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Studies in Confusing Films

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Lost and Found

studies in confusing films

Dominic John Alleyne Lash

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts

Department of Film and Television

December 2018

76,403 words

abstract

This thesis uses the concepts of disorientation and confusion as a means of providing detailed critical accounts of four difficult films, as well as of addressing some more general issues in the criticism and theory of narrative film. Although the familiarity of the emotional and affective aspects of disorientation and confusion provides its starting point, this thesis is chiefly concerned with textual and hermeneutic matters, rather than with spectator affect.

Lost and Found argues that disorientation, as a concept, combines aspects of objectivity and subjectivity. The thesis also articulates two distinct – albeit related – meanings of confusion: the familiar affective meaning and a more technical, non-pejorative sense that refers to the way different aspects of a film may be entwined ("confused") with one another. Two theoretical chapters (chapter one and chapter four) explain and explore two critical and rhetorical terms that can assist the film critic in addressing the implications of understanding disorientation and confusion along these lines. These terms are *metalepsis* and *figuration*. Four more chapters are devoted to exploring the various distinct critical consequences that follow from attending to the disorienting and confusing aspects of four recent films.

This thesis concludes that there is a continuum between orientation and disorientation; all films are at least *somewhat* confusing, but no film is *utterly* disorientating. The disorientating aspects of the films studied herein, it is argued, highlight or exacerbate qualities that are present to some degree in all narrative films. *Lost and Found* defends the view that the best critical methodology is one that responds to the demands of the film in question rather than attempting to build a toolkit that is ready to take on all comers, and that studying disorientating and confusing films can be of great help in showing how we might develop such a critical practice.

acknowledgements

Many thanks to my supervisor Alex Clayton for striking a beautiful balance between encouragement and scepticism that has made the process of developing this thesis a pleasure. Thanks also to Kristian Moen for his wonderfully gentle but penetrating comments. I am very grateful to the University of Bristol for the financial support that made working on this thesis possible. The department of Film and Television has been a splendidly supporting and stimulating environment in which to work; many thanks to all the staff and students with whom I've come into contact for making it so. Special thanks to the members, past and present, of the terrific PhD community, in particular Hoi Lun Law (who read most of this and was always ready with a helpful insight), Eve Benhamou, Miguel Gaggiotti, Sarah Kelley, Steven Roberts, and Polly Rose. I hope our Fantasmic Close Encounters continue long into the future.

Thanks to my parents for their persistent support and patience in the face of the curious trajectory of my activities.

This – like the last one – is for Kate. I know she knows that none of it would be possible without her, but it can't hurt to offer a reminder.

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: DATE:6th Dec.2018.....

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introduction

how lost are we, exactly? disorientation and confusion in film

You kind of get lost. And getting lost is *beautiful*. (David Lynch in Barney 2009: 225)

The fact that being lost admits of degrees is rather surprising. We might have assumed that as long as we have *some* idea of where we are, we can't – strictly speaking – be lost: "I'm not *lost*, I'm just not completely sure where I am." It is, however, perfectly natural, on finding yourself in a city you don't know very well, to say to yourself, or to someone that you stop to ask for directions, "I do have *some* idea of where I am, but I'm a little bit lost". That this is the case must have something to do with the fact that having a rough idea of where one is can sometimes be very helpful (if, say, I need to get north of the river and all I know is that I'm currently south of it) but is in other situations of almost no help at all. (If I don't know where the street I'm on lies in relation to the street I need to get to, then knowing that both streets are on the same side of the river does nothing except to reassure me that at least things could be worse – I could be *even more* lost!) It does not, therefore, follow from the fact that there can be degrees of being lost that the closer one is to being on track, the less lost one is. The questions of where one is and of what one knows about where one is, although intimately related, are distinct.

This thesis will propose that something similar is also true of films, and that this has consequences for our understanding of the relationship between the epistemic and affective dimensions of some familiar consequences of being lost: disorientation and confusion. The topographical way of thinking employed in the previous paragraph has much in common with one of the most familiar ways that we talk about being lost while

watching a film, in which by saying that we are lost we mean to indicate that we are confused.¹ Just as in our putative unfamiliar city, we can be a little bit lost in a film ("I know they're after the murderer, but I've no idea why they're interviewing this woman"), almost completely lost ("I have absolutely no idea who any of those people are or what they're up to"), or somewhere in-between. In his book on film noir, Robert Pippin refers to 'the typical sotto voce patter one hears underneath noir showings: "Who the hell is that?" "Wait! I thought she was dead?" "Are we supposed to know whether he knows?"' (Pippin 2012: 41). Filmmakers have long found it interesting to elicit experiences of disorientation and confusion, and film viewers by no means invariably find them an obstacle to pleasure.

These invented examples might, however, give the impression that being lost relates primarily to details of plot or motivation; certainly, confusion about *what* is going on or *why* it is going on often leads to our feeling lost, but we can also feel lost in other ways – emotionally lost, for example, or even what we might call stylistically lost, if, say, we can get no grasp on how the stylistic dimensions of a film relate to its other aspects. (Some viewers feel lost in this way in relation to the range of colour schemes and film stocks used in Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (1975).) George Toles has written interestingly about the relation between the different senses of being lost, and how being lost in the sense of being absorbed causes us to attempt to fill the gaps and remedy the

¹ The other sense, which is not my primary subject but which will also make an appearance from time to time, is the sense in which being lost indicates being engrossed: "I was so lost in the film I didn't even notice the fire alarm."

unmade connections that might be causing us to feel lost in the sense of confused:

When viewers are absorbed by screened events to the extent that they feel inside them, they are necessarily split between the sense of what is present to them – through emotional investment and participation – and what is absent – the fact of literal separation from the image, distance, and perhaps friction with certain elements in the fantasy mix. ... As we become integrated with the spectacle, we become more committed to filling in gaps that will heighten the reality effect with "necessary-for-belief" details that are not actually there.

(Toles 2016: 115)

Toles points out how we fill in these gaps 'with inferences about character psychology, story logic, environment' as well as by paying attention to 'how the parts are arranged', to 'repeating patterns' and to 'the most fitting ways to think about the plot' (*ibid.*). But, for Toles, in the final analysis 'mostly it is ourselves (a roiling mass of feelings and contradictions) that we mine to fill in the gaps' (*ibid.*). True though this account very likely is, my methodology shall depart from Toles' final remark (that it is 'ourselves... that we mine to fill the gaps'). Though I shall inevitably consider the psychological, emotional and speculative activities of viewers, this is not a work of affective or phenomenological criticism, but is instead more textually and formally focused. My aim is to offer an account of some aspects of a hermeneutics of confusion in film, insofar as it can inform criticism – to investigate "where we are" with regard to a film, what we *know* about where we are, and how these two things relate to and impinge upon each other, with consequences for critical writing.

Certainly, films can disorient or confuse as the result of carelessness – poor

editing that leaves an audience pointlessly muddled about spatial relationships, for example – but my focus is on situations in which the experience is productively occasioned, giving rise to aesthetic richness; as David Lynch says, "getting lost is *beautiful*". Early in Carl Th. Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), the Lord of the Manor (Maurice Schutz) appears to Allan Gray (Nicolas de Gunzburg). Gray is in bed (the previous intertitle refers to "his restless sleep" ["seinen unruhigen Schlaf"]), and the Lord enters his room by unlocking – from the outside – a door that is locked from the inside. He leaves Gray a package, then departs. The whole scene has unfolded like a dream. What does it portend, we wonder? Later, however, we see that Gray *really does* possess the package that the Lord left him. How can this be possible? The film's opening titles tell us that Gray's 'preoccupation with the mad ideas of bygone centuries' has turned him into 'a dreamer and visionary for whom the boundary between reality and the supernatural has been lost' (my translation).² The film makes the viewer, also, lose their clear sense not only of this boundary but of others including (but not limited to) the boundaries between sleep and waking; past and present; fantasy and reality; and even the living and the dead. Gilberto Perez describes how, in *Vampyr*, 'everything appears eerily blurred in a no man's land between life and death' (Perez 1998: 124).

It does not, however, do this only through its fantastical narrative; more localized devices also create subtly disorientating effects. In the scene immediately after the Lord of the Manor's arrival, we see Gray set off purposefully from the inn. Dreyer

² 'Die Beschäftigung mit den Wahnideen vergangener Jahrhunderte machte ihn zu einem Träumer und Phantasten dem die Grenzen zwischen Wirklichkeit und Übernatürlichem verloren gingen.'

cuts to a weathervane (a silhouette of an angel) and then to a shot of a river running horizontally across the centre of the frame, bounded above and below by its tree-lined banks. A reflection in the water picks its way from left to right on the far bank: Gray, we surely assume. But we only just have time to realise, with a jolt, that there is *no body* giving rise to the reflection before Gray appears at the bottom of the image, entering the frame also from the left, but on the near bank (see fig 0.1; the next scene shows that the impossible reflection is one of a number of shadows that are supernaturally able to act independently of the bodies that give rise to them). A comparable disruption of time, space, and identity occurs later when Gray emerges from a trapdoor, looking intently to his left (screen right; see fig 0.2). The camera tracks right to reveal a coffin. In so doing it is, we assume, directing our attention to match Gray's. But then the camera suddenly pans left and catches Gray in the middle distance already departing, walking *away* from the coffin through a doorway. These examples are not in accordance with "classical" practice as it usually defined, which is constructed in such a way that it 'passes relatively unnoticed' (Bordwell 1985: 164), but neither are the techniques deployed here designed to be clearly visible. They disorientate us by playing with – even, we might say, by taking advantage of – the assumptions we use to make sense of films, the ways we have, to use Toles's language, 'fill[ed] in gaps' in the film 'with "necessary-for-belief" details that are not actually there'.³

³ My interpretation of these moments is at variance with Mark Nash's attempt to read the film exclusively in terms of Todorov's notion that hesitation between possible explanations is what characterises the fantastic (Nash 1976). (Stanisław Lem's polemic against structuralism does a good job of pointing out methodological, empirical and logical problems with Todorov's argument; see Lem 1974.) Although



figure 0.1: A reflection enters the frame... but turns out not to be that of Alan Gray, as we are likely to have assumed.



figure 0.2: We assume the camera movement tracks Gray's attention, but his mind – and body – are elsewhere.

Until we rewatch and analyse such sequences, we are very likely to notice "something wrong" but unlikely to be clear as to why we feel this way. Whether the disorientation has been produced by disrupting the connection between what a character appears to be attending to and what the film attends to (as in the second example, with

some disorientating effects in the film *do* rely on hesitation (or on something even stronger, a kind of undecidability), it is not hesitation that is decisive here but the realisation that one has *already* formed an interpretation, but has done so erroneously: our disorientation is caused by the fact that we *do not* hesitate.

the coffin), or by fantastically disrupting the laws of physics (as with the riverbank example), in both cases we notice that our expectations have been subverted, but doing so takes precedence over noticing *how*, or even noticing *what* those expectations were.⁴ Phenomena such as these continue to be of importance in contemporary cinema, which is the subject of this thesis. I will attempt to demonstrate this with regard to four relatively recent films that are superficially rather dissimilar, but united by the fact that in different ways they all deploy strategies of – frequently fantastical – disorientation: *INLAND EMPIRE* (David Lynch, 2006); *Holy Motors* (Leos Carax, 2012); *Colossal Youth (Juventude em Marcha)* (Pedro Costa, 2006); and *Goodbye to Language (Adieu au langage)* (Jean-Luc Godard, 2014). I am not proposing an historical argument about the prevalence of disorientating films, but these four films are the best recent examples I know of the kinds of productive disorientation that I am interested in. I hope to demonstrate over the course of the thesis a number of ways that these four films speak to each other, offering differing but complementary insights into confusion and disorientation.

In engaging with forms of disorientation I am concerned both with producing critical readings of films and with offering an account of some aspects of criticism. In both cases disorientation will serve to highlight issues of orientation, not only in a static,

⁴ Daniel Morgan describes this as resulting, ultimately, from the way Dreyer 'trades on an underlying *desire* we have to identify with the camera, to be with it as it moves through the world' (Morgan 2016: 241). He notes perceptively that the notion that viewers identify with the camera is taken by many theories of camera movement as 'conceptual bedrock' when it is in fact 'the expression of a deep *epistemological fantasy*' (*ibid.*).

topological sense ("where are we?") but also in a more processual or methodological sense ("what assumptions do we proceed from, and how do they guide our progress?"). I am interested both in how we get (or fail to get) our bearings, and in what we discover by (and while) doing so.⁵ Such questions could profitably be asked about any film, but the films I have chosen to examine in detail raise them with particular urgency because, in their different ways, they all – like *Vampyr* – blur the boundaries between different modes of being (fact, fiction, dream, memory, anticipation).⁶ One might say that they entangle levels of reality that, conventionally, either remain wholly distinct or have their relationship carefully managed and displayed as such to the audience (such as by the distinction between colour and black and white in *The Wizard of Oz*, for example). I want to explore the way that these films, like all films, '[set] the spectator upon a certain "course"' or path, as Francesco Casetti puts it (Casetti 1998: 14). In these instances,

⁵ I do not, therefore, assume that disorientation or confusion are necessarily to be avoided or diminished; doing so has led to what are, to my mind, some unfortunate consequences in the psychology of aesthetic experience. Paul J. Silvia, for example, argues that in a 'functional sense, interest and confusion are opposites. Interest motivates learning, exploring, seeking information, and engaging with new things... confusion presumably motivates withdrawing, avoiding, and shifting to something different' (Silvia 2010). This formulation does not allow for becoming intrigued by something precisely *because* it is confusing; Silvia's 'presumably' might be a sign of recognition of this limitation.

⁶ Stanley Cavell argues that 'unmarked juxtapositions of reality with some opposition to reality' represents a 'natural subject' for film, a reflection of the facts that 'to be human is to wish, and in particular to wish for a completer identity than one has so far attained; and that such a wish may project a complete world *opposed* to the world one so far shares with others' (Cavell 1978: 253 & 255).

however, the path may often be overgrown with briars or seem to suddenly vanish from beneath our feet. As in Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), the direct route is not always the safest.

Confusion or disorientation are, then, an almost inevitable component of any viewer's experience of these films, and not only on a first viewing. Before going any further it will be useful to explore these terms more closely. There are two related but distinct senses of confusion – the first familiar, the second a little peculiar – that I want to explore. Firstly there is confusion as the name of something experienced by the audience. This is the familiar affective sense, whose meaning is very close to that of disorientation ("I'm confused!"); it is a possible *effect* of confusion in the second sense. This second sense refers to the confusion which we find in the films themselves. In saying this I am not using the word pejoratively (indeed part of my purpose is to counter critics who find these films confused in just such a sense), but rather in a sense related to that which Alexander Baumgarten, the eighteenth-century founder of aesthetics, thought was particular to aesthetic cognition. Terry Eagleton explains that "[c]onfusion" here means not "muddle" but "fusion": in their organic interpenetration, the elements of aesthetic representation resist that discrimination into discrete units which is characteristic of conceptual thought' (Eagleton 1990: 15).⁷ This does not mean that

⁷ This sense of confusion can pertain not only to aesthetic cognition but also to perception itself.

Baumgarten's usage derives from Leibniz, for whom "clear" ideas were contrasted not with "confused" ideas but rather with "obscure" ones. "Distinct" and "confused" are the two subcategories of clear ideas, as Simon William Grote – drawing on Leibniz's 1684 "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth and Ideas" – explains: 'An idea is clear, in that it allows one to recognize what thing is being

conceptual thought can have nothing to do with aesthetic objects – they "resist" thought, they do not "escape" it – but that discourse about them must *take account* of this resistance (and perhaps also *account for* it). The particular narrative and ontological "confusions" found in these films are a subcategory of, and perhaps even an allegory for, a phenomenon of resistance to analysis (in the sense of a neat carving up into separate parts) that is present in aesthetic cognition generally speaking.⁸ The resistance of aesthetic objects to discrimination does not require us to avoid deploying distinctions – such as, for example, those between emotion and logic, form and content, or diegesis and affect – so long as we continually remind ourselves that all applications of such distinctions to "confused" phenomena must remain, at least to some extent, local and provisional. Confused objects of thought, we might say, call for interpretation.

And what of disorientation? In a 1786 paper entitled "What is Orientation in Thinking", Baumgarten's famous admirer Immanuel Kant explored the word's etymology:

To *orientate* oneself, in the proper sense of the word, means to use a given

represented, because it contains representations of those characteristics of the thing that allow one to distinguish it from other things. An idea is confused, as opposed to distinct, in that those distinguishing characteristics are not made explicit, so that the thing represented cannot immediately be classified according to a definition' (Grote 2010: 113).

⁸ Some recent thinking continues to see a fundamental link between aesthetics and forms of confusion: for Jacques Rancière, '[w]hat aesthetic 'confusion' initially tells us is that there is no such thing as art in general' (Rancière 2009: 6).

direction... in order to find the others, and in particular that of the *sunrise*. ... For this purpose, however, I must necessarily be able to feel a difference in my own *subject*, namely, that between my right and left hands. ... Thus, in spite of all the objective data of the sky, I orient myself *geographically* purely by means of a *subjective* distinction; ...

(Kant 1991: 238-9)

For Kant, even the literal meaning of "orient" combines – or "confuses" – space and time, the objective and the subjective, the moment of the dawn and my sense of the difference between my two hands. The lesson Kant draws from this etymology is that the proper meaning of orientation in thinking is 'to be guided, in one's conviction of truth, by a subjective principle of reason where objective principles of reason are inadequate' (*ibid.*: 240). Without wishing to misrepresent the problems with which Kant is chiefly concerned in this essay – which have to do with the relationship between faith, ethics, and reason – his account is pertinent to the aesthetic issues that are my focus in this thesis. 'Objective principles of reason' are never sufficient for criticism, but accounting for the role of the subjective does not have to mean explaining away personal response as an accident of biography ("Apichatpong Weerasethakul is one of our greatest directors – I love anything that reminds me of that wonderful holiday in Thailand").⁹ Rather, it involves attending to the relationship between the particular paths

⁹ In arguing for a "material phenomenology", Simon Jarvis has written: 'Until affective impressionality is recognized as the substance that most certainly exists, it will continue to be ruled out of court as merely idiotic, as singular, as personal, as subjective, and it will continue to be the case that the first

that the critic follows and the ways that the film in question gives itself up to exploration. No critic can explore a film from every possible avenue and there will inevitably be a subjective dimension in the choice of approach, but there is no way to excise this subjectivity in order to be left with the purely objective. Writing critically on the films covered in this thesis raises this issue with urgency because it is frequently unclear which critical path is most likely to reduce disorientation. The critic's interpretational choices are therefore emphasised all the more prominently.

Just as the films in question problematise certain boundaries, hovering "between" them, so my critical goal is to find a way of examining these films that lies "between" two broad critical strategies, with the intention of drawing on their strengths but avoiding what I see as their main weaknesses. These two options might be characterized as, firstly, the abandonment of narrative interpretation (and its replacement by symbolic, affective or other lines of interpretation) and, secondly, the treatment of films as ciphers, as puzzles to be decoded. Taking the work of David Lynch as an example, an instance of the first option might be Greg Hainge's statement, concerning *Lost Highway* (1997), that 'there is no rational explanation for the major diegetic events of the film' (Hainge 2004: 143). This kind of claim has a tendency to obscure the extent to which Lynch's cinema *is* responsive to critical investigation: not all

move in any account of aesthetic experience will be to cross out, to fail accurately to listen to, the experience the inquirer has actually had, in favor of an experience she thinks she ought to have had, because she thinks other people are likely to have had it.' (Jarvis 2002: 12)

claims are equally substantiable.¹⁰ Hainge is eager to praise the film's inclusion of 'inexplicable' events because, he claims, this helps it to achieve 'the complete dissolution of narrative', as well as of 'logic and linear time', which I find to be a couple of hyperboles too far (*ibid.*: 143 & 145). The advantage of an attitude like Hainge's, however, is that it can help demonstrate how much we can say about a film even without "getting the story straight". The feeling that this should always be our first task can sometimes be a distraction, an obstruction to coming to terms with a film. I am sympathetic to Hainge's claim that 'Lynch's aesthetic operates by fusing style and diegesis' (although I would be less absolute and say 'confusing' in Baumgarten's sense (*ibid.*: 149)); narrative can, at times, be more effectively appreciated if left for a while on the critical back burner.

Eschewing the first approach's shrug in the face of narrative difficulties, the second approach – treating films as puzzles – goes to enormous lengths to encompass as much as possible. And, after all, as Jonathan Culler has observed, if overinterpretation is a danger, then so is what we might call "underinterpretation" (see Culler 1992: 112); Stanley Cavell states that his 'experience is that most texts, like most lives, are underread, not overread' (Cavell 1981: 35).¹¹ Seeking out and taking account of that

¹⁰ Although I do not find "rational" the most helpful word here (and Hainge is certainly not alone in using it this way; I discuss a comparable instance in V.F. Perkins's *Film as Film* in Lash 2017: 167-8), if what Hainge wishes to draw attention to is *Lost Highway*'s paradoxical quality I am in full agreement. I will briefly discuss this further in my second chapter. Alex Pavey offers an account of *Lost Highway* that is compatible with my argument here in Pavey 2014.

¹¹ Cavell goes on to say that 'going too far... is a risk inherent in the business of reading, and venial in

which challenges one's interpretations is a critical virtue. Jeremy Blackman's website HALFBORN, dedicated to the analysis of *INLAND EMPIRE*, boldly states that '[t]he actress Nikki Grace (played by Laura Dern) is not real. She is a fantasy, her life as a wealthy actress is a fantasy, and her new film – *On High In Blue Tomorrows* – is a fantasy' (Blackman 2009). This claim is, at the very least, open to challenge – other readings are certainly possible – but nevertheless, Blackman is on to something with his rather bald remark: 'To all those who suggest that a Lynch film should not make sense, let me suggest that you're lazy.' (*ibid.*) It can be tempting to suggest that no solution is possible when, in fact, it is merely difficult to find. But this approach also has serious shortcomings. In striving too hard for consistency certain possibilities risk being closed off; Blackman is excessively confident about the existence of criteria by means of which one can securely 'separate the meaningful details from the less meaningful ones' (*ibid.*).¹²

comparison with not going far enough' (Cavell 1981: 37).

¹² Treating certain films as "puzzle films" is not confined to fan-based approaches, but has also become popular in cognitive film studies. Some aspects of the films I discuss in this thesis and the way I will discuss them overlap with this work. Films that have been studied under this rubric include Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998) and indeed a number of films by David Lynch. But my intentions are rather different; I have no wish to identify a genre or subgenre of films grouped by shared features, nor to taxonomize a set of particular cognitive procedures to which films can give rise. In fact – with the possible exception of *INLAND EMPIRE*, which Kiss and Willemsen (following Edward Branigan) include as an example of the extreme case of the "impossible puzzle film" (see Kiss and Willemsen 2017: 60) – the films that I analyse would not be recognised by puzzle film scholars as canonical examples of the type; such scholars would be more

In a discussion of Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), Nikolaj Lübecker offers an account of the ways a film might be "puzzling" that is more germane to my purposes. He writes that although 'to some extent the film does have a puzzle character', *Elephant* 'is not about piecing events together in order to understand what happened. Quite the contrary, we know what happened and it seems there is no way to put the pieces together' (Lübecker 2015: 64). The film produces moments in which '[w]e suddenly realise that – temporarily – we were not where we thought we were; and that we no longer know exactly where we are' (*ibid.*). Time and space can be confused. A nine-minute sequence featuring a character called Nathan walking:

... is framed by two identical shots of the headmaster looking at another teenager... even if Nathan has been walking for nine minutes, we have not progressed. But it is important to add that the move away from narrative progression does not take us towards stasis. It would be more accurate to say that there is nothing but movement. Kinesis, but no progression.

(Lübecker 2015: 64 & 65)

I will have nothing further to say about *Elephant* in this thesis, but the features Lübecker identifies are exactly the type that I will explore: the confusions that a viewer can feel ('we no longer know exactly where we are'), and the textual features (very frequently involving a disturbance of what we had assumed to be firm boundaries) that give rise to these confusions. As his book's title – *The Feel-Bad Film* – indicates, Lübecker's focus is on the causes and consequences of particular affective states. There

likely to regard these films as examples of art cinema.

is some overlap of my interests with his, as well as with those of Eugenie Brinkema in her *The Forms of the Affects*, a book whose argument that attending to affect requires *more* – not less – close reading I am wholly in sympathy with. (This is the case because affect is 'a problematic of structure, form, and aesthetics' (Brinkema 2014: xvi).) But confusion and disorientation in their affective senses *as such* are not my focus; my object, rather, is to argue that they are worthy of critical attention and to demonstrate that they can also be a critical resource.

To recap, if the first critical option (abandoning narrative interpretation) tends to give up certain lines of enquiry too early, the risk of the second (treating films as puzzles requiring solution) is that it underplays the extent to which decisions about where to focus our interpretational attention shape the very interpretations we produce. Stanley Cavell observes that 'facts of a frame, so far as these are to confirm critical understanding, are not determinable apart from that understanding itself' (Cavell 1979: 224). That is to say that it is not possible to determine which aspects of a film ('facts of a frame') are pertinent to our understanding of it *before* we understand it. We always understand *something*, however partial, provisional, or ultimately mistaken this understanding may turn out to be. Our understanding is always under negotiation, continually shifting and developing, and as it does so our view of which facts are pertinent also changes. Facts and understanding reciprocally influence each other. It is not only the case that comprehension often rests on acts of interpretation, but also that the particular interpretational path taken will have consequences for the subsequent progress of that interpretation. A more generally satisfactory account of a confusing film requires, it seems to me, an attention *both* to minute details of narrative *and* a reflexive awareness of one's critical and interpretational approaches. Ultimately, both of the

critical strategies that I have perhaps slightly caricatured in the preceding paragraphs make too clear a distinction between narrative, diegetic concerns and other aspects of film (tone, mood, symbol, affect, rhythm, etc.). Either (for the first option) films like Lynch's essentially have *no narrative* as such (recall Hainge's claim about 'the complete dissolution of narrative'), or (for the second) they actually possess relatively conventional narratives, it is just that these narratives are buried and in need of excavation. I want, instead, to claim that in films such as those I will examine in detail narrative questions are "confused" – in Baumgarten's non-pejorative sense – with these other aspects. But to say these different dimensions are, in the final analysis, inseparable, does not mean that they cannot be distinguished, nor that we are unable to give an account of their relationships. Two concepts will be central to my own attempt to produce such accounts: *metalepsis* and *figuration*.



figure 0.3: the metaleptical death of an audience member

Through the work of Gérard Genette and others, *metalepsis* has come to be used to designate instances of narrative wherein diegetic (or ontological) levels that "ought not" to be able to come into contact with one another nevertheless do. In *Daffy Duck & Egghead* (Tex Avery, 1937), when Egghead implores an audience member to sit down, and eventually shoots him when he refuses, that is an example of *metalepsis*. So, too (it seems), is the first scene I mentioned from Dreyer's *Vampyr*, in which a dream visitation is nonetheless able to give Gray a physical book. *Metalepsis* can be a very helpful

concept, whether one is investigating particular types of narrative confusion (in the non-pejorative sense) or the audience confusion (in the regular sense) which narrative "confusions" may result in.

Traditionally, metalepsis is considered as a rhetorical figure. Figuration is, then, a much more general concept than metalepsis. Indeed, words such as "figure", "figurative" and "figural" have a huge range of senses. But the senses that particularly interest me relate to the way that two particular meanings of the word *figurative* intersect with one another in film. In studies of rhetoric or literature, the figurative exists in opposition to the literal: figurative language is language that is not – or not merely, or not entirely – literal. In visual art, however, the notion of the figurative exists in opposition not to the literal but to the *abstract*; abstract art is non-figurative. These two senses could be seen to pull in opposite directions: in visual art figuration is a move *towards* "replication", while in literature it pulls *away* from it – away from direct, literal, factual statements. Film is particularly interestingly placed because – in its multi-layered deployment of image, sound and language – it makes use of phenomena that can be described using either sense of the word.

The disorientations produced by my second and third examples from *Vampyr* (see figures 0.1 and 0.2) make use of both senses of the figurative. The disorientations are produced via the visual means by which people and objects are represented (one sense of "figuration"), but they would not be as disturbing as they are without the symbolic, metaphorical or metonymic import of these representations (their "figuration" in a more literary sense). The sight of a shadow without a source is disturbing because of the disruption of causal order it signifies; the image of a man ignoring a coffin makes

us suspect that the coffin serves as a metonym for his own death. This "confusion" of procedures of figuration is extremely widespread in narrative cinema, so let me attempt to make what I mean a little clearer with a canonical instance of classical cinema, albeit 'a film with a classical narrative structure that nevertheless resists classical narration' (Lehman 2004: 240): John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956).

Ford's film famously includes a number of shots that look out from an enclosed space through an opening. The first and last shots of the film do so; one other very important shot does the same; and there are also shots looking out from inside a teepee and from a cave. Peter Lehman notes that '[t]he doorway motif with its elaborate use of both outer and inner doorways as well as teepee openings and mouths of caves is elaborately complex' (*ibid.*: 250), but argues shortly afterwards that 'the shot viewing the action through the mouth of the cave... is entirely motivated by the visual rhyme of the composition' (*ibid.*: 251). I would, however, follow Nicole Brenez when she argues (*vis à vis* another film from 1956, George Cukor's *A Star is Born*) that it 'is not merely a matter of rhymes aiming to establish a thematic coherence but of constructing a film through the form of a passage between altered images' (Brenez 2007: 21).¹³ These shots in *The Searchers* are figurative *both* in the sense of their metaphorical import (which relates to the many crucial boundaries that the film tests via its themes of miscegenation and incest, not to mention the possibility of discerning what is going on inside a person

¹³ The detail and subtlety of Lehman's subsequent argument and the way he incorporates a great many of the film's thematic and narrative patterns suggests that he may not, in fact, think that 'visual rhyme' is really the *sole* motivation for the motif.

from what they show on the outside) *and* in the visual sense: the images literally resemble one another.

The way that these phenomena interpenetrate make particular *narrational* phenomena possible. Many commentators have noted the relationship between the way the camera moves outwards in the opening shot, only to retreat within in the film's final image. I have not, however, seen much discussion of the relationship between outward and inward movement in the first two "doorway" shots. The opening of the film clearly represents a look from the inside out, from the – at least apparently – safe homestead to the exterior and the unexpected (and in a number of ways disturbing) arrival of Ethan Edwards (John Wayne). But the second use of such a shot occurs after the whole family, including Ethan's (illicitly) beloved Martha (Dorothy Jordan), has been killed, and its female members raped. This time, the use of a very similar image represents a look from the *outside in*, and hence indicates that the deaths of Martha and the other family members are so horrific that they can only be represented by not being shown: we see only Martha's torn and bloodstained dress, and what we understand to be Ethan's gaze at her corpse. This point is made all the more powerfully because of what Brenez calls the 'passage' from the opening – outwardly directed – shot to the shot of Ethan looking in. Both the similarities and differences between the two images are crucial: the visual similarity calls attention to the narrative and symbolic differences.¹⁴

¹⁴ The contrasting way that the death of Martin's (Jeffrey Hunter) "accidental" wife Look (or Luke, or Wild Goose Flying in the Night Sky, played by Beulah Archuletta) is represented has implications for the racial politics of the film. We look out from within the teepee at Ethan looking in, but we are then



figure 0.4: Visually similar images can represent either looking out or looking in.

This phenomenon is related to what George M. Wilson calls 'rhetorical figures of narrational instruction' (Wilson 1986: 49), but instead of Wilson's exploration of the way rhetoric can organise our view of, or relation to, a narrative, I mean here to emphasise something simpler but more fundamental: 'rhetorical figures of narration', perhaps. We cannot wholly separate the narrational from the symbolic: the film's narration *itself* proceeds, in part, through particular means whose figuration is connected in both the literary and the visual senses of the word. At this point my discussion has, clearly, moved away from notions of fantastical disorientation. But it will be my claim that the potential confusions (in both senses) that figurations may give rise to in any narrative film are exacerbated in the films that this thesis concentrates on, precisely because of their fantastic, metaleptical, and disorientating narratives. Investigating these films will, therefore, not only give an insight into the workings of a rather particular and unusual group of films, but also give pointers towards phenomena with much wider applicability.

shown Look's dead body. It takes two shots to represent an event – death – that earlier, with the death of Martha, took only one shot. Clearly Look's death, precisely because we *can* look directly on her dead body, is figured by the film as much the less traumatic of the two deaths.

To this end, the structure of the thesis will be as follows. My first chapter will situate the detailed critical readings of *INLAND EMPIRE* and *Holy Motors* that comprise my second and third chapters by articulating the nature and significance of metalepsis in film, as well as some of its ontological and rhetorical implications. This first theoretical chapter, then, is concerned particularly with issues of diegesis and narration. The chapter on *INLAND EMPIRE* will focus on the way that critical consistency may be in tension with completeness. Can consistency – reduction or elimination of disorientation – only be achieved at the price of certain exclusions? What happens if we are forced to leave different things out in different readings? With regard to Carax's film, I will argue that cohesion and consistency can be as disorientating as their absence. *Holy Motors* cues us to set aside certain expectations, only to wrong-foot us later on by unexpectedly reintroducing them; it shows that connections are not always conducive to orientation, but can in fact be disorientating. But having shown that coherence can be disorientating, I will argue that the film ultimately achieves coherence not *despite* its disorientating elements, but *by means of* them. After the chapters on Lynch and Carax, a second theoretical chapter will deal with issues of signification and discourse (and hence with criticism itself and the relation of critical language to the films it concerns itself with), focusing the discussion via a more extended exploration of figuration. Detailed analysis of Pedro Costa's *Colossal Youth* (2006) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Adieu au langage* (2014) will make up my final two chapters. Both films disorientate, but through opposite strategies: *Colossal Youth* by often seeming not to give us enough to go on, *Adieu au langage* by giving us far too much to keep a handle on. Despite this contrast, in both cases the films' figurative procedures can be shown to reveal a great deal more narrative content and consistency than is initially apparent. I

shall explore a range of senses of figure that help articulate the ways *Colossal Youth* simultaneously orientates and disorientates its audience, and use the notion of immersion to explore the ways we can become lost in *Adieu au langage* both in the orientational sense that is primary throughout this thesis, and in the other sense of becoming absorbed in it, somehow in the midst of it.

The value of this thesis will, I hope, lie chiefly in the readings it offers of four important, challenging, but still underdiscussed recent films. The thesis will also defend some theoretical propositions about film and, by articulating some particular achievements of certain films, will attempt to demonstrate – *a fortiori* – some possibilities of the medium of film more generally. Following on from these readings and demonstrations, it will offer and defend some methodological recommendations concerning film criticism. There can be advantages to confusion, both while we are watching a film and in writing about it, and I hope to show what some of them might be.

chapter one

metalepsis in film and its implications

What is called metalepsis?

Stories within stories are anything but rare in the cinema. An arbitrary and highly selective list of films where they feature strongly would include *Mabel's Dramatic Career* (1913), *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), *The Saragossa Manuscript* (1965), *La Nuit américaine* (1973), *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (1974), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1980), *Videodrome* (1983), *eXistenZ* (1999), *Adaptation* (2002), *Hable con ella* (2002), *Synechdoche, New York* (2008), *Cloud Atlas* (2012) and *The Forbidden Room* (2015). When we encounter a narrative within another narrative we are dealing, in a certain sense, with an ontological hierarchy. In the most general sense (from the perspective of our "real" world) everything in a narrative is on the same ontological level – is, precisely, narrative. When, however, a narrative contains another narrative, then from the perspective of the containing narrative (according to which it is not narrative but reality), the contained narrative *is*, nevertheless, still narrative. The two narratives are thus ontologically distinct and, generally, there cannot be direct exchange between the two: such exchange is as impossible as it would be for J.K. Rowling to meet Harry Potter. But, nevertheless, nested narratives not infrequently *do* feature such supposedly "impossible" crossovers. Such entanglements between nested stories within a single work are increasingly being studied under the rubric of metalepsis (see, for example, Kiss 2012 and Buckland 2013). Gérard Genette, whose *Figures III* (1972) formulated the basics of the modern understanding of metalepsis, subsequently devoted a whole book to the subject (Genette

2004).

The origins of the term and the history of its usage are complicated and at times contradictory. Indeed, as Genette points out, in some ancient Greek usage *metalepsis*, lacking a precise definition, could be more or less synonymous with both *metonymy* and *metaphor* (Genette 2004: 8). For Dumarsais in 1730 *metalepsis* became a subcategory of *metonymy*, one in which an effect stands for its cause, or vice versa; whereas for Fontanier in the early nineteenth century it referred to a *metonymy* involving an entire proposition (never just a single name). Genette has sorted through these various meanings and come to the conclusion that the clearest and most useful application of the term is to restrict it to a further subcategory of Dumarsais's definition, and call *metalepsis* any procedure 'which unites, in one sense or another, the author and their work, or more generally the producer of a representation with that representation itself' (*ibid*: 14; my translation).¹ This definition comes, in the course of Genette's book, to broaden out slightly to refer to any situation where *ontologically distinct levels* (whether properly so, or merely fictionally so, from within the *diegesis*) encounter one another. If a character from a film escapes from the film and begins to exist in the world that produced the film, as Tom Baxter (Jeff Daniels) does in Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), then this is *metaleptical* – and not only when Baxter meets the actor who "produced" him, Gil Shepherd (also Jeff Daniels, of course).

In this chapter I will attempt to sketch an understanding of the nature and role

¹ '... qui unit, dans un sens ou dans l'autre, l'auteur à son œuvre, ou plus largement le producteur d'une représentation à cette représentation elle-même.'

of metalepsis in cinema, including its relation to questions of ontology and rhetoric, and to indicate the relevance of the concept to the questions of orientation and disorientation with which I am concerned. I will, however, address those questions less directly than in the critical chapters that follow; my purpose in this first chapter is to prepare the ground and develop some tools that will prove useful later on. I shall do so first by clarifying the relationship between metalepsis and the fantastic. This will lead to a discussion of the ontology of fiction that is guided by attention to metalepsis, after which the chapter will conclude by claiming that metalepsis is best seen not merely as a question of the logic of fictional worlds but as, fundamentally, a matter of rhetoric. Metalepsis, I will argue, can guide us to an understanding of the way a work of fiction solicits the attentions and emotions of its audience. It can do this by prompting us to attend to the intersection – or confusion, in Baumgarten's sense – of a number of different logical or rhetorical dimensions (narrational, affective, etc.) and by encouraging us, instead of attempting to separate them tidily at all costs, to remain sensitive to the ways they impinge on one another.

Metalepsis and the fantastic – misconceptions and possibilities

It is easy to overstate the disruptive potential of metalepsis. Since I do believe that it is of the nature of metalepsis easily to give rise to the fantastic or the paradoxical, it is particularly important to be clear that this is not its only function, nor always a consequence of its presence. Thomas Morsch rightly points out that '[m]etalepses are neither a specifically postmodern stylistic device, whose reach would be restricted to the corresponding genres, nor do they necessarily have anti-illusionistic effects. Depending

on context and on how they are deployed, metalepses may instead serve to enhance and stabilize fiction' (Morsch 2012: 114). Earlier in the same article, however, he himself makes the very mistake that he warns against when he remarks that '[m]etalepsis not only places part and whole, lower-order and higher-order levels, in a mirroring relationship, like the device of *mise en abyme*, but it also lets each pass over into the other in a paradoxical manner not amenable to the logic of "realism"' (*ibid*: 111). This is going too far since, as Genette shows, even the nineteenth century realist novel is full of examples of metalepsis not aimed at disrupting the logic of the fictional world. One well-known example is when Balzac ('or, if you prefer, the narrator of *Illusion perdues*') writes '*while* the venerable churchman climbs the ramps of Angloulême, it won't be useless to explain, etc.' (Genette 2004: 22; Genette's emphasis, my translation).² The metalepsis here emphasises that it takes time to climb a ramp by declaring that this gives the narrator time to convey some other information while the climbing is taking place. Adopting the conceit of doing something else *while* an event is happening in the fictional world is to mimic the way the real world works, in which certain actions require a certain amount of time, and to downplay the ability of fiction to dispose of time and space in any manner it sees fit.

We might, however, wonder whether metalepsis *in cinema* tends more universally towards the fantastic and paradoxical than it does in literature, because effects such as Genette's example from Balzac rely on the identity between the narrator's

² 'ou, si l'on préfère, le narrateur d'*Illusions perdues*'; '*Pendant que* le vénérable ecclésiastique monte les rampes d'Angloulême, il n'est pas inutile d'expliquer, etc.'

enunciation and the substance of the narrative, an identity which comes naturally to literature but that cinema can only, at best, imitate. In 1910, Berthold Viertel published an essay entitled "Im Kinematographentheater", or "In the Cinematic Theatre", where he described the experience of sitting in a Viennese movie theatre watching the German and Austrian kaisers watch a film that had been recorded that very morning and depicted none other than themselves. The two rulers

... saw a true likeness of themselves, one that appeared to speak, salute, and laugh. And the audience in the picture applauded. And the audience in the theater also applauded. And the monarchs in the picture showed their appreciation. And the real monarchs showed their appreciation in reality. But then, all of a sudden, one of the films ripped, and the theater went dark. At that very moment, shivers went down my spine. What?! Did that tear also go through the real people? Horrified, I asked myself: Who here is the real one?

(Viertel 2014 [1910]: 32)

Viertel has a metaleptical experience in the absence of any intention to generate one on the part of the filmmaker or projectionist. The experience of cinematic duplication is exhilarating (even the kaisers applaud) but also horrific and corrosive of our trust in the correspondence of our senses to reality. What kind of existence do cinematic images possess, and how does "real" reality relate to the indexical representation of reality? Which of the two is the more real? Cinema confronts us with what Viertel refers to as 'this terrifying doubleness [*Doppelgängertum*] of representation' (*ibid.*). Doublings and doppelgängers are prominent in a number of films made in the decade after Viertel's article, exploring the horror of the idea that our uniqueness can be undermined, but also

implicitly exploring the very nature of cinematic representation itself.³ Viertel's account is also suggestively reminiscent of specific moments in much later films. There is, for example, the ripping of the film which is also the ripping of a face at the beginning of a famous sequence in Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966). Towards the end of *INLAND EMPIRE*, the character played by Laura Dern watches herself on the big screen, 'in a dark theatre, before they bring the lights up', just as the kaisers did in 1910. The photograph's very realism (which the movement of cinema amplifies) is also the source of its most fantastic quality, that of *duplication*. It is this profound link between (realist) representation and (fantastical) duplication that enables these troubling metaleptical effects.

In his book *The Cinema, or The Imaginary Man*, originally published in 1956, Edgar Morin develops the implications of cinematic duplication with, it is true, a certain degree of speculation, but also with great clarity and fluency. He argues that 'at the hallucinatory encounter of the greatest subjectivity and the greatest objectivity, at the intersection of the greatest alienation and the greatest need, there is the *double*, the image-specter of man' (Morin 2005: 25). In Morin's sketch of the early history of the

³ Among these films are *Der Andere* (1913), *Der Student von Prag* (1913), *Der Golem* (1915) and *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920). (See Andriopoulos 2006.) The interest of cinema in doubles, twins, changelings and the like has never abated, being recently represented by Richard Ayoade's adaptation of Dostoyevsky in *The Double* (2013). Gilbert Cohen-Séat, originator of the filmology movement, argued that cinema 'ends by creating a universe which is added to our universe' (*Essai sur les principes d'une philosophie du cinéma* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1946: 24)), quoted in Lowry 1985: 35.

cinema, it is not that the wonderment of the realistic (as supplied by the Lumière brothers) is replaced, when its novelty fades, with the magical and fantastic, but something rather like the opposite. Techniques developed to produce magical effects become drained of the fantastic and given syntactical roles in order to support narrative realism:

We have given ghostly superimposition and doubling pride of place because they have for us the familiar traits of that "magic" already evoked, but also because they possess the characteristics proper to the new world of the cinema: *they are tricks whose effect is first of all fantastic, but that subsequently go on to become techniques of realist expression.* ... They are a part of this cluster of illusions that, once the fantastic recedes, will constitute the elementary and essential rhetoric of all film.

(*ibid.*: 51; emphasis in original)

The consequence of this is that fantasy becomes 'the preponderant fiction of the cinema. ... There is not an "either/or" of film realism and unrealism, but a dialectical totality with multiple forms. The truthful, the seemingly truthful, the incredible, the possible, the idealized, the stylized, defined objects, undefined music, combine in a mixture with infinite possibilities' (*ibid.*: 167).

The possibility of disorienting its spectators thus seems, to Morin, built in to the cinematic apparatus. For him, the process of viewing a film involves a kind of two-way traffic, where externalising and internalising movements are equally crucial. (We might remember the outward-looking and inward-looking images from *The Searchers* that I discussed in my introduction.) The cinematic spectator both projects into the film and

identifies with it, moves out into it and brings it into themselves. Morin subsumes these two movements under the term *participation*, which 'coincides exactly, to our mind, on the mental and affective plane, with the notion of projection-identification' (*ibid.*: 89). Cinema, then, makes it clear that subjectivism and the magical (or fantastic) have much in common:

... the subjective state and the magical thing are two moments of projection-identification. One is the nascent moment, blurred, hazy, "ineffable." The other is the moment where identification is taken literally, made substantial; where the alienated projection, lost, fixed, fetishized, becomes a thing: doubles, spirits, ghosts, bewitchment, possession, and metamorphosis are truly believed in.

(*ibid.*: 87)

What I find most valuable in Morin's account is the way he attempts to show that the very processes which enable us to engage emotionally with a narrative also render us vulnerable to uncanny metalepsis. By becoming lost (absorbed) in a film we cannot help but open ourselves up to the possibility of disorientation. As we will see in the next chapter, *INLAND EMPIRE* could almost be considered an allegory for this process: in a more extreme form of externalisation, moments in which characters literally identify with a projection are central to the film's narrative.

On the ontology of fiction: Étienne Souriau

and after I had seen

That spectacle, for many days, my brain

Worked with a dim and undetermined sense

Of unknown modes of being

(Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), I, 417-420)

It is a distinctive fact about the cinematic apparatus that it involves multiple channels of signification. In this it is unlike, for example, the novel: 'A novel is made only of words, so we can say that in this sense it has only one "channel". ... In cinema the signifying material is more diverse (images, sounds, dialogue, and so on), so there are many channels' (Metz 2016: 170). This is certainly true, although a novel can *feel* as if it has multiple channels; hence the great interest of tone and irony to the analyst (the very possibility of free indirect discourse relies on a separation between the words of the narration and what it actually *says*). The exploration of the impossible seems characteristic of art, as in paintings that evoke movement, or music that evokes stillness. Alain Badiou sees it as particularly characteristic of cinema: 'No painting will ever become music, no dance will ever turn into poem. All direct attempts of this sort are in vain. Nevertheless, cinema is effectively the organization of these impossible movements' (Badiou 2005: 82). I suggest that novels have one channel but explore the ways they can seem to have many, whereas cinema with its multiple and manifold channels explores the ways they can be entwined with one another.

One reason that cinema lends itself so readily to metaleptical narrative may, I speculate, be to do with its pluricodal nature and the resultant fact that it can be seen as composed of different *levels*. Making connections between different levels is part of cinema's bread and butter. One well-known, and still useful, taxonomy of cinematic levels is that put forward by Étienne Souriau in his article "La Structure de l'univers

filmique et le vocabulaire de la filmologie", published in the *Revue internationale de filmologie* (Souriau 1951). Thus, although I would not claim that cinema is intrinsically metaleptical, the way metalepsis highlights the intersection of different narrative levels can sensitise us to the way that an interaction between levels, in a more general sense, is characteristic of cinema.

Souriau's taxonomy involves seven levels, as follows: the *afilmic* (the real and ordinary world independent of the film), the *profilmic* (the space photographed by the film camera), the *filmographic* (the film as a physical, material, chemical object; the celluloid strip – or today the digital file), the *screenic* or *filmophanic* (the film as projected on the screen), the *diegetic* (the imaginary world created by the film),⁴ the *spectatorial* (all the subjective phenomena brought into play by the perceptual, mental, and psychological activities of film viewers) and finally the *creatorial* (the implied activity of the creator(s) of the film). The list is suggestive and useful, but even such a synoptic view is not exhaustive, because multiple layers can be in operation simultaneously *within* and *across* Souriau's categories: think for example of the possible operations of geometric, chromatic, gestural, sonic, musical, verbal and written information in a single film sequence.⁵ The interpretation of a gesture, say, might

⁴ Souriau was, significantly, '[t]he first scholar to use the term diegetic in the modern sense' (Winters 2010: 226).

⁵ The French notion of a cinematic "field" (*champ*) – the segment of the represented world that we can see, which exists in depth but is nevertheless bounded by the screen – is also not precisely covered by any of Souriau's levels.

require reference, at the very least, to the afilmic, profilmic, diegetic and spectatorial levels. In Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep* (1946), when Vivian Rutledge (Lauren Bacall) finally, at the encouragement of Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart), gives in and scratches her leg, we can only interpret her scratch by referring to contemporary social customs about the display of female legs in the presence of a male, and feminine decorum more generally (afilmic), to the actual scratch that Lauren Bacall, sat on a desk before a camera in 1945, gave herself (profilmic), to the significance of the encouragement to scratch, and the acquiescence to it, in the context of the developing relationship between Rutledge and Marlowe (diegetic), and to our positioning as spectators (presumed to be male?) who are, via the camera, shown a certain amount of Mrs. Rutledge's leg (spectatorial). (Or should that be Lauren Bacall's leg?) That which is theoretically separate (although simultaneous) also proves able to intersect. Even in a straightforward scene such as this, different levels can become, we might say, *entangled* with one another. In situations whose explanation requires simultaneous reference to multiple levels, we might even speak of "metaleptical explanation".⁶

⁶ As an example of an instance where a metaleptical explanation would be desirable, I offer George M. Wilson's remark that, at the end of Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005), 'it is implicitly suggested that we don't know that all of the image-track has not been fictionally derived from mysterious security cameras that somehow seem to be effectively present everywhere' (Wilson 2011: 101). Given the extent to which Haneke's film trades on the friction between our desire for a diegetically consistent explanation of its mysteries and the film's refusal to provide one, offering an explanation so resolutely diegetic – if nonetheless bordering on the fantastic, and therefore in tension with the general tenor of the diegesis – seems to me more of a distortion than a clarification. Better, I suggest, to admit that the

The ontological distinctions between the levels of Souriau's taxonomy are various and complex. The profilmic, for example, could be considered as a subset of the afilmic, as ontologically similar but distinguished by the fact that it is the target of a particular form of representation (that provided by the film camera). The diegetic level is distinct because its contents are fictional. But how does the ontology of fiction relate to that of the extrafictional, "real" world? Is the fictional simply the non-existent, of the same order as subjective fantasy? Besides his work explicitly on cinema, Souriau was a philosopher involved in issues of aesthetics and ontology much more generally; indeed, he 'was a philosopher before he was an aesthetician' (Lowry 1985: 76). For Souriau, '[a]rt differs... from most human activities, which are oriented towards events. Art is directed towards the production of beings, and thus toward ontology' (*ibid.*: 77). Hence the importance of a key term for Souriau, that of *instauration*, or, as paraphrased by Luce de Vitry-Maubrey, 'the ensemble of processes which result in establishing a being whose presence, solidity, and autonomy of existence are incontestable' (Vitry-Maubrey, *La pensée cosmologique d'Etienne Souriau* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1974), p. 219; quoted in Lowry 1985: 75). But what kind of being is this? In 1943, a decade before the lecture outlining his taxonomy of cinematic levels, Souriau published *The Different Modes of Existence* (Souriau 2015), a difficult and curious but also very stimulating attempt to allow for the possibility that when we say "to exist" we do not always mean the same

question cannot be solved from one side alone and to offer a metaleptical explanation that combines a diegetic aspect with reference to the way the film manipulates and deliberately frustrates spectator desire.

thing or, to put it another way, that there are different ways of existing.

Such abstract speculations may seem a little remote from metalepsis and cinema but if diegesis is something that operates according to our sense of reality, and if we want to understand how and why a diegesis can be confusing or disorientating, it is important to know as much as possible about that sense of reality. Souriau's comments about fictional existence are particularly relevant and interesting. As explicated by Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, in their introduction to the recent republication of Souriau's book, the philosopher is asking whether

... we finally have the right to grant existence to beings hitherto dismissed as belonging to the "purely subjective," for example, to the beings of fiction? To those phantoms, chimeras and imaginaries that are sometimes so inconsistent that we have great difficulty recalling or reconstructing the experience, and yet which sometimes seem endowed with such an insistence that they seem more "real" than the M. Durands, Duponds or Dufours with whom we are summoned to coexist?

(Stengers and Latour in Souriau 2015: 57-8)

Particularly interesting here is the pairing of the *inconsistent* with the *insistent*: perhaps it is exactly this combination which characterises fictional beings? Souriau argues that '[t]hese *mock-existences* or pseudo-realities are real; but also counterfeit in that they formally imitate the *réique*⁷ status, without having its consistency or, if we want to

⁷ "*Réique*" is a neologism coined by Souriau that might be translated as "thingly".

speak in this way, its matter' (Souriau 2015: 154). Both consistency and inconsistency are crucial to the fictional. It is not just that a degree of consistency is required for credibility; it is also impossible for fictional beings to be *without* inconsistency – there is no way they can possess the consistency of non-fictional beings (recall the remarks by Toles about the 'gaps' that spectators are 'committed to filling in' that I cited in the introduction). So fictional beings are merely imaginary, then? Not so fast, Souriau warns. As Stengers and Latour put it, 'the reader supports the work, but for all that he is not at liberty' (Stengers and Latour in Souriau 2015: 60):

There is a consistency specific to the beings of fiction, a specific type of objectivity that Souriau describes by the pretty word *syndoxic*. In a certain way, we all share Don Juan, Lucien de Rubempré, Papageno, the Venus de Milo, Madonna or *Friends*. Certainly this is about *doxa*, but a *doxa* that is sufficiently held in common that we can recognize these beings as having a specific form of monumentality. Our tastes can vary, but they focus on elements that are sufficiently apportioned to enable a shared analysis.

(*ibid.*: 58)

Hamlet does not exist in the same way that you or I exist, but his existence or non-existence is not simply a private matter. Hence one can, for example, say false things about him. What marks out fictional beings is not merely that their existence is purely phenomenological, but that they 'formally imitate the *réique* status, without having its consistency' (Souriau 2015: 154); they are distinguished from passing feelings or perceptions precisely in that they appear to have a more stable, consistent existence – akin to that of non-fictional beings – that they in fact lack. Fictional beings lack both the

consistency of the non-fictional and the freedom of the purely imaginary. Their existence is constrained. Fictional beings exist by means of our *solicitude*, the care or attention we give them.

Souriau describes the 'phantoms, chimeras and fairies that are the representations of the imagination, the beings of fiction' as 'fragile and inconsistent entities' (150). The fictional and the fantastic appear here, just as in Morin's work on cinema, to be fundamentally and inextricably entwined. As discussed above, Morin indicates the ways that films confuse representation and the fantastic (because of the tension between realism and duplication), a confusion that metalepsis can then exploit. Souriau, on the other hand, shows that if metalepsis foregrounds questions of fictional ontology, then it is necessary for us to consider our relation to the fictional beings in question, to examine the way they solicit our attention, emotions, or desires. One common name for this kind of solicitation is rhetoric, to which, in the final section of this chapter, I now turn my attention.

Metalepsis and rhetoric

Given that diegesis and ontology are crucial for the presence of metaleptical effects, one might think that these categories could be used to provide classificatory criteria, distinguishing films with multiple narratives but no metalepsis from those that do exhibit it. We could even construct something of a sliding scale without troubling such a taxonomy unduly. For example, Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999) features nine narrative strands, but all of them take place in the same world at the same time: no metalepsis here. In *Cloud Atlas*, on the other hand, although all its narratives

take place in the same world, they do so at different times spanning hundreds of years. Even without the intimations of reincarnation that dot the narrative, the presence in one narrative strand of written or filmed narratives (and an LP) that derive from another strand move us into a more metaleptical situation, though perhaps still only on the threshold of metalepsis proper. It is only when characters from fictions that are diegetically fictional, or that originate in diegetic dreams or fantasies, interact that we have metalepsis proper: no metalepsis without the fantastic, it appears. Such a map of the territory is not without value. Certainly, when narrative strands that have previously remained separate finally intersect, this is not enough to qualify as metalepsis, lest it proliferate uncontrollably. And yet this particular mapping will not do, because metalepsis is not simply a question of *fabula* (narrative events considered in the order they happen within the fictional world), but also of *sjuzhet* (the order in which the events are presented in the film). It is not merely a phenomenon that pertains to the logic of fictional worlds, permitting us to ignore the specific images, words and sounds which give rise to those worlds; metalepsis is also a matter of narration and figuration.

Take, for example, the famous "Wise Up" sequence in *Magnolia*, in which Aimee Mann's song "Wise Up" links the film's nine protagonists, who all sing it at the same time, though they remain separate from one another and have no knowledge that the other characters are also singing the same song. Ascribing a (diegetic) mystical connection to explain the sequence would be crass. Clearly, compared with the film up to this point, the sequence is unrealistic. But something unrealistic does not thereby necessarily become fantastic. Recalling the notion I introduced in the introduction of the possibility of becoming "stylistically lost", I think that the sequence is better approached in terms of dramatic mode and aesthetic risk, via what I suggested above one might call

a "metaleptical explanation" – an explanation that combines diegetic logic with rhetorical and affective impact. George Toles argues something very similar:

Anderson takes a mammoth risk by inserting a musical sequence so late in his narrative, without any preliminary warning or formal preparation for an eruption into song that is as serious as it is surreal. ... The entire fragile edifice of the film might well collapse if the "Wise Up" sequence registers as nothing more than bathos and authorial hubris. Anderson jettisons one well-established framework of representation (messy, snarled-up realism) and replaces it with a framework that is overtly choreographed, stylized, and highly compressed. He paradoxically makes his gentle, formally and emotionally contained musical montage *dangerous* by so brashly disregarding the rules of proper film storytelling and constructing his climax on a foundation of coincidence. ... And the number recklessly flirts with absurdity, apparent in such decisions as... having two singers... performing in states of unconsciousness.

(Toles 2016: 15)

Were the sequence to exist on its own as a music video there would be nothing either dangerous or metaleptical about it: the *song* would seem the primary diegetic level, one that is "illustrated", we might say, by its application to a range of different narratives. Diegetic questions are certainly not irrelevant to the sequence (it is true that coincidence is the sequence's diegetic foundation, not magic or telepathy) but they are not primary: what is primary is the set piece's aesthetic tightrope walk, which we could characterise as a highly self-aware instance of what Alex Clayton, following V.F. Perkins, calls aesthetic suspense. Clayton's account of aesthetic suspense meshes tightly with Toles's

discussion of the "Wise Up" sequence: it involves 'moments [which] punctuate without quite puncturing the film's drama and invitation to emotional investment', perhaps a play with 'arriv[ing] at, but not... pass[ing], the edge of absurdity' (Perkins's words, quoted by Clayton), or a director's deliberate toying with their 'pact of tolerance' with the spectator (Clayton 2016: 209 & 201). Tolerance is not the same as credibility, but straining either involves similar stakes. Are the risks that are taken with regard to the audience's credulity and patience, or with their sense that their emotional and aesthetic involvement in the film thus far has been fairly elicited by the filmmaker, adequately compensated by the particular affective and aesthetic qualities of the musical sequence?

The crucial lesson I take from this example, and with which I will close this chapter, is that diegetic questions cannot always be neatly sliced off from other questions – such as questions of form, tone and mood – which we might broadly claim to be aspects of a film's rhetoric. Without gauging the rhetorical stance of a film or a sequence in a film we cannot say anything useful about any metaleptical qualities it may possess; examining those metaleptical qualities can, in turn, be of importance in forming a view about the kind of rhetoric that is in play. Our understanding of rhetoric and of metalepsis can mutually shape and inform one another. This should be unsurprising if we remember the resistance to neat "slicing-up" that is characteristic of aesthetic confusion, in Baumgarten's sense.

I agree with Toles about coincidence in the "Wise Up" sequence, but I am not so sure about absurdity – or rather, he is right to say that absurdity is *flirted* with. We are likely to feel a touch of absurdity when an unconscious character sings, but this will only persist if we insist that the diegetic status of every incident in a film can always be

pinned down (are they *really* singing or not?). In fact, not all questions about diegetic status have an answer that is revealing: sometimes they may be best left unasked. They must be solicited by the work in question: *INLAND EMPIRE* does so to a degree that the "Wise Up" sequence in *Magnolia* does not, because our very understanding of the narrative of Lynch's film hinges on the answers to such questions, which is not the case with Anderson's film. To claim that problems about diegetic status must always have a solution is to refuse to recognise that diegetic status is a production, not a fact.⁸

⁸ To the viewer who remained sceptical about the "Wise Up" sequence, one could demonstrate its non-arbitrariness, its location in networks of patterning in *Magnolia*. A song (Mann's version of Harry Nilsson's "One") unites all the characters early on in the film but causes no alarm because it conforms to the convention of nondiegetic music. (It is the sense that the characters are singing to a nondiegetic song that makes the "Wise Up" sequence feel metaleptical.) We have also seen what Toles calls the 'overtly choreographed' earlier, in some very elaborate Steadycam shots, but again this artifice is covered by convention. The way the sequence relies on coincidence ties into what is one of the film's major themes, announced as such at its very outset (a narrator relates some – fictional – historical coincidences and asserts that "this is not just a matter of chance"). Finally, the way that the sequence borders on breaking the fourth wall connects both to Jim's (John C. Reilly) act of pretending to be in a police documentary, and to the film's final shot, in which Claudia (Melora Waters) looks directly at the camera.

chapter two

projecting into *INLAND EMPIRE*: "Disappeared where it's real hard to disappear."

In general, our consideration of the nature of contradiction has shown that it is not, so to speak, a blemish, an imperfection or a defect in something if a contradiction can be pointed out in it.

Hegel, *Science of Logic*

Early on in David Lynch's *INLAND EMPIRE* (2006), Nikki Grace (Laura Dern) and Devon Berk (Justin Theroux) are beginning the first rehearsal on the set of their new film, *On High in Blue Tomorrows*, in the presence of director Kingsley Stewart (Jeremy Irons) and his assistant Freddie (Harry Dean Stanton). Freddie hears a noise from the soundstage, which is supposed to have been cleared of other people. Devon goes to investigate, makes chase, but eventually loses whoever it is behind a row of theatrical flats representing the house belonging to Nikki's character in the film, Sue Blue. On his return to the others, Nikki asks Devon who it was. He replies that whoever they were, they "disappeared where it's real hard to disappear". It eventually transpires that what has taken place is an entanglement of reality and fiction, a metalepsis: the intruder was Sue Blue herself (or perhaps Nikki-playing-Sue, at a different point in time). Later in the film we see the intrusion from the intruder's point of view: following an arrow written shakily on a metal door below the words "Axxon N.", Dern's character emerges onto the soundstage, looking at herself! She runs, pursued by Devon, and eventually opens a door in what should be merely a façade and takes refuge in a building that should not exist.



figure 2.1: Devon heads off to investigate

Where is it "real hard to disappear"? And why? These scenes in *INLAND EMPIRE* activate ideas of location and confusion, logic and paradox. In this chapter I want to suggest that attempting to produce a single, wholly consistent and coherent interpretation of Lynch's film may be misguided, but that this does not imply that we should therefore abandon all investigation into the film's consistency and coherence and just give ourselves up to disorientation.¹ I shall illustrate this by outlining three different strategies for reading the film, each of which will develop out of omissions in the previous reading. First, however, I shall situate my reading in the broader context of my thesis by outlining certain thematic and theoretical concerns relating to the idea of our "position" with regard to a film and the relationship between its objective and subjective dimensions. Even highly disorientating or ambiguous situations can be discovered to

¹ Some have suggested that we should. Michael Atkinson, reviewing *INLAND EMPIRE*, claims that the frustration experienced by many critics and viewers comes about because they have 'expected a narrative clarity where there is none, and searched for irrelevant codes and readings even as they ignored the sensual experience they had, dozily lost in the underlit corridors of Lynch's imagination' (Atkinson 2007). Though I would challenge such readings, they are far from inexplicable; Jennifer Pranolo's statement that *INLAND EMPIRE* is 'arguably Lynch's most inscrutable work to date' is perfectly reasonable (Pranolo 2011: 477).

operate according to certain constraints and attending to these constraints, I will argue, can be critically productive.

How do we know where we are?

In my introduction, I highlighted the connections between the ways we might talk about being lost in a place and being lost with respect to a film. It might be that it is when we are lost that we become most conscious of our location or situation: disorientation emphasises our desire for orientation. But if we get lost while watching a film we need not rush too quickly to find ourselves again; when our position is unclear, the very way such a lack of clarity operates can help to elucidate how the film is working. Many films, and not just the noirs studied by Robert Pippin, raise questions about the activities and understandings of agents, and may show 'how unstable, provisional and often self-deceived are their claims to self-knowledge, and how little in control they are of their criteria for deliberation' (Pippin 2012: 4). If there are lessons to be taken from this for our ordinary lives, we may assume them to extend to how we watch and understand films. Films can trick us or cause us to self-deceive in a great many ways. Nevertheless, precisely because our 'criteria for deliberation' can seem beyond our control, there may be useful information to be gained by reflecting on what they might be. When we are bewildered or disorientated by a film, reflection on what we *do*, nevertheless, think or feel often reveals our thoughts and feelings to be interestingly constrained, and the nature of these constraints can serve a crucial orientational function. We may still, of course, come to decide that we were in error, but we are very rarely *completely* at sea at any point.

It is not, of course, the case that the structures by means of which films become meaningful to us *determine* their meaning. But studying them can inform and enrich our critical engagement with films. The hermeneutic traditions that most interest me are united by their shared interest in, and respect for, the film as text. They attempt a responsible engagement with cinema which does not deny the contribution of personal response, but which attempts to ground such responses in the details of the film, arguing for a position in such a way that others can return to the film and decide whether or not they are persuaded by an argument. I find Martha Nochimson's reading of *Mulholland Dr.* (2001) to be an example of a rather irresponsible reading of a Lynch film. The claim that the diegetic events of the film take place in the order in which they are presented to us, and that it is merely 'a widespread misunderstanding that the film divides into dream and reality' (Nochimson 2004: 180) is certainly bold and unusual, but Nochimson makes no attempt to engage with the (many and manifold) textual details that suggest a division into dream and reality, or even those (such as the piano-shaped ashtray) which suggest that certain events are not presented in the diegetically "correct" order. Nochimson provides no compelling reason to entertain her reading when the "standard" reading incorporates so many more of the film's details more parsimoniously.

It seems that we cannot even perceive the world without organising – constraining – our perception. Neuroscientist Jeffrey Zacks points out that we create models even at the level of perception, to organise what we see. The frequent invisibility of continuity errors is an index of this:

If a continuity error introduces a discrepancy between the model of the situation before the cut and the model of the situation after the cut, you have a much

better chance of detecting it. But so much information never makes it into the model in the first place! ... We experience the rich representations of visual persistence, so we think we have access to them later when we go to remember. But what we actually have access to is a sketchy, incomplete model.

(Zacks 2015: 234)

Making such models, and being constrained by them, is inevitable; we could think of the examples from *Vampyr* I cited in the introduction in these terms, as an exploitation by Dreyer of the way we are constrained by the models we construct. David Lynch has indicated a way that this can be seen as a resource rather than a limitation. Even if we find a film to be oblique in the extreme, we are likely to react against an interpretation with which we do not agree, as Lynch explained in a question and answer session:

And another thing I say is, if you go after a film – withholding abstractions – to a coffee place, and having coffee with your friends, someone will say something and immediately you'll say, "No, no, no, no, that's not what that was about! This was what..." And so many things come out, they're surprising, so you *do* know, you *do* know, for yourself. And what you know is valid.

(mondovich 2007)

I do not take the import of Lynch's observation to be that all interpretations are equal (he claims that 'what you *know* is *valid*', not 'whatever you *think* is *correct*'). Rather, I am interested in his description of how our reaction to what we feel to be an erroneous or inadequate account of a film can prompt an awareness of the interpretational activity we have undertaken while watching it (even if we were unaware of doing so), as well as the evidential basis for the resulting interpretation (including the relevant schemas or

constraints).

I am using "constraint" here in a neutral – rather than a pejorative – sense intended to indicate that, as I discussed in the introduction, critical interpretations of films are matters neither of subjective whim nor of objective proof. To return to the orientational metaphors with which I began this thesis, one could compare constraints to landmarks. When we attempt to orientate ourselves in an unfamiliar location, there will often be a choice of possible landmarks. If we chop and change between them too much, however, we are likely only to end up disorientating ourselves further. Having chosen a landmark, or a particular collection of landmarks, we often do best to stick with them. I am attracted to the connotations of restriction, of an absence of free choice, that the notion of constraint generates precisely because I will, in this thesis, frequently make reference to the interpretive multiplicity or indeterminacy that can derive from confusing films. These multiplicities or indeterminacies are often of crucial importance, but it is not – or should not – be a question of giving equal weight to any bright idea that a film might generate in us. Our experience even of highly disorientating narrative films can, I want to claim, be constrained in ways that can themselves be put to productive use as orientational tools.

Projection and coherence in INLAND EMPIRE

I turn now to an in-depth analysis of *INLAND EMPIRE* in order to articulate the unusual and disorientating ways that it probes the relationship between textual constraint and subjective response. In the very first moments of the film a beam of light illuminates or projects the outlines of the words INLAND EMPIRE in capital letters. At

pivotal narrative moments in the film Lynch deploys a type of shot sequence that I shall call the projection sequence, wherein a character's literal and psychological points of view seem to intertwine in an "impossible" – metaleptical – fashion. A character is shown looking towards something, followed by a reverse shot indicating that what they are looking at is themselves, at another point in space and time, after which another shot shows that one of the two versions of the character has disappeared. They have, presumably, "projected into" another version of themselves. A phenomenon of psychological derivation is made into a "literal" – if fantastical – diegetic reality. Projection becomes, in *INLAND EMPIRE*, not merely a useful metaphor for grasping the film's thematic operations, but also a feature of the narrative.

Warren Buckland points out that this device 'is highly unusual, but not unique; Kubrick uses it towards the end of *2001* (1968), when Bowman is in the white room and sees an older version of himself. Once we see the older Bowman, the younger one disappears, and the film continues with the older man' (Buckland 2013: 243). Comparable sequences also appear in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, a short 1943 film made by Maya Deren with her husband Alexander Hammid, in which a dreamer (played by Deren) watches herself from a window. Each dream-self seems to generate yet another self, but unlike in *INLAND EMPIRE* these projections do not replace one another but multiply, until three different Derens sit around the kitchen table. The device also has a precursor in Lynch's previous film. There is an apparent shot/reverse-shot of a single character at the beginning of the second part of *Mulholland Dr.* Diane Selwyn (Naomi Watts), who we have previously known as Betty Elms, is distraught at the break-up of her relationship with Camilla Rhodes (Laura Elena Harring). We see Diane from behind, standing at her kitchen sink. She turns to her left, at which point her dishevelled

face, which has clearly been crying, breaks into a smile as she says "Camilla! You've come back!" A reverse shot shows us Camilla at her most glamorous. Tears of emotion come to Diane's eyes, and she sighs in excitement, only for her tears and sighs of joy to become sobs of horror as her face contorts into a grimace. Another reverse shot shows us Diane herself, washed-out and hard-faced, apparently looking towards her hysterical self with weary contempt. The editing here shows us the collapse of fantasy into reality: the longed-for return of the lover is only a figment of the imagination, and hence there is nothing to see but oneself. In *INLAND EMPIRE*, however, the diegetic status of the projection shots is more ambiguous; we cannot be at all confident that it is possible to recuperate them in a non-fantastic fashion as the representations of a disturbed mind.

The first "projection sequence" happens at the end of the visit Nikki Grace receives from Grace Zabriskie's "Visitor #1". Following her visitor's pointing finger, Nikki looks across the room and sees herself a day later, about to hear from her agent that she has got the part of Sue Blue; a reverse shot shows only an empty room, into which her butler comes with the telephone.² The second occurs when Sue, played by Nikki, unexpectedly finds herself on the soundstage of *On High In Blue Tomorrows*, looking back through time at herself during the first read-through. It is the "earlier" Nikki, rather than the intruder, who disappears. The two projection sequences, then,

² The sense that the visitor has somehow brought about this strange sequence reminds me of a remark made by Tom Gunning about the fondness of another director, also interested in the fantastic and in the uncanny powers of the gaze, for metalectical effects: '[Fritz] Lang at points seems to confuse the clear separation between diegetic story and action and extradiegetic style, as characters seem to exert control over the visual devices of the film itself, especially its editing' (Gunning 2000: 16).

differ in terms of which version of Laura Dern's character(s) it is that disappears. In the first sequence it is the watcher who disappears; in the second sequence, the watcher remains while the one being watched vanishes. We could, just about, explain the first projection sequence as a simple temporal ellipsis, a jump forward in time (perhaps Nikki did not "really" see herself on the sofa), but the second time an event we have already seen is altered. When Sue emerges on to the soundstage her gaze causes her earlier self to disappear; the clarity of the distinctions between what is diegetically real and diegetically fictional, between what happened "then" and what is happening "now", begins to become seriously compromised.



figure 2.2: Nikki, Kingsley and Freddie look on as Devon investigates (28' 17") but later, as Sue looks on, Nikki is nowhere to be seen (59' 13")

These metaleptical "projection sequences", therefore, bring the narrative into a realm of paradox. But need we simply conclude that Lynch has made a paradoxical film, about which more general claims are impossible, because they will always be confronted by inconsistency? Do the metaphorical, thematic implications of "projection" fully motivate these and other, similar sequences? Must we choose either to orientate ourselves by using thematic explanation to dissolve the sense of disorientation or to dwell with that disorientation and give up any attempt at orientation? Or, echoing the strategies of "metaleptical explanation" I suggested in the previous chapter with regard to *Caché* and the "Wake Up" sequence in *Magnolia*, might we be able to

articulate the film's coherence – by which I simply mean the way that it comprises a whole – in a way which clarifies where we are in relation to it, without explaining away its mysteriousness?

In the remainder of this chapter I shall attempt to do this by engaging in different strategies of reading, each of which will accommodate differing interpretations. Significance will turn out to depend on our interpretive decisions. This is by no means to say that we can make *INLAND EMPIRE* mean "anything we want it to"; on the contrary, I will try to show how the film – as text – is responsive to our critical decisions. But we cannot securely rely on the film to indicate which of its elements are the most important and thus, more than with most films, what we decide to omit in any given reading (and all readings must omit *something*) is likely to turn out, in an alternative reading, to be of central importance. Before outlining these three different strategies, some remarks on the relation of parts to wholes in *INLAND EMPIRE* will be helpful.

In his famous lecture on 'The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences', physicist Eugene Wigner paraphrases a question he was once asked:

How do we know that, if we made a theory which ... disregards some of the phenomena now commanding our attention, that we could not build another theory which has little in common with the present one but which, nevertheless, explains just as many phenomena as the present theory?

(Wigner 1960: 1)

He concluded that it 'has to be admitted that we have no definite evidence that there is no such theory' (*ibid.*). Something similar, I will argue, will prove to be the case with

Lynch's film. Different interpretations *within* a given strategy will differ in the weight they give to agreed-upon sets of data. But in considering each strategy as a whole we will find it to have blind spots which, when noticed, demand to be prioritised. If we accede to such demands, we will find our entire reading strategy to be reconstituted. Somewhat ironically, I do want to attempt a fairly comprehensive reading, in the sense at least of leaving out as little as possible that *might* be important.³ This of course is a logic that leads towards the impossible notion of including everything. But it seems to me necessary to gesture in this direction, even at the price of some awkwardness or unwieldiness, precisely because my argument has to do with the absence, in *INLAND EMPIRE*, of the kinds of cues towards relative significance that we usually take for granted. Hence it seems proper, in my reading, to take as little as possible for granted.



figure 2.3: David Lynch, "Fish Kit" (still from David Lynch: The Art Life [Nguyen, Neergaard-Holm & Barnes:2016])

We might say that local orientation is possible in this film, but only at the price of emphasising global disorientation. The problematic relationship of part to whole has

³ I'm conscious, for example, of not having found a place for the scene where Nikki says to what may be her husband's parents that she understands some Polish, but doesn't speak it.

long been a concern for Lynch. Michel Chion observes that '[e]ven as he seeks to recreate a unity, Lynch seems to aim for the part as such to subsist, the part which is incommensurable with the whole' (Chion 1995: 181). As a young man, Lynch made "kits" out of the parts of dissected animals, pointing out the difference between a complete collection of parts and a whole. Hence Chion's decision to name his alphabetical discussion of important elements in Lynch's work as a "Lynch-kit", and to describe it as 'an attempt to reconstitute an impossible whole' (ibid.: 161).

In problematising the possibility of securely interpreting the relation of its parts to its whole, *INLAND EMPIRE* has something in common with Herman Melville's last novel, *The Confidence-Man* (1857). Like Lynch's film, Melville's novel supplies no secure place from which to judge its narrative. In it, a sequence of confidence tricksters (or perhaps a single trickster in varied disguises) continually undermines interpretational security. As Peter J. Bellis has argued, we ourselves fall victim to a con if we assume that all elements of the work can be accounted for in a single consistent interpretation. But we are nonetheless constantly challenged to determine truth from falsehood, philosophy from sophistry. Bellis argues that consistent readings of *The Confidence-Man*:

... are produced not by interpretation but by exclusion. ... Most critics are quick to spot the temptations to "confidence" in *The Confidence-Man*, but they must ignore the way in which the text itself is a temptation to interpretive confidence. The "standard line" in fact proves rather gullible in the end – about the identifiability, self-consistency, and unity of both selves and texts.

(Bellis 1987: 568)

INLAND EMPIRE is concerned much more with 'the identifiability, self-consistency, and unity of... selves' than with gullibility but here, also, interpretation – in the sense of producing a coherent account of the film – seems possible only at the cost of completeness. More than any other of Lynch's works, in fact, *INLAND EMPIRE* brings coherence into conflict with completeness. No reading of the film that I have encountered finds a convincing place for everything in the film. But neither does the fact that each reading has lacunae mean that no reading is possible other than one based on purely subjective assertion. Rather, I suggest, the film is constructed in such a way as to render possible a large number of mutually incompatible readings, which are each consistent as long as they pay the price of omitting one or more elements.⁴ It is not that we have no idea where we are with regard to the film, but that we cannot know *exactly* where we are. Something always remains unlocatable. As Brian Rourke puts it: 'While the viewer can pursue a dizzying array of options in imposing coherence on the film, none works without remainder' (Rourke 2016). I would merely question Rourke's use of the word "imposing" here, which to me implies an excessively one-sided view, wherein the film outstrips all coherence and thus requires that – if we want to demand coherence of it – we can produce it only by distorting the film by using frameworks imported from elsewhere. I believe the situation to be more delicate than this. We can respond to the interpretive invitations that the film offers us, but we must also be sensitive to the pitfalls they present and the gaps or limitations they exhibit.

⁴ The film's form recalls something Ezra Pound once said about the form of his *Cantos*: 'It had to be a form that wouldn't exclude something merely because it didn't fit' (quoted in McGann 1988: 8).

I should make clear that the tripartite structure of the argument that follows is more of a conceit than a critical claim in itself. I do not wish to argue that the film encourages precisely the progression between different reading strategies that my chapter follows; nor does everything I have to say fit neatly into one of the three approaches. My hope is rather that the structure I have used may demonstrate, or perhaps even dramatize, an oscillation between, on the one hand, a confidence that the film is responsive to our investigation of it and, on the other, a nagging feeling that, as Rourke puts it, one cannot fit it all together without contradiction or remainder. I do not propose the exact trajectory outlined here as the best, let alone the only, possible account of a critical response that does justice to the film. Rather, I hope to establish the possibility that searching for appropriate means of orientation with regard to this film may lead us to have this *kind* of critical relationship with it.

The Lost Girl

It seems appropriate to begin by searching for an account of the film that accommodates as much as possible. But how to do so? The film opens with a bewildering abundance of material, which I will attempt to give a flavour of. Two black and white sequences follow the film's opening image of the projector beam and the title. The first consists mostly of close-ups of a turntable – its needle and the record spinning upon it – over which we hear a male voice scratchily announcing "*Axxon N.*, the longest running radio play in history! Tonight, continuing in the Baltic region, a gray winter day in an old hotel". Then we see a hotel corridor and a man and woman. The latter says, in Polish, that she doesn't recognise the hallway. Their faces blurred, they enter the room

and discuss "what whores do". Blurred facial close-ups indicate that the man gets the woman to do just that. She says, twice, that she is afraid. Then the low, threatening drones that have accompanied all the images thus far give way to the lighter, ethereal sounds of a female voice claiming that she "sing[s] this poem to you, on the other side I see". The image, still black and white, resolves into the woman sitting on the bed, alone, though her face is still blurred out, as if to protect her identity in the manner of surveillance footage shown on television. We cut to her point of view of the other side of the room, where her abandoned shoes are still lying on the floor next to the sofa and there is a standard lamp in the corner.



figure 2.4: the Lost Girl appears in colour for the first time

Then there is an abrupt transition to colour. A close-up looking directly into a camera lens (though exactly what kind of lens is difficult to tell) is superimposed on a slightly wider version of the penultimate black and white shot. A dark-haired woman is sitting on a bed covered in a green bedspread, naked apart from a red dress that she holds against herself; she will only be named as the Lost Girl at the very end of the film, if we pay attention to the credits (she is played by Karolina Gruszka). She is not looking towards us but off to screen right towards, as the next shot reveals, a television showing only static. We briefly see the television over her shoulder and then, finally, are given a close-up of her face, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her television screen fills with strange sped-up images of three humans with large rabbit heads in a room that

resembles a sitcom set, followed by a woman walking to the front door of a palatial house. This, we will soon learn, is the material that is immediately to follow in *INLAND EMPIRE*. We zoom in on this Lost Girl's crying eyes as the voice sings "It's far away, far away from me", before we dissolve to the rabbits' room and watch, now at normal speed, what the Lost Girl was watching.

Despite the sense of disorientation that this complex and bizarre opening is, I think, sure to generate in every first-time viewer, there is a great deal in it that prompts us both to consider the Lost Girl as the centre of the film and to identify to some extent with her, both emotionally and perspectively. Emotionally, there is her evident pain and suffering, as well as the affective qualities of the music, which is clearly linked to the Lost Girl; perspectively, there is the fact that what she watches on her television turns out to be the same – or at least very similar – to what we watch on the cinema screen. If we respond positively to these invitations a relatively coherent account of *INLAND EMPIRE* as the Lost Girl's story is not too difficult to construct. Her next appearance makes it clear that her contact with Nikki/Sue is crucial: she provides Laura Dern's character(s) with the means "to see" (by burning a hole in silk and looking through it while wearing a watch). We are given views of the Lost Girl's past, in which she seems possibly to have been married to the man we know as the Phantom (Krzysztof Majchrzak) and to have committed at least one murder. She later contacts the man we know both as Nikki Grace's husband and, in another reality, as Sue Blue's husband (played by Peter J. Lucas) in some kind of séance, and laments that she doesn't know where she is. But the gun that Lucas's character is given after the séance enables Nikki, once she has fully acknowledged that the Lost Girl is watching her, to destroy the Phantom and to liberate the Lost Girl with a kiss. At this point Nikki disappears, having

fulfilled her purpose, and the Lost Girl is tearfully reunited with her husband (Peter J. Lucas again) and their son (identified in the credits as "Smithy's son"), who we see for the first and only time. The resolution of the problem that was established at the beginning is underlined by the only other appearance of the song we hear at the beginning of the film (written by Lynch, it is titled "Polish Poem", and sung by Chrysta Bell). The song is only now allowed to run for its full length; at its end we learn that, finally, "something is happening".

A number of critics agree that *INLAND EMPIRE* is the Lost Girl's story. Todd McGowan is clear that the film's centre is the Lost Girl, who has a 'traumatising sexual encounter', after which 'she sits on a chair [sic] crying and watching the television, which unfolds a fantasmic drama that ultimately transforms her situation and reunites her with her husband and son' (McGowan 2010: 8). VanCleeve Taggart sees the film's nested narratives as consisting, precisely, of a hierarchy of nested projections. Although, plausibly, Taggart locates the Lost Girl herself as a character within *Axxon N.*, she nonetheless views her as the "projector" of everything she watches on her television, which is to say the vast majority of *INLAND EMPIRE*. But considering the Lost Girl as central in this way need not require us to buy in to the narrative of her redemption. For Jonathan Goodwin the resolution of her narrative is savagely ironic:

The idol materializes, and the kiss signifies the completion of the Lost Girl's atonement fantasy. She is reunited with her husband and family. But the actual message here is that nothing has changed. The film's epilogue depicts the vehicle of transformation – the actress Nikki Grace – in an enlightened state being ritually praised by prostitutes, figurants, and other cinematic illusions. The Lost

Girl has returned to her, by comparison, drab reality and is now satisfied with it; but the implicit comparison with the exultancy of Grace's ascent makes her atonement and reconciliation seem almost a cruel joke.

(Goodwin 2014: 318)

Goodwin's reading is ingenious but I have difficulty seeing it as supported by the film. There is nothing in the film that specifically indicates that the emotional reunion of the nuclear family should be considered "drab". The Lost Girl is not returned, satisfied, to a reality she was previously dissatisfied with but is released from a prison – the hotel room – into the reality and the relationships she was desperate to reconnect with. (When we are first shown her modern husband's duplicate in the Polish past – Peter J. Lucas with a moustache – we cut three times to the familiar close-up of the Lost Girl, her lips parting in yearning and suppressed anticipation; we also cut to her, weeping more intensely than usual, when we see him murdered.) We have earlier seen Peter J. Lucas in the same set beating Dern's character – the Lost Girl's surrogate, we assume – because he can't father children but she is nevertheless pregnant. Now he comes in happily with a young boy, and so forgiveness cannot be far from our minds. And since we have seen another version of him lying dead on a Polish street, we also think of resurrection. (Or, since she previously had to be contacted via a séance, perhaps it is the Lost Girl herself who is resurrected.) The film gives us no reasons I can see to suppose that forgiveness or returning to life are, at this point, to be considered as "cruel jokes".

Nevertheless, the double ending is certainly problematic. Taggart's reading is a little too neat in its construction of a fully coherent hierarchy of projections. As the film moves towards its ending, the connections that seemed previously to be parallel threads

of narrative in different times, as some kind of curse doomed the same story to happen over and over again, now appear to be collapsing in on one another, leaving us with the Lost Girl, no longer lost but found, the curse having been lifted. And yet, if Nikki is merely the Lost Girl's fantasmic projection, or at least merely the instrument of her liberation or redemption, should she not leave the film after the kiss which makes her disappear? But, as Goodwin notes, she does not.

Instead, we find her back again in what was once the rabbits' room, looking out at an empty auditorium from which we hear the sound of applause, after which we return to the meeting with her first visitor. The first time around she had a vision of the action which, it turned out, comprised the majority of the film. This time she has a vision of herself sitting serenely in a pale blue dress, and it is this same self who appears in the final, ecstatic coda. The two different versions of the soundstage scene occur within half an hour of each other, but the viewer has to wait almost two and a half hours to see a different version of this first projection sequence, giving it great structural and affective weight. If Nikki is merely the Lost Girl's fantasy or projection, should the coda not be the Lost Girl's vision? But there is no indication that the Lost Girl has any more visions after, or during, the reunion with her family. Rather than reaffirming the connection between Nikki and the Lost Girl, or collapsing the two personae into a single person, the conclusion seems to separate them out from one another.

It seems, therefore, that considering the film's action as neatly wrapped up in the Lost Girl's narrative cannot really contain the film's conclusion, which is a rather major element of the film for a reading not to be able to account for (this might perhaps be one reason for Goodwin's perception of the ending as a 'cruel joke', though he does not make

this argument). The film seems, rather, to present an instance of what Robert Pippin calls 'being bound up in overlapping fantasies' (Pippin 2017a: 84). Nikki's fantasy or vision is given an importance that is incomprehensible if she herself is merely a fantasy. So she must be "real" – but in what sense? Rourke's claim that '[w]ithin the fabula, this final victory is seen by no one and has no discernible effect' (Rourke 2016) is unsatisfactory. Within which fabula, or whose fabula? Does this not beg the question of how the fabula in the film is to be established at all? Not to mention the fact that the final scenes certainly have an effect on the viewer. Should we postulate that Nikki and the Lost Girl exist in parallel worlds of equal diegetic status that fantastically connect? Or is there another way of reading the situation?

One possibility would be to reconsider the relationship between syuzhet and fabula. Daniel Neofetou has suggested, a little too broadly, that Lynch's film's 'could often be said to have syuzhets without fabulas' (Neofetou 2012: 11). In this he goes too far. There is no Lynch film where a fabula cannot at least partly be reconstructed from its syuzhet but, nevertheless, the proposition is not unhelpful because it reminds us to be wary of the fact that the fabula is always a reconstruction, never something we are presented with directly. *Lost Highway* might be Lynch's boldest foray into such territory, because the narrative is explicitly paradoxical: its end is its beginning, and Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) is (like the film's Mystery Man [Robert Blake]) in two places at once, both downstairs speaking into the intercom and upstairs listening to it. Petra Kallweit (using the distinction between *histoire* and *discours* which, for my purposes here, can be considered equivalent to that between fabula and *sjuzhet*) derives from this the argument that it is possible to 'show that differences (before – after; inside – outside; here – there) are pure *discours*-phenomena that no longer correspond at any point to the

histoire. Meaning would then – according to this manner of reading – be purely an effect of signification, that is, an illusion' (Kallweit 2005: 224; my translation).⁵ We might even see this as the fundamental trick of linear narrative: to make us willingly entertain the notion that its linearity is merely a way of unfolding something that exists, as it were, outside time, as a consistent totality. Roland Barthes observes that 'rereading draws the text out of its internal chronology ("this happens *before* or *after* that") and recaptures a mythic time (without *before* or *after*)' (Barthes 1990: 16), as if, that is, one could build a physical model of a story, existing all at once, and it is merely a contingent limitation of our condition that it happens to take us a while to explore it bit by bit. But the really startling realisation that Lynch's work can give rise to is not, I think, that the fabula is merely a reconstruction – this is easy to realise and accept – nor that it is sometimes impossible to piece together a coherent one. Rather, the surprise is how easily this is concealed. Or, we might say, how surprisingly little disoriented we are by inconsistency, in the right conditions. *Lost Highway* demonstrates impeccably how well a syuzhet without a consistent (non-paradoxical) fabula gets on without one, how much we rely on the promise of one (the expectation of future explanation and clarification), rather than there being anything in the nature of linear storytelling which requires such a fabula to exist in order for the syuzhet to be followable.

INLAND EMPIRE does not operate quite like *Lost Highway*; its complexities do

⁵ '... Differenzen (vorher – nachher; innen – außen; hier – dort) als reine *discours*-Phänomene erweisen, denen kein Punkt der *histoire* mehr entspricht. Bedeutung wäre dann – folgt man dieser Lesart – ein reiner Signifikanten-Effekt, also eine Illusion.'

not result so much from direct presentation of paradox. But it does explicitly put into question the very possibility of passing from our sense of '*before* or *after*' into a region '*without before* or *after*'. One of Dern's characters articulates this explicitly: "I don't know what was before or after. I don't know what happened first. And it's kinda laid a mindfuck on me."⁶ Even so, it is the excess of material rather than its indeterminacy that causes the real difficulties. (Recall my description of the film's opening; many details remain unaccounted for, not least the function of the shift from black and white into colour.) Rourke puts it well when he argues that '[t]he difficulty results from a surplus of narrative series within the *sjuzet*, rather than an incomplete or incoherent *fabula*' (Rourke 2016). In his own reading, however, Rourke still insists on constructing a singular *fabula*, even if this requires going beyond any textual warrant. His suggestion that the 'young woman who immigrated to the US from Poland' (about whom 'one can never be certain whether her image appears on camera directly, though she most likely resembles the "Lost Girl") during her childhood 'enjoyed listening with her mother to recordings of a family collection of old radio plays on a phonograph' (Rourke 2016) is based on nothing more than imaginative speculation. In fact *INLAND EMPIRE* shows how Barthes's different times depend on one another: if the internal chronology of a text admits of different readings, then so must its "mythic time". What might happen if we set aside for the moment the quest for a single *fabula*? What other strategies might be open to us?

⁶ Similar notions makes frequent appearances in Lynch's oeuvre, most recently in Mike's repeated question in *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017): "Is it future or is it past?"

Laura Dern and her characters

If we read the film with the Lost Girl at its centre, the séance scene in which the Polish husband makes contact with the Lost Girl is absolutely crucial, connecting as it does all of the film's most important narrative threads. These include the relation of the Lost Girl to her husband and of Poland to Los Angeles as well as the notion of the Rabbits as transitional figures facilitating the quest to destroy the Phantom (the three old men present at the séance give the husband a gun which he then places for Dern's character to find and use to kill the Phantom, after which they transform into the Rabbits). And yet the scene is not often commented upon either in reviews or criticism, and I suggest that one reason for this is that Laura Dern does not appear in it. Her performance – in what she herself has described as 'the greatest experience I've had as an actor' (Lynch and McKenna 2018: 425) – so strongly gathers our attention that when a key narrative scene appearing almost exactly two thirds of the way through the film – perfectly placed to supply narrative clarity preparatory to the build-up to the final conflict – does not include her it is very hard for us to feel it to be genuinely crucial.

A very obvious feature of Dern's performance is that she plays a number of characters. There are at least two, Nikki Grace and Susan Blue, but their relationship is sufficiently obscure that we cannot discount the possibility that there are still others: is the woman who tells her stories to Mr. K. (Erik Crary) Sue, Nikki or a third persona?⁷

⁷ G. Smalley takes things to extremes: 'She [Dern] possibly plays as many as six or seven characters, depending on whether you chose to see the woman who fights with her husband when she announces she's pregnant, the woman at the outdoor barbecue, or the woman who hangs out with the prostitutes

Dern is not the kind of actor to become almost unrecognizable in different roles, but she is able to bring about very different effects via characteristic mannerisms, which prevents them from really being mannerisms. This is true in her work across Lynch's oeuvre but here it is concentrated in a single film. There is in Dern's performance a reweighting of an ensemble of devices (a repertoire of gestures, of vocal inflections, and so forth), one example of which is a certain way of speaking with her lips only slightly parted and barely moving.

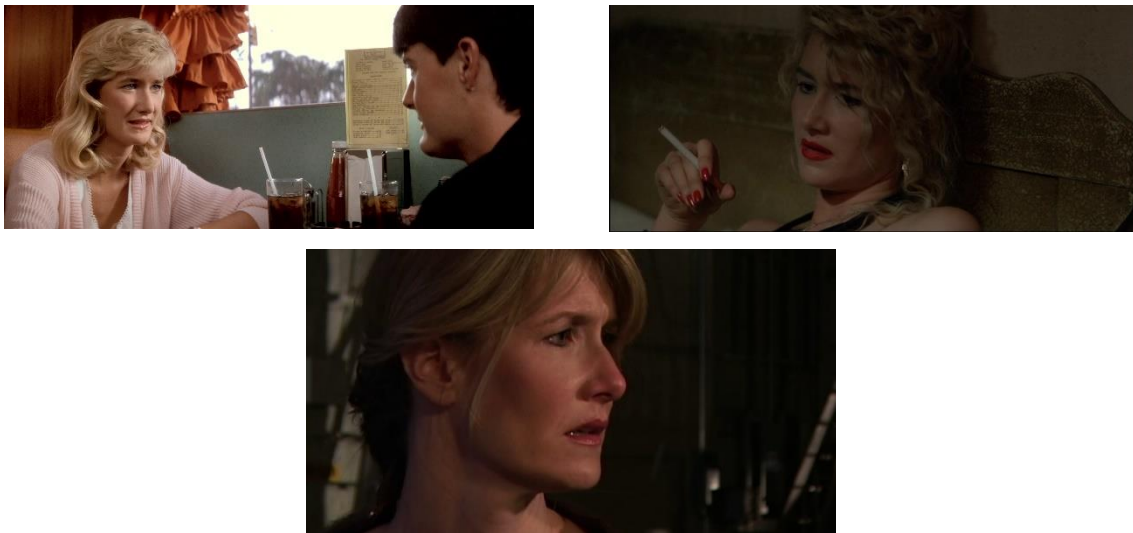


figure 2.5 Sandy, Lula, and Nikki: Laura Dern speaks while barely moving her lips, variously conveying concern and curiosity (Blue Velvet), fear and desire (Wild at Heart), or sorrow and guilt (INLAND EMPIRE).

The fact of the mannerisms is hardly surprising – it would be true even for a "chameleonic" actor if we looked hard enough – but that she is versatile while remaining very recognizable is in fact very appropriate for the kind of disorientations that *INLAND EMPIRE* produces. An actor more given to virtuosic displays of range – a

as having a separate identity or not.' (Smalley 2010)

Daniel Day Lewis or a Tom Hardy, say – might have signalled the distinctions between characters *too* clearly, diminishing the sense that each bleeds disorientatingly into one another.

The need for recognition and the desire for consistency of character, or rather the fear of their absence or loss, are insisted on throughout the film: Sue and the Polish Lost Girl both implore others to "Look at me and tell me *ifwhether* you've known me before!" A. J. Greimas once analysed how narrative coherence is maintained across a flashback in Maupassant's short story "Deux Amis": 'Identification ... implies the neutralization of the temporal category *present vs past*... The cognitive operation therefore establishes the dominance of the relation of identity over the temporal category' (Greimas 1988: 26). In conventional flashbacks, the fact that people change over time (and are thus, in a sense, *different people* at different times) is neutralised – or at the very least underplayed – and instead the reader's orientation is facilitated by being reassured that, even though different times are at issue, we are dealing with *the same characters*. But in *INLAND EMPIRE* neither the viewer nor, crucially, the characters themselves can be so sure that identity takes precedence. Characters often seem in a state of radical doubt as to the consistency of their identity, a doubt that the audience may very well share. This is perhaps best seen in Laura Dern's various accents. When we first encounter Nikki she is a guarded and unsympathetic film star with a nondescript standard American accent; she only lights up when her acting is discussed. As Sue Blue, she has a working class southern accent. As the film proceeds, these accents cease to be so clearly distinguished. When Nikki and Devon discuss going for an Italian meal after the shoot they use their southern accents. At first this seems part of their flirtation: they are covering what they know to be the actual beginning of an affair

with the melodramatic playacting of their film roles. But later in the film Dern's accent ceases to be a reliable guide to which character she is currently occupying, as in Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977) when it initially seems that Carole Bouquet and Ángela Molina represent two sides of Conchita's personality (coolly Gallic or fierily Iberian), a clarity which the film proceeds to undermine.

Might it be possible, nevertheless, to select the persona which is central, around which the others can be organised and interpreted? Thus far I have tended to centre on Nikki, but was this warranted? Is to take her as "more real" than Sue to fall into a trap the film sets by showing her first, just as *Mulholland Dr.* does by showing Betty Elms before Diane Selwyn? Some readings, as we have seen, do invert the precedence. The website *Halfborn*, for example, is certain that Nikki is Sue's fantasy:

The actress Nikki Grace (played by Laura Dern) is not real. She is a fantasy, her life as a wealthy actress is a fantasy, and her new film – *On High In Blue Tomorrows* – is a fantasy. ... In INLAND EMPIRE, the *characters* are real while the *actors* are fake. (Lynch does have a sick sense of humor.) In other words, Sue Blue and Billy Side are real people.

(Blackman 2009)

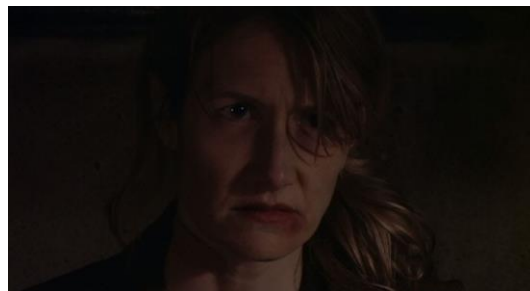


figure 2.5: another of Dern's personae

This reading relies on identifying the character that delivers her monologues to

Mr. K. with Sue. There is good reason to do so: towards the end of her appearances, this character begins to tie in narrative threads that we have seen elsewhere. Immediately after the dreamlike scene in Sue's backyard where her husband tells her that he is going to join the circus to look after the animals, Mr. K. learns that the "fucker went to some Eastern Europe shithole with the fuckin' circus". After Sue's second visitor informs her about the man next door named Krimp, the next shot is of Dern telling Mr. K. that "It was a funny name – they was called Krimp." (She is then shown visiting her neighbour, which reveals him to be the Phantom, and picking up the screwdriver that will later kill her.)

Despite all this, however, it is not entirely clear that the character who delivers the monologue is straightforwardly to be identified with Sue Blue. Some details are either inconsistent (the Phantom is clearly not "a marine from North Carolina") or superfluous ("He had a sister with a wooden leg").⁸ The woman delivering the monologue also refers to her son having died; this the first we have heard of his existence. The accent and the intensity of the sexual violence in these monologues has echoes of Marnie's mother's (Louise Latham) final monologue in Alfred Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964), but in that film the narrative revelation is crucial. In Lynch's film, on the other hand, the power and impact of Dern's monologues is not predicated on their

⁸ As if to counter the accusation that the monologues leave unnecessary loose ends, a woman with a wooden leg introduces the coda, looking around Nikki's living room and proclaiming "Sweet!" But what difference would it make to identify her as the Phantom's sister? Below I discuss the fact that an overabundance of connections does not necessarily produce coherence.

narrative connection to the rest of the film; once again, the film seems to contain a surplus of material. Many of the stories in the monologue could equally well belong to Sue as not belong to her. These include her stories about her violent relations with men, and the nested narrative the man with "a dick like a rhinoceros" tells her about the town he grew up in, in which a chemical factory "was putting so much shit in the air you couldn't think straight" and caused a young girl to have an apocalyptic vision, complete with "fire and smoke and blood rain: you know, like they say". Where exactly would this narrative fit in Taggart's scheme of projections?

Perhaps pursuing this question, or similar questions, is not likely to be the most fruitful path. We might turn our attention more towards the nature of Dern's performance, and the relations between its different aspects, than towards the precise nature of the diegetic relationships between her different personae. Anthony Paraskeva argues that 'each layer of Dern's performance supplements rather than erases earlier versions, so the performance, and consequently the film itself, never attains completion' (Paraskeva 2012: 11). He finds various aspects of Dern's performance to have resonance with different acting exercises proposed by Stanislavski:

Stanislavski's teaching, an extended reflection on Diderot's "paradox of the actor" – an actor must experience real emotion, and yet if the emotion is real, it is not acting – begins with what he calls "the magic as if"...: an actor treats a fictional circumstance "as if" it were real, by visualising the details of the character's world and forming a concrete set of images in her mind, what he calls a "filmstrip" of images, in preparation for the role... Stanislavski's "magic as if" is one way of thinking about the transitions between levels of the real and the

imaginary in Lynch.

(*ibid.*: 13)

Paraskeva's specific identification of these instances is not always convincing: the scene when Sue finds her way onto the soundstage and sees Nikki does not closely resemble 'another of Stanislavski's acting exercises, in which the actor, in order to enter into the role, imagines herself in the house of her character, going through a typical day, walking through its many rooms'; its emphatic strangeness conflicts with the everydayness that is central to Stanislavski's exercise- (*ibid.*: 15). Nevertheless, to emphasise the importance of acting, of *roles*, both in Dern's performance and in the characters she plays, is exactly right. The paradox that Paraskeva refers to is projected onto the audience: it may confuse or disorientate us but it need not undermine the affective power of a performance if it is revealed to be, diegetically, just that: a performance. (I will explore this phenomenon in more detail in the following chapter on *Holy Motors*.)

Recalling the discussion of Souriau in the previous chapter, we might differentiate between types of metalepsis by attending to the different ways that the beings that inhabit the various interacting layers solicit our attention, our emotions, and so forth. Or the very fact that they do *not* seem to operate differently may be what is distinctive. Nikki Grace and Sue Blue, despite existing on different narrative/ontological levels, both solicit our engagement in ways that are more similar to each other than to the ways the Lost Girl gets and maintains our involvement. Nikki and Sue are – at least relatively – fully drawn as characters, whereas we continually feel we do not quite know "enough" about the Lost Girl. The performative range permitted to Karolina Gruszka is relatively narrow, and therefore her experiences serve, for the most part, merely to

prepare us for Dern's more detailed performances, which represent more intense and complex metaleptical experiences which bind together notions of Hollywood performance, cinema technology, and the role of projection in everyday life and relationships.

These experiences are very often phantasmagorical and grotesque. Beside the "projection shots" there is, for example, the shot of Dern moving slowly over a clown's face painted on the ground, only to rush up to the screen and fill the frame with her grimace. The distortion of her face in this scene is prefigured by the distorting wide-angle lens Nikki is "infected with" when following her first visitor's finger (prior to this it is only used for shots of the visitor), as well as the contortions of Sue's face when, screaming "Billy!", she looks out of the house it was "real hard to disappear" into. It is also echoed by the face – a version of Nikki's own – that replaces the Phantom's when she finally shoots him. There is also the disorientating sound and light show, the visual and sonic overload, that surrounds Sue in her living room and seems to precipitate her appearance on a Hollywood street at night accompanied by prostitutes.

Terry Castle has argued that

... since its invention, the term *phantasmagoria*... has shifted meaning in an interesting way. From an initial connection with something external and public (an artificially produced "spectral" illusion), the word has now come to refer to something wholly internal or subjective: the phantasmic imagery of the mind.

(Castle 1998: 29)

Hence phantasmagoria, like projection, is a concept concerned with the relation of fantasy and desire to the internal and external, echoing some of the themes explored by

Morin that I outlined in the previous chapter. This relationship, according to Castle, was confused, rather than clarified, by the scientific debunking of optical illusions. The persistence of visions and hallucinations, in spite of the fact that they had now been rationally explained, threatened the rationality of visual perception itself:

The paradoxical effect of the psychological argument was to subvert the boundary between ghost-seeing and ordinary thought. Of course some apparitions could be attributed, quite simply, to specific pathological causes – fevers, head injuries, inhaling or imbibing stimulants. But the rationalists, at the same time, could not forebear reaching after a seemingly more universal or totalizing explanation: that thought itself was a spectral process, and as such, easily modulated into hallucination.

(*ibid.*: 56)

Following this line of thinking, *INLAND EMPIRE* might almost be seen as a dramatization of the hallucinatory nature of thought, one that problematizes and plays with the distinction between inside and outside. This suggests a different way of relating Dern's performances to the fictional experiences of the characters she portrays, for whom the distinction between outside and inside is frequently unclear, and at times even paradoxical. *Axxon N.* is "outside" the narrative, framing the film, in that it is where we begin ("the longest running radio play in history"), and yet it is also inside: Nikki must follow arrows to find it at the heart of the film. Finding and losing are also connected in the film with insides and outsides; when explaining the fate of the doomed filming of *Vier Sieben* (of which *On High in Blue Tomorrows* is a remake) Kingsley says that 'after the characters had been filming for some time, they discovered something inside the

story'. Note also the confusion (a subtle metalepsis) between actor and role (another kind of outside and inside) in the way he says that the *characters* – rather than the actors – had been filming. We might also note that *Vier Sieben* seems to be both "before" Nikki's story – in that it is the name of the film she is remaking – and "within" it, indeed at the heart of it, since the number "47" appears on what turns out to be the door of the rabbit room. Earlier, when Nikki gets up after what we quickly learn was only her filmic death as Sue, we might well feel disappointment at an over-familiar device which the complexity of *INLAND EMPIRE* had led us not to expect; "it was only a movie" is only a step ahead of "it was all a dream". But the continuing strangeness of her dreamlike attitude ("What's the matter with Nikki?" asks Kingsley) causes us to reassess: she is not yet "outside" whatever process she has become trapped in. She leaves the soundstage, and looks directly at the camera, which, as a reverse shot then shows, entails looking directly out of the Lost Girl's television, making real contact with her for the first time.⁹ When we cut back to Nikki, outside has become inside: the soundstage now connects to a corridor leading to a cinema where she watches herself on the screen.

Just as a lack of faith in their self-consistency ("tell me if you've known me before!") attacks – from within – Nikki's Cartesian certainty in her own existence, a sense that everybody else knows more about her than she does herself attacks this self-certainty from without. There are repeated indications that everybody apart from Nikki

⁹ The first contact between them, when the Lost Girl explains to her how to burn a hole in the silk, has the quality of a dream or vision, but the return to the film set has explicitly signalled that we "should" by now have returned to Nikki's primary reality.

is certain that she will start sleeping with Devon, which disorientates them (presumably because they have not yet admitted their attraction to themselves). When they appear on Marilyn Levens's (Diane Ladd) television show, we join them as they return from a commercial break, after which Levens's first words are: "Mamas, lock up your daughter's doors! Nikki, really, this news, this shocking revelation by Devon must send a shiver down your spine! Are you going to be able to be true to hubby with a wolf in the den?" From their reactions, it seems as if Nikki is as much in the dark as to what she is talking about as we are. Later, when Nikki's husband Piotrek (Peter J Lucas once again) takes Devon upstairs to warn him off Nikki, Devon seems equally confused. The two are watched by Nikki, prefiguring the moment when she and Devon do have sex (proving "everyone" to have been correct), when they are watched by Piotrek. This scene is crucial in the development of the confusion of character: Billy insists that Sue is Sue, while she desperately tries to get him to recognise her as Nikki.

Need we, as viewers, come down on one side or another? When it comes to the film's conclusion, perhaps rather than deciding whether we are watching Nikki, or a transfigured version of Sue, the presence of other actresses who do not otherwise appear in the film (Laura Harring – Rita/Camilla from *Mulholland Dr.* – and Nastassja Kinski) might suggest that we should really be concentrating on the fact that we are seeing Laura Dern, whose remarkable skills have focussed our attention for the preceding three hours.¹⁰ Taggart suggests as much as a way of consolidating her reading of a series of projections, emphasising both the physical projection of the film and its source in the

¹⁰ Harring's voice does appear in the film, belonging to one of the rabbits.

work of David Lynch: 'We see the source of all the Nikkis (actress Laura Dern), signalling the merging of the final remaining projection residue (transfigured Nikki) into the consolidated Lynch-position' (Taggart 2006). If, however, *INLAND EMPIRE* is a film centred around a performance (or performances), and the reflexive dramatisation of the means by which that performance (or those performances) are achieved, we might feel that it uses profligate means for such an exploration. If performance is central, why all the explicit repetitions and connections between parts? Why not simply allow for thematic or affective resonances? Would not that have put the emphasis even more on Dern's performance? Aren't we distracted by our attempts to parse the connections? Perhaps it is a mistake to foreground what is being connected. Perhaps by doing so we are neglecting having a really close look at the connections themselves.

Connections

It is clear that, despite its confusing surface, *INLAND EMPIRE* contains an abundance of connections between its various parts. There is, as Freddie says, "a vast network, an ocean of possibilities", though tracing these possibilities may take us to unexpected places; Lynch has remarked that '[y]ou enter the film in one place and come out in another' (Lynch and McKenna 2018: 436). Perhaps rather than attempting interpretation as a method of unifying sense-making (as I emphasized in my first strategy) or concentrating on the relationship between performance and coherence (as in my second), we could emphasize pattern-finding by tracing connections, as Nikki/Sue does when she follows the arrow beneath the words "Axxon N". Connections are made throughout the film via similarities and repetitions. These are both visual (the

silhouettes of the male rabbit, of Visitor #1 in Nikki's doorway, of Kingsley and Freddie entering the soundstage; the many lamps) and sonic (flickering electricity, drones, finger clicks, particular pieces of music). Most striking are the great many verbal echoes; it seems as if everything mysterious in the film is said at least twice: "9:45", "after midnight", "horse to the well", "just down the way", "look at me and tell me if you've known me before", "have a way with animals", "check the gate". (John Esther pleasingly – albeit, I would argue, not entirely accurately – describes the film as containing 'much rhyme and very little reason' in Barney 2009: 246.) Subtitles are used to provide exact repetitions even between utterances in different languages.

As well as connections we make because of repetitions, the film is full of corridors, doors, staircases: very literal forms of connection. The combination of hotel corridors with the music of Penderecki might put us in mind of Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), about which Deleuze wondered how we can 'decide what comes from the inside and what comes from the outside, the extra-sensory perceptions or hallucinatory projections?' (Deleuze 2013: 212) Physical passage is frequently emphasised, and yet in the projection sequences movement in both space and time is achieved *without any* intervening transition. In fact, in the middle of the film, transitions are often combined with a sense of stasis. Previously, even if the connections are "impossible" or fantastical (as in the "projection shots") we can more or less follow them as part of a linear, if excessively sinuous, narrative. Things get stranger and the connections a little looser after Nikki (or Sue) enters the house that should be merely a theatrical front, disappearing "where it's real hard to disappear". The first encounters with the Bad Girls give rise to a series of visions which represent a clear segment of the film, concluding with another moment where two of Dern's personae look at each other (via a

shot/reverse-shot), one above and one below. Transitions seem at this point rather more like movements between parallel streams of narrative than anything else. We might move, for example, from Sue's house to a Poland of the past, only to find ourselves back in Sue's house with no explanation and with no obvious development having taken place.¹¹ So far, in a sense, so conventional: cutting between different narrative streams is par for the course for narratives from soap operas to Hollywood, and has been since D.W. Griffith. The difference is that we have here no secure means for comprehending the *relationships* between the narrative threads, whether temporally, spatially, or causally. As a result the narrative seems to have stagnated, or perhaps to have been spatialised, made geometric: different methods of connection and transition are explored without this implying progress or transformation.

I want to conclude by suggesting two final ways of considering the notion of connection which this sense of narrative stasis in the middle of the film might be seen to prompt (because it frustrates or at least impedes narrative/diegetic explanation): connection as parody and connection as allegory. A number of interpreters attempt to use the words of Nikki's first visitor as a key to the film. But there is something hyperbolic about them. In the density of their simultaneous suggestiveness and obscurity they take to extremes the kind of riddle that often commences a fairy story

¹¹ With respect to the way that the film blurs or problematises boundaries, it might be worth noting that Sue's house is a bungalow, and that John David Rhodes argues, for reasons I do not have space to go into here, that the American bungalow itself confuses a number of binary distinctions: 'the bungalow form is the site at which a range of antinomies intersect (modern/traditional, country/city, nature/culture, private/public, moral/immoral)' (Rhodes 2017: 68-9).

and is eventually explained at its conclusion. Despite the efforts of many ingenious interpreters, is it possible to be confident what she means by her references to a "little boy", a "little girl", or to the "reflection", the "alley behind the marketplace" and the "way to the palace"? Plausible candidates can be proposed (Hollywood as the marketplace, and the alley behind it as all that goes on "behind the scenes", in the broadest sense, to make its products possible) but not with the neatness with which fairy tale riddles tend to get solved. We return to Visitor #1 at the end of the film but not to her words; they set off the narrative but then recur only in verbal ("9:45", "after midnight"), visual (the alley down which Sue walks with her groceries before following the "Axxon N" arrow) or thematic echoes. Is our tendency to latch onto repetition as indicative of meaning being parodied?

At one point our confusion about the identity of characters in the Polish segment of the film is explicitly mocked. We watch Peter J. Lucas's Polish character take leave of his wife, of whom we can see only her back. She shouts after him "I'm not who you think I am!", and then Lanni (Emily Stofle), one of the Bad Girls, pokes her head into the frame, very close to the camera and grotesquely uplit and asks "Who is she?" There is a dissolve to a dead woman played by Julia Ormand (who also plays Billy's wife Doris Side, and later in the film stabs Sue with the screwdriver), and then Lori (Kristen Kerr), another of the Bad Girls, also leans into the frame and again asks "Who is she?" Is this evidence that the wife and the dead woman are one and the same, or does it mock our desire for this to be so? Our confusion is parodied; the very repetition of the question pokes fun at our determination to find meaning in repetition.

Alternatively, and very differently, perhaps *INLAND EMPIRE* is about the

translations involved in the global sex industry. Hollywood may involve whoring oneself out ("I'm a whore!" Sue exclaims to her audience of prostitutes), as, so some think, does marriage. Here we are dealing mainly with metaphor, but movement from Poland to the USA also involves the literal trafficking of women. Richard Peña, the programming director for the Film Society of Lincoln Center, has been quoted as saying that

... the film includes a Hollywood story about a young actress who gets a part in a film that might be cursed; a story about the smuggling of women from Eastern Europe; and an abstract story about a family of people with rabbit heads sitting around in a living room.

(Peña paraphrased in Blatter 2006)

Joshua D. Gonsalves, in an otherwise hostile essay on the film, agrees: 'the not altogether ridiculous sublime of the brutal, statistical facticities of global sex traffic intimate why many insist that Lynch's films are not about anything' (Gonsalves 2010: 118). They insist on it, that is, to avoid the realities that Lynch intends for us to confront. Jennifer Pranolo's psychoanalytic and allegorical reading of the film grasps the nettle of the role of sexualised violence against women in this film (something which is, as is frequently noted, present in most of his works) and makes a number of interesting observations. But even though it would have fitted in well with my previous interpretive strategy centred on Dern's performance, I remain unconvinced by the way the logic of her argument rests, ultimately, on a claim that the violence extends all the way to the impositions of Lynch (the director and writer) upon Laura Dern the actor: 'Recognising herself as a cliché, Dern is nonetheless trapped in her roles-within-roles in films-within-

films – roles and films that alarmingly spill over into reality, and vice versa – compelled to perform her own fracturing of identity as stipulated by Lynch's self-replicating script' (Pranolo 2011: 483). This seems to me to be one metalepsis too far and not to leave much, if any, room for Dern's performance of violence *as a performance*. In addition, the claim that at the end we see Dern's character back with her "Visitor #1" 'pristinely untouched, poised for the whole apparatus of torture to begin again' (*ibid.*: 490) takes no account of the way the film's rhetoric figures this final sequence as an achievement of a state *beyond* torture, where as the "Polish Poem" puts it, "something is happening" and we are, at last, "on the other side".

At any rate, the brutality of the connections of sex traffic and the way they associate sex and death is metaphorically literalised in Street Person #2's (Nae Yuuki) story about her friend Niko, who looks "just like a movie star", but is "on hard drugs and turning tricks" and has "torn a hole into her intestine from her vagina".¹² Sex, shit and death are brutally connected in a single image we could even consider as a kind of physical metalepsis.¹³ More broadly, the confusing experiences undergone by Laura Dern's characters might be seen to allegorise the relationship between fantasy and reality experienced by trafficked women. Seduced by fantasies of a better life to come – perhaps in the movies – they are (literally) dislocated and suffer both violence and

¹² This last point of course connects Niko to Nikki in more than name because the screwdriver wound she receives is in more or less the right place to have created just such a wound.

¹³ Pranolo sees it as a 'fleshy metonym for the various 'holes' in *Inland Empire*' (Pranolo 2011: 492), but it seems to me that it would be more properly described as a metaphor.

profound disorientation. The connections they need are torn apart, while new connections are formed that all too frequently end up destroying them. On such an allegorical reading, the fantastic aspects of *INLAND EMPIRE* would express the extreme nature of this disorientation. Discussing the clinical judgement of disorientation, Alex Pavey explains that

... the terms in relation to which one is judged to be disorientated are socially constructed – they are a matter of consensus rather than objective reality. The disorientated subject experiences this ambiguity viscerally – the very trauma of disorientation arises from the complexity of doing so. Fictional narratives ... are capable of exploring the possibility that these 'public reference systems' themselves may in fact be unstable, or unreliable, or hostile.

(Pavey 2017: 81-2)

The paradoxical dimensions of *INLAND EMPIRE*'s metalepses could, then, be seen as reflections of this instability and unreliability. The trafficked woman does not merely experience disorientation; her attempts at reorientation compound her predicament and emphasise its irrationality. The bizarre eruption of Little Eva's "Loco-motion" into one of the sequences of Nikki/Sue and the Bad Girls emphasizes the connection between movement ("locomotion") and prostitution: euphoria gives way to desolation via a truly mad movement ("loco-motion"). This sequence is followed by Sue's announcement that she is pregnant with a baby her partner appears not to want, another peril of sex work, after which the Bad Girls dance again, this time to Etta James's "At Last", which might now seem bleakly ironic as it fades out on the words "I found a dream".

Although accounting for the film's ending would, on such a reading, once again

prove problematic (at least if it is not to seem an insensitively saccharine wish-fulfilment, thereby either reversing Goodwin's perception of a 'cruel joke' or making it even more brutal) I believe such a reading to be at least partially defensible. I also recognise that the "translational" operation of interpreting allegory leaves largely unaddressed the issues of the film's actual affective treatment of sexualised violence against women. This is not the place for a full discussion of this issue, but suffice it to say that neither a reading of this film (nor indeed Lynch's work in general) as simply manipulating sexual violence to misogynist ends, nor as innocent of all charges of exploitation, seem to me to be satisfactory. (Pranolo's reference to 'Lynch's pornography of the uncanny' [Pranolo 2011: 492] is, I think, deserving of further investigation.) Be that as it may, and at the risk of turning a reference to something painfully concrete merely into a cipher for something abstract, I think that the introduction of the theme of the trafficking of sex workers might alter the significance of the many confusions between inside and outside in *INLAND EMPIRE* that I noted earlier.

At the same time as the reality of people trafficking can be used to organise the film's abstractions in relation to a desolate reality, the metaphor of smuggling opens out again into an account of a pervasive phenomenon in human experience. Every boundary in *INLAND EMPIRE* (such as those between characters [e.g. Nikki and Sue], between places [e.g. a real street in Hollywood and its recreation on a soundstage], or between nested narratives [*On High in Blue Tomorrows* and *Vier Sieben*]) might be seen as creating a border across which things can then be smuggled. The ways borders are crossed in the film indicates that literal smuggling is only one instance of a fundamental human phenomenon, in which something crosses a boundary surreptitiously and lies hidden and often unnoticed on the other side. The emphasis on memory might, for

example, indicate the smuggling of the past into the present, while the film's multiple impossible projections could be seen as emblematic of what Tony Tanner calls the 'magics' by which different selves overlap and impinge upon one another: "We smuggle... ourselves into other people through who knows how many mesmeric and penetrative magics" (Tanner 1987: 207).¹⁴ The fact that we are frequently unsure where the borders might lie in *INLAND EMPIRE* becomes precisely the point: it is less an issue of mapping a whole by tracing connections, and more about the way selves and societies are constructed through hidden, and often forbidden, transitions – or, perhaps, projections.

I do not intend the three reading strategies I have presented to represent a progress from less to more satisfactory strategies for orientating oneself with regard to the film. There is a great deal to be gained from considering it, for example, as in some sense the story of the Lost Girl's release or redemption. I have tried to show that the fact that the strategies I have outlined do not, in the final analysis, add up neatly does not prevent the film from being responsive to the questions one asks of it; one can always ask different questions with each viewing. But if I were to close my investigations of the film with an attempt at some kind of general claim it might be something like this: that the manifold confusions and disorientations that *INLAND EMPIRE* both contains and generates can, ultimately, be seen to indicate that all consistent selves based on a logic entirely free from paradox may, just like consistent stories, only come about as the

¹⁴ Tanner's remark comes from his enthusiastic response to the possibilities opened up by this metaphor of smuggling, as occasioned by Joseph McElroy's 1966 novel *A Smuggler's Bible*.

result of so many acts of smuggling which conceal that which does not fit somewhere
"where it's real hard to disappear".

chapter three

achieving coherence: diegesis and death in *Holy Motors*

Leos Carax's 2012 film *Holy Motors* follows a certain M. Oscar (Denis Lavant) as he pursues a series of "rendezvous" that involve performing as a great many characters; he is driven from one appointment to the next in an enormous white limousine by his chauffeuse, Céline (Édith Scob). The film is many things – depending on who one listens to it might be a love letter to the cinema, an elegy or even an obituary for film, an exultation in the multifaceted possibilities of screen performance, or a self-indulgent and only intermittently successful mess of uncoordinated fragments – but neither its admirers (of whom I am one) nor its detractors have paid much serious attention to its diegesis. The strategy of simply assuming that any investigation into the possibility of a coherent diegesis will prove fruitless (a strategy I criticised in my introduction) is encountered from two sides, as it were: for many of the naysayers, *Holy Motors* doesn't even *attempt* to play by the rules, while for some in the yes camp it travels far beyond the trivial straitjackets of narrative logic, leaving them reeling irrelevantly in its dust. In this chapter I will explore this neglected aspect of the film – diegesis – by attempting a reading that largely follows the sequence of events as they unfold. This will provide an opportunity to explore the relationship between orientation and coherence from a different angle than in the previous chapter. There, my focus was on the question of the global coherence of *INLAND EMPIRE* and its relationship to our orientational strategies; I argued that Lynch's film only achieves coherence at the expense of completeness, and can thus cohere in a number of different ways, depending on what one omits, but that to claim this is not at all the same as arguing that the film

can be made to mean whatever one wants. Here, I want to look more closely at the impact that these issues have for our relationship with the film as we progress through it, whether on a first or a subsequent viewing.

In this chapter I want to use the question of the senses in which *Holy Motors* might or might not be said to have a coherent diegesis to explore the proposition that it is less useful to describe a film as being coherent (or as having coherence) than to see coherence as something that is (or is not) achieved by the film in question. Perhaps it is more helpful to say that certain films *achieve* the status of a unified whole (coherence being what unified wholes exhibit) than that they *possess* such a status. Is coherence a *sine qua non* for orientation? Can we only orientate ourselves in the presence of coherence? Orientation is a spatial metaphor, but the experience of watching a film takes place in time. Might there be a sense of coherence which has less to do with a film's patterning, considered in the abstract, and more to do with the drama of its unfolding in time?¹ And if so, what are its consequences for our understanding of orientation? In saying this I do not mean to imply that, as we progress through a film, fragments – incoherent in themselves – are gradually added together, so that something incoherent becomes coherent when the final piece is in place. I am thinking, instead, of

¹ This drama – of which George M. Wilson's 'rhetorical figures of narrational instruction' (Wilson 1986: 49), referred to in my introduction, are perhaps a subset – was known in the Middle Ages by the name *ductus*: '*Ductus* is the way by which a work leads someone through itself: that quality in a work's formal patterns which engages an audience and then sets a viewer or auditor or performer in motion within its structures, an experience more like travelling through stages along a route than like perceiving a whole object' (Carruthers 2013: 190).

the way that coherence is – like orientation – something we *expect*, a presumption according to which we organise our experience of a film, and which filmmakers can therefore take into account and manipulate.² It is impossible to be oriented in space without knowing how other places (where one is not) relate to one another; we have to be oriented *towards* or *with regard to* something. Perhaps the quasi-metaphorical sense in which we say that we are (or are not) oriented with regard to a narrative has something in common with this. Is narrative orientation not also a form of orientation *towards* – whether towards explanation, resolution, or satisfaction in some broader sense? In which case, knowing where we are in a narrative film becomes at least as much a question of process, of development, as it is of whether or not we are in possession of sufficient information to explain the onscreen goings-on. We can, surprisingly, feel oriented with regard to a film even if we don't know exactly "where we are", as long as we are confident enough in where we are going. In the experience of the viewer, a film is not either coherent or incoherent, once and for all. Instead, its coherence is a function of our continuing engagement with it as we watch and listen; it can at least feel as if films can *become* coherent (or not), and can also *lose* coherence. It might follow from this that we cannot fully demonstrate the coherence of a film without taking account of the spectator's relationship with it. On this account, coherence would seem to have more to do with a satisfying relationship with and between the various

² This thought is related to the discussion in the last chapter concerning what we can learn from *Lost Highway* about the extent to which films trade on the *promise* of a coherent (non-paradoxical) fabula, rather than there being anything in the nature of linear storytelling which requires such a fabula to exist in order for us to be able to engage with them.

aspects of a film (and the way they change) than with a list of logically compatible components. To put it another way, coherence might as easily be seen as a function of orientation (we find coherence when we are orientated) as the other way round (coherence leads to the feeling of orientation).



figure 3.1: Oscar, Céline and the limo

Holy Motors provides a singular site for exploring these ideas because the ways in which it manifests and manipulates its diegesis dramatize these very issues. Certainly it is difficult to perceive a fully consistent diegesis in the film; probably doing so is close to impossible without speculation that extends well beyond any textual warrant. But far from signifying the abandonment of any aspiration to diegetic consistency, the film's pervasive reflexivity exploits these difficulties. Critics have noted the reflexive treatment of issues such as film production, spectatorship, and performance, but *Holy Motors*'s reflexivity also extends to the diegetic procedures by means of which films engage and sustain their viewers' interest and engagement (their solicitude, which – as we saw Souriau argue in chapter one – is necessary for the existence of fictional beings). As I will discuss below, the film activates and interrogates a number of different kinds of belief we might hold with regard to a film. The very variety with which *Holy Motors* generates and addresses its own diegesis *itself* creates a distinctive thread that runs throughout the film. In this chapter I want to show some of the

structural means by which the film accomplishes this, and to explore the way its most confusing and disorientating aspects are intimately related to the way it thematises coherence and belief, which it seems to me it does most significantly in its (often allegorical) treatment of death.

What is coherence?

Films take time to happen. It takes time to watch them, and viewers make judgements about their internal patterning, their narrative, their visual and sonic style, not only when the credits have rolled, but also *during* the film. In order for us to feel that one sequence in a film has something to do with what follows – or that it does not – we must be continually evaluating its coherence, whether or not we are strongly conscious of it. Judgements about coherence made while watching a film are necessarily provisional, and may be revised in the course of a viewing, or on subsequent viewings, but nevertheless this continual process of evaluation suggests that it could be productive to consider coherence as something that is in continuous negotiation during a film's passage, and that, even when achieved, is always at risk of being destabilized or destroyed: not only the judgment but also the coherence itself must remain to some degree provisional. (It is always at least *possible* that a new reading could persuade me that a film I thought incoherent is in fact coherent, and vice versa.) There is, certainly, no coherence without a film being viewed: coherence involves a relationship between the film and its audience. This need not, however, imply that coherence can only properly be said to apply to the reception, rather than to the object of that reception. C.S. Peirce wrote in 1868 that 'men and words reciprocally educate each other; each

increase of a man's information involves, and is involved by, a corresponding increase of a word's information' (Peirce 1966: 71). Each increase of a film viewer's information, then, is perhaps also matched by a corresponding increase in the film's information. When a film is seen to achieve (or to lose) coherence, something happens both to the viewer and to the film.

In language, a "coherence relation" can be understood as 'an aspect of meaning of two or more discourse segments that cannot be described in terms of the meaning of the segments in isolation' (Sanders et. al. 1992: 2). By being coherent, two elements of a discourse give rise to more than the sum of their parts. Coherence, in this sense, is distinguished from cohesion: the latter is focussed on 'the linguistic realization' itself, whereas the former is ultimately to do with 'the cognitive representation of a discourse' (*ibid.*: 2-3). This distinction seems meaningful and relevant with regard to other forms of discourse that are either non-linguistic or, like film, include language as only one of their aspects. On this reading, coherence is the more abstract – but also the more powerful – concept, referring to the way that parts combine to make a whole (and not just a collection).³ Coherence also requires more extensive and thorough demonstration than cohesion, which has to do, largely, only with the connections between surface features. A sequence without cohesion, for example, could potentially give rise to a

³ This account of coherence need not contradict the notion referred to above that our sense of coherence can fluctuate during a viewing. Particularly during a first viewing, we do not know precisely what kind of whole the parts will come to make up; our sense of coherence can therefore fluctuate as our expectations about the nature of this whole shift. (One could describe my account of *INLAND EMPIRE* as an attempt to trace an unusually difficult instance of this process.)

coherent cognitive representation, precisely because of the specific form the lack of cohesion takes. On the other hand, showing that, say, a film deploys a limited range of colours would be to show only that the colour scheme of the film exhibits a certain cohesion. To demonstrate that this colour patterning gives rise to coherence would require a more extensive argument.

To many critics, the series of apparently unconnected narratives that makes up Carax's film frustrates the diegetic consistency which grounds the sense of coherence in most narrative films.⁴ "Consistency" is another rather slippery word beginning with "c" to add to "coherence" and "cohesion". I am taking consistency here to refer primarily to the compatibility of different segments or aspects of a film (logically speaking, that which is inconsistent is contradictory); cohesion has, perhaps, more to do with similarity (because similar things fit together). The distinction between consistency and cohesion is useful because both can be operative at the same time in different ways. Two sequences in a film could, for example, be stylistically cohesive (filmed in the same style with the same kind of *mise en scène*) but narratively inconsistent if, say, they portrayed the same event in two incompatible ways; *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) springs to mind. Conversely, these hypothetical sequences could also be narratively consistent (telling a single story) but stylistically incohesive. Cohesion and consistency are both, on this account, less general or global concepts than coherence; judgements

⁴ Manohla Dargis wrote in *The New York Times*, for example, that '[a]lthough the movie doesn't have an obvious narrative through line, its episodes are nonetheless deeply connected by mood, visual style and Mr. Lavant' (Dargis 2012).

about coherence need to take into account the way cohesion and consistency interact. The complexity of these different aspects of a film's coherence is a good indication of how complicated the question of coherence might, in many cases, need to be.

These issues have been notably pursued with regard to narrative in American cinema of the 1970s. In 'The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the 70s' (an article originally written in 1980), Robin Wood usefully notes that '[t]he dividing line between coherent works that register incoherence and works that are incoherent within themselves may not always be clear' (Wood 2003: 41). His focus is, however, on unintentional ideological incoherence and thus very different from mine. To echo Wood's language, I am in a sense arguing that *Holy Motors* is an "incoherent work that registers coherence", but because I am focussed on orientational, narrative and thematic issues rather than ideology, to say so risks being slightly misleading. Wood's article does not address distinctions such as those between coherence, consistency and cohesion. In his book *Hollywood Incoherent*, Todd Berliner does address them (adding the term "incongruity" into the mix), but handles them rather differently, declaring his intention to use the word incoherence in what he calls 'the literal sense to mean a lack of connectedness or integration among different elements' (Berliner 2010: 25). Thus Berliner's "incoherent" parallels my "inconsistent" or "incohesive". Although I am not entirely sure that Berliner's own terminology is completely consistent (he does not, as far as I can see, articulate the distinction between incongruity and incoherence: coherence, apparently, 'refers to a congruity of elements' [*ibid.*], which doesn't get us very far), I would tend to agree with his conclusion that '[d]isunity oftentimes indicates good filmmaking – filmmaking that is unpredictable and varied, filmmaking that takes us to destinations that we could not foresee but that nonetheless feel, once we make an improbable

connection or resolve an incongruity, as inevitably the right place' (*ibid.*: 221).⁵

Berliner's logic here echoes Sanders et. al. 1992; when two disparate elements are understood as existing in a coherent relationship, there has been a cognitive gain that could not have been achieved by either element in isolation: we have been taken to a destination 'that we could not foresee'.

Thinking of *Holy Motors* as thematically coherent but often inconsistent and incohesive on other levels, including the narrative level, might appear to be supported by some of the director's statements. Carax has claimed, for example, that the film does not tell a story but rather narrates 'the experience of being alive', and that it derives merely from 'a couple of images and feelings that I splice together', as Ginette Vincendeau recounts:

In the best auteur cinema tradition, Carax scorns the notion of narrative yet claims a grandiose project ("Is the film telling a story? No, it is narrating a life. The story of a life? No, the experience of being alive") and denies authorial intentionality while reinforcing it: "There's never any initial idea or intention behind a film, but rather a couple of images and feelings that I splice together."

(Vincendeau 2012)

⁵ This conclusion is offered explicitly in contrast to V. F. Perkins's views and while, as I say, I am in sympathy with it, Berliner's treatment of Perkins does not give full due to the subtlety and sophistication of his arguments; I try to show in Lash 2017 how one could reach a similar conclusion by following Perkins's own principles, even if so doing entails disagreeing with some of his explicit judgements.

We should note, however, that the absence of a pervasive 'initial idea or intention' says nothing about the coherence of the resulting work, and that Carax does not here claim that narration is absent from his film. Still, non-linear interpretations of *Holy Motors* (by which I simply mean interpretations that pay little or no heed to the sequence of events as presented in the film) based on features such as intertextuality and reflexivity are attractive as a way around the confusions its diegetic idiosyncrasies can generate, and such interpretations are certainly not inappropriate. I shall briefly survey some of them before presenting a different account of the film's treatment of diegesis.

Intertextuality and reflexivity

Few films display such relentless intertextuality as *Holy Motors* (although *Adieu au langage*, to be discussed in my sixth chapter, certainly gives it a run for its money). The works, genres, and people referred to in the film include the following (the list is deliberately unwieldy to give a sense of the sheer number and range of the film's references):

- Étienne-Jules Marey's photographic movement studies (not just referred to but actually included)⁶
- the opening of the *Divine Comedy* (the trees on the walls of the room in which

⁶ The examples chosen (single exposures reanimated by the cinematic apparatus) are more reminiscent of Edward Muybridge's work than the more familiar Marey style that combines multiple exposures in a single image.

the Sleeper awakes)

- King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928)
- E.T.A. Hoffmann's 1813 short story "Don Juan" (in which a man finds a secret passage from his hotel room to an opera house)
- 1954's *Godzilla* (via its theme music)
- the photographer Diane Arbus (namechecked by Harry T-Bone's assistant)
- Beauty and the Beast
- the tradition of the Pietà (re-enacted by M. Merde and Kay M (Eva Mendez) with an apparently Islamic Mary)
- Jean Seberg (through Kylie Mynogue's character's name, her costume and her haircut)
- Henry James (a scene from *Portrait of a Lady* is re-enacted by Oscar and a woman called Élise [Élise L'Homeau])
- Georges Franju's 1960 *Eyes Without a Face* (via the appearance in both films of Édith Scob, underlined by the mask she puts on at the end of *Holy Motors*)

There is perhaps even a reference to Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, which opens with what initially appear to be houses talking to one another, echoed here by the conversation between the limos in their garage with which the film closes.⁷ To this list

⁷ Given *Holy Motors*'s concern with death and the afterlife it is not irrelevant that the speakers in Capra's

we would have to add a number of Carax's own earlier works, referenced most obviously by the (almost continual) presence of his favourite actor, Denis Lavant, but also via the reappearance of M. Merde from 2008's *Tokyo!*, as well as of Michel Piccoli (from 1986's *Mauvais Sang*) and the department store La Samaritaine, which was prominent in *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* (1991). The press document produced for the Cannes festival in 2012 adds even more references: the Borges story 'Everything and Nothing'; Franz Kafka; Georges Bataille's *L'Expérience Intérieure* (1943); Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936); and Leonid Andreyev's short story 'Lazarus' (1906). Even this exhausting list is far from exhaustive.

What can we make of such bewilderingly – disorientatingly – extensive intertextuality? Besides giving insights into the way Carax may have constructed his film, a list such as this seems likely to do nothing so much as underline the film's incoherence. What could possibly unite such a diverse collection of texts? Perhaps *Holy Motors* is no more than a grab-bag of the various unrealized projects attempted by Carax during the decade since *Pola X* (1999), loosely (or even spuriously) linked by the conceit of M. Oscar, the film actor (as his name of course underlines), in a pale

film turn out to be praying for a suicidal man, and that the prayers are heard by angels. In its focus on imminent obsolescence this scene might also, possibly, as Jonathan Rosenbaum notes (see Rosenbaum 2012), refer to the opening of *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) originally planned by Billy Wilder, in which Joe Gillis's corpse would have told its story to the other corpses in the morgue (see Madsen 1968: 82-3).

cinematic echo of melancholy Jacques.⁸ In response to such a claim, however, it would be possible to point to recurrent concerns which might begin to bind the film's parts together. The proliferation of intertextual references to cinema in *Holy Motors* could be seen as suggesting that we consider the film a meditation on the medium. As noted above, cinema is clearly a kind of "motion capture technology", one which is now experiencing a kind of afterlife in the age of the internet and the mobile phone. The sequence featuring Michel Piccoli as a man with a prominent birthmark, in which M. Oscar laments the invisibility of today's cameras has been widely, and plausibly, read as allegorizing Carax's nostalgia for analogue film technology and his dislike of digital media, despite (or because of) the fact that he was compelled to use digital cameras to make *Holy Motors*.

This reflexivity is not only directed at the current state of cinema; it is also used to activate much wider thematic activity. One such theme, cued by the film's opening images of naked men (from Marey), is that of movement, its representation, and how it relates to the human body. Transport is the crucial motivation for much movement, in humans as it is in animals, and the various prostheses by which humans transcend the body's limitations and extend their transportational possibilities extend the film's treatment of the theme. It includes machines for transport ranging from cars to boats, zeppelins (the Sleeper has a photo of one on his wall), aeroplanes (which can be seen landing and taking off through the window in the Sleeper's room), all the way to the modern virtual movement of "motion capture" technology in M. Oscar's second

⁸ 'All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players', *As You Like It*, act II, scene 7

appointment.

With death, movement comes to an end, and yet cinema enables us to see people long dead still moving and talking (their "motion" has been "captured"). A sense of being beyond the grave is pervasive in the film, whether in a "literal" sense or more metaphorically, such as in the scene between Oscar and Jean (Kylie Minogue), which outlines the afterlife of a sexual relationship. One of Carax's favourite riffs in interviews is that he makes his films for the dead or for ghosts.⁹ Jeremy Biles declares that 'the holiness of *Holy Motors* also has something to do with its evocations of the underworld' (Biles 2013: 6). M. Merde (one of Oscar's personae) passes through a literal underworld beneath Paris, which seems to be populated by a parallel society of its own (we see him pass a line of trudging people). Céline, shouting at another limousine driver with whom she almost has an accident, calls him "Ectoplasm on wheels!"¹⁰ Gérard Manset's song 'Revivre', towards the end of *Holy Motors*, discusses what would happen if we were to live again: we would have to relive everything exactly as it was, in a kind of Eternal Return. The "afterlife" theme is particularly well reinforced by some of the film's

⁹ Fergus Daly and Garin Dowd quote him as saying that '[o]n fait des films pour des morts ou des fantômes' (Daly and Dowd 2003: 6), though I cannot find this phrase in the source they cite. Very similar phrases can, however, be found in a number of interviews online.

¹⁰ "Ectoplasme à roulettes!" This is in fact another instance of intertextuality, being a quotation from, of all people, Captain Haddock, who calls the group of men being trafficked into slavery under the pretence of being taken to Mecca "bougres d'ectoplasmes à roulettes". (This was a replacement for the earlier "Bougre de Zouaves à la noix de Coco", later deemed racially unacceptable.) See Hergé 1974: 50.

intertextual references. The Hoffmann story ('Don Juan'), for example, includes the fantasy of a meeting with an opera singer at what the protagonist later learns was the exact moment of her death, while Andreyev's 'Lazarus', a quotation from which appears on the back cover of the Cannes press document, deals with what happened to Lazarus after Jesus brought him back from the dead.

The list of sources for and references in the film given above is representative in its reach, and yet, if it gives the impression that the film feels like a collage of half-overheard fragments and fleetingly sighted glimpses, its texture is misleading. Though Godard is certainly one of the many influences present, the collage texture so often favoured by the older filmmaker is almost wholly absent from *Holy Motors*. The elements of the film *are* woven together, but in perplexing and paradoxical ways. It is the very *urgency* with which *Holy Motors* raises questions of diegesis which has led some critics to downplay its importance, in order to avoid what Erick Neher calls the 'lengthy periods of epistemological panic' that Carax generates in his audience (Neher 2013: 232). I want now to explore some different, less direct, routes out of these dysphoric sensations, in order to see what we might learn if we are willing to stay with them, to explore them and their consequences.

Reading Holy Motors in sequence

As Adrian Martin has correctly observed, while watching the film 'we are constantly led to wonder about the precise *status* of almost everything we see and hear' (Martin, Adrian 2014b: 13). What happens if we pay particular attention to *diegetic* status? I do not by any means wish to dismiss thematic interpretations of the film, but

rather to supplement them by showing that linearity and questions of diegesis are by no means as irrelevant to *Holy Motors* as some might think. It is worth mentioning, parenthetically, that doing so challenges the approaches taken by some of Carax's critics. Fergus Daly and Garin Dowd's work in what is still, rather surprisingly, the only book-length study of the director, is a case in point. Though character motivation is not something I will explore in detail in this chapter, Daly and Dowd's attitude to it serves to illustrate their attitude to diegesis. When discussing another critic's comments on *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf*, Daly and Dowd challenge the 'assumption... that the action needs to be grounded in character motivation in the first place' (Daly and Dowd 2003: 118). *Holy Motors* seems to make this remark all the more pertinent. But we might want to respond by charging Daly and Dowd with not even *attempting* to ground action in character motivation (and subsequently, should this prove impossible, drawing conclusions from their failure). They claim that 'what Carax is interested in pursuing... is what Maurizio Grande has called '*images non-dérivées*' ("non-derived images"), and pursue their argument in terms of the relationship between fate and chance in Carax's cinema (*ibid*: 114). This relationship is certainly of great importance, but part of its importance lies in the fact that the characters' *responses* to contingent events are crucial. In *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* these responses include those to events which they take to be contingent but which have in fact been engineered, such as when Michèle (Juliette Binoche) thinks she has accidentally knocked the money they have stolen into the Seine, whereas in fact Alex (Denis Lavant) has moved it closer to her precisely to make her more likely to do so. Such sequences simply cannot be fully understood without paying attention to questions of motivation.

Daly and Dowd seem to assume that doing so would risk reducing the film to a

conventional fable dressed-up with formalist, auteurist fireworks. The critical desire to challenge such a hierarchy is admirable, but it seems to me that they go too far the other way and simply declare, by *fiat*, that Carax's cinema is far too advanced to have anything to do with such antiquated notions as character motivation. But what might happen if, granting that we cannot assume that everything needs grounding in plausible motivation, we nonetheless seriously enquire into the possibility that it has an important role to play? Not to do so risks grossly misreading films such as *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* and *Pola X*; indeed the relationship between motivation and artifice in these films – the increased role given to motivational plausibility – seems to be one of the things that most clearly distinguishes them from *Boy meets Girl* (1984) and *Mauvais Sang*. Given this account of the development of Carax's films, we cannot make, at the outset, the kind of assumptions made by Daly and Dowd with regard even to a film as peculiar as *Holy Motors*. I want to claim Carax generates here a new relationship between motivation and artifice whose power to disconcert comes about precisely because it denies us the kind of certainty about the irrelevance of motivational coherence (or other forms of diegetic coherence) that Daly and Dowd recommend.

It is time to examine the film in more detail. The constructed nature of the fusion between image and sound that is the narrative sound film is underlined at the film's outset, and its history (synchronised sound coming to cinema later than image) is mimicked in miniature. *Holy Motors* begins with silent animated images from Marey's photographic studies of movement: image divorced from sound. We then see an audience in a cinema, unremarkable except for the fact that they appear to be fast asleep. (Carax says that he does not know if they are asleep or dead; see Asdourian 2012.) We can hear the film they are watching, but not see it: sound is divorced from

image. The following sequence involves Carax himself playing a character identified in the credits as the Sleeper. The Sleeper wakes up in what might be a hotel room and finds a secret door into the cinema with the audience of sleepers or corpses. This is relatively easily absorbed as a reflexive, metanarratological commentary; the convention of the introduction means that the beginning of a film is a site where we are open to more abstract sequences before the diegesis properly establishes itself.¹¹ I would suggest that we do, however, expect to be shown something of the film that the sleeping audience, and then the Sleeper, are watching: perhaps even that it will prove to be the very film we, the audience, go on to watch (as seems to be the case with the images on the Lost Girl's television in *INLAND EMPIRE*).

This is indeed what we appear to be offered. At the end of the introduction we cut to an image of a girl sitting in the window of a boat, looking out. Except that we have been tricked: the nautical associations are prompted only by the soundtrack, and the fact that the window is round (and hence suggestive of a porthole). Cristina Álvarez López thinks that the continuity of sound at this point tell us that '[e]ven though we never see the images projected onto the screen, we know that it is Carax's film because the sounds we hear (lapping waves, birds, a horn) are stretched out to cover the beginning of the next scene' (López in Martin and Shambu 2012). But I think this overlap of sound – what Genette would call a sonic metalepsis – serves rather to indicate the opposite. We never see those waves or those birds, and the image that

¹¹ Compare, for example, the opening montage (combined with Scott Walker's music) of the otherwise much more diegetically straightforward – albeit still confusing – *Pola X*.

appears to suture sound and image (the porthole) is not in fact a porthole. The girl is in fact looking out of the round window of a large – and admittedly ship-like – modernist house, the sound being merely "held over" from the unseen film. This figure is a complex riff on what is known as a pre-lap, in which the sound from a succeeding scene enters before the image. This device can be made to serve various purposes; not infrequently the sound is introduced in such a way that the viewer initially assumes it "belongs" to the scene they are still watching. There is, therefore, momentary confusion when the image changes and reveals this not to be the case. Murray Pomerance has written about this phenomenon, arguing that:

... the pre-lap functions as a kind of upholstery to soften the shock of the voyage... In the "voyage" of the pre-lap, the "upholstering" buffer is a particular nuance in the sound as it occurs in the first shot, one that makes it seem, somehow, obscurely and dimly, not only logical and appropriate but also, and at the same time, *wrong*. The sound *is* here, and we can understand that it is here, and yet as much as it fits it should also not be here. ... When the transition is resolved, we have a feeling of release and coherence: yes, *here* is where that voice truly belongs. This is why we are neither exasperated nor utterly confused when the cut occurs, nor displeased, even though we have been, as it were, ripped away from an integrated whole of picture and sound only to have our world displaced by a temporary transition that may well seem, as it is occurring, relatively loose-jointed and incomprehensible.

(Pomerance 2008: 148-9)

What happens at this point in *Holy Motors* takes advantage of our familiarity with the

kind of process Pomerance describes, but only in order to undercut it. The fact that the scene before the transition takes place in a cinema means we feel – wrongly, it turns out – more secure than in Pomerance's examples: we hear nautical sounds and ascribe them to something that is, diegetically, a movie; we think we have a clear rationale for the disjunction between image and sound. At this point the Sleeper, standing on the balcony of the cinema, turns his head to look directly at the screen, and there is a cut to what we think is a porthole. The apparent eyeline match and the continuity of sound both encourage us confidently to conclude that we have now entered that movie ourselves. But it seems actually to be the case that we *never* see the film that the sleeping (or dead) audience is sitting in front of; we only hear it. (The nautical sounds soon fade away and are replaced by early morning birdsong and children playing.) Carax creates a moment of false diegesis, a fraudulent image (what we see is not part of a boat) that, by means of what we can only in retrospect see as suspiciously comfortable 'upholstery' takes advantage both of our desire for orientation and our slightly smug satisfaction at successfully – so we suppose – avoiding disorientation. The 'feeling of release and coherence' that Pomerance refers to is generated only to dissipate almost immediately. The film is so constructed as to give us the feeling of being slightly ahead of it, whereas in fact it is we who have to catch up with it. Reflecting on this might prompt us, very early in the film, both to be sensitive to precise diegetic status and wary of the means by which it is generated.

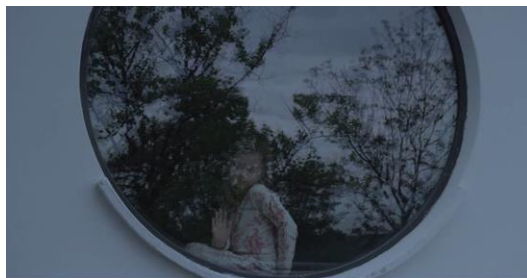


figure 3.2: the fraudulent porthole

After this, things relax a little. The banker speaks to Céline about the number of appointments he has for that day, something very reasonable for a rich, successful and busy banker to do. He discusses firearms with a colleague on the phone, apparently believing himself to need a greater level of protection; a thriller might be in the offing. But his first appointment turns out, astonishingly, to be that of spending some time acting the role of an old woman begging on the streets of Paris. This is followed by a sequence in which he takes on the role of a motion capture artist, working on fight scenes and scenes of fantastic reptilian intercourse, presumably for one or more films or computer games. By this point diegetic problems seem to have faded into the background. We think we have cottoned on: the film has a fantastic premise, that of a man whose job is to be a series of others. Narrative – in the sense of a fictional thread running through the whole film, with events at one point in the film having consequences elsewhere – will not be a primary concern. We are perhaps led to expect a series of variations on the idea of acting and performance. The dominant mode might seem to be that of the permutation or series: how many variations on the idea will the film be able to come up with? We might at this point wonder how – or if – the film will manage to sustain interest: will it be essentially a series of vignettes, vulnerable to longeurs if a particular vignette does not interest us? Will even its high points seem disconnected from the body of the film? Will it be possible to present something "new" each time, and even if it is, will this be enough? Will the film suffer the cinematic equivalent of what the composer Helmut Lachenmann describes as the risk, in new music, of 'withering away in the "sonically interesting" – i.e. boring – no man's land of exotic defamiliarisatory acrobatics'? (Lachenmann 2004: 66)

The M. Merde sequence that follows does not disrupt this hypothesis, but does introduce the possibility, which promises to be a means of avoiding some of the possible pitfalls just outlined, of more extensively drawn characters and the presence in the 'appointments' of mini-narratives, however bizarre and oblique. The narrative in this sequence is clear, even if its exact import is not: M. Merde emerges from the sewers, stomps through a graveyard munching flowers and terrifying passers-by, before coming upon Kay M being photographed by Harry T-Bone (Geoffrey Carey). This prompts T-Bone to move from expostulations of "Beautiful! Beautiful!" to "Weird! Weird" – this could easily be taken as reflexive, as Carax's sarcastic portrait of enthusiasts who can say nothing more about his films than that they're "*so weird*" – and insist that his assistant (Annabelle Dexter-Jones) ask if Merde is willing to be photographed. This results in some violent slapstick: Merde bites off the assistant's fingers and abducts Kay M, throwing her over his shoulders. Back in the sewers he removes some of her clothes and fashions them into a makeshift burka, in a kind of dance of the seven veils in reverse,¹² before finally falling asleep in her lap, with a prominent erection, while she sings him a lullaby (albeit a rather disturbing one, a version of "All the Pretty Horses" that makes reference to a lamb having its eyes pecked on).

This sequence is immediately followed by a deliberately "normal" narrative, that of a father and his shy teenage daughter who pretends to have had a good time at a party when in fact she has been hiding in the toilet. The scene is a remarkable exercise in narrative economy, presenting rounded characters with emotional plausibility and power

¹² Thanks to Gareth Evans for this observation.

in a brief span of time (the sequence lasts about nine minutes). But it also plays with our wish, perhaps not fully extinguished, that the film might present some kind of diegetic reality. Though we can certainly read this sequence as presenting a variation on the previous sequence (and hence developing a coherence through contrast: the Merde sequence is extremely unusual, almost aggressively unfamiliar, while that of the father and daughter could come from any number of other films or television series), does it not also activate our wish to know more about M. Oscar? Are we wrong to hope that perhaps the diegesis of the frame narrative, or conceit, is not so loose as it seems? Could it be that this is really M. Oscar's daughter? It is soon indicated that she is not (Oscar is made up for this role, complete with wig, just as he is for all his others), but that we might feel this way is not accidental or based only on importing inappropriate expectations into a film which has given us plenty of clues that they have no place here. Instead, the film encourages such speculation: we do not see Céline give Oscar the dossier for this appointment, as we have for all the previous appointments; the father tells his daughter that he's had "appointments all day long"; and Oscar seems genuinely angry and frustrated when he returns to his limo. Is this more acting, the emotions awakened by the scene bleeding – in a kind of metalepsis – into the actor's real life, or something else? Immediately afterwards comes an *entr'acte*, a musical sequence in which Lavant (is he or is he not Oscar at this point?), playing an accordion, leads a group of ambulatory musicians around a church playing a version of R.L. Burnside's "Let My Baby Ride". The sequence certainly furthers the film's thematic interest in the body, movement, and the relationship between sound and image but also reinforces the power of conventional formal designation: precisely because this sequence is marked as an interlude, its diegetic status is unlikely to concern us.

After the entr'acte, however, we are presented with a host of sequences that force us to ask questions about the film's diegesis. Biles claims that '*Holy Motors* thus has no discernible plot, but rather proceeds through a chain of episodes, each requiring Oscar to adopt a different persona' (Biles 2013: 3), but this is not the case. It is, rather, the film's wager to make this *seem* to be the case at the beginning, but then to undercut this conclusion. Saige Walton is much closer to the mark when she writes (quoting Gorfinkel 2013) that 'Oscar's eclectic "acts" do not undo "any conceptual fixity" as some critics have suggested, just as the hallucinatory world of *Holy Motors* exceeds a surrealist poetic of the cinema as dream' (Walton 2014: 246). But that the risk that we will come to Biles's conclusion is undertaken deliberately is, I think, supported by one of the deleted scenes included on the Artificial Eye DVD and Blu-ray editions of the film. In it, we see M. Merde and Kay M emerging from the sewers, thanking each other and each getting into their own separate limousines. To have included so early the idea that there is a whole world of Oscars, as it were, each with their own limo and series of roles to play, would have drastically altered the drama of the film. It is crucial that this revelation occurs later in the film, precisely so that it can be a striking, even shocking realization.

What do we believe in?

M. Oscar tells the Man with the Birthmark that he is having increasing trouble believing in his performances. What does it mean for an actor to believe in their performance, or, indeed, for an audience to believe in an actor's performance? I want to pause briefly in my passage through the film to investigate this question and its

connection to diegesis and orientation. When we say we are not convinced by an actor we do not mean that we are disappointed to learn that they *are* an actor, but that we do not "believe in" their performance. An actor's belief in their own performance has to do, I suspect, largely with its meaningfulness and hence, frequently, with its connection to an audience. These questions are not restricted to the performance of actors in films but might also be used to frame the way in which we might "believe in" a narrative film more generally. Noël Burch puts his view this way:

As Christian Metz reminded us a few years ago, belief in the cinematic image as an analogue of real phenomena, if it ever was an hallucination (such as might be induced by drugs or psychosis, for example), has long ceased to be one; it is, indeed, a *willing* suspension of disbelief, an emotional involvement which may certainly attain great depths of anguish or compassion, but which is always grounded in the awareness that the subject is 'only watching a film'. It is in this respect, Metz further suggests, that the filmic experience resembles that of the phantasy rather than the dream.

(Burch 1982: 18)

Burch and Metz are, I believe, correct; it is worth emphasising the fact that diegesis involves not merely an intellectual process (involving, for example, judgements about the consistency of a represented imaginary world or situation); our sense of a film's diegesis also draws upon more emotionally shaded aspects of cognition, related to a sense of immersion. Indeed, Burch explains earlier in the same piece that, in his understanding, narrative is not a *sine qua non* for cinematic diegesis; distinguishing diegetic production from diegetic reception, and referring to diegetic process in order 'to

encompass the two', he declares that 'one of my contentions is that this process can be triggered off in a filmic context independently of the presence of any narrative structure, and that one may consequently see it, rather than narrative, as the true seat of cinema's "power of fascination"' (Burch 1982: 16). But does Coleridge's notion of suspension of disbelief accurately describe what this kind of "believing in" feels like, whether we are watching a film or, say, reading a novel? J.R.R. Tolkien suggests that we should not be so sure:

That state of mind has been called "willing suspension of disbelief". But this does not seem to me a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful "subcreator". He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. ... then disbelief must be suspended. ... But this suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing...

(Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories" [1947]; quoted in Wolf 2012: 24)

For Tolkien, also, believing in a fictional world is not to be confused with hallucinating, but nevertheless, when all is operating as it should, it is this belief, rather than the performance needed to bring it about, that dominates our awareness; the fact that we always know it is a fiction (except in cases of psychosis or delusion) does not prevent us becoming strongly "lost" in a narrative film, in the sense of being immersed in it. When we submit to the world presented by a book (or a film) we *entertain* the notion that it is

real (without, of course, being deluded that this is the case) and are only reminded that we are in a sense only pretending when 'the spell is broken'. For Burch and Metz, on the other hand, watching a film appears to involve what we might call a performative act of belief. We willingly suspend *disbelief*, and thus in watching a film we are engaging in a continual performance perhaps somewhat akin to that engaged in by the film actor, in which we are always aware, at least to some extent, of the performative nature of our submission to this belief.

These two options are not mutually exclusive theoretical possibilities; both of them seem to me to be recognisable, and one or the other may be more prominent at any given time. There can, nevertheless, be tension between them. A very similar distinction could be made about the forms of belief engaged in by the film actor. This can be seen in the fact that the tension between willingly entertaining a belief and engaging in a performative act of belief is given its clearest articulation in *Holy Motors* during the conversation with the Man with the Birthmark (which occurs immediately after the first 'appointment' following the entr'acte), where Oscar bemoans the fact that the cameras have become invisible. Henry Carroll has discussed the way this scene articulates the film actor's need for the audience in order to achieve the requisite level of belief in their own performance: 'Put in the context of cognitive engagement, Oscar's loss of the lens leads to the loss of believability, an existentially tragic development that strips him of what was essentially his reason for existence' (Carroll, Henry 2014: 8). This is right, I think, but incomplete. Carroll neglects the implicit paradox: Oscar can't believe in his performances any more precisely because of the invisibility of the cameras, which is to say the absence of signs that cinema is *not* real. The actor's curse of only being able to be-

lieve, not only in their performance, but in *themselves* by an act of pretending is attributed by Borges to Shakespeare in a text quoted by Carax in the Cannes press document (though Carax does not quote this particular passage): 'The work of a thespian held out a remarkable happiness to him – the first, perhaps, he had ever known; but when the last line was delivered and the last dead man applauded off the stage, the hated taste of unreality would assail him.' (Borges 1999: 319)

Viewers of *Holy Motors* have, in a sense, the opposite dilemma. The film – deliberately, I believe – risks disrupting its audience's belief in it precisely by the way it interferes with our abilities either to immerse ourselves in it by entertaining its fiction or to find other ways of maintaining the performance necessary for continued engagement. It challenges our capacity to entertain its diegesis (by subverting diegesis without allowing us to relax into a decision that narrative and diegetic cohesion are irrelevant), which puts our ability to sustain the performative act of believing in it, in a wider sense, also in danger. It risks frustrating us into losing patience. Maintaining more clearly, for example, that M. Oscar's story is only that of a (perhaps) allegorical bridge between different vignettes or mini-narratives, whose connections are only formal or thematic (not diegetic) might well have made the film easier to digest, by more easily allowing the audience to discard certain kinds of enquiry into coherence. Instead, in the second half of the film, our readiness to "believe in" the film is encouraged by its absorptive power but challenged by the raising of diegetic questions that disrupt our absorption. This tension is also supplemented by another: that between consistency and absorption. This latter tension is precisely that which the first few appointments encouraged us to consider as of minimal importance. To return to the terminology established earlier, the lack of cohesion between the early sequences seemed to cue us that there is no need to

look for consistency, and that we could therefore find ourselves absorbed – or not – by each sequence without consequence for our engagement with any other sequence; whatever coherence the film might have, it seems, would not come from its diegesis. This stance ceases to be tenable during the film's second half.

Absorption and inconsistency

I want to argue that the second half of *Holy Motors* makes part of its project a testing of the possible tensions between absorption and inconsistency. James Naremore is right to point out that 'most movies contain a heterogeneous mix of performing styles and skills' (Naremore 2014: 51), but it is of course rarer for a single actor to express such a 'heterogenous mix' in a single film. When this does happen it almost without exception draws attention to itself and becomes a *tour de force* of performance: think of Alec Guinness's multiple roles in *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (Robert Hamer, 1949) or those of Peter Sellers in *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964). The reflexivity that results draws attention to the act of performance to just the degree that the performance absorbs us. We are so consistently reminded to be alert to performativity that, paradoxically, the more we are absorbed in Lavant's performances the greater the possibility of our becoming aware of them as performances – precisely because the more absorbing the performance, the more successful it is *as a performance*.

The second half of the film draws out various paradoxes from this situation by means of metaleptical entanglements between Oscar and the characters he performs. In one of the few readings of the film to seriously take account of the way it develops, Daniel Morgan observes:

Starting from the postulate of a robust account of absorption, *Holy Motors* strips away seemingly necessary features, revealing them to be irrelevant to the creation of an immersive fictional world.¹³ It takes some time for this project to emerge. While the first half of the film contains a number of extraordinary and strange sequences, by and large there is a fairly clear distinction between Oscar and the characters he plays. ... it's only with the pivotal scene in the warehouse that the complications really begin to arise. ... The ontological border between character and actor, seemingly intrinsic to narrative feature films, is increasingly porous.

(Morgan 2015: 7)

The first of M. Oscar's appointments after the entr'acte involves him playing (or becoming?) an assassin. Lavant, however, plays not only the assassin but also his victim. What begins as perhaps the most explicit genre pastiche in the film thus far (of a Hong Kong crime drama) descends into the realms of the diegetically weird, or even impossible. Oscar's character, Alex, reclothes and shaves his victim, Théo, so that they will look identical (even giving him an identical scar above the eye). But Théo proves not to be dead and gives Alex an identical wound to that which Alex gave him. *Had* this been a Hong Kong crime drama the narrative might, perhaps, have been that Alex and Théo are twin brothers and that Alex wishes his enemies to think it is he, not his brother, who has died. But when Théo proves not to be dead and wounds Alex, identity is more

¹³ This recalls Burch's position on the primacy of diegesis versus narrative referred to above.

profoundly challenged.

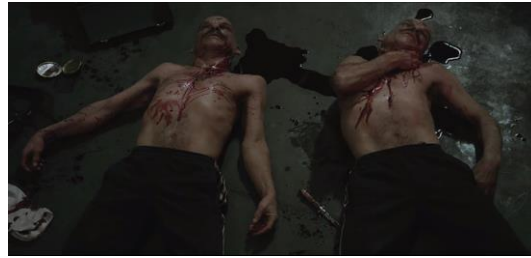


figure 3.3: vulnerable identities

Morgan's account of this is as follows:

The physical care involved in this transformation contrasts with the absence of work involved in the motion-capture process shown earlier, and it occasions what seems to be a kind of pun: whereas Oscar and the woman are turned into animation, Alex's victim is literally animated – made to resemble Alex, he then comes to life as Alex, stabs him, and then, confoundingly, staggers out to be rescued by Céline and resume his schedule of appointments.

(Morgan 2015: 4)

The point about the pun is excellent and anticipates some of the notions of figuration to which I will turn in my next chapter, but Morgan is a little too sanguine about identity here. When a wounded man emerges and collapses before he can get back to the limo, and has to be assisted by Céline, we have *no way* of knowing whether it is M. Oscar or not. For the first time, Oscar seems to be in real (diegetic) danger, and yet at the same time his identity is made a matter of – perhaps unresolvable – doubt. Characteristically, this doubt is then undercut simply by being ignored: the next sequence shows Oscar (or his double) as hale and hearty as before, talking to the Man with the Birthmark.

Another intertextual moment occurs at this point and addresses the same themes.

Holy Motors inverts a scene in Franju's *Les yeux sans visage*, the opening of which shows Louise (Alida Valli) in black raincoat and a rain bonnet disposing of a body, dragging it from a car. In *Holy Motors*, Céline (Édith Scob, who played Christianne in Franju's film), also in a rain bonnet, drags the body of Oscar/Alex/Théo to the car in order to save him. (This precedes what we might call the explicit reference *Holy Motors* makes to *Les yeux sans visage*, which only takes place at the end of the film when Scob puts on the mask.) Disposal of a dead body becomes recovery of a dying body; rather than the aftermath of death, we have a kind of rebirth.



figure 3.4: disposal in *Les Yeux sans visage*



figure 3.5: rescue in *Holy Motors* (detail)

Morgan is, I think, quite right when he argues that:

The great achievement of *Holy Motors* is to show us that despite what we know about the film, what we cannot help but knowing about it [*sic.*], each time a scene begins we are drawn in, absorbed by and engaged in its actions. We are helpless, rapt as much as the spectators in the film's opening scene.

(Morgan 2015: 8)

As we have seen, however, far from being 'rapt', the cinema audience is either asleep or dead! The projected light from the screen reflects back on the bodies of the audience in a kind of "re-projection" which links to all the film's varied explorations of repetition and afterlife. Projecting a film is to bring it *back* to life, which is not quite the same as

having a life after death. Perhaps, in its allegories, *Holy Motors* tries to show how the cinema has been more concerned with resurrection (a return to how things were) than it has with the afterlife (a new state of being). The question of the afterlife of cinema itself can be raised now given that the notion of the death of cinema is conceivable, but this does not mean that the only death that the film is concerned with is that of cinema; immediately following the discussion with the Man with the Birthmark is a sequence which initiates a series of narrative investigations of *human* death.¹⁴

Oscar sees his banker persona sitting at a roadside cafe, insists that Céline stops the car, and gets out and shoots him. Some kind of metaleptical entanglement seems to have taken place, but what kind? During the phone call in his limousine at the beginning of the film the banker mentions a meeting to take place 'tonight at Fouquet's', and it is indeed at a café called Fouquet's that he is found and shot. Our sense of diegesis is severely challenged – not just because Oscar himself, shot repeatedly by the banker's bodyguards, is apparently killed for a second time and again suffers no lasting ill-effects, but because we had assumed that Oscar's performances had no life outside his engagement with them. But here it appears that they do: is Oscar taking on the role of people that *do* otherwise exist? Or perhaps that *did*? The diegetic confusion is directly connected to the theme of death. Céline, in yet another reflexive moment, links the audience's state of mind with Oscar's, telling the crowd to 'excuse him; there's been a

¹⁴ Carax has said: 'I use cinema as language to create the science fiction world but hopefully the film is not about cinema' (Asdourian 2012).

mix-up [confusion]'.¹⁵ Are all Oscar's roles meant to be of the dead, meaning that the banker is breaking the rules by being alive?¹⁶

These scenes absorb us – puzzle and intrigue us – precisely because they *break* the ground rules of diegetic consistency (which is to say the presumption of its irrelevance) we had assumed to be in operation. The rules are broken in such a way as to comprise a sequence of metaleptical, or quasi-metaleptical, transgressions of the boundary of death which demonstrate that (as I argued in my first chapter) metalepsis can be more productively considered as a rhetorical instrument than as a logical category. Both "Alex" and "Théo" seem mortally wounded, but somebody survives; we do not know which one – or is the answer simply that it is Oscar who survives? Does he play both parts? (Denis Lavant certainly does!) Then both the banker and Oscar appear to die, and yet Oscar is not dead. In the next sequence an old man dies and his young niece weeps, but since this is only a performance they are able to speak to each other and express the wish that they will meet again. The niece is called Léa but the actress is Élise; the fact that the *actual* actress is also called Élise suggests a metaleptical connection with the world outside the film. The following sequence reverses this structure: it is revealed that there is more than one performer travelling between appointments in a limousine, so we might think that Jean's apparent suicide would be

¹⁵ 'Excuser-le, il y a eu un confusion.'

¹⁶ In the next sequence, Oscar plays a man called M. Vogan. In the Merde sequence there is a sardonic joke: a group of tombstones all invite one to "visit my site" and contain a web address; one of these is www.vogan.fr.

easily explained away as another performance. However, Oscar – even though he is not at this point on a rendezvous and hence presumably not performing – reacts as if Jean's death were real, dashing into the limousine with a cry of horror and grief. In *Holy Motors*, death does not only cause emotional confusion but is treated allegorically via a range of narrative or logical confusions, in Baumgarten's sense. The film's metalepses are the rhetorical instruments by means of which its allegories are generated.

I shall discuss death and allegory in *Holy Motors* in more detail to conclude this chapter. For now, I want to continue our passage through the film. The scene after the shooting of the banker is the deathbed scene derived from Henry James, where it is first confirmed for us that (at least some of) those with whom Oscar interacts are themselves performers like him.¹⁷ We might note that when Oscar, as M. Vogan, is lying delirious in a fever he connects the worlds of his appointments: 'You should have deliberately not done it, Théo', he says, which is one of his lines from the preceding Hong Kong gangster murder appointment. Who exactly is suffering from delirium: Vogan, or Oscar as well? There is in this scene a very meticulous but yet puzzling treatment of diegetic and non-diegetic sound. Shostakovich's 15th string quartet begins nondiegetically, but it also functions to signal the beginning of the scene proper: the music does not start until after Oscar has sprayed on fake sweat and climbed into bed. It seems to signal the real

¹⁷ For some viewers the question as to whether this is the case becomes active early in the film. A number of students of mine became concerned about the question of how many of the people we see are performing within the diegetic world after the finger-biting episode. Does Jamie the photographer's assistant *really* lose her fingers?

beginning of his existence as M. Vogan (even though the hotel staff had earlier greeted him as such). Like the music in the shower in *Psycho* (see Cecchi 2010), then, this clearly non-diegetic music has a diegetic significance: it cues the audience to the shift of diegetic level from the performance of performance to the embedded narrative itself. There then follows, however, a great show of reintroducing the same music diegetically. Léa switches on the CD player. The music begins again, and it continues as she goes into the next room to change, but it then continues undisturbed when there is a cut to her sitting by the bedside – so it cannot now be diegetic. Is this a deliberate inconsistency? Or were we perhaps too hasty in our assumption that the scene proper had commenced? It seems more plausible that it is Éliane, the performer, not Léa, the character, who switches on the music. Does she only become Léa after she has changed her clothes, despite having earlier mopped Oscar/Vogan's brow? Is she in fact switching on *nondiegetic* music? After all, a CD player would be an odd prop in a Henry James adaptation, and we do not see it during the two characters' dialogue. How do we distinguish performance and the performance of performance?¹⁸

The next scene is the meeting between Oscar and Jean. The film enters another genre pastiche, this time of a musical. The lyrics to the song perhaps satirize both the audience's feeling that diegetic explanation would render things intelligible, and the film's tendency toward the elliptical. Jean sings 'we once had a child / we called her / but then she'; a backstory to the relationship seems to be offered, but any further

¹⁸ Morgan raises this same question with regard to the moment Lavant, or Oscar, or the movement capture artist, falls on the treadmill (see Morgan 2015: 7).

information that might actually explain things is withheld. Or is the withholding merely an obvious euphemism for the daughter's death? What else could have happened to the child to cause her parents to 'wander so very far apart', to make 'lovers turn into monsters'? Enigma and melodramatic predictability coincide, and we are led to wonder whether the explanation we think we want *would* be any kind of satisfactory explanation. The scene could merely be the latest in the film's series of variations: having learnt that there are other performers, an obvious variant is for two of them to meet outside of the arena of performance. And yet, though Jean tells Oscar that she is about to play an airline hostess called Eva Grace, when her lover comes to meet her (while Oscar slips away unseen), he calls her Jean, not Eva. Is a real betrayal of some kind taking place? To further complicate matters and destabilise our sense of the distinction between authentic and inauthentic personae, Jean *removes* her wig to become Eva, rather than putting one on.

The film is nearly over. There remains what seems to be a satire on the nuclear family, albeit one executed with a peculiar degree of pathos, when Oscar's return home turns out to be just another appointment, this time as the husband and father of a family of chimpanzees, and the return to the garage, where Céline puts on her *Eyes Without a Face* mask, after which the cars have their final conversation. The latter parts of the film constantly pose challenges to our sense of its consistency, in a manner even verging on the exhaustive. We could consider consistency of genre (drama, musical, melodrama and comedy all make an appearance), consistency of tone, consistency of register, consistency of plausibility, and consistency of diegetic level. Inconsistencies in all these departments disrupt the diegesis, or have the possibility to do so, but they coexist with affective phenomena which affirm it, in its absorptive sense. Concurrently, there are also

bewildering and paradoxical *connections* which cause diegetic problems, but also negatively underline the importance of narrative diegesis; if diegesis were not important, the connections would not cause problems.

Throughout *Holy Motors*, then, questions of diegetic cohesion, consistency, and ultimately coherence are all raised, varied and developed in a manner whose sequence is crucial to their effect. These effects are often in tension and at times paradoxical, but the film achieves a singular coherence precisely via the way in which it reflexively manipulates the cohesion and consistency of its own diegesis. Like *INLAND EMPIRE*, *Holy Motors* demonstrates that cohesion and consistency – connections in general – do not automatically reduce disorientation; in fact, if we are led specifically *not* to expect them, they can lead to profound bewilderment. The film also demonstrates how near to paradox are many features we often take for granted in narrative films. Enigmas only make sense because for most of the time they do not make sense (if they did they would not be enigmas); performances are only absorbing because we are aware that they are performances and thus not wholly absorbed by them. Carax's film powerfully underlines the instability of our engagement with films, the way that films constantly transform themselves and thus transform our relationships with them.

Love and death

Just as I argued in my chapter on *INLAND EMPIRE* that the possibility of mutually incompatible interpretations need not result in a meaningless free-for-all, I want to conclude this chapter by showing that the formal self-awareness and ludic manipulation of the viewer's responses that permeate *Holy Motors* need not preclude

serious treatment of matters that extend far beyond the film itself, in particular of one of the most serious matters of all – namely death.

I argued above that the film's paradoxical metalepses involving death help generate its allegories. Gilberto Perez has persuasively argued against the notion that allegory is 'lifeless and abstract – "incompatible with modern poetry", in Erich Auerbach's words'; of course it *can* be lifeless, but so can any other mode of representation (Perez 2011: 36). Perez discusses Auerbach's influential essay on *figura* and claims that Auerbach attempts to distinguish allegory from *figura* (which involves real historical personae and events foreshadowing one another) precisely because of the widespread notion that allegory must be sterile. On the contrary, says Perez, 'Auerbach's figural mode demonstrates that allegory need not retreat into thin abstractions but can marshal a living concreteness to its purposes' (*ibid.*: 38).¹⁹ Perez attempts to demonstrate this by showing how it can activate real, urgent historical situations; he discusses allegories of independence and Islam in Ousmane Sembène's *Ceddo* (1977) and of American nationhood in John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946). Although *Holy Motors* might seem very far removed from the 'living concreteness' that Perez argues allegory can 'marshal... to its purposes', it might well put us in mind of his speculation that 'allegory is necessary when you can't get there from here, when no part of experience, no laborious recounting of many parts of experience, can adequately stand for the whole and comprehend its meaning' (*ibid.*: 39). Death surely fits these

¹⁹ Auerbach's understanding of the figural is rather different from the notions of figures and the figurative most useful to me; see the next chapter for clarification.

criteria perfectly; what coherence can there be between the world of the living and that of the dead? It is no accident that the religious allegories Auerbach discusses so often involve looking forward to life after death: Perez cites the examples of the figural connection between Joshua leading the Israelites into the promised land and Jesus's promise of eternal life, or that 'between Cato the free man who preferred death to life in servitude and the freedom from bondage to sin enjoyed by souls in heaven' (*ibid.*: 38). Religion does, in fact, have a presence in *Holy Motors*; the film's final word, spoken in ragged chorus by the limousines, is "Amen".

The first part of the film's credits pass in silence, ending with one final brief sequence from Marey, of a young boy playing with a ball, followed by the words 'un film de Leos Carax' and then a photograph of Yekaterina Golubeva, Carax's partner, and the dedication "Катя, – тебе" ("Katya – to you"). The girl we see in the circular "porthole" as the film proper commences is in fact the daughter of Golubeva and Carax; Golubevna died in 2011 during the production of *Holy Motors*.²⁰ Perhaps we should take the role of actual human death in *Holy Motors* more seriously than is sometimes done; or rather, because nobody doubts the sincerity of the dedication, consider it to be more than incidentally and biographically relevant to the film. A number of critics have noted that Carax says that it was Golubeva who gave him the Hoffmann short story that inspired the scene with the Sleeper (see Asdourian 2012). We might also note what Carax has said about Golubeva's role in *Pola X*, where she plays Isabelle: 'one could

²⁰ The cause of death is unconfirmed but, adding pathos to the death of Kylie Minogue's character, it is rumoured to have been suicide (Thomson 2014).

think of Isabelle that she comes out of one of those bombed tombs and she walks towards us like in Abel Gance's film *J'accuse* wherein the dead of the First World War walk toward the camera, walk toward us... She is somewhat like that phantom' (quoted in Daly and Dowd 2003: 153). In her only acting role in Carax's films, Golubeva played a kind of ghost, before becoming as it were a "real" ghost in *Holy Motors*. Viewed in this way the explorations of different kinds of deaths, non-deaths, and not-not-deaths in the second half of the film seem much more emotionally intense, as does Oscar's return to the chimpanzee family (not to mention the use of the Sparks song "How Are You Getting Home?" in the father and daughter sequence). Perhaps the film's more surreally light-hearted touches should be interpreted along the lines of Albert Camus's recommendation, cited by Geoff Dyer at the beginning of his book *Zona*, that 'the best way of talking about what you love is to speak of it lightly' (Camus, 'A Short Guide to Towns Without a Past', quoted in Dyer 2012: n.p.). This might help explain the film's distinctive brand of gentle black humour that treats death as something of a social embarrassment. When the banker's bodyguards have shot Oscar, for example, Céline whispers to him – so that the crowd of onlookers can't hear – that they'll be late, and when M. Vogan has died and his niece is weeping with her head on his chest, Oscar gently moves her head as he gets up, saying 'pardon' and explaining that he has another appointment to get to.

James Naremore has made the following observation about Stanley Kubrick: 'the key to his style lies in his anxious fascination with the human body and his ability, which he shares with all black humorists and artists of the grotesque, to yoke together conflicting emotions, so that he confuses both our cognitive and emotional responses' (Naremore 2007: 35). Particularly if we consider Naremore's use of 'confuses' in the

light of the double senses of the word (pejorative and technical) which I outlined in my introduction, this passage suggests a perhaps unexpected but I think illuminating affinity between Kubrick and Carax. The grotesque links the body and the intellect, emotional reactions and considered conclusions: hence Kubrick's interest in 'confounding the animate with the inanimate – a type of confusion that Wolfgang Kayser specifically connects with the grotesque' (*ibid.*: 31).²¹ The relationship between the animate and the inanimate is at the heart of *Holy Motors*.²² The passage of time brings about the end of biological life, and yet it tends to animate old technology: just as the analogue film that once seemed mechanical and alien now seems idiosyncratic and organic in comparison with digital media, analogue electronic music that once seemed cold and alien (in Bebe and Louis Barron's soundtrack to *Forbidden Planet*, say) now seems positively warm and alive compared with some digital electronics. Carax highlights the way that the obsolete is so easily viewed as dead or dying; obsolescence itself blurs the boundary between the animate and the inanimate. The apparent immateriality of the new virtual

²¹ Naremore elsewhere (*ibid.*: 29) mentions Diane Arbus in this connection, and Arbus is, as we have seen, explicitly – if rather sarcastically – cited in *Holy Motors*.

²² We should not assume that Carax necessarily outdoes Kubrick in terms of surrealism; for all his mannerist excesses the Frenchman can be emotionally more straightforward than the American. In contrast, for example, to the surrealism by which showroom dummies become reanimated as weapons in the fight at the end of Kubrick's *Killer's Kiss* (1955), the mannequins lying on the floor in the Samaritaine during Jean's song about 'what we were' seem to function almost entirely in terms of elegiac pathos, until our shock when Oscar gives them a savage kick at the end of the song forces us to realise that they are simply bits of wood and plastic.

world, which is really an occlusion of materiality (an internet search involves real computer servers doing real work, but distant and hidden from the searcher) makes the very physical presence of machines, whose qualities once served to emphasise their difference from living beings, into a point of connection with non-machinic bodies. In an interview included in the press kit for the Cannes festival Carax writes:

The film is therefore a form of science fiction, in which humans, beasts and machines are on the verge of extinction – "sacred motors" linked together by a common fate and solidarity, slaves to an increasingly virtual world. A world from which visible machines, real experiences and actions are gradually disappearing.

(Cannes 2012: 13)

Might we, then, consider the film an allegory for death that is seen as much from the perspective *of* the dead, or at least of those – like the cars – poised precariously between death and life, as it looks forward to death as the uncrossable horizon? Carax, the *Sleeper*, is alive, but the film he sees or dreams is in a sense the world of the dead. This, in one more paradox, is true even though at the same time it is also the world of life, of bodies and machines in motion. This particular paradox is, of course, one of the most familiar in film: the bodies Marey photographed seem as alive as they did more than a hundred years ago when they were first filmed; *are*, in fact, as alive as any other body on film, even though the bodies we see have long been dead; many of them, in all likelihood, for a hundred years or more.

Holy Motors brings these paradoxes vividly to life even when they concern death; its allegories, reflexivities and contradictions put to the test our understanding of

the relationships between coherence, cohesion and consistency, or between different kinds of belief. In doing so, however, the film brings these elements into closer, more complex relationships ('confuses both our cognitive and emotional responses') rather than separating them ever further from one another. Ultimately the film does, it seems to me, achieve coherence. Even if we are often puzzled or unbalanced by it, the extent to which the film does *not* fundamentally disorientate us – despite its many contradictions, inconsistencies and moments of apparent incoherence – is remarkable; this might in fact be one of its most significant achievements. James Walters has speculated that 'those moments in films when events occur inconsistently to the potentials and possibilities of the fictional world that the film has created' might turn out to be 'ultimately... the times when viewer disappointment sets in as a film's credibility dissolves' (Walters 2008: 101). On my reading, *Holy Motors* indicates that this is rather too broadly stated; many other results are also possible. Recalling Casetti's notion of the path that a film sets the viewer on, Stephanie Van Schilt observes that '[t]he path that *Holy Motors* led me down was often murky, rough, violent and puzzling. But I never felt lost because, while at times disorienting, it never became obtuse' (Daly and Van Schilt in Martin and Shambu 2012). This achievement has its roots, it seems to me, in a love both for the cinema in general and for one woman in particular; this love is something that, for once, the film expresses both consistently and coherently.



figure 3.6: dedication

chapter four

figuring (out) films: figuration in narrative cinema

This thesis contends that confusion and disorientation are not merely the result of encountering shapelessness, but that different filmic forms may prompt different kinds of disorientation, all of which have their own shape. I attempt to trace some of these shapes in the chapters devoted to specific films. Another word for shape is figure. In this chapter, I will argue that the concept of *figuration* can contribute to this process of tracing, as well as to a critical approach to films which offers the possibility of tailoring one's methods and interpretations to the film in question without either requiring one to select a rigid methodology or succumbing to eclecticism. Because of the concept's complexity and pervasiveness, I will not attempt to define figuration at the outset. Instead, the first part of this chapter will work towards a provisional definition, which will then be explored through the recent work on figuration in film that I find most stimulating.

What it is that abstract concepts name is not only a question of language; the distinctions between abstract and concrete, between literal and non-literal, and between implicit and explicit, may (strictly speaking) be intralinguistic, but they also have fundamental ontological and epistemological significance.¹ There is, of course, much about film that is non-linguistic but criticism is (for the most part) conducted in the

¹ I like Arnold Isenberg's remark that '[i]t seems silly to ask how music can be *light-hearted*, as if you already knew how a *heart* can be *light*' (Isenberg 1973: 9).

medium of language. And not only this: even the non-linguistic parts of film are conditioned by the language(s) in whose company they come into being, exist and are responded to. In what follows I hope to be able to sketch the outlines of a synthesis which will be both clarificatory and stimulating with regard to what (and how) films mean as well as what (and how) we can productively write or say about it. These are, of course, questions that might be raised by any film but that disorientating films can render unavoidable. In places this chapter is somewhat abstract because this seemed the most efficient and uncluttered way of presenting my ideas, but elsewhere (as well as in the chapters that follow) I have tried to present sufficient numbers of concrete examples as to tether any abstractions to the details of actual films.

The chapter is structured as follows: after beginning with an account of what exactly a cinematic figure is, it goes on to discuss the coverage of figuration in film theory that is most helpful for the purposes of this thesis, before concluding with a short exploration of the way that some theorists have used figuration to investigate extreme situations of disintegration, short-circuit, and overload – which is to say, precisely some of those situations in which disorientation or confusion seem likely to result.

What is a figure; or, what is it that is figured?

Certain words are so central to our thinking that a rigid division into literal and figurative is not desirable. *Shape* is one of those words. A shape drawn on a wall is a literal shape, while an argument has a shape only metaphorically; I would not contest this. But the way an argument has a shape is very close to the way our notional graffiti does: it has parts that relate to each other in a particular way. (If we were to say that

both the image and the argument had a *form*, would one instance be literal and the other metaphorical?) Talk of shape in a film readily takes on both literal and figurative senses. What shapes are on the screen? What is the shape of a film's plot? In keeping with the underlying presumptions of this thesis, the study of figuration seems to me to represent a prime site for demonstrating the way that certain distinctions can be problematised without being superseded. We can deconstruct the distinction between the literal and the figurative but we do not have to discard or destroy it.

The word figure, from the Latin *figura* (shape, figure, form) has almost exact cognates in a great many European languages (Dutch *figuur*, English and French *figure*, German *Figur*, Italian and Spanish *figura*, to name but a few), all of which deal with roughly the same constellation of meanings, which are many and various. A figure can be, for example, an abstract shape; a number; a representation of a human being ("a figure appeared in the doorway", or "the police chief seemed rather a suspicious figure")²; an instance of non-literal language (figurative language being, precisely, that which is not literal)³; a musical motif; or, at the most abstract, anything isolable as an object (as in the Gestalt notion of figure and ground). As developed in criticism and

² A figure in this sense is something less rounded, more schematic, than a "character". Incidentally, in French, a "figurant" is the kind of actor we would call in English an "extra".

³ Genette traces this tendency back to César Dumarsais's *Des Tropes* (1730), which did much 'to place at the center of historical thought the opposition between the literal and the figurative..., and therefore to turn rhetoric into a consideration of figuration, a turnstile of the figurative defined as the other of the literal, and of the literal defined as the other of the figurative – and to enclose it for a long time to come in this meticulous vertigo' (Genette 1982: 105).

philosophy, even if we restrict ourselves to instances that have been put to use in film theory, the range of senses seems, if anything, even more bewilderingly broad, as Chang-Min Yu indicates: 'Figures can be an interpretive structure (Erich Auerbach via Hayden White), libidinal events (Jean-Francois Lyotard), formal and corporeal subversions (Gilles Deleuze), semiotic short-circuits (Dudley Andrew), and units of cinematic economies (Nicole Brenez)' (Yu 2016).

Yu's list indicates that there will be no possibility, in the space available, even to outline the full compass of the different notions of figure. As I noted in the introduction, the meanings of figuration in visual art and in literature could be seen to pull in opposite directions. In both cases they relate to representation, but in visual art figuration moves *towards* direct "replication", while in literature it pulls *away* from it – away from direct, literal, factual statements. Figurative painting represents people and objects from the "real world", or at least things similar to them (gods, heroes, etc), while figurative writing exists in contradistinction to literal writing. It can at times even seem as if the word is used in diametrically opposed senses. Compare, for example, the notion of the figurative as it is often used in studies of language and literature (namely to refer to that which is not literal) with Jean-Louis Comolli's reference to the way films have deployed 'the initial impression of reality (figurative analogy + movement + perspective)' (Comolli 1980: 133). Comolli means to indicate the way that images of people and objects on screen resemble those we see in our everyday lives, which is perhaps as close as an image can get to being "literal". If this (literal) resemblance can be called "figurative" it is not far from being the opposite of the sense of "figurative" that would be in play were we to say that calling our history teacher a fossil is a figurative (i.e. non-literal) use of language.

Specifically, of course, calling a teacher a fossil is an example of a metaphor. The debate in literary and linguistic studies about which form of figuration is dominant is too intricate to rehearse here (but see Matzner 2016: 25 ff. for an excellent discussion). Suffice it to say that I do not take the position that all literary figuration is ultimately a kind of metaphor; for one thing, metonymy, irony, and synecdoche have all been credibly argued to be distinct forms of figuration of equal conceptual status. I suspect that taking metaphor to be more or less synonymous with figuration has discouraged some critics from pursuing the notion of figuration in film, because it makes it seem too fundamentally literary a concept to be truly helpful. The discussion that follows will, I hope, go some way to indicating the richness and usefulness of considering figuration as covering a much wider territory than metaphor alone.

But does considering figuration as covering not only the whole range of its literary meanings (metaphor and beyond) but also the plastic sense used in visual art risk rendering it so general as to evacuate its usefulness? The apparent incompatibilities between the different senses of figure have to do, as we have seen, with problems of the literal versus the figurative or the abstract versus the concrete, as well as the ways that these oppositions cross-pollinate, so that the literal can also seem to be in opposition to the abstract. Far from tending towards incoherence, it is precisely this overlap, and the tensions it indicates, which I think are most interesting and productive for thinking about cinema in terms of figures, precisely because films are so reliant both on actual, physical shapes and a wide variety of abstract types of patterning (narrative, symbolic,

and so forth).⁴ I want in this chapter to clarify the notion of figuration in film (to reduce confusion in the pejorative sense) because it has the potential to be such a helpful concept for discussing some of the cinema's fundamental confusions, in Baumgarten's sense.

Discussions of figuration in film frequently hinge on its relation to ideas of language, of representation, of narrative. But such ideas are all too often seen only as restrictive, as things which cinema has the power to do without, or even to explode, a viewpoint that William D. Rott characterizes as thinking 'that there is a special, visual dimension of communication ("the figural") where verbal meanings become fuzzy and inadequate or where the symbolic is confounded by the real' (Rott 2000). Rather than using the concept of figuration to gesture towards a supposedly liberated realm beyond the reach of language, it seems to me more productive to attempt to find ways of expressing the complicated ways that films combine the literal and the figurative.⁵

⁴ Jacques Aumont refers to this phenomenon with a metaphor based in hygiene: 'traditionally, the figure is a sort of contamination of the verbal by the iconic' (Aumont 1991: 191). Aumont also offers a useful corrective to any tendency too rigidly to oppose uncoded (iconic) visual resemblance to language's code-based methods of signification. In fact, visual recognition also involves highly abstract procedures: 'the work of recognition uses not just the elementary properties of the system of vision, but also the capacities for coding which are already quite abstract' (*ibid.*: 57).

⁵ I have difficulties, for example, with Jennifer M. Barker's claim that '[t]o say that we are touched by cinema indicates that it has significance for us, that it comes close to us, and that it literally occupies our sphere.' (Barker 2009: 2). Despite its proximity to the claim that cinema 'literally occupies our sphere', the word "touched" remains metaphorical here. The literal is implicitly equated with the real,

But if studying figuration in film is, among other things, a way of addressing the intersection and interaction of the figurative and the literal, we might reasonably ask ourselves what it is that is figured. Is figuration just another word for form, for the shape that content takes? On the contrary, Genette indicates how attention to figuration can move us beyond sterile notions of form versus content:

For Louis Hjelmslev... the opposite of form was not, as in the academic tradition, *content*, but *substance*, that is to say, the inert mass, either of extralinguistic reality (the substance of the content), or the means, phonic or otherwise, used by language (the substance of expression). ... If the relevant opposition is not between form and content, but between form and substance, "formalism" will consist not in privileging forms at the expense of meanings – which is senseless – but in considering meaning itself as a form imprinted in the continuity of the real, in accordance with an overall segmentation that is the system of the language: language can "express" the real only by *articulating* it, and this articulation is a system of forms, just as much on the level of the signified as on the level of the signifier.

(Genette 1982: 70-1)

Genette uses "articulation" in a way that is almost a pun on the word in the sense of

which leaves no way of insisting on the importance of a particular metaphor other than carry on as if it were not a metaphor: 'These terms [skin, musculature, viscera] are not used metaphorically, but are stretched beyond their literal, biological meanings to encompass their more phenomenological significance' (*ibid.*: 20-1).

conveying meaning ("I tried to articulate what I was feeling") and in the sense of *made up of connected parts* (as in an articulated lorry). In his essay "Shelley Disfigured" Paul de Man also relies on the notion of articulation, declaring that 'it is the alignment of a signification with any principle of linguistic articulation whatsoever, sensory or not, which constitutes the figure' (de Man in Bloom, et. al. 1979: 61). The crucial point, as I understand it, is that figures do not arise through the representational elements of poetry *per se* but that it is via patterning *of any kind* that figuration can come into being, because meanings have to be patterned and hence pattern (whether of something that can be sensually imagined or not) implies the presence of meaning – even though this might turn out to be only an 'illusion of meaning' (as de Man, being a good deconstructionist, wants to insist). Meanings and patterns reciprocally rely on and inform one another, hence both the interest and the slipperiness of figures. What does it take for a pattern to be meaningful? Does it rely on existing structures of meaning or can it bring new such structures into being? Dudley Andrew puts it this way: 'Figures alter, but don't dispense with, the dictionary'; he argues that they have the power 'to reorient not only the discursive event but the system itself' (Andrew 1983: 137 & 140); therein lies much of their power.

Following this line of thinking, it would not, I suggest, be too cavalier to elide 'linguistic' in de Man's reference to 'any principle of linguistic articulation'. We might then be able to risk a definition of the kind of figuration that is relevant here and declare that figuration, in any medium, can be understood as *signification that is significantly aligned with articulation*. I am here retaining de Man's terminology; his use of "articulation" is close to the broad sense of "shape" or "shaping" that I have used at various points. This definition has the consequence that figuration in film can, certainly,

be linguistic, but it can also be chromatic or durational or perspectival or any number of other things; any aspect of the way an artwork is articulated or shaped is potentially available for figurative deployment. In other words, any articulation that is aligned with signification (we might even say confused with, in Baumgarten's sense) is a candidate for being described as figurative, as long as this alignment can be shown to be significant or meaningful. Figuration in a large sense then comes to be more or less synonymous with rhetoric, taking that term also in a broad sense. According to this way of thinking, cinematic figuration refers to any aspect of any way that a film is shaped (in any sense), insofar as it can be demonstrated that the shaping is significant. Such demonstrations are accomplished by showing *how* the shaping (or articulation) is aligned with signification and what the consequences of this alignment might be. This, of course, is largely a task for film criticism (though it may involve film theory and, potentially, film history as well).

Quintillian wrote in the first century that 'nihil non figuratum est' ('nothing is not figured'), though he was aware that this was true only in a certain sense (see Matzner 2016: 33).⁶ We have already seen Genette claim that all language (or, we might say, all discourse) is shaped. This is certainly true but it threatens to evacuate the idea of figures of all use. If everything were a figure there could be no criteria of recognizability for

⁶ Note the other words to which the notion is cognate, owing to the history of its translation from Greek rhetoric into Latin: 'The Greek term σχῆμα, for instance, which is reasonably consistently used in Greek rhetoric to denote what the latter rhetorical tradition will call a 'figure', is variously translated and/or referred to by Roman rhetoricians as *forma* or *conformatio*, *exornatio*, or *figura*.' (Matzner 2016: 31) Thus words such as "scheme", "form", and "ornament" might also be in our minds.

figures. Niklas Luhmann, in this context, makes extensive use of the distinction between form and medium (rather than content or substance), arguing that it is only forms that are ever perceived directly; because everything is "shaped" – figured – we have no access to media "in themselves":

... the medium can be observed only via forms, never as such. The medium manifests itself only in the relationship between constancy and variety that obtains in individual forms. A form, in other words, can be observed through the schema of constant/variable, because it is always form-in-medium.

(Luhmann 2000: 106)

This argument could be used to help construct a case that claiming that everything is "figured" need not entail that there are only figures. Everything manifest must be a form, but the discovery of figures is not thereby rendered critically vacuous because we can distinguish between form and figure via the notion I argued for above, namely that figures are forms that repeat and/or transform ('are aligned with articulation') *in a significant way*. Thus studying figuration would seem, necessarily, to involve evaluation. There is a transition from signification, in a general semiotic sense, and significance, in a more evaluative sense: signification is how meaning is produced, but to claim something is significant is to claim a particular value for it. (The distinction between signification and significance in this sense could be seen to parallel that between *meaning* and the *meaningful*.) I think this is correct but I would argue for a rather low threshold of significance here. If a pattern or an articulation can be shown to be meaningful *in any way*, then it constitutes a figure; how significant this figure is within our interpretation of the film as a whole is a separate question. Demonstrating

that the transformations of a particular figure are significant is, as I said above, a critical task; it cannot be accomplished according to a foolproof method or algorithm. A segment of a film either is a dissolve or it is not. Anybody who understands the definition of "dissolve" will be able to identify it as such, but showing whether or not this dissolve is a figure, and if so what kind of figure, is a task for criticism.

In the remainder of this chapter I want to cover two issues in more detail, which are more closely related to questions of orientation and disorientation than the first part of this chapter because they concern the questions both of what, in a film, we are oriented with regard to, and how we are so oriented. I want first to look in more detail at the treatments of filmic figuration which I find most helpful, as well as some of the pitfalls they help point out, whether intentionally or not. Secondly, I will briefly discuss some ways that the notion of figuration might help us articulate how films handle difficult, disorientating relationships between the meaningful and the visible.

Figuration in recent film theory

George Bluestone's pioneering 1957 book *Novels into Films* has some interesting things to say about the ways that effective cinematic metaphor has a different relationship to the constraints of diegetic motivation and plausibility than does literary metaphor. The relationship between the literal and the diegetic assumes a distinctive importance. Sounding not unlike V.F. Perkins, Bluestone argues that 'a special kind of film trope is possible, but only when it is confined to cinematic terms: it must arrive naturally from the setting (as Lilian Gish's knitting in *Way Down East*, or Marlon Brando's horse in *Viva Zapata*)' (Bluestone 1957: 22). This claim might have allowed

Bluestone to develop an argument around, say, the relationship between cinematic metaphor and irony (see his remarks on ironic contrast on p. 25) which would have put him on the wider territory of figuration, as I understand it, but any such possibility is, unfortunately, obscured by his presentation⁷ and his highly dubious insistence on a fundamental distinction between literature and cinema that rests on 'the contrast between the novel as a conceptual and discursive form, the film as a perceptual and presentational form' (*ibid.*: ix).

Kamilla Elliott has done useful work unpicking this supposed dichotomy, while also agreeing with Bluestone's sense of the necessary conditions for effective filmic metaphor: 'For figures to be effective in realist film, the connotative, nonliteral element of the figure must also hold its own in the realist filmic world.' (Elliott 2003: 235) Unfortunately, her own arguments also exhibit significant confusions. For example, when discussing Roman Polanski's *Tess* (1979), Elliott claims that the director 'creates a highly effective adaptation of Tess's "peony lips" [from Hardy's novel] in a filmic metaphor on "lips" and "strawberries"' (*ibid.*: 235). That things are becoming a little strained is indicated by the oddness of her phrasing; we don't ordinarily refer to metaphors "on" things. Rather ironically, given Elliott's dismissal of those who apply a literary perspective too strictly (N. Roy Clifton's 'argument has had little impact largely

⁷ At one point he appears to contradict himself within a single paragraph, opening with the claim cited above about the need for cinematic metaphor to 'arrive naturally from the setting' – which implies nothing about exactly how it is presented, technically speaking – only to conclude that '[t]he final and most central cinematic analogy to the metaphor may be found in the special case of editing' (Bluestone 1957: 22).

because it applies verbal paradigms, which rest uneasily on film' [*ibid.*: 273, n. 60]), she insists on finding an absolutely strict structural parallel between linguistic and filmic metaphors, directly carrying over I.A. Richards's distinction between tenor and vehicle. Tess (Natassja Kinski) receives a strawberry from Alec (Leigh Lawson): '[L]ips and strawberries are similarly colored and shaped, so that the strawberry visibly enhances and modifies Tess's lips just as the word "peony" enhances and modifies the word "lips" in the novel. The tenor (mouth) is briefly juxtaposed to and enhanced by the vehicle (strawberry) before the vehicle vanishes' (*ibid.*: 235). When Elliott argues that '[t]he strawberry-lip metaphor avoids confusion because the strawberry is a diegetic part of the scene, with realist and narrative as well as metaphorical significance' (*ibid.*), this contradicts the claim, only two paragraphs before, that it is essential that there is 'clear signalling of which is the figure's literal and which is the figure's figurative part' (*ibid.*: 234). The notion that confusion is *avoided* because 'the vehicle (strawberry)' is 'diegetic' and thereby, somehow, contributes to 'signalling' that the strawberry is 'the figure's figurative part' is profoundly muddled. We might ask whether the sequence is not most straightforwardly seen as an instance of comparison, as a filmic simile rather than a metaphor at all; metaphor is not the only kind of figure.

The understanding of figuration that Jacques Rancière displays in his chapter on Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1948) in *Film Fables* appears to me to be much more fruitful, and very much in accordance with the view I have been arguing for in this chapter. A perfect instance is his discussion of the early scenes that convey the birth of the love between the young Bowie (Farley Granger) and Keechie (Cathy O'Donnell), which take place in the garage run by Keechie's father in which Bowie and his fellow bank robbers Chicamaw (Howard Da Silva) and T-Dub (Jay C. Flippen) take refuge.

Unfortunately the English translation, through a very minor error, obscures this. There, we read that 'Ray needs more than a cinematographic trope to get this body removed from resemblance to materialize before us' (Rancière 2016a: 96). The French, however, reads: '[I]l aura fallu plus d'un trope cinématographique pour faire consister devant nous le corps sans ressemblance de Keechie' (Rancière 2001: 128). The point is that not that Ray needs 'more than a cinematographic trope', but that he needs more than *one* cinematographic trope. This makes sense of the subsequent declaration that '[w]hat he needs, first of all, is a synecdoche' ('all we have at first are this voice, these cheeks, and these hands floating in the night as if severed from their body'), which is to be combined with 'a second operation of subtraction that isolates the two lovers in the thieves' hide-out' (*ibid.*: 98), and also 'a new operation that imposes two overlapping yet incompatible spaces onto the homogenous sensorium created by the "cinematographic" prose of the novel' (*ibid.*: 98-9).

The 'operation of subtraction' is an example of what Sebastian Matzner would call a trope, a deviation from ordinary or expected procedure: the growing love between Keechie and Bowie is represented by, in the main, *avoiding* showing them looking at one another. Instead, for the most part one of the pair *looks* while the other *does*:

Keechie's absent presence cuts right through Deleuze's very neat opposition between the functionality of the action-image and the expressive power of the affection-image. The film captures the different intensities of sensation in the execution of ordinary, daily tasks like fixing a heater, pulling out a jack, changing a car wheel, or massaging a wound. These are actions that two people do together, or that one does while the other looks on, actions whose proper

gestures and time are much better suited to indicating the love budding between two people who don't know what love is than any ecstatic exchange of glances or conventional approximation of bodies.

(*ibid.*: 98)

The third figure consists in superimposing the 'incompatible spaces' of Bowie-Keechie-Chicamaw-T-Dub and Bowie-Keechie. This is achieved by framing. When Chicamaw and T-Dub disappear from one shot to the next, 'it is as if they had never been there, as if there never had been enough space for the two of them in this room' (*ibid.*: 99). This is the case even though '[t]his instant when they are alone doesn't last even five seconds. By the next shot the camera has already moved back to frame Keechie and Bowie squarely between the two other thieves' (*ibid.*). We are aware that, diegetically, all four characters are present throughout the entire scene, but Ray's handling of the *mise en scène* gives us the feeling that this is not the case. The ordinary procedure whereby not every character present in a scene is visible in every shot is figuratively amplified to give the feeling that when we can only see two characters, they are the only people there, the only people who *could* be there.

Rancière is interested in how cinema presents without representing, in 'the construction of a completely novel individuation, of a love object that is one precisely because it has been stripped of the identifiable sexual properties that make it an object of desire' (*ibid.*: 95). Ray manages, in Rancière's eyes, to present an object of desire precisely *as an object of desire*, rather than presenting that about it which is desirable so that the audience can infer that it is such an object (potentially so for us, and hence plausibly so for a character or characters). This example exemplifies the kind of

complex entanglement films can achieve between what figures show and how they show it. It also demonstrates that cinematic figuration in no way requires us to ignore our everyday knowledge of the world. We need to "inhabit" the scene in the garage imaginatively (as V. F. Perkins would insist) in order to understand the figurative logic of its gazes and non-gazes. But note that Rancière only needs a specific rhetorical name (synecdoche) for the first of his three figures: the study of figuration is by no means to be reduced to searching through films for equivalents to classical rhetorical figures, but neither are they ruled out as irrelevant. Specific, named figures are particular examples of a much wider phenomenon, a great many of whose manifestations cannot be pinned down so neatly.

Some of the most extensive work on figuration in cinema has been undertaken by Nicole Brenez. In 1990 she edited a three-issue run of the journal *Admiranda* devoted to "Figuration Defiguration" including a glossary prepared by Brenez and Luc Vancheri, which defines figuration as the:

... symbolic game or process aiming to establish a fixed, evolving or unstable correlation between the plastic, aural and narrative parameters able to elicit fundamental categories of representation (such as the visible and invisible, mimesis, reflection, appearance and disappearance, image and origin, the integral and the discontinuous, form, the intelligible, the part and the whole ...) and other parameters – which may be the same parameters, depending on the particular type of determination effected – relating to fundamental categories of ontology (such as being and appearance, essence and apparition, being and nothingness, same and other, the immediate, the reflective, inner and outer, ...).

(Brenez and Vancheri 1990: 75; trans. Adrian Martin in Martin, A. 2012a: 8)

Although the attempt to produce a general definition produces a tangle of subclauses and confusing qualifications we can see immediately that, although they do not define figuration as pertaining to any kind of significant shaping whatsoever, Brenez and Vancheri certainly *do* see it as a profoundly pervasive concept.⁸ That it involves change or transformation is clear, but it also has (or creates) rules or regularities by which it operates. It is a 'game or process', one which involves a relationship between representation and ontology or, more precisely, between whatever parameters can elicit [*relever*] or relate to [*relevant*] the categories involved in representational and ontological questions. We could sum up their position very roughly as the claim that figuration is the way – or, rather, the particular ways – in which representation and ontology are related.

We should not, therefore, be misled by the fact that the article by Brenez that opens the issue includes a table comparing and contrasting the notions of representation and figuration that she finds in Eisenstein and in Barthes (Brenez 1990: 11). Figuration is not, according to this definition, an alternative to representation, but something that

⁸ This definition might usefully be compared with Stephen Heath's definition of "figure" in *Questions of Cinema*: 'The circulation between agent, character, person and image, none of which is able simply and uniquely to contain, to *settle* that circulation, the figure it makes in a film. What obtain are specific regimes of the articulation of the different instances, particular versions of coherence, of the balancing out of the circulation; whether, as is most often the case by a hierarchization in the interests of character or by some pattern of movement between character and image. The articulation can fail to balance, slip into an overlaying that does not simply cohere.' (Heath 1981: 182)

involves it: 'It will be argued here that representation concerns the set of the filmic text *as a set*, whereas figuration introduces ruptures, sutures and divisions by means of which the text organises its elements, including, of course, the rigidity or the wavering of its own categories' (Brenez 1990: 10; my translation).⁹ It is not so much that representation is global and figuration local (which appears perhaps to have misled Adrian Martin, as we shall see below), as that representation is to do with consistency (or, we might say, is threatened by inconsistency or discontinuity), whereas figuration is often concerned, precisely, with rupture. It is often when a film's representational activity appears disrupted that we need to think in terms of figuration in order to account for its meaningfulness.¹⁰ Figuration is not merely concerned with conveying relationships but, as Brenez and Vancheri's definition has it, with 'aiming to establish' them, with forming relationships – or indeed with dissolving them, which is why the three issues of *Admiranda* are titled "Figuration Defiguration". Brenez thus seems

⁹ 'On dira ici que la représentation couvre l'ensemble du texte filmique comme ensemble, là où la figuration introduit les ruptures, sutures et partitions par quoi le texte organise ses composants, y compris bien sûr la rigidité ou le tremblement de ses propres catégories.' We should note that Brenez, perfectly willing to problematise her own distinctions, ends her article with an example of a filmmaker who 'conceives of representation *as* figuration' ('conçoit la représentation *comme* figuration'), namely Robert Bresson (Brenez 1990: 19).

¹⁰ This claim might recall Barthes's denigration of representation when compared to figuration, according to which representation is 'when nothing emerges, when nothing leaps out of the frame' (Barthes 1975: 57), but I would prefer to retain a more mutable relationship between the two, such as I think we see in Rancière's discussion of *They Live by Night* or in Brenez's claim, cited in the preceding footnote, that it is even possible to conceive of 'representation *as* figuration'.

entirely in agreement with Dudley Andrew's sense of figures as things which 'have the power to disrupt the relation of context to sign and reorient not only the discursive event but the system itself which will never be the same afterwards' (Andrew 1984: 170). This definition is also, I think, compatible with the notion of figures as involving articulation aligned with signification; we might say that such alignments are how the correlations between representation and ontology that Brenez and Vancheri refer to are established.

Brenez has, then, led us to a general notion of figuration which is more useful than the notion that 'nihil non figuratum est', but remains profoundly abstract. How can we connect it to the kind of concrete analysis we saw in Rancière's discussion of *They Live By Night*? And to what use has Brenez's work been put by other critics? Adrian Martin, who has been greatly inspired by Brenez's work on figuration, shows, I think, both the strengths of Brenez's line of thinking and some of the traps it lays. Martin argues in an interview with Anna Dzenis about his book *Last Day Every Day: Figural Thinking from Auerbach and Kracauer to Agamben and Brenez* that *Holy Motors* is a '100% figural film, in that it's all about, literally, a body which transforms from scene to scene, with make-up, with acting, with voice; every resource of the cinema is devoted to the mutation of a central character from one scene to the next' (Martin, A. 2012b). The figural is, for Martin, concerned with the representation of bodies (with figures in the visual art sense of the word) and with transformation (which is closer to the literary notion). Elsewhere in the same interview it becomes apparent that one of the strengths of "figural thinking" for Martin is the license it gives for a certain release from plausibility: 'If you plunge in with the idea that every film is a cartoon, every film is unreal, and every film is implausible, then you can actually go somewhere with it' (*ibid.*). If we take this as a recommendation not to be unduly restricted by critical

hierarchies, to remember that there exists no necessarily prefixed sequence of critical priorities – "get the story straight, and *then* we can start looking at themes or visual patterns" – then I think it is sound.¹¹ But there is also a potential problem. It would be regrettable to end up repeating certain rather brittle forms of avant-gardism that saw the unrealistic as necessarily superior to the realistic or considered it always productive to emphasise artifice as artifice. One could just as well turn the argument around: just as implausibility need not destroy, say, psychological interpretation, so diegetic interpretation need not destroy any insights derived from "figural thinking". My analysis of *Holy Motors* was aimed at showing this: it was not my intention to argue, exactly, that the film has a diegesis that has been missed, but that the certain transformations (precisely, *figures*) will remain imperceptible unless we are prepared to engage in diegetic thinking.

The danger of which I am warning can be seen even more clearly in an introduction to Brenez's work written by Martin: 'In a figural model... the cinema leaves behind its last vestiges of mimesis, copying, or resemblance to the real: the cinema traces, figures, weaves *ex nihilo* its fully imaginary, endlessly renewed repertoire of spaces, places, movements, gestures, worlds and bodies' (Martin, A. 1997). Granted, the notion of removing even the 'last vestiges of mimesis, copying, or resemblance to the real' is an obvious hyperbole; it is nonetheless an unhelpful one. It may well, as Martin

¹¹ Recall Heath's definition of "figure", cited above. Martin would, I think, agree: sometimes coherence is achieved by 'hierarchization in the interests of character', but many times other procedures may be more relevant.

goes on to say, be a question of 'corrod[ing] all of our common-sense, facile assumptions about analogical resemblance in film', but this certainly does *not* equate to saying that film has nothing to do with analogical resemblance. I think William D.

Routt's summary, already partially cited above, is more helpful:

What is *not* being asserted, as I understand it, is that there is a special, visual dimension of communication ("the figural") where verbal meanings become fuzzy and inadequate or where the symbolic is confounded by the real. On the contrary, figuration is everywhere – in language, in sound, taste, smell and touch as well as in what we see. It is the common currency of experience.

(Routt 2000)

Martin does, it is true, develop a related point in the introduction to his book *Mise en Scène and Film Style*: 'We should be careful not to depart, too brusquely, for the "higher order abstractions" that we regularly translate the evidence of our senses into: meanings, symbols, metaphors, allegories, directorial intentions, "world views"' (Martin, A. 2014a: xvii). The intent of this statement is laudable, but I want to insist on the impossibility of any kind of clean break between sensation and signification, whichever aspect we are inclined to put the emphasis on. What we should really avoid – or at least treat with great care – is "translational" thinking: thinking that "*this* [image] signifies *that* [meaning]", and hence that, in interpreting the image as such, "*this* has been transformed into *that*" (or has been revealed as "really" being *that*) and that we can now, therefore, get on with talking about "*that*", leaving the details of "*this*" behind. In fact, we cannot concentrate on the evidence of our senses without being connected to the

world of meaning.¹² Saying about Brian de Palma's *Passion* (2012), as Martin does in the very first paragraph of his book, that 'Isabelle (Noomi Rapace) is sitting expectantly in the audience' (*ibid.*: x) is to introduce a great many 'higher order abstractions': that this image is that of a woman called Noomi Rapace; that she is an actress representing – in a fictional world (another abstraction) – somebody called Isabelle; that we can tell from the image that this person is sitting in a theatre as an audience member; and that we can gauge something of her emotional state from her appearance (that her mood is expectant). The question is really *which* abstractions we deal with, and how we handle them. The idea of figuration provides a helpful framework for thinking about the relationship between the way sensory material is shaped and the patterns of the "abstract" inferences that this shaping allows us to draw; a way of considering the relationship between the concrete and abstract that neither dissolves the distinction between the two nor renders it absolute, final and non-negotiable.

Disorientating figures

Gesturing towards that which entirely escapes language risks leaving us, paradoxically, all the more trapped by it, unable to articulate the way that films, like figures, are 'both without and within' language. For the art historian and theorist James

¹² Merleau-Ponty writes in 'The Film and the New Psychology' that '[i]t is impossible to understand perception as the imputation of a certain significance to certain sensible signs, since the most immediate sensible texture of these signs cannot be described without referring to the object they signify' (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 51).

Elkins, '[a]n interpretation of a picture that stresses its "visual language," its linguistic structure, or its semiotic system, is not a reading made from somewhere "within" language and "outside" pictures, but simply an interpretation that lists only some of the qualities of the image' (Elkins 1998: 161). I want to reiterate this claim, without qualification, with regard to film. Elkins, sounding very reminiscent of Jean-François Lyotard's influential book *Discourse, Figure*, also observes that 'images are complex in the only ways that a structure can be truly complex: they are partly inside and partly outside systematic, linguistic, logical, and mathematical structures of meaning' (*ibid*: xii), and follows this up by noting that 'disorder is not a simple absence, but a structured field of possibilities' (*ibid*: xvii). To return to my overarching theme, disorientation might be described as an experience of disorder, but it is not simply the absence of knowing where one is; it too is a 'field of possibilities' with its own characteristics.

In a 2011 lecture, Brenez outlined her intention to 'consider three major figural operations', all of which refer to situations of extremity and breakdown. They are: 'figurality by disintegration' (exemplified by Antonin Artaud and Philippe Grandjeux), 'figurality by overload' (Godard) and 'figurality by short circuits', which she claims to be 'the innovation of Jean-François Lyotard' (Brenez 2011). The experience of such deviations and distortions is very likely to be one of difficulty, at the very least (and frequently of confusion or disorientation). For Elkins, 'too often, reading the art historical literature, it can seem as if pictures are relatively easy to write about, to put into words', and thus he has:

... no global objection to contemporary semiotics except perhaps for the occasional claim that it is an optimal, transparent, or transtheoretical approach to

visual artifacts. Instead, I am concerned with those places in pictures where the inevitable linguistic or semiotic model stops making sense, becomes counterintuitive, or begins to contradict what is actually happening.

(Elkins 1998: xi)

Brenez's 'disintegration', 'overload' and 'short-circuit' are not so far from Elkins's moments when linguistic models stop making sense (because they are disintegrating?), become counterintuitive (because our intuitions are overloaded?) or begin to contradict what is happening (because there has been a short-circuit?). By no means all instances of figuration are difficult in such ways, but those that are represent very rich sites for investigation.

In the two following chapters I shall make some forays in this direction, firstly by exploring how *Colossal Youth* can be approached via a variety of senses of "figure", and secondly by examining how *Adieu au langage* is a prime example of the 'figural by overload' that Brenez identifies in Godard's work more generally. In both cases I shall explore how the analysis of cinematic figures and tropes relates to narrative and try to show how these films challenge the notion that figures and narratives operate on entirely separate levels. This is a way of thinking that results in the view that figuration and narration can be unproblematically discussed in isolation from one another, which I shall dispute (having already prepared the ground for so doing with my discussion of *The Searchers* in my introduction). But I want to emphasise that this interpenetration of figuration and narration is by no means a unique feature of highly disorientating films. My enquiries are directed at exploring the way that different films employ different figurative strategies which may call for different responses; the different ways that films

can be confusing or disorientating could then be considered as a subcategory of this wider phenomenon, that pertains to the criticism of narrative films in general.

To take as an example a critic very different from Brenez, the value placed by V. F. Perkins on proportion, plausibility and coherence might be seen as representing an attention to particular kinds of figurative strategy, which is to say particular ways that films produce meaning and significance. This of course involves, but is by no means restricted to, the kind of narration a particular film employs; it extends to a film's rhetoric in the widest sense. A certain kind of plausible coherence could, then, be understood as an instance of one possible figurative strategy among many, rather than a *sine qua non* for critical intelligibility.¹³ This sense of the rhetoric of a film as expressing its particular figurative strategy (or strategies) underlies the two following chapters. I will argue that, without considering figuration, narration, and the relationship between them, we cannot fully account for the ways *Colossal Youth* and *Adieu au langage* both orient and disorient their viewers. *Colossal Youth* can seem at times to have *too little* on which to build a narrative, while *Adieu au langage* often appears to have far *too much*. I will argue that these impressions – to which the films' figurative strategies give rise – are also crucial to the different narrative strategies of each film.

¹³ A film that exhibits implausible incoherences might be examined in terms of the way its figuration makes an unusual, "inverted" use of the notions of plausibility and coherence, rather than as an attempt to elude or demolish the relevance of the criteria of plausibility or coherence; see the preceding chapter on *Holy Motors* for an example of an attempt at just such an examination.

chapter five

Colossal Youth: homes for displaced figures

White credits appear, in silence, on a black background. A busy but gentle murmur of voices, vehicles and nocturnal shufflings fades up. Then an image appears. It contains none of the sources of the sounds we can hear; instead, the camera looks up from an empty courtyard at the back walls of a collection of fairly decrepit buildings, lit by a dim grey light. The sky and the borders of the image are jet black. Densely packed in on each other, most of the buildings are punctured by dark, blank windows. A chest of drawers appears at one of the first-floor windows. Someone pushes it all the way out; it falls with a violent crash on the ground one storey below. Other items of furniture follow: a single drawer; what might be a bedside cabinet; a chair; something that looks like a door. At the window we can just barely make out the figure responsible for these expulsions.

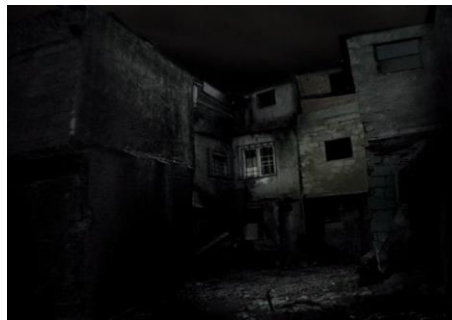


figure 5.1: expulsion

So begins Pedro Costa's 2006 film *Juventude em Marcha (Colossal Youth)*.¹ We

¹ Literally *Youth on the March* but known in English as *Colossal Youth*, after the only album (from 1980) by Young Marble Giants, thus indicating the filmmaker's interest in punk and post-punk music.

later realise that the figure in the shadows is Clotilde, wife of the film's protagonist, Ventura. Clotilde has kicked her husband out and proceeded, for good measure, to destroy his furniture. Films frequently begin with a domestic situation, an image of home that is then somehow disrupted – whether this image is of a comfortable (if a little indifferent) home, as in *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999) or one that is from the outset uncomfortable and unsettling, as in *Lost Highway*. *Colossal Youth* does indeed begin with a domestic situation, but Costa represents it only via multiple displacements. We never see inside Ventura and Clotilde's home; neither do we see anything of Ventura's expulsion itself. Instead, the expulsion of the furniture serves as a metonym for the displacement of Ventura. Ventura's displacement could easily be seen as a metaphor for the wider story of the displacement of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood of Lisbon called Fontainhas. Between 2001 and 2005, the overwhelmingly Cape Verdean population (96.5%) were expelled from their homes, which were certainly ramshackle but also (if only ambivalently) beloved. The inhabitants were moved into clean and bright but antiseptic and soulless new apartments in Casal da Boba (see Treno 2013). The old neighbourhood was knocked down. But this is not all that Ventura's expulsion signifies, because if it were we would simply have a story, common to many, told in microcosm through the experience of one participant, and *Colossal Youth* is something richer and more ambiguous than that. The film's opening shot in fact exemplifies one of its characteristic procedures: it provides opportunities for the viewer to orientate themselves and at the same time obstructs their attempts at so doing.

How does this happen? When we encounter this scene during a first viewing of the film, what we are seeing is clear enough (furniture is being thrown from a window),

but why it is happening is mysterious. The clarification which follows is itself displaced. We only see Ventura inform his daughter Bete that "your mother's gone" after Clotilde, wielding a knife, delivers a monologue about swimming with sharks and leaving her son weeping on the shore. We do not even, at this point, have enough information to securely identify the woman with the knife with the figure that expelled the furniture: it is only two scenes later that Ventura reveals that Clotilde has stabbed him. To complicate matters still further, Bete doesn't let her father in but claims that he's "got the wrong door and the wrong daughter". We are not in a position to decide whether this is a daughter wanting rid of her father, a father who has indeed come to the house of the wrong daughter – or even if she isn't his daughter at all.

Beyond ambiguities about the contents of the diegesis, there are also ambiguities about the status of that diegesis. What mode of reality is being represented? The man who in the film is called Ventura is in fact played by a nonprofessional actor, also called Ventura, who lives in the same parts of Lisbon where *Colossal Youth* was filmed, which brings us into proximity with documentary; *Colossal Youth* does, however obliquely, tell a true story. On the other hand, when Ventura tells Bete that "I've been having this nightmare for thirty years", can we be sure that this is merely a metaphor, and that we are not "literally" (literally within the fiction, that is) watching Ventura's dream? Even if we do not go this far, there are invitations to see certain parts of the film, at least, as dreams. At one point, after one of the scenes in the shack that take place during the Carnation Revolution of 1974, Ventura wakes up on the floor in his new apartment, making it possible to construe the preceding scene as a dream. Could the film be

Ventura's "mindscreen" in Bruce F. Kawin's sense?² A fantastic or dreamlike logic often seems to be in operation, perhaps reflecting both Ventura's memories and the disorientation that his traumatic experiences have produced in him. Ventura tells Gustavo that he was stabbed by Clotilde, but also that the woman that stabbed him "had Clotilde's face, but it wasn't her". Towards the end of the film Ventura's friend Lento appears to be a ghost. But even if we were to decide that the film represents Ventura's mindscreen, it is not clear to what extent this would actually aid us in our attempts at orientation. It seems likely that it would simply provide a quasi-diegetic *explanation* for our disorientation, instead of a route out of it; an illusion of immediate clarity rather than a genuinely clarifying engagement with the experience of the film.

We should also note that the film's displacements do not *only* disorientate us. They are also thematic or, we could say, mimetic of Ventura's experience, which is one of profound disorientation. We identify with Ventura *because of* his disorientation: his confusion mirrors our own. Alex Pavey has noted that '[a] crucial shift in meaning' of the word 'occurred in parallel with the pathologization of disorientation that took place at the turn of the twentieth century: disorientation expands in the psychiatric literature to encompass not only spatial confusion, but also disruptions in *temporality* and *identity*'

² Kawin argues that if we see the images that comprise a narrative film to be organised by an offscreen presence – broadly, by some kind of narrational agent – 'it does not seem necessary to deny the possibility that the organizer, as a persona of the artist or even just as a character, can be fictitious, and that he can include an image of himself (or an indicator of his offscreen presence) in the filmed field without compromising his status as narrator' (Kawin 1978: 4).

(Pavey 2017: 79).³ At various moments Ventura – just like Laura Dern's characters in *INLAND EMPIRE* – exhibits confusion as to *where*, *when*, and *who* he is. But although the expansion of disorientation beyond purely spatial senses has been immensely productive for thought, this particular triad still conceives too rigidly of the subject as an isolated individual, underplaying the extent to which disorientation is a fundamentally relational phenomenon. Amy Harbin offers an alternative triad which corrects this overemphasis: 'To become disoriented is, roughly, to lose one's bearings in relation to others, environments, and life projects' (Harbin 2016: xi). The members of Harbin's triad are more outward-facing, relational and transformative, more open to unexpected responses or alterations – and are all of profound importance in *Colossal Youth*.

Some degree of identification with characters is, of course, one of the most common – and the most productive – orientational strategies that narrative films invite, and *Colossal Youth* is no exception. The film does not, however, simply align our experience with Ventura's. Other characters might often be easier to identify with: Vanda, perhaps, through her narratives of hospitalization, childbirth and motherhood, or even Lento, through his occasional irritation with Ventura's insistence that he memorise a letter to his wife. Some of the devices that are most commonly employed to facilitate identification (such as point-of-view shots and editing organised around eyeline matches) are, however, absent from *Colossal Youth*. We are also *excluded* from Ventura's world because of his very mysteriousness, aided by the cinematography which

³ Pavey's "Disorientation: The History and Pathology of a Concept" (pp. 74-84 in Pavey 2017) gives a helpful overview.

constantly makes him strange by framing him, in expressionist or *film noir* style, at stark angles against empty backgrounds. Jean-Louis Comolli observes:

Ventura's entire body moves spaciously through the images. It is as if the entire filmed space were visible in each shot. The frame, in other words, no longer functions as a mask. The regular use of lenses with short focal lengths opens up the screen and makes the actors' bodies float in a frame much too large for them. Many compositions, in order to frame even more space and no doubt to destabilise the filmed bodies, are not only shot at a low-angle but also from the side. The world depicted no longer has the equilibrium to which cinema had long accustomed us. Everything has become topsy-turvy.

(Comolli 2010: 69)

As well as emphasising the way Costa uses the frame of the image as yet another boundary, these remarks also indicate the fact that *Colossal Youth* continually refuses to reassure us: it disconcerts as well as disorientates. As Comolli notes, almost all the spaces we see are framed so they are bounded on all sides. (Costa has spoken of his 'taste for the room, for confinement' (Costa 2008: 15; my translation).)⁴ Even though the use of wide-angle lenses and frequent low angles tends to magnify the foreground and elongate the distance from the front of the space to the back, the boundedness of the spaces filmed means that this elongation is not expansive. The spaces are expanded and

⁴ '... mon goût pour la chambre, pour l'enfermement...' Cyril Neyrat has described *Colossal Youth* as 'a chamber film, in the sense of the term *chamber music*' (Neyrat 2010: 16).

yet constricted at one and the same time, disconcertingly both displaced and condensed.⁵



figure 5.2: still life?

Though the disorientations that *Colossal Youth* gives rise to have a flavour all their own, Costa's use of nonprofessional actors and frequent ellipses show what he has learned from Robert Bresson, just as his framing and the way repetitions and patternings

⁵ Costa has remarked on the technical difficulty of achieving these effects, and how 'it took a very long time to find the position of the camera. In width, depth, and height, there is only one point where the three dimensions come together, only one possible place where the verticals are straight, and it's sometimes very hard to find because if you move a millimetre one of them becomes curved or starts to move left. ... In *Colossal Youth* there are lots of angles, of verticals and horizontals, of doors, windows and perspectives, it was a terrible job and sometimes really maddening, almost mathematical' (Costa 2008: 98-9; my translation). ['... il fallait un temps énorme pour trouver la position de la caméra. En largeur, en profondeur et en hauteur, il n'y a qu'un point où les trois dimensions sont ensemble, un seul point possible pour que les verticales sont droites, et c'est parfois très dur de le trouver parce que si tu changes d'un millimètre, il y en a une qui devient courbe ou qui commence à fuir à gauche. ... Dans *En avant, jeunesse*, il y a plein d'angles, de verticales et d'horizontales, de portes, fenêtres et perspectives, c'était un travail monstrueux et parfois vraiment exaspérant, presque mathématique.']

make the film into something of a self-contained system show the influence of Yasujirō Ozu. The reason Costa's images often appear mysterious has something to do with the reason why, according to Hasumi Shigehiko, images appear poetic in Ozu's work: 'Ozu's talent lies in choosing an image that can function poetically at a particular moment by being assimilated into the film, not by affixing to the film the image of an object that is considered poetic in a domain outside the film' (Shigehiko 1997: 121). Consider the collection of bottles in Ventura and Lento's shack, which are only rendered poetic by their plastic qualities (their placement in the frame, squeezed against the bright window by an expanse of grey; the muted but resonant effect of their colour in contrast to the near-monochromaticism of the rest of the image) and the tension between their beauty and their functionality. To what extent, for example, does their fragility indicate preciousness or disposability?

Some kind of transformation occurs to the figures that Costa films:

The director recalls showing *Colossal Youth* in Fontainhas, while the area still existed. "Afterwards, one of the more politically active neighbourhood boys raised his glass and said, 'Ventura, every day I see you in the ghetto, and you're dirty or you're crazy or drunk or half asleep – now I see you up on screen, and you're all of us.'"

(Romney 2015)

Ventura's noble but wounded figure could not exist without the real Ventura but the two are far from identical. In the film, Ventura comes to seem, then, as Georges Simenon said of himself and Stanley Cavell said of the physiognomies of Chaplin, Keaton and Garbo, to be "at home everywhere and nowhere" (Cavell 1979: 182). Pinning him down

can be as hard as pinning the film down. Yet we should not let our disorientation distract us from what is simple about *Colossal Youth*: the film might be seen, ultimately, as tracing an arc from the initial expulsion from home to the final scene in which Ventura is alone with his granddaughter in his daughter's bedroom, at home in some sense, however provisional and transitory.⁶

In what follows I want to trace some of the displacements and disorientations that *Colossal Youth* generates, outlining the way it frequently destabilises distinctions – such as between fiction and documentary, fantasy and reality, memory and experience, metaphor and literalness – without rendering them inoperative. Following on from the previous chapter, I will use the notion of the figure – of figuration – to assist in so doing. I will work towards the general sense of figuration I outlined in that chapter, focussing in turn on figure as person, as metaphor, and finally in a more general sense as a significant "shaping" in and of space and time. It is the one of the film's singular achievements that it does not merely break down distinctions but, precisely, displaces or disorients them. At moments in the film we might feel everything to be highly mysterious, only to come to puzzle over our very puzzlement: what is so mysterious about a man standing in an empty apartment? Jacques Rancière thinks that Costa's 'cinema is simultaneously a cinema of the possible and of the impossible' (Rancière

⁶ Other narratives also exhibit relatively conventional structures of resolution. Ventura's relationships with both Lento and Bete eventually achieve reconciliation: Lento finally learns the letter (even if he has had to die to do so), and Bete does at last relent and let Ventura in. There are also a number of smaller cohesive narratives, such as Vanda's about giving birth, and the "letters" of Nhurro and Paolo.

2011b: 39). *Colossal Youth* does not merely disorientate us – which is not too difficult an achievement – but disorientates us by the very manner in which it orientates us. It can both orientate and disorientate at the same time.

Networks of significance

It will be useful at the outset to articulate something of the way *Colossal Youth* is structured. It contains a very focussed repertoire of motifs, which can at different times take the form of metaphors or metonyms, or take on more broadly thematic functions. I identify the following motifs as particularly important: furniture; falling; knives; departure; confusion of identity; work; waiting; appetite; the letter; locks; health. All these motifs have made an appearance by scene eleven, which is to say a quarter of the way through the film (I count forty-four scenes in total; see the appendix for a scene breakdown of the film that also traces the appearance and recurrence of these motifs). For three-quarters of the film, that is to say, we are dealing with the recurrence of motifs with which we are already familiar. The way that the different "series" in the film function contributes to the sense of some kind of network. By this I mean that although all the components by which narrative films usually orientate their viewers are present (characters, spaces, events, objects, themes), and although there is certainly (sometimes) change within and among these components, the traditional sense of themes developing linearly, blossoming, and becoming gradually enriched is largely absent; instead the film jumps between them, so that viewers have to reconstruct a sense of development by connecting the motifs in memory, bridging the film's many ellipses.

This is not to argue that the themes and motifs are disconnected from one

another. The question of home unites a great many of the motifs (furniture, departure, work, appetite, locks), as does a focus on boundaries and transitions. Furniture is what is inside the home, work is what takes place outside it. Similarly, appetite tends to grow outside the home and be satisfied inside it. Locks – when they work – allow one to keep this boundary in operation, ensuring that that which should be inside the home stays there, and that that which should remain outside cannot get inside. But these boundaries that are likely to seem characteristic of home for many – perhaps most – viewers of the film will not necessarily seem so to everybody. The loss of home that *Colossal Youth* traces is also an interrogation of the meaning of the concept itself, in that it also involves the inscription of boundaries that, far from marking out a home, prove instead to be destructive of a particular understanding of it. As Costa said about the films that preceded *Colossal Youth*:

In *Vanda*, and already in *Ossos*... you don't really know if you're in somebody's house, in everybody's house, or if this particular house, this living room, this room, isn't actually more of a plaza or a forum, an *agora*, a place where people go in order to say a bunch of things or to hide themselves.

(Costa 2008: 15; my translation)⁷

In this context a lock doesn't mark out a home, it prevents a home from being possible:

'They have locks, and we have a shot of a guy opening a door. They never opened

⁷ 'Dans *Vanda*, dans *Ossos* déjà... on ne sait vraiment pas si on est dans la maison de quelq'un, dans la maison de tout le monde, ou si cette maison-là, ce salon, cette chambre, n'est pas plutôt un square ou un forum, une agora, un lieu où les gens passent pour dire des tas de choses ou se cacher.'

doors, at least before. And I do not remember a key. Never. An idea of a key was nonexistent. In Fontainhas, the public space and private space was undetermined' (Eguchi 2008). Nevertheless, however public and private are divided up, home must always be a space that can be defined in contrast with spaces that are *not* home. Expulsion and exile (whether of Ventura, the inhabitants of Fontainhas more generally, or of the Holy Family in the painting by Reubens that we see in the Gulbenkian) emphasise the home through narratives of its loss.⁸

Neither the film's locations nor its thematic threads are, then, clearly located within a gradually revealed, and gradually evolving, hierarchy. New connections do develop over the course of the film, yet most of the time it feels more like themes are simply introduced in sequence, in a manner which gestures towards a basically synchronic organisation. How might we go about resolving this apparent contradiction? A clue is provided by what Comolli goes on to say after the passage quoted above, and in which he is, I think, mistaken: 'Nothing happens from one shot to the next apart from this emptiness. There is no off-screen: everything is the *same* from one frame to the next, persistent and monotonous' (Comolli 2010: 70). The wrongness of this remark serves, by contrast, to indicate the way that *Colossal Youth* deploys repetition and development, or structure and transformation. While much might be the same from shot to shot, to say that everything is the same is a gross exaggeration. Many crucial things

⁸ There is also the merest gesture towards voluntary and beneficial departures from home, when Vanda discusses wanting to go to Fátima on pilgrimage in thanksgiving for her daughter's health. The irony is that we feel this desired departure to be the least likely of fulfilment.

happen *between* the shots: Ventura's wounding by Clotilde, the return of Beatriz to Vanda, and the death of Zita, to name just three. The recurrence of motifs not only underlines the many samenesses of the lives we are witnessing; it also reveals the way that change recontextualises repetition.

It is clear that the *prospect* of change is very important, specifically the constantly looming change represented by the time when Fontainhas will no longer exist, but this time is difficult to locate precisely. The relationship of the diegesis to it is disorientating; we seem to be situated right on the edge, at the horizon, of Fontainhas's ceasing-to-be. In one scene Ventura tells Nhurro that nothing remains of Fontainhas 'but dirt, weeds, and rats', and yet Bete is still there – even if she's 'the only one left'. It is hard to decide if we should say that Fontainhas *has been* abandoned, or *will soon* be abandoned. We hear the sounds of its demolition but do not witness it visually. Particular spaces recur in the film as much as the motifs do, and not much appears to change within these spaces each time we see them. Revisited spaces are very much in the majority,⁹ and they are clearly related to each other, but their relationships, too, are closer to those between points in a network than to a continuous topology. The fact that they are filmed in static shots also contributes to the sense of nodes in a network, of static points.¹⁰ We cannot even see from one space to another: there are plenty of

⁹ Locations that do not recur – the Gulbenkian, its garden, the first apartment Ventura is shown, and Nhurro's furniture shop – are the exception rather than the rule.

¹⁰ There are only four exceptions: the rightward pan in the shot in which Ventura first appears (scene 2); the rightward pan in the apartment in 10; the pan down from the sky and left to the bench in 16; and

windows in *Colossal Youth* but they are almost all either jet black, as in the scene of the expulsion of the furniture, or a sheer, impenetrable white, as in Vanda's bedroom. We are very aware of the distinction between Fontainhas and the new apartment blocks, but we have absolutely no idea how one would get from one to the other. We can only measure the distance between locations in terms other than the spatial. These spatial ellipses might, perhaps, mimic the gaps in Ventura's memory. We move between spaces by discontinuous leaps rather than by continuously changing passage.

We talk of "a point in time" as easily as we do of "a point in space". Perhaps we could distinguish the way *Colossal Youth* handles points in time from its treatment of points in space by saying that points in space are specific but isolated: we easily see how they are distinguished from one another (there is no danger of confusing Fontainhas with Casal da Boba) but not how they are connected. The scenes presented *in* these spaces, by contrast, do not initially appear to represent privileged points in time, but frequently appear – as they clearly seem to Comolli – almost like what we might call, with apologies to Deleuze, "any-moments-whatever". The challenge with the points in time we witness is to distinguish what is particular about them. What, if anything, distinguishes one occasion when Ventura meets Gustavo for lunch from another, or one period of lying together on Vanda's bed from the next? What kind of changes, developments or transformations are perceptible? It is easy to see how different sequences are connected (by similarity, by repetition), but discerning what renders them distinctive is more difficult.

the rightward pan in 42.

One solution to this challenge is to recognise that the prominent repetition of certain elements, even when others have changed, is often precisely what gives a scene its particularity. The events we see often stand out because of their relation to even more unusual events. In this they are, certainly, more subtly distinguished from one another than the events that are presented in many films, but they are nevertheless each unique and somehow special. This can be the case even when what has changed was never present for the viewer. An example of this is the scene in which Vanda, Ventura and Gustavo sit in the dining room after learning of Zita's death. We have never seen Zita in this room (she does not appear in *Colossal Youth* at all but only in its precursor, *In Vanda's Room* [2000]) and yet it becomes clear from the emotional temperature of the scene how changed it is by her absence. This is, presumably, the first time the three of them have sat together in this room since Zita's death; probably at other times (which we have not been shown) they sat there together with her. Thus what initially appears as a repetition (the same three people in the same room – compare this scene with scene 24) is in fact marked as different by Zita's absence.

Rarely in cinema are the dual spatial and temporal senses of the word "scene" as important as they are in *Colossal Youth*. Each scene is both a particular place (as in "the scene of the crime") and a specific narrative event, such as a particular conversation (as in "don't make a scene!"). The result is that the distinction that many films make use of between unique narrative events (such as the burning of Rosebud) and events representative of a recurrent action or type of action (a frosty evening between Kane and Susan) becomes very difficult to make. Scenes that on a first viewing can seem merely evidence of a repetitive and uneventful way of living – representative examples of the activities that take place in particular spaces – come to take on more and more

particularity with each re-viewing. These scenes, spatial and temporal, lie between, and therefore connect, very different times and places even if they do not themselves change very much, at least not while we watch. It is in the way that it slowly makes its viewers aware of these connections that the film constructs its networks of significance.

Figuration in (and of) Colossal Youth

The scene in *Colossal Youth* that takes place in the garden of the Gulbenkian both develops the figure of Ventura, as a character, and enacts a more abstract figuration where day becomes night within a single shot. Ventura gives us in this scene some of the most concrete information we learn about him in the whole film: how he came to Lisbon from Cape Verde (even the exact date: 19th August 1972); how he worked on the construction of the Gulbenkian; how he was injured in a fall. Yet the speech in which he imparts this information is accompanied by a camera movement down from the canopy of trees with blue sky clearly visible (contrasting with the dungeon-like space of the museum's interior, which we have just exited) which then follows Ventura as he sits on a bench. He is now strongly illuminated, but not by the sky, which is scarcely visible any more, and is instead surrounded by deep shadows in a dramatic chiaroscuro.¹¹ Day transforms into night, or at least into a kind of less localised, more mythic time. The time of the narration is made ambiguous at the same time as the content of the narrative

¹¹ The effect is, of course, in fact achieved by using mirrors to direct the daylight, as one can see in Aurélian Gerbault's documentary *All Blossoms Again* (2006).

becomes ever more specific. Seemingly opposed tendencies shape a single sequence.

I shall now proceed to use the notions of the figure and of figuration to help unpack more fully some of these tendencies and the devices that exploit them, starting by exploring figures as persons, then as metaphors, and finally in a more general sense as a way of referring to the shapes in and of space and time that *Colossal Youth* both is and brings about.

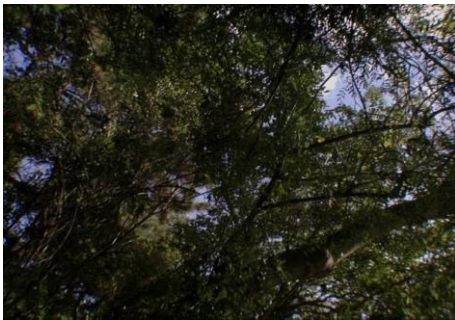


figure 5.3: from day to night without a cut

Figure as person

How are the "figures" in this film presented and how do they present themselves? Some words by Gilberto Perez are, I think, pertinent here:

Jean-Luc Godard said that every film is a documentary of its actors . . . In his own films Godard purposely brings forward the documentary of the actor as distinct from the character being played. If an actor's performance is an icon of the character, the documentary of the actor is an index of the person giving the performance.

(Perez 1998: 37)

In *Colossal Youth* we encounter actors playing characters very close to, or even at points

indistinguishable from, the actors themselves. But a movement which brings the character close to the actor, performance close to non-performance, is not the only procedure at work here. The performances in *Colossal Youth* are in general focused upon the simple performance of gestures and the speaking of words rather than on the projection of such performances in order to convey discernible intent. There is, however, a continuum of performance styles. The "documentary of the actor" is not merely a version of people "playing themselves"; we can also distinguish in the film between different ways of doing so. As in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997), acting styles as forms of representation are put into question. But whereas in Haneke the contrast is a drastic one between diegetic realism (the family) and a metaleptic stylisation (the young men in white, one of whom addresses the audience), here there is a more subtle range of possibilities on display, which probe the distinction between acting in the sense of representing a character and acting in the simple sense of doing. Any kind of screen acting also requires acting in the most straightforward sense: certain things need to be done; what attitudes of belief actor or audience exhibit in relation to these acts is, in a sense, a secondary question.

The different modes of performance present in the film also relate to narration: many characters in *Colossal Youth* tell their own stories as much as they enact them. The film frequently shows us bodies, otherwise unmoving, in the act of speaking. Sitting in her room, always on the same corner of the bed, and watching television is both what Vanda enacts and what she *does*. She tells her own story of her experiences in hospital, and she tells it in much the way she would tell it to her friends were the camera

not there.¹² Others, while still telling their own stories, perform for the camera more directly. Many of the people who appear in the film were asked to write their own texts, and to consider them as letters, which is to say specifically as words directed towards another:

What I asked of them was to bring me... it's almost like accepting cinema, like a letter, like writing a letter to someone. So I said, imagine that you are going to write a letter, read a letter, so you think about to whom you want to address the letter. And that's going to be your part in the film. You will write something for somebody.

(Costa in Eguchi 2008)

Costa has frequently spoken of the way that his introduction to Fontainhas came when Cape Verdeans he met during the filming of *Casa de Lava* asked him to take letters back to their relatives in Lisbon. But even if we did not have Costa's account of his process, I think the content of the monologues and the conviction with which the nonprofessional performers deliver them might have suggested that they had a hand, at least, in their composition. The finished film contains traces of the "documentary", in Godard's sense, of a particular kind of performance. Nhurro's monologue is one of these texts and is delivered almost directly to camera, with the actor's face right in the centre of the frame. So is Clotilde's monologue at the film's opening. At the other extreme, Ventura is for

¹² Vanda Duarte will certainly have become very used to Costa's presence not only in the making of this film but the long process of filming *In Vanda's Room* in the years previous to the making of *Colossal Youth*.

most viewers the most distinctive figure in the film, and yet he is the one whose has the largest quantity of dialogue likely to have been written for him by Costa.¹³



figure 5.4: acts of watching, speaking and listening

Costa has claimed that he wrote the letter which Ventura constantly attempts to teach Lento in collaboration with Ventura: he told Volker Pantenburg that the letter 'is a mix between [Robert] Desnos' letter to Youki and a letter that Ventura wrote me as an example of those he used to write his wife Zulmira. I organized both and *merged* them' (Pantenburg 2016: 50).¹⁴ Inspired by Costa's interest in letters, Jacques Rancière, one of

¹³ The main exception is the scene in the garden analysed above.

¹⁴ Desnos is the French Surrealist poet Robert Desnos, who also collaborated with Man Ray on the film *L'Étoile de mer* (1928) and died in Theresienstadt in 1945. The letter he wrote to his lover Youki on 15th July 1944 is reproduced in full on p. 125 of Costa and Chafes 2007; the "letter from Ventura" appears on pp. 126-7. Desnos's letter first appeared in Costa's work in *Casa de Lava*, where it, combined with another letter (which Jacques Rancière claims was that of 'an immigrant worker'; see Rancière 2014: 136) takes on the role of a love letter written to Edite (Édith Scob). Part of this letter can be found in the scrapbook Costa kept during the preparation for and making of the film (Costa 2013: 6). In fact, the letter in *Colossal Youth* is identical to the letter in Costa's earlier film *Casa de Lava* (1995), so unless Costa met Ventura many years before we have been led to believe, it seems that it cannot have been his letter that Costa used. Perhaps, since the letter he did use was by another immigrant Cape Verdean labourer, Costa simply misremembered? Or could this be a deliberate

Costa's most insightful and influential critics, distinguishes the way that human figures are presented in *Colossal Youth* by way of Rousseau's epistolary novel *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*. Rousseau's preface is an exchange between "Rousseau" and a fictional interlocutor:

These family letters, are they real or fictive, the objector asks the man of letters. If they are real, then they are portraits, and we expect portraits to be faithful to the model. This makes them not very interesting to people who are not members of the family. "Imaginary paintings", on the other hand, interest the public, provided they resemble, not a particular individual, but the human being. Pedro Costa says things differently: the patience of the camera, which every day mechanically films the words, gestures, and footsteps of the characters – not in order to make films, but as an exercise in approximating the secret of the other – must bring a third character to life on the screen. A character who is not the director, nor Vanda, nor Ventura, a character who is, and is not, a stranger to our lives. But the emergence of this impersonal also gets caught up in the disjunction in its turn: it is hard for this third character to avoid becoming either Vanda's portrait, and as such enclosed in the family of social identifications, or Ventura's painting, the painting of the crack and the enigma which renders family portraits and narratives futile.

(Rancière 2011b: 38-9)

attempt to give Ventura a claim to a certain kind of authorship in *Colossal Youth*?

These references to painting are not arbitrary. We have seen that there are a number of "still lives" in *Colossal Youth*, particularly of bottles in the shack; Costa cuts from one of these directly to the image of Reubens' *Flight into Egypt* hanging in the Gulbenkian. There are also a number of shots of single people which it certainly seems appropriate to refer to as portraits, rather than just paintings or pictures (Rancière's actual word is "tableau"; see Rancière 2011a: 102). According to Rancière, Costa attempts to avoid Rousseau's distinction between the portrait (required to be faithful but of limited interest) and the picture (interesting to the public at large but not resembling any particular individual) by waiting for the arrival of what Rancière calls a "third character", or "third figure" as it appears in another translation of a very similar piece (see Rancière 2014: 140).

I would suggest, however, that photographic reproduction itself destabilises this distinction. Do the figures in Costa's recent films represent fully rounded individuals, cinematic characters, or instances of types? I think they partake of, or gesture towards, something of all three possibilities. The fascination of their photographic portraiture often rests precisely on the fact, *pace* Rousseau, that faithfulness to the subject increases rather than decreases the image's resemblance to the human being. And yet types are certainly not avoided: the types in *Colossal Youth* include "impoverished slum-dweller", "recovering drug addict mother", but also "phantom", something Ventura not infrequently resembles. Rancière's claim that the 'third figure' is one who 'should be born on screen' seems to me to be hard to square with the comments by Costa from which Rancière derived the idea:

When the correct balance is achieved between what is in front of, and behind,

the camera, when impatience is replaced by the mechanical memorization of days, words, gestures, steps, a third person almost always unexpectedly emerges that is no longer Ventura, is no longer Vanda, is no longer me, who is and yet isn't a stranger to our lives, who walks beside us throughout the film.

(Costa and Chafes 2007: 116)

In neglecting the question of the balance between what is before and behind the camera, Rancière is obliged to discuss the "third figure" entirely in terms of how it might be represented.¹⁵ But why, after all – even if we accept the distinction between portrait and picture – should it be a choice between a portrait of Vanda and a picture of Ventura? Why not a picture of Vanda (perhaps representing the ordinary residents of Fontainhas) and a portrait of Ventura (as an idiosyncratic figure inassimilable to his surroundings)? Indeed there are in *Colossal Youth* no portraits – in the sense of carefully framed close-ups – of Vanda, as there are of Ventura and others; the representations of Vanda in the familiar surroundings of her room might indeed be better described as tableaux.¹⁶ To

¹⁵ I think Rancière may perhaps be too keen to link Costa's 'third person' (the original Portuguese in fact says merely 'um terceiro' ['a third']; see Costa and Chafes 2007: 115) to the 'third character' as found in Ibsen and Bresson: 'The counterpart of the image that cuts the literary narrative is this voice that simultaneously lends body to the image and subtracts from it. It is like a thwarted narrative voice in literature [*une parole littéraire contredite*]: neutrality of the narrative voice attributed to bodies it has disowned and that distort it in turn. Ironically, the voice that defines Bresson's cinematographic art was first imagined in the theater as the voice of the "third character," the Unknown or the Inhuman, Maeterlinck thought inhabited Ibsen's dialogues.' (Rancière 2016a: 14)

¹⁶ Costa's remarks about the close-ups in *In Vanda's Room* provide evidence of the way he thinks in terms

see, as I think Rancière risks doing here, Vanda as representing Costa's documentary side and Ventura his hallucinatory fictionalism would be to commit an injustice against the subtlety of the balances in these films, one that Rancière explicitly warns against. It would be to orient ourselves too readily, too easily, 'to situate [Costa's] way of working in an all too simple play of oppositions between the wealth of colours and the misery of the individuals, between activity and passivity, between what is given and what is seized' (Rancière 2011b, 14). The distinction between the portrait and the picture may turn out to be more unstable than Rousseau's interlocutor would have allowed.

Whatever the case might be, when we attend to the question of what kind of figures we are watching in *Colossal Youth* it becomes clear that there is in the film a subtle play of variations marking out the territory between the kind of acting we might expect in documentary (where the fiction is often that the camera's presence makes no difference), a kind of collaborative performance (such as in Nhurro's monologue, where text and delivery are largely the responsibility of the performer, with lighting, framing, etc., that of the filmmaker) and finally the relationship we expect in a fictional film (a performer speaks the lines and enacts the gestures required of them by the director). The procedures of representation and performance are not drawn attention to by drastic gestures of rupture but in a quieter fashion which rewards the viewer who becomes

that are compatible with an understanding of figuration as a form of reorientation of expectation: 'It's the opposite of what a close-up is supposed to do: to reveal, to show things bigger. It's absolutely the opposite: the moment where one hides the most, where one sees the least' (Costa 2008: 55; my translation). [C'est l'inverse de ce qu'un gros plan est censé faire: révéler, montrer en plus grand. C'est absolument le contraire: le moment où on cache le plus, où on voit le moins.]

aware of the relevance of certain questions rather than brusquely insisting upon them. The subtlety of these distinctions renders them likely to be initially disorientating, or at least lacking in orientational information: the distinctions between different modes of performance are not starkly underlined. Ultimately, however, they serve as territory by means of which the film's representational strategies can become discernible.

Figure as metaphor

Pedro Costa has, in the past, expressed his aversion towards both metaphor and documentary, two categories that might seem inescapable in the discussion of his work. He has proclaimed both 'I don't like documentaries' ('I Died a Thousand Times', conversation with Nuno Crespo accompanying Costa 2013) and 'I don't like metaphors' (Costa and Chafes 2007: 128). To some extent these statements might derive from the filmmaker's wish to wrongfoot his interpreters. However, the forms of performance and representation that we have just examined show how Costa dramatizes different responses to what I called the fiction of the camera's absence which marks many documentaries, and which I suspect might be one of the things Costa has an aversion to (as well as, presumably, the tendency of some documentaries to deliver a message with excessive clarity). The latter proclamation about metaphor, I would suggest, stems from a reluctance to include sequences that can be "translated" into a message. Towards the end of Costa's earlier film *Ossos* (1997) there is a scene in which Tina attempts to help Clotilde (played by *Colossal Youth*'s Vanda Duarte) with the cooking and ends up spilling boiling water on her. After a pause, both girls laugh. The scene seems clearly to be saying that even when you attempt to help people, you often end up hurting them,

but that this is something to be accepted and laughed at, rather than struggled against.¹⁷ Such direct metaphorical messages are rare in Costa's work, and particularly rare in the work after *Ossos*. This might be the kind of metaphor that he 'doesn't like'.

Other forms of metaphor, however, suffuse *Colossal Youth*. Clotilde's opening monologue is structured according to metaphors of fear, isolation and bravery. When she was a young girl she swam constantly, whereas 'none of the boys had the nerve to follow me'. But 'no shark ever got near' to her. She swam 'like a fish', which seems to have rendered her safe from the sharks. We might think a fish to be particularly vulnerable to a shark, but the simile also indicates the fact that she is at home in the water, neutralising the sharks' territorial advantage. Clotilde's sharks might be linked to the anaconda that Ventura and Vanda watch killing a crocodile on television; perhaps the sharks did not eat her because, unlike the anaconda's crocodile, she was not their natural prey. Costa, it seems, is happy deploying metaphor as long as any possible message is sufficiently ambiguous. Perez has challenged Eisenstein's view that, in Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930), the fact that image of the mourning woman is taken in long shot compromises the clarity of its metaphorical significance. Perez argues that the image is indeed 'a metaphor but it is a concrete woman first, and that makes it a richer metaphor, a metaphor for a life-affirming beginning, yes, but also for the human cost of such a beginning, for the suffering involved in such an affirmation' (Perez 1998: 189). Costa might perhaps be placed in a tradition running back to this point. Not only are Costa's metaphors entwined with his diegesis, as we saw both Bluestone and Elliott recommend

¹⁷ Thanks to Gareth Evans for a helpful conversation about this scene.

in the previous chapter, but metaphor, for Costa as for Dovzhenko, gains rather than loses power through ambiguity. It should be more like a region open to exploration than a roadmap to an existing territory.

The crucial figures, in the sense of metaphors or metonyms, in *Colossal Youth* are frequently binary in nature. Primary among these are the figures of the letter and the knife.¹⁸ A letter is both an instrument of communication and a means of keeping communication private. It is 'what traverses absence' (Badiou 2009: 367), but it can conceal as much as it transmits. It communicates between its sender and receiver but, if it is sealed in an envelope and remains unopened until it reaches its destination, it also hides its contents from the messenger who delivers it. This coexistence of transmission and occlusion has something to do with the fact that the metaphor of the letter is not infrequently applied to Costa's films themselves. The Criterion box set containing *Ossos*, *In Vanda's Room* and *Colossal Youth* is entitled *Letters from Fontainhas*, and Daniel Eschkötter argues that the 'films that originated in Fontainhas can be seen as letter-films, as letters of reply and also as audiovisual gifts given in return, just as Jean Rouch conceived of his filmic anthropology' (Eschkötter 2016: 67-8; my translation); hence, the Criterion set could just as appropriately have been called *Letters to Fontainhas*.¹⁹ In addition, actual letters are central to the lives of the residents of

¹⁸ In Costa's short films *Tarrafal* (2007), *The Rabbit Hunters* (2007) and *O nosso homem* (2010) these two figures are directly combined in a closing shot of a deportation notice pinned up with a knife.

¹⁹ 'Die in Fontainhas entstandenen Filme kann man als Brieffilme verstehen, als Antwortbriefe und auch audiovisuelle Gegengaben, wie sie Jean Rouch in seiner filmischen Anthropologie konzipiert hat.' Costa has spoken about 'the amazing Jean Rouch' as one of his primary inspirations (see Guaneri

Fontainhas: 'letters are the medium at the centre of the Fontainhas complex: letters that are recited, displayed, refused, carried around, reluctantly received' (*ibid.*: 68; my translation).²⁰

Ventura himself is also refused, reluctantly received, and sometimes welcomed. His character and its representation in the film are intimately tied up with notions of communication, transmission and, nevertheless, separation. Costa has said that the character of Ventura as he appears on screen is 'made by what I think about him and what he probably thinks about me also. So yes, it's probably something between me and them, me and him. I always say that the film is made around the difference that is in the middle of me and him' (Eguchi 2008). Rancière argues that the relationships central to *Colossal Youth* together 'compose a highly specific poetic displacement, a *figure* which, within the film, speaks about the art of the filmmaker, about its relationship with the art of the museum, about the relationship that each art has with the body of its characters, and thus with their respective politics' (Rancière 2011: 95; my translation; emphasis in original).²¹ Recalling Rancière's idea, encountered in the previous chapter, that

2015).

²⁰ 'Und Briefe stehen tatsächlich auch medial in Zentrum des Fontainhas-Komplexes: rezitierte, vorgezeigte, vorenthaltene, mitgeführte, unwillentlich erhaltene Briefe.'

²¹ '... composent donc un déplacement poétique bien spécifique, une figure qui, au sein du film, parle de l'art du cinéaste, de son rapport avec l'art des musées, du rapport que l'un et l'autre entretiennent avec le corps de son personnage, et donc de leurs politiques respectives.' John Howe's translation of this passage in Rancière 2014: 131 is unfortunately garbled and loses the pun on different senses of figure: 'a figure who in the middle of the film discusses the filmmaker's art and his relationship with him and

figuration can present without representing, it seems that a displacement can itself be a figure, one that refers to the relationship between the material and the significant.

Ventura seems to be almost everybody's father, a relationship at once material and significant. The narrative of the first part of the film (after the destruction of the furniture and Clotilde's brandishing of the knife) involves Ventura's attempt to find out which of his children Clotilde was mother to. He tries Bete (who tells him that he's 'got the wrong door and the wrong daughter'), Gustavo (who asks 'what woman?'), and Vanda (who tells him that her mother is in the cemetery). This narrative thread returns later when Ventura tells Paolo that his (Paolo's) mother has left him (Ventura). He is not contradicted, so we might think that Ventura's quest has been successful until we learn that Paolo's mother is called Lurdes. Ventura's eventual reconciliation with Bete, and his telling her of how they met, might indicate that he did not in fact have either the wrong door or the wrong daughter at the outset, but this is never confirmed. Beyond this narrative device, a straightforward metaphor is also in operation. When, after Zita's death, Vanda tells Ventura, 'Papa, Zita was your daughter, but she was my sister first', it is made clear that family relationships are something more than a matter of simple

with his own character's body, and consequently of their respective politics'. The translation by Emiliano Battista included in the Masters of Cinema DVD of *Colossal Youth* (Rancière 2011b) is better, but also loses the polysemy, by translating 'figure' as 'metaphor': '... a very specific poetic displacement, a metaphor that speaks in the film about the art of the filmmaker: of its relationship to the art in museums, and of the relationship that one art and the other forges with the body of its characters. A metaphor which speaks, in short, about their politics.'

biology.

Ventura is also some kind of guardian figure. This image seems to have arisen from his actual role during the filming of *In Vanda's Room*, concerning which Costa has said that 'I think that I took him for a sentinel' (Costa 2008: 134; my translation).²² In *Colossal Youth*, is Ventura a guardian because he is a parent, or is it the other way round? Does he take on parental qualities because of his guardianship? His guardianship is also in contradistinction to that of the museum attendant at the Gulbenkian, who tells Ventura:

Guarding this isn't like guarding the open-air market back home. Here you wield an iron hand in a velvet glove. There, it's just an iron hand. ... Here it's another world. An ancient, untroubled world. No one shouts or runs or spits on the floor. It's nice and easy.... It's trouble when someone like you turns up.

(*Colossal Youth*, 46'00" – 46'45")

Ventura's guardianship, on the other hand, is all about remaining with the Cape Verdeans. We never see Ventura actually defending anybody against violence or preventing the destruction of Fontainhas, but his presence and his witness, the way he is not simply one of the inhabitants but is also distinguished from them, so that it seems that he somehow accompanies them, is in itself a form of defence against the psychic violence that the displacement is enacting. (He is also a messenger, in that he is the only figure who appears able to move between Fontainhas and Casal da Boba; the movement

²² 'Je crois que je l'ai pris pour une sentinelle.'

that is the film's subject is elided, perhaps as a traumatic event that can only be represented indirectly.) The psychic violence that Ventura seems to have undergone (as well as actual violence: his fall from the scaffolding and his wounding by Clotilde) has not only precipitated his confusion but is also, perhaps, what suits him for such a role.



figure 5.5: threatening gesture

There is, though, another figure who briefly appears as a defender, namely Clotilde. In an excellent close reading of her only scene (the knife-wielding scene at the film's beginning) Annika Weinthal observes:

Here, shortly before the opening of the main narrative, the camera looks metaphorically one more time deep into the memory of Fontainhas, out of which emerges Clotilde, the woman with the knife. The story that she tells is simultaneously her story and that of many others; is both concrete memory and a symbol of feminine power.

(Weinthal 2016: 58; my translation)²³

²³ 'Die Kamera blickt hier – kurz vor Einsatz der Haupthandlung – metaphorisch noch einmal tief hinab in das Gedächtnis Fontainhas', aus dem Clotilde, die Frau mit dem Messer, hervortritt. Die Geschichte, die sie erzählt, ist gleichzeitig ihre Geschichte und die vieler anderer; ist konkrete Erinnerung und

The memory that Clotilde speaks of derives from when she was young; it must of course have taken place in Cape Verde. Thus, immediately after the furniture crashes to the ground, signifying Ventura's expulsion and the wider expulsion from Fontainhas, we get the most direct representation there is in the film – a representation that is admittedly still oblique – of Cape Verde itself. Weinthal notes that the figures of Clotilde and her son could be seen as coming from Costa's earlier film *Casa da Lava* (1994), which was set and filmed in Cape Verde, and in which we see many women 'who linger on the Cape Verdean islands in isolation and poverty, left behind by their husbands and fathers who have gone to Portugal to look for work' (*ibid.*).²⁴ Clotilde's 'threatening gesture' ('Drohgebärde') can thus be interpreted in a multitude of ways. It 'can be understood simultaneously as a warning to the sharks, to the young men on the beach, and to the listener not to get too near to Clotilde' (*ibid.*).²⁵ Whoever is listening to Clotilde's speech, at whom she brandishes her knife and stares so ferociously, is, as Weinthal reminds us, invisible. Though she does not address us directly, I think we could also consider ourselves, the viewers, as one more object of her threat. Is she warning us off, or perhaps warning us not to get close too lightly? Does Clotilde signify

Sinnbild weiblicher Stärke zugleich.' The following citations from the same article are also my translations.

²⁴ '... die in Abgeschiedenheit und Armut auf den Kapverdischen Inseln verweilen, zurückgelassen von ihren Männern und Vätern, die als Arbeitsmigranten nach Portugal gingen.'

²⁵ '... kann gleichsam als Warnung an die Haie, an die jungen Männer am Strand und an den Zuhörer verstanden werden, Clotilde nicht zu nahe zu kommen.'

an effective resistance that Ventura cannot offer? At the end of her single brief scene Clotilde withdraws into the darkness, but her knife blade still glints.

We are, here, on the boundaries of allegory. We could perhaps speak of *Colossal Youth* as containing more allegories than metaphors, since a feature of allegory – of extended metaphor – is that while its overall import may be relatively clear, the more extended the allegory the more difficult it becomes to ascribe the specific metaphorical significance of each minute component. In a sense allegory is a literalization of metaphor: an "actual" figure (character) is deployed in the service of the figurative (the metaphorical or metonymic).²⁶ Pantenburg usefully proposes that we could consider Costa's films as instances of the paradoxical concept of the 'concrete allegory' (Pantenburg 2016: 43; my translation).²⁷ The continual proximity of Costa's allegories to the concrete (the diegetic, but also the actual historical and even the profilmic) is what prevents allegory becoming *mere* allegory, the kind of allegory which, when decoded, exhausts the interest and significance of its vehicle. Ventura's role as an allegorical father helps guide us through *Colossal Youth*, but it does not constitute the film's meaning. It is only one component among many: by no means everything in the film is allegorical. Those allegorical elements that are present may help us to orientate ourselves, but they do not unpack their own significance or tell us what we should make

²⁶ Echoing the formulation I used in the previous chapter, one might say that in allegory characters (and their stories) are the aspects of a film's articulation that are aligned with signification in order to produce a figuration.

²⁷ '... könnte man Costas Filmen als konkrete, ja konkretistische Allegorien bezeichnen.'

of them.

Figure as a shaping in space and/or time

How else, then, might we orientate ourselves with respect to this film, and why is it sometimes hard to do so? What role does the film's figuration, in the widest sense, have to play here? We might begin by noting the absence of establishing shots. Not only, as we have seen, are the spaces in which the film takes place dissociated from one another, but they are not even clearly situated in their immediate surroundings. What exactly do establishing shots, customarily, establish? We might say that they proceed from the assumption that we can separate space and event. A wide shot of a particular location announces it as a space in which events can take place. A tighter shot of the action serves to emphasise the uniqueness of temporal activity in contradistinction to the openness of space. Many different stories could take place within one space, but they could not take place within one space at the same time. The way that *Colossal Youth* simultaneously emphasises the temporal and spatial senses of "scene" goes some way to undermining this. Without establishing shots, every space seen in the film is marked out as individual just as every moment in time is. We are not so much disorientated because the arrangement of the space is hard to discern; on the contrary, shots where this is the case (such as that of Clotilde brandishing her knife) are few and far between. But we do not know how the spaces we see are articulated. We get four different views of Vanda's apartment, with minor variations: one of her bedroom, one of the hallway, one of the dining room, and one of the front door. But even by the end of the film we are none the wiser about how these spaces link up. As soon as we return to

one of these four views we know exactly where we are, but we would still not know how to move to any of the others.

Even the staircases and corridors seem more like spaces in their own right than transitions between other spaces. When they are connected these connections can be misleading. After he has been shown the first possible apartment in Casal da Boba, Ventura descends a flight of stairs. We are likely, I think, to assume that he is leaving the apartment. But then we hear a knock at a door, after which we see him in Vanda's bedroom. Going downstairs to an apartment seems peculiar; this only makes sense if we remember that we learned earlier that Vanda has a basement flat. Later on, Ventura sits at the foot of a flight of stairs as Vanda, Beatriz and Gustavo climb past him. Ventura follows and we hear a door close. But rather than any room in Casal da Boba, the next shot shows Ventura standing in the doorway of the shack he shared with Lento in the 1970s. When the passage between shots does seem to articulate different spaces – rather than underlining their isolation – it tends to do so across time and space rather than according to the logic of a realistic diegesis.

So how does *Colossal Youth* figure time? Rancièrè has written of Costa's "still lives" (Rancièrè 2011b), which might suggest that these compositions can be linked to the destabilisation of the dichotomy between the living and the dead that runs through Costa's cinema.²⁸ Vatchel Lindsay's excellent observation that "[i]t is a quality, not a

²⁸ Consider, for example, the dead father in *O Sangue* who nevertheless writes a letter, or the long tracking shot in *Ossos* in which the boy carries what seems to be the dead baby in a plastic bag, only for the baby to turn up alive and well.

defect, of all photoplays that human beings tend to become dolls and mechanisms, and dolls and mechanisms tend to become human' (Lindsay 1922: 25) seems somehow not to apply to *Colossal Youth*. We see very few mechanisms at all, and the figures, in all their stillness, never seem mechanical. Instead – just as in *Holy Motors*, but in a very different way – the distinction that is called into question is the notion that everything must be either alive or dead, and cannot be both. We have seen how the temporality of the film seems poised at the exact moment when the neighbourhood could be said to be either dead (everyone has gone) or with minimal life remaining (Bete is still there). Are we close to the realm of the undead? As I have noted, at the end of the film Lento has become a ghost. Ventura's resemblance to the zombie Carre-Four, from *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) by Costa's beloved Jacques Tourneur, has also been remarked upon (Costa 2008: 134).



figure 5.6: guardians (*Carre-Four* and *Ventura*) [both images brightened for visibility]

Yet if we can speak of the life of Fontainhas, then clearly it is not only organisms that can be alive or dead.²⁹ The environment, it seems, can become a figure. (I don't think, incidentally, that the figures in *Colossal Youth* ever become environments: there

²⁹ Pedro Treno claims that 'the neighbourhood itself becomes, in the eyes of the camera, a kind of character that comes to life by itself' (Treno 2013: 1).

are no shots anywhere in the film with more than three people in them; the human beings represented in the film are always figures, not backgrounds or environments as they can become in crowd scenes, for example. The distinction between figure and ground is always clear.) Maybe, however, "life" and "death" are slightly too constrictive as categories, and it would be more helpful to think about methods of articulation: construction and animation. Ordinarily, non-living things (particularly, in this film, buildings) are constructed, whereas living things are animated. This might provide a way for a reformulation of Lindsay's observation to regain some of its pertinence: we see at times, for example, how the figure of Ventura is constructed as a sharply outlined, curved dark shape against the bright straight lines of his new apartment. But if figures are in a sense constructed (in that we can see how, as images, they are put together), then rooms can also be animated. Despite the similar whiteness of the two rooms, the presence of Ventura together with Vanda and, eventually, Beatriz progressively animates Vanda's bedroom in a way that never happens in Ventura's apartment.

What of the figures that Ventura and Bete see as they lie on her bed and stare at her wall? (Ventura tells her: 'In the houses of the departed there are lots of figures to see'.) The figures on the wall also seem both constructed (each of them sees something different, apart – perhaps significantly – from a policeman that they both see) and animated. As Bete says, 'When they give us those white rooms we'll stop seeing these things.' The contrast between the richly textured, subtly illuminated greenish walls of Fontainhas and the starkly unforgiving white walls of Casal da Boba is one of the most striking visual aspects of *Colossal Youth*; imaginative life will be in grave danger of impoverishment in those deathly white spaces that cannot so easily be animated. We should, however, note the parallels in this scene with those of Vanda and Ventura

watching TV. Here they look to screen right, there to screen left, but the compositions are similar and in both cases we see only the watching, not what is being watched. I see nothing to indicate that the television is condemned as imaginatively deadening: on the contrary, Vanda is wholly engaged both with the anaconda and her favourite soap opera, *Franklin*. Costa has no reason to be even-handed about the demolition – clearly the film condemns it – but neither does he simplistically romanticise a life without modern technology and media.³⁰

As we have had reason to note a number of times thus far, the same phenomena which can help to orientate the viewer can also disorientate them. Take, for example, the length of time we spend in Vanda's room. This helps us come to know the space, but also makes us wonder exactly why we're spending such a long time there. The distinction between *waiting* and *doing nothing* is both suggested and destabilised. For example, it might initially seem as if there is a distinction in operation between waiting for something or someone (as Ventura clearly does in scene 3), and simply doing nothing (as with Ventura and Vanda in scene 6). But as the film continues it becomes increasingly difficult to be sure that sitting or standing quietly can ever be adequately described as *doing nothing*. When Ventura and Bete sit quietly together, for example, the sounds of Fontainhas being dismantled and people preparing to leave are quietly but

³⁰ Likewise, though it may seem brutal when Semedo tells Ventura that 'unpaid electricity bill means no light', is it definitely worse than falling from a pylon trying illegally to get on-grid, as Lento does? Costa's sensitivitiy to questions of the aestheticisation of poverty might be indicated by a reflexive reading of Paolo's claim that the doctors are taking pictures of and filming his treatment and sending the photos and films to the USA.

clearly audible. Are Ventura and Bete, then, simply waiting to be relocated? Or are they, rather, actively *being*, existing in the space which they know they will only be permitted to occupy for a short while to come? Similarly, is Ventura doing nothing in the film's final scene, or is he looking after his granddaughter?

A related phenomenon takes place with regard to what activity might be required from us as viewers. The film's narration maintains the viewer at a certain "distance" from the film's events, which enables some narrative ironies (irony being, traditionally, considered as a rhetorical figure).³¹ Volker Pantenburg argues that 'the realities on screen and of the audience are not linked by any direct form of empathy or identification. What unites them is a feeling of uneasiness' (Pantenburg 2010: 61). Uneasiness is, perhaps, a mild form of disorientation. One method by which *Colossal Youth* generates this uneasiness involves not flagging up the introduction of information which will have narrative significance. Thus it is possible to have a sense of inactivity,

³¹ Jonathan Rosenbaum seems to find *Colossal Youth* not ironic enough. Writing about *Casa da Lava* (but after the release of *Colossal Youth*), he suggests that in the earlier film disorientation results from the fact that we are given a character (Mariana) to identify with, but also that as her motivations become harder to read the sense that she may be a deeply unpleasant and profoundly selfish character raises its head – something which is made all the more troubling and resonant by the possibility of seeing her as Costa's representative, or as in a sense allegorical of his involvement with Cape Verde and the Cape Verdians in making the film. Rosenbaum implies that the absence of such ambiguous self-accusation makes the later films somewhat weaker: 'And Costa can't interrogate her motives for remaining on the island without interrogating his own. It's not a question he can answer, but it's the brutal posing of this dilemma that makes *Casa de Lava*, for me, his strongest film' (Rosenbaum 2012: 8).

even perhaps something close to boredom,³² of time passing listening to idle conversation which seems to have little narrative import, only later to develop the feeling that we have not been paying enough attention, that we have missed crucial information. This impression is itself part of the film's narrative and figurative strategies. The narration does not merely dress itself up with particular figures; its narration is itself figured. For example, Bete mentions Nhurro before we first meet him in the following scene. But we do not get any other signals that should expect to meet this character, and hence are likely not to distinguish specifically narrative foreshadowing from other information whose significance is motivic or thematic. When we meet Nhurro we are reminded of some of the things that were said about them, but also of what we have forgotten, because we were not listening with our "plot antennae" up. The relative simplicity of the film's structure at this point (a character is mentioned for the first time and then introduced in the very next scene) is easy to miss and only becomes apparent on repeated viewings.

If the difficulty of describing any of what we see as genuine inactivity increases as the film goes on, there clearly is linear development in the film. One such linear sequence is the pattern of two characters being joined by a third, after which one of the first two leaves. This pattern occurs a number of times during the film within individual

³² Perez observes about Straub-Huillet (among Costa's most profound influences), that those who find the sequences in the car in their *History Lessons* (1972) boring 'are bored not for lack of action but for lack of a scheme of meaning that would subsume all that action going on in the streets' (Perez 1998: 284).

scenes, but is traced out over a larger timespan in the pattern Ventura/Vanda, Ventura/Vanda/Beatriz, and finally Ventura/Beatriz. The final pair only occurs in the last scene of the film, giving a degree of formal closure at the same time as the image of a grandfather together with his granddaughter raises questions about the relationship of the past to the future, and whether they are necessarily coherently connected, or whether there is an irreducible gap between them. Weinthal argues that 'Clotilde defends the memories of the inhabitants of Fontainhas against oblivion with her knife, because when the last house is demolished, it is not only a place of communal living that will go missing, but also a place of potential remembrance of shared origins' (Weinthal 2016: 58; my translation).³³ Memory is not a secure repository of "homeliness": if certain physical structures are destroyed, memory itself will eventually deteriorate.

In conclusion, I wonder if we might say that the very concept of "home" disturbs the literal/figurative distinction. To say that a place is one's home is clearly not a metaphor but because emotions unveil the bluntness of the fact/value distinction and our tendency to align the literal with the factual, it doesn't seem quite right to say that it is literally true. Can one, for example, be literally in love? "I love you" is of course a performative, and a home with no love is not a home. In Costa's film home is not merely something that has been lost, but also something that (just like, I have argued, coherence in a film) has to be *achieved*. Love might seem to be related to animation, in my

³³ 'Clotilde verteidigt mit ihrem Messer die Erinnerungen der Bewohner Fontainhas' gegen das Vergessen, denn mit dem Abriss der letzten Häuser geht nicht nur ein Ort des geteilten Lebens, sondern auch ein Ort des möglichen Erinnerns an die gemeinsame Herkunft verloren.'

previous distinction between animation and construction: love grows rather than being built. And yet what makes a home a home in *Colossal Youth* is very much related to construction: the fact that the inhabitants of Fontainhas built their shacks themselves, but did not build their new houses, is crucial. As Costa puts it, talking about Casal da Boba: 'Yes, it's very simple: they're houses that they didn't build' (Costa 2008: 165; my translation).³⁴



figure 5.7: a glimpse of home achieved?

For all its bleakness, *Colossal Youth* is not without hope of the possibility of animation within these new, carelessly constructed apartments. At the very end of the film, Ventura sleeps on Vanda's bed as Beatriz plays on the floor beside it. The child initially seems a little disconcerted, but eventually she begins to laugh, and as she does so Ventura wakes up and passes his hand across his face. Both for characters and viewers, the film ends with a gesture, however provisional, of orientation rather than disorientation. Despite the excessive displacement that the film traces, as well as the ellipses and passages of stasis whose very emptiness disorientates us, we are finally given a tiny glimpse of the possibility that this house could, in time, achieve the status

³⁴ 'Oui, c'est très simple: ils sont dans des maisons qu'ils n'ont pas construites.'

of some kind of home – at least for Beatriz's generation, if not for Ventura's.

chapter six

sink or swim: immersing ourselves in *Adieu au langage*

This thesis has been dealing with questions of orientation and disorientation in film, with the ways that films can cause us to lose – or to have difficulty getting – our bearings, and with the consequences of the various critical strategies we might employ in response. As I have had occasion to observe more than once, the language of orientation relies on a metaphor of territory; it envisages a film as some kind of place through which we pass, which may at times be more or less familiar, and may either supply or deny the signs necessary for us to be able to assess our "location" in relation to the landscape that is the film.¹ In *Colossal Youth* we encountered some situations where such signs seem to be lacking. In common with much of his work, Jean-Luc Godard's 2014 film *Adieu au langage* presents almost the opposite situation: it contains such a surfeit of images, sounds, fragments of music, and citations (both acknowledged and unacknowledged) that it can seem almost impossible to distinguish figure from ground, to separate elements that might serve as signs from those which are merely features of the landscape. This means that the film is often extremely confusing (in the ordinary sense). This confusion is generated both by the lack of obvious connections – those parts of the film that most exhibit what Brenez, as I mentioned in my figuration chapter, calls 'figuralità by overload' – and, as in *Holy Motors*, by the presence of connections that it is difficult to know what to do with. (This is particularly the case in

¹ Alternatively, of course, a film may – like *Holy Motors* – offer deliberately misleading signs.

those moments in that film that both offer a narrative and frustrate its comprehension.) If the critic were to attend primarily to the experience of watching the film, rather than attempting to parse its logic, this would be completely understandable and, because of Godard's interests in texture and affect, very likely to lead to insights into the film (and not only into the spectator). But to pursue such a strategy exclusively would run the same risks that, as I described in my introduction, are a consequence of presupposing that the search for narrative coherence in Lynch's films is misplaced. I will therefore take a different approach and engage in a deliberate search for strategies of orientation. As I also argued in my chapter on *Holy Motors*, I want to claim that the difficulty of perceiving a consistent diegesis in *Adieu au langage* should not lead us too quickly to assume that pursuing questions of diegesis could only result in a misdirected and fruitless quest. But, of course, it will not be possible to simply take the orientational strategies that worked elsewhere and apply them here; we need to look for new ones, guided by this film in particular. That we can look to confusing films themselves for guidance as to how we might go about orientating ourselves is, as I hope is becoming clear, one of the central claims of this thesis.

Daniel Morgan expresses the particular sensation of confusion that Godard's recent work produces at the start of his book *Late Godard and the Possibilities of Cinema*:

As any viewer of Godard's work over the past several decades can readily attest, his films and videos tend to evoke a feeling of being at sea. ... It's not so much a question of being able to identify every reference thrown our way – a task that seems not only fruitless but also pointless – as it is a problem of not knowing

where to start, of not understanding what Godard is doing.

(Morgan 2013: 1)

Morgan does not offer a formula for gaining orientation; his one general methodological stipulation is that 'only by staying with the intricate weave of sound, image, and text can Godard's late films and videos be approached and understood' (*ibid.*: 2). Appropriately enough, perhaps, *Adieu au langage* presents the viewer with problems of knowing 'where to start' right at the outset. It begins by presenting the viewer with an 'intricate weave' that includes a collection of endings. The film starts with a complex montage sequence in which, at one point, we read on the screen a phrase derived – as a number of the film's French viewers, at least, might perhaps be expected to recognise – from the final lines of Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* ("oui, c'est ce que nous avons eu de meilleur, dit Deslauriers").² We are also shown an excerpt from the end of Howard Hawks' 1939 *Only Angels Have Wings* in which Bonnie (Jean Arthur) realises that Geoff (Cary Grant) has given her the double-headed coin that had belonged to his beloved friend Kid (Thomas Mitchell) and was therefore, in telling her to flip the coin ("tails you go, heads you stay"), asking her, in his own way, to stay with him. Placing these citations at the beginning of the film allows them only the merest amount of context, making it very difficult to judge the mode in which we are invited to read them. The conceit of placing endings at the beginning suggests irony, but how much and of what kind? Will the film turn out to be a kind of essay film, along the lines of Godard's own *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, or is this merely the prologue to a more conventional narrative?

² "yes, it was the best time we ever had, said Deslauriers"

It only takes a minute and a half, after all, before we encounter a title reading "1: la nature", after which we see a ferry arriving at shore and, soon after, meet some named characters. If we're a little lost at the beginning of *Adieu au langage*, this is not anything unusual. The same can be said for a great many films; even in the most straightforward narratives, it takes at least some time for us to orientate ourselves. What is more distinctive, and more bewildering, here is that we don't even know in quite what way we're lost. Right at the outset, the film problematises those notions of "territory" on which the metaphor of orientation is based.

In the passage from Morgan I quoted above, it is interesting that he expresses the disorientation that Godard's films can provoke with an aquatic metaphor: 'a feeling of being at sea'.³ *Adieu au langage* is full of images of (and references to) water and associated phenomena. Immediately after the opening montage sequence, as I have mentioned, we see a ferry arrive on the shores of Lake Geneva, and later a woman drinks from a water fountain. The film proceeds to offer us a compendium of images of forms of water, including but not limited to: puddles; washing hands; rivers; thirst ("J'ai soif"); rain on windshields; snow (on cars and in a forest); Freudian speculations on the mythic associations of submersion in water with birth; rain; clouds; the sea; a shower;

³ Disorientation and confusion seem both to have a close connection with aquatic imagery. Ami Harbin writes that an 'oceanic metaphor' is 'used strikingly often to describe disorientations' (Harbin 2016: 2), and Martine Beugnet points out that '[o]ne of Leibniz's favoured examples of clear and confused perception is that of the sea, which we identify although we cannot distinctly perceive it: we hear the roar of the sea, made of all the crashing waves, writes Leibniz, and we identify it as the sound of the sea even though we cannot distinguish the sound of each individual wave' (Beugnet 2017: 2).

rapids; fog (mentioned on the soundtrack); a glass of water for painting watercolours, and so forth. I want to argue in this chapter that it may be appropriate to think of this film in terms of its strategies of *immersion*; immersion does not preclude orientation but it shifts the terms of the metaphor somewhat. The viewer is no longer securely placed on the land (even if lost) but in the very midst of things.

The notion of immersion also seems appropriate to this film because it is Godard's first feature in 3D; both sound and image are in stereo. The stereoscopic illusions of depth created by 3D cinema technology are frequently discussed in terms of their immersive effects on the viewer. Delia Enyedi has usefully referred to the "immersion aesthetic" of the film (Enyedi 2017) and, indeed, the film's images of water often look particularly remarkable in 3D, such as the early scene of hand washing in a fountain, or the waves on Lake Geneva. This kind of immersion is often regarded as sensual, as purely experiential and as having nothing to do with elements of film such as character and narrative. But the other aspect of film most frequently discussed in terms of immersion is, precisely, narrative; immersion is a common way of talking about the other sense, besides becoming confused or disorientated, in which we can get "lost" in a film. The idea of being immersively lost in a narrative is interestingly in tension with that of being lost as a result of disorientation. We say that we are lost in a story when we are so engrossed in it that we can almost forget that it is merely a story, which in no way entails being lost in the sense of being disorientated; sometimes the result of the latter is, precisely, to prevent us from getting lost in the story, in the sense of being immersed in it.

From some of Godard's previous work, and some of the criticism work on it, one

might expect that Godard's reaction to ideas of immersion, both in relation to 3D's illusionary potential and to narrative, would be to disrupt it, to render palpable – in broadly Brechtian fashion – the fact that immersion, whether in a 3D image or in a story, is simply illusion. Certainly, in *Adieu au langage*, Godard does frequently disrupt both these, and other, forms of immersion. But this can have complex dialectical effects. When, for example, the soundtrack is abruptly silenced or interrupted – which happens regularly in *Adieu au langage* – the immersive properties of sound are not simply undermined. They are also emphasised, because the sudden change makes strikingly evident the disappearance of that in which we were previously immersed. Thus I want to argue that Godard does not *only* disrupt immersion in this film; there are rather more complex relationships at play between immersion and the disruption of immersion which have profound consequences for our sense of orientation or disorientation. Godard does not only reinforce and exploit the non-immersive qualities of stereoscopic images, their tendency to create what Raymond Durgnat calls a 'depth too "laminated" to feel real' (Durgnat 1967: 116), although he does radicalise this tendency: at times the film almost generates the impression that objects can extend, paradoxically, *in front of the foreground* (negative parallax) and *behind the background* (positive parallax). When Josette (Héloïse Godet) sits in a slatted chair outside the cultural centre, for example, it somehow seems that she is in the foreground but that nevertheless the chair juts out towards us, further forward than the foreground.

But more nuanced procedures are also at work. The 3D treatment of the aforementioned scene of a woman washing her hands in the pool of a fountain, for example, puns on the notion that 3D images represent depth: the depth of the pool does indeed come across strongly, but what is more striking about the image is the way the

stereoscopic image renders the *surface* of the water as a shimmering plane, covered in floating leaves and broken by the hands being plunged into it. (It might stand as an instance of what Godard's voice, much later in the film, refers to as the difficulty of fitting flatness into depth.) Indeed, many of the most striking three-dimensional images in the film emphasise surfaces, or at least textures, such as the almost tactile crenellations of waves on Lake Geneva that are seen starting just before 23 minutes into the film. Textures such as these both invite and resist immersion. They suggest a tactility, creating a sense that the viewer could almost touch the film, could immerse oneself in the sensory qualities of its world that go beyond what can be seen and heard; but, at the same time, they make one also acutely aware that this is impossible.⁴ They operate as a kind of interface between surface and depth.

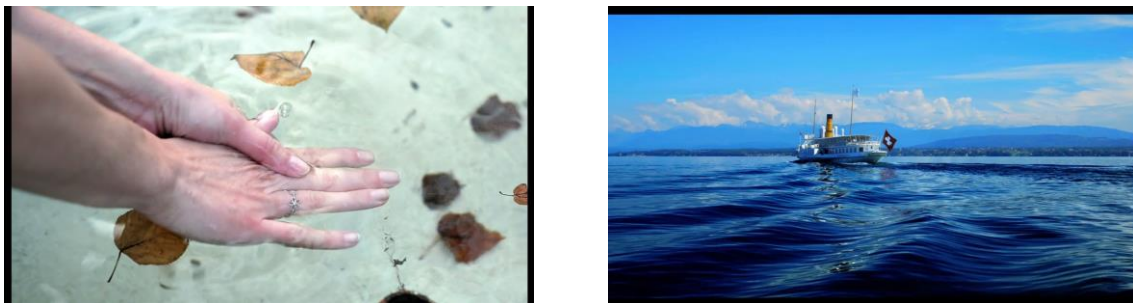


figure 6.1: water in 3D – surface, depth, texture, interface

I will try to show how the figuration that is at work in *Adieu au langage* both exploits and disrupts immersive phenomena and, in particular, water as a symbol (metaphor or metonym) for immersion. Whenever we encounter a phenomenon that has the capacity to clarify the film, there is almost always a contrary movement that is likely

⁴ Nick Jones writes that 'just as a sculpture might emphasise its constituent material (be it iron, wood, glass, etc.), this film stresses and revels in the immaterial material of stereoscopic depth' (Jones 2018).

either to obscure it, or to distract us from the fact that it has been clarified. The film might almost be seen to thematise this tendency via the pervasiveness of the theme of water and its highly contradictory properties. Water, after all, can literally support floating bodies and is a necessary support of life itself but one can also drown in it; it can be transparent, not obscuring vision – in fact it can clean away the murk obstructing a clear view – and yet it also tends to refract and distort whatever is seen through it. The film plays with surfaces and depths, with volumes and media (what we see and what we see through). See, for example, the various images of car windscreens, often splattered with rain, that both are and are not coterminous with the cinema screen, that seem to occupy the same space as the screen and yet also make us aware that this is impossible. There is transparency but there is also distortion. All of this emphasises water as a medium, and therefore reflexively emphasises the filmic medium as well. So water does not merely serve to immerse us in the film; it makes immersion itself into a theme. We are, I think, intended to recognise the mediated quality of every image, every word, every sound in the film, but we are not *only* intended to do this. The film also has immersive strategies of its own. But what are they? If it does not offer an immersive experience directed towards forgetting that one is immersed, what kind of immersion *does* the film offer?



figure 6.2: screens

History and argument

The body of *Adieu au langage* consists of two narratives, or two variations on the same narrative focussing on a couple consisting of a man and a woman. The segments concerning the first couple are labelled "1: la nature" and the second "2: la métaphore". Early in the first "la nature" section, the film makes various propositions concerning the historical and social milieu in which we are currently immersed. The didactic aspect of this part of the film is ironically acknowledged (one sequence begins with Davidson, played by Christian Grégori, announcing "allez, en examen", or "come on, exam time"), but this does not undercut the seriousness with which the film puts forward certain proposals. As Rick Warner summarises in his excellent article on the film, one of the most crucial references is to Jacques Ellul and his argument – made originally in the article "Victoire d'Hitler?", published in *Réforme* on 23rd June 1945, only weeks after VE day – 'that Hitler, despite his army's defeat, must be seen as having achieved a definitive political victory insofar as his conquerors put in place more cunningly veiled forms of mass control', even though in fact Hitler invented nothing, because he was merely continuing the work of figures such as Machiavelli, Richelieu and Bismarck (Warner 2016: 66). The conspiracy theory-like texture thereby introduced into the film recalls Deleuze's remarks towards the end of *Cinema 1* to the effect that one of the signs of the crisis of the action-image in post-war American cinema is the prevalence of a sense of 'a powerful concerted organisation, a great and powerful plot' in which '[o]ccult power is confused with its effects, its supports, its media, its radios, its

televisions, its microphones' (Deleuze 2005: 214).⁵ But here, rather than rupture, it is diachronic historical continuity that is emphasised, of a particularly dark kind.

There is, however, also an emphasis on synchronic discontinuity. When Davidson declares that Ellul foresaw almost everything, his voice is doubled on the soundtrack with a very slight delay, creating a kind of division within unity. Very shortly afterwards another male voice (apparently called Alain – this may perhaps be the young male student, unnamed in the credits, played by Jeremy Zampatti) declares that in 1793, at the height of the Terror, the Convention produced the civil code, the new calendar, the decimal system, the manufacture of steel, government accounting, and the Conservatoire de Musique. Given the extensive reference to what Ellul called "Hitler's Victory", it seems clear that this cannot be read simply as an account of the need for destruction in order for there to be progress; the fact that the list of the Convention's achievements is read over images of a Nazi motorcade followed by a shot of the Tour de France might even satirise the notion of progress, as well as pointing to continuities in different forms of spectacle. But neither is there a sense that the achievements of the French Revolution are irreparably compromised by the Terror; they are compromised, perhaps, but in complex and ambivalent ways. Eschewing any contact with that which is compromised seems, for Godard, to be no solution at all. But where should we put the

⁵ Deleuze seems here to mean 'confused' in a sense closer to Baumgarten than the familiar pejorative meaning. His specific subject is the change across Fritz Lang's *Mabuse* films, and his point not that the effects of 'occult power' are simply mistaken for that power itself but that a genuine change has taken place: Mabuse's power 'no longer passes through a production of secret actions, but rather through a monopoly of reproduction' (Deleuze 2005: 214).

emphasis – on the Terror or on the decimal system, as it were?

The question of emphasis is crucial to the film's strategies of immersion and disorientation and the way that they facilitate multiple interpretations that nevertheless retain a relationship with one another. Digital media are a crucial site both for the exploration and exhibition of such fluidity, as both a prime contemporary example of the techniques that perpetuate "Hitler's victory" (in that they can be argued to facilitate 'cunningly veiled forms of mass control') and also the very medium in which *Adieu au langage* exists. But Godard's sleight of hand is extensive. Ellul was in fact a Christian anarchist, and his article concludes by referring to 'the man Jesus Christ, who alone smashes the fate [les fatalités] of the world, who alone closes the jaws of Moloch, who alone will liberate men tomorrow from the servitude that the world is preparing for us today' (Ellul 1945; my translation).⁶ Does Godard mean to *détourner* Ellul by repurposing his argument about the spread of State power, or does he mean to introduce the possibility of ironically undercutting what appears to be his film's argument? The question of whether this film, and similar films by Godard, actually present arguments is a thorny one. Morgan is of the opinion that they do:

Rather than presenting straightforward propositions or even carefully encoded allegories, Godard works with an array of images, clips, texts, and references, whose density frustrates our ability to read meanings off them. If the contents of Godard's arguments are idiosyncratic, it is in part because we are called on to

⁶ '... l'Homme Jésus-Christ qui seul brise les fatalités du monde, qui seul ferme la gueule du Moloch, qui seul fera demain les hommes libres des servitudes que le monde nous prépare aujourd'hui.'

judge and make sense of them in new ways.

(Morgan 2013: 7-8)

But I wonder whether we should pause a moment. Are they really arguments or do they merely look or feel like arguments, or invite one to treat them as such, an invitation one can also reject or at least treat with suspicion? Why should we assume that they are the film's arguments, let alone Godard's arguments? Morgan does recognise this problem, but he swiftly elides the notion of making an argument with a broader notion of philosophy: 'In a sense, these questions are a version of a more common debate over the extent to which film can be said to do the work of philosophy' (*ibid.*: 25). But the various versions of the claim that "films think" are, to me, more obviously various and able to be understood variously than the specific claim that a film *argues*. Hence what Morgan calls his 'fairly modest proposal' does not quite address the issue: 'We can say that a film (or video) raises questions of philosophy if and when considerations of these questions are necessary to arrive at a good interpretation of the way that film's images, sounds, and texts are put together' (*ibid.*: 26).



figure 6.3: thumbs, phones, and books

It seems in keeping with the way that *Adieu au langage* handles the many binary distinctions it deploys that it is possible to read its "arguments" in mutually contradictory ways. Early on in the film, for example, analogue and digital information

technologies are literally juxtaposed. As Warner writes, '[g]athered around the bookstall, Davidson and the male student trade and fidget with their iPhones as Marie [Marie Ruchat], in the more immediate foreground, picks up and flips through the book in question. The shot thus stages a contrast between two media and the kinds of gestures they cultivate' (Warner 2016: 66). This is very helpful, but it seems to me equally possible to perceive similarity here as it is to recognise difference. We would be more secure, interpretationally speaking, if the internet was simply being castigated for, say, its negative effects on attention span. In fact we see both phones *and* books. People look things up on their phones but still buy books at book sales. As if in answer to Davidson's ironic question about what people did with their thumbs before they used them on their phones, we see people thumbing through books. The full history of the information revolution in which we are currently immersed goes back at least to William Caxton's printing press rather than only to Tim Berners-Lee's world wide web. When boundaries dissolve, this can help us to see continuity as easily as it can erase the possibility of recognising difference.

Another example that it seems possible to read both as endorsed by the film and as attacked by it occurs at the film's beginning. The very first thing we see in the film is the phrase "tous ceux qui manquent d'imagination se réfugient dans la réalité",⁷ in white text on a black background, alternating with a large ADIEU in red capitals. Is reality the ultimate object of representation or merely a bolthole for those lacking creative potential? Or is this the wrong way to think about it? Marie Darrieussecq, from whose

⁷ "those who lack imagination take refuge in reality"

short piece in *Libération* the phrase derives, concludes that what the phrase indicates is that 'to be a writer, a poet, a playwright' (we might add, a filmmaker) is 'to want to create linguistic tools for describing a world perpetually in motion' (Darrieusseq 2014; my translation).⁸ Such a world, surely, is a *fluid* world, one which we do not merely inhabit but are, unavoidably, immersed. Whichever way we read it, however, what are we to make of the fact that it opens the film? Does this necessarily mean that the film is an endorsement of the remark, or might it be considered as an extended attempt to demonstrate its falsity, or at least to attempt to interrogate and challenge it? A different emphasis will have serious consequences for our reading of the film. Emphasis is often, here, a matter of choice, which is literalised by the two much-commented upon shots in which the image "splits", the right-hand camera panning right and then back, while the left remains immobile.⁹ To distinguish between the images we need to choose one of them, to close one eye so that we can see clearly, which also means that we can only see half of what there is to see. Throughout this thesis, I have indicated ways in which different strategic choices in dealing with disorientating phenomena can have incompatible or inconsistent results; *Adieu au langage* dramatizes this with particular starkness.

⁸ 'Alors être écrivain, poète, romancier, dramaturge, ce serait ... désirer créer de nouveaux outils langagiers pour décrire un monde sans cesse en mouvement.'

⁹ I wonder if there is in these shots something of the opening of the famous sequence in *Vampyr* in which Allan Gray's dream self leaves his sleeping body.



figure 6.4: choose your image

One could, of course, accuse Godard of wanting to have his cake and eat it; of putting forward particular arguments but always retaining the possibility of retreating behind the defence that the argument was only presented, rather than actually being argued by the film. But – to stretch the metaphor to breaking point – it all depends on what kind of cake one takes Godard to be baking. Are we correct to see Godard himself as making arguments via his film, or are arguments themselves part of the material with which he works?¹⁰ To put it another way, is the goal to persuade via argument, or is it to offer a range of arguments for assessment? Or perhaps these are not the only options – the texture of an argument may be what Godard is most keen to produce, or the feeling of being subject to an attempt to persuade, to name only two possibilities. This issue has long been pertinent to the interpretation of Godard's films. One might consider the discussion between Nana (Anna Karina) and Brice Parain (playing himself) towards the end of Godard's *Vivre sa vie* (1962). Though it is certainly plausible to see the film as

¹⁰ We might recall here Frederic Jameson's discussion of Godard's *Passion* (1982), in which he refers to 'Godard's themes... only distantly resembling ideas, and serving as the various lights that strike his aesthetic object in rotation, tinting it, highlighting a relief, flooding another side or aspect, and then plunging the collective substance – the totality of the film's relationships – back into the chiaroscuro of a Rembrandt' (Jameson 1992: 176).

endorsing the positions put forward in their discussion about thought, love, and maturity, it is just as important that – contrary to what might be expected from an encounter between a young woman and an aging male philosopher – their discussion neither represents experience educating inexperience nor youthful freshness revitalising jaded age. Instead, as is indicated by the fact that the scene is shot in as close as the film gets to traditional shot/reverse-shot, their exchange represents an encounter between equals, both of whom – for all their differences – seem equally vital and equally thoughtful. Argument can be a component of Godard's cinema in a multitude of ways; making a firm decision as to whether the films themselves agree with their own arguments is only sometimes a necessary or even a helpful thing to do.

Distinction and division

Whatever role argument has in *Adieu au langage*, however, in order to engage with it properly it is necessary to take heed of the distinctions that a given argument puts into play. Distinction, as well as division, are crucial to my understanding of the operation of immersion (and its disruption) in *Adieu au langage*. What distinctions are relevant? What parts can we distinguish in relation to which whole? Distinction is necessary for orientation (if we cannot distinguish one thing from another we have no hope of finding our way), and division is necessary to understand how a film, or anything else, fits together (if we cannot separate parts from wholes we can have no sense of how something is articulated, to use a word that was important in my figuration chapter, and to which I shall return below). But, while closely related, these two concepts are themselves distinct: it is possible for two things to be distinguishable

without their being divided from one another, and it is also possible for two indistinguishable things to be divided (like the two faces of Geoff's coin in *Only Angels Have Wings*). Hence the film's emphasis on pairs, which are themselves frequently paired (the two couples; the twin stereo channels of images and sounds; there is also reference at two points in the film to "two questions"), but also its frequent investigations into continuity (as in the historical examples referred to above, or the images of water, or references to certain mathematical ideas, in particular to the Riemann function, which is centrally concerned with the relationship between continuity and singularity). But how is the film's world related to – distinguished from, or divided from – our own world? Or is there no such division?

Warner notes, rightly, that 'the film's focus on two couples arises in the context of – not as a retreat from – the larger social crises that are raised in the film's opening minutes' (Warner 2016: 66). Youssef Ishaghpour observes that in Godard's early work, 'there is dehiscence and hiatus between character and place... reflecting an awareness that fiction, actors and camera are all deployed in a preexisting world' (Godard and Ishaghpour 2005 [2000]: 130-1). The world is an image and images are part of the world; it is this which, Godard claims, gives cinema the unique property of being able to narrate the world's history by narrating its own history (see *ibid.*: 87-86). We might think that this realization achieved a kind of culmination in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, in comparison to which the relatively more conventional narrative devices present in the intermittent series of films initiated by *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* (1980) could only appear to be a regression, despite the director's pleasure at having, with that film, 'landed in this beautiful country of narrative' (cited in Quandt 2007: 132). And yet there is a very interesting passage in the voiceover to 1999's *The Old Place*, made with Anne-Marie

Miéville immediately after the completion of *Histoire(s)*:

Artistic thought begins with the invention of a possible world, or a fragment of a possible world, which needs to be confronted with the outside world through experience, through work, painting, writing, filming. This never-ending dialogue between imagination and work allows an increasingly acute representation of what is commonly called reality.

(cited in de Baecque 2007: 120)

The claim here appears to be that all artistic creation requires some form of what we might call diegesis, even if only in a fairly abstract sense: "the invention of a possible world" with, presumably, its own internal rules and landscape, whose relationship with "the outside world" it is the artwork's job to explore. Nothing here, of course, says that such a "world" has to be an even quasi-realistic representation of our world, complete with characters, places, events, and so forth. Nevertheless, viewed in this light, conventionally diegetic representations might be better seen as a subcategory of a more general procedure rather than as an alternative strategy,¹¹ let alone an alternative that is fundamentally weaker than the essayistic or argumentative procedures on display in, say, *Histoire(s) du cinema*. This proposal might also be seen to imply that the claim that "those who lack imagination take refuge in reality" misunderstands the relationship between imagination and reality. It is not so much that the phrase is either correct or

¹¹ This conceptual structure should be rather familiar by now; earlier I argued something very similar, for example, about the relationship between metaphor and figuration.

incorrect but rather that, by opposing reality and imagination, it sets out from a mistaken premise.

Does, then, language, or cinema – or even art more generally – consist of a component of the world, or does it create a microcosm of some kind of wider world? According to Rancière, a certain transformation occurred in this regard with the advent of Romanticism:

It is not the case, as is sometimes said, that it [Romanticism] consecrated the 'autotelism' of language, separated from reality. It is the exact opposite. The Romantic Age actually plunged language into the materiality of the traits by which the historical and social world becomes visible to itself, be it in the form of the silent language of things or the coded language of images.

(Rancière 2013: 32)

One might want to call Godard, in this sense, a Romantic filmmaker, or at least an heir to this aspect of Romanticism. But it is also an aspect that he interrogates, and in *Adieu au langage* he does this prominently through the image of the forest. We see a number of woods and forests, with the dog Roxy – a central character, on whom more later – wandering through them, and there are various references to forests. Both Gédéon (Kamel Abdeli) and Marcus (Richard Chevallier) declare that the Apache (Gédéon is more specific and refers to the Chikawa tribe) call the world "the forest". One shot resembles Courbet's painting "L'Origine du monde", linking notions of worlds to

"forest" as slang for pubic hair.¹² There is also reference to the notion that showing a forest is easy, but showing a room with a forest nearby is difficult; these words are spoken over an image showing just that, as if to question the literalness of the statement.¹³ We are not dealing here merely with a question of artistic operation *per se* but of its relation to the widest questions of history and society. How does narration (or fiction) relate to history? Is history a fiction (as Jean Baudrillard at times came close to claiming) or are fictions empirical (as Rancière insists)? Godard's equivocal answer might be "yes and no" to both options. The forest can be used in relation to both these possibilities, because it is ambiguous whether the idea operates more as an image of the world in microcosm (metonymy) or an image of the world as a whole (metaphor).

Narrative, hidden in plain sight

It would, I think, be false to claim that *Adieu au langage* does not present us with narrative, in the sense of microcosm, but it can frequently seem as if the narrative is handled as *material*, in a similar way to the abundance of quotations and citations. Warner, who argues that *Adieu au langage* is a kind of essay film, argues that:

¹² At other moments there are some rather questionable jokes about this, which seem to refer to the fact that, as Zoé Bruneau explains in her book *En attendant Godard*, she shaves her pubic hair and thus had to wear a merkin to film the nude scenes (Bruneau 2014: 30-1). At one point we hear that there is "no more forest", and at another she stands in a doorway and holds a rug in front of her naked body.

¹³ Warner points out that this phrase is a reference to Godard's own *Cahiers du cinéma* review of Alexandre Astruc's 1958 film *Une Vie* (Warner 2016: 64).

From the early 1960s ... [Godard's] uses of the terms "essay" and "essayist" have implied not a formulaic type so much as a reflective disposition that inspires his very approach to working with sights and sounds, an activity of thought that forgoes a rigid choice between two generic options: staging a drama and carrying out a concerted critical inquiry.

(Warner 2016: 62)

Drama and 'concerted critical inquiry' are, then, not mutually exclusive; Godard's dramas can be critical and his criticism can be dramatic. Nevertheless, *Adieu au langage* seems to me clearly to occupy different generic territory from, say, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. This is largely down to the different roles of narrative in the two works. The question is both how *Adieu au langage* is put together, how it is articulated, and what it enunciates, with what degree of clarity: how articulate it is. Godard avoids classical continuity editing yet the film could not make sense without it. The film often eschews the clarificatory resources of classical continuity editing, such as when Roxy "adopts" Josette and Gédéon at a petrol station; a simple cutaway to the dog in the car would have clarified this scene enormously. Yet we do need to use the expectations that classical continuity has created in us to make narrative sense of otherwise disjunctive montage. Take, as a simple example, the shots of Roxy indoors: since we are not explicitly shown that the house is that of the couple(s), we have to remind ourselves to consider that it might be so (even though nothing we see exactly suggests that it isn't).

One particularly surprising aspect of *Adieu au langage* is how straightforward some aspects of the organisation of the film comes to seem, once one has grasped its principle. The moment-to-moment movement remains complex and unpredictable, but

the middleground divisions are in fact very simple. This can be seen in the structural parallels present in the main body of the film, the second appearances of "1: la nature" (which begins at about 15' 40") and "2: la métaphor" (starting circa 34' 35"). These sequences are dominated by conversations by unseen couples overheard while we look out of the windscreen of a car, exchanges in a house between – usually naked – couples, and passages involving Roxy. As has been mentioned, there are two couples in the film: in "1: la nature", Josette and Gédéon, and in "2: la métaphor", Ivitch (Zoé Bruneau) and Marcus. They are deliberately cast to look similar; rather than facilitating orientation, similarity here generates confusion. Clear views of the actors' faces are avoided during the early parts of the sequences under discussion, generating still further confusion. But though they do look similar, they are in fact clearly distinguishable, and on repeat viewing we can see that only one of the couples appears during their respective sections: the diegetic threads never tangle (at least not in this sense). Not only this, but they parallel each other remarkably straightforwardly.

In the "1: la nature" sequence beginning around 15'40", the broad sequence is, in its barest outline, as follows. There is a conversation in a car. The couple (Josette and Gédéon) are naked in the house, and there is a discussion about shit and equality while the man sits on the toilet and defecates. Roxy is on a forest path. The ferry arrives again; we hear, offscreen, an explosion, screeching car brakes, and gunshots; the red-headed Marie can't hear (because of the explosion, presumably), says "he says he's dying: then let him die", and reaches down: her hand comes up red; the Mercedes leaves the square

which is familiar from the initial bookselling scene.¹⁴ There is an extended sequence featuring Roxy. He then adopts the couple at a petrol station by getting in their car and refusing to leave. There is more material of the couple at home in front of the television, including the first HD "well-composed" and balanced shot of the two of them. More dialogue in the car follows. Roxy gets out for a walk. The couple leave Roxy by the lake while they go to watch *Frankenstein*. A helicopter lands, there is an explosion, and Roxy appears to be blown up. The sequence after this, the "2: la métaphor" sequence starting at 34' 36", begins with a reiteration of an image of Ivitch behind the metal fence and the off-screen declaration "Je suis a vos ordre" ("I am at your command" – literally "order") with which the preceding "métaphor" section concluded. There is a conversation in a car, then a brief appearance by Roxy. The couple (Ivitch and Marcus) are then naked in the house, and there is a discussion about shit while the man sits on the toilet and defecates. The ferry arrives again, the passengers disembark. A café. The booksale: there is a shot; we see water made red by blood and a man lolling in it. Then a sequence featuring Roxy (the water speaks to him) and another conversation in the car.

¹⁴ What we see and hear, as well as what we can't see and can't hear, are crucial in this sequence. Albertine Fox interestingly suggests that the language of the obvious and obscure might introduce an unconscious bias towards the visual, one which 'constrains the focus to narrative comprehension in terms of visual coherence, and overlooks the power of the spectator's aural imagination' (Fox 2018: 183). Unfortunately for my purposes she does not explore the role of the 'aural imagination' in making narrative and diegetic inferences or speculations but moves immediately to suggest that we listen to *Adieu au langage* 'as though it were a piece of sonic art or poetry rather than attempting to comprehend it in terms of its adherence to a storyline of visible events' (*ibid.*: 183-4).

The couple then appear at home once again, in front of the television, and there is a second HD "well-composed" shot. They discuss having children but decide on a dog instead. There is a crane shot of a car park near a dock during which we can see the shadow of the crane (perhaps a reference to the opening of *Le Mépris*). Roxy comes into the house wet and whining. We see the couple at home yet again; at one point we hear a dog bark off-screen. There is another shot from the inside of a car, then it's back to the site of the booksale. Next we see a motorway at night; the couple discuss being on time or being first, and there is mention of Riemann ("another German!"). Roxy is seen in the snow, beside a lake at sunrise or sunset, and then his head is seen from above while we hear "One can imagine that Frankenstein was born here". There is, again, a helicopter and an explosion (though a dog is harder to see – perhaps a paw is visible). Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Byron appear; Mary is working on *Frankenstein*. The three sail off in a boat.

Though difficult to follow from a verbal description, just as it is when watching the film, **table one** will help to show how close the parallel sequences are, perhaps making "je suis a vos ordre" into another pun. Events that occur in both sequences follow, almost exactly, the same order. (The second sequence is longer and contains a longish section that is not paralleled in the first sequence.) The parallel narratives are not merely similar stories but similarly *structured* stories: the *sjuzhet*, not just the *fabula*, are similar. It *is* possible to perceive a fairly consistent diegesis, or at least to be clear on what it is that would need to be supplied in order to clarify things. After discovering the surprising simplicity of the structural parallels, another of the film's surprises is quite how cogent the narrative (or narratives) in the film turn out to be, despite their extensive lacunae. Thus, as I claimed at the beginning of this chapter, we

table one

1: la nature (15'38" – 34'35")	2: la métaphor (34'36" – 1 hr 2'07")
	Ivitch behind the fence
car conversation	car conversation
naked in the house – toilet conversation	brief view of Roxy
brief view of Roxy	naked in the house – toilet conversation
ferry arrives – there is violence	ferry arrives – there is violence
extended Roxy sequence	extended Roxy sequence
car again – Roxy adopts the couple	car again
at home with TV – "well-balanced" shot	at home with TV – "well-balanced" shot
	discussion of children – decide on dog instead
	medium-length Roxy sequence
	couple at home
	car again
	the booksale again
	motorway
car – Roxy gets out	
they announce going to see <i>Frankenstein</i>	Roxy – discussion of <i>Frankenstein</i>
helicopter blows up Roxy	helicopter blows up Roxy (?)
	Mary and Percy Shelley with Byron

do need to at least *look* for solutions to certain narrative problems, even if, in the final analysis, it is the search itself rather than its outcome which is of greatest importance.

Which narrative problems, then, raise themselves urgently? Particularly thorny is the issue of the knife. We see a bloody bath in both strands, and a knife in "2: la métaphor". Josette tells Gédéon, "four years ago, you stabbed me; you've forgotten".¹⁵ Are the two couples representations of the same couple? All we would need to do to allow for this possibility is to locate "2: la métaphor" earlier than "1: la nature". In this reading, the woman ("Ivitch" at this point) is threatened by her German husband. A man ("Marcus") offers to help her ("Je suis a vos ordre"). They begin an affair, but they have an argument (we see a fight in a shower) and he stabs her. Four years later (the opening of "1: la nature") the husband appears again, somebody is shot (neither "Marcus" nor "Gédéon"), and the man (now "Gédéon") offers to help her, and they recommence their affair. I have no wish strongly to defend this reading; my point is merely that the film is coherent enough to allow it to be a possibility; an underdetermined possibility, perhaps, but one that rests on more than mere speculation. What is perhaps most surprising about taking the diegesis of *Adieu au langage* seriously is the fact that we can distinguish between fabula and sjuzhet at all, even if we are left with some seemingly unanswerable enigmas. We might say that we can distinguish between fabula and sjuzhet but not divide them.

¹⁵ This is somewhat reminiscent of *INLAND EMPIRE*, but amnesia is not a theme insisted upon in *Adieu au langage* in the way it is in Lynch's film.

Talking dog: the question of Roxy

And what of Roxy? The images of his death by helicopter recall the final images of Chris Marker's account of the New Left in the 1960s and 70s, *Le Fond de l'air est rouge (A Grin Without a Cat)*; 1977, re-edited in 1993), which show wolves being culled from a helicopter, images that are juxtaposed with an international arms fair. The final words of the film's voiceover are "some wolves still survive" ("il y'avait toujours des loups"). These same images are also deployed in chapter 4A of Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. Does Roxy, then, represent a kind of political defiance? It is difficult to tell, but *Adieu au langage* could at the very least be seen as an attempt to explore the internal life of the dog/wolf, rather than using him merely as an allegorical/political cipher, almost as a riposte to what Osip Brik wrote about deer in Vertov's *A Sixth Part of the World*:

Instead of a real deer, we get a deer as a symbolic sign with a vague conventional meaning. But since these deer were filmed without any thought about their possible use as conventional signs, their real nature as deer has resisted this turning them into symbols, and as a result we get neither a deer nor a sign, but a blank space.

(*Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties* (Pordenone: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004), p. 227; quoted in Rancière 2014: 238)

At one point in *Adieu au langage* a voice-over tells us that the water spoke to Roxy, in a passage derived from Clifford D. Simak's 1951 time-travel novel *Time and Again*. The manner in which this is integrated into the film is, I want to argue, an example of a diegetic (rather than merely juxtapositional or collage) procedure. It has a climactic

effect not only rhythmically (based on its location within the film) but also both thematically (Roxy and the water have earlier been juxtaposed but here they communicate), and diegetically. It is also allegorical: the non-human world ("goodbye to language") speaks. The situation could be post-apocalyptic (as in Simak's novel) but it also seems to refer to that which exists in parallel to humanity, but to which we can never access because we have language. To represent this extra-linguistic world by means of and in terms of language is neither an absurdity nor an evasion: it is, rather, to refuse the all-too-easy gesture of claiming that cinema, simply by using means other than language (image and sound), can get *beyond* language.

The final section of the film, in which the couples are not seen, might seem to challenge my argument about the importance of the film's narrative. But does it not in fact emphasise the importance of Roxy as a diegetic centre, and not merely a symbolic centre? In a kind of *détournement* of Burch's ideas about the primacy of diegesis, referred to in chapter four, rather than diegesis coming before narrative, a certain diegesis (i.e. Roxy's) is arrived at on the "other side" of narrative. This might, in retrospect, be seen to be signalled right at the film's outset. The first appearance of the number 1 and the words "la nature" seem to announce the commencement of the first section of the film proper. They are preceded by the image of the animal that, we learn later, is not merely "a dog", but rather Roxy. If we were less certain that we knew how a Godard film was likely to operate, might we take the image of Roxy as the commencement of the diegesis? At 1hr 2'08", another title appears, which moves from "mémoire historique" to "malheur historique". It might be labelled as section 3, were it not that it in fact says "3D". Its texture recalls the opening montage, featuring a sequence focussed on the act of painting, what seem to be knights templar, arrivals at a

train station and a bus stop, and so forth. Roxy is seen relaxing on a sofa and being ordered out of the house ("Roxy, tu sort!"). Roxy is then seen again on a sofa. Marcus and Ivitch, having clearly decided on a dog for now rather than children, discuss him offscreen: "he seems depressed" – "no, not at all, he's dreaming of the Marquesas Islands" – "like in the Jack London novel" – "exactly".¹⁶ (I disagree with Warner here, who seems to think that these voices belong to, or are at least somehow associated with, those of Godard and Melville; see Warner 2016: 75.) Nico Baumbach has argued, with respect to this sequence, that:

Roxy suggests the possibility not of "non-thought" but of another form of thinking uncontaminated by the symbolic or technological order – whether words or the distinction between being nude or clothed. Solitary like her caretakers, she is also a figure for freedom, not in the sense of the romantic masculine rejection of the law that might have attracted the younger Godard, but one that comes from fidelity.

(Baumbach 2014: 41)

One of the characters in Simak's 1952 novel *City* (also cited in *Adieu au langage*) speaks of dogs having '[a] *different* mind than the human mind, but one that works with the human mind' (Simak 1988: 69). Fidelity is, of course, that which dogs most commonly stand for.¹⁷ The passage from *City*, however, might give the symbolic

¹⁶ This appears to be a conflation of *Call of the Wild* (1903) (and/or *White Fang* (1906)) with *The Cruise of the Snark* (1911).

¹⁷ The juxtaposition of themes of fidelity and of relationships with the non-human underlines the

function of canine fidelity in the film a melancholic turn, for there "humanity" is only achieved by the race of dogs after human beings have suffered a final apocalyptic end. The end of Godard's film, like its beginning, juxtaposes beginnings and endings, but now the endings are either fantasies that were never fulfilled, or memories. In the "2: la métaphor" mirror scene Marcus proposes having children to Ivitch. Not yet, she says, and suggests a dog instead. We then see a young boy and girl running across a field. They seem at one and the same time to represent the couple as children ("imagine that you're still a little boy", Ivitch tells Marcus) and the children that they will never have, if it is Ivitch that shoots and Marcus that is shot (she is, after all, told to leave because the police are coming). We should not forget when we see the film's final images of Roxy that we have twice seen him blown up by a helicopter (shades, perhaps, of the way that Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* [1962] ends with images of Ivan, even though we have just learned of his execution by the Nazis).

I find that I disagree with Warner somewhat about Roxy's significance. Or, rather, I feel myself inclined to put the emphasis on one side of the equation whereas he emphasises the other. A voiceover at one point claims, explicitly citing Rilke, that we can only know what is outside through an animal's gaze. Warner argues that 'the film figures Roxy's gaze as an opaque medium that lets us indirectly and partially take "what is outside" into account' (Warner 2016: 73). I think this is more or less right, but elsewhere Warner goes a little too far, such as when he writes that Roxy's powers of love and vision are designated by the film 'as falling beyond our reach – as belonging to

relevance of the film's references to *Frankenstein*.

a realm of sensation to which humans, as verbocentric and egocentric beings, have no direct access' (*ibid.*). The film certainly emphasises that there is a non-linguistic realm and a nonhuman realm, but it is not quite right to say that they fall 'beyond our reach'; we cannot occupy them, but we *can* have some kind of access (just not *direct* access). Roxy's gaze may be "opaque", but it is an "opaque *medium*". This lets us take heed of the irony that it is with human vision that we see through Roxy's eyes, and through language that Rilke speaks of what is "outside".

The way this is conveyed has to do with performance. The humans in the film perform rather stiffly, at times in an almost Bressonian fashion. Roxy, who really does belong to Godard and Miéville, is in a sense not performing at all, and yet, because everything we see of her is mediated and selected, everything about her appearance becomes a performance.¹⁸ But it is not easy to see how we could have reached this sensation without passing via narrative enacted by means of human performances. Thus the narrative in *Adieu au langage* could itself be considered a kind of signpost, a means of orientation towards something not in itself fundamentally about narrative. The discovery of a (relatively) coherent narrative, initially buried, changes our sense of the appropriate attention with which to watch the film, and thus opens the way to consider Roxy diegetically, initially in the standard sense (the dog is a character), and subsequently in an expanded sense that gets to the heart of the film's thematic concerns. If diegesis has to do with a character's world, what is the world of a dog and to what

¹⁸ Performance on film does not, of course, have a simple relation with intention since directors often choose takes because of things that the performers may not have been exactly conscious of.

extent do we have access to it?

Warner has very helpfully tracked down the source of the sounds of dog and baby that conclude the film, a YouTube video entitled "Husky sings with baby". Watching the whole video, there really does appear to be echoing of rhythmic and pitched material between the two, but on the part of the *dog* rather than the baby. Yet the baby will, in the future, enter into language fully, while the dog never will. Ronald Bogue connects this moment to one of the songs we hear after the excerpt from "Husky sings with baby", the popular French folk song "Marlbrough s'en va-t-en guerre" ("Marlbrough Has Left for the War"):

... we are reminded of the two divergent destinies that await baby humans and canines: that of the infant, who will soon sing nursery songs of war with no foreseeable end, and that of the dog, who will live among humans, but will be able to run back and forth through the forest, which is what the Apaches called 'the world'.

(Bogue 2017: 287)

Therefore I am not wholly convinced that *Adieu au langage*, at its conclusion, 'gestures towards a threshold beyond its current reach, toward the dawn of a new perceptiveness, the birth into the world of a language keyed to the potentialities that Roxy incarnates' (Warner 2016: 76-7). "Husky sings with baby" is, after all, a recording of something that really did happen in our world, not a construction of a utopian future. Certainly the film begins with endings so it would make sense to consider it as ending with new beginnings, but the final image is of a return: of Roxy rushing towards the camera, running towards the cameraman, who is in fact Godard himself. We are immersed in

language and in consciousness; certainly the film presents this as a limited, and potentially tragic, situation, but not only this. *Adieu au langage* certainly does not pretend that one can (let alone that the film can) somehow just break out of this condition – nor even, necessarily, that one would want to.¹⁹

To conclude we might recall James Elkins's claim, quoted in my fourth chapter, that '[a]n interpretation of a picture that stresses its "visual language," its linguistic structure, or its semiotic system, is not a reading made from somewhere "within" language and "outside" pictures, but simply an interpretation that lists only some of the qualities of the image' (Elkins 1998: 161). We can still see outside the water when we are immersed into it; distorted vision is still vision. Despite the long-standing conviction that 'for Godard language is pre-eminently the place of lies and the visual pre-eminently the place of truth' (Jameson 1992: 170), this pre-eminence has been the source of problems rather than a source of clarity, hence Godard's fascination with and reliance on language, and the difficulty of his oft-mentioned search for a "just image" that is not "just an image" ("une image juste / juste une image" in *Le Vent d'Est* (1970), recalled in *Notre Musique* (2004)). By immersing us in its complex and frequently disorientating images and sounds, all presented – like its narrative – in doubled forms that diverge almost as often as they cohere, *Adieu au langage* indicates that all acts of judgement have to take place from within some medium, somehow in the midst of things, rather than from without, from a securely distanced vantage point. Our orientation cannot rely

¹⁹ Although one could say that it shows some of the reasons one might think one wants to – to be closer to Roxy, for a start.

on a secure perspective, because our view is always distorted by the medium itself. The indeterminacy that results does not simply undermine coherence or orientation, however; it is also – like language, and indeed like consciousness itself – a condition of possibility for orientation itself. *Adieu au langage* both exploits and allegorises this fact. Throughout the film we may suddenly pass at any moment into utterly different territory; the film's editing shows that a second, or even a microsecond, is 'a thick thing – thick enough to separate two worlds, large enough to hold two worlds' (Simak 1988). But, however obscurely, these worlds are also shown to be articulated, or to hold out the possibility of articulation. This is the case even if this articulation confuses us, or (to put it in the language of my fourth chapter) if we cannot easily parse the ways that the film's articulation is aligned with its signification, which is to say that we cannot easily give an account of its figuration – although recognising what it is that we would have to interrogate in order to do so is simple enough: namely, those subjects, themes, and images I have concentrated on in this chapter (argument, history, narrative, humanity and non-humanity, depth and fluidity).

Adieu au langage might, perhaps, be seen to demonstrate that in getting our bearings we may discover that we were not lost in the way we thought we were. The parallels in the two *sjuzhets* – the stories of the two couples – are not only almost impossible to perceive without deliberate analysis (whereas one might have assumed that structural repetition always assists perceptual clarity), but the very parallels themselves, in asserting similarity, can serve to conceal difference. Local orientation can just as easily obstruct as clarify the passage to a more global orientation. But as well as seeing another instance of the dialectic whereby clarity can also serve to confuse, we might conclude from this that the source of our perplexity did not lie where we thought

it did. Perhaps we were wrong about *where* we were lost. It is less the lack of diegesis in *Adieu au langage* that makes it hard to get our bearings than the very strength and abundance of diegetic cues that nevertheless – as in *INLAND EMPIRE* – resist being composed into a coherent whole, whether during viewing (largely due to the abundance of material we are asked to absorb), or during subsequent analysis and interpretation. We are forced to accept that we are often unable to gain enough distance to see the film *as a whole*; I have argued that this is a consequence of the particular sense of immersion that the film generates in the viewer.

I want to conclude with one final example of undecidable emphasis. Recalling that the film juxtaposes or conflates beginnings and endings, it is certainly also important that "adieu", 'as Godard has stressed, means not only goodbye but is, in certain Swiss cantons, also a welcoming greeting' (Baumbach 2014: 41). Some critics, forgetting or in ignorance of this fact, have been too ready to see the film as primarily some kind of elegy; putatively for language, but maybe also for cinema. Perhaps, however, this film also signifies Godard's *welcoming* of language. Just as much as it gestures towards that which will forever lie beyond the grasp of language, the film indicates its grasp of the fact that language is not merely 'the place of lies'. The mediated access that language gives to what lies beyond it may be mediated – we cannot escape our immersion – but it *is* access, nonetheless.

conclusion

method-free orientation

Experiencing narrative films always involves attempts at orientation, and therefore orientation is always a pertinent concept for film criticism. Although our sense of orientational success may vary among different aspects of a film – we might, say, be clear about character motivations while being confused about the function of the music – we must always be orientated or disorientated to some degree; we can be both but we cannot be neither. Disorientation is in fact a form of orientation; it is not the absence of orientation so much as the experience of orientational difficulty.¹ Absolute disorientation – having no idea *at all* what is going on, or why – is theoretically possible but as difficult to imagine in practice as complete orientation (which would involve knowing everything about a film, being able to answer any and every "what" or "why" question that might be posed about it). When we watch films we endeavour to orientate

¹ This by no means relegates disorientation to a relatively trivial subcategory of orientation; quite the opposite. One could even reverse the formula and say that orientation is the experience of minimal difficulty, and hence a subcategory of disorientation. Poet and scholar J.H. Prynne paraphrases the philosopher Nicolai Hartmann: 'All human action... including physical movement and emotional activities such as expecting, hoping, desiring, valuing and so on, intend outward from the subject. ... It is for Hartmann the resistance that these activities... encounter in the external world that is the chief source of our awareness of the world's independent reality. The world becomes intelligible to us... by virtue of the fact that it resists our activities in various ways,' to which Prynne appends the suggestion that '[d]ifficulty... is the subjective counterpart to resistance: I experience difficulty when I encounter resistance' (Prynne 1961: 27-8).

ourselves, and it can feel that we are doing so in collaboration with the film, by struggling with it, or in spite of it. Successful criticism does not only clarify the film for us, but is also illuminating about these orientational struggles. Criticism is also orientational; one could even say that its fundamental purpose is orientational. It does not (or at least should not) tell us what to think but prepare us to watch (or watch again) with a poise that we did not have before – or perhaps lacking a poise we felt falsely secure in. No criticism, I would argue, aims at disorientation. Even if, say, a piece of writing was intended to demonstrate that a film often taken as straightforward is in fact profoundly bewildering, by showing us why we should find the film disorientating such criticism would be aiming to orientate us appropriately. Good criticism always aims to be appropriate; clarification does not entail removing all difficulties but, rather, being as clear as possible about what difficulties there are. Not finding a disorientating film to be disorientating would be inappropriate and would therefore be, in itself, a form of disorientation; 'better a real obscurity than a false clarity', says Stanley Cavell (Cavell 1979: 232).

Over the course of the discipline's still relatively short history, film studies has proposed a range of orientational strategies. These have included attending to a film's authorship and the intentions behind it (perhaps assisted by information about its production history); to patterns of comprehension based in universal or at least quasi-universal features of human cognition; to the details of the particular means – often conceptualised as quasi-linguistic – by which films signify, or produce meaning; to the ways historical conditions find expression in particular films; to genres and the webs of shared, public expectations they form, and how these webs shape and guide viewers' orientational presuppositions; to the gender or sexual politics represented in a film, or

implied by its means of representation; to ideological phenomena, often expressed in unconscious contradictions between material conditions of production and explicitly stated content or intentions; or to unconscious processes more generally, whether at work in a film's producers or its spectators. All these methods, and others besides, have made great contributions to our understanding of films. But they all have also, at one time or another, been proposed as secure methods of achieving true understanding of films; or, to put it in the language of this thesis, of reliably keeping disorientation to a minimum.

It is my contention that, with regard to the aesthetic judgement of films – which is by no means detached from questions of authorship, cognition, signification, history, ideology, and so forth, but is nevertheless distinct from them – the best orientational method is the absence of method. By this I do not mean that aesthetic criticism should not be methodical but that it should aim to avoid *general* methods, that the critic should be prepared to attend to the individual film and tailor their method to the demands of that film rather than arriving armed with a predetermined way of forcing the film to give up its secrets.² In the introduction to his collection *A House Made of Light*, George Toles states: 'When I go to the movies I eagerly accept the first condition of my presence there: I am the one in the dark' (Toles 2001: 13). His pun emphasises the fact

² Robert Pippin recently made some remarks to this effect after delivering a paper on Hitchcock's *Vertigo*:

'If we take the film as a case study then our conclusions that are derived from it are just confirmational of [our theories]. ... When I read this paper and there are Film Studies people in the audience, they say, "What the hell are you doing? ... What's your theory?" ... I'm just trying to understand the goddamn film!' (see Pippin 2017b)

that a certain amount of disorientation, of not knowing what will happen, or why, is common to our experience of all narrative films, at least at the outset. But not only this; Toles's remark also implicitly suggests that we do not attempt to remedy this situation too eagerly. He goes on to remark that '[a]s a reader of film... it is never the task I set myself to *master* the narrative I am interpreting. It is more a matter of trusting the film to show me things – in its own terms, terms that I do not initially have at my disposal, living as they do within the form of the work itself' (*ibid.*: 18). A good critic, Toles implies, is open to being shown things by the film they are engaged with, and an excessive zeal for orientation risks closing down the possibility that the film might 'show [them] things' that they did not know before.

Confusion and disorientation both make an appearance in Toles's introduction, and both – curiously enough – in connection to Henry James (who, as I noted in chapter three, was the source for one of the segments of *Holy Motors*). Toles quotes the critic R.P. Blackmur's response to *The Wings of the Dove* and notes with interest how reading the book seems to 'unsettle, disorient, and overwhelm' him (*ibid.*: 18). Later he cites James himself, noting that the novelist 'has famously described, in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, the "house of fiction" as a dwelling with countless "possible windows" to accommodate a host of dissimilar artists and their widely divergent points of view on the "human scene"' (*ibid.*: 23). Toles remarks:

It is difficult to ascertain... where we, as readers, are best situated – inside or outside the house? Is the position we seek one of intimate proximity to the characters and artist arranger peering out, or one of detachment, where we stand at some remove from the house proper, and calmly contemplate the composite

arrangement of the figures (characters and artist alike) in their private window compartments? Perhaps the confusion of our placement in the passage is James's most finely conceived effect. Readers are continually in both positions, as well as in others "not quite" specified.

(*ibid.*)

I mentioned in the introduction the two common senses of being lost in a film – either that of being absorbed in it, swept up in the story, or of being alienated, unsure of how to understand what is taking place on the screen. We could say that the first sense of being lost is that of being lost *in* a film, whereas the second is a form of being lost precisely because one *cannot get into* a film, but feels oneself excluded, left outside it. Toles, drawing on James, suggests that we can be disoriented precisely because of being confused about the extent to which we are "inside" or "outside" a novel or film. Of course, our feelings about this are likely to change, often in quite subtle and delicate ways, during the course of watching a film. I also mentioned in my introduction the question of the relationship between where one is and what one knows about where one is. Both orientation and disorientation could be described as functions of the changing nature of this relationship. (For example, as is the case with the window in *Holy Motors* that initially appears to be a porthole, disorientation tends to be all the greater when it follows the sense that it has been successfully kept at bay.)

Precisely because these two relationships – that between being lost in or lost "outside of" a film and that between "where we are" and what we know about where we are – are so delicate, a rigidly predetermined method risks being insensitive to both of them. I am certainly not suggesting that disorientation is an intrinsic good in its own

right but, rather, recommending an acceptance – a qualified or provisional acceptance – of disorientation, because disorientation can be critically productive. This by no means entails never attempting to lessen disorientation but, instead, being aware that doing so inappropriately will lead to distortion. Towards the end of his book, in the context of some remarks about collaborating with Guy Maddin on his film *Careful* (1992), Toles suggests that fairy tales might have some useful lessons to offer:

Quests in narratives typically begin like dreams, in which the quester knows neither the goal nor himself. The Russian folktale "Oom Razoom" explicates this situation nicely by assigning its average hero the rather daunting task of traveling to "I Know Not Where" to bring back "I Know Not What." Often, however – and in movies especially, far too often – there is an impatience to exchange at the earliest possible opportunity this mournful or exhilarating initial disorientation for a kind of false centeredness... The assumption seems to be that clarity is the basic requirement of both the quester's game plan and effective narrative closure. ... What is one to do, however, if one believes that the most credible and intriguing questers are not decisive about goals but are, in effect, sleepwalkers? ... What fairy tales present as their center of gravity is the renewable condition of being lost. Being lost is the price you pay for magic, and the magic can as easily increase your sense of not knowing where (or who) you are as lessen it.

(*ibid.*: 330)

Toles suggests that many films exhibit 'an impatience to exchange at the earliest possible opportunity this mournful or exhilarating initial disorientation for a kind of

false centeredness', and that this is regrettable. Presumably – bearing in mind what Toles says in his introduction – the critic is encouraged not to do likewise. Just as questing characters can be surprisingly unclear about their goals, so the critic should be willing to accept being lost, not just in order to experience its 'magic' ("and yet, there is the magic," says Grace Zabriskie's character in *INLAND EMPIRE*), but also because accepting, even if only provisionally, the confusion of being lost at least *may* ultimately lessen, rather than intensify, disorientation, although there are no guarantees: 'Being lost is the price you pay for magic, and the magic can as easily increase your sense of not knowing where (or who) you are as lessen it'.

In this thesis I have tried to demonstrate that if there is not a "right answer" as how to respond to disorientation, neither are the choices we make in so doing indifferently arbitrary. The various ways that a film guides or applies pressure to our responses – or, indeed, refuses to do so – will shape these choices. The itinerary, enquiry or quest (or Casetti's 'path', to which I referred in the introduction) offers itself as a model, as long as one keeps in mind that the journey – not the destination – is the point. As Toles says, being lost is a 'renewable condition', which implies that one can always get lost again, but also that any given experience of confusion or disorientation may turn out to be only temporary (otherwise the condition would not have to be renewed). Just as the acceptance of disorientation does not entail the celebration of disorientation for its own sake, the absence of a general method for the reduction of disorientation does not entail critical anarchy. I am suggesting that one's critical methodology must be formed anew with each film, not that there must be no methodology. The ways of thinking about metalepsis and figuration that I have defended have methodological implications for the appropriate application of these concepts. I argued, for example,

that examining metalepsis can serve as a tool for critically addressing the intersection of ontological and rhetorical questions (and their mutual dependence on one another), as well as that fully accounting for the way many films disorientate us cannot be achieved without paying attention to both their narrative and figurative dimensions and to the relationships between them. Disorientating films can make the critic grateful for any and every applicable method. But accepting disorientation means not prejudging which methods will be appropriate for a given film, but instead allowing the film to guide the critic. This is another maxim that applies to narrative film in general but that very disorientating films raise with urgency; ignoring it means running a serious risk of critical irrelevance.

These are not, of course, original suggestions. In the context of an exploration of the 'fragile and equivocal middle' on display in Kant's aesthetics between the facts that a) that one cannot persuade another person of something's beauty by argument alone and that b) claims of beauty are not merely reports of subjective experience (which is to say that a claim about beauty is 'not really a claim about an object, but not really a claim about a subject either'), Simon Jarvis has argued that 'it is precisely *method* – wherever that means a procedure invariantly applied to differing objects – which would delete just the equivocality that has here been argued to be constitutive of the field of criticism. Method, that fear of error hardened into an imaginary guarantee against making mistakes, is in this case the error itself' (Jarvis 2002: 5 & 16). Neither is this suggestion original in the context of film studies; Cavell remarks in his book on Hollywood comedies of remarriage that 'the way to overcome theory correctly, philosophically, is to let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it' (Cavell 1981: 10). Nevertheless, I feel that this advice is ignored sufficiently often for it to be worth

restating and defending.

How, then, have I tried to be guided by the films I have discussed? In the case of *INLAND EMPIRE* I was particularly struck by the urgency with which the film evokes not only a sense of painful disorientation but also the desire to understand, as well as by the enormous number of echoes and rhymes (verbal, sonic, and visual) that run through the film. But I was also struck by the way there seems to be *too much* in the film to allow for a consistent and coherent interpretation. My approach attempted to take this excess seriously. It might have been assumed that the attempt to reach understanding in the presence of such an overabundance of clues would have lead in one of two directions: either a consistent interpretation would have turned out to be possible, albeit difficult, or the film would have been revealed as a collection of so many "temptations to interpretive confidence" (to echo the passage from Peter Bellis I quoted in this chapter), whose purpose is ultimately to mock our desire to believe that consistency is possible. In *INLAND EMPIRE*, however, the first of these options at least appears to be simply impossible, while the second requires us to do violence to certain affective dimensions of the film (the joyousness of the conclusion simply does not fit with a reading of the film as fundamentally cynical and sarcastic). Thus I was led to consider the possibility that the film might cohere in *multiple* ways, each requiring the omission of different elements; coherence is possible, but at the price of exhaustiveness. In this way it seemed to me possible not only to take seriously the film's patterns and echoes as productive of coherence (rather than as merely its fraudulent semblance) but also to acknowledge and to some extent account for its contradictions and lacunae. I suggested, ultimately, that the film might be read reflexively (or allegorically) to indicate that what is true of it is also true of human beings: that fully consistent selves based on a logic

free from all traces of paradox come about only as the result of so many acts of concealment and deception.

Holy Motors also engages with questions of selfhood and consistency, through an explicit theme of acting and performance. But the way the film presents a sequence of roles engaged in by M. Oscar suggested to me that it might be appropriate to consider in some detail the way that the viewer is led, linearly, through the film. (This idea was also prompted by the fact that such an approach has to date been largely ignored in critical work on *Holy Motors*.) Taking this approach required me to suspend any preconception that the film is, as it might initially appear, merely a series of vignettes whose sequence has, at most, a rhythmic or textural rationale. This led to the discovery not that such a preconception is simply inappropriate, but, on the contrary, that the film's disorientational strategies take deliberate advantage of it. The viewer is led to discount questions of connection and coherence between the vignettes, with the result that when such connections do begin to appear, rather than feeling like the basis for a consistent reading, they are instead profoundly disorientating; as Peter Bradshaw writes, '[t]he audience is forever being encouraged to forget about narrative sense and slip into a warm bath of unreason, but persistently jolted back out of it' (Bradshaw 2012).³ *Holy Motors* indicates that there can be no simple division of filmic devices into those which

³ Searching for the appropriate method with which to approach any given film does not mean attempting to be free of all preconceptions, but rather attempting to become aware of one's preconceptions and the effects they have on one's critical responses. To be persuaded by a film that a certain preconception should be discarded is very different from never having had it in the first place.

orientate and those which disorientate, abstracted from their function in particular films. In clarifying why this is so it proved useful to distinguish quite precisely between concepts often taken to be more or less synonymous: coherence (which refers to a global function, the quality that is exhibited by a unified whole), cohesion (the connections between parts), and consistency (the similarities or differences between those parts). *Holy Motors* both disorientates and absorbs its viewer, which suggested to me that the rules of a film's diegetic world – or the apparent absence thereof – may be impossible to account for without paying attention to the ways a film draws the viewer in, how it both invites and frustrates belief. I concluded, ultimately, that the various allegories, reflexivities and contradictions of *Holy Motors* challenge and deepen the viewer's understanding of coherence, cohesion, consistency, the relationships between these concepts, and their consequences for the viewer, as well as reminding us of the importance of the temporal dimension, that making judgements about the coherence of a film involves assessing a process at least as much as an object.

If an abundance, even an overload, of material characterises both *INLAND EMPIRE* and *Holy Motors* (as well as *Adieu au langage*) then *Colossal Youth* appears most obviously distinguished from these films by its slowness and minimalism. It seems to have an "underload" of material. But it does, nevertheless, both represent diegetically and consist formally of complicated and confusing relationships. Its narrative, tonal, and symbolic dimensions at times reinforce one another but at other times seem to be in tension. Pedro Costa's film seems at times to recommend a particular reading strategy only to reveal its inadequacies. For example, the film's slowness could be seen to invite a reading of its scenes as quasi-documentary representations of a certain kind of behaviour (watching TV while looking after a child in a rather desultory fashion, for

example) more than as specific links in a narrative chain. But, not infrequently, a subsequent scene will indicate that there was rather more specific narrative information supplied earlier than we had realised, with the result that, despite its glacial pace, we sometimes find ourselves feeling outpaced by the film, that we have been somehow left behind and must struggle to catch up. Despite lacking the kind of jarring or startling disjunctions of the other films I examined in detail, *Colossal Youth* proves able, in a number of ways, *simultaneously* to orientate and disorientate the viewer. In articulating these and related effects I found it useful to explore a range of senses of what the "figure" might be – person, metaphor, or a more abstract pattern – in order to explore the ways that these senses, representative of different strategies of reading the film, both do and do not comfortably combine with one another.

If *Holy Motors* shows that connections can in themselves be disorientating, *Adieu au langage* indicates that simple patterns not only do not necessarily assist in orientation, but are not even necessarily perceptible. In analysing the film I discovered that the two similar narratives presented in succession in the middle of the film parallel each other very exactly, offering equivalent scenes in almost exactly the same order. This parallel was almost completely inaccessible to me while watching the film, whose density is such that a rather vague sense of events that echo or rhyme with each other was all that I could initially glean from it. This indicated that the presence of pattern is not, in itself, productive of spectatorial orientation; it depends on how the pattern is managed and manipulated – on a film's rhetoric. Orientation with respect to Godard's film is challenging both because of how it immerses the viewer (how it draws the viewer in, "immersion" here being similar to being "lost" in a film in the sense of being caught up in it) but also because of the way its "essay film" texture makes the viewer

conscious of connections to the world beyond the film. *Adieu au langage* does not attempt to create the impression of a fully self-contained diegesis, but reminds the viewer that the film is part of the wider world in which it and the viewer are immersed. The neatness of the parallel stories did, however, indicate to me that diegesis has a greater role to play in this film than critics have tended to allow for. Reading the film for its diegesis I concluded that it is the very strength and abundance of diegetic cues that – as in *INLAND EMPIRE* – resist being composed into a coherent whole that causes us problems in getting our bearings. Ultimately, I argued that the particular sense of immersion that the film generates in the viewer forces us to accept that that we are often unable to gain enough distance to see the film *as a whole*, but also that it does not suggest some kind of radical doubt or permanently suspended judgement. The film certainly insists that not everything is language, but it also offers the possibility that the access language gives to what lies beyond it, although mediated and distorted (because we cannot escape our immersion either in language or in the world) is nevertheless a real, not illusory, form of access.

In saying that the critic should construct their method anew for each film, I do not of course mean that they should construct it from scratch. It is my hope that the discoveries I have made in this thesis with regard to these four films and what they tell us about disorientation and confusion – as these concepts pertain both to films and to the ways we might think and write about them – will be of use in thinking about other films. Examples that have recurred in different chapters include the idea that a film that resists being encompassed by a single global interpretation is not necessarily irremediably incoherent, and the notion that orientation and disorientation are always functional and contextual and that, therefore, no specific devices can be securely

claimed always to be productive of one or the other. But if these ideas do prove useful in other contexts it will still be as *components* of methodologies appropriate to the films in question, rather than as methods to be exported wholesale. Of course, many films are very similar to each other, and in those cases the critic's methodology will need less tweaking. It might even be that the extent to which critical methodology needs to be rethought can provide an evaluative criterion for films; the most powerful and interesting films will be those least amenable to investigation with a standard toolkit.

That is the conclusion I have reached in this thesis. I want, however, to offer just a few final remarks about beginnings and endings, and to connect them to Toles's ideas about quests and goals, by returning to the film with which I also concluded my introduction. Toles notes that to be on a quest does not, rather surprisingly, require that one be clear about one's goal. *The Searchers* is very clearly a quest narrative, but its motivating factors are in many ways profoundly opaque. David Bordwell is not wrong to claim that 'goal-oriented characters' are crucial to many narratives, nor that comprehension of their goals is in itself a primary goal of the spectator: 'narrative comprehension and recall are centrally guided by the goal of creating a meaningful story out of the material presented' (Bordwell 1985: 157 & 34). We would be wrong, however, to conclude that the more explicitly the characters' goals are presented, the less confused either their situation, or ours as spectators, must necessarily be. In saying this we have returned full circle to where we began in the introduction, with the notion that being lost can admit of degrees but that it does not exhibit a simple structure whereby the closer one gets to one's goal, the less lost one is. The critic may think themselves about to unlock the secrets of a film only for a new observation to throw their interpretation into crisis. At the end of John Ford's film, Ethan Edwards brings

Debbie home after her long captivity with the Comanche. Of course, this was not his goal. Ethan's goal was to find her, yes, but then to kill her; for Ethan, to have been a Comanche's wife is worse than being dead.⁴ But, of course, Ethan does not kill her. A number of critics have written about the way that *The Searchers* shows how our goals are not transparent to ourselves; George M. Wilson, for example, discusses the way that certain events of the film eventually reveal to Ethan 'what his search and his hatred have been about' (Wilson 1986: 48).⁵



7.1 *Confusion rectified?*

But where does that leave us, the viewers, at the end of the film? At the very beginning – as the camera follows Martha out of the house to see Ethan arriving in the distance – we don't know what she knows but we do, for a moment, fully share her point of view. Confusion appears straight away, however, linked both to the passage of time (Ethan lifts up little Debbie, mistaking her for her elder sister Lucy) and to the policing of racial boundaries (Ethan says to Martin that a 'fellow could mistake you for a half-

⁴ And not only Ethan: for Laurie, too, as we learn in her extraordinary outburst at Martin – whose goal *is* to bring Debbie back alive – in which Laurie even claims that Martha, Debbie's mother, would have thought it better for her to be killed than rescued.

⁵ Pippin discusses a number of film noirs in these terms in Pippin 2012.

breed', to which Martin replies that no, he's one eighth Cherokee, the irony being that this means that, for Ethan, it would be no mistake at all to take him for a 'half-breed'). These two confusions are recalled when Ethan finally catches up with Debbie and, famously, once again lifts her up in the air; this time he *does* recognise her, and he does not mistake her for a half-breed either. Clarity seems to have been achieved. Ethan has either abandoned his original goal or perhaps, as mentioned above, has discovered that he was mistaken as to what his goal actually was. This resolution of confusion turns out to require a spatial division. Ethan's position with regard to the family has been ambiguous throughout the film (because of his love for Martha and the intensity of his racial hatred), but it has now become clear: he has become an excess preventing the whole from being whole and there is nothing for him to do but ride off into the distance.

Both Ethan and the others know their place (as Lieutenant Greenhill tells the Reverend Captain upon being told to tell his father 'where he's at': 'But he knows that, sir!'), even though what they know most importantly about these places is that they can no longer coincide. We the viewers, however, do *not* know where we're at, but remain awkwardly suspended, at least partially sympathetic to two parties who can never be properly brought together. Douglas Pye connects the difficult question of viewer sympathy to the film's more general treatment of race, and suggests that we are "suspended" throughout: '*The Searchers* allows no comfortable identification with or disengagement from its hero (who is both monstrous *and* John Wayne) or easy detachment from other expressions by White characters of racial fear or hatred' (Pye 1996: 229). At the film's conclusion we are neither comfortably aligned with the family (of whom we see nothing once they cross the threshold) nor with Ethan, and the film's figuration, in trapping us on the threshold, expresses this; we feel Ethan's expulsion

without also feeling ourselves part of the community that he has been expelled from. As the door closes on Ethan's retreating figure it does not enclose the viewer in the warmth of the family home but leaves only darkness. We leave the film as we entered it: disorientated. This is entirely appropriate given the complexity of what we have witnessed and must prepare to digest. In this and in many other instances, disorientation and confusion are not defects to be remedied, but important components of both *how* and *what* films mean.



7.2 *Ethan is shut out but the viewer is not shut in.*

appendix: Colossal Youth scene breakdown

1. *An unpeopled courtyard in Fontainhas, Lisbon, by night. Furniture is being thrown from a first floor window. (furniture [1]; falling [1]) A "portrait" of Clothilde, wielding a knife. (knives [1]) Clothilde describes swimming, untroubled by sharks and how she watches, from the sea, her son crying on the beach, while other people watch her from the shore. She withdraws. (departure [1])*
2. *Ventura arrives at his daughter Bete's door. She tells him he has the wrong door and the wrong daughter but he denies this. "Your mother has left me," Ventura says, "I've been having this nightmare for more than thirty years." (departure [2]; dream [1])*
3. *Scene: waiting for Gustavo [1]. Ventura picks up his son (Gustavo) from a construction site we only hear but do not see. (work [1]; waiting [1])*
4. *Ventura and Gustavo eat together. "Not hungry?", Gustavo asks. "No," says Ventura. (appetite [1]) Ventura tells Gustavo that Clothilde has gone. "She stabbed me with a knife. ... She had Clothilde's face, but it wasn't her. ... I don't know if it was her or another woman I slept with." (departure [3]; knives [2]; dream [2]; confusion of identity [1])*
5. *Outside the new apartments [1]. Ventura calls to Vanda, who appears, but only as a voice.*
6. *In Vanda's room [1]. Ventura and Vanda watch TV. Medium close framing, more darkness than light. Vanda wants, among other things – including the unemployment benefit she isn't getting – her daughter to be with her, but she isn't. (work [2]) Vanda's mother is dead (hence she is not Clothilde, we assume). (doing nothing [1] [importantly distinct from "waiting"])*
7. *The shack [1]. Lento and Ventura play cards. Lento asks for a letter to send his wife and Ventura instantly begins reciting one. (the letter [1]) Ventura asks Lento to write it down, but "there are no pens in the shack".*
8. *Outside Bete's house [1]. Ventura waits outside what we will only later will we discover is Bete's house. He says "I brought chicken," but is not let in. Eventually he leaves. (waiting [2])*
9. *Outside the new apartments [2]. Ventura meets André Semedo, housing officer and former locksmith. (locks [1]) They exchange details of their origins in Cape Verde. (departure [3]) Semedo points to the flat he will show Ventura: "It's full of light."*
10. *Apartment number one. Semedo: "Temple, shack, household god." Semedo wipes the wall where Ventura has touched it. (wiping [1]) The apartment is unfurnished. (furniture [2]) Ventura descends the stairs.*
11. *In Vanda's room [2]. Wider framing than before and the room now lit by a bright window covered with material. Vanda tells the story of how she gave birth. (hospitals [1]) "I'm not fucking sick!" she told the medical staff. (health [1]) She demanded food, was told she shouldn't eat, but also felt nauseous. (appetite [2]) She threatened suicide. Ventura, about children: "Raising them is hard work, but it's worth it." Ventura calls Vanda Zita by mistake, quickly correcting himself. (work [3]; confusion of identity [2]) Ventura stands in the hallway of Vanda's apartment. (waiting [3])*

12. **Waiting for Gustavo** [2]. Ventura seems to look directly at the camera, but his eyes are deeply shadowed so it is hard to be sure. Construction noises off-screen and this time an argument as well. (**waiting** [4]; **work** [4]) A cat crosses the frame.
13. Ventura and Gustavo eat together again. Gustavo is working even though it is a holiday. (**work** [5]) Ventura asks after Gustavo's wife and daughter.
14. **The shack** [2]. Ventura recites the letter again. (**the letter** [2]) Still life of a bright blank window, darkness inside the room, and richly hued glass bottles.
15. **The Gulbenkian** (inside). First we see only a painting. Then a different shot also shows Ventura. A guard whispers to him, Ventura moves off, and the guard wipes the floor where he was. (**wiping** [2]) Portraits of both Ventura (who moves his head to look to his left, screen right) and, less tightly framed, the guard (who moves his head to look to his right, screen left). The guard escorts Ventura out, unlocking a door like a jailer. (**locks** [2]) They ascend a staircase and birdsong can be heard.
16. **The Gulbenkian** (garden). Travelling shot moves from the tree canopy to Ventura who sits down on a bench. Ventura tells the story of how he came to Portugal from Cape Verde (19th August 1972), sitting next to a man on the plane who didn't eat. (**departure** [4]; **appetite** [3]) He worked building the Gulbenkian. The museum attendant speaks about how his life working here is easier than it was in Cape Verde, although it causes trouble when someone like Ventura turns up. (**work** [6]) Ventura was injured in a fall here. (**falling** [2])
17. Scene: **the shack** [3]. Ventura is bandaged. He isn't hungry. (**appetite** [4]) He plays cards with Lento and keeps reciting the letter. (**the letter** [3]) Ventura is now hungry. (**appetite** [5]) Lento now has two pens, but no paper: he scribbles on a desk. Ventura brings in a bottle and then a record player. They listen to the Os Tubarões song "Labranta braço". Lento's scribbling makes the record player stick, so Ventura eventually stops him by gently putting his hand on top of Lento's.
18. **In Vanda's room** [3]. Very similar framing to 11. Vanda's very young daughter, Beatriz, is now present. Vanda's cough (familiar from No Quarto da Vanda) has returned. (**health** [2]) Vanda: "Mama just wants to raise you. Then I can die." (**departure** [5]) Ventura talks to Vanda about going to visit Bete. The two daughters appear not to know each other, but share things such as a love of shrimp. "Dance, baby, dance!"
19. **Outside Bete's house** [2]. Jagged shadows. Ventura sings and is let in. Bete: "You know you have a dead son?" She has heard people talk about Nhurro, "but I doubt my brother is alive." Ventura and Bete sit in silence; outside are the sounds of the evacuation and demolition of Fontainhas: moving furniture, tools. (**waiting** [6]; **furniture** [3]) Sneezing. Ventura stands outside the house.
20. **Nhurro's furniture shop**. (**furniture** [4]) Ventura asks, "Are you clean, Nhurro?" "I'm not the same Nhurro you left in that hole, in that shanty town." (**confusion of identity** [3]) Nhurro recites a "letter" to his mother, who says "I'm expecting you." (**waiting** [7]) She is awaiting relocation from Fontainhas; his father has returned to Cape Verde to die. (**departure** [6]) Nhurro's father can't read. How can Nhurro's father have returned to Cape Verde if he is Ventura's son? (**confusion of identity** [4])

21. **The shack** [4]. Ventura murmurs the letter to himself. (**the letter** [4]) Sound of gas. Another still life with bottles. Ventura's footsteps. Liquid in one of the bottles vibrates. (**waiting** [8])
22. Scene: **apartment number two**. We begin in the ground floor entranceway. André Semedo (a former locksmith) tells Ventura: "We seem to be having trouble with the keys. How did you get in?" Ventura says the door was open. (**locks** [3]) This apartment looks identical to the last one, again unfurnished. (**furniture** [4]) Ventura points to the ceiling just as Semedo had pointed to the apartment in 9 and says "It's full of spiders." Semedo: "How many children do you have?" Ventura: "I don't know yet." (**confusion of identity** [5]) Ventura has some trouble with the intercom, thinking it to be a doorbell. Ventura repeatedly opens a door that closes by itself. Framed so the vertical of the corner of the room is not true, so the door appears to be falling due to gravity. (**falling** [3])
23. Ventura sits surrounded by debris, stuffing papers into his pockets. He blows his nose.
24. **At Vanda and Gustavo's dining table** [1]. Vanda and Ventura. Vanda wants to take Beatriz to Fátima on pilgrimage. Ventura says he will come too and pay for the trip. (**departure** [7]) Vanda: "The cripple wants to come too." Gustavo arrives. Vanda: "I've had enough of these couches." She found a table but didn't bring it home, and when she returned it had gone. (**furniture** [5]; **departure** [8]) Vanda talks of white shapes that "look like ghosts. My daughter sees them too." Ventura tells again the story of how Clothilde ("or a woman just like her") destroyed his furniture and stabbed him. (**furniture** [6]; **knives** [3]) Vanda offers Ventura some fruit but he says he's full. She leaves and he accepts an apple. (**appetite** [6]) Ventura asks Gustavo "You're married to Vanda?" (**confusion of identity** [6]) Pattern of 2 -3 – different 2: Ventura/Vanda; Ventura/Vanda/Gustavo; Ventura/Gustavo.
25. **The shack** [5]. Strong wind outside. Lento enters and Ventura continues reciting the letter. (**the letter** [5])
26. **Apartment number two** [2]. Very dark image: all we can make out is a hand and a rectangle of light from a window. There is silence. Sound of a doorbell tells us we are in the new apartment. Ventura is lying on the floor, and gets up to answer the door. (**furniture** [7]) (Can the preceding scene now be reinterpreted as a dream?) Paulo ("the cripple") has come calling, by coincidence. Paulo knocks on doors to beg, succeeding by being concerned about the health of the occupants. (**health** [3]) But his friend has tried to scam money by pretending that Paulo has died and needs funeral expenses, etc. So is Paulo, not Nhurro, the brother presumed to be dead that Bete spoke of? (**confusion of identity** [6]) Ventura: "Your mother left me, Paulo." (**departure** [9]) Paulo now sells toys outside schools.
27. **The shack** [6]. One brief shot.
28. **In the park**. Ventura buys food from a street vendor. Sits on a bench with Lento.
29. **The shack** [7]. A window is being boarded up. (**work** [7]) Lento and Ventura seen from outside the shack, framed in a window. Lento tells the story of the carnation revolution, which is happening, diegetically, at the same time as this narration, although from the perspective of the majority of the film this scene takes place in the past. Ventura: "I went to confession. The priest asked me if I ever ate human flesh." (**appetite** [7]) Ventura tries to get Lento to work on learning

- the letter, but Lento insists that it's futile because no letters will now reach Cape Verde. (**the letter** [6]) Lento is holding a machete. (**knives** [4]) He boards up the window we are looking through.
30. **Outside Bete's house** [3]. Sawing and barking of dogs can be heard. Ventura and another man (Xana). Xana: "Another one departing... Zita, Lina's daughter. The usual poison." (**departure**: [10]) Ventura: "It wasn't poison she took. It was all the poison taken for her before she came into the world." Bete emerges and Xana leaves. 2-3-2: Ventura/Xana; Ventura/Xana/Bete; Ventura/Bete. Ventura and Bete go inside and look at patterns on the wall. They both see different things. Bete asks Ventura, "did you see him?" Ventura only replies "I was in real pain. I just heard someone crying in the street." In Portuguese, "the street" ("na rua") is a near-homophone for Nhurro. Bete: "When they give us those white rooms, we'll stop seeing these things."
 31. Ventura in a passageway between steep buildings like a canyon.
 32. Outside a door we haven't seen before (**outside Vanda's apartment** [1]). Distant muffled music from a stereo. Then **at Vanda and Gustavo's dining table** [2]. The muffled music can still be heard. Waiting – Vanda is crying. (**doing nothing** [4]) They are mourning Zita. Vanda: "Papa, Zita was your daughter, but she was my sister first."
 33. **The shack** [8]. Close-up of a gas lamp and a machete. (**knives** [5]) A "portrait" of Ventura, still with bandaged head, in a blue and black striped top. He recites the letter. (**the letter** [7]) Lento: "That's an awful letter, Ventura."
 34. **The hospital**. (**hospitals** [2]) Ventura comes to visit Paulo in his hospital bed. Paulo's wife is also present but does not speak. Paulo: "I had too much anaesthesia." He wants to work: "Goldsmith would be perfect. That's the trade I learnt as a kid... I even did wedding rings." Paulo wants Ventura to come with him to see his mother. The last time he went, with Nhurro (Ventura: "My Nhurro?"; Paulo: "Yes") was a disaster. Paulo's mother is called Lurdes, but in 26 Ventura told Paulo that "your mother left me", so we had assumed she was Clothilde. (**confusion of identity** [7])
 35. Ventura at the bottom of a flight of stairs rising to screen left. We hear Vanda, Beatriz and Gustavo. They pass him, but only Gustavo pays him any attention, putting his hand on his shoulder.
 36. **The shack** [9]. Ventura: "The shack floor is shaking." (Remember the liquid in 21.) Lento brings in a radiator. Lento: "I can't write and you won't write." Lento tries to connect the electricity but falls from the pylon. (**falling** [4]) Ventura's bare feet. The bandage falls on them.
 37. **In Vanda's room** [4]. Vanda talks about the graves of her mother and Zita. "Papa, your socks don't match."
 38. **Outside Bete's house** [4]. Bete and Ventura at the dining room table. Ventura: "I brought your mother grilled chicken at the hospital the day you were born." (Remember the chicken in 8.) Ventura met Bete's mother on Independence Day. He sings "Labranta braço" from 17. (Political history is now folded into personal history.)
 39. An alleyway.
 40. Ventura goes up the stairs he descended in 10.

41. *Lento opens a fire-blackened door and lets Ventura in. The whole apartment has been incinerated. They hold hands. Ventura: "They say you jumped from a window with your wife and children." (falling [5]) (Time converges: Lento's burnt flat is in one of the new apartment blocks – he says he and Ventura will be neighbours – but it can't be as they weren't built back then.) Lento: "I threw a match on the mattress because of our problems." Lento asks if Ventura can see Clothilde. Ventura: "Stop it, there's no-one there." Lento finally recites the letter. (the letter [8])*
42. *An outdoor shot panning right. Reflections of light from a river on trees. A road and low-rise buildings beyond. Birdsong. A bridge to the right. Ventura and Lento row past in a boat.*
43. *Outside Vanda's apartment [2]. Ventura knocks on the door. Vanda comes out and Ventura goes in to look after Beatriz. Vanda listens at the other door, to screen left, then lets herself in. (locks [4]) Ventura stands in Vanda's hallway as he did in 11. (waiting [9])*
44. *In Vanda's room [5]. The TV is on quietly. Children can be heard playing outside. Ventura lies on his back on the bed. (waiting [10]) Beatriz plays on the floor by the bed, perfectly framed in the bottom right corner of the screen. The series 2-3-2 (Ventura/Vanda; Ventura/Vanda/Beatriz; Ventura/Beatriz) has finally been completed. Cut to black. Sound continues: Beatriz chatters contentedly. Fade to music.*

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Boy Meets Girl (Leos Carax, 1984)

Caché (Michael Haneke, 2005)

Careful (Guy Maddin, 1992)

Casa de Lava (Pedro Costa, 1995)

Ceddo (Ousmane Sembène, 1977)

Céline et Julie vont en bateau (Jacques Rivette, 1974)

Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941)

Cloud Atlas (Tom Tywker, Lana Wachowski, and Lilly Wachowski, 2012)

Colossal Youth (Juventude em Marcha) (Pedro Costa, 2006)

Daffy Duck & Egghead (Tex Avery, 1937)

Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene, 1920)

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Der Andere (Max Mack, 1913)

Der Golem (Paul Wegener and Henrik Galeen, 1915)

Der Student von Prag (Paul Wegener and Stellen Rye, 1913)

Dr. Strangelove (Stanley Kubrick, 1964)

Earth (Alexander Dovzhenko, 1930)

Elephant (Gus Van Sant, 2003)

eXistenZ (David Cronenberg, 1999)

Eyes Wide Shut (Stanley Kubrick, 1999)

Forbidden Planet (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956)

Funny Games (Michael Haneke, 1997)

Godzilla (Ishirō Honda, 1954)

Goodbye to Language (Adieu au langage) (Jean-Luc Godard, 2014)

Habla con ella (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002)

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It's a Wonderful Life (Frank Capra, 1946)

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I Walked with a Zombie (Jacques Tourneur, 1943)

J'accuse (Abel Gance, 1919)

J'accuse (Abel Gance, 1938)

Killer's Kiss (Stanley Kubrick, 1955)

Kind Hearts and Coronets (Robert Hamer, 1949)

L'Année dernière à Marienbad (Alain Resnais, 1961)

La nuit américaine (François Truffaut, 1973)

Le Fond de l'air est rouge (A Grin Without a Cat) (Chris Marker, 1977/1993)

Le Mépris (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963)

Les Amants du Pont-Neuf (Leos Carax, 1991)

Les Yeux sans visage (Georges Franju, 1960)

Le Vent d'est (Jean-Luc Godard, 1970)

L'Étoile de mer (Man Ray, 1928)

Lost Highway (David Lynch, 1997)

Mabel's Dramatic Career (Mack Sennett, 1913)

Magnolia (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999)

Marnie (Alfred Hitchcock, 1964)

Mauvais sang (Leos Carax, 1986)

Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000)

Meshes of the Afternoon (Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid, 1943)

Modern Times (Charlie Chaplin, 1936)

Mirror (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1975)

Mulholland Dr. (David Lynch, 2001)

My Darling Clementine (John Ford, 1946)

Notre Musique (Jean-Luc Godard, 2004)

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O nosso homem (Pedro Costa, 2010)

O Sangue (Pedro Costa, 1989)

Ossos (Pedro Costa, 1997)

Passion (Brian de Palma, 2012)

Persona (Ingmar Bergman, 1960)

Run Lola Run (Tom Tywker, 1998)

Sauve qui peut (la vie) (Jean-Luc Godard, 1980)

Sherlock Jr. (Buster Keaton, 1924)

Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979)

Synechdoche, New York (Charlie Kaufman, 2008)

Tarrafal (Pedro Costa, 2007)

That Obscure Object of Desire (Luis Buñuel, 1977)

The Big Sleep (Howard Hawks, 1946)

The Crowd (King Vidor, 1928)

The Double (Richard Ayoade, 2013)

The Forbidden Room (Guy Maddin, 2015)

The French Lieutenant's Woman (Karel Reisz, 1980)

The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp (Powell and Pressburger, 1943)

The Old Place (Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, 1999)

The Passenger (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1975)

The Purple Rose of Cairo (Woody Allen, 1985)

The Rabbit Hunters (Pedro Costa, 2007)

The Saragossa Manuscript (Wojciech Has, 1965)

The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980)

The Searchers (John Ford, 1956)

The Wizard of Oz (Victor Fleming and others, 1939)

They Live By Night (Nicholas Ray, 1948)

Tokyo! (Leos Carax, Bong Joon-ho and Michel Gondry, 2008)

Twin Peaks: The Return (David Lynch and Mark Frost; television programme, 2017)

Une Vie (Alexandre Astruc, 1958)

Vampyr (Carl Th. Dreyer, 1932)

Vertigo (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)

Viva Zapata! (Elia Kazan, 1952)

Videodrome (David Cronenberg, 1983)

Vivre sa vie (Jean-Luc Godard, 1962)

Way Down East (D.W. Griffith, 1920)