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FIGURES OF CONSPIRACY: FINANCE CAPITAL AND THE AESTHETICS OF  
SPECULATION

by

JOHN W. ROBERTS

Under the Direction of Angelo Restivo, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation intervenes to theorize the implications of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century economic financialization for media studies and visual culture by considering the ways in which both the contemporary economy and contemporary culture share a central emphasis on speculation, a term which ambivalently refers both to the capacity to see, as well as the capacity to hypothesize and imagine. The central issue at stake is the question of how imaginary, speculative, and representational values in the economy can have real effects not only on stock prices but also on the material conditions of lived experience of individuals, as in the emblematic case of the 2008 global financial crisis. To answer this question, the dissertation develops a theory of the figural, drawing on the writings of Erich Auerbach, Gilles Deleuze, Walter Benjamin, and others, in order to explain how abstract processes of speculation can come to have

concrete, material consequences. At stake is the notion that social reality and aesthetics are intimately imbricated through figural relations. Consequently, it is to mediated aesthetic renderings of the process of speculation that the dissertation looks to locate and comprehend these economic and cultural transformations. I focus on objects that deal centrally with conspiracy and investigation, which I argue following Fredric Jameson is the dominant representational locus of the cultural imagination of global finance. Body chapters contain close formal analyses of the amateur conspiracy chart style known as “Chart Brut,” the medical mystery television series *House M.D.*, the found-footage horror film *Sinister*, and the videos news thriller *Nightcrawler*. A conclusion considers how the film *Arrival* constellates the formal and thematic issues at stake in the body chapters together into a potentially unified figure.

INDEX WORDS: Financialization, Figurality, Conspiracy, Diagram, Detection

FIGURES OF CONSPIRACY: FINANCE CAPITAL AND THE AESTHETICS OF  
SPECULATION

by

JOHN W. ROBERTS

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

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2019

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2019

FIGURES OF CONSPIRACY: FINANCE CAPITAL AND THE AESTHETICS OF  
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by

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May 2019

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, to my brother, and to Clare, who knows more than anyone the exact price of the risk that this project carried.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Augustine writes of his own membership in a kind of conspiracy, “But alone I would not have done it, could not conceivably have done it by myself.” This could not be more true of this project, which had help from many supporters along the way. I must first gratefully acknowledge the profound support of my advisor, Angelo Restivo, who encouraged me to play the go-for-broke game of cultural history. I would also like to thank the other members of my dissertation committee for their time and insight: Alessandra Raengo, Jennifer Barker, and Fredric Jameson. I am especially indebted to Dr. Raengo’s seminars and an independent study, which furnished the intellectual space in which much of the conceptual core of this project was formed. Lastly, I would like to recognize the immense support of my fellow graduate students and writing group companions for their support and friendship: Daren Fowler, Jenny Gunn, Cameron Kunzelman, and Jennifer Olive. Truly, I could not have done it alone.



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## 1 INTRODUCTION: THE FIGURAL LOGIC OF THE CONSPIRACY DIAGRAM

The labyrinth is the right path for the person who always arrives early enough at his destination. This destination is the marketplace.

–Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Blown Up Figures

In a well-known scene from Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966) Thomas (David Hemmings), a fashion photographer who believes he may have inadvertently photographed an attempted murder while taking pictures of a romantic liaison at a park, hangs the eponymous blown up photos he has taken in a sitting area of his studio in an attempt to ascertain what exactly it is that he has captured on film (fig. 1.1).



Figure 1.1 *Blow Up*

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," in *Selected Writings, Volume 4 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 170.

Initially perplexed by the woman's (Vanessa Redgrave) seemingly worried glances into the surrounding shrubbery, things start to become clearer to Thomas when he first begins to organize the photos spatially, so as to produce the semblance of an eye-line match between the woman and the object of her gaze, and then organizes them into a roughly linear temporal sequence around him. In a self-reflexively cinematic gesture, the narrative that emerges from these images—or that is produced by their precise arrangement into what Seymour Chatman has described, in this specific context, as a “narrative array, a ‘textualization’ or ‘entexting’ of what would otherwise be a random group of photographs” (that the woman noticed someone lurking in the bushes with a gun, evidently about to shoot the man)—crystallizes for Thomas once both the spatial and temporal dimensions of his photographs are organized to suggest chains of cause and effect, and the emergence of his understanding is conveyed to the spectator of *Blow Up* through a montage of Thomas's still images that differentially evokes the nature of cinema itself as a medium defined by spatial movement through time.<sup>2</sup>

The cinematically-induced suggestion that Thomas has captured a meaningful narrative ‘event’ on film is, however, quickly (and in the end, irredeemably) attenuated by the grainy ambiguity of his blown up images themselves, which push to the limit photography's ability to indexically capture and disclose something recognizable as meaningful or actionable information (fig. 1.2).

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<sup>2</sup> Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni, or, the Surface of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 149.

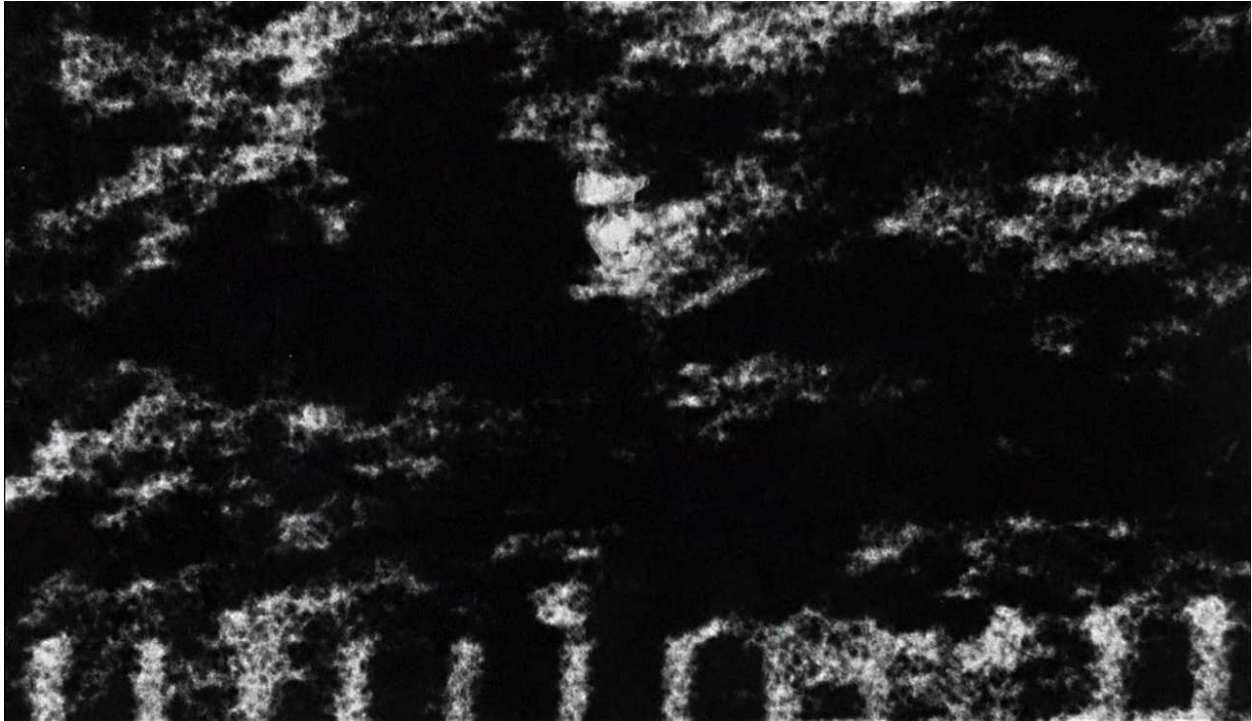


Figure 1.2 *Blow Up*

As Robin Wood (any many other commentators besides) long ago explained, “The main drift of *Blow Up* seems to me very clear: we are shown a young man inhabiting a world in which everything combines to undermine the firmness of his hold on reality. The mystery surrounding the murder comes as a test: he is subjected to a *deliberate* undermining of his confidence in his own perceptions, and he crumbles.”<sup>3</sup>

For some critics like Wood, *Blow Up* thus delivers a pessimistic take on the disintegration of objective reality, although more recently a more optimistic interpretation of the film has been espoused. Both the pessimistic and optimistic interpretations of the film turn on how the ending of the film, in which Thomas, having abandoned hope of communicating his experience to others, encounters and decides to participate in a mimed tennis match, which is

---

<sup>3</sup> Ian Cameron and Robin Wood, *Antonioni* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 131.



being conducted without a ball. On the one hand, Wood is representative of the pessimistic view, in which “Thomas’s retrieving of the ‘ball’ marks his final surrender: his grasp of objective reality fatally undermined, he is a lost (because disintegrated) soul.”<sup>4</sup> On the other, Thomas’s willingness to participate in the imaginary tennis game indicates a hope for the future, and the possibility of a sense of community and consensus overcoming Thomas’s isolation and existential malaise. This view is summed up by Peter Brunette:

Thus, by participating in the celebrated ball-less game of tennis with the mimes at the end, Hemmings can be seen as shaking off his narcissism (which amounts, in the epistemological context of the film, to a kind of solipsism), by implicitly admitting that reality is always unconsciously *constructed*, and constructed *socially*, that is, along with other human beings. Anything can mean anything, anything can stand for or represent anything else, anything can *be* anything, but only to a group, never to an individual (at least not for long).<sup>5</sup>

Brunette interprets the social construction of reality suggested by the ending as a positive gesture, towards community and away from narcissism, towards the freedom of anything to “be anything” and away from the stultifying paralysis of ambiguity. Sam Rohdie similarly connects *Blow Up* to the rest of Antonioni’s oeuvre through a thematic emphasis on ‘the new,’ in a passage worth quoting in its entirety:

The new in Antonioni appears within what is sure and established as a present yet hidden surface making itself seen and felt within what Barthes would call the ‘interstices’, the line between alternative realities, something new contained in the ordinary and conventional, and which often threatens it, not to be replaced by another ‘thing’, but rather not to be replaced at all, as when a figure, or an object dissolve into patterns, a landscape, or fog or rain overwhelm a ‘subject.’ It is something akin to the progressive enlargement of a photograph as occurs in *Blow-Up*: an event becomes an image; the image loses its figure to become dots and tones; these in turn coalesce into another image, finally into other ‘events,’ but equally unstable, impossible to fix.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Brunette, *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 117.

<sup>6</sup> Sam Rohdie, *Antonioni* (London: BFI, 1990), 49.

What these two interpretations by Brunette and Rohdie make clear is that, between Wood's writing in 1971 and Brunette and Rohdie in the 1990s, the 'disintegration' of Thomas' "soul" and the distinctly modernist ennui associated with the ambiguity that pervades the film at every level has become less of a pressing issue for interpreters of the film, and that in fact it is precisely the instability of meaning at play in Thomas's world that enables a kind of 'reassembly of the social' along more communal and less solipsistic lines. The film, on this view, marks not so much the dead-end of aesthetic modernism in the dissolution of stable subjectivity, but a turn toward semiotic play and the production of the new that is characteristic of aesthetic postmodernism. Indeed, in its movement away from the human subject as the epistemic and narrative core of the film, and towards a less anthropocentric emphasis on the object-world of which the human is only a de-privileged component, that has led Laura Rascaroli to characterize the film as "proto-postmodern."<sup>7</sup> There are perhaps many reasons for this shift in the critical evaluation of *Blow Up*, including the simple passage of time and the benefit of retrospective analysis, but one factor that merits mention, since it is central to all that follows, is the influence of Deleuze on film theory and criticism in the intervening years between 1971 and 1990, particularly with the publication of *Cinema 2* in 1985 (and in English in 1989). Richard Rushton makes the connection between Deleuze, Rascaroli, and Rohdie clear in his summary of Deleuze's usage of Antonioni in the early pages of *Cinema 2*:

These humans whom Deleuze describes as being absent from the world and absent from themselves; might this merely echo like the reiteration of a thousand other commentators on Antonioni, that he charts a modernist, existential alienation which features humans in various stages of late capitalist angst? Certainly, yes, but Deleuze also wants to try to argue that Antonioni is a profoundly optimistic director who believes in the kinds of positivities opened up

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<sup>7</sup> Laura Rascaroli, "Modernity, Put into Form: *Blow-Up*, Objectuality, 1960s Antonioni," in *Antonioni, Centenary Essays*, ed. Laura Rascaroli and John David Rhodes (London: BFI, 2011), 68, 77-8.

by modern experience. . . . While Antonioni offers a devastating critique of modern life, by way of this critique he also opens up the possibility of redeeming or rediscovering that modern world.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the desubjectification and shift in emphasis towards the object-world described by Rascaroli becomes legible as part of a broader flattening of the ontological register of Antonioni's films, part of the production of a system of what Deleuze calls a system of exchange between the objective and subjective, real and imaginary, physical and mental poles of pure optical and sound situations. For Deleuze, this system of exchange "[guarantees] passages and conversions, tending towards a point of indiscernibility (and not of confusion)."<sup>9</sup> Here we can also see the seed of Rohdie's eloquent analysis of the new in Antonioni as a process of figural de- and reterritorialization of images, both in the representational-photographic sense in *Blow Up*, but also in Deleuze's sense of an image as a block of pure space-time. Indeed, as Brunette suggests, "anything can *be* anything," but never to an individual, only to a group or plurality through and across whom such 'exchanges' can occur.

As I have indicated, all this is (perhaps?) well known and thoroughly rehearsed within the history of film studies. So, too, is the shift marked by *Blow Up* from aesthetic modernism to postmodernism in art cinema, and the ways in which Antonioni's oeuvre both straddles and complicates such a distinction. In *Blow Up* this is achieved in part through Thomas' ultimate ambivalence about his novel experience, along with his evident, if ambiguous, willingness to participate in the simulacral mime of a tennis match that concludes the film. It is also achieved through the film's emphasis on the way in which photographs of a thing or event come to displace and substitute for the thing or event itself, one consequence (or cause?) of which the

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Rushton, *Cinema After Deleuze* (London: Continuum, 2012), 68.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989 [1985]), 9.

film explores as both lucrative in the form of photographic fashion advertising, and threatening in the form of a loss of confidence in the historical representability of events embodied by Thomas' failure to prove that a murder did indeed take place despite possessing, even after his studio is ransacked, a photograph of the murdered body (fig. 1.3).



Figure 1.3 *Blow Up*

If *Blow Up* is a paradigmatically significant film in the way it marks the kinds of economic, aesthetic, and technological transformations entailed by the postmodern turn, it is also ground zero for a series of contemporary changes in global image culture, in which the questions raised by *Blow Up*—what can an image disclose, either indexically or historically? How can representations of things circulate economically in place of the things themselves, and what if any are the limits of such substitutability?—have become both intensified and transformed by the rise to prominence of digital forms of mediation, and as we shall see, also by the innovation of digitally circulating financial instruments.

The fundamental significance of *Blow Up* in this context is perhaps most readily apparent in the way its most visually striking, or at least most iconically enduring set-piece, Thomas's organization of his blow ups into a meta-mise-en-scène—what Adrian Martin terms a *dispositif* of cinematically-technologically mediated perception—has become wholly absorbed into the grammar of commercial filmmaking in the form of the 'conspiracy wall.'<sup>10</sup> The 'conspiracy wall,' as I am terming it, operates as a visual shorthand for an process of labor-intensive and cognitively taxing investigation, and in particular signifies the investigative aporia of the information network too large or convoluted to be tidily unpacked and explained—Fredric Jameson's 'geopolitical aesthetic' condensed to a single visual figure. These iconic images can be found not only in political thrillers and conspiracy films, but across virtually all contemporary genres and forms of American media, from animated family films like *The Peanuts Movie* (dir. Steve Martino, 2015) and network TV comedies such as *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), to commercial advertisements and cartoon strips in *The New Yorker* (fig. 1.4).

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<sup>10</sup> Adrian Martin, *Mise en Scène and Film Style* (Basingstroke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 179.

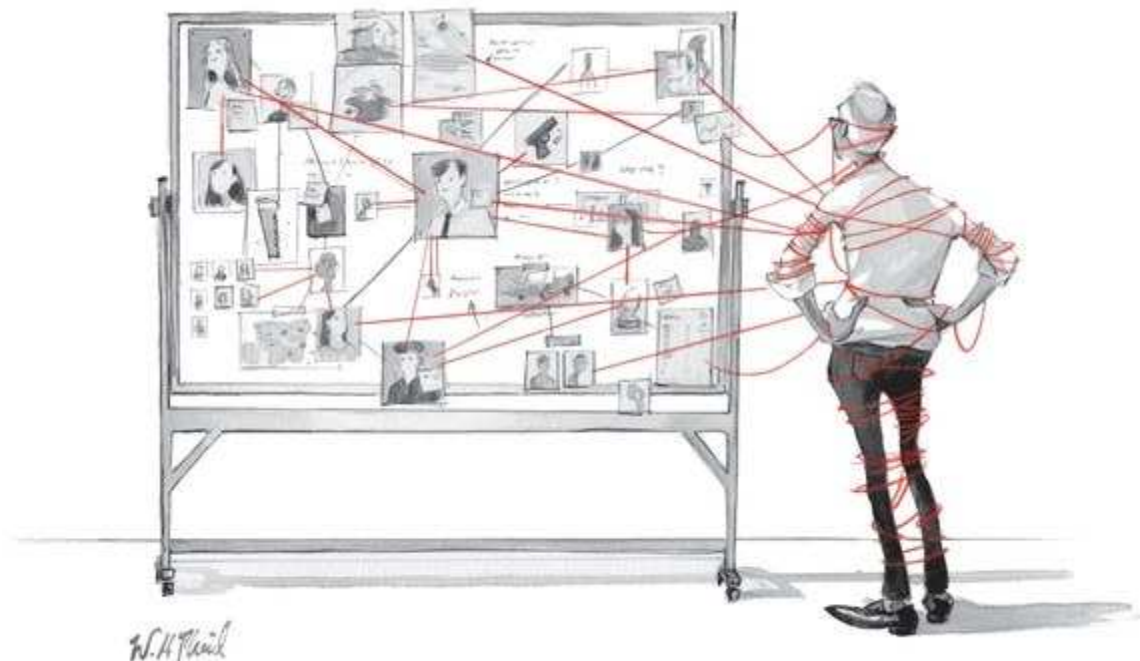


Figure 1.4 *The New Yorker*

The conspiracy wall is discussed at greater length in chapter 1, but the semantic and affective charges it carries derive genealogically from *Blow Up*, in which the mise-en-scène operates as a figural condensation of the film's broader thematic content, where by figural I mean here something like a formation that spans and articulates both the schematic and expressive aspects of an aesthetic or rhetorical function. Indeed, *Blow Up* anticipates the ways in which the more contemporary media objects discussed in this study unite two conceptually distinct theorizations of the figural itself. On the one hand, Thomas' illegibly grainy images, particularly the final one he is left with after the others are taken, evince Lyotard's argument in *Discourse, Figure* that there is a kind of chiasmatic tension between linguistic-discursive and plastic-figural modes of communication.<sup>11</sup> An image with a clear discursive content (a landscape,

<sup>11</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse-Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2011 [1971]), 205-218.

anthropomorphic figures) is blown up until that content's referentiality dissolves into the figural shape of the image itself, its play between light and dark patches. Just as Lyotard points out how the letter and the lines that form it cannot ultimately be separated as distinct categories of signifier and signified or content and form, so the body in the picture cannot be clearly distinguished from the surrounding environment, and the figure falls back into the image's ground. On the other hand, Thomas' images become figures, in Erich Auerbach's sense of the term as an historical event that prefigures a later event that fulfills them both, when he retroactively interprets them as evidence of a deferred, non-linear historical event. *Blow Up* effectively brings together these respectively spatial and temporal approaches to figurality, demonstrating how deeply imbricated the two senses are with each other, and how both Lyotard's and Auerbach's attention to the figural turns on the question of the aesthetic and its role in the production not only of discourse and plastic form, but knowledge and the temporality of historical events, within the context of the postmodern turn. In doing so, it provides a clue, in the form of a certain figure, and in its attentiveness to the expressive capacities of figuration itself, that uncovers a much vaster range of conspiratorial articulations between the visual and the temporal, the plastic and the historical, and the (re)productive and the social.

*Blow Up's* concern for the epistemic limits of imagistic reproduction, the circulation of simulacra, and the negation of historical time entailed by a crisis of representational realism, all help to explain its continuing cultural relevance and the extent to which its visual iconography has been appropriated as an expedient means of reiterating these concerns, all of which have intensified since the film's release in 1966. What *Blow Up* cannot yet comprehend in 1966, although to be sure there are prefigurations of it in the film's treatment of fashion photography, is the extent to which the economic structures undergirding and shaping the tectonic cultural

transformations of the 1960s would become more fully financialized over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and into the 21<sup>st</sup>.<sup>12</sup> If *Blow Up* marks the transition from Fordist modernity to post-Fordist postmodernity, then the film's quixotic coda stands, from the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, less as a conclusion to Thomas's story but as an open-ended gesture to the future, which has since 1966 become our own inherited time.

But how do the economic and cultural transformations already under way in 1966 affect the epistemological stakes for visual representation once these changes have more fully matured? The critical literature on *Blow Up* offers a clue. Robin Wood adroitly anticipates Deleuze by writing that in the film, "The distinction between appearance and reality blurs and dissolves....All sense of values disintegrates."<sup>13</sup> Although Wood is essentially making the same observation as Deleuze regarding the dissolution of rigid polarities distinguishing the real from the imaginary, the implications of this dissolution are themselves diametrically opposed: modernist existential paralysis of the subject versus post-modernist flows of asubjective affect. I want to focus more precisely, however, on Wood's use of the term 'values' to characterize that which disintegrates in the film. Chatman also raises the question of values, quoting an interview with Antonioni in which the director claims that *Blow Up* is a film that questions the nature of reality: "I'm really questioning the nature of reality. This is an essential point to remember about the visual aspects of the film since one of its chief themes is to see or not to see properly "the true value of things." (*Value* here surely means 'import' or 'quality,' not 'worth' or

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<sup>12</sup> Angelo Restivo makes a similar case regarding the reception of Antonioni's next film, *Zabriskie Point* (1970), arguing that the film produces an "unreadable historical sign" composed of "signifiers in a historical moment in which it was impossible for them to cohere." See Angelo Restivo, "Revisiting *Zabriskie Point*" in Rascaroli and Rhodes, p. 86-7.

<sup>13</sup> Wood, *Antonioni*, 131.



‘price.’)’<sup>14</sup> Chatman assures us that when Antonioni refers to “value,” he really means existential/moral ‘significance,’ and *surely* not value in an economic sense of the term. I would like to suggest that not only is Chatman’s confidence misplaced, but that the question of value is in fact central both to the ways in which the post-Deleuzian interpretations of the film cohere, and to the ways in which the film proleptically gestures toward a post-modern, post-Fordist mode of economic and social organization that has become our contemporary history (to the extent that such a thing is ideologically possible after Fukuyama). In other words, whether or not Antonioni in the 1960s was referring to “import” in an interview (although given the etymology of the word, this may not be any better for Chatman), our present circumstances have fulfilled Antonioni’s film, and this fulfillment also transfigures the question of value itself into one that anticipates the paradoxical circulation of immaterial commodities, as in the paradigmatic case of the commodified affects produced by advertising, which is of course Thomas’s whole professional stock-in-trade.

In other words, I would like to suggest that it is not a mere coincidence that Deleuze uses the term “exchange” as a central figure for the ways in which Antonioni stages the production of the new. Nor is it a coincidence that the concept of the figural plays a key role in Deleuze’s theorization of that exchange. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari cite Lyotard’s then-new *Discourse, Figure* as a text that effectively grasps the ‘illiteracy’ of capitalism in its tendency to decode flows, rather than overcode them through processes of ‘despotic’ signification.<sup>15</sup> As opposed to Chatman’s confident assertion that Antonioni’s term ‘value’ signifies a moralizing, humanistic content, Deleuze and Guattari approvingly summarize Lyotard: “It is not the figures

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<sup>14</sup> Chatman, *Antonioni; or the Surface of the World*, 152.

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Penguin, 1977 [1972]), 241.

that depend on the signifier and its effects, but the signifying chain that depends on the figural effects—the chain itself being composed of asignifying signs—crushing the signifiers as well as the signifieds, treating words as things, fabricating new unities, creating from nonfigurative figures configurations of images that form and then disintegrate.”<sup>16</sup> This fabrication of new unities, the formation and disintegration of image configurations, characterizes not only Antonioni’s film, but also the decoding and axiomatizing operations of capitalism itself, its fundamental formal characteristics. A key insight of Deleuze and Guattari’s study of “capitalist representation” is that Marx’s general formula for capital, M-C-M, is both a conceptual model and a practical account of the processes of de- and reterritorialization entailed by the mysterious transformations of the commodity itself. M-C-M identifies the schizophrenic process of the transubstantiation of the abstract into the concrete and the concrete into the abstract, the virtual into the actual and its return, and the reciprocal movement of representamen into referent, and vice versa.<sup>17</sup> The question of (exchange-)value is therefore inseparable from the question of representation, but as Deleuze and Guattari point out, capitalism is not a semiotic regime of Saussurean signs, but rather a regime of Lyotardian figures of desire, producing material effects, and affects, that expressively produce forms, and only subsequently anything recognizable as meaning or writing.

Consider again Rhodie’s account of the new in *Blow Up* as that which appears in the interstices between realities, something accessible when stable figures or forms dissolve into their molecular constituent elements, or when an event becomes an image, only for that image to become an event in turn. In the context of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s analysis, we can now grasp

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 249-50.

*Blow Up*'s investment in photographic representation as a figure (in Lyotard's sense of the term) for the value form itself, and of the emergent forms of late 20<sup>th</sup> century economic organization that would come to complicate any clear distinction between images and events. Rhodie's description of Antonioni also resonates, in compellingly specific ways, with the practice, endemic to fully virtualized finance capitalism, of 'slow market,' or latency arbitrage, in which high frequency stock traders are able to exploit microsecond differences in the transmission of pricing information across globally networked stock exchanges to buy the same stock lower in one location, then immediately sell those shares in another location, where the price is temporarily higher.<sup>18</sup> The market is, in this sense, like Thomas' photos—what appears as a coherent and unified representational form becomes, when blown up to view its smallest components, an irreducible spatial and temporal multiplicity, and a network of disjunctions that belies any sense of self-identical objects. In the case of the stock market, high-frequency trading algorithms extract value from the spatiotemporal interstices between two places and two temporalities, two different realities of the value of a particular financial instrument. At the macro level, prices appear stable, but at the smallest micrological levels, these 'dots and tones' both provide for, and in a sense *are*, the diachronic flows of liquidity that constitute global finance capitalism. It is only by paying a service fee to such algorithmic arbitrageurs that any sense of the market as synchronically self-identical is possible.

As Alison Shonkwiler puts it with reference to the anticipatory orientation of finance capitalism, "finance must be understood as a *process* of abstractification and concretization. Finance continuously seeks the path of the shortest, fastest, and highest return. It works by

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<sup>18</sup> See Michael Lewis, *Flash Boys: A Wall Street Revolt* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), 172 for a straightforward account of this practice.

running the possibilities, comparing hypotheticals and actuals, and trading on the difference, thereby *realizing* that which had been hypothetical or unreal.”<sup>19</sup> The distinctive futurity of finance is also echoed by Cédric Durand, who argues that “fictitious capital represents claims over wealth that is yet to be produced. Its expansion implies a growing preemption of future production.”<sup>20</sup> Hence, the quixotic conclusion of *Blow Up* takes on a new valence as a double gesture, on the one hand toward precisely this future moment of futurity, in which exchanges between the virtual and the actual can be productive of new flows of desire, new forms of social organization, and new modes of aestheticized bodily address, as Rushton claims. On the other hand, in the context of Antonioni’s own oeuvre, the film’s finale gestures decisively toward the increasing alienation produced by the emergence of precisely these new forms of organization wrought by 20<sup>th</sup> century economic financialization. With *Blow Up*, we are simultaneously confronted with the possibility of the production of the new, and the nascent realization that the mode of such a production is a fully capitalistic one, and that as Durand suggests, it has preemptively leveraged its options on the future production of the new itself.

Crucially, *Blow Up* also shows how speculation is central to this production of the new. Thomas’s investigation of the possible murder ultimately hinges fundamentally on a question of aesthetic speculation, in the literal sense of *aesthesis*: is there a figure, or not? This fraught *aesthesis* in turn has historical implications: did an event occur, or didn’t it, and how ought Thomas act in response? Lastly, as I have already indicated, the film’s ultimate staging of an exchange between the actual and the virtual, and the ambiguous potentials inherent in the recognition of such exchanges, gestures toward (and indeed speculates on) the economic

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<sup>19</sup> Alison Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary: Economic Mystification and the Limits of Realist Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), xxxiii.

<sup>20</sup> Cédric Durand, *Fictitious Capital* (London: Verso, 2017), 1.

transformation from industrial to post-industrial, ‘fictitious’ capitalism, and the real subsumption of ostensibly individual and private aesthetic under capital.<sup>21</sup> In using speculation as a ground for rendering these social and economic concerns, *Blow Up* anticipates contemporary, post-digital cultural developments, while also staking out speculation, in both its aesthetic and economic moments, as an aesthetic, cultural, and political problematic within the domain of moving-image media. To the extent that financial speculation has become more central to the global economy since 1966, and to the extent that aesthetic judgment, and in particular Kant’s antinomy of taste, has also become both more central to the creation of cultural products through the technologically facilitated ability to measure, valorize, and amplify the individual tastes of increasingly narrow demographic groups as a form of neoliberal ‘self-branding,’ speculation has become a more pertinent and central problematic spanning each of these arenas.<sup>22</sup>

## 1.2 Diagramming the Constellations of *A Beautiful Mind*

This dissertation explores the intertwined representational and cultural problematic of speculation, claiming centrally that this nexus of questions is articulated culturally through the figure of the conspiracy wall, which provides an aesthetic and epistemological schema or diagram through which the relationship between economic financialization and contemporary

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<sup>21</sup> This is, of course, also an extension of the circumstance described by Adorno and Horkheimer in their dialectical formulation of a “culture industry,” in which capitalist instrumentality has colonized the preserve of aesthetic disinterest. The crucial distinction here, however, is that whereas Adorno and Horkheimer viewed the formal difficulty and experiential friction of high modernism as a strategy of resistance to the culture industry, the cognitive and affective energy produced by this engagement is itself what is being productively commodified and regulated in the post-modern period. Hence the introjection of Antonioni’s high modernist stylistics into the heart of popular visual culture, in the form of the conspiracy diagram. See Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 11-46, but especially 15-6.

<sup>22</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett: 1987 [1790]), §56. See also Steven Shaviro, *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2015), 8.

visual culture can be articulated. As an aesthetic concept, the conspiracy wall emerges out of the milieu of the conspiracy film genre and designates the assemblage of visual information as part of an investigation, most stereotypically organized on a cork board in an investigator's office. Crucially, I am claiming that it also expresses the formal structure of subject-object relations between informatic assemblages and investigating observers, whose investment in the production of knowledge or truth constantly threatens to slide into paranoia, conspiracy thinking, and ultimately Deleuzo-Guattarian schizophrenia. In this sense, the conspiracy wall functions as a contemporary analogue of Foucault's interpretation of *Las Meninas* as an aesthetic object that formally triangulates relations of knowledge, power, and subjectivity in a manner that renders the epistemic and political structure of a particular historical formation in condensed form.<sup>23</sup> The aesthetic objects under scrutiny here each incorporate the figure of the conspiracy wall, as I am terming it, and in each the formal rendering of the interrelated processes of investigative detection and the production and organization of images is the central prism through which these texts come to allegorical grips with the ramifications of financialization and the increasing centrality of speculation of all stripes to mass culture under capitalism. Across a variety of genres and media forms, the figure of the conspiracy wall signals the attempt to grasp the social implications of the extensive and indeed profoundly ontological changes in capitalism since the 1970s, by phrasing these implications in terms of digital image production and circulation, logics of preemption, and the paradoxical materialities of an increasingly dematerialized, financialized capital. All of the objects under consideration here, despite their differences in genre, no less than in medium, share a concern for these implications of the ontological changes wrought by the

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<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House: 1970 [1966]), 17.

financialization of capitalism, and frame that concern in terms of a dialectical tension between abstraction and concretion.

In this sense, the objects of this study are contemporary descendants of the 1970s conspiracy thrillers analyzed in Jameson's *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, albeit with several crucial distinctions. First, the financialization of global markets was only a newly emergent phenomenon in the 1970s, and its full consequences were not yet known when films like *The Parallax View* (dir. Alan Pakula, 1974) and *All the President's Men* (dir. Alan Pakula, 1976) were made. The end of the Bretton Woods monetary system in 1973, which had stabilized the value of global currency in the service of American geopolitical hegemony in the postwar period, inaugurated far-reaching changes that facilitated the development of financialization in the latter quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, and following from this, it is precisely the digitization of communications technologies that has enabled the metastasis of financial instruments and accelerating financialization in the intervening decades. While the communications technologies in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* are largely analog technologies, it is to digital image production and circulation that we must look in order to locate the expression of finance in culture. Lastly, none of the objects under discussion here would be readily identifiable generically as 'conspiracy' films, in the conventional sense of that term as indexing narratives of shady governmental operatives, secret plots, or overtly manifest political contents. Since the 1970s, however, the generic tropes of the conspiracy film have become increasingly commonplace, to the point where they too quickly become self-reflexive pastiches of their own ostensible contents. More than two decades have passed since *The X-Files* (1993-) transformed the generic narrative of investigation of a totalizing government conspiracy into a series of de-politicized

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<sup>24</sup> Durand, *Fictitious Capital*, 20-2.

narrative clichés, and more than three years have now passed since *The X-Files* was itself nostalgically revived.<sup>25</sup> After *The X-Files*, whatever modernist potential may have been embedded in the controversy of *J.F.K.* (dir. Oliver Stone, 1991) has been effectively transformed into an alibi for selling a bemused brand of detached, speculative skepticism as a commodified affective experience, as is evident in the slew of commercial programs dedicated to ‘considering’ various conspiracy theories, of which *Ancient Aliens* (2010-) and various cable news programs are perhaps the most well-known and viewed.<sup>26</sup>

Importantly, although the roots of the conspiracy wall as an aesthetic paradigm date back at least to *Blow Up*, it is still only partially formed in the 1970s cycle of conspiracy thrillers. In *All the President’s Men*, Bob Woodward’s home/office space features a bulletin board covered with index cards and slips of paper, presumably to help organize the expansive and tedious Watergate investigation, but the board is only fleetingly present in the film (fig. 1.5).

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<sup>25</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 17. Moreover, the most potent political content of *The X-Files* is arguably not in its serial narrative of a sprawling governmental conspiracy, but in its narratively interstitial ‘monster of the week’ episodes, in which the conspiracy clichés are forced into contact with a more authentic and televisually suitable mapping of the idiosyncrasies of various American locales.

<sup>26</sup> On the modernist potential of *J.F.K.*, see Hayden White, “The Modernist Event,” in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, edited by Vivian Sobchack (Los Angeles: AFI, 1996), 17-38.





Figure 1.5 *All the President's Men*

More significant and more strongly emphasized as a set-piece is the mosaic image produced by high school students' signs in *The Parallax View*, where the tiled and fragmentary signs of the students gesture toward the aesthetic unity of portraits of U.S. presidents and the to-be-assassinated senator (fig. 1.6).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> This image also owes a stylistic and conceptual debt to the "Shanghai Lil" musical number in Busby Berkeley's *Footlight Parade* (1933), in which a similarly tiled mosaic of Franklin Roosevelt's portrait is rendered by a grid of performers. This in turn also articulates the genealogy of the conspiracy wall to Siegfried Kracauer's concept of the mass ornament as a figure for capitalist *ratio*, about more which below.



Figure 1.6 *The Parallax View*

Here, the contradiction between aesthetic unity and perceptual fragmentation allegorizes the historical desire to elect the senator while simultaneously attesting to its tenuousness and contingency, both of which are dialectically inverted by the senator's ensuing assassination, which affirms the contingency of political history while also showing the democratic will of the people to be a sham that covers for the more unitary and singular political will of the Parallax Corporation and its clients.

While *The Parallax View* marks a continuation of the aesthetic and political problematic of the conspiracy wall inaugurated by *Blow Up*, it is not until the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the motif solidifies into its contemporary, recognizable form, replete with pieces of string connecting pieces of information together in a figure that carries the full weight of the aesthetic and epistemic problems it crystalizes, in Ron Howard's Best Picture-winning film *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), which fictionalizes the life of John Nash, the schizophrenic mathematician responsible

for crucial insights into game theory.<sup>28</sup> Here, not only is the form of the conspiracy wall fully articulated, but it is deployed precisely in order to indicate the difference between rational, productive, and creative thought on the one hand, and paranoid irrational, and self-destructive thought on the other. *A Beautiful Mind* marks a pivotal shift in the representational function of the conspiracy wall in several ways, the first of which is that the conspiracy thriller is no longer the generic dominant of the film, but is itself made recognizable *as genre*, as a narrative content rather than a narrative form, in order to more effectively signify Nash's schizophrenia to the viewer. This in turn indicates a broader diffusion of the generic tropes of the classic conspiracy thriller, which can now be quoted as a gestural stand-in for the political content of films like *The Parallax View*. In part, this diffusive absorption of the distinctive formal components of the conspiracy thriller into other genres like the prestige drama in the case of *A Beautiful Mind*, the blockbuster action film in many of the contemporary superhero films, but especially *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (dir. Joe and Anthony Russo, 2014) and *Captain Marvel* (dir. Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, 2019), and the other genres under discussion in the chapters below, indicates that the conspiracy thriller may no longer be recognizable as a distinct genre only because it has become infused into and across a wide and diverse array of generic forms.

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<sup>28</sup> *The Usual Suspects* (1995, dir. Bryan Singer) functions as another transitional object in this genealogy of the conspiracy wall. During the film's climactic narrative twist it is revealed to the audience that Verbal Kint/Keyser Söze has been improvising his account of the film's plot by drawing inspiration from the interviewing detective's cork board and incorporating details from the contents of the board into his narrative. While in this film the corkboard does function in the service of the construction of a unified narrative out of an assemblage of charged fragments, it is also being knowingly wielded by a criminal mastermind possessed of epistemic mastery, displacing the necessary element of cognitive aporia and epiphany away from the diegesis and onto the film's own audience. The epistemic omniscience of the Spacey character, who knows the truth all along, recuperates the generativity of the conspiracy wall in the service of a conventional narrative reversal.

*A Beautiful Mind* presents two versions of the conspiracy walls. In the ‘good’ version, the figure stands for the rational comprehension and explanation of complex behavior (fig. 1.7), while in the ‘bad’ version, it indexes Nash’s descent into paranoid and hallucinatory mental illness, in which he can no longer discern the real from the imaginary and believes himself to be caught up in a Cold War codebreaking conspiracy (fig. 1.8).

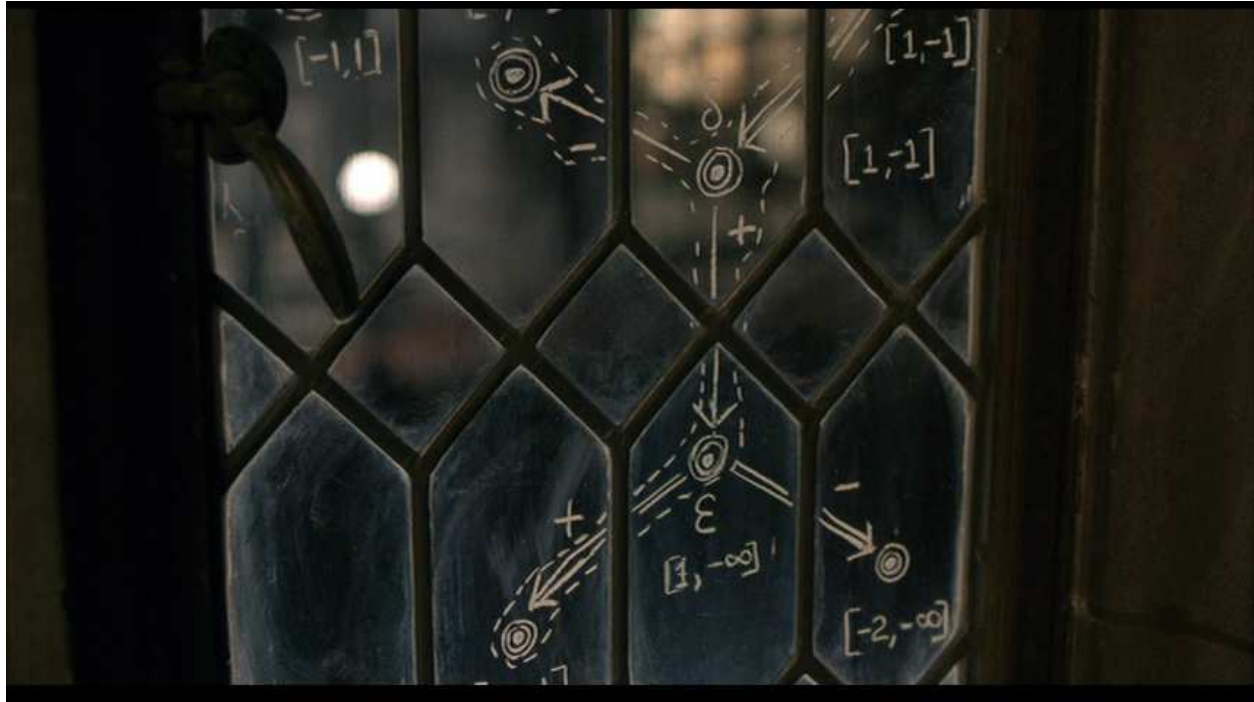


Figure 1.7 *A Beautiful Mind*

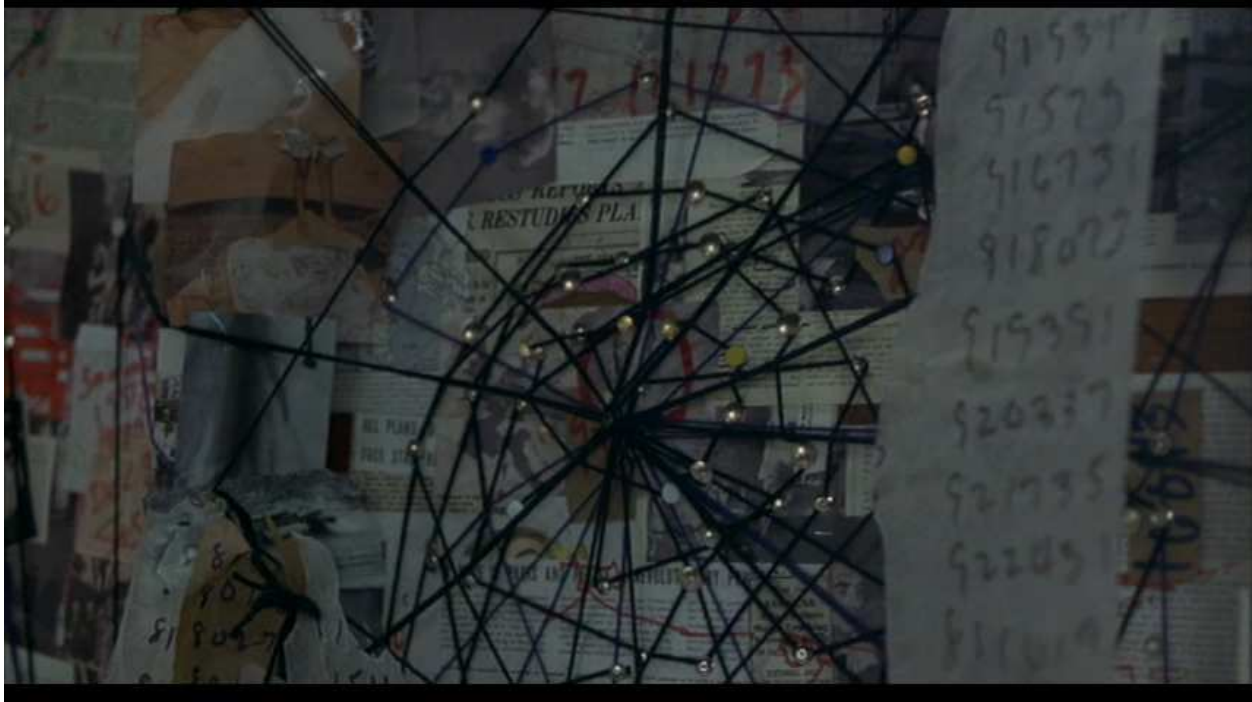


Figure 1.8 *A Beautiful Mind*

Between these two poles the film offers several variations on its theme, from the opening sequence of the film in which Nash is shown recognizing the geometrical patterns undergirding the ugliness of a colleague's necktie (fig. 1.9), to a scene in which he epiphanically perceives the hidden patterns embedded in numerical code while working in a defense project (fig. 1.10), to a romantic scene in which Nash uses his genius for pattern recognition to produce new constellations in the night sky as a romantic gesture at the behest of his date and future wife (fig. 1.11). Thus, through the film's aesthetic and contextual repetition and variation, it crystallizes the form of the conspiracy wall as an aesthetic figure, but does so in its abstraction of that form into a set of relational principles that extend beyond the generic circumstance of the conspiracy thriller.

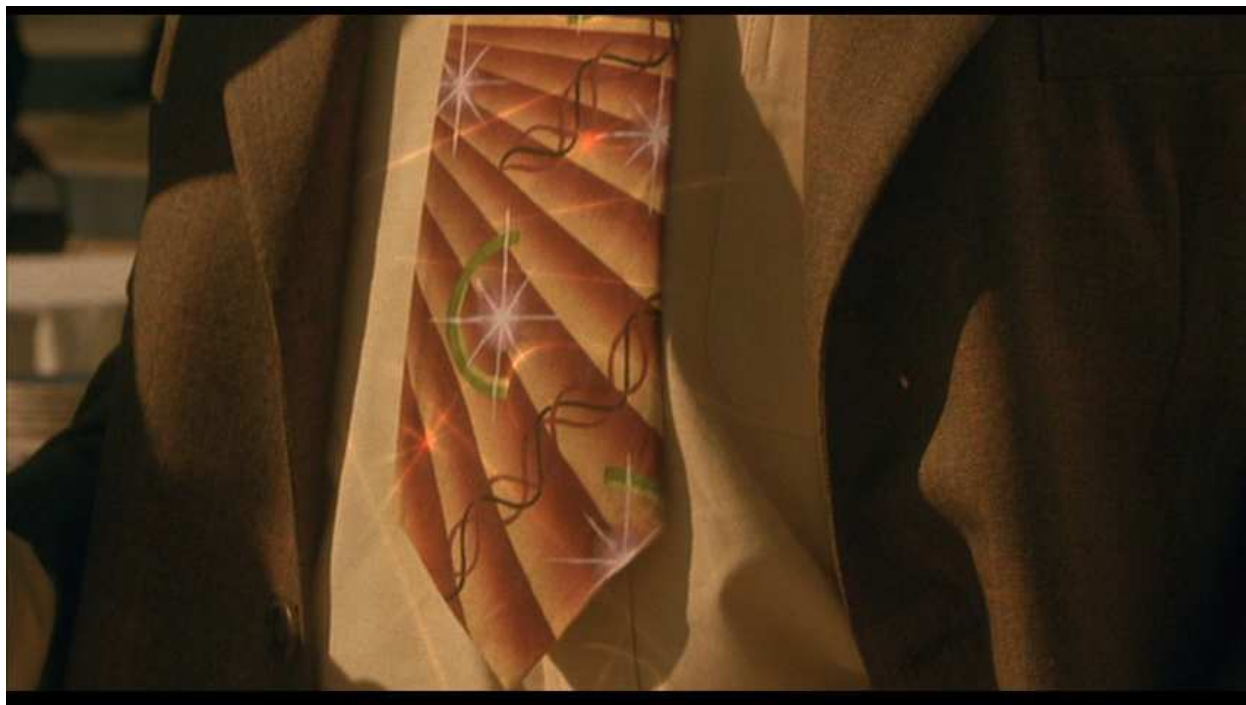


Figure 1.9 *A Beautiful Mind*

419385	05 374859 62	52534 637936	93190 461 94	98104 57418
4 724	896430 8939	37 978 13 95	04 986334408	26 058 6862
715830	12574 970 43	<b>808 82012998</b>	041498186 44	26441517385
64761	4349 90 7487	57 555864594	<b>5353 0868966</b>	26375 974 86
458 79	348 75300499	5632 03 753	826378 99135	593036 8931
0 9722	41044 145 26	<b>066789 8127</b>	16303 08 430	88827 77 92
72812	2564976 497	2710339 8273	3394 0516 62	768031925644
29565	4168321 1489	4616 914 68	46 2752 2312	0784989 072
605 72	102952413 98	210103 1888	12817 158 62	754933 58474
09883	845 81788993	4410 9469 36	47 21 13461	073 78315 27
029 56	8335 285 59	<b>144010796329</b>	1521811 572	0043527011
082347	95 44963 791	7306 29675	78185 0327 1	113441 99090
2 541	4663 80 002	584396268737	39386906 074	09 688 9122
317650	8 16 32 20	85 455 5169	328 33 58 66	8129 442 855
79 543	272634 0592	39 315028 89	57191 187 91	73237 71 32
27 55	43185317 391	497425 3938	<b>02820359817</b>	7395 0563588
334279	592 58 2553	58653 452388	1309 57506	084969 06649
88526	722 60 36 54	7572357 29	142 55 66519	73503368007

Figure 1.10 *A Beautiful Mind*



Figure 1.11 *A Beautiful Mind*

The film's work of representational and conceptual abstraction therefore iteratively unpacks how the conspiracy walls in the film constructively figure subject-object relations, problematizing the act of speculation in an almost literally Kantian sense of these terms. In one scene Nash is institutionalized as a result of his psychosis, but believes his powers of reason and problem-solving will allow him to find the solution, to which his psychotherapist replies that Nash cannot reason his way out of mental illness on account of the fact that the illness is afflicting his ability to reason in the first place, marking a Kantian dilemma if ever there was one and framing Nash's illness and genius in terms of his ability to look at the world and see its underlying patterns, a faculty which is disrupted by the unwanted proliferation of illusions into his empirical experience of the world-as-appearance. Through its investment in mapping the different configurations between subjects, objects, and epistemological modes of knowing, *A Beautiful Mind* effectively, if unwittingly, renders the form of the conspiracy wall as a kind of

diagram, a discursive form governing and distributing relations between subjects and objects and expressing these relations as a multiplicity of potential instantiations, from the aesthetics of fashion to the stars themselves.

Deleuze's reading of Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*, and in particular his emphasis on Foucault's distinction between propositions and statements, helps to illuminate the discursive functioning of *A Beautiful Mind*'s conspiracy walls. For Foucault, discursive statements are general functions of possible expressivity, whereas propositions constitute the expressed, or signifieds of a particular semiotic and discursive regime.<sup>29</sup> Deleuze expands this distinction into an immanent relation between schematic functions that organize and delimit the possibilities of expression, and the actual expressions that are produced in accordance with those functions. Deleuze explains that statements refer not to a unique force or particular fact of expression, but to "certain intrinsic positions which are extremely variable and form part of the statements itself."<sup>30</sup> Importantly, and hence the synonymic wordplay, discursive statements do not only establish relations between subjects and objects of discourse, but they express those relations, and generatively produce them at the same time that they stand as representational models or diagrams of those same productive forces. "If statements can be distinguished from words, phrases or propositions," Deleuze writes, "it is because they contain their own functions of subject, object and concept in the form of 'derivatives.'"<sup>31</sup> If the individual instantiations of the conspiracy wall in *A Beautiful Mind* correlate with propositions, or signifieds, whether of the conspiracy genre itself, or of Nash's epiphanic genius or mental illness, then when taken together

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<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1972 [1969]), 86-7.

<sup>30</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988 [1986]), 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



as a set of variations, the film's conspiracy walls express the diagrammatic organizing parameters immanent to, and ultimately constitutive of, this discursive operation of the production of generic or narrative legibility.

Moreover, *A Beautiful Mind* marks a significant turning point in the genealogy of the conspiracy wall not only because of its metapictorial theorizing of its own conditions of representability, but also because the film's narrative resolution of Nash's illness, in which he comes to terms with persistent fictional hallucinations in order to remain intellectually productive and romantically gratified, allegorizes the financialization of the 20<sup>th</sup> century global economy. Specifically, the film allegorizes the transcendence of the zero-sum game of the Cold War by the accommodation of the productive fictions of globalized, neoliberalized, and financialized capitalism. Crucial to this interpretation is the fact that Nash's personal and domestic problem, that is his schizophrenia, is successfully overcome by the same game-theoretical reasoning for which he is famous: he and the hallucinations reach a cooperative compromise (one is tempted even to say a kind of utopian conspiracy, a dialectical reversal of Nash's psychotic paranoia), ironically echoing the innovation of the concept of the Nash Equilibrium at the core of the film's historical narrative. The film literally suggests that the accommodation of fictitious entities is necessary in order to maintain domestic and professional stability and productivity, effectively dramatizing finance capital's encompassing of its own absolute exterior 'schizophrenic' limit, an event thought structurally impossible by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*.<sup>32</sup> This notion in the film has its allegorical correlate in the embrace of fictitious capital, in the form of financial derivatives, as a cornerstone of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century globalized economy, primarily as a consequence of its perceived efficiency by neoclassical

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<sup>32</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 266.

economists in mediating between global supply and demand.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the film's allegorical content and its aesthetic form are intimately related, as both express potential relations between knowing subjects, the possible illusion of empirical reality, and the epistemic means through which those subjects and objects are produced in mutual relation to each other. Here, where the film's aesthetic concern with the figural, its discursive expression of these relations, and its contextualization of this concern and its investigation in relation to economic financialization, is where the film most profoundly expresses the cultural and representational problematic of speculation, which also animates *Blow Up* and the 1970s conspiracy thrillers. This nexus of concerns is also where *A Beautiful Mind* provides a kind of figure, or as the film itself reflexively suggests, a constellation—in the fully figural and fateful sense of Benjamin's usage of it—for 21<sup>st</sup> century visual representations of investigation, particularly those that tend toward the speculative and conspiratorial, rather than the procedural and linear. Hence, I take the film as crystallizing a set of interrelated and interlocking economic, metaphysical, and aesthetic concerns that is itself representative and in anticipation of later motifs in visual media, the most pronounced and widespread of which is the conspiracy wall itself. These concerns turn, more specifically, on considerations of finance capital and financialization, the concept of the Deleuzian diagram, and the figural as such, as well as what each of these concepts has to do with the others. In the following sections, I will briefly sketch the ways I am using these terms, as well as their relationship to each other within the framework of this project.

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<sup>33</sup> See Saskia Sassen, "The Embeddedness of Electronic Markets: The Case of Global Capital Markets," in *The Sociology of Financial Markets*, ed. Karin Knorr Cetina and Alex Preda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 17-37.

### 1.3 Speculative Capital

The concept of finance capital, or of financialization, has been defined in a variety of ways. Summarizing and reflecting on a white paper by sociologist Greta Krippner, Gerald Epstein remarks that

as [Krippner] summarizes the discussion, some writers use the term ‘financialization’ to mean the ascendancy of ‘shareholder value’ as a mode of corporate governance; some use it to refer to the growing dominance of capital market financial systems over bank based financial systems; some follow Hilferding’s lead and use the term ‘financialization’ to refer to the increasing political and economic power of a particular class grouping: the rentier class; for some financialization represents the explosion of financial trading with a myriad of new financial instruments; finally, for Krippner herself, the term refers to a ‘pattern of accumulation in which profit making occurs increasingly through financial channels rather than through trade and commodity production.’<sup>34</sup>

While each of these perspectives offers valuable insight, here I want to trace a line of thought on financialization that follows Marx’s initial sketch of fictitious capital, while emphasizing the figurality of financial instruments. In the briefest possible terms, finance capital represents a “problem,” as Fredric Jameson has termed it, in that it short-circuits Marx’s general formula for capital, M-C-M, allowing money to exchange for money without passing through the commodity form, in an abbreviated M-M’ form.<sup>35</sup> This is the same circumstance identified by Marx in volume 3 of *Capital* and elaborated on by David Harvey, in which the problem of money’s having to be invested in material goods or labor in order to produce interest—a process which reduces the flexibility and general exchangeability of money—is solved by the lending and exchange of advances on that expected and hypothetical interest as capital; or in other words,

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<sup>34</sup> Gerald A. Epstein, “Introduction: Financialization and the World Economy,” in *Financialization and the World Economy*, ed. Gerald A. Epstein (Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2005), 3.

<sup>35</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Culture and Finance Capital,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1997): 259.

credit.<sup>36</sup> Crucially, as Harvey explains, the economic innovation of credit involves the temporal separation of the purchase and sale that compose an economic exchange: “The category of ‘fictitious capital’ is in fact implied whenever credit is extended in advance, in anticipation of future labor as a counter-value.”<sup>37</sup> Rudolf Hilferding, in his landmark early study of finance, affirms this temporal disjunction as the essence of credit and debt.<sup>38</sup> Importantly, the time gaps opened up by the innovation of credit and debt instruments also opens a space for financial speculation, in which titles to interest on loans rather than commodities are exchanged, paving the way for increasingly complex derivative financial instruments to be created and traded.<sup>39</sup> These kinds of wagers on price changes define the modern concept of the ‘derivative,’ as “a species of transactable contract in which (1) there is no movement of capital until its settlement, (2) the change in the price of the underlying asset determines the value of the contract, and (3) the contract has some specified expiration date in the future.”<sup>40</sup> The financial derivative, like earlier instruments of speculation, credit, and debt, similarly relies upon (because it bets on) a temporal window created by the disjunction of the purchase and sale in a monetary transaction.

The history of finance and financialization is long, and arguably, as Giovanni Arrighi and Ian Baucom have suggested (although with quite different points of emphasis), perhaps ultimately inextricable from the history of capitalism itself. However, As LiPuma and Lee explain, as governing or dominant economic paradigm financialization begins in the 1970s with

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<sup>36</sup> David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 2006 [1982]), 266-7. See also Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. 3, ch. 25.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>38</sup> Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital: A Study of the Latest Phase of Capital Development*, ed. Tom Bottomore (London: Routledge, 1981 [1910]), 60.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>40</sup> Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 33.

the collapse of the Bretton Woods system and the innovation of the Black-Scholes model of risk quantification. The end of Bretton Woods system in 1973, which enabled central banks to fix and regulate currency exchange rates, led to a system of floating exchange rates, in which the market would itself determine currency prices, in turn leading to an increase in volatility in currency prices. The Black-Scholes model, also developed in 1973, allowed investors to quantify volatility, or risk, of financial assets, leading to the development of a boom in the creation of derivative financial instruments.<sup>41</sup> As LiPuma and Lee argue, these changes to the global financial system in the 1970s helped transform it into a new and distinctive economic system that valorizes the circulation of capital over the production of commodities.<sup>42</sup>

Several significant implications can be drawn from this brief sketch of financialization. Firstly, finance capital is anticipatory or preemptive, in the sense that it anticipates and wagers upon future changes in asset prices. At the micro level, this preemptive anticipation is baked into the formal structure of credit, as well as of derivatives, while at the macro level, as Cédric Durand notes, “fictitious capital represents claims over wealth that is yet to be produced. Its expansion implies a growing pre-emption of future production.”<sup>43</sup> The temporal paradox of finance capital is, as Durand explains, that while future returns are preempted by present exchanges, suggesting increased flexibility and freedom today, the valorization of the present is increasingly dependent on the anticipation of a stable futurity that forecloses alternatives, producing an economic and temporal determinism with no alternative.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid 67-78. See also Costas Lapavistas, *Profiting Without Producing: How Finance Exploits Us All* (London: Verso: 2013), 2-4.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 5, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Durand, *Fictitious Capital*, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 50, 151, 155.

At the same time, a novel futurity is paradoxically also necessary for the expansion and continued growth of capital. The pricing of financial derivatives is predicated on the ability to statistically model price volatility on the basis of historical data regarding similar forms of risk, but as LiPuma and Lee cogently explain,

While any single derivative “predicts” or discounts the future, derivatives as a class of financial instruments significantly influence that future. Certainly, the calculus that agents use to determine the value of a derivative assumes that its effect on the future is so minimal as to be discounted in the discounting mechanism. However, while this may be more or less true with respect to an individual transaction, derivatives as a collective action transform the economic landscape.<sup>45</sup>

In short, a derivative itself is created by a financial agent who relies on prior historical performance data to calculate the derivative’s price, rightly discounting the possibility that the individual derivative itself will have a statistically significant impact on the market as a whole. Collectively, however, derivatives have a transformative effect, and can drastically and violently reshape the economies of entire nations. Derivatives thereby create the novel futurity they need, a futurity marked by ever-increasing volatility and leverageable risk, in order to continue expanding and circulating through the market. In this sense they function, like disciplinary diagrams or celestial constellations, to produce and seal the fates of the circumstances they organize and give order to. For Jameson, the peculiar temporal arrangement organized by finance capital finds its cultural expression not only temporally, but also spatially, through a postmodern aesthetic of fragmentation and renarrativization, in which the postmodern fragment is capable of seamlessly renarrativizing and producing meaning, as opposed to the “empty,” “meaningless,” and “autonomized” fragmentation of modernism.<sup>46</sup> Thus, postmodern fragmentation indexes the

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<sup>45</sup> LiPuma and Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*, 136.

<sup>46</sup> Jameson, “Culture and Finance Capital,” 264-5.

self-sustaining flow of abstracted and financialized capital through the global circuits of the economy, continually producing recombinations of the same as the form of the new.

Moreover, finance capital is not only preemptive and productive, but as the emblematic case of derivatives makes clear, also distinctively *figural*. Derivatives objectify statistically modeled risk, volatility, or in even more basic terms, price change and difference. These objects then circulate globally, and fetishistically, as though they are absolutely divorced from the underlying social conditions of risk that engender them (i.e. geopolitical strife or environmental crisis), but which in fact come to reshape, and often exacerbate, the very forms of risk that are underlying the derivatives themselves. LiPuma and Lee explain that

On the one hand, [the derivatives market] assumes that the analysis of a derivative can discount and quantify risk because the social reality that it models will remain constant over the life of any specific transaction. On the opposite hand, derivatives as a class of financial instruments are powerful because they transform that social reality and therefore the character of the risk that engenders the social interdependence of the principals....The pricing of derivatives thus presupposes that they simply reflect economic reality rather than having a hand in creating it, meaning that to the extent that the global market for derivatives, in concert with other social and historical forces, transforms political and economic conditions, it will be impossible to accurately calculate volatility and thus price a derivative accurately.<sup>47</sup>

Derivatives therefore produce the social reality that they purport only to objectively represent, and they do so by mosaically aggregating historical data into a single figural representation, which in turn functions as part of an aggregate assemblage to shape that underlying reality. They exemplify Deleuze's concept of the statement (which I argue below is closely related to his notion of the diagram) as a self-organizing function that produces and regulates possible organizational and material outcomes, and they also materialize the figural relations between the past and the future that are constitutive of Auerbach's concept of the *figura* as a phrase yoking

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<sup>47</sup> LiPuma and Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*, 136.

the historical past to the redemptive future. As LiPuma and Lee note, “the power of the financial system depends greatly on its power to produce the categories through which it is grasped.”<sup>48</sup> In the following sections, I lay out the significance of the concept of the diagram as a way of apprehending the self-reflexively generative nature of speculation, and then explain how the figure functions as an aesthetic and formal instantiation of that speculative diagram.

#### 1.4 Speculative Aesthetics

If value appears to be distinctively productive under finance capital, as exemplified by the case of derivatives, then so have representations of value, which have also become representational values. Therefore, the what is at stake in the financial turn is not just the representability or figurability of capital, but the capitalization of representability, as in the innovation of the Black-Scholes system, as a means of production of the real. Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle hint at this in characterizing cognitive mapping as a “forcing into being a certain kind of political visibility” and as a “force-field in which our conceptions of both modes of production and aesthetic regimes are put to the test,” but if capitalism is indeed “the true ground of being in our time,” then a more robust theoretical apparatus capable of giving expression to the very ontogenic expressiveness of capitalism as a metaphysics is required.<sup>49</sup> Toscano and Kinkle note, at the tail end of their study, that “Having surveyed many of the ‘maps’ thrown up by anxious desire to represent our mode of production, it is difficult not to conclude that, bar some inspiring exceptions, capital has been a theme or content, not an occasion to truly rethink and refunction our available genres, styles, figures and forms, to recast our methods of inquiry in

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>49</sup> Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015), 10, 22, 3.



the arts as in the sciences of society.”<sup>50</sup> But if this is the case, it is in part due to the limitations of the very logic of representation that is taken to bear on the aesthetic objects that are interpreted as examples of cognitive mapping.

In other words, ‘mapping’ must be reconceived as a productive rendering of space-time in the world-system, rather than as some kind of passively representational act of orientation within a larger system. It must become, in Donald Mackenzie’s suggestive description of the productive function of financial models, “an engine, not a camera.”<sup>51</sup> This is in part why the concept of the figural plays a central role in this study, since it more effectively captures the chiasmatic, generative tension between words and images, between representations and capital, and between the past, present, and future. The concept of the figural is also grounded in the claim on a formal and conceptual parallelism between the related logics of the commodity and of financialized capital, as forms of representation, and W.J.T. Mitchell’s concept of the ‘imagetext’: a set of image-text relations in which it is not the differences between the image and the text, but rather the differences those differences make—a second-order abstraction in which incommensurable dimensions, image and text, line and letter, become commensurable with each other.<sup>52</sup> Hence the importance of the figural in situating and compositing these conceptual elements in the project’s broader analytical framework.

If, as Toscano and Kinkle provocatively suggest, “Capitalism, after all, is a religion of everyday life, an actually-existing metaphysics,” then what kind of ‘actually-existing

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>51</sup> Donald MacKenzie, *An Engine, Not a Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

<sup>52</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 91.

metaphysics' is it?<sup>53</sup> I would suggest that LiPuma's and Lee's account of derivatives as productive of social reality, as well as Shonkwiler's account of financialized capital, as a process of abstractification and concretization that realizes what had been unreal by trading on the difference between hypotheticals and actuals, is Whiteheadian *après la lettre*, and that Whitehead's process philosophy, and in particular his inversion of Kant, provides just the kind of metaphysical account of concretization, abstraction, and *process* necessary to grasp the profound representational and aesthetic challenges brought about by finance capital.

In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead argues that “The philosophy or organism is the inversion of Kant's philosophy. The *Critique of Pure Reason* describes how the process by which subjective data pass into the appearance of an objective world. The philosophy or organism seeks to describe how objective data pass into subjective satisfaction. For Kant, the world emerges from the subject; for the philosophy of organism, the subject emerges from the world—a ‘superject’ rather than a ‘subject.’”<sup>54</sup> Instead of beginning, as Kant does, with the subject as the center of the metaphysical universe, Whitehead takes the event, as an unfolding of contiguous processes, as the fundamental object of his philosophical investigation. Consequently, Whitehead inverts the order of Kant's critiques, placing aesthetics, rather than ontology or ethics, at the center of philosophical inquiry, arguing that affect (what Whitehead terms “emotion”) is the metaphysical ground for these other concepts, rather than vice versa. As Whitehead explains,

The philosophy or organism aspires to construct a critique of pure feeling, in the philosophical position which Kant put his *Critique of Pure Reason*. This should also supercede the remaining *Critiques* required in the Kantian philosophy. Thus in the organic philosophy Kant's ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’ becomes a distorted

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<sup>53</sup> Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 23.

<sup>54</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (Corrected Edition), ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978 [1929]), 88.

fragment of what should have been his main topic. The datum includes its own interconnections, and the first stage of the process of feeling is the reception into the responsive conformity of feeling whereby the datum, which is mere potentiality, becomes the individualized basis for a complex unity of realization.<sup>55</sup>

In other words, Whitehead's process philosophy takes aesthetics, and more specifically Kant's aesthetic of the beautiful, which accounts for how subjects can engage in judgment without a determinate concept, through a 'free play of the cognitive faculties,' as the primary explanatory mechanism through which reality, which is fundamentally composed of affective "prehensions," constitutes itself and changes over time. Steven Shaviro explains that for Whitehead, "Beauty is therefore an *event*, a process, rather than a condition or a state."<sup>56</sup>

Marxist criticism, including Toscano and Kinkle, as well as Jameson's writings of the 1990s, figure global capital as a sublime and unthinkable totality, but Whitehead orients us towards a different set of questions regarding aesthetics and capital by providing precisely the kind of metaphysics that finance capital seems to require. Capitalism, as Marx's theory of the commodity suggests, is already a system predicated on a form of representational exchange that operates via abstraction. Finance capital raises this abstraction to a higher power, by allowing monetary abstractions to represent and exchange for each other, and by incorporating processes of speculative judgment about the future into the very fabric of the present. What is needed now is perhaps not an account of how individual subjects map their relation to the sublime totality, but an account of how processes of aesthetic representation and judgment (which is also to say *events* of Whiteheadean *beauty*) precede and inform processes of subject formation, constituting

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>56</sup> Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 4.

the very economic and social fabric necessary as a prerequisite to the consequent production of subjectivities which can strive to apprehend the sublime reaches of global capital.

The commodity is an aesthetic object, in the precise sense that Marx provides in his formula for the relationship between exchange-value and use-value, in which “exchange-values cannot be anything other than the mode of expression, the ‘form of appearance,’ of a content distinguishable from it.”<sup>57</sup> That the value of the commodity appears in the form of its physical and sensuous properties is the basis of commodity fetishism. Exchange-value is an abstract quantity, while use-value is qualitative, and therefore inescapably aesthetic. Commodity fetishism occurs when exchange-value mistakenly appears *as* use-value, as a property of things themselves. As Marx explains, “The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.”<sup>58</sup> In a particularly Whiteheadian turn, Marx immediately goes on to explain commodity fetishism through an analogy to vision:

In the same way, the impression made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye. In the act of seeing, of course, light is really transmitted from one thing, the external object, to another thing, the eye. It is a physical relation between things. As against this, the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977 [1867]), 127.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-5.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

Here, Marx analogizes commodity fetishism to an outmoded theory of vision which takes the sensible qualities of objects to be properties of the object in themselves, rather than subjective effects of the physical relationship between objects and perceiving subjects. Whitehead traces this manner of thinking about perception to Descartes, whose “unquestioned acceptance of the subject-predicate dogma forced him into a representative theory of perception.”<sup>60</sup> For Whitehead, this erroneous subject-predicate theory of perception wreaks havoc throughout modern philosophy: “All modern philosophy hinges round the difficulty of describing the world in terms of subject and predicate, substance and quality, particular and universal. The result always does violence to that immediate experience which we express in our actions, our hopes, our sympathies, our purposes, and which we enjoy in spite of our lack of phrases for its verbal analysis.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, the subject-predicate model of perceptual experience inadequately explains the actual nature of perceptual events, in a manner that unduly isolates, objectifies, and indeed fetishizes objects of perception. In actuality, for Whitehead, “We find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures; whereas, under some disguise or other, orthodox philosophy can only introduce us to solitary substances...”<sup>62</sup> Whitehead echoes Marx in asserting the definitively *social* nature of perceptual relation, and in ways that produce a metaphysical resonance between the two: Marx’s transubstantiation of qualitative social relations into abstract, material quanta, and Whitehead’s intensively materialist theory of the ‘society’ as a ‘nexus’ of actual entities affectively ‘prehending’ each other.<sup>63</sup> Through this juxtaposition, Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism comes close to the form of argument Whitehead uses to

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<sup>60</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 49.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 34.

critique the subject-predicate model of experience, and hence to enact the latter's aesthetic reversal of Kant's metaphysics. What Marx, no less than Whitehead, endeavors to explain is the manner in which economic relations of exchange are always imbued with relations of processual sociality and aesthetic judgment 'without criteria,' relations which, through the process of exchange, become abstracted into discrete, quantitative relations between subjects and objects, perceivers and objects of property, that is, "forms of appearance" in precisely Kant's own technical usage of the term as "that which allows the manifold of appearance to be ordered in certain relations."<sup>64</sup>

By making affective experience primary, Shaviro suggests, Whitehead comes to anticipate Deleuze as a philosopher of becoming.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, Whitehead also becomes a predecessor of Rancière, whose concept of the distribution of the sensible—"the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it"—can be appreciated fully in its aesthetic implications.<sup>66</sup> Rancière is correct to point out that "there is an aesthetics at the core of politics," and that the political nature of experience is fundamentally inseparable from its aesthetic nature. But if "politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time," then the metastasis of conspiracy's aesthetic form into an ontologically generative mode of epistemology entails a raising of the stakes, since we are no longer talking simply about the partition between the visible and the invisible, but about a more

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<sup>64</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. And ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1781]), 172-3.

<sup>65</sup> Shaviro, *Without Criteria*, 15, 47.

<sup>66</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 7.

profoundly ontological partition between what is authorized or permitted to exist and what is not.<sup>67</sup> To the extent that the phantasmagorias of financial value and speculation are relevant epistemic formations then, they are also constitutive forms, facilitating and enacting the distribution of the sensible as ontogenic aesthetic forces. This is, of course, already implicit in Rancière's characterization of aesthetics, which itself echoes Shaviro. Rancière states that "aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense—re-examined perhaps by Foucault—as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience."<sup>68</sup> Thus, Whitehead helps us understand mapping precisely in its processual aspect, as an '-ing'; an aesthetic process of schematic *and material* formation, in which the schematic and material dimensions are mutually immanent to each other.

### 1.5 The Schema, Diagram, The Abstract Machine

This immanence of schematicity and materiality is taken up most fully and explicitly by Deleuze, in his concept of the diagram. We have already encountered one variation on Deleuze's concept of the diagram, in the form of his distinguishing, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, between statements and propositions. At its most basic, Deleuze uses the concept of the diagram, which appears throughout his oeuvre in many guises and through many diverse examples, as a means of revising and reorganizing the relationship between what Kant called schemata and images of objects, or forms of appearance in empirical sense perception. As Melissa McMahon explains, both Deleuze's and Kant's philosophical projects share an investment in

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

problematizing the concept of difference in terms of the difference between the conceptual and the non-conceptual rather than between concepts themselves, between the intelligible and the sensible, and between the logical and the aesthetic.<sup>69</sup> In Kant, this difference is negotiated by the notion of synthetic a priori concepts of the understanding which, like problems in geometry, “[require] a material process of construction or transformation, in the course of which properties of a figure come to light which cannot be deduced from its concept.”<sup>70</sup> McMahon argues that “Deleuze is clearly inspired by the geometrical or ‘schematic’ understanding of a concept as a *diagrammatic mode of occupying space and time*: the idea that a thing’s concept or essence is a set of distinctive points or movements that mark out a territory, instead of being a purely intelligible identity.”<sup>71</sup> Deleuze’s innovation, however, is to follow Whitehead in insisting on the primacy of aesthetic experience, as a material movement in space-time that conjoins bodies and produces images, which precedes and informs the other cognitive faculties.<sup>72</sup> In doing so, as Shaviro claims, he transforms Kant’s notion of the regulative idea into the concept of the virtual:

A regulative idea does not determine any particular solution in advance. But operating as a guideline, or frame of reference, the regulative idea works *problematically*, to establish the conditions out of which solutions, or “decisions,” can emerge. In positing a process of this sort, Kant invents the notion of the transcendental realm, or of what Deleuze will call the virtual...Deleuze himself does what he credits Nietzsche with doing: he “stands [Kantian] critique on its feet, just as Marx does with the [Hegelian] dialectic.”<sup>73</sup>

Hence, the diagram, in Deleuze’s thought, performs a function that is analogous to the Kantian schema, but differs fundamentally in that its trajectory moves from unconditioned apperception

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<sup>69</sup> Melissa McMahon, “Immanuel Kant,” in *Deleuze’s Philosophical Lineage*, ed. Graham Jones and John Rolfe (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 87.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>73</sup> Shaviro, *Without Criteria*, 33-4.



to conditioned reason, rather than the reverse, and in its mediation between virtual and actual, rather than the possible and the real. Shaviro explains this inversion by claiming that “To convert Kant from transcendental idealism to transcendental empiricism, and from a juridico-legislative project to a constructivist one, is to move from the possible to the virtual, and from merely formal conditions of possibility to concrete conditions of actualization.”<sup>74</sup> This in turn entails a different function for the schematic diagram, which for Deleuze operates as a self-organizing, doubly articulated hinge between pure matter, movement, and sensation on the one hand, and form and intelligibility on the other.

For Deleuze, the diagram, or figural, explains how molar structures can form out of molecular assemblages. As I have already suggested, this ‘problem of difference,’ as McMahon calls it, is found across Deleuze’s thought, and in many guises. It is present in *The Logic of Sense*, where Deleuze claims that “*Sense is both the expressible and the expressed of the proposition, and the attribute of the state of affairs*. It turns one side toward things and one side toward propositions....It is exactly the boundary between propositions and things....It is in this sense that it is an ‘event’: *on the condition that the event is not confused with its spatio-temporal realization in a state of affairs*.”<sup>75</sup> Later in *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze reiterates this problem in terms of representation, stating that “Representation must encompass an expression which it does not represent, but without which it itself would not be “comprehensive,” and would have truth only by chance or from outside.”<sup>76</sup> In this passage, Deleuze frames the Kantian problem of the schema, or the figure that contains its own regulative but non-deducible properties, as a problem

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>75</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990 [1969]), 22.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

of representational signification: what immanent logic distinguishes sense from nonsense? Here, Deleuze's conception of the diagram, though he does not use that terminology, comes close both to Lyotard's theorization of the figural, and to Auerbach's historically-oriented account of the *figura*, which will be discussed at greater length below.

The problem of difference is also phrased, by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, along explicitly linguistic lines, in their discussion of the double articulation and its relationship to Hjelmslev's model of the sign. Here, the concept of the double articulation is leveraged to explain how the divide between matter and intelligibility is traversed:

The first articulation chooses or deducts, from unstable particle-flows, metastable molecular or quasi-molecular units (*substances*) upon which it imposes a statistical order of connections and succession (*forms*). The second articulation establishes functional, compact, stable structures (*forms*), and constructs the molar compounds in which these structures are simultaneously actualized.<sup>77</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari go on to explain how Hjelmslev's sign model, which decomposes the sign not only into signifier and signified, but into forms and substances of content and expression, thereby producing an account of processes of stratification that transcend the narrow confines of linguistics to isomorphically encompass all manner of modes of material organization and formation, as what they term an abstract machine. Discussing regimes of signs, they write:

We must therefore arrive at something in the assemblage itself that is still more profound than these sides [of the assemblage, content and expression] and can account for both the forms in presupposition, forms of expression or regimes of signs (semiotic systems) and forms of content or regimes of bodies (physical systems). This is what we call the *abstract machine*, which constitutes and conjugates all of the assemblage's cutting edges of deterritorialization. An abstract machine in itself is not physical or corporeal, any more than it is semiotic: it is *diagrammatic*....The abstract machine is pure Matter-Function—a diagram independent of the forms and substances, expressions and contents it will distribute.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013 [1980]), 47.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-4.

Thus, the diagram is an abstract machine, but it is not, or not simply, material or physical in nature. Rather, it is a schematic mechanism that regulates the boundary between sensation and intelligibility—conjugating an assemblage’s deterritorializations—that is virtually immanent to material process of formation. It is not a figure, but rather figural, in its regulation of the differences and contiguities constitutive of intelligible forms. Like the Foucauldian statement, it functionally organizes and distributes forms, substances, expressions and contents, generating and delimiting the actual articulable propositions.

The implications of Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism, and its diagrammatic schematism, for visual culture and moving image studies are most clearly expressed through his interpretive readings of Foucault and Francis Bacon. Deleuze identifies, in *Discipline and Punish*, a shift in Foucault’s thinking from the earlier period of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and prior, in which Foucault posited both discursive statements as well as non-discursive environmental structures and institutions, to a conception in which even putatively non-discursive, purely visual structures are capable of producing effects analogous yet irreducible, to discourse: “What *The Archaeology* recognized but still only designated negatively, as non-discursive environments, is given its positive form in *Discipline and Punish*, a form that haunted the whole of Foucault’s work: the form of the visible, as opposed to the form of whatever can be articulated.”<sup>79</sup> Deleuze argues that the major significance of *Discipline and Punish*, and especially of its keystone example of the panopticon, lies in the realization that power operates through non-discursive formations like architectural structures and organizations of visibility and invisibility just as much as it does through discursive statements, decrees, and other linguistic

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<sup>79</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, 32.

utterances. In this sense, Foucault follows Lyotard in emphasizing the chiasmus between images and discourse, albeit as a site of the exercise of power, as much as of desire. Deleuze notes that Foucault terms this capacity for figural formation a diagram, explaining that

The *diagram* is no longer an auditory or visual archive but a map, a cartography that is coextensive with the whole social field. It is an abstract machine. It is defined by its informal functions and matter and in terms of form makes no distinction between content and expression, a discursive formation and a non-discursive formation. It is a machine that is almost blind and mute, even though it makes others see and speak.<sup>80</sup>

For Deleuze, the Foucauldian diagram does not merely describe the means through which power finds its expression, but is also, perhaps more fundamentally, the mechanism through which material and social realities, as stable if contingent forms or structures, are immanently constituted through ongoing processes of formation:

It never functions in order to represent a persisting world but produces a new kind of reality, a new model of truth. It is neither the subject of history, nor does it survey history. It makes history by unmaking preceding realities and significations, constituting hundreds of points of emergence or creativity, unexpected conjunctions or improbable continuums. It doubles history with a sense of continual evolution.<sup>81</sup>

Power, for Deleuze, both constitutes and produces a diagram immanent to the material field upon which it exerts epistemic and historical force, a figure cohering into stable diagrammatic forms of multiple forces in mutual tension, thereby producing the conditions under which truth can be thought by sculpting relations between the visible and the articulable, the sensible and the sayable. Thus, the diagram provides a conceptual means for understanding not only how forces can congeal into more or less stable forms, but also how historical strata are thereby formed, and how knowledge/power relations come to be stabilized in a particular historical configuration.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 35.

If Deleuze deploys the notion of the diagrammatic figure as a political and historical concept, it is also no less importantly an aesthetic concept in his thought. In *The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze applies the concept of the figural to the painting of Francis Bacon, using Bacon's triptych designs and application of "free marks" to show how the body, as a temporarily stable form, even if subject to distorting forces and modulations, can emerge out of pure aesthetic force. As Deleuze explains,

"The diagram is thus the operative set of asignifying and nonrepresentative lines and zones, line-strokes and color-patches.... They mark out possibilities of fact, but do not yet constitute a fact (the pictorial fact). In order to be converted into a fact, in order to evolve into a Figure, they must be reinjected into the visual whole; but it is precisely through the action of these marks that the visual whole will cease to be an optical organization; it will give the eye another power, as well as an object that will no longer be figurative."<sup>82</sup>

In reviewing the trajectory of Deleuze's accounts of the diagram, we can see that it is always both aesthetic, insofar as it consists in aesthetic forces that cohere into forms, and political, insofar as those forms are also distributions of visibility, and by extension of power. It is, as Deleuze claims, "the presentation of the relations between forces unique to a particular formation; it is the distribution of the power to affect and the power to be affected; it is the mixing of non-formalized pure functions and unformed pure matter."<sup>83</sup> In other words, the diagram designates the aesthetico-political zone where force and form, affects and passions, function and matter coincide.

## 1.6 Figural Constellations

In order to assess this aesthetic production of the real in and through processes of financialization, and in order to locate its expression in both practices of everyday life and in

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<sup>82</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005 [1981]), 83.

<sup>83</sup> Deleuze, *Foucault*, 72-3.

aesthetic texts that figure it, we need a theoretical concept that can account for ontological production in both its aesthetic and historical dimensions. As I have already suggested in the discussion of *Blow Up* above, the concept we need and which I shall argue unites these two features, is the figural. The key significance of the concept of the figural is its ability to articulate the schematic aspect of the Deleuzian diagram with the actualized aesthetic forms to which it is immanent. In doing so, it also provides a crucial fulcrum between the thought of Deleuze and that of the Frankfurt School and its fellow-travelers, particularly Auerbach, Kracauer, and Benjamin. In this section, I provide an account of the figural from the perspective of these thinkers that works to connect their understanding of the relationship between aesthetic form and history to Deleuze's diagrammatic schematism.

There are many important differences between Deleuze on the one hand and Auerbach, Kracauer, and Benjamin on the other, perhaps most importantly their markedly different views on the centrality of the human subject in relation to social structures of knowledge production. In bringing the concepts of the figural and the diagram together, however, I attempt to highlight the continuities between these two distinct historical eras and intellectual contexts for thinking the relationship between individuals, knowledge, aesthetics, and power, and the particular utility these continuities possess for grasping the representational, cultural, and diagrammatic implications of financialization. It is worth recalling here Foucault's comment that "If I had known about the Frankfurt School in time, I would have been saved a great deal of work. I would not have said a certain amount of nonsense and would not have taken so many false trails trying not to get lost, when the Frankfurt School had already cleared the way."<sup>84</sup> It is also worth

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<sup>84</sup> Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994 [1986]), 4.

emphasizing the similarities between the intellectual projects of social theory and poststructuralist critique: in profound ways, both projects stand as challenges to Kant, who stands as a central philosophical interlocutor for both the Frankfurt-affiliated thinkers and the poststructuralists. This is why the Whiteheadian inversion of Kant's critiques, which places aesthetics at the center of the critique of the relationship between the subject (or Whitehead's 'superject') and knowledge, stands as a key metaphysical and ideological intervention, and why the figure and the diagram are themselves central to the (itself likewise aestheticized) relationship between capital and contemporary culture. In this sense, Whitehead's revision of Kant, taken up by Deleuze, offers a dialectical fulfillment of the promise of Kant's metaphysics that parallels the Marxian inversion of Hegel. It provides what Adorno, Horkheimer, and the other thinkers associated with the Institute for Social Research strove to theorize: the ground for a thoroughly materialist theory of society that would account for the ways in which social structures come into being and become determinate epistemological and ideological structures shaping the behavior of individuals. It also explains why the aesthetic is so central, not only to Benjamin and Adorno, in their belief in the power of fragmentary, mass cultural commodities to disclose aspects of the larger social structure in which they were produced, but also to Lyotard and Deleuze, in their respective intellectual valorizations of the differend and the diagram.

As Adrian Martin points out, the figural analyses of historical time and perceptual bricolage, as practiced by Kracauer and Benjamin, owe a substantial conceptual debt to the influence of Erich Auerbach.<sup>85</sup> Auerbach's work on biblical figural interpretation, immortalized in *Mimesis* but articulated most explicitly in his essay "Figura" from 1938, traces the

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<sup>85</sup> Adrian Martin, *Last Day Every Day: Figural Thinking from Auerbach and Kracauer to Agamben and Benez* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2012), 15-24.

development of the concept of the *figura* from Ancient Latin rhetoric to medieval Christian interpretation of the bible. On Auerbach's account, the Latin *figura* first described a rhetorical device in which a word or phrase with one meaning insinuated another, but without negating the first, explicit meaning of the phrase: "The aim of a figure is not, unlike in all tropes, to substitute words for other words; figures can be formed from words used in their proper meaning and order."<sup>86</sup> Over time, this figural relationship of a term to its implication transformed from a purely rhetorical device into a metaphysical attitude towards historical time. Writing about medieval biblical interpretation, Auerbach notes that "The fulfillment is often designated as *veritas*...and the figure correspondingly as *umbra* or *imago*; but both shadow and truth are abstract only in reference to the meaning first concealed, then revealed; they are concrete in reference to the things or persons which appear as vehicles of meaning."<sup>87</sup> He explains that "Moses is no less historical and real because he is an *umbra* or *figura* of Christ, and Christ, the fulfillment, is no abstract idea, but also a historical reality. Real historical figures are to be interpreted spiritually (*spiritaliter interpretari*), but the interpretation points to a carnal, hence historical fulfillment (*carnaliter adimpleri*: *De resurrectione*, 20)—for the truth has become history or flesh."<sup>88</sup> As Auerbach defines it, then,

Figural prophecy implies the interpretation of one worldly event through another; the first signifies the second, and the second fulfills the first. Both remain historical events; yet both, looked at in this way, have something provisional and incomplete about them; they point to one another and both point to something in the future, something still to come, which will be the actual, real, and definitive event.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1938]), 26.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.



On Auerbach's account, for the practitioner of figural interpretation history "remains forever a figure, cloaked and needful of interpretation."<sup>90</sup> One consequence of this philosophy of history is that it comprehends historical time as essentially conspiratorial in nature. Auerbach distinguishes between figural interpretation and the "modern view," in which the latter is distinguished in terms of the self-sufficiency of historical events in a linear causal process, as opposed to figural interpretation, in which both historical phenomena and their interpretation are structured by an a priori theological given, a conceptual diagram into which historical phenomena can be slotted.<sup>91</sup>

What Kracauer and Benjamin add to Auerbach's account of the figural is firstly, the notion that figural interpretation can coincide with a view of history as a contingent, materialist process. Secondly, they reimagine the raw material of interpretation, which for Auerbach's own medieval interpreters remains history as revealed by scripture, positing a mode of figural interpretation that can deal directly and literally with spatialized images, rather than Auerbach's *imagos*. Taken together, the Frankfurt School thinkers modernize Auerbach's medieval scholars, showing how the concept of figural interpretation can articulate spatial relations that are essentially aesthetic to temporal relations that are essentially historical, producing a matrix of historical consciousness and facilitating cognitive mapping. More than this, however, the redemptive, messianic potential of photography and cinema described by Kracauer, and Benjamin's concept of "collective bodily innervation" as a biomechanical mechanism through which adaptations in the human sensorium are possible on a social scale, suggest that the stakes

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 59.

of the figural are more than merely representational, and that figuration stages itself as a ground for collective social transformation.<sup>92</sup>

In his essay on photography, Kracauer distinguishes photography from natural memory and from traditional art forms by claiming that memory images distill the data of sense perception into a representation of one's "personal history":

This history omits all characteristics and determinations that do not relate in a significant sense to truth intended by a liberated consciousness. How a person represents this history does not depend purely on his or her natural constitution or on the pseudo-coherence of his or her individuality; thus, only fragments of these assets are included in his or her history. This history is like a *monogram* [emphasis in original] that condenses the name into a single graphic figure which is meaningful as an ornament.<sup>93</sup>

For Kracauer, these memory images, which omit insignificant information and reduce relevant fragments into a single coherent, unified, ornamental figure, are distinguished from photography, which he sees as refusing to do the work of reducing perceptive elements into a single image, and instead "stockpiling the elements," and capturing "only the residuum that history has discharged."<sup>94</sup> Unlike the memory image, photographic images, Kracauer asserts, are "unredeemed" images of nature, collections of all the residual fragments that do not congeal into an image of subjectivity.<sup>95</sup>

Yet photography, precisely because of its ability to render the negative space to the memory image, or handcrafted image's positive image of distilled experience, thereby becomes charged with a powerful dialectical potential. Since photography is 'unredeemed' and does not automatically perform the task of transforming sense data into a signifying figure, it opens up a

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<sup>92</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 132-8.

<sup>93</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 51.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 52, 55.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

possibility to reveal physical reality to the observer, but a physical reality unmediated by the condensing function of memory or aesthetic labor. Its ability to, as Kracauer puts it, “disclose this previously unexamined *foundation of nature*,” [emphasis in original] thereby “promotes a conflict of consciousness with nature...the reflection of the reality that has slipped away from it.”<sup>96</sup> For Kracauer then, photography’s unique ability, and its political task, is to disclose unredeemed reality, to force a conflict between consciousness and natural sensory information, and in doing so to reveal the historical process by which monogrammatic figures are produced in the first place, and to demonstrate the “provisional status of all given configurations.”<sup>97</sup> As Miriam Hansen explains,

Understood as a general warehousing of nature, photography provides an archive that makes visible, in a sensually and bodily experienced way, both the fallout of modernity and the possibility of doing it over, of organizing things differently. This archive, though, is anything but easy to access and navigate, it is rather an *an*-archive—a heap of broken images—that lends itself to the task precisely because it lacks any obvious and coherent organizational system.<sup>98</sup>

If memory performs the work of figuration, collecting, organizing, and amalgamating fragmentary perceptions and thoughts into memory images, photography’s refusal to perform this task—and both its ability to show it up as a historical process and its ability to solicit a self-conscious act of historical assemblage on the part of the observer—indicates the centrality of figuration as a simultaneously aesthetic and historical process. Through the self-conscious labor of figural assemblage, the contingent and unredeemed reality of technologized perception can be reconfigured, redeemed *differently*, and perhaps even progressively improved.

Kracauer’s vision of the potential of photography, to pull a historicizing, materialist consciousness out of the detritus of the mundane collection of insignificant fragments is echoed,

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 36.

in a more general way, in Benjamin's philosophy of history. Perhaps most famously, Benjamin's own figure of Klee's angel as an angel of history, wreckage of time piling up at its feet, evokes both the apocalyptic deluge of commodities under technologized capitalism, as well as the messianic hope for future redemption. Whereas Kracauer is more cautious in his estimation of photography in 1929, by the time of the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* in 1940, a sense of desperate urgency pervades Benjamin's writing: "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again....For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image."<sup>99</sup> If Kracauer coined the turn of phrase designating photography as the "go-for-broke game of history," Benjamin's writing cashes it in for the greatest affective impact. His notion of *jetztzeit*, the "presence of the now" which must be forcibly extracted, even "blasted out" from images of the past, gives poetic philosophical expression to Kracauer's possibility of photographic redemption, and reimagines it as a shocking, violent moment of annihilative redemption, rather than as a careful process of curative collection.

Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* present the dramatic fulfillment of his theorizing about historical figuration, but it also gestures backwards to prior, more fragmentary figures of and in Benjamin's thought. While the breadth of Benjamin's thought on the nature of history is far beyond the scope of this analysis, one key concept—the constellation—can help illuminate not only Benjamin's investment in the figural, but his parallels with Deleuze as a reinterpreter of Kant. The concept of the constellation runs through Benjamin's writing, from his early study of the *Trauerspiel* to the late *Theses* mentioned above. Benjamin begins *On the*

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<sup>99</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings, Volume 4*, 390-1.

*Origins of German Tragic Drama*, famously, with an “Epistemo-Critical Introduction” that frames, in a distinctly post-Kantian manner, the possibility and limits of knowledge about the book’s historical and textual subject matter. In particular, he frames his introduction in terms of the relationship between ideas, concepts, and empirical reality: “Through their mediating role concepts enable phenomena to participate in the existence of ideas....As the salvation of phenomena by means of ideas takes place, so too does the representation of ideas through the medium of empirical reality. For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in their concept: as the configuration of these elements.”<sup>100</sup> Benjamin explicitly follows Kant in claiming not only that concepts mediate the experience of empirical reality or sensible apperception, but that ideas themselves, like Kant’s categories of pure understanding, cannot be represented in themselves, but are only indirectly accessible to thought insofar as they are present in particular, actualized empirical apperceptions. Benjamin goes onto elaborate on this point: “The set of concepts which assist in the representation of an idea lend it actuality as such a configuration. For phenomena are not incorporated in ideas. They are not contained in them. Ideas are, rather, their objective, virtual arrangement, their objective interpretation.”<sup>101</sup> Importantly, the idea itself is instantiated at the level of the *arrangement* of phenomena, as a schematic regulating principle governing the legibility of empirical forms. Thus, Benjamin’s well-known dictum that “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars” analogizes the idea to the formal configuration and imagistic legibility of a given set of objectively existing data.<sup>102</sup> As Graeme Gilloch explains, “The idea is neither a

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<sup>100</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998 [1928]), 34.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

pile of instances nor a mere complex of precepts. Rather, it is a pattern of finely crafted, carefully positioned fragments composed by concepts: a mosaic....The idea is constituted in the particular formation or pattern adopted by a set of fragments, and manifests itself only within them.”<sup>103</sup>

The concept of the constellation, as a schematic principle of formation, answers Benjamin’s even earlier call “to create on the basis of the Kantian system a concept of knowledge to which a concept of experience corresponds, of which the knowledge is the teachings.”<sup>104</sup> Its general form, as Samuel Weber claims, is reflected in Benjamin’s idiosyncratic usage of the German *-barkeit* suffix in his most pivotal conceptual coinages, and anticipates Deleuze’s concept of the virtual:

If Deleuze, as we have seen, describes “structure as the reality of the virtual,” one could say that Benjamin construes the virtual as the reality of structure—here, the concept. The mark of this virtualization of the concept is Benjamin’s distinctive use of the German suffix *-bar*, which in English would have to be translated either as *-able* (or *-ible*)....To recapitulate, what results is a series of concepts that are all constructed around this suffix: “Criticizability,” “Translatability,” “Citability,” “Reproducibility,” and “Recognizability” in the *Arcades Project*; and “impartability” in the essay on language. These are Benjamin’s *-barkeiten*, his “*-abilities*,” which define his major concepts in terms of what Derrida has called *structural possibility* rather than in view of their actual realization. The philosophical predecessor of this unusual move is probably to be found in Kant’s use of the suffix *-mäßigkeit* in the *Critique of the Power to Judge*. It is no accident that this formulation is invented by Kant in order to articulate a type of judgment that provides no actual knowledge, determines nothing, and is therefore not cognitive, precisely to the extent that it remains tied to a certain *singularity*.<sup>105</sup>

Weber explicitly links Benjamin’s terminological emphasis on the structural possibility inherent in the process of conceptual formation both to Kant’s earlier concept of the faculty, and to

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<sup>103</sup> Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 70.

<sup>104</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” in *Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 109.

<sup>105</sup> Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s –Abilities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 39.

Deleuze's later concept of the virtual as the field of structuration immanent to the actual. In other words, Benjamin's "abilities," of which the legibility of the constellation is a self-reflexively (doubly articulated) example *par excellence*, are schematic in the same way that the Deleuzian diagram is schematic; the constellation is the diagram, and both are actualized in and through particular historical figures.

The diagrammatic and historically mediated nature of Benjamin's concept of the constellation is clarified in his short essay "Doctrine of the Similar" from 1933, in which he links the legibility of astrological constellations to the mimetic faculty. Not only does Benjamin claim that the mimetic faculty has a history, "in both the phylogenetic and ontogenetic sense," and that "play is to a great extent its school," but crucially that "As researchers into old traditions, we must take account of the possibility that sensuous shape-giving took place—meaning that objects had a mimetic character—where today we are no longer capable even of suspecting it. For example in the constellations of the stars."<sup>106</sup> Here, the concept of the constellation metaphorically yokes "sensuous shape-giving" to meaning, and ultimately to specific courses of historical action and behavior. Benjamin terms this relationship between the human and celestial realms a "nonsensuous similarity," a relationship which also obtains, for Benjamin, in writing between "what is said and what is meant, but also between what is written and what is meant, and equally between the spoken and the written."<sup>107</sup> Here, Benjamin comes tantalizingly close to anticipating not only the notion of the diagram, but the Foucauldian concepts of discourse, genealogy, and power:

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<sup>106</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," in *Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 2: 1931-1934*, ed. Michael W Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 694-5. This essay anticipates Benjamin's contemporaneous and more well-known essay "On the Mimetic Faculty."

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 696-7.

The most important of these ties may, however, be the one mentioned last—that between what is written and what is said. For the similarity which reigns here is comparatively the most nonsensuous. It is also the one which takes the longest to be reached. And the attempt to represent the actual history of this similarity can hardly be undertaken without a glance into the history of its birth, however impenetrable the darkness that is still spread over it today. The most recent graphology has taught us to recognize, in handwriting, images—or, more precisely, picture puzzles—that the unconscious of the writer conceals in his writing . . . Script has become, like language, an archive of nonsensuous similarities, of nonsensuous correspondences.<sup>108</sup>

Thus, Benjamin's figural notion of nonsensuous similarity, the principle operating between the perceiving subject and the legible constellation, functions discursively, articulating what is written to what is meant in a historically mutable manner, one that can be interpreted to excavate the unconscious processes at work in the formation, and all in a way that is, as Benjamin makes clear, immanent to the semiotic function of language as communication: "Thus, the literal text of the script is the sole basis on which the picture puzzle can form itself. Thus, the nexus of meaning which resides in the sounds of the sentence is the basis from which something similar can become apparent out of a sound, flashing up in an instant."<sup>109</sup>

If the Benjaminian constellation shares with the Deleuzian diagram its schematic aspect, it differs in its historicity. Although historical duration and change is implicit in Deleuze's reading of Foucault, Benjamin makes it a central facet of the function of the constellation as a philosophical concept. "Doctrine of the Similar" ends with Benjamin stating that "...the astrologer reads the constellation from the stars in the sky; simultaneously, he reads the future or fate from it."<sup>110</sup> To read a constellation, then, is to engage in a kind of speculative divination that figurally produces a sense of historical determinacy that is immanent to the image itself.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 697.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.



Elsewhere, Benjamin clarifies that such images, which he terms dialectical images, bear a figural relationship to historical time:

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical...<sup>111</sup>

For Benjamin, the formation of constellations is dialectical, in the sense that it conjoins opposites or extremes together, figural in the sense that what is produced is a relationship between two points in historical time, and historical in the sense that the relationship between the historical elements in the image is a juxtapositional and qualitative, rather than strictly linear-quantitative one. This fragment in turn gestures toward Benjamin's ultimate stance in the historical *Theses*, in which

Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad....He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history; thus, he blasts a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework.<sup>112</sup>

Ultimately, Benjamin advances a program of constructivist historical materialism that, like Kracauer's cautiously utopian view of the potential of photography, calls for the violent, shocking reorganization of schematic constellations into new and explicitly revolutionary forms.

It is extremely ironic then, or perhaps only extremely dialectical, that the apotheosis of Benjamin's philosophy of history, along with Kracauer's and Auerbach's, lies precisely at the

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<sup>111</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 463 [N3,1].

<sup>112</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 396.

center of contemporary capitalism as such, in the go-for-broke game of speculative risk quantification, where configurations of economic and social risk can be reconfigured into profitable, and putatively risk-dispersing global constellations. In this sense, financial derivatives offer a paradigmatic example of the Benjaminian dialectical image, insofar as they figurally articulate, in a kind of nonsensuous similarity, the figural strivings of 20<sup>th</sup> century Weimar materialist critique and the materially ontogenic figuring operations of 21<sup>st</sup> century finance capital. Indeed, *A Beautiful Mind*'s dramatization of the taming of (schizophrenic) risk, through the realization of its lucrative productivity, testifies to this figural relation between the Benjaminian constellation and the financial derivative. This tragic sublation of Auerbach, Kracauer, Deleuze, and most of all Benjamin into the uppermost echelons of capital, is however not without its own dialectical reversal, in which the materialist figural constellation moves into the heart of capital, ready to split open in a flash. In the chapters that follow, I rely on the conceptual groundwork laid by these thinkers of the figural as diagrammatic schemata for constructing and interpreting my own constellation of historical objects.

## 1.7 Chapter Summaries

This project asserts that speculation designates both the diagrammatic process through which the historical strata of contemporary financialized capitalism are formed, and that the functional mechanism of speculation is essentially figural. While, as this introduction claims, elements of this diagrammatic process dates back at least to the mid-1960s, the chapters below focus on the first decade and a half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the aesthetic epicenter of conspiratorial figuration, leading up to and in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Although it focuses primarily on American commercial cinema, it also looks at related television and new media texts as well, arguing for a broad-based cultural shift, which is strategically supported by

analyses of texts in a variety of genres, from medical melodrama, to independent drama, to science-fiction and horror. The objects under discussion here are not presented as being an exhaustive compendium of conspiracy walls, a project that would be all but impossible given the figure's ubiquity. Rather, the objects stand as evidence for that claim that the conspiracy wall and its figural logic is embedded in several of what I take to be the most pressing and interrelated questions in contemporary theory and aesthetics, namely the production and circulation of digital images, logics of preemption, and the vexing question of post-digital materiality. This is to say that the conspiracy wall is locatable nearly everywhere in contemporary visual media, from commercial films to gallery art and amateur media, but its governing figural logic is, like Kant's pure notions of understanding, only effectively comprehended when it is 'empirically' entangled in other discourses, and helps to shape them.<sup>113</sup> Hence, it is through case studies in which the figural logic of the conspiracy diagram is immanent to the aesthetic form of the object itself that I seek to extract a sense of the abstract schematic operation of the diagram itself.

The first chapter of the dissertation looks more closely at the core theoretical concepts of conspiracy, the figural, and the diagram, as they function in the contemporary context. By reading Erich Auerbach's theory of figural interpretation as a kind of prefiguration of conspiracy theory, the chapter considers how medieval Christian figural prophecy forms a hermeneutic basis for the contemporary visual aesthetics of conspiracy. This theoretical analysis is developed through interpretive readings of Auerbach's *Mimesis*, amateur online conspiracy charts, and the murals of Julie Mehretu. These disparate objects present a shared articulation of the visual grammar of conspiracy media, while also rendering the historical and aesthetic contours of how the diagram operates within and through specific representational contexts: Auerbach's

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<sup>113</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 281-3.

theorization of paratactic fragmentation as an historical form of realism articulates a conspiracy theory of historical reconfiguration, while the amateur conspiracy charts, termed “Chart Brut” by Gawker, use the visual form of the conspiracy wall to articulate epistemic relations regarding historical events. Lastly, the chapter explains how Julie Mehretu’s massive murals, and in particular her *Mural* (2009) located in the New York headquarters of Goldman Sachs, appropriate the aesthetics of the conspiracy wall to present a self-reflexive critique of the history of capitalism as a temporally and spatially figural enterprise. In this respect, Mehretu’s work functions as a kind of metapictorial theoretical discourse, while simultaneously participating in precisely this same speculative financialized economy in virtue of its spatial location and Goldman patronage.

Chapter two deals centrally with the relationship between preemption and the figural, explaining how the temporal logic of preemption, vital to the conduct of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, is also a figural logic of prefiguration and redemption. This chapter seeks to bridge the gap between two historical strata of the Bush Administration’s prosecution of the wars, and of the financial crisis and its attendant shift in concern from foreign violence to domestic value. It argues that financialization and preemptive warfare are closely related, through a reading of the network television series *House* (2004-2012). As Pasi Väliäho cogently argues, the shift toward financialization is intimately connected to a shift in the nature of subjectivity, from the optical subject of the eye and the gaze to the neural subject of the networked brain. I shall argue that this transformation has its immediate roots not only in the financial crisis as such, but also in profound changes in imaging technology, which find their fullest expression in MRI. As an imaging technology, MRI mediates the temporal and the visual dimensions of the figural, producing spatialized images out of temporal differences in nuclear

intensity. MRI technology is therefore fundamentally and ontologically distinct from both traditional photography and X-ray, since unlike the latter, MRI produces an image by measuring changes in the vibration of hydrogen atoms over time, literally rendering space out of time. Medical imaging technology central to the show's preemptive diagnostic puzzle-solving, which treats the human body as a conspiracy, and given Dr. House's motto that "everybody lies," also authorizes the invasive and often ethically compromised penetrative surveillance of the body. Dr. House's belief that "everybody lies" fuels rampant and expensive speculation about the patient's body, and early in the show's broadcast run, also often about the patient's home. The chapter places *House*'s investment in the production of evidentiary images into dialogue with co-contemporary advertising images, showing how the show's anxiety around the relationship between images and evidence is symptomatic of a broader structure of feeling within American culture between 2003 and 2008.

Chapter three addresses how the found-footage horror film *Sinister* (dir. Scott Derrickson, 2013) figures financialization as a phantasmagoric threat to both home and personal property. In the film the protagonist, a financially overextended nonfiction writer, must perform the surveillance of digitized super-8 home movies as a form of labor and as a form of spectatorship, in order to produce a true crime narrative that will allow him to afford an expensive house purchased before the economic downturn. This chapter reads the film as a meditation on the hauntological specter of property value in the wake of the Great Recession, and the ways in which the ephemerality of digital circulation, both as digital money and digital media, provokes an epistemic crisis of value. In the film, the locus of such a crisis is in digital surveillance technology's ability or inability to register salient information and preserve it through the process of digitization. *Sinister* complicates the subject-object relations of the gaze

by allowing the object to return the gaze, and to do so in ways that extends the power relation beyond architectural knowledge relations, and into the register of affective embodiment.

Chapter four considers the role of conspiracy, figuration, and aesthetics with respect to the relationship between race and value. Through an examination of *Nightcrawler* (dir. Dan Gilroy, 2014), this chapter shows how mediation and figuration operate in tandem to produce racialized events through the production of figural constellations. In *Nightcrawler*, the protagonist exchanges commodities for technologies, and eventually exchanges images of racialized violence for money. The film's special attention to the aesthetic composition of racial violence and death into television news packages figures the problem of reality's aesthetic, rather than rational origin, thereby interrogating what constitutes 'real' news. The chapter reads the film as developing a formal critique of contemporary capitalism's structuring elements of exchange, valorization, and financialization. The film thereby makes a case for racialization as the schematic grounding upon which these economic and social structures are erected and maintained. It then turns to consider the relationship between the production of racialized precarity and the form of financial derivatives, which likewise require situations of risk in order to generate financial liquidity that is abstracted and extracted from racialized bodies.

What connects each of these chapters together is that they all attempt to articulate the dialectical tension between abstraction and concretion that is structurally inherent to both representation and economic financialization. If the dissertation as a whole seeks to understand how financialization intensifies the dialectical contradiction between the abstract and the concrete, which manifests at the cultural locus of visual representation, then the body chapters pursue the implications of this representational quandary, if not indeed a crisis, across a series of exemplary case studies. Each chapter focuses, therefore, on one or more media objects in which

visual representation is thrown into crisis by the competing and contradictory demands of materiality and abstraction. These objects express the ramifications of this economically exacerbated visual regime not only for the stakes of representation but, in chapter order, for historical causality, neoliberal subjecthood, precarious labor, and racialized embodiment respectively. All of these key concepts are in play across each of the chapters, but each chapter focuses more centrally on one than the others.

The structure of this project is intended to assemble a constellation of interrelated and interlocking analyses. In short, these individual case studies attempt something like their own figural assembly: a collage of fragmentary images from contemporary moving-image culture, which collectively gesture toward broader economic and aesthetic modalities of the epistemology of mass culture. Hence, a brief conclusion discusses *Arrival* (dir, Denis Villeneuve, 2016) as a kind of metatheoretical constellation that articulates various formal and conceptual threads from each of the preceding chapters. As such, the conclusion also turns to reflect upon the methodological implications entailed by the usage of the concept of the figural as an analytic for conducting formal analysis.

The necessarily piecemeal nature of the project's approach reflects a broader neoliberalization of epistemology itself. If culture now infamously takes itself to be 'post-truth,' this indicates a transition from some imaginary antediluvian epistemic structure of shared, public 'truth,' to a privatization of epistemology in which each individual consumer is entitled to his or her own private 'truth,' hermetically sealed off from intervening appeals to shared experience or common rhetorical grounding. Likewise, this privatization of truth is accompanied by a privatization of knowledge production, which foists the responsibility for generating knowledge(s) onto the citizen-consumer. Yet if this is the case, then it is also the case that

academic assemblages of evidentiary *figurae* are in no way exempt from such economic and epistemic processes. The objective-aesthetic and the subjective-epistemological cannot be conceived of as distinct realms, or in terms of a one-way flow of schematic organization from a synthetic a priori concepts to the empirical realm. This immanent entanglement of the transcendental concept or figure within the empirical matter of its expression also motivates the methodological approach that the analyses in the body chapters take. Each of the chapters below is itself structurally organized in a manner that reflects the formal structures of the media objects they analyze. Hence, rather than assuming a fully transcendental theoretical position from which to observe and comment upon the dissertation's objects, or a fully immanent mode of theoretically charged description, this project situates itself in the midst of things, between the transcendental and the immanent, but with arms reaching in both directions. The stakes of this methodological decision are, on the one hand, to refuse an ahistorical, transcendental subject position from which to gaze upon a manicured landscape of curated evidence. To do so would be to fall into the trap of presuming unmediated access to a conceptual totality that is determinative with respect to the interpretation of aesthetic forms. On the other hand, to refuse a methodological position of total immanence is to assert that there are still subject-positions, however compromised, from which we necessarily make conceptual claims and empirical observations. In doing so, I hope to expressively reflect at an analytic level how the conspiracy diagram functions at a formal level, or at least to avoid turning a deaf ear to the objects themselves, and to the historicity of this project itself.



## 2 HISTORICITY, FIGURALITY, CONSPIRACY

### 2.1 Introduction

In the Introduction the conspiracy wall was briefly sketched, as a figure expressing the schematic relations between the aesthetic and the epistemic, and as a diagram mediating speculative subject/object relations within financialized capitalism. If the form of this diagrammatic figure was nascent in *Blow Up* and the classic conspiracy thrillers of the 1970s, I argued that it reaches a kind of transformative apotheosis in *A Beautiful Mind*, where all of the formal elements—the collage of images affixed to a wall, and connected, both materially and conceptually, together by lengths of string—are co-present, and where the articulation of conspiratorial speculation to financial speculation is perhaps most explicitly manifested. From here, the aesthetic form of the conspiracy wall becomes increasingly ubiquitous across visual media forms, from film and television to social media. While the near contemporaneous film *Minority Report* (2002) also presents a parallel analogue of the conspiracy wall in the preemptive investigation of ‘PreCrime,’ in which the detection of crime is visually figured as a technological hybrid of desktop computer use and analog VCR jogging (fig. 2.1), it is *A Beautiful Mind* that furnishes the dominant model for representing investigative speculation in 21<sup>st</sup> century visual media, at least in terms of the proliferation and circulation of the formal tropes it codifies.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between *Minority Report* and the preemptive logic of what he terms “premediation,” see Richard Grusin, *Premediation: Affect and Mediality After 9/11* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 38-61.



Figure 2.1 *Minority Report*

As the introduction also noted, the visual form of the conspiracy wall is virtually ubiquitous across contemporary media, with far too many specific instantiations to list. Therefore, rather than attempting to track down each individual example, or even to identify and canonize the most important or influential conspiracy walls in contemporary media, this chapter aims at a more narrow and focused analysis of the expressive logic of the conspiracy wall as such, considered as an abstract schematic form of organization. It seeks to unpack the epistemic and aesthetic logic of the conspiracy diagram, and to consider the relationship between the figural speculation inhering in it to the speculative logic of financialization. Thus, this chapter argues that the representational logic of the conspiracy wall both formally and figurally expresses the representational logic of financialization. This claim in and of itself is not new, but what is different about the contemporary conspiracy wall is its ontogenically productive capacity.<sup>115</sup> That is, the formal figuration of the conspiracy wall also operates as a kind of

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<sup>115</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992).

Deleuzian diagram that models subject-object relations under the epistemic and aesthetic regime of finance capital, a regime that is constitutively defined by the ontogenic productivity of the aesthetic, which functions in a generative manner, producing truth and value through the mechanism of speculation.

As the introduction also explained, finance capital presents itself not only as a regime of capital circulation, but as a distinct representational problem. The “problem” of finance capital, as Jameson understands it, is that it short-circuits Marx’s general formula for capital, M-C-M, allowing money to exchange for money without passing through the commodity form, in an abbreviated M-M’ form. This is the same circumstance identified by Marx and elaborated on by David Harvey as “fictitious capital,” in which the problem of money’s having to be invested in material goods or labor in order to produce interest, a process which reduces the flexibility and general exchangeability of money, is solved by the lending and exchange of advances on that expected and hypothetical interest as capital; or in other words, credit.<sup>116</sup> Paradoxically, the existence of credit allows the transactional process of commodity exchange to reverse its conventional temporal order. In a typical cycle of profit accumulation, money (M) is exchanged for, or invested in, a commodity (C), which after a certain amount of time is itself sold for a profit (M’). Credit reverses this sequence, allowing a capitalist to begin with a credit loan (M’), exchange or invest that money in a commodity (C), and then exchange that commodity for a profit, after paying back the loan (M). In a way, the existence of credit therefore enables a kind of time travel, in which the outcome of a sequence of commodity exchanges is peremptorily anticipated. As Cédric Durand explains, “fictitious capital represents claims over wealth that is

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<sup>116</sup> David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 2006 [1982]), 266-7. See also Marx, *Capital vol. 3*, ch. 25.

yet to be produced. Its expansion implies a growing pre-emption of future production.”<sup>117</sup> The temporal paradox of finance capital is, as Durand also explains, that while future returns are preempted by present exchanges, suggesting increased flexibility and freedom today, the valorization of the present is increasingly dependent on the anticipation of a stable futurity that forecloses alternatives, producing an economic and temporal determinism with no alternative.<sup>118</sup> At the same time that future time is preempted or foreclosed by the anticipatory operations of credit and finance, a novel futurity is also, paradoxically, necessary for the expansion and continued growth of capital. In order for capital to expand there must be a mechanism for the production of temporal or historical difference, rather than simply the return of the same. This is a fundamental problem of contemporary capitalism, one with sweeping social and ecological ramifications, but it is also a problem that serves as an interpretive key to the inner schematic logic of conspiracy as a mode of representation in relation to the structure of capitalism.<sup>119</sup>

For Jameson, the peculiar temporal arrangement organized by finance capital is intimately tied to a paradigm of spatial organization, namely a postmodern aesthetic of fragmentation and renarrativization. In his essay “Culture and Finance Capital,” Jameson argues that the fragment plays a central role in negotiating the relationship between culture and finance capital. Jameson argues that whereas in aesthetic modernism the fragment is “empty,” “meaningless,” and “autonomized,” the postmodern fragment is capable of seamlessly

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<sup>117</sup> Cédric Durand, *Fictitious Capital* (London: Verso, 2017), 1.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 50, 151, 155.

<sup>119</sup> For a discussion of the ecological ramifications of capital’s paradoxical need to sustain and foreclose its own exterior, see Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso: 2015) and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Penguin, 1977 [1972]), especially “Capitalist Representation,” 240-262.

renarrativizing and producing meaning.<sup>120</sup> Thus, for Jameson the changing function of fragmentation plays at once an aesthetic role and a historically periodizing one, insofar as changes in its aesthetic function also index the shift from modernism to postmodernism, and this both in aesthetic terms and in terms of the attendant cultural logic, which is itself informed by underlying changes in the structure of the global economy. As Jameson explains, “Modernist abstraction, I believe, is less a function of capital accumulation as such than of money itself in a situation of capital accumulation. Money is here both abstract (making everything equivalent) and empty and uninteresting, since its interest lies outside itself. It is thus incomplete... it directs attention elsewhere, beyond itself.” By contrast, Jameson explains that finance capital introduces “a play of monetary entities that need neither production (as capital does) nor consumption (as money does), which supremely, like cyberspace, can live on their own internal metabolisms and circulate without any reference to an older type of content.”<sup>121</sup> Therefore, for Jameson postmodern fragmentation indexes the self-sustaining flow of abstracted and financialized capital through the global circuits of the economy, continually producing recombinations of the same as the form of the new, which must dialectically be understood also as the new as the form of the same. Hence, the aesthetic fragment functions in the context of Jameson’s analysis, as well as this one, as what Deleuze and Guattari designate as a double articulation: a hinge between the aesthetic and economic dimensions of representation (a term which must now be articulated only under erasure), which itself articulates distinct historical periods and is situated as a hinge between them.<sup>122</sup> Crucially, aesthetic fragmentation operates across both temporal and spatial

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<sup>120</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Culture and Finance Capital,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1997): 264-5.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> See p. 45.

dimensions, and it is the fragment's ability to traverse these dimensions that gives it the ability to articulate history and aesthetics in such a powerful way. The question of fragmentation, then, is central to the representational logic of conspiracy because it articulates a network of conceptual and discursive threads pertaining to the representational objects of finance capital and of aesthetics, the most salient of which are the concepts of representational self-sufficiency, circulability, and historicity.

Following Jameson, this chapter assumes a parallelism between structures of fragmentation and renarrativization in the postmodern regime of aesthetic representation and in the logic of post-Bretton Woods financialized markets. The peculiar temporal structure of credit, in which a diachronic process of exchange is transmuted into a synchronic sum of money capital, albeit an extremely abstract one that may not have any material referent beyond a computational signifier, has already been mentioned. Also, as the introduction explained, we can readily see both the temporal and spatial dimensions of the logic of financialization at work in what is termed 'slow market' or latency arbitrage, in which high frequency trading algorithms, executing trades in the scale of microseconds, are able to exploit such microsecond differences in the transmission of pricing information across globally networked stock exchanges to buy the same stock lower in one location, then immediately sell those shares in another location, where the price is still temporarily higher.<sup>123</sup> In a more general way, the capacity to quantitatively price volatility and risk, a necessary precursor to contemporary financial derivatives, also entails the concretization of fundamentally indeterminate and qualitative *temporal* relations between states of affairs.<sup>124</sup> All of these examples therefore point to the ways in which the contemporary global

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<sup>123</sup> Michael Lewis, *Flash Boys: A Wall Street Revolt* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), 172.

<sup>124</sup> Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 78.

stock market is, in this sense, like the photos in *Blow Up*—what appears as a coherent and unified representational form becomes, when expanded to view its smallest components, a spatiotemporal multiplicity, and a series of disjunctions that belies any sense of self-identical objects, that *nevertheless*, and *necessarily*, operates *as though* it is a temporally and spatially self-consistent construct.

Thus, the economic and cultural logic of financialization can be characterized, in part, by a spatiotemporal logic of fragmentation and reconfiguration. The key claim of this chapter is that this logic is essentially figural, in the ways that Auerbach and Deleuze deploy this term. Despite their clear differences, Auerbach and Deleuze share an investment in understanding how aesthetic forms cohere, which is in itself a question about the unifying capacity of aesthetic fragments. By placing them together, this chapter explores how not only their deterritorializing similarities but also their territorializing differences, namely Auerbach's distinctive investment in history and representation, in contrast to Deleuze's investment in asignifying affective force, might speak to each other as two sides of an expressive and epistemological dialectic. In short, this synthesis of their theories of the figural provides, I am suggesting, a solution to the particular 'form-problem,' as Jameson would say, of the 'post-truth' characteristic of speculative thinking, in both its conspiratorial and financial modes, under contemporary capitalism.

## 2.2 Erich Auerbach's Conspiracy Theory

Émigré German philologist Erich Auerbach admittedly makes for an unlikely theoretical antecedent to the conspiracy diagram, given both his disciplinary and historical distance from contemporary visual culture, and his characteristically placid, 'serene' mode of humanist inquiry, even in the face of exile in Turkey during World War II. Auerbach, whose monumental *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, published in German in 1946 and English in

1953, helped to set the agenda for the emerging field of Comparative Literature, and holds a privileged position as one of the great, if also one of the last, advocates for enlightened humanism as a posture toward the scholarly interpretation of culture. Paul Bové goes so far as to claim that the primary function of *Mimesis*, and therefore also of Auerbach himself,

is not as a philological model but as a sign that in an antihistorical, antihumanistic age of relativism, mass-cultural leveling, and the increasing irrelevance of writers and critics, it is not only possible for critics to perform opportune and important acts, to construct monumental synthetic texts in the face of massive specialization, to invent new techniques for dealing with changed cultural conditions, and to do all this out of the unique intellectual and existential experience of the individual scholar, but also, in so doing, to relegate culturally a certain image of the responsible authoritative critical voice.<sup>125</sup>

For Bové, Auerbach represents the limit point of humanistic scholarship, insofar as the philologist's historicism leads him ultimately to historicize his own position as an intellectual commentator and literary critic, a self-reflexive move that Auerbach himself cannot transcend, but which opens out onto the anti-humanist scholarship of Said, and especially Foucault.<sup>126</sup>

Thus it would seem that Auerbach makes an odd fit as an intellectual progenitor of conspiracy theory, given the latter's predilection, as Jameson has explained, for totalizing apparatuses of social domination in which the individual has no real chance of withstanding the deterministically totalizing power of the conspiratorial whole (*viz. The Parallax View*), let alone attempting any kind of effective synthesis of its disparate parts into a conceptual unity, which remains only a utopian horizon toward which the individual can be oriented, but can never reach (*viz. All The President's Men*). Yet as this chapter argues, Auerbach's theoretical synthesis, in his concept of the *figura*, between historical causality and aesthetic-spatial parataxis theoretically

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<sup>125</sup> Paul Bové, *Intellectuals in Power: A Genealogy of Critical Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 80-1.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.



anticipates the relationship between aesthetics and historical truth claims that is characteristic of the conspiracy diagram. This in turn entails an articulation in the conspiracy diagram between history and power that opens onto a novel consideration of the role of speculation in constructing historical time. If Auerbach's limits are transcended by Foucault, as Bové suggests, those limitations also prefigure many of Foucault's important concerns vis-à-vis the relationship between discourse and authority, as well as between the individual and the incapacity to speculate beyond the limits of a particular regime of power/knowledge.

Indeed, despite the superficial oppositions between self-assured humanistic inquiry and paranoid, anti-humanist apophenia, a closer look at Auerbach's intellectual trajectory reveals a series of tantalizing connections to conspiracy's aesthetic and epistemic problems. To begin with, while it is well-known that Auerbach's *habilitationsschrift* on Dante inaugurated his celebrated philological career and formed the basis for his later thinking on realism and representations of everyday life, it is less well-known and scarcely remarked upon in English-language Auerbach scholarship that prior to the Dante *habilitation*, Auerbach pursued and in 1913 earned a doctoral degree in Law, writing a dissertation on the topic of the problem of criminal "coperpetration," that is to say criminal conspiracy. "Combining a component of guilt with a component of innocence, the role of the coperpetrator contains in its very structure a potential for tragedy," writes Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, for whom Auerbach's early work anticipates his later concern with the tragic dimension of the mundane, everyday dimension of daily life.<sup>127</sup> This synthesis of guilt and innocence is characteristic of criminal conspiracy within

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<sup>127</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "'Pathos of the Earthly Progress': Erich Auerbach's Everyday," in *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology*, ed. Seth Lerer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 28.

the frameworks of both historical and contemporary legal statutes.<sup>128</sup> It also indicates, at a very early stage in Auerbach's thinking, the significance of a discontinuous mode of causality in which the actions of one individual can causally and legally implicate another individual, who may not have been present or directly involved in the perpetration of a criminal act. This logic of discontinuity anticipates Auerbach's later discovery of the discontinuous nature of Hebraic style in the Old Testament, as opposed to the smooth, Hellenistic continuity of Homer's *Odyssey* in the famed opening chapter of *Mimesis*. It also anticipates the way, as Auerbach explains, Joshua becomes retroactively complicit in the redemptive sacrifice of Christ, as a prefiguration of the latter.<sup>129</sup> Read backwards through Auerbach's later theorizing on the discontinuous temporality of figural relations, it is clear that conspiracy represents an early example of a figural relation in Auerbach's thought. Although Auerbach never again explicitly explores the topic of conspiracy, its implication in the mode of relationality designated by the *figura* allows it to hover as an immanent presence in Auerbach's oeuvre.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Conspiracy law has been used to prosecute individuals whose actions on their own may not violate the law, but are considered criminal when considered in combination with the cooperative actions of others. Conspiracy law has been applied not only in cases involving organized crime and conspiracies against the state, but also to suppress collective labor action or anti-war protest by assigning substantial criminal responsibility for a collective action to each individual participant. See Benjamin Levin, "American Gangsters: RICO, Criminal Syndicates, and Conspiracy Law as Market Control," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review (CR-CL)* 48 no. 1 (2013): 105-164.

<sup>129</sup> Erich Auerbach, "Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature," *Yale French Studies* 9 (1952): 4.

<sup>130</sup> In this respect, Auerbach is pursuing a line of hermeneutic and moral inquiry already begun much earlier, in another canonical work of the Western literary canon: Augustine's *Confessions*. Early in the *Confessions*, Augustine details his experience participating in a collective theft of pears, devoting particular attention to the peculiar way in which one can be guilty through association, and not only through direct action. See Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), II.iv.9-II.x.18.

The immanence of conspiracy to Auerbach's work is also locatable in his intellectual and personal relationship with another German émigré intellectual, Walter Benjamin. The friendship between Auerbach and Benjamin is widely remarked upon in Auerbach scholarship, as both men were born in 1892 and grew up in the same Berlin neighborhood, a fact which Auerbach references in his written correspondence with Benjamin in the 1930s.<sup>131</sup> While these letters suggest a cordial, yet rather formal relationship between scholars of a shared generation enduring the rise of the Third Reich, Kader Konuk speculates, in a remarkable and generically conspiratorial turn, that Auerbach and Benjamin probably met for the first time at the Prussian State Library sometime in 1923 or 1924, during which time Benjamin was conducting his research on the origins of the *Trauerspiel*, and Erich Auerbach was working as a librarian while composing his own thesis on Dante. Konuk suggests that it was probably Auerbach who helped Benjamin conduct his research, and whom the latter praised in a contemporaneous letter to Gershom Scholem.<sup>132</sup>

The possible meeting between Auerbach and Benjamin at such crucially formative moments for each scholar adds an element of bibliographic intrigue to the account of their relationship, but whether or not this meeting took place, I read their intertwined intellectual development as a case of theoretical coperpetration, in the sense that despite their terminological denials—for reasons we shall see, Auerbach adamantly rejects the notion of allegory, Benjamin's

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<sup>131</sup> See Karlheinz Barck and Anthony Reynolds, "Walter Benjamin and Erich Auerbach: Fragments of a Correspondence," *Diacritics* 22, no. 3/4 (Winter 1992): 81-3, Erich Auerbach, Martin Elsky, Martin Vialon and Robert Stein, "Scholarship in Times of Extremes: Letters of Erich Auerbach (1933-46), on the Fiftieth Anniversary of his Death," *PMLA* 122, no 3 (May 2007): 742-62, and Seth Lerer, "Introduction" in *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology*, 14.

<sup>132</sup> Kader Konuk, *East West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 27. Konuk also provides an insightful account of the likely cross-influence between Auerbach and Benjamin.

favored term—they are closely united in their theoretical commitments, particularly with respect to their theorizations of history and its interpretation. This theoretical similitude hinges, as I have already indicated, on the question of allegory, and on the question of history. Michael McGillen explains that despite their superficial terminological differences, “Auerbach’s theory of figural interpretation and Benjamin’s theory of allegorical citation have a strong structural affinity.”<sup>133</sup> For McGillen, this affinity involves a shared emphasis on aesthetic and anti-historicist historical fragmentation, rather than on representational unity: “Both figural interpretation and allegorical reading engage in a historical reading that activates a historical figure for a remote present. This amounts to a practice of literary criticism that considers the literary text a historical object that entertains relations not with its historical context but with the present in which it is read.”<sup>134</sup> Although for McGillen Auerbach and Benjamin share an approach to historical reading, he understands this fragmentation to have opposite historical implications for each thinker: for Auerbach fragmentation entails a future moment of salvation, whereas any such redemption is foreclosed within Benjamin’s theory of history.<sup>135</sup>

Auerbach’s theory of figural interpretation is incipient in his *habilitationsschrift* on Dante, but its most explicit articulation occurs in the essay “Figura,” begun in 1935 and published in 1938. In this essay, Auerbach traces the origin and development of the concept of the *figura*, or figure, from its origins in Latin rhetoric to its central role in the figural interpretation of biblical scripture in medieval Christian scholasticism. For Latin rhetoricians and poets, the term *figura* was initially used as variously synonymous with shape, appearance,

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<sup>133</sup> Michael McGillen, “Erich Auerbach and the Seriality of the Figure,” *New German Critique* 133 45, no. 1 (February 2018): 120.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 123. See also Jesse M. Gellrich, “Figura, Allegory, and the Question of History,” in *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology*, 120 for a concurring view.

outline, semblance, and a host of other terms designating plastic form. In the first century A.D., however, the term took on a new meaning on the concept of the rhetorical figure. As Auerbach writes of Quintilian's understanding of the term, the rhetorical figure "is a form of discourse which deviates from the normal and most obvious usage. The aim of a figure is not, as in all tropes, to substitute words for other words; figures can be formed from words used in their proper meaning and order."<sup>136</sup> Unlike tropes, which employ words in a nonliteral sense, as in metaphor for example, the *figura* maintains the literal meaning of the individual words, even as the meaning of the whole assemblage of words becomes transformed into something other than what the individual words would literally suggest. Hence, a figure of speech involves a formation of words into a grouping that establishes a distinctive relation between literal words, as formal elements of the figure, and the figure itself as a whole or unity. Auerbach explains that "The art of hinting, insinuating, obscuring circumlocution, calculated to ornament a statement or to make it more forceful or mordant, has achieved a versatility and perfection [in Antiquity] that strike us as strange if not absurd. These turns of speech were called *figurae*."<sup>137</sup> Again, unlike metaphorical speech, which may be rhetorically effective but which uses words in a nonliteral sense, the rhetorical efficacy of a figure, especially when used to hint or suggest a meaning without explicitly claiming it outright, lies precisely in the fact that the literal meaning of each individual word is maintained, while the meaning of the whole is transformed.

While the *figura* functions as a rhetorical device in Latin oratory, Auerbach traces its transformation, in medieval biblical hermeneutics, into a complex theory of both textual and historical interpretation, in which the concept of the figure is used to reframe the Old Testament

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<sup>136</sup> Erich Auerbach, "Figura," *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1938]), 25-6.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

as an anticipatory prefiguration of events in the New Testament and the End of Days.

Conceptually, the rhetorical *figura* gives way to the hermeneutic model of figural interpretation, which Auerbach defines thusly:

Figural Interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life.<sup>138</sup>

As with the classical figure, the relationship between first and second-order meanings is significant, and in this respect figural interpretation demonstrates continuity with the rhetorical figure. As Auerbach notes, it is the notion that the figure conceals or hides something other, be it an insinuated meaning, a theological truth, or a prediction about the future, that carries over from antiquity into the medieval concept of the figure.<sup>139</sup> The crucial difference, however, is that whereas classical oratory took the figure merely as a means of persuasion, medieval scholars understood it as applying to historical reality itself, in a real and literal sense. Thus, Auerbach claims that the nature of figural interpretation is such that

Figural prophecy implies the interpretation of one worldly event through another; the first signifies the second, the second fulfills the first. Both remain historical events; yet both, looked at in this way, have something provisional and incomplete about them....Thus history, with all its concrete force, remains forever a figure, cloaked and needful of interpretation.<sup>140</sup>

This, for Auerbach, is also what distinguishes figural from allegorical interpretation, which views the formal content of the figure as historical but its meaning as abstract or symbolic (e.g. as representing a virtue such as justice or wisdom).<sup>141</sup> In a later essay from 1952, Auerbach

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 54.

clarifies this position, explaining that in the case of allegory or symbolism, “at least one of the two elements combined is a pure sign, but in a figural relation both the signifying and the signified facts are real and concrete historical events. In an allegory of love or in a religious symbol at least one of the terms does not belong to human history; it is an abstraction or a sign.”<sup>142</sup> Hence, Auerbach’s resistance to the term ‘allegory,’ motivated by a desire to clarify the explicitly historical nature of both interpretive poles in a figure, in no way contradicts Benjamin’s theory of allegory, which is similarly invested in the historical dimension of representation. Though they may draw differing conclusions about the redemptive potential of history itself, both Auerbach and Benjamin emphasize the historicity of both the ‘signified’ and the ‘signifier’ of the figure or allegory, and do so in opposition to the deficient idealism of symbolism.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, they both understand the logic of the figural or allegorical as fundamentally one of fragmentation and reconfiguration. As Benjamin describes the baroque era’s valorization of the “highly significant fragment”: “It is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification.”<sup>144</sup> Benjamin’s theory of allegory, however, at least as outlined in the *Trauerspiel* monograph, understands allegory in terms of its production via the accumulation of fragments in fiction—in literature and theater—whereas Auerbach is quite explicit about figural prophecy’s use of past historical events in order to anticipate future historical ones. For Auerbach, figural

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<sup>142</sup> Auerbach, “Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature,” 6.

<sup>143</sup> See McGillen, “Erich Auerbach and the Seriality of the Figure” 121-3 and Gellrich, “*Figura*, Allegory, and the Question of History” 120-3, and for example Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1998), 166.

<sup>144</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 178.

prophecy is more than an interpretative tool or a hermeneutic strategy, it is an epistemic regime, what Benjamin will only later famously term a ‘philosophy of history.’

The historicity of the figure is what makes figural interpretation not merely a hermeneutic strategy, but also a theory of history, insofar as figural interpretation comprehends the flow of historical time and causality in fundamentally distinct terms, as opposed to “modern” historiography:

In the modern view, the provisional event is treated as a step in an unbroken horizontal process; in the figural system the interpretation is always sought from above; events are considered not in their unbroken relation to one another, but torn apart, individually, each in relation to something other than is promised and not yet present.<sup>145</sup>

In assuming that historical events of the past, such as those recorded in the Old Testament, prefigure events in the New Testament and beyond, figural interpretation is forced to take a view of temporality that is not linear, causal, and sequential, but rather one in which events that are chronologically disparate and causally unrelated are immanent with respect to each other, and immanent to what Auerbach later terms “the plane of providential design.”<sup>146</sup> As Hayden White has noted, Auerbach’s notion of the figure-fulfillment dyad allows him to construct a theory of history, and of historical redemption, endowed with “a modern equivalent of classical “telos” and a secular equivalent of Christian “apocalypse.” It allows him to endow history with the meaning of a *progressus* towards a goal that is never ultimately realizable or even fully specifiable.”<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Auerbach, “Figura,” 59.

<sup>146</sup> Auerbach, “Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature,” 5.

<sup>147</sup> Hayden White, “Auerbach’s Literary History,” in *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology*, 125.



Auerbach provides us with a theory of temporal figuration, in which historical events themselves, rather than being self-contained and self-identical, are temporally dispersed, multiple, and always in need of an interpretive and aesthetically constructive act that will unite them. In the same way that figural interpretation produces historical truth claims through a process of creative, interpretive recombination, financialization operates by preemptively producing real value in the present by using the past to anticipate the future, and in the case of latency arbitrage, by profitably trading on the temporal difference. As Alison Shonkwiler explains, “Finance continuously seeks the path of the shortest, fastest, and highest return. It works by running the possibilities, comparing hypotheticals and actuals, and trading on the difference, thereby realizing that which had been hypothetical or unreal.”<sup>148</sup> Likewise, figural prophecy seeks to realize the truth of what Auerbach calls “a definite event in its full historicity,” a fully material, ‘actual’ historical occasion.

If Auerbach’s theory of figural interpretation is a theory of history oriented on a temporal axis, it is also, no less significantly, a theory of aesthetic expression oriented on a spatial one. Fredric Jameson has argued that the historical periodization of realism, modernism, and postmodernism generates a kind of “technical problem” that demands a function that would mediate between the historiographical and the formal or aesthetic.<sup>149</sup> The Auerbachian *figura*, in fact, serves precisely such a mediating function, insofar as it frames the historiographical as inescapably aesthetic and needful of interpretation, while it also historicizes the very act of interpretation itself, thus casting the aesthetic and the historiographical into a dialectical bi-

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<sup>148</sup> Alison Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary: Economic Mystification and the Limits of Realist Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), xxxiii.

<sup>149</sup> Fredric Jameson, “The Existence of Italy,” in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 155.

polarity (though Auerbach does not use this dialectical language). This is nowhere more evident than in Auerbach's magnum opus, *Mimesis*, in which the formal analysis of the syntax of realism, and the serial organization of such analyses into a work aspiring to represent the totality of the western literary canon, is in turn reframed by Auerbach's gesture of including himself in the historical lineage of modernist authors in his analysis of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

In *Mimesis* Auerbach identifies parataxis—the spatial arrangement of clauses in a sentence in a manner that ambiguates the relation between the clauses—as the dominant principle governing the development of representations of realism from Homer onward. The ellipses engendered by paratactic construction is what distinguishes Genesis from *The Odyssey* in aesthetic terms, which for Auerbach entails an entirely different conception of history. Auerbach also identifies parataxis as the principle of realistic representation in Augustine, and Gregory of Tours, though Dante apparently transcends paratactic construction to produce a novel form of unity between irruptive clauses.<sup>150</sup> These stylistic trends anticipate, and even prefigure, the emergence of turn of the century aesthetic modernism in the work of Proust, Joyce, Woolf, and others, in their emphasis on aesthetic fragmentation, spatial and temporal ambiguity, and random occurrences, even to the point of a disintegration of the causal-historical movement of narrative temporality. Crucially, for Auerbach the historical temporalities engendered by literary representation are necessarily spatial in terms of their syntactic construction, a point that is not lost on the author of *Mimesis* as he constructs his own survey of western literary history. The organization of *Mimesis* into twenty fragmentary (Auerbach even, somewhat apologetically, calls them “arbitrary”) case studies, seemingly disconnected from a comprehensive historical causality

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<sup>150</sup> See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 23, 71-2, 109-10.

(perhaps because of Auerbach's notorious lack of access to bibliographic sources in Istanbul), indicates the influence of Auerbach's subject matter on his own principles of formal construction, as well as the distinctively modernist sensibility that governs *Mimesis*.<sup>151</sup> In writing his history of aesthetic realism, Auerbach dialectically historicizes aesthetics, while also aestheticizing historical representation, which leads inexorably to the synthesizing conclusion that *Mimesis* itself must be historicized—a point Auerbach acknowledges by indicating that *Mimesis* stems from the same modernist literary tradition that informs Woolf.<sup>152</sup>

Auerbach thus provides an answer to the Jameson's problem of periodization, insofar as the method of figural analysis in *Mimesis* mediates between the concept of history and the concept of the aesthetic, demonstrating how aesthetics and history are always immanent to each other, and demanding both the historicizing of the aesthetic and the recognition that historical narratives, as *narratives*, are ineluctably aesthetic, which in turn demands a new act of historicizing. Furthermore, *Mimesis* momentarily crystallizes the dialectical tensions between realism, modernism, and postmodernism through the way in which it, rather like the 'actantial positions' Jameson ascribes to the conspiracy film, rotates through each of the positions in turn, blurring the clear distinctions between them.<sup>153</sup> On its face, *Mimesis* makes a claim for realism, that is, a positive *epistemic* claim about the nature of literary history, but its Viconian historicism necessarily entails the historicizing of each paratactic moment of realism relative to the others. Auerbach's recognition that not even *Mimesis* is exempt from the imperative to historicize entails a distinctly postmodern act of historicizing the historicizing gesture itself, in a kind of

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<sup>151</sup> See Jacob Hovind, "Figural Interpretation as Modernist Hermeneutics: The Rhetoric of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*," *Comparative Literature* 64, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 257-69.

<sup>152</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 548.

<sup>153</sup> See Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 34.

meta-historicist rupture that unleashes a mise-en-abyme of reproductive serial figurations without any ultimate fulfillment.<sup>154</sup>

A central question in this scheme, therefore, is that of the event as such, since the aesthetic-historical hermeneutic circularity worked over in, and by, *Mimesis* threatens to beg the question of how historical change as such is possible at all, and whether or not the periodizing positions of realism, modernism, and postmodernism might not become, through a dialectical reversal, no longer periodizing functions at all, but only aspects or moments of a profoundly ahistorical and conservative stasis. One answer is to reverse this reversal by noting how the inability to historicize is precisely symptomatic of the postmodern as such, as an historical era that is inaugurated perhaps by Auerbach himself and the periodizing problem his work poses. The other, I think more productive answer, and the one I have emphasized in the introduction, is to foreground the event in precisely this problematic way by pointing to the ways in which aesthetic experience might, at least minimally, evade the legislating functions of schemata insofar as it occurs, as Shaviri claims, “without criteria.” Whitehead’s reversal of the Kantian system, and Deleuze’s and Benjamin’s parallel investments in the processual nature of sensory experience in the respective figures of the diagram and the constellation, point to the ways in which aesthetic experience might function, if not as a ground, then as a kind of immanent exteriority in relation to history and historical categories.

Another temptation here is to align Auerbach’s method of paratactically organizing extremely close readings of specific textual fragments into a unifying figure of history with the aesthetic logic of the conspiracy diagram as such, insofar as the latter likewise involves the

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<sup>154</sup> This is McGillen’s thesis regarding Auerbach’s late revision of his theory of the figure in “Typology and Medieval Literature.” See McGillen, “Erich Auerbach and the Seriality of the Figure.”

aestheticizing organization of historical fragments into a potentially totalizing narrative explanation.<sup>155</sup> Against this oversimplification, I would suggest that the value of this comparison lies precisely in a *figural* relation between Auerbach's method and the conspiracy wall: Auerbach's deployment of aesthetic modernism as a means of coming to grips with the impossibility of representing the totality of western literature, along with the disappearance of the mode of humanist scholarship for which Auerbach advocates, prefigures the conspiracy wall's use of *post*-modern aesthetic fragmentation, which in turn provides a potential solution to the problem of modernist disintegration, in an act of *renarrativization* that reconfigures the relationship between the (formerly humanist) subject and the object of investigation.

### 2.3 Chart Brut: Conspiracy Theory in Practice

Given the parallels between Auerbach's theory and practice of figural interpretation, I now want to turn to a specific example of the kind of figural, paratactic organization that is characteristic of not only of Auerbach's textual examples, but of Auerbach himself and of the contemporary conspiracy diagram. As I work to show, the hermeneutic desire for, and potential for textual and historical reconfiguration plays a central role in the aesthetic organization, and epistemological structure, of the conspiracy diagram. As with *Mimesis*, the question of renarrativization, what in Benjaminian parlance might be termed narratability, lies at the core of the aesthetic and epistemic stakes of the conspiracy diagram.

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<sup>155</sup> Indeed, the programmatic goals that Jameson lays out for *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* are both highly reflective of, and dialectically engaged with, the goals of *Mimesis* and Auerbach's *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, namely to understand how individual texts activate questions of allegory, character, and eschatological totality. See Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 10. In this context, it may also be worth mentioning that parataxis relies, linguistically, on *coordinating* phrases without connective conjunctions.

In December of 2014, online blog Gawker published an article recounting the rise of “a new style of folk art booming on the internet,” what its author sarcastically termed “Chart Brut.”<sup>156</sup> Taking cues from visual representations of investigation in detective and conspiracy media, and most obviously from the manic, paranoid conspiracy walls of *A Beautiful Mind*, the aesthetic depicts relations between agents in perceived conspiracies, using Microsoft Paint or other consumer-grade image editing software and a proliferation of hand (or mouse) drawn lines, typically red, to visually articulate the causal relations among actors and objects presented as evidence with respect to some particular event. This collage style of visual rhetoric, which manifests itself as an assemblage of image fragments, copied and pasted into one larger image, has become an intuitive mode of online visual communication, and has figured prominently in the occurrence or representation of a number of significant events in internet culture in recent years.

As the Gawker piece explains, the first, and perhaps still most prominent use of this style occurred during the manhunt for the Boston Marathon bombing suspects in April 2013, during which it served as a means to posit amateur theories regarding the identities of the bombers on the basis of security camera images released to the public by authorities. The images published by Gawker, which originally appeared on the popular social networking website Reddit, demonstrate attempts to identify the bombers based on crude eyeline matching and the identification of individuals wearing backpacks similar to one found shredded at the scene. While the amateur detective producing and debating these images ultimately did not identify the Tsarnaev brothers, they did entertain the (false) speculation that a missing 22 year-old Brown

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<sup>156</sup> Sam Biddle, “Chart Brut: How the MS-Paint Graphics of Conspiracy Took Over the Web,” *Gawker*, December 2, 2014, <http://gawker.com/chart-brut-how-the-ms-paint-graphics-of-conspiracy-too-1651851261>.

University student, Sunil Tripathi, was one of the bombers.<sup>157</sup> The evidentiary basis of this speculation was an image collage, placed left to right across a white background: first a blurry, low-resolution image of one of the bombers, with a circle around the individual's face lightened by image editing software, then an image of Tripathi posing for a portrait near some campus buildings, and lastly a third image featuring these two images superimposed (fig. 2.2).<sup>158</sup>



Figure 2.2 Chart Brut Featuring Sunil Tripathi

This Galtonesque triptych, which also bears a striking aesthetic resemblance to the overlapping digital superimpositions of *Minority Report*, was evidently sufficient to fuel rampant speculation that the missing student was missing *because* he was a terrorist, either in hiding or preparing to strike again. Tripathi was subsequently found dead in the Providence River, his death reported as

<sup>157</sup> Jay Caspian King, “Should Reddit Be Blamed for the Spreading of a Smear?” *New York Times*, July 25, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/28/magazine/should-reddit-be-blamed-for-the-spreading-of-a-smear.html?pagewanted=all&r=1&>.

<sup>158</sup> Although the creator of this image deleted his or her Reddit account, the post is archived at [https://www.reddit.com/r/WTF/comments/1cn7ax/recently\\_missing\\_brown\\_university\\_student\\_s\\_unil/](https://www.reddit.com/r/WTF/comments/1cn7ax/recently_missing_brown_university_student_s_unil/), accessed January 23, 2019.

a suicide, and apparently caused in part because of the weight of the accusations hurled at himself and his family during the veritably ecstatic online investigation.<sup>159</sup>

The Boston Bomber investigation and the death of Sunil Tripathi may be the most obvious example where collages in the ‘Chart Brut’ style facilitated online speculation, and in this case led to distinctly tragic material consequence, but it is far from the only notable event to be pervaded by these kinds of images. The GamerGate movement, as Gawker also reports, made extensive use of the style in attempts to trace connections of alleged collusion and sexual quid pro quo between videogame developers and members of the games media (fig. 2.3).

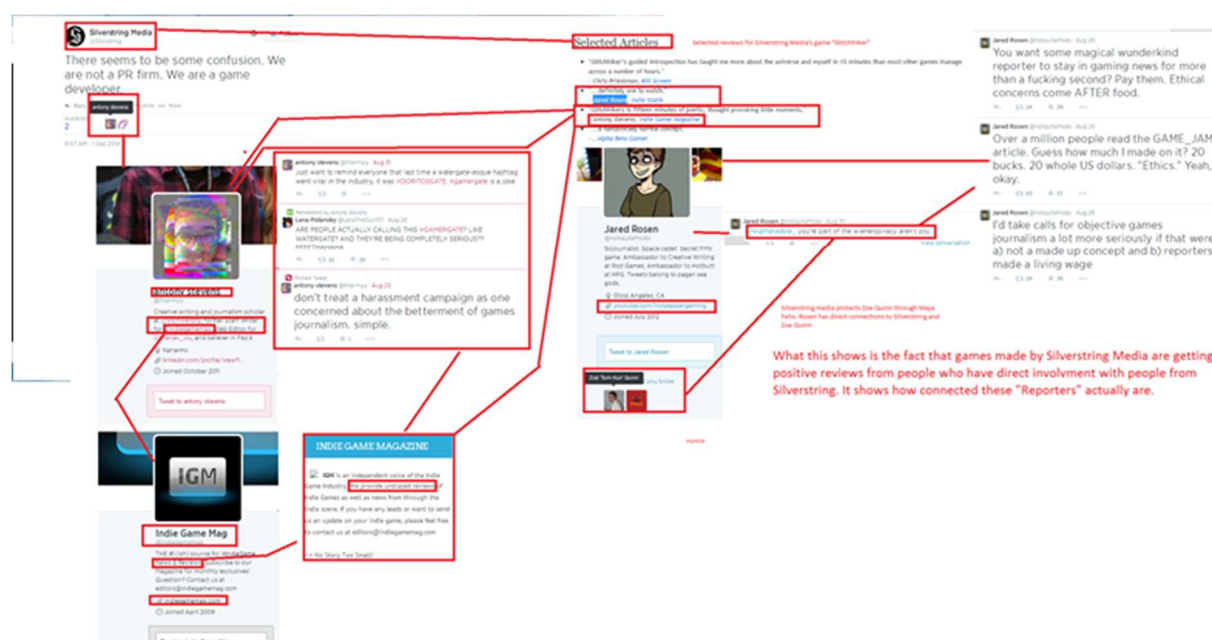


Figure 2.3 Chart Brut Featuring GamerGate

It also played a role in the 2014 celebrity iCloud hacking scandal, as a means of speculating about the sources, authenticity, and provenance of photographs of nude celebrities under what

<sup>159</sup> Jason Nark, “The Boston Bombing’s Forgotten Victim,” *Philly.com*, April 29, 2014, [http://articles.philly.com/2014-04-30/news/49497042\\_1\\_sunil-tripathi-providence-river-sunny](http://articles.philly.com/2014-04-30/news/49497042_1_sunil-tripathi-providence-river-sunny) (now defunct), accessed April 29, 2016.



participants euphemistically framed as a process of ‘investigation.’ More recently, the Chart Brut style has also been deployed to present conspiracy theories regarding the 2017 mass shooting in Las Vegas (fig. 2.4).

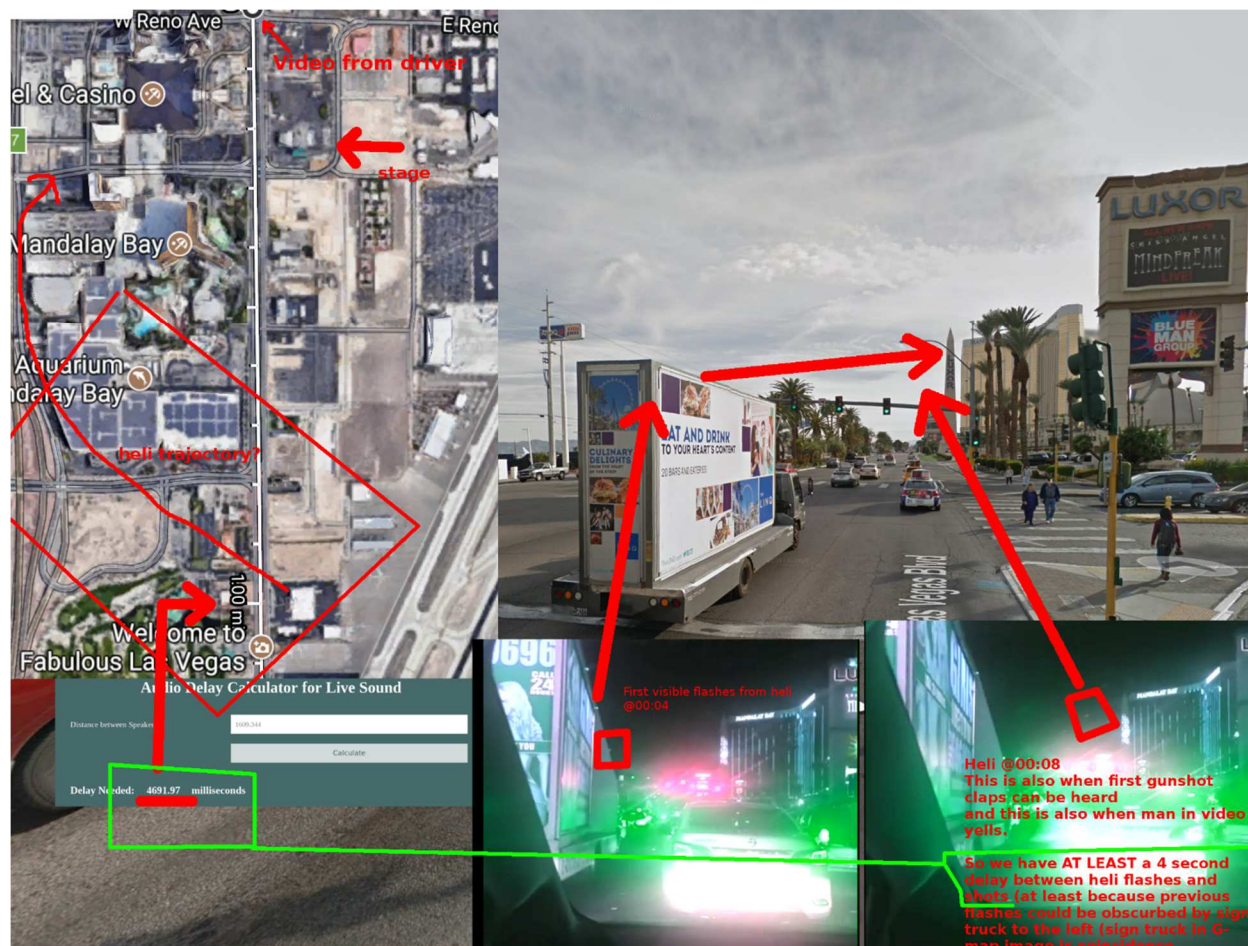


Figure 2.4 Chart Brut Featuring the Mandalay Bay Mass Shooting

If the Gawker essay that coined the term ‘Chart Brut’ functions as an effective snapshot of a cultural form of representation, it is also largely sarcastic and dismissive in tone, suggesting that these images can serve no cultural purpose beyond their ability to gesture towards the paranoid and conspiratorial nature of the internet itself. Rather than dismissing it (Gawker’s pithy conceptual designation may as well stand), taking Chart Brut seriously can provide insight into the particularly aesthetic nature of conspiracy as a significant and demonstratively impactful

mode of popular epistemology and vernacular realism. In other words, although the Chart Brut style of organizing and presenting information may not always (or often) be rhetorically effective, in terms of persuading a putative audience, the case of Sunil Tripathi and others who have been slandered indicated that at the very least, the style does produce effects of real consequence. Thus, if Chart Brut's objects are speculative, then they are speculations that can find, and have found, fulfillment in reality, along the lines of Auerbach's theory of figural interpretation. This capacity to actualize or fulfill the content of speculative aesthetic forms is deeply connected to the logic of financialization, precisely because of their shared formal logic of fragmentation and renarrativization. Moreover, this process of de- and reterritorialization reconfigures both temporal-historical and spatial-aesthetic relations. Hence, to unpack and explain this it is necessary to chart the ways in which the schematic form of the conspiracy diagram articulates both a figural spatial and a figural temporal logic. Here, Auerbach's theorization of the spatial and temporal logics of figurality provides a theoretical model for approaching the precise ways in which Chart Brut and the abstract schema of the conspiracy wall articulate a distinct spatial aesthetic to a temporal logic of historical time.

As the previous section explained, Auerbach's theory of the *figura* articulates a temporal logic, in which two events that are chronologically disparate are nevertheless connected together as elements in a figural pair (and later, in the "Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature" essay of 1953, an open-ended figural series). The first prefigures the second, and the second fulfills the first, while gesturing beyond the pair to an ultimately transcendent and eschatological unity. Thus, each individual figure in a figure-fulfillment dyad stands in a particular evidentiary relationship to some ultimate truth that cannot itself be disclosed, but only rhetorically evinced through acts of local interpretation. In practice, both as a rhetorical construction and as a

hermeneutic theory of history, the figure relies essentially on the spatial reconfiguration of syntactic elements across scale, from the individual turn of phrase to the structure of *Mimesis* to the vision of history as a series of figures in succession. Crucially, although the temporal and spatial dimensions of the figural can be disarticulated conceptually, they move together in practice as a spatiotemporal structure.

Thus, the concept of the figure, as I wish to import it from Auerbach, has two primary and interconnected aspects: a formal, rhetorical, and aesthetic one, which aligns with the classical meaning of the term, and which finds itself instantiated in the production of Chart Brut's image collages, and an interpretive, prophetic, and historical one, which is located at the site of consumption of these images, and is identified with their intended effects. Both of these aspects are illustrated, for example, in the images produced in the wake of the Boston Marathon bombing investigation, as evident in figs. 5<sup>160</sup> and 6.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Eric Dubay, "The Boston Bombing False-Flag Conspiracy," *The Atlantean Conspiracy*, April 24, 2013, <http://www.atlanteanconspiracy.com/2013/04/the-bosting-bombing-false-flag.html>.

<sup>161</sup> anitadalton, "Boston Marathon Bombing Conspiracy: Craft International, False Flag - UPDATED," *Odd Things Considered*, <http://www.oddthingsconsidered.com/boston-marathon-bombing-conspiracy-craft-international-false-flag/>.



Figure 2.5 Chart Brut Featuring the Boston Marathon Bombing

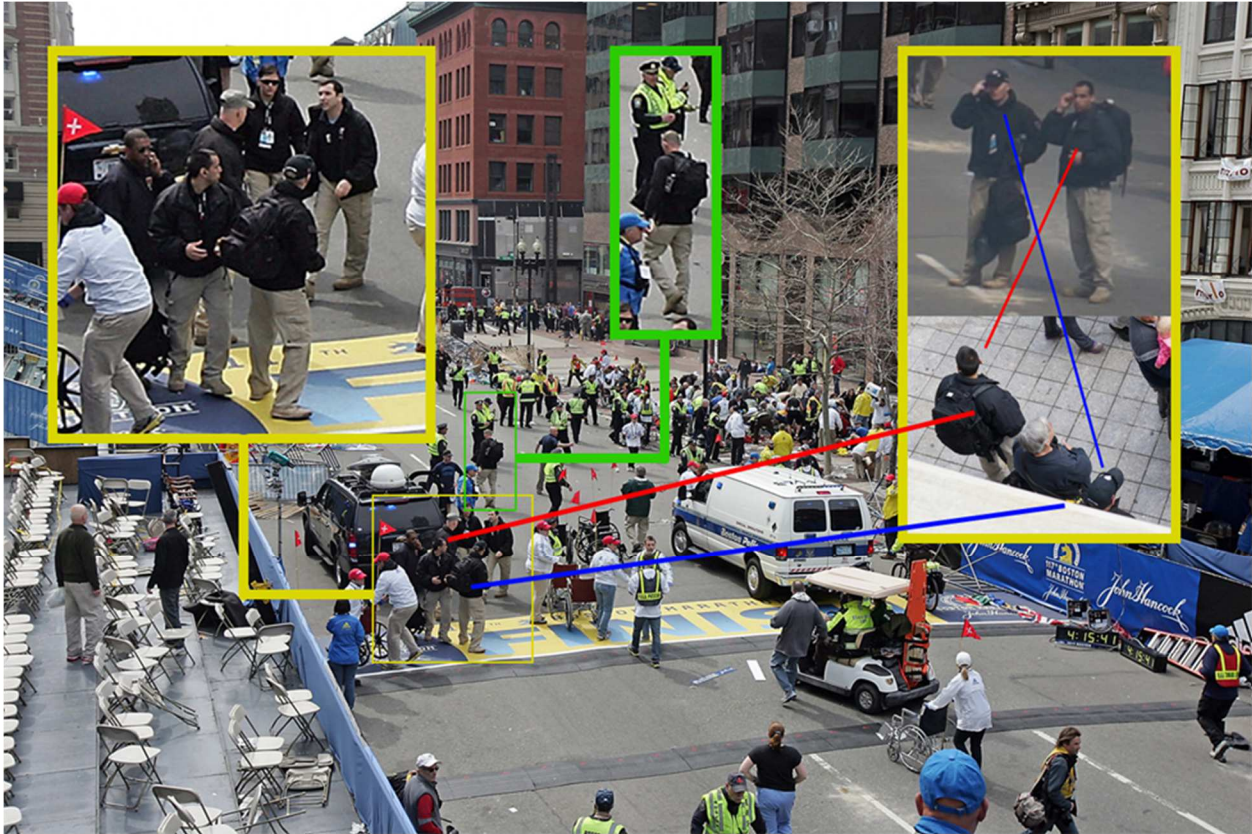


Figure 2.6 Chart Brut Featuring the Boston Marathon Bombing

These two figures attempt to demonstrate, in the Chart Brut style, that the Boston Bombing was not, as widely reported, an act of terrorism carried out by the Tsarnaev brothers but was, in fact, a ‘false flag’ operation conducted by military contractors under the auspices of the U.S. federal government. These images attempt to show that the two men in question, in the upper right of fig. 2.5 and the upper left of fig. 2.6, are covert operators responsible for the lethal blast. As fig. 2.2 attempts to make clear, the backpack apparently shouldered by one of the men is the same type of pack that the FBI claims contained one of the deadly explosives.

These are conspiratorial images insofar as they attempt to articulate lines of power and agency through nodes of evidence.<sup>162</sup> In this particular instance, the nodes of evidence are surveillance and media images of the scene of the bombing, and the lines of agency are quite literally actualized in the images as brightly colored lines connecting the images to each other, identifying both relevant actors and suggesting relations between actors, which in this relatively limited case amounts to the attempted identification of several seemingly innocuous individuals as suspicious, and indeed as military contractors, and further that the backpack worn by one of them contained one of the bombs, making these contractors the bombers, and not the Tsarnaev brothers, who are presumably only patsies in this inside operation. These are also figural images, insofar as they take individual elements (which would stand by themselves as merely signifying the presence of certain individuals at certain places at some point in time, or the design and style of an exploded backpack) and recontextualize them in the formation of an aesthetic-rhetorical assemblage that transforms them from first-order signifiers into components of a (putatively) persuasive apparatus. Moreover, although these collages are presented as self-evident, they both demonstrate a figural interpretation on the part of their authors, as well as require one on the part of the collage's observer. These images seek not only to explain an historical event, but to establish a relationship of figuration and fulfillment between the historical event and its aesthetic rendering, in which the latter is capable of laying bare and unconcealing the mysterious truth of the conspiracy's design, which in this case makes the U.S. federal government analogous to the God of Christian figural prophecy.

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<sup>162</sup> See Jodi Dean, "Theorizing Conspiracy Theory" *Theory and Event* 4, no. 3 (2000): n.p., <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/32599>.

The aesthetic form of these images, which emphasizes fragmentation and reconfiguration, echoes Auerbach's distinction between the temporality of figural interpretation and that of modern history:

In the modern view, the provisional event is treated as a step in an unbroken horizontal process; in the figural system the interpretation is always sought from above; events are considered not in their unbroken relation to one another, but torn apart, individually, each in relation to something other than is promised and not yet present.<sup>163</sup>

In assuming that historical events of the past, such as those recorded in the Old Testament, prefigure events in the New Testament and beyond, figural interpretation is forced to take a view of temporality that is not linear, causal, and sequential, but rather one in which events that are chronologically disparate and causally unconnected are immanent with respect to each other, in virtue of their mutual immanence to the 'plane of providential design.' Figural temporality is reflected in the formal aesthetics of Chart Brut, which render not only the fragmentation, but the collapse of chronology and linear causality through its flattening approach to visual composition. As in *Mimesis*, figural time is rendered through a spatial organization of paratactic fragments, which strive toward a unity of both aesthetic and historical expression. This figural approach to aesthetics and temporality is not limited only to the kinds of images produced in the wake of the Boston Marathon bombing, but are characteristic across its variations. In general, the Chart Brut image understands the historical fragments it collects as prefiguring a revelation of truth, but a revelation that can only be understood through the interpretive practice of assembling the fragments properly. Like the Boston conspiracy images, Chart Brut in particular, and conspiracy theory in general, prefigures and anticipates a moment of revelation that would fulfill it, allowing its virtual speculation to become actualized as reality and truth. Siegfried Kracauer's early book

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<sup>163</sup> Auerbach, "Figura," 59.

on the detective novel explains this redemptive process of fulfillment, which for Kracauer is essential to the activity of detection and mystery solving, as follows: “the self will be in relation with the supreme mystery that will carry it to its fullest point of existence....what is experienced will become real; won knowledge will attain absolute human value.”<sup>164</sup> Adrian Martin, in whose short book on figural thinking this quotation appears, explains that for Kracauer, the hero of detective fiction functions as a figure of tension, situated liminally between the two spheres of the human and the divine, between the evidentiary and the mysterious, and ultimately between the living and the dead.<sup>165</sup> The eschatological liminality that Kracauer finds in detective fiction is also essential to the figural logic of *Chart Brut*, which like all conspiracy theory is always oriented towards the Messianic moment of future revelation that would fulfill its fragmentary contents and render speculation into absolute truth.

That *Chart Brut* images do not conform to the Enlightenment tradition of linear-causal empiricism (that is, they appear to most observers as recklessly implausible) is not only not a deficiency, but is indeed necessary for the logic of figural thinking to operate properly. Since, as Auerbach claims, figural interpretation necessarily voids linear temporal and causal relations, the meaningful relations between the disparate fragments brought together in the images of *Chart Brut* do not simply stand in self-evidently meaningful relation to each other. They must be made to signify, and despite these images’ presentation as simply self-evident, more than mere spatial proximity is required in order for this process to operate effectively. In *Chart Brut*, meaningful connections are typically rendered through the editorializing lines that connect fragments within the collage form. In addition to the figural organization of fragments, this line-connection stands

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<sup>164</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Le Roman Policier* (Paris: Payot, 2001), quoted in Martin, *Last Day Every Day*, 19-20.

<sup>165</sup> Martin, *Last Day Every Day*, 20.



as the other key aesthetic feature of Chart Brut. As a feature, the use of lines to connect fragments follows very much in the aesthetic tradition of the conspiracy wall. Indeed, the Gawker piece on Chart Brut cites several contemporary examples, including *True Detective* (2014-) and *The Wire* (2002-2008), to which I would add *Homeland* (2011-2019) as another notable, and especially colorful, recent example (fig. 2.7).<sup>166</sup>

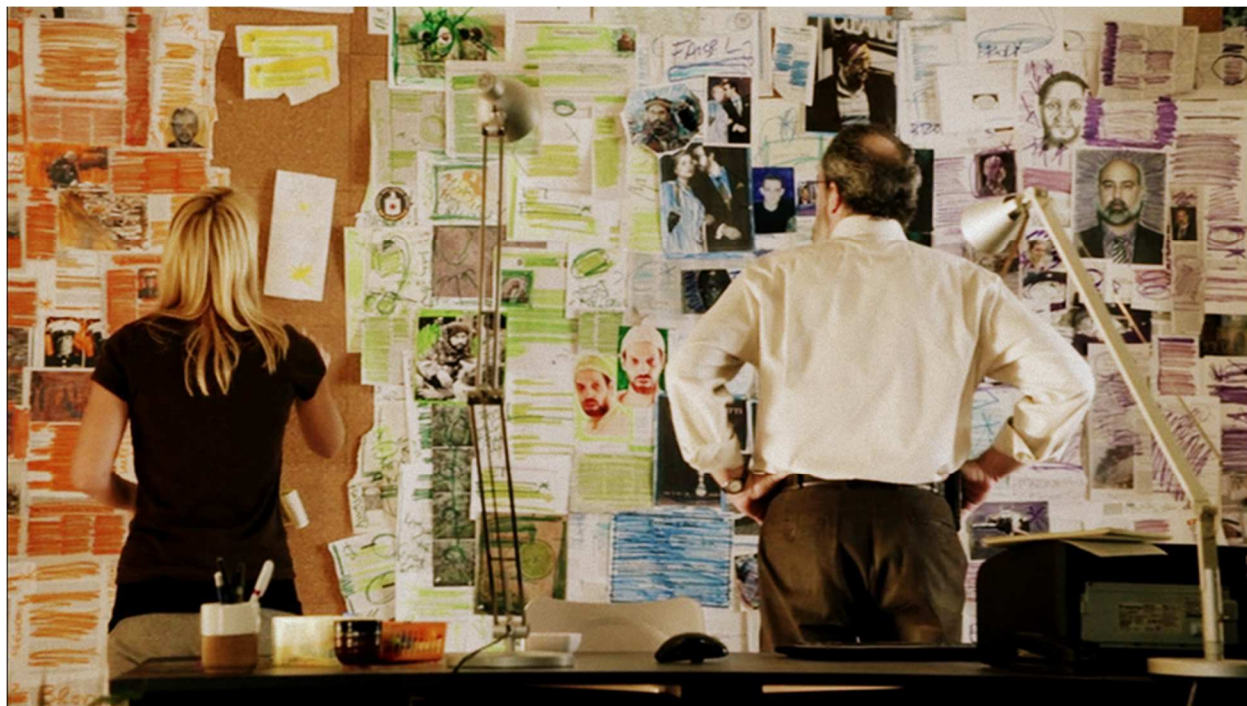


Figure 2.7 *Homeland*

<sup>166</sup> Historically, these renderings of investigation *in media res* can be traced back at least as far as Fritz Lang's *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933), which might well be the Ur-text for all figural conspiracy in film. In the film, the detective hero Lohmann's precinct office features a massive map of the city, pegged with tacks denoting areas of interest. This attempt at a figural rendering is mirrored by the eponymous testament, a series of scrawled handwritten pages produced by the insane criminal Mabuse which, when inadvertently assembled in the right order by an unwitting doctor, become legible as the instruction manual for establishing an 'Endless Empire of Crime,' a dystopian fulfillment of Mabuse's figural *écriture*. Beyond Lang's film, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles* contains the (now well-worn) example of a note composed from words cut out of the newspaper and pasted together to produce a supposedly untraceable message. See Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, in *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories, Volume II* (New York: Bantam, 2003 [1902]), 28-9.

In the conspiratorial images of Chart Brut, the lines connecting fragments into meaningful relationship function as if attempting to render visible and explicit the lines, not only of causal force, but aesthetic force that allow the collages to congeal into unified aesthetic, as well as rhetorical forms. It is though the lack of self-evidently meaningful relation between the fragments is rendered over and sutured together by these lines of force, which seek to bring about the historical fulfillment of these figures by aesthetic, rather than historical means. Hence, the potential for renarrativization, so important to Jameson's account of the relationship between financialization and postmodern aesthetics, is in Chart Brut a wholly metaphysical question of the capacity of an aesthetic assemblage to express a certain facticity. The facticity of Chart Brut's figures is sought in the play of obscure lines of force rendered visible, a notion that can be traced back at least to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, where Kant claims that the essence of aesthetic judgment is a free play of cognitive powers that mediates between the presentational powers of sensation and cognition, one that produces a sense of aesthetic pleasure as a consequence of the harmony between these two faculties of sensation and cognition. For Kant, the effect of this harmonious relation is the facilitated play of imagination and understanding, and the universal communicability of such a sensation of aesthetic pleasure is the basis that underwrites aesthetic judgment.<sup>167</sup> On this model of aesthetic experience, the harmonious sensation produced by the indeterminate "free play" of the faculties of imagination and understanding constitutes the subjective experience of aesthetic beauty.

Contrary to this view, Christophe Menke notes that the domain of aesthetics has, since Leibniz, been divided between two "irreconcilable" aspects of aesthetic theory, namely an

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<sup>167</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987 [1790]), 61-3.

understanding of the principle of sensible activity as a faculty in the Kantian sense, versus an understanding of it as a force: “The force propelling an ongoing transformation of the unconscious ideas that constitute us.”<sup>168</sup> This latter view, put forth by Johann Gottfried von Herder and in anticipation of Whitehead and Deleuze, asserts that the aesthetic force (as opposed to faculty) is the force of the imagination, which as Menke explains means the formation of a unity, but not a unity generated through a conjunction of impressions, but rather “the generation of images by their conjunction with other images. The imagination creates images by creating the unity of these images.”<sup>169</sup> Herder’s concept of force, as Menke explains, “designates a form of apperception” that observes and orders into relation. The nature of this relation, for Herder, is the “operation of one thing *into* another,” which Menke explains, stating “the other is that which is effected and engendered by the one, such that the one is transformed or continuously formed into the other.... ‘Force’ means that the one and the other exist only in operation, in the transition of the one into the other, in the emergence of the other out of the one.”<sup>170</sup> Herder’s aesthetic theory privileges force over faculty, with the crucial consequence that rather than supposing a universalized, transcendental subject position through which aesthetic judgment transpires, it seeks to explain how aesthetic force functions as a support undergirding the constitution of the subject as such.

Hence Herder prefigures Deleuze who, as the introduction explained, takes up the position of aesthetic experience as a material movement that produces images, in a manner that precedes and informs the other faculties. For Deleuze, the diagrammatic figure is a kind of

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<sup>168</sup> Christoph Menke, *Force: A Fundamental Concept of Aesthetic Anthropology*, trans. Gerrit Jackson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013 [2008]), 12.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

constructivist schema, functioning to organize the virtual dimension of “possibilities of fact,” which when actualized aesthetically will produce a concrete and perceptible form.<sup>171</sup> This articulation of the aesthetic to the factual is most prominently expressed in *The Logic of Sensation*, in which Deleuze approaches the question of how Francis Bacon’s painting articulates a figural logic of sensory experience. Here, Deleuze famously distinguishes between the figurative, or representational aspect of painting, and a figural aspect, which he provocatively aligns with “the fact.”<sup>172</sup> Indeed, Deleuze identifies the relationships between coupled figures, though in explicitly nonnarrative terms, as “*matters of fact*” [emphasis in original].<sup>173</sup> As the introduction explains, such “matters of fact” eventually become, later in *The Logic of Sensation*, identified as diagrammatic forms, but Deleuze’s early provocation to consider nonnarrative relations between figural elements as possessing facticity, and as, quite literally, *materially expressive of facts*, reverberates with Auerbach’s parallel concern with how figural elements in a hermeneutic apparatus can likewise constitute an historical fact of the matter for the interpreter.

For Deleuze, the answer to this question involves an appeal to the concept of force, as a “condition of sensation.” Yet, as he argues, “it is nonetheless not the force that is sensed, since the sensation “gives” something completely different from the forces that condition it.”<sup>174</sup> In other words, aesthetic force serves as a preconditional ground upon which both figural and eventually figurative effects rely, though this force is not itself typically sensible to the observer, who experiences it only in more ‘molar’ terms of figuration. For Deleuze then, the central problematic of painting is how to render these invisible forces visible, which is closely aligned

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<sup>171</sup> See p. 41.

<sup>172</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005 [1981]), 6.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

with the related problem of “*the decomposition and recomposition of effects*” [emphasis in original].<sup>175</sup> In *The Logic of Sensation* Francis Bacon’s painting, with its emphasis on the figural rather than the figurative, provides the solution to this form-problem, which must now also be considered as a force-problem. In *Chart Brut*, as with conspiracy theory in general, the sensible expression of lines of articulation, which is to say the articulation of matters of fact, is an equally pressing concern. *Chart Brut*’s literal lines of connection strive to render these epistemic forces visible and to self-reflexively present decomposition and recomposition, which in this context *should* be understood in narrative terms, as putatively self-evident and self-sufficient narrative articulations.

Thus, in *Chart Brut* the lines that trace conspiratorial connections seek to establish the ordering and relational operation of aesthetic force. These lines of force gather disparate fragments into what is presented as a coherent and sensible unity, and the ability to be understood as a coherent explanation of some event or state of affairs. Through this operation of force, *Chart Brut* strives toward the transformation of its figures into factual representations about what is—a fully articulated diagram. The nature of figural thinking is such, however, that this process of ‘ongoing formation’ is never complete, leaving facticity as the absolute limit toward which the figure moves, but into which it can never successfully resolve. That the nature of figurality is such that the fulfillment of figures always exists in the future and yet to occur, and consequently insofar as *Chart Brut*, as embodying the schematic diagram of conspiracy thinking, also employs figural thinking, the consummation of integral fulfillment is always beyond reach, a kind of conspiratorial sublimity that is only ever gestured towards.

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<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-9.

Hence, the articulating lines of force of Chart Brut, as Deleuzian “matters of fact,” do not so much succeed in articulating facts of the matter, so much as they *figure* them as an expression of aesthetic and hermeneutic desire. In so doing, Chart Brut provides a sublimating solution to the problem of finance capital’s simultaneous need to produce a novel futurity on the one hand, and incessant reconfiguration of the same on the other. Insofar as the process of renarrativization can be said to occur in Chart Brut, it holds out the utopian promise of figural redemption, that is, a future that is meaningfully, perhaps even progressively, different from the present. Presumably the sublime revelation of the Grand Conspiracy has the potential to effectuate meaningful social change. Yet, the very structure of figurality as such ensures that this reconfiguration cannot but resemble the past that schematically conditions, which is to say *prefigures*, its aesthetic appearance and hermeneutic recognizability, ensuring a perpetuation of the same as the guise of the new. In Chart Brut, Benjamin’s Angel of History reappears as an Angel of Conspiracy.

#### **2.4 Conclusion: Julie Mehretu’s Speculative Gaze**

If this problematic of renarrativization and its discontents is implied in Auerbach and Chart Brut, it is taken up in a far more explicit and politically incisive way in the work of contemporary visual artist Julie Mehretu, whose abstract work not only evokes the spatial form of the conspiracy diagram, but also functions to critique it. Moreover, whereas financialization remains schematically immanent in the figural form of the conspiracy diagram, Mehretu’s work, and especially her 2009 *Mural*, commissioned by Goldman Sachs and located in the lobby of the financial firm’s global headquarters in New York, self-consciously theorizes finance capital as a unification of figural temporality with figural spatiality.

The mural spans a massive 80 feet wide by 23 feet tall and is composed of six overlapping layers of abstract line, shape, and color embedded in sanded acrylic spray (fig. 2.8).



Figure 2.8 *Mural*

Thematically, the work's formal elements express a sense of historical time: while the abstract lines and shapes evoke the history of abstract modernist painting, the incorporation of architectural plans signifies various aspects of the history of capitalism: there are fragments of architectural plans, including Greek and Roman markets and modern high-rise buildings, maps of trade routes including New Orleans cotton exchange routes, as well as the façade of the New York Stock Exchange, all embedded and palimpsestically layered within the mural. In addition to the work's gestures toward its own art-historical and economic contexts, the mural is also annotated by abstract marks of color that traverse the sprawling canvas, indicating a sense of affectivity, animacy, and spatio-temporal movement that reverberates with Deleuze's account of Bacon's affectively intensive "free marks."<sup>176</sup> In its formal investment in orchestrating a discontinuous mode of historical time by means of a collage of fragments, therefore, the mural resonates strongly both with the literary form of *Mimesis*, as well as with the visual style of *Chart Brut*.

Yet what sets Mehretu's work apart from these others, and what gives it a distinctively polemical critical edge, is the way in which its thematic expression of historical temporality,

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<sup>176</sup> See Alex Fialho, "Creative Insiders: Julie Mehretu," Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, <http://lmcc.net/place/julie-mehretu/>, accessed April 9, 2018.

which is legible through close scrutiny of the surface of the work, is differently experienced by observers inside and outside of the building that houses the work. As Calvin Tompkins of *The New Yorker* has observed, Mehretu's layering practice produces a sense of spatial depth in the work that itself evokes a sense of temporality.<sup>177</sup> The way in which this temporality is rendered spatially, through the collapse of historical strata into a single visual plane, not only echoes Auerbach's explanation of figural interpretation as implicating a series of incomplete, non-linear, fragmentary historical events that mutually redeem each other, but also the movement from force to form that characterizes the diagram in Deleuze's *Logic of Sensation*. In Mehretu's *Mural*, as in *Mimesis* and *Chart Brut*, figural space becomes a way of rendering figural time, and the interaction of these two systems, architectural and historical, reproduces the operational logic of finance capital for the mural's observer: from afar (i.e. from the public space on the sidewalk outside the Goldman lobby) the mural appears as a molar, unified whole (fig. 2.9), while up close (i.e. inside the lobby), the work is composed of spatially minute representational, and historical, disjunctions, rather than a self-identical relation between the mural's layers (fig. 2.10).

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<sup>177</sup> Calvin Tompkins, "Big Art, Big Money," *The New Yorker* March 29, 2010. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/03/29/big-art-big-money>.





Figure 2.9 *Mural* (Exterior)

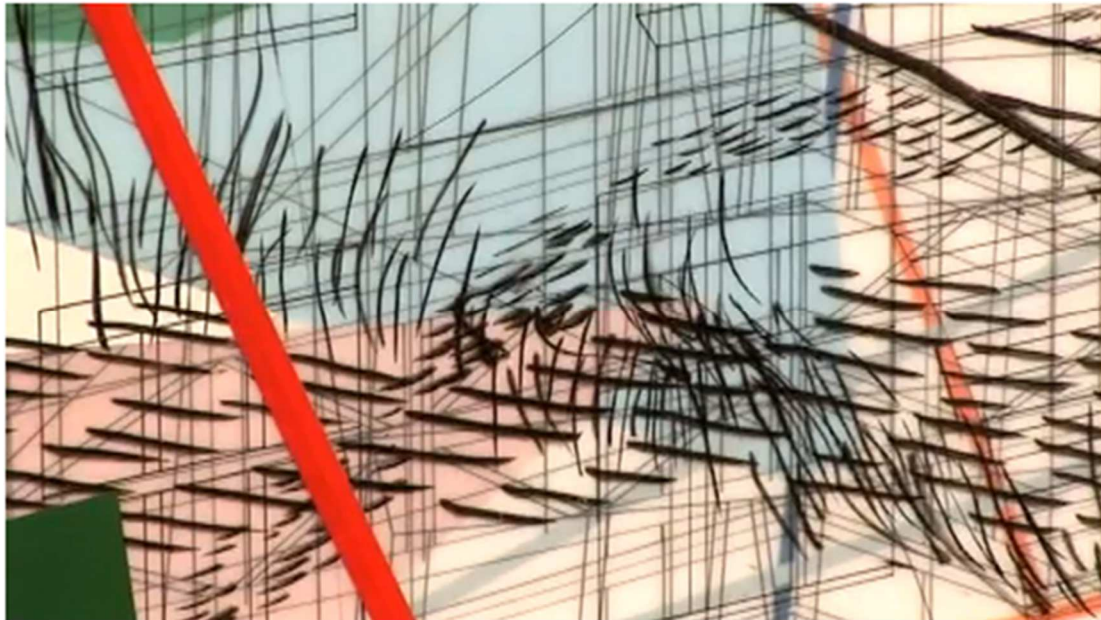


Figure 2.10 *Mural* (Detail)

In doing so, it incorporates relations of power, in the form of visual and epistemological access to the work and its fine details, into the observer's very experience of it. While it is visible through a window from the street, only Goldman Sachs employees and guests who pass through lobby security may assess the work up close, in a way that would reveal the actual fragmentary details of which the work as a whole is comprised.

Moreover, not only does the mural's spatial location produce a series of disjunctions between inside and outside, insider and outsider, and private and public that self-reflexively enacts the privatization of public art and public space, but it does so in a way that constructs these distinct subject positions as markedly different modes of apprehension of the work and whatever representational content it may disclose. Counterintuitively, it is the public outsider whose view of the work is as a representational unity, whereas it is the Goldman insider alone who can appreciate the fragmented, non-self-identical form of the work, along with its intricate and historically specific detail. Thus, Mehretu's mural aesthetically and architecturally reproduces the division between insider and outsider views of the market itself, which becomes the genuine content of the work as an installation piece: the public view of the market is the illusion of a stable and coherent system, guided by the providence of the 'invisible hand,' whereas the privileged inside view of the mechanisms of the marketplace reveals a disjunctive, incoherent system of intense financialization, in which privileged access to market data, such as the microsecond price fluctuations that enable latency arbitrage, allows institutions like Goldman to extract profit seemingly out of thin air. The bodily movement from inside the Goldman building to its outside would, then, figure the ontologically generative movement of speculation itself, from value as an imaginary representational fiction, to value as a 'real' and productive force, value as self-sufficient face-value.

Thus, Mehretu's *Mural* provides not only a sort of cartographic map, but also an epistemic and affective diagram of finance capital and neoliberal privatization, one that hinges on the privileged ability to interpret the figural object, and hence also on the very question of the narratability of aesthetic form. The question of renarrativization is answered differently depending on the observer's location in space relative to the painting, such that the general public sees a work in its holistic formal unity, but without access to the narrative elements of the work while the privileged insider sees the work in its fragmentation, but with the ability to articulate this incomplete striving toward formal unity to the historical signifiers of the history of capitalism and mercantile exchange. Mehretu's mural thereby renders the problem of renarrativization in all its dialectical complexity, by presenting oppositional perspectives on the narratability of the work that depend on the observer's subject-position relative to the institutions of finance capital. Mehretu's own commentary on her work is instructive here. She describes how, in her work, the tension between the incorporation of architectural plans and abstract marks and characters functions to both produce the sense of space the work affords, as well as to undermine and dismantle any sense of coherence or self-identical form.<sup>178</sup> Mehretu explicitly affirms this dioptic focus as the stated goal of the *Mural*, explaining that her "aim is to have pictures that appear one way from a distance, almost like looking at a cosmology, city, or universe from afar—but when you approach the work, the overall image shatters into numerous other pictures, stories and events."<sup>179</sup>

What Mehretu's remarkable work ultimately produces is an experiential, embodied reminder that the abstractions of finance capital, as much as those of conspiracy theory, are

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<sup>178</sup> Lawrence Chua and Julie Mehretu, "Julie Mehretu," *BOMB* 91 (Spring 2005): 29-30.

<sup>179</sup> Sarah Lewis, "Unhomed Geographies: The Paintings of Julie Mehretu" *Callaloo* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 221.

inseparable from the question of the specific bodies interpellated by these speculative systems of world-making and representation. It is precisely the question of the location of the body that ultimately *matters* in relation to the Goldman mural, which is why critiques of the work on the grounds that its commission by an investment bank only serves to supplicate the 1% are doomed to miss the point. The mural takes the presumption that it is itself a speculative commodity, in the form of an interest-bearing work of fine art installed in an obviously commercial location, and reconfigures the conventional subject-object relation between the viewing subject and the art object. The mural effectively shows up the public observer with a speculative interest in the work as, from the perspective of Goldman Sachs itself, an objectified commodity whose social value and capacity for exploitation by the financial system is determined by its epistemic and spatial relationship to the fixed and centered speculative object. In other words, one's distance from the locus of financial speculation directly correlates to one's susceptibility to the exploitative mystifications of the financial system, particularly those that require naïve investors to view the market as a stable and coherent system that functions smoothly and instantaneously, which the market is not and does not. The mural's modality of spatial critique also, therefore, extends to an immanent critique of the racialized, geospatial structure of global finance, in which developing economies in African and Latin American nations, not to mention American subprime mortgage loans, are exploited by financial systems that capitalize on the social risk inherent in credit-debt relations at the same time as ideological presumptions create the ground for those very same risk assessments.<sup>180</sup>

Thus, Mehretu's work raises the question of embodiment in relation to speculation, a question that is articulated in differing ways, with differing stakes and differing outcomes, in

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<sup>180</sup> See p. 34.

each of the chapters that follow. In the following chapter, the naïve medical patient's body on *House M.D.* also becomes a site for speculative exploitation, albeit without a conscious concern for financialization or critique as such. In the following chapter on *House*, as well as in the chapters on *Sinister* and *Nightcrawler*, financial speculation becomes submerged as an immanent diagrammatic form that while not explicitly articulated, is detectable through its indexical effects on the bodies it interpellates.

### **3 SCANNING THE NEOLIBERAL BRAIN: *HOUSE M.D.* AND THE BIOPOLITICAL T.V. SCREEN**

#### **3.1 Introduction: The Biopolitical T.V. Screen**

The December 5, 2005 issue of *TIME* Magazine features a cover story on “The Year in Medicine from A to Z,” a brisk recap of breakthroughs in medical science over the previous 11 months. On the magazine's cover this headline is accompanied by a graphic cover image featuring an illustration of a male human figure, viewed from slightly above, whose glowing and radiant purple skin-surface reveals beneath it the body's vascular system of heart and red-blue arteries and veins, all of which is visually encapsulated by a large red and yellow pill (fig. 3.1).



Figure 3.1 *TIME*

Obliquely, this cover image evokes the body as seen by medical imaging technology—an MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) or CT (Computed Tomography) scan—and this not only through the transparency of the body, but also through the angle of the (hypothetical) camera and the pill background, which work to suggest the supine orientation of the body in relation to the visualizing scanners of medical imaging technology.<sup>181</sup>

<sup>181</sup> *TIME* 166, no. 23, December 5, 2005.  
<http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20051205,00.html>.

To seek to understand the state of medicine and culture through “The Year in Medicine from A to Z” is, however, only to see a symptomatic surface phenomenon belying a deeper condition. The article itself addresses 26 distinct medical news items from the preceding year, one for each letter of the alphabet, with a short, three or four sentence blurb-like summary: a dog was cloned. The controversy over Terry Schiavo’s life and death erupted. Fish oil supplements looked promising for combating heart disease. But these fragmentary, sound-bite accounts are less revealing as historical documents than the interstitial advertisements that separate and conjoin them. One such ad promotes GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), a pharmaceutical giant, and one of several that advertises heavily in magazines like *TIME* that appeal to a middle-aged, middle-class readership.<sup>182</sup> The ad features an off-white background, onto which is laid a vertical rectangle of brown textile fabric, and over that another rectangle forming a weathered, browned page (fig. 3.2).

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<sup>182</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, the median *TIME* subscriber age and income were 45.7 years and \$66,176, respectively. See Pew Research Center, “Median Age of Readership by Magazine,” March 12, 2007, <http://www.journalism.org/numbers/median-age-of-readership-by-magazine/> and Pew Research Center, “Median Income of Readership by Magazine,” March 12, 2007, <http://www.journalism.org/numbers/median-income-of-readership-by-magazine/>.

WE'RE FIGHTING AN ENEMY WE CAN'T SEE IN  
**A WAR THAT NEVER ENDS**  
 AND WE'RE ACTUALLY WINNING

Developing new drugs to fight disease is one of the hardest things you can possibly do. We can work through millions of compounds to find the one that's exactly right. It can take an average of 15 years and \$800 million to get there. And then, bacteria have a nasty habit of developing resistance. Which puts us back where we started. Thing is, everyone benefits from our work on antibiotics. So the war never stops. And losing is definitely not an option.

Today's medicines. Tomorrow's miracles.™

GlaxoSmithKline

Figure 3.2 *TIME*

Over the top of this page are snapshot photos of a doctor and some kind of microscopic image, although it is unclear exactly what is supposed to be visible in it. On the page, text reads, on separate lines: “WE’RE FIGHTING AN ENEMY WE CAN’T SEE / IN A WAR THAT NEVER ENDS / AND WE’RE ACTUALLY WINNING.” More text goes on to explain that developing drugs to fight disease is expensive and time consuming, that bacteria develop resistance and force drug companies to start over, that the ‘war’ on disease has no end, and (yet) must be won, or at least continued, since “losing is not an option.”<sup>183</sup>

<sup>183</sup> *TIME* 166, no. 23, December 5, 2005, 37. <http://time.com/vault/issue/2005-12-05/page/38/>.



As this ad makes abundantly and explicitly clear, the fight against disease being waged by pharmaceutical companies is thought, by the company and presumably by *TIME*'s readership, to be analogous to the War on Terror then being waged by the U.S. and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan. The interminable nature of warfare, which has come to define the still-ongoing global conflict, is leveraged by the ad to explain drug development as a kind of necessary, indefinite war on the ever-present threat of potentially lethal disease. As with the War on Terror, the "enemy" is invisible, prone to "resistance," and expensive to eradicate. Also like that War on Terror, GSK can project the image that it is "winning" the war, at the same time that it acknowledges that the war is impossible to win, and must continue forever, both because bacteria resist and because a successful resolution to the war on disease would eliminate the need for GSK and other pharmaceutical conglomerates to continue to exist. As Brian Massumi explains, in the similar context of the subsumption of both viral pandemics and warfare under the rubric of future threat, "There is always a remainder of uncertainty, an unconsummated surplus of danger....Self-renewing menace is the future reality of threat."<sup>184</sup>

This was also not the first time that global terrorism and disease had been productively compared. Among many examples, George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, perhaps more well-known for the coinage of the term "Axis of Evil," uses a similar medical metaphor to analogize the War on Terror. In his speech, Bush refers to "the terrorist parasites who threaten their countries and our own," while also noting that Hussein's Iraq "is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world." Here, the logic of terrorism as a disease, one that is all the more dangerous for its ability to 'hide' and evade visible detection, is leveraged in the

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<sup>184</sup> Brian Massumi, "The Future Birth of the Affective Face: The Political Ontology of Threat," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 53.

service of drumming up support for the then-imminent war against Iraq. According to this metaphorical logic of terrorism-as-disease, the war to be fought is as much one of images and visibility as it is of boots on the ground, or compounds developed in a laboratory. For Bush, GSK, and *TIME*'s December 2005 cover story, to succeed requires the ability to visualize the invisible enemy, to make the diseased body, whether literal or the body politic, open to visual inspection and preemptive, prophylactic intervention.

The GSK ad, despite its assertion that disease is invisible, illustrates a snapshot photo of what is presumably bacteria, twice framed with an iris-like mask (to denote the microscope that would make the bacteria visible to the naked eye) and with a white border (to denote the image as an image, as something transportable, showable, and shareable). The 'mise-en-scène' of the ad suggests that the war against disease (as well as, perhaps, the War on Terror that is evoked by the ad, but which remains invisible and implicit within it) can be fought through the production of images and their placement into literal imbrication. The image of the disease, set against the image of the GSK researcher who would cure it, encourages *TIME* readers to think of both wars as wars of invisibility, organized according to a logic whereby the ability to see and frame images accords with the ability to control and manage biological and geopolitical resistance to the dominant order of neoliberal capitalism. Moreover, the capacity for biological threat control and management is articulated simultaneously to both the ability to produce images that visualize invisible threats, as well as the ability to arrange images spatially in a manner that effectively produces a sense that the biological threat, and its image, is itself under expert control.

À propos of this relationship between virality, visibility, images and power, Pasi Väliäho asks: "If images are quasi-corporeal and even, to quote W.J.T. Mitchell, 'parasitical' passengers that travel across time and space in their human mediators, where can we locate them

conceptually?” He goes on to propose the concept of biopolitical visual economy, a field of power relations that is established at and through the intersection of the visibility of images in the realm of screens and pictures, and the beliefs and affects that are evoked by those images and the visual logic that constitutes them.<sup>185</sup> For Väliäho, biopolitical visual economy names a kind of Rancièrian *partage du sensible*, articulating relations between what is sayable and what is visually sensible: “The image can be visual or verbal, aural or tactile, or any combination of these, the main point being that it works, if not always subserviently, within networks of power and constitutes ‘the sensible system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.’”<sup>186</sup> Although Väliäho uses Rancièrè’s language to describe biopolitical visual economy, his emphasis on the articulation of the sayable and the visible implicitly evokes Deleuze’s parallel problematic of the differentiation of the sensible and the intelligible, as discussed in the introduction. Indeed, the Rancièrè quotation Väliäho appeals to here itself indicates, in so many words, a schematic or diagrammatic functioning of visibility itself, insofar as it is both self-evident to sense perception, and capable of disclosing the commonalities and regulative functions immanent to the empirical field it produces.

According to Väliäho, the contemporary apparatus of biopolitics is distinguished by a shift from subjectivity as the dominant mode of thinking the individual in relation to sociopolitical authority to brainhood, in which biopolitical control is exercised not only on the body, but on the brain that is taken to be the seat of the biologized self.<sup>187</sup> Images, as Väliäho’s

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<sup>185</sup> Pasi Väliäho, *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-8.

reference to Rancière suggests, are the principal means through which the neurobiological self is managed and controlled under neoliberal capitalism, and particularly through the ability of images to circulate between brains and screens. For Väliaho, therefore, visualizations of the brain therefore hold a privileged position in the visual economy of neoliberal brainhood, since they effectively constitute the discourse that contemporary capitalism has about itself with itself, as both contain and propagate the logic of neoliberal brainhood in and through their circulation.

Väliaho's primary interest is in examining the ways in which screen images "administer our temporal realities" and orient us temporally through mediating image technologies: "Images incorporate the future in the present; they make the future a fact lived here and now in our bodies. In doing so, they reiterate the key logics of biopolitics today, logics based on the management of future possibilities, on the ontogenetic effectiveness of appearances to conjure up what has not yet happened but will happen." As Väliaho makes clear, the preemptive ontogenesis entailed by neoliberal biopolitics operates across a vast field of action, from the preemptive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the speculative securitization of high finance.<sup>188</sup> As Randy Martin likewise observes, "While not reducible to the interests of finance capital, war today takes on a financial logic in the way it is organized and prosecuted. War is a means of destruction, but also the occasion for reconstructing a region along specific lines for particular ends. War destroys, but it also bears forms of life that render perceptible capital's inner machinations."<sup>189</sup> What both Martin and Väliaho bring into focus is the ways in which both finance and contemporary warfare are regulated, not only by "capital's inner machinations," but by a distinctively figural, speculative logic through which the image, construed broadly as a general form of sensible

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>189</sup> Randy Martin, *An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

representation, is imbued with a temporally and spatially productive capacity: to produce the future in the present, as well as to organize the respective parts and positions that constitute the visual field into a cohesive figure.

This chapter seeks to understand more precisely how the biopolitical regime of neoliberal brainhood emerged during its particular historical moment, as well as to explain how this regime articulates processes of visual and securitizing speculation. In this respect, the GSK advertisement that opened this chapter should be understood as symptomatic of the solidification of a larger cultural epistemology of the image, one that comes about precisely at an historical moment of intense and pervasive anxiety regarding the ability of visualization technologies to effectively produce a satisfactory image of biological, political, and existential threats. In this moment, medical and military visualities enter into a relation of mutual transference and exchange, each trading epistemic and affective properties with the other, and producing a kind of composite: a figural biomilitary visuality. This chapter's goal is, by collating disparate elements, to render an image of neoliberal brainhood at this point in its development—between the beginning of U.S. military engagement in Iraq in 2003 and the 2008 financial crisis—which in turn has a transformative effect on how speculation is itself figured culturally. In doing so, this chapter works not only to show how the biomilitary visuality of the War on Terror anticipates and feeds into the crisis of speculation that is so acutely exacerbated by the financial crisis, but also to explore how digital images, as articulations of the dialectical tension between materiality and abstraction that grounds both aesthetic and financial speculation, function as loci for expressing the ramifications of the longer *durée* of financialization.

If the GSK ad is particularly striking, it is, however, only a narrow example of one image that circulated briefly during late 2005. In order to produce a more adequate image of neoliberal

brainhood, a more powerful and expansive imaging and imagining technology is required. This chapter therefore turns to television as a medium for the circulation of images that visualize the brain and its functions. In particular, I look to the first three seasons of the network television program *House M.D.* (2004-2012), which aired from fall 2004 to spring 2007, as an especially well-positioned synaptic junction in Väliaho's map of contemporary visual culture. In the show, Dr. Gregory House and his diagnostic team of doctors solve medical mysteries that consistently hinge on the illegibility of ambiguous symptoms that must be rendered both visible and intelligible by House and his team during the course of the investigation. As Dr. House's near-namesake Holmes would indicate, the show centers on processes of investigation and detection, in which the patient, in both body and mind, is treated with suspicion. While the program itself provides a rich textual mediation of the brain, the body, and the cultural visibility of disease, I am seeking here to contextualize the show within the broader situation of American culture between 2003 and 2007 by theorizing it as an image of the neoliberal brain. This chapter therefore also considers, alongside *House M.D.*, *TIME* magazine as a primary historical archive, along with other relevant archival sources of information.

2003 marked a banner year in the emergence of neoliberal visibility, for at least three reasons. Firstly, it was the year in which the Second Iraq War commenced, following closely on the heels of the "Axis of Evil" State of the Union speech, in which Bush outlined his eponymous doctrine by vowing to preemptively strike enemies of the USA, claiming that "We are protected from attack only by vigorous action abroad and increased vigilance at home." Secondly, 2003 was the year in which the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine was awarded to Paul C. Lauterbur and Sir Peter Mansfield, "for their discoveries concerning magnetic resonance

imaging.”<sup>190</sup> Although MRI technology has existed since the 1970s, and was increasingly widespread beginning in the 1990s, it was only formally acknowledged at this prestigious level in 2003, effectively marking its arrival in the public consciousness as a vitally important medical technology. Lastly, although perhaps no less significantly, 2003 was also the year in which General Electric overhauled its corporate brand image for the first time since 1979, replacing its brand slogan of “We bring good things to life” with “Imagination at Work.” This overhaul was accompanied by an aggressive marketing campaign that cost in excess of 100 million dollars, and indicated G.E.’s shift away from associations with lighting and consumer appliances, and towards a more expansive and diversified brand identity.<sup>191</sup> “Imagination,” to the extent that it replaces “good things,” indexes the cultural shift away from the Fordist regime of manufacturing and towards the Post-Fordist regime of immaterial goods and cognitive labor, and especially towards images as the products of an ‘imagination’ figured as work.<sup>192</sup> In this context, it is

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<sup>190</sup> “The Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine 2003,” Nobelprize.org, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/medicine/laureates/2003/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/medicine/laureates/2003/).

<sup>191</sup> This marketing campaign included a series of four television commercials, each of which illustrates the ways in which G.E.’s products and services either have, or will, transform the world of technology. Three of the ads invite viewers to hypothetically reimagine America’s technological and cultural history through the lens of contemporary technology, with spots featuring a jet-propelled Wright Brothers’ Kitty Hawk flight, an episode of *Lassie* in which the faithful collie uses kung-fu inspired by *The Matrix* to protect Jeff (or is it Timmy?) from a mountain lion, and a scenario in which a sublime trove of medical documents, clearly modeled on *Citizen Kane* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, is easily accessible thanks to digital information technology. A fourth ad however looks to the future, imaging a world in which the automobile-painting robots that have replaced human labor are themselves obsolesced by an even more advanced plastics technology that obviates the need for paint at all. The humanoid robots are shown playing cards and reading magazines at work before they are disconcertingly reassigned to become crash test dummies, in an oddly bleak repetition of the deleterious effects of automation on human labor. See examples at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPqn5p-8Vdg>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4XMfj2zbiQ>, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kk3A2BGqerI>.

<sup>192</sup> Stuart Elliott, “The Media Business: Advertising; G.E. to Spend \$100 Million Promoting Itself as Innovative,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 2003.

crucial to note G.E.'s position as one of the most prominent manufacturers of medical imaging technology, especially MRI machines, which serve as the means of production of such images.<sup>193</sup>

As Väliäho suggests, visualizations of the brain maintain a privileged status within the regime of neoliberal brainhood, as they function to both bear and propagate the logic of contemporary biopolitical power. Moreover as scientific images they contain, embedded within them, traces of what Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison refer to as the “epistemic virtues” that guide their construction and use. For Daston and Galison, scientific images index the ways in which subject/object relations are understood by the individuals who produce and consume them.<sup>194</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, photographic objectivity entailed a professional ethics of restraint and elimination of will, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the necessity of interpreting abstract images (such as of bubble chambers and the brain) entailed an ethics of trained interpretation of images. I would suggest that these kinds of processual relations, which shape how interactions between subjects, or brains, and images are supposed to take place in terms of epistemology, ethics, and affect, are a useful means of approaching visualizations of the brain in neoliberal brainhood precisely on account of the ways in which they allow both subject-positions and object-positions to emerge as discrete, yet articulated forms out of the inescapably aesthetic process of interpretation that unfolds between them. As bearers of “epistemic virtues,” or in other words a particular distribution of the sensible or Deleuzian diagram, scientific images can be subjected to a transcendental deduction that reveals the forces of subjective and objective construction at play

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/16/business/media-business-advertising-ge-spend-100-million-promoting-itself-innovative.html>.

<sup>193</sup> G.E. self-reported, in its initial issue of *Signa PULSE* magazine, that it supplies MR scanning systems to 15 out of the nation's top 16 hospitals, as determined by US News & World Report. See *Signa PULSE: The Magazine of MR*, Fall 2006, 4.

<sup>194</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 35-42.



in a particular case. Moreover, although Daston and Galison restrict their study to medical images produced by and for professional scientists, I would also suggest that their model for analysis, which takes scientific images as always freighted with various assumptions about the nature of visualization, may be usefully extended beyond technical images, and into the realm of images that signify scientificity and that circulate culturally. The “Year in Medicine from A to Z” cover image, for example, weaves together epistemic, ethical, and affective engagements by rendering the body as permeable and readily available to inspection, albeit an inspection that is able to restrict itself to only specific systems of the body (i.e. the vascular system, and not organ tissue, or bone) and elides sexual organs. The body here is rendered as a glowing, purple entity, radiating its own energy and projecting power, even as the image penetrates its surface. This image, like many others, makes legible and indeed is only legible through the way it articulates assumptions about the capacities of medical imaging technology, and the form of visibility produced through the use of such technology.

As I have suggested, the first three seasons of *House* are situated at the intersection of neoliberal discourses regarding medicine, visibility, and the War on Terror. As a (partly) episodic medical mystery program (especially during its first three seasons, which iterate relatively narrow variations on its basic narrative format), *House* features a number of consistent formal and stylistic characteristics that establish its unique identity as a television program through weekly and seasonal episodic iteration. In this respect, *House* shares in common with MRI technology the concept of a ‘common brain space.’ Since no two individual brains are precisely identical, either in terms of anatomy or in terms of patterns of neurobiological activation, the concept of common brain space was developed in order to construct a normalized, ‘average’

brain that could serve as a reference for comparisons. As one introductory MRI textbook explains,

The concept behind this development [of common brain space] was to develop a common coordinate framework for expressing relative neuroanatomical positions in any brain....In order to represent individually variable brain shapes in a standard coordinate framework computational methods for ‘warping’ one brain geometry into that of another have been developed....Such methods fit one brain shape to another by optimizing the alignment of neuroanatomically similar features of the two brains.<sup>195</sup>

This technique functions through the accumulation of a substantial number of individual brain scans, which are then ‘warped’ together computationally in order to produce a mathematical and visual composite. The unified visual form of the average brain is created through the ‘warping’ of differential fragments into a holistic whole. The notion of a common brain space, then, is something like the MRI equivalent of Francis Galton’s 19<sup>th</sup> century composite portraiture, except that whereas Galton superimposed images onto each other to generate a composite image, brain atlases are oriented according to shared ‘landmark’ structures of the brain, which are used to produce a normalized average image. In both cases, the scientific goal is a kind of deduction of common properties, structures, or qualities on the basis of an inductive accumulation of individual examples, but in the case of common brain space the composite whole remains an hypothetical form that is produced by forcibly ‘warping’ a plurality of concrete, but fragmentary images together into a single unified, but abstracted visual figure.

*House*, through its episodic iteration of narrative, thematic and stylistic features, produces a kind of televisual brain space that renders itself visible for analysis as a composite image; an ur-text that is not identical to any particular episode of the show, but offers a map of landmarks

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<sup>195</sup> Paul M. Matthews, “An Introduction to Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging of the Brain,” in *Functional MRI: an Introduction to Methods*, ed. Peter Jezzard, Paul M. Matthews, and Stephen M. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 21-2.

to which any individual episode can be normalized or distinguished and which demonstrates, like the brain itself, structural plasticity. Unlike Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance, however, in which a group can be defined according to a set of overlapping, shared features, but where no single feature is necessarily common to all members of the group, the concept of a common brain space emphasizes the mapping of partially overlapping relations between structures over the definition and categorization of the features subject to such a mapping operation.<sup>196</sup> Also unlike Walter Benjamin's 'photographic' notion of history, in which "The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again," the notion of brain space suggests a less instantaneous and more iterative, if not compulsive, approach to the imagination of history and to Väliäho's "administration of temporal realities."<sup>197</sup> In order to perceive *House* as an historico-cultural image, it must be observed not at the level of singular episodes or plot lines, but as an aggregate, and as a kind of archive. For this reason, this chapter elevates the mundane and typical aspects of the show over distinctive episodes, even those which engage more explicitly with themes of conspiracy and geopolitics.

For a procedural like *House*, these minute similarities and differences from episode to episode are at least as useful for approaching the show as a kind of cultural index. This in turn reflects the way in which MRI operates at a technical level. Unlike x-ray images, which similarly expose the inside of the body but which traditionally work by means of the registration of a visible trace on a photochemical surface, MRI operates by producing, detecting, recording, and visually *rendering* changes in the magnetic polarity of hydrogen nuclei within the human

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<sup>196</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackford, 2009), §66-69.

<sup>197</sup> See Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings, Volume 4 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 390.

body.<sup>198</sup> Thus, as Kelly Joyce explains, “The body is transformed into an array of numerical measurements that are then coded into images,” and indeed typically as a set of multiple images, each of which offers a slightly different visual perspective on the object in question.<sup>199</sup> Hence, MRI is technologically and conceptually situated at the thresholds of material embodiment and abstract, speculative representation, between quantitative measurement and qualitative imagination. Moreover, whereas x-ray technology is predicated on photochemical absorption and analog indexicality, MR is a thoroughly digital technology that produces visual models of tissue based on recorded data recording changes in nuclei polarity over time. Consequently, as opposed to the spontaneous and unpredictable flash of Benjaminian history, MR offers us, as a guiding metaphor, something much closer to the accumulation of wreckage at the feet of Klee’s angel.<sup>200</sup> Instead of a photographic explosion to blow open the historical continuum in a moment of danger, we may look to the steady accumulation of episodic slices that, with the right kind of map of common landmarks, can begin to form meaningful relation.

The analytical purchase of the concept of a common brain space for *House* is not, or not only, that it indicates a degree of isomorphism between the episodic, iterative structure of the medical mystery series and the similarly iterative process of constructing brain atlases. Rather, what the concept indicates is that the logic of speculative finance is immanent to both of these hermeneutic operations, insofar as both finance and brain space are definable in terms of a capacity to actualize what the hypothetical or only latently virtual, as in the instrumental objectification and rendering-fungible of conditions of social risk in the process of calculating

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<sup>198</sup> See Kelly A. Joyce, *Magnetic Appeal: MRI and the Myth of Transparency* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2008), 13-4 for an accessible overview, or for a more technical explanation see Matthews, “An Introduction to Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging of the Brain,” 5.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>200</sup> Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 392.

prices for derivative products. In both instances preemptive ontogenesis, as a strategy of risk management, becomes incorporated into a cybernetic feedback loop of what Ivan Ascher calls “the mode of capitalist prediction,” predicated less on commodification than on securitization, in both its financial and military registers.<sup>201</sup> Thus, *House*, MRI, and the logic of financial speculation themselves form a kind of Benjaminian constellation producing an image of neoliberal visibility, the schematic function of which can also be turned on *House* itself as an immanent example.

The textual structures of *House*'s brain space under consideration here, which function as organizing characteristics of neoliberal brainhood in the early to mid-2000s, fall into two broad categories, each of which can be parceled into two sub-categories or branches. The first category deals with the show's visualization of images, and can be subdivided into the stylistic use of the “*CSI* shot” to visualize the medical symptom as image, and the production of a decisive, ‘tell-tale’ image that secures knowledge of the disease etiology and coincides with a successful resolution of the mystery, the illness, and the episode. The second category concerns the show's rendering of action and can likewise be split into the figuration of diagnosis as cybernetic puzzle-solving and game play, as well as a pharmacological emphasis on the logic of preemptive action. These four markers constitute key structures in the image of neoliberal brainhood that is produced by *House*, and as such also constitute an emergent self-theorization of neoliberalism by itself—the imagination of the neoliberal brain at work. In this respect, the show echoes Väliäho's assertion that the brain appears, within neoliberalism, as a “dynamic and self-organizing system”

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<sup>201</sup> Ivan Ascher, *Portfolio Society: On the Capitalist Mode of Prediction* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2016), 17-30.

that is both “plastic and self-modifying.”<sup>202</sup> The show’s ability to ‘bootstrap’ itself into a theoretical *cogito* is, therefore, perhaps as much a sign of the times as it is a hermeneutic conceit.

### 3.2 Medical Imaging

The typical, ‘normalized’ episode of *House* begins with a pre-credits opening scene that establishes the medical emergency to be solved during the course of the episode. These scenes begin as innocuous vignettes, in which House’s future patients are seen going about their daily lives, until those lives are traumatically disrupted by the sudden onset of symptoms that will inevitably lead to death unless their underlying cause can be discerned and treated effectively. In the show’s pilot episode, “Everybody Lies” (S1:E01, original airdate: November 16, 2004), a kindergarten teacher, exuberant after a weekend of implied sex with a new partner, loses the ability to speak before collapsing into a grand mal seizure in front of her class. Immediately after the credits, an opening dialogue between Dr. House and his friend (and the Watson to his Holmes) Dr. Wilson, establishes that the patient’s seizures have been getting progressively worse, and that death as a result of brain tumor or another equally serious affliction is likely.

As the series continues and the audience becomes familiar with this basic pattern, the show modifies and elaborates on it, no longer necessarily focusing solely on the victim-to-be, but allowing medical trauma to emerge from unexpected places in the *mise-en-scène*. In “Spin” (S2:E06, original airdate November 15, 2005), the pre-credits sequence follows two young boys spectating a bicycle race, as they run to secure a vantage point before the racers pass by. Although one of the boys begins to breathe sharply, indicating an asthma attack, it is not the boy but one of the cyclists who is felled by sudden illness, crashing dramatically on the course. In this instance, the show demonstrates a plasticity of the sudden onset structure in order to trick its

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<sup>202</sup> Väliäho, *Biopolitical Screens*, 21.

audience into thinking the asthmatic child would be the episode's victim, producing more shock and surprise when it is revealed to be an athlete in peak physical condition who is afflicted. This trope amplifies the show's suggestion that violent medical trauma can affect anyone at any time, even those considered least susceptible, and that death may be imminent for anyone, anywhere.

The opening hook, which functions as an entrée to a large majority of all *House* episodes, visualizes and narrativizes the bodily risk created by the potential imminence and unpredictability of life-destroying trauma in post-9/11 America. It articulates a set of cultural anxieties regarding the possibility of terrorizing attacks, displacing concerns about national security onto the medicalized body, effecting a chiasmatic reversal of the logic of Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech, and echoing the logic of GSK's print advertisement in *TIME*. Another advertisement in that same GSK campaign, a television spot about developing drugs to fight pandemic bird flu, echoes these same anxieties. It features a GSK spokeswoman and scientist asking the viewer to consider how the time-consuming challenges involved in finding treatments for diseases like heart disease Alzheimer's disease also apply to bird flu, and suggests that a bird flu pandemic would be devastating. Unlike heart disease, diabetes, or Alzheimer's, the ad tells us, a bird flu pandemic would transpire much faster, nearly instantaneously by comparison, hence the need for preventative vaccine research.<sup>203</sup> This ad, like *House*'s opening sequences, presents a view of life-threatening disease as spontaneous and sudden. Like Bush's speech, it also highlights an affinity between disease and biological warfare in terms of unpredictability, immediacy, and the need for both preemptive action. In the case of the GSK ad, this preemptive action takes the form of preemptive financial investment, which in turn generates new lucrative

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<sup>203</sup> Eric Moncaleano, Moncaleano.com, <http://moncaleano.com/#welcome> (now private), accessed April 11, 2016.

products designed to manage and mitigate potential risks, or on other words, a preemptive form of financial and national securitization.

The logic of spontaneous, immediate danger in the show's opening sequences and throughout the program, are frequently punctuated by what Shannon M. Kahle, borrowing a concept from Karen Lury, identifies as the "CSI shot": a CGI visualization of the interior of the body that was pioneered by *CSI* (2000-2015), though its aesthetic roots are traceable at least to the visual rendering of bullet wounds and sepsis in David O. Russell's Gulf War I heist film *Three Kings* (1999). Kahle describes the *CSI* shot as follows:

This technique is a computer generated image that makes it appear as if the camera is entering the body, giving viewers a tour through the inside of the body....The *CSI* shot is used on *House* to confirm a diagnosis, demonstrate the effects of treatment, and sometimes to demonstrate the bodily events that lead to the onset of the patient's symptoms.<sup>204</sup>

For Kahle, *House*'s appropriation of the *CSI* shot is a function of its Foucauldian view of the relationship between knowledge and the body, in which any notion of subjective interiority is obviated in favor of a notion of the subject as a set of legible bodily inscriptions, facilitated by various medical as well as televisual visualization technologies (fig. 3.3).

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<sup>204</sup> Shannon M. Kahle, "Reading the Body on House, M.D.: Medical Surveillance as a Model of the Social." *The Communication Review* 15 (2012): 279.



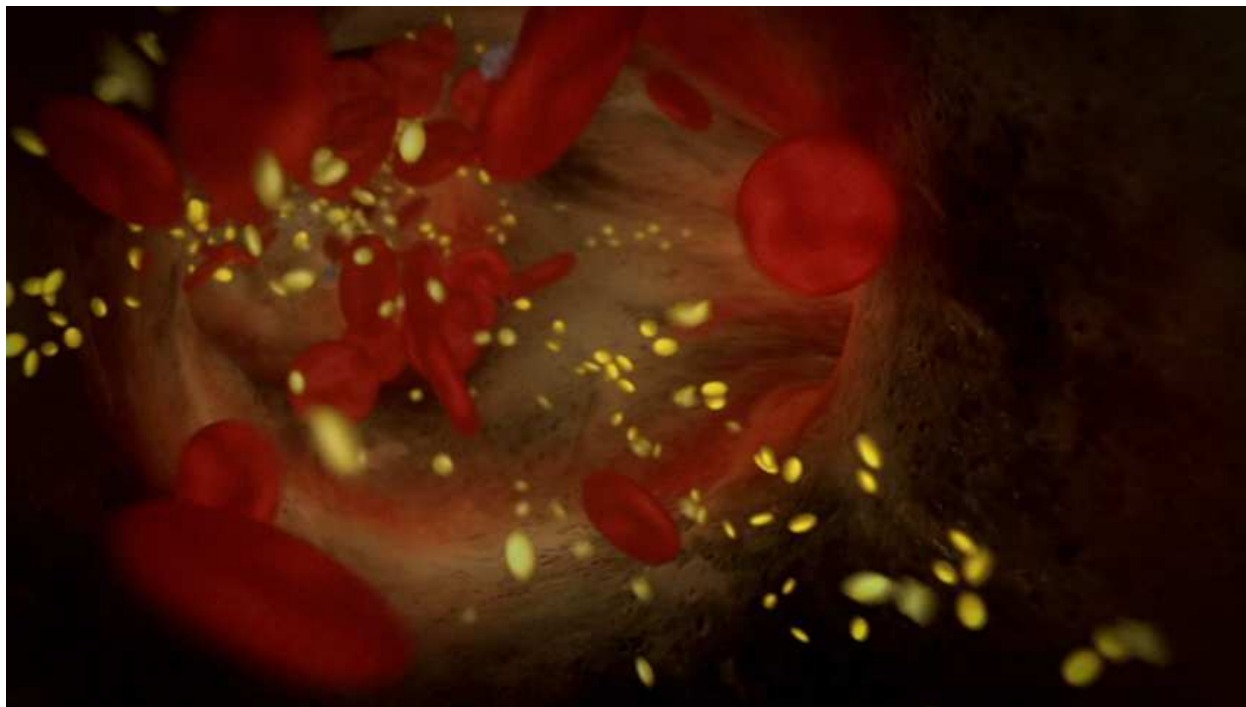


Figure 3.3 *House M.D.*

Kahle argues that the show therefore proposes surveillance as the most effective and reasonable means of social interaction.<sup>205</sup> Kahle's argument is persuasive, and the Foucauldian double confluence she identifies of surveillance and medical practice, which on *House* is figured in both medical and mediatic terms, gestures toward a broader sense of the perceived functions and cultural value of visualization technologies. Indeed, surveillance as a medical and televisual technology of power is already inscribed in the 'red herring' variant of the *House* cold opening, in which the obvious target of the show's narrative interest is not always clear, which in turn demands that the spectator carefully scrutinize the entirety of the mise-en-scène as potentially suspicious and potentially dangerous. This in turn articulates, in a more generalized and visual manner, the show's central, categorical conceit that "everybody lies" and should be treated

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 290.

accordingly through a preemptive assumption of guilt. Building on Kahle's insight, but moving away from *House's* own textual logic, I would suggest that the show's use of the *CSI* shot is symptomatic of a deeper play of cultural values surrounding the (in)ability to produce an adequate image of that which is killing the body, which again must be understood in both local, individual terms as well as in national, collective terms.

Such a cultural concern regarding the capacities and limits of visualization is already apparent in the GSK ad that opened this chapter, but it extends far beyond this individual example. For example, in Fall 2006, G.E. began producing and distributing *Signa PULSE: the Magazine of MR*, an advertainment periodical that features articles on MR applications, interspersed with ads for G.E. itself. Although the circulation of this periodical is unclear, its target readership is evidently medical professionals working with MR equipment. One of the five articles in the inaugural issue, titled "Producing High-Resolution MR Images Despite Patient Movement," informs readers about "PROPELLER HD," a motion-reduction technology designed to overcome visual artifacts caused by body motion in order to produce clearer, more easily legible images. Echoing these concerns over visibility and legibility, the center pages of this issue of *Signa PULSE* feature an ad for G.E.'s 'Signa' line of MRI machines. The first page of the ad (fig. 3.4) features an image of a hummingbird at a flower, its wings only a blur of rapid motion, with the caption "How do you capture difficult images?" On the following page, large text reads: "Start by capturing the imagination," and in smaller print: "There have always been patients who have been difficult to image. But through the eyes of GE's Signa® High Definition MR, you get a new view of your patients, Clearer and more accurate, So you can diagnose quickly and with more certainty."

The information contained in this document is current as of publication of the magazine.

GE Healthcare



How do you capture  
difficult images?



Figure 3.4 *SignaPulse: The Magazine of MR*

The third page in the ongoing advertisement then features an image of the same hummingbird, only here its wings are sharply visible.<sup>206</sup> This ad, in keeping with G.E.'s then-novel "Imagination at Work" brand identity, invites readers to appreciate G.E.'s advanced imaging technology, which eliminates unwanted artifacts and renders a clear, intuitively understandable and legible image, one that would allow doctors to secure effective knowledge regarding the body of a potential patient. As with GSK's bird flu advertisement, it emphasizes time as a crucial factor in making a diagnosis and thereby preventing harm. Its suggestion that time can be parceled out in miniscule increments (small enough to catch a hummingbird's wings in flight) suggests that control over temporality is necessary to effectively visualize space, and its anthropomorphizing of imaging technology suggests that such control is only possible through the "eyes" and "imagination" of an MRI machine.<sup>207</sup> Indeed, it is the ability to engage in literal speculation, the use of the eyes and the imagination to create an immaterial image that can then, in turn, be used to manage future risk, that is what is at the core of what is being advertised here.

In the popular imagination, MRI and other medical imaging technologies are often understood to be transparent, unmediated, objective pictures of the real human body, rather than as complex, highly mediated representations requiring training, judgment, and interpretation in order to become legible.<sup>208</sup> Kelly Joyce argues on this basis that MRI technology is understood

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<sup>206</sup> *Signa PULSE*, Fall 2006, 33-7.

<sup>207</sup> The ad's use of rapid animal locomotion here also hearkens to one of the founding myths of the cinema, Eadweard Muybridge's serial photography study *The Horse in Motion*. The key difference is, of course, the way in which MRI technology associates the ability to manage and regulate the flow of time in the present with the ability to manage the flow of time *in the future*, rather than simply in the present or the past.

<sup>208</sup> Joyce, *Magnetic Appeal*, 75. See also Colin Klein, "Images are not the Evidence in Neuroimaging," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 61, no. 2 (June 2010): 265-278.

within an ideological framework that equates the picture with the real.<sup>209</sup> The ability of images of the body to enter into fungible relations with the body itself presents as both a crisis of the real, and as the paradoxical solution to that same crisis. On *House*, the *CSI* shot's kinetic and spectacular power is often used to give the audience information about a patient's illness that is literally invisible to either the patient or the doctors. In this respect, the use of CGI animations to render the inside of the body marks the limit of natural human vision, which must be supplemented by technologized vision—both extradiegetically through the aesthetic rupture between photorealistic live action and computer animation, and intradiegetically through the diegetic medical imaging technologies themselves. The *CSI* shot therefore takes on the epistemic mantle of the real, but in a way that only a computer-animated rendering is capable of. Like G.E.'s medical imaging technologies, the *CSI* shot is presented as itself possessing not only a certain kind of animacy, but also the imaginative, speculative capacity to render visible the invisible, and accessible the inaccessible.

*House*'s narrative structure, which frequently collapses narrative resolution into the production of a 'tell-tale' image affirming the certainty of a diagnosis, echoes this problem and resolution model of image production. Although this definitive image is frequently produced by medical imaging technology, it is often produced as a direct material inscription, on the body or elsewhere. In "Occam's Razor" (S1:E3, original airdate November 30, 2004), the episode's mystery is conclusively solved when Dr. House produces a pill inscribed with the letter 'L,' thus proving that the patient's symptoms were caused by a pharmacist's nearly fatal error. In "TB or not TB" (S2:E4, original airdate November 1, 2005), the hypothesis that the patient has an insulin-producing tumor is confirmed when the team intentionally provokes a stroke in the

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<sup>209</sup> Joyce, *Magnetic Appeal*, 75.

patient. This diagnosis is visually corroborated for the viewer by a *CSI* shot of the patient's bloodstream, as insulin is seen being released and interacting with other chemicals (fig. 3.3). A similar CGI corroboration of the conclusive diagnosis appears in "Deception" (S2:E9, original airdate December 13, 2005), in which the grape aroma of the patient's bruise indicates an infection, House's explanation of which is synesthetically accompanied by a *CSI* shot of the wound that shows what the doctor smells. As with MRI technology in the popular imagination, *House's* emphasis on the production of an image, especially a computer-generated image in the form of a *CSI* shot, presents such technologically enhanced vision as coterminous with the real and as essentially both reliable and definitive. Whereas the use of computer animated images of the body functions in the early and middle parts of an episode to indicate that something is wrong with the body, without clearly explaining what the cause of the illness is, in the final analysis visualization technologies are presented as essentially sound.

The notion that digital imaging technology as the 'imaginative' capacity to reliably enhance human vision is also evident in the ad discourse surrounding personal digital cameras during this time. The October 2006 issue of *Popular Science* indexes this idea well.<sup>210</sup> Pages two

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<sup>210</sup> The October 2006 issue also demonstrates a central concern with technology and visibility in the content of its journalistic articles. The issue's feature stories include: "Your Flat-Screen TV: What goes on inside a superthin liquid-crystal display," "New Secrets of Area 51: Stealth jets? Hypersonic bombers? What's really being developed at the military's most famous classified hangar?," "Unveiling the First Invisibility Shield: New materials that bend light around objects are bringing the science-fiction dream closer to reality," and "The Internet is Sick... But We Can Make it Better: How ideas from biology—evolution, immunity, and forensics—will keep your PC safe from hackers." These stories deal variously with questions regarding the visibility of image-producing technologies, the invisibility of military technologies, the actualization of virtual imagination through technology, and the biologizing of technology as a preventive measure against external threat. They also promise the reader a kind of 'inside look' on these technological developments, suggesting that the magazine itself can operate as a kind of visualizing technology, in order to show the inside of a TV, the inside of a military base, and so on. See *Popular Science* 269, no. 4, October 2006, 7.

and three of this issue feature a two-page spread ad for the Sony ‘alpha 100’ DSLR camera (fig. 3.5).



Figure 3.5 *Popular Science*

The first page of the ad features an image of kinetic cresting waves, overlaid with the text “The New Sony  $\alpha$  with built-in Image Stabilization.” The opposite page features a calm sea and sky, divided in half by the horizon, with the alpha 100 camera in profile, overlaid with the caption: “Steady your world.” Visually, the two pages of the ad juxtapose a turbulent, blurry sea with the calm clarity of still water, an obvious visual signifier for the kind of image stability offered by the camera.<sup>211</sup> The ideological subtext, however, is as clear as the image: consumer-grade

<sup>211</sup> *Popular Science* 269, no. 4, 3-4.

visualization technology can bring order, security, and tranquility to a violent, turbulent, unpredictable world. Just as with G.E.'s Signa MRI machine, commodified technologies of visibility are correlated with safety, transparency, and ease of use. What's more, the ideologically constructed transparency and epistemic efficacy of MRI is, in these ads, transferred from multi-million dollar professional-grade medical technologies to affordable consumer-grade cameras: you too can wield the power of the digital to securitize your world.

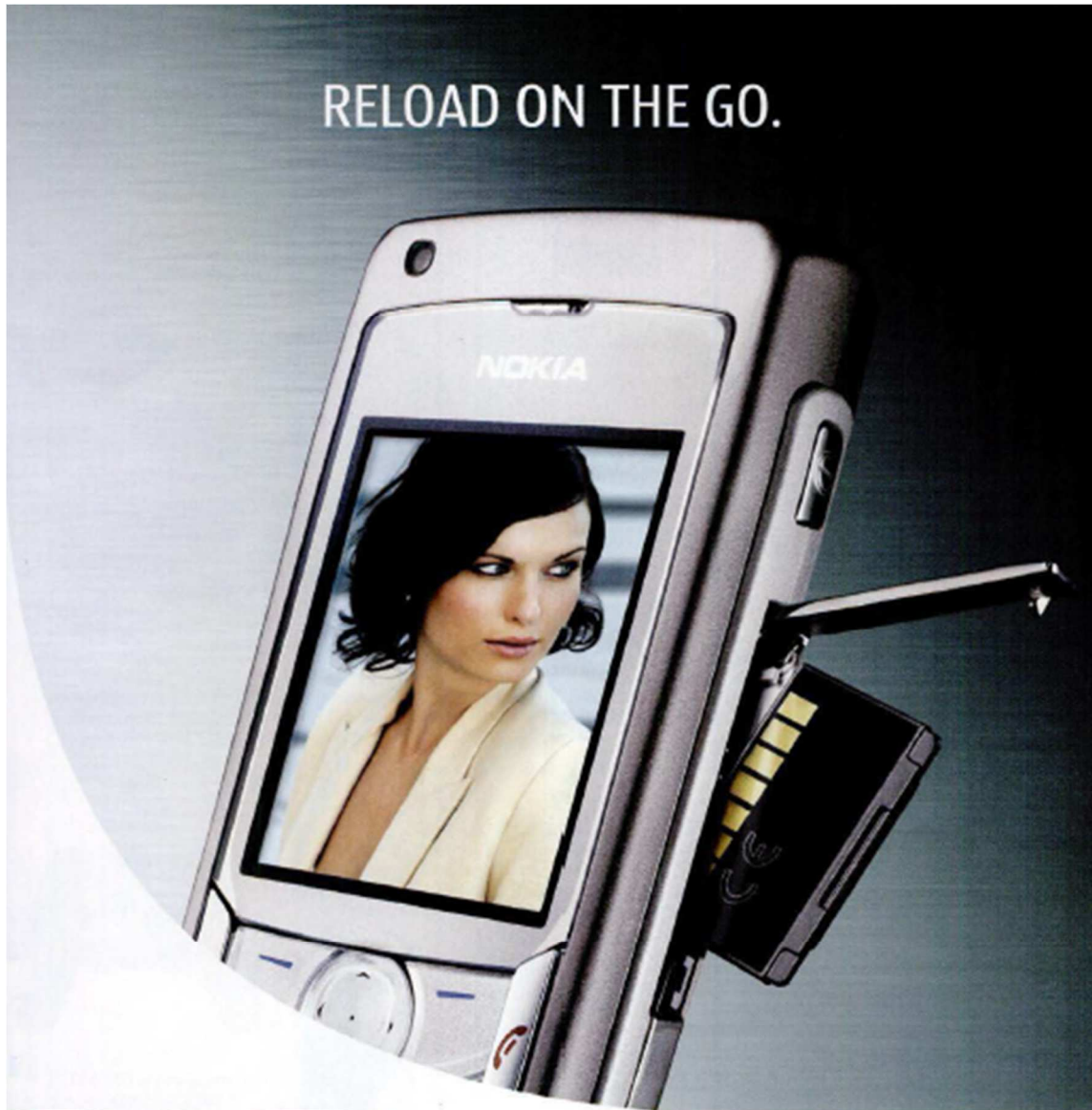
These same themes are evident throughout ads and reviews for consumer electronics, especially digital cameras, in *Popular Science* during this time period. In the following November issue, a photography tech roundup article titled "The Camera Sees All," promoting an \$1,800 Fuji Finepix S3 Pro Uvir DSLR camera, notes that the camera enhances the consumer's ability to take photos at night, since "now the same technology that helps crime-scene investigators uncover invisible evidence like gunpowder residue is available to you."<sup>212</sup> An ad in the September 2005 issue promoting a Nokia camera phone with removable memory storage encourages the reader to "Reload on the Go," thereby suggesting a congruence between the phone's memory card and an ammunition clip, along the lines of ease of use and preparedness for action (fig. 3.6).<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> *Popular Science* 269, no. 5, November 2006, 26.

<sup>213</sup> *Popular Science* 267, no. 3, September 2005, 31.





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Figure 3.6 Popular Science

This issue also features a cover story about scientific advancements in healthcare entitled “Will you be Able to Predict—and Prevent—Your Demise?” The story covers ways in which medical imaging technologies, including genome mapping and CT scanning, are helping to personalize and improve the capacities of predictive medicine.<sup>214</sup>

Such stories and advertisements indicate the ways in which visual media, rehearse, and in doing so seek to ameliorate, a cluster of cultural anxieties surrounding the reliability and efficacy of technologically mediated vision within the sociohistorical context of the War on Terror. As the November 25, 2002 cover of *TIME* pointedly asserts, Osama bin Laden has not yet been caught (fig. 3.7).

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 56-63.



Figure 3.7 *TIME*

This cover image, which features a white background, filled mostly with empty space, presents a washed out, monochrome photographic portrait of bin Laden in its center. Bin Laden's faint features seem to blend into the background, effectively staging his disappearance from the (mise-en-)scene, and rendering his elusiveness not only from capture, but from the image as well. The fraught relationship between bin Laden's presence and absence is further emphasized on *TIME*'s March 29, 2004 cover illustration, which depicts a series of matches, each with bin Laden's face (the same, exact image, in fact, as the 2002 cover) on the head, accompanied by the caption "Al-Qaeda: The Next Generation" (fig. 3.8).



Figure 3.8 *TIME*

This cover, like its 2002 predecessor, renders anxiety regarding bin Laden's visibility and disappearance, this time suggesting that his image could burn up and vanish in the ignition of a fire, an apparent visual metaphor for further volatile terrorist activity not involving, but perhaps inspired by bin Laden himself. One wonders, and rhetorically speaking it would seem one is indeed meant to wonder, whether this chemical transformation would leave a trace that forensically indexes bin Laden's former presence, or whether he would disappear completely?

The same, evidently ontological concerns about the presence and absence of bin Laden also haunt both medical imaging equipment and consumer-grade digital cameras as technologies of image production. They stage, through expressive form, the same kinds of ambiguities and anxieties that surround contemporaneous academic discourse on the nature of digital photography, which similarly places the questions of the index and the trace at the forefront of attempts to come to grips with the ontology of digital images.<sup>215</sup> But if the present absences of bin Laden, not to mention Saddam Hussein's Weapons of Mass Destruction or the World Trade Center buildings, haunt popular representations of technologies of vision, then these representations work to assuage and mollify these anxieties as much as they compulsively figure them. This is reflected in the way *House* consistently figures the physiological symptom as an image, as well as the production of images as symptomatic of an epistemic regime in which to prevent disaster requires the elicitation of the proper, and properly indexical, image.

### **3.3 Differential Diagnosis as Risk Management**

If as the previous section argued, both *House* and the popular print media that emerged along with it present biopolitical control and avoidance of future catastrophe as hinging on the

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<sup>215</sup> See for example Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," *Differences* 18, no. 1 (2007): 128-52.

production both of actual images and the sense of digitally enhanced visibility entailed by them, then the ways in which those images are produced are also a necessary component of the brain space illustrated by these mediated images. On *House*, the tell-tale image that secures the safety of the body against death is only produced (and is only producible) after the diagnostic process of hypothesizing and ruling out various causative illnesses before arriving at the correct conclusion.

On the show, this iterative process typically involves team meetings during which symptoms and possible illnesses are charted on a dry erase board, in between which medical tests of blood, tissue, or imaging scans are performed, and the results of which are then reported and further diagnostic possibilities are articulated or ruled out (fig. 3.9).

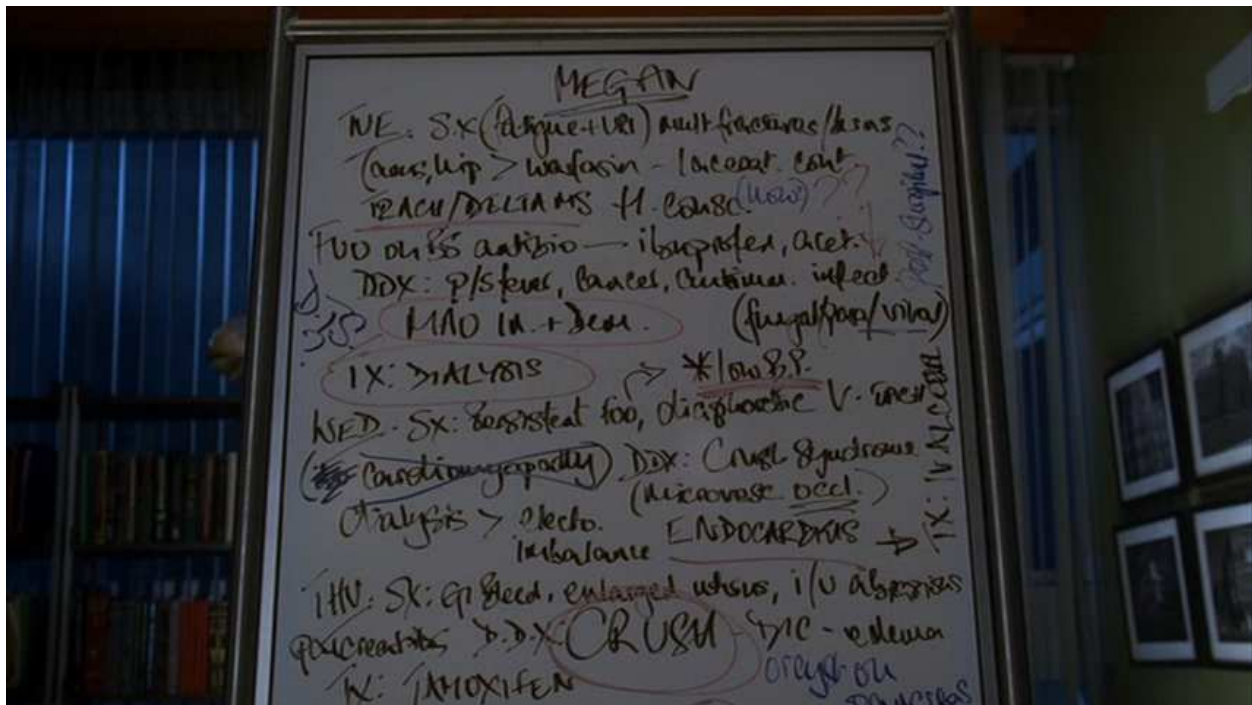


Figure 3.9 *House M.D.*

The dry erase board is an essential component in *House*'s neoliberal brain space, as it appears in nearly all the show's episodes, and even when it is not literally present its diagnostic function is

figured through substitute surfaces, including an airplane movie screen and the bottom of a bunk bed in a prison cell. The white board provides a pliable system of visual organization that strives, like the show's medical imaging technology, to produce an image that will solve the mystery and conclude the investigation. In the context of the show's rendering of the process of differential diagnosis, however, the board functions as an analog of the conspiracy wall in *A Beautiful Mind*, as a figure that mediates the subject-object relations constructed through the act of speculation. Indeed, although *House* does not frame its own discourse vis-à-vis the body in the explicit terms of conspiracy, Dr. House's (and the narrative discourse's) constant refrain that "everybody lies" produces a speculative relation between the doctors and their patients, as well as between the doctors and each other in the show's interpersonal melodrama, that threatens to surpass cynical skepticism and move into misanthropic paranoia. The white board stands as the locus of such speculations, not only as a figure for epistemic closure but as a figure for the iterative, and in aggregate over the show's eight seasons, Sisyphean, processual temporality of compulsive speculative investigation.

The show explicitly describes this diagnostic process as puzzle solving on a number of occasions, notably in "The Socratic Method" (S1:E6, original airdate December 21, 2004), in which House's view of patients as puzzles is explained during a conversation between Dr.

Foreman and Dr. Wilson:

Foreman: I thought he liked rationality.

Wilson: He likes puzzles.

Foreman: Patients are puzzles?

Wilson: You don't think so?

Foreman: I think they're people.

Wilson: Yeah, well, he hates them. And he's fascinated by them.

The theme of diagnosis as puzzle-solving is reiterated again in "DNR" (S1:E8, original airdate February 1, 2005), in which Dr. Wilson criticizes Dr. House's obsessive need to solve medical



mysteries by telling House that while “some doctors have the Messiah complex, they need to save the world. You’ve got the Rubik’s complex. You need to solve the puzzle.” Although these examples come from the show’s first season, and exist in part to establish preliminary characterizations, the ludic attitude toward medical diagnosis demonstrated both by House, and the program itself, is consistent across the show’s broadcast run.<sup>216</sup> The show regularly presents the activity of diagnostic medicine, replete with liberal use of medical imaging technologies, as a gamelike activity. Indeed, this playful attitude is reinforced by the sly, mischievous, and flippant character of House himself.

The gamelike nature of medical practice, as articulated by *House*, is also illustrated in an article in the October 2004 issue of *Popular Science*, which contains an article entitled “Why Give a Dead Man a Body Scan?” The article explains how CT and MRI machines are beginning to be used in Switzerland to conduct “virtual autopsies,” which can take image slices of the body non-invasively, and can allow a corpse to be virtually dissected at any time, anywhere, and as many times as is necessary or desired.<sup>217</sup> The article describes this process in videogame-like terms:

As intent as schoolboys with a new videogame, the two men take turns clicking and dragging screen controls to manipulate the image on the monitor. Vock defines and deletes the CT scanner’s bed to leave the woman’s body suspended in midscreen. Slowly he melts away silvers layers of skin, muscle and connective tissue to reveal bare white skeleton. He rotates the image, head over heels....Then, layer by later, he reassembles the body. When he reaches the level of fascia...he stops again, intrigued by the abnormally high position of the

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<sup>216</sup> While the playful approach to medicine remains consistent, the show’s later seasons do problematize House’s apparent addiction to solving medical mysteries, which entails both a compulsion to endanger patients in order to cure them, as well as an inability to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships.

<sup>217</sup> For a similar account of this practice that emphasizes, along Derridean lines, the archivization of the body rather than the ludic plasmaticity of such an archive, see Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 47.

woman's stomach and the telltale indentation, like and overly tightened belt, around the organ's midsection.<sup>218</sup>

Like *House*, this passage compares the diagnostic aspect of forensic medicine, especially where it involves medical imaging technology, to a game, in this instance evoking the physics and camera perspectives (not to mention the gender dynamics) of third-person digital games, as well as the rotational analysis and configuration involved in solving a Rubik's Cube or other similar three-dimensional puzzle. It suggests an affinity between imaging, diagnosis, and play that is also very much at the heart of *House's* depiction of diagnostic medicine.

Moreover, the article also goes on to explain, in an astonishing passage, how the U.S. Department of Defense is "extremely interested" in establishing virtual autopsy facilities at its morgue at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. William Rodriguez, the deputy chief medical examiner for special investigations at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, is quoted stating that "As the technology becomes more efficient, this becomes a way to scan many more bodies in a shorter amount of time with fewer pathologists."<sup>219</sup> While one wonders about what kinds of catastrophic emergency events would necessitate the ability to "scan many more bodies in a shorter amount of time," perhaps the key insight regarding this militarization of virtual autopsy technology was reported in a *New York Times* article in 2009 explaining how the military, with funding through the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), uses information collected from virtual autopsies of soldiers to learn about enemy weapons, as well as to make iterative adjustments and improvements to battlefield medical gear.<sup>220</sup> The Department of

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<sup>218</sup> Jessica Snyder Sachs, "Why Give a Dead Man a Body Scan?" *Popular Science* 265, no. 4, October 2004, 56.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>220</sup> Denise Grady, "Autopsies of War Dead Reveal Ways to Save Others," *New York Times*, May 25, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/26/health/26autopsy.html>.

Defense's collection of virtual autopsies effectively functions as an archive of bodily trauma, one that can be used to render the maimed corpse first into an abstracted and malleable virtual 3D model, and then into an even more abstract form of pure logistical information. In doing so, the plastic and plasmatic archive of virtual autopsies articulates the speculative dimension of medical visualization technologies to the informatic logic of contemporary warfare.

This reactive-anticipatory approach to warfare relies fundamentally on the insights of cybernetics, a theory and method of systems regulation developed by Norbert Wiener during World War II to produce more effective artillery performance by statistically modelling probable enemy behavior and incorporating these calculations into an automated targeting and firing process.<sup>221</sup> Both the Department of Defense virtual autopsy program and the way *House* presents the diagnostic process share the same undergirding cybernetic logic. In the former instance, CT scans are used to gain feedback from the battlefield, and to make the dead body both legible and intelligible as an information asset, that is to recover value from the loss of life in military risk. The information gained is then fed back into military planning and logistics operations, in order to produce more effective results in the future. The use of virtual body scans for this purpose by DARPA represents only one more recent application of cybernetic simulation to anticipatory war planning. As Crogan also explains, another DARPA program, SIMNET, a simulation training technology project active in the 1980s and 1990s, was used to produce anticipatory models of Operation Desert Storm. The actual battle plans for the entire war were based on information gleaned from these wargaming simulations, and the same technology was used to record the

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<sup>221</sup> Patrick Crogan, *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation and Technoculture* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011), 3-4.

actual eventuality of the war, information from which was then used to re-stage and review the effectiveness of battle tactics.<sup>222</sup>

The principles of network control pioneered by Weiner during World War II, as Randy Martin notes, have been profitably applied to economic market forecasting. Both warfare and market speculation rely on the anticipatory risk-management strategies of cybernetics, to such a strong degree that for Martin, it is now true that “Warfare has been packaged and produced along the lines of financial instruments,” namely derivatives and securities.<sup>223</sup> Martin cites the U.S. military’s employment of professional economists during the Vietnam War to apply mathematical market modelling strategies to the war, but also the use of the same cybernetic modelling strategies to both combat severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in Asia in 2002 and to manage the military’s massive retirement and healthcare investment portfolios.<sup>224</sup> The anticipatory risk-management protocols of cybernetics thus provide a strong link between the speculative conduct of the War on Terror, and the similarly speculative management of epidemiological crises like SARS, the unarticulated fear at the center of the GSK ad at the beginning of this chapter, and more explicitly elsewhere.

On *House*, diagnostics is presented as precisely such a cybernetic process of gleaning information from medical records, performing tests on the body or administering treatment, then using that information to further refine the diagnosis, most typically through the visual mediation of the dry erase board. As with the virtual autopsy program, the victimized body becomes a kind of informatic toy to be modulated until actionable information emerges, and ultimately the puzzle is solved and victory in the game is declared. Also like the virtual autopsy program, the

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 13-4.

<sup>223</sup> Martin, *Empire of Indifference*, 66.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 81.

cybernetic diagnostics of *House* rely necessarily on the dying body as an essential element in the informatic feedback loop. In both cases it is the body's illness unto death that yields usable information. A crucial distinction, however, is that whereas the Department of Defense virtual autopsy program only receives dead bodies and plays no explicit role in their production, on *House* the patient is typically deliberately exposed to danger in order to accelerate the diagnostic process. House and his team regularly 'confirm' a diagnosis by exposing the patient to a treatment that will visibly harm them if they have the disease in question, thereby creating new risk and provoking crisis, in order to produce results and ultimately save the patient.

In this sense, *House* presents a pharmacological model of diagnostic medicine, in which treatment often involves inducing sickness, rendering the two indistinguishable from each other and reinforcing the financial logic of risk as not only a necessary, but a beneficial and lucrative feature of markets: the securitization of risk as a form of security.<sup>225</sup> Derrida, reading Plato's *Phaedrus*, describes how the concept of a drug, or *pharmakon*, entails a fundamental ambiguity: "This *pharmakon*, this "medicine," this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination can be—alternatively or simultaneously, beneficent or maleficent."<sup>226</sup> For Derrida, writing itself is, inside the *Phaedrus* and outside it, a kind of *pharmakon* in the sense that it operates as an ambiguous medium through which the differentiation of *différance* is produced through play.<sup>227</sup> In other words, the *pharmakon* functions, for Derrida, as a figure for deconstruction as such and in a general way. For Bernard

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<sup>225</sup> See Martin, *Empire of Indifference*, 63.

<sup>226</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981 [1972]), 70.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 103, 127.

Stiegler, however, it also maintains a special relation to the widespread cultural dissemination of extremely sophisticated technological knowledge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: insofar as “technical knowledge is pharmacological, that is, it has the ambivalent structure of a *pharmakon*: it is always at once potentially beneficial and potentially harmful.”<sup>228</sup> For Stiegler, complex technologies like genetic engineering and nanotechnology, in conjunction with the global financial crisis, have produced a kind of technophobic ambiguity around the beneficent/malevolent potentials of technological innovation that stands as an epistemic crisis to be overcome.<sup>229</sup>

*House* consistently stages the amelioration of this anxiety by rehearsing the successful resolution of medical mysteries, in which the ambiguously pharmacological element of both Dr. House’s treatment of patients (as well as the team’s use of precisely the kinds of technical knowledge Stiegler discusses) is shown to be if not wholly beneficent, then at least necessary. For example, in “Maternity,” (S1:E4, original airdate December 7, 2004), during an outbreak of a mysterious disease among newborn babies in the hospital, different treatments are administered to two babies suffering from the same illness, with full knowledge that one infant is likely to die while the other is likely to be saved. In part, the drama of the episode revolves around the ethical dilemma posed by the decision to kill one infant so as to save many more. In “DNR,” the patient’s mysterious illness is improved through an aggressive treatment involving the administration of many drugs simultaneously. In order to discern which of the treatments is actually causally effective, the drugs are withheld, one at a time, until the patient’s health

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<sup>228</sup> Bernard Stiegler, “Distrust and the Pharmacology of Transformational Technologies,” trans. Daniel Ross, in *Quantum Entanglements: Social Reflections of Nanoscience and Emerging Technologies*, eds. Turben B Zülsdorf, et al. (Heidelberg: IOS Press, 2011), 28.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-1.

plummets, with House and the other doctors relying on their ability to save the patient faster than their course of treatment kills him.

Through this veritably accelerationist paradigm of diagnosis and treatment, *House* demonstrates the logic of pharmacological preemption at work. In the same way that, as Bush asserted in 2002, the U.S. can only be protected from attack by “vigorous action abroad,” *House* figures proactive and preemptive action as the optimal strategy for fighting disease. The geopolitical notion that war is the most expedient path to peace is reflected in the diagnostic, prescriptive, and indeed the televisual narrative logic of *House*. In this sense, *House* both narrativizes, and affectively administers to its viewing audience the logic of what Väliaho describes as the “preemptive brain.” As he explains:

Neoliberal brainhood thus organized itself specifically around the felt reality of threats, risks, and insecurities, which are the key values that constrain how we simulate and act on the world. The neoliberal brain, to use Richard Grusin’s term, “premediates”—affectively forefeels—future possibilities in the present with an eye toward anticipatory responses, especially when fear or anxiety about future threats or danger is involved.<sup>230</sup>

*House* rehearses precisely this bundle of concerns regarding security, risk, and threat through its depictions of diagnostic daring in the face of imminent bodily disaster and death. The show functions to demonstrate, at least during its first three seasons in which the formulaic narrative structure of the show is most strongly evident, the successful outcomes of preemptive brainhood at work. This preemptive logic also parallels the logic of the pre-crisis financial markets as an ‘eat your cake and have it too’ activity of increasing exposure to risk and increasing profit, without the specter of collapse.

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<sup>230</sup> Väliaho, *Biopolitical Screens*, 49. See also Richard Grusin, *Premediation: Affect and Mediality After 9/11* (New York: Palgrave, 2010).

The logic of preemption evident in *House* also operates through medical advertising discourse in both *TIME* and *Popular Science*, most typically through the ubiquitous presence of ads for Viagra and other erectile dysfunction medications in the mid-2000s, especially after Viagra's two chief competitors in the marketplace, Levitra and Cialis, were approved by the FDA in August and November of 2003, respectively.<sup>231</sup> These ads emphasize the need to 'be ready when the moment is right,' and to encourage potential customers to preemptively anticipate and act on the future possibility of gratifying sexual activity through a quite literal act of libidinal investment, by buying and consuming pharmaceuticals. A similar rhetoric is also used to advertise cholesterol medication, which is framed as preempting heart attacks, and asthma medication, which likewise can prevent sudden and life-threatening asthma attacks. Taken together, the trinity of preemptive advertisements for erectile dysfunction, cholesterol, and asthma medications are very strongly represented in *TIME* and *Popular Science* between 2004 and 2006. Like the diagnostic approach of *House* and the foreign policy of the Bush administration, these advertisements exhort the reader to affectively forefeel the future moment—of sex, or of death—in the present, and to invest, in the present, to either enhance or mitigate the possibility of future events.

### 3.4 Conclusion

If *House* operates successfully as an expression of neoliberal brainhood during its first three seasons, it is equally indicative of shifts in American culture during its latter five seasons. At the end of the show's third season ("Human Error," S3:E24, original airdate May 29, 2007) House fires one member of his diagnostic team and the other two quit, ending the season on a cliffhanger and indicating change on the horizon for the show. Season four marks a sea change in

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<sup>231</sup> See the *Drugs@FDA* database at <https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cder/daf/index.cfm>.



the show's narrative structure, which is marked by an increased emphasis on its serial aspects, and in particular the relationship dynamics between the show's principal characters. Season four follows House's attempt to hire a new team by running a *Survivor*-esque contest in which (mostly) young doctors compete for a limited number of employment opportunities. Although each episode still features a medical mystery, the solving of the mystery begins to take a backseat to the interpersonal dynamics of the doctor candidates and the hospital more generally, which in the fourth season emphasizes the internecine struggle for job security between potential diagnostic team members. As the first rumblings of what would become the global financial crisis began to be heard, for example, in Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan's declaration on the PBS NewsHour that there had been a "bubble in housing," *House* began to turn inward toward the sufferings and tribulations of its own doctors, as much as it still focused on the suffering of the patient's body. In doing so, the show suggested that there was no longer such a large gap between those patients who were at risk, and the diagnostic professionals who enjoyed the capacity to take risks and reap the professional benefits. This shift from medical mystery to medical melodrama solidified somewhat at the end of the fourth season, which concluded with a two-part story ("House's Head," S4:E15, original airdate May 12, 2008, and "Wilson's Heart," S4:E16, original airdate May 19, 2008) in which one of House's former prospective employees, Amber, who has become involved in a serious romantic relationship with House's best friend and colleague Dr. Wilson, is grievously injured in a bus accident (for which House's bad behavior may be responsible) and becomes the patient whose medical mystery House needs to solve. Amber's death at the end of "Wilson's Heart" marks a significant turn in *House*, and a pivot from ludic medical mystery to, as one contemporaneous reviewer called it, "a

complex meditation on misery,” in which addiction, pain, and suffering increasingly overshadowed the practice of diagnostics, which itself became increasingly fatigued and trite.<sup>232</sup>

The slow demise of *House*, embodied in the demise of Dr. House himself, as he increasingly falls victim to his own abuse of the painkiller Vicodin, reflects, notwithstanding the destructive external effects of neoliberal preemptive visuality in the form of preemptive warfare, the increasingly internal immiseration that occurs when the logic of preemption fails to successfully anticipate and preempt a crisis, as was the case during and after the 2007-2008 financial crisis. “Wilson’s Heart” aired less than two months after Bear Stearns was acquired for pennies on the dollar by J.P. Morgan Chase, affectively premediates the crisis, “forefeeling” the suffering to come, and eerily and ironically locating the site of that suffering as the House. Over the final four seasons, *House* observed the breakdown of relationships between principal characters, while Dr. House himself grappled with addiction, withdrawal, and was institutionalized, imprisoned, and dealt with Dr. Wilson’s terminal cancer diagnosis at the series finale. But for a contemplation of the vicissitudes of the recession itself, in a way that achieves more than the purely negative image of it that *House* provides (that is, the recession as a negation of the positive logic of pre-crisis speculation), the next chapter turns to a film that comes to grips more directly with the consequences of failed speculation.

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<sup>232</sup> Margaret Lyons, “House Series Finale: The Show Was a Meditation on Misery,” *Vulture*, May 21, 2012, <http://www.vulture.com/2012/05/house-series-finale-hugh-laurie.html>.

## 4 “YOU CAN NEVER EXPLAIN SOMETHING LIKE THIS”: NARRATIVE AND ECONOMIC SPECULATION IN *SINISTER*

### 4.1 Introduction

In a dimly lit home office, a writer gets to work: taking notes while screening home movies and hoping (needing desperately, in fact) to make sense of the footage somehow, to scrutinize the screen until it yields a meaningful, self-evident explanation of its visual contents. The writer is Ellison Oswald, protagonist of *Sinister* (dir. Scott Derrickson, 2012), but this description, with slight modifications, could just as easily fit the (post-)cinematic spectator of *Paranormal Activity* (dir. Oren Peli, 2007), who examines that film’s home movies with the same level of investigatory intensity, and with similar outcomes: both will be fascinated and frightened by the images they see, and also be made palpably anxious by the evidentiary truths those images do and do not disclose. Shifting and expanding frames again, the description could apply as well to the spectator of *Sinister* (academic or otherwise), engaging in processes of narrative hypothesis-testing and thematic construction: a forensic construction of narrative that pieces together coherent meaning from a flow of audiovisual data in time.

Indeed, as we shall see, there is in *Sinister* a distinctive immanence between the ‘techniques of the observer’ employed within the film and those of the observer *of* the film, and that the film’s textual dynamism derives precisely from the tension created by this relation. In the film, down-on-his-luck true crime writer Ellison Oswald moves his family into a home where the previous owners were gruesomely murdered. By moving into the murder house (one might, in the parlance of high-frequency trading, call this an example of co-location), Oswald hopes to glean the gritty details that will catapult him back into the limelight and put an end to his own family’s money troubles. As it turns out, Oswald gets more than he bargained for as his

investigation uncovers evidence, in the form of amateur found-footage film reels recording a series of murders, that a demonic power might be responsible for killing the previous owners. Only Oswald's ability to reconstruct the narrative of what happened to the previous residents of the house can save his own family from the same fate, but by the time the plot is uncovered it is too late, and the family is doomed to become the most recent addition to the collection of ghostly reels.

This chapter explores how *Sinister*, in its incorporation of processes of forensic spectatorship within the film's narrative diegesis, stages the dialectical interdependence of a pair of cultural and technological oppositions. The first of these oppositions is structured as a tension between labor and surveillance. The film constructs Ellison's professional labor of narrative construction and meaning-making as a form of precarious labor that is necessary for him to support his family in a time of economic hardship, coming as it does on the heels of the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent recession. The film renders this labor of narrative content creation, however, as a form of fraught surveillance, the ethical and existential anxiety of which is produced through the haunted media(ing) object's capacity to reverse the flow of surveilling control from subjective domination of the object, to the object's overturning of the perceiving and putatively centered subject-position. Thus, the film creates a dialectical image of speculation that partakes of both its spectatorial and economic valences. In contradistinction to the previous chapter, in which processes of speculation and image-making were, at least in the first three seasons of *House M.D.*, presented as being capable of producing epistemically satisfactory and medically effective, *Sinister* explores what happens when speculation fails and is thrown into crisis.

The film's dialectical opposition between surveillance and labor, however, is crucially filtered or compounded through a second opposition, which is structured as a tension between media ontologies. The film crucially stages this dialectical opposition through its diegetic interrogation of the status of audiovisual media in moments of technological transition from celluloid film to digital video. Unlike in *House*, where digitality is necessary to visualize the interior of the body, here it is rendered problematic, and even threatening to the body. This emphasis on digitization, however, in turn provides something like a unifying sublation between the two forms of visual and economic speculation in *Sinister*, providing a new conceptual ground upon which to speculate about the state of speculation itself that extends beyond the diegetic narrative of the film to bodily implicate the film's spectator.

In the years following the remarkable and unlikely financial and popular success of *Paranormal Activity*, which was produced in 2007 but did not see wide theatrical release until 2009, the American horror film genre has undergone a significant shift towards films that resemble the surprise hit both in terms of style and content. Most pointedly, the influence of *Paranormal Activity* has been felt through both the use of found footage aesthetics as an organizing stylistic and narrational feature, and through a renewed emphasis on narratives of supernatural possession. In particular, in addition to the six films in the *Paranormal Activity* franchise (2007-2015), *REC* (dir. Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2007), *Cloverfield* (dir. Matt Reeves, 2008), *Diary of the Dead* (dir. George Romero, 2008), the anthology *V/H/S* trilogy (2012, 2013, 2014), and *Europa Report* (dir. Sebastián Cordero, 2013) represent only a small

sample of the horror and science fiction films that have appropriated the aesthetics of found footage video, and have done so across the generic contexts of horror and science-fiction.<sup>233</sup>

Critical scholarship on this cycle of films has emphasized two significant features: on the one hand scholars have examined the appropriation of documentary aesthetics as a both compelling and problematic aspect of the cycle, insofar as the films seem to appeal to the credible veracity of documentary in order to depict incredible, supernatural occurrences. On the other hand, scholarship has also emphasized the cultural anxieties embedded in this very tension between documentary style and fantastic, supernatural content, particularly as it relates to the processes of mediation involved in producing such images. As the introduction to a recent edited collection of essays on horror cinema in the digital age attests, “digital horror is a cinema of anxiety embodying, in its ‘shaky-cam’ cinematography, verisimilitudinous *mise-en-scène*, paranoid narrative propensities and often startling visual imagery, a range of concerns regarding the technologically-mediated and globally capitalized subjectivity of the present.”<sup>234</sup> Both of these analytical prongs are present in Barry Keith Grant’s article on what he terms “verité horror and sf film,” which he defines as a cycle in which “the camera exists within the diegesis, often with much of the story unfolding in real time, as if it were there recording actual not fictional events, as in the documentary tradition of cinema vérité.” Grant further contends that “the realist aesthetic of these films, in combination with their fantastic and frightening elements, reveal a postmodern anxiety about the indexical truthfulness of the image that has been exacerbated by

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<sup>233</sup> As of this writing, the found footage aesthetic remains a somewhat prominent feature of the American horror genre, if not of science-fiction, with the 2018 release of *Unfriended 2* (dir. Stephen Susco, 2018).

<sup>234</sup> Linnie Blake and Xavier Aldana Reyes, “Introduction: Horror in the Digital Age” in *Digital Horror: Haunted Technologies, Network Panic and the Found Footage Phenomenon* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 11.

the ubiquity of digital technology.” He identifies the core anxiety in the cycle as a tension between the digital image and its ability (or lack thereof) to indexically affirm evidentiary reality, a worry which is articulated in the context of the emergence of reality television in the years after 9/11’s traumatic televised documentation.<sup>235</sup>

Caetlin Benson-Allott similarly argues, regarding what she terms as “faux footage horror,” that these films “dramatize the risks of finding media files in the twenty-first century.” She links the ‘seemingly found’ aspect of the cycle to an ethical dilemma regarding the status of pirated media images in the contemporary digital era of easy and immediate access. The documentary aesthetics of such films suggest that they have been “unethically obtained, that *we are not supposed to be watching these images* [emphasis in original].” Reading these films as contemporary media industry morality tales, Benson-Allott claims that the ethical crisis of spectatorship precipitated in this cycle gestures towards a cultural and industrial fear regarding media piracy and the unauthorized dissemination of digital images beyond the control and economic exploitation of the media industries.<sup>236</sup>

I want both to press these arguments further and, at the same time, bring their central claims closer together by suggesting that the ruinous consequences of the unauthorized circulation of images allegorize the unauthorized, unethical circulation of wholly digitized finance capital through global markets, before finally coming home to roost in the traumatized body itself. If Grant’s concern is about the inability of the verité image to secure the indexical real, and Benson-Allott’s is a social anxiety about unauthorized circulation, then the site where

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<sup>235</sup> Barry Keith Grant, “Digital Anxiety and the new Verité Horror and SF Film,” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 6, no. 2 (2013): 153-175.

<sup>236</sup> Caetlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2013), 168, 171, 184.

both of these concerns meet is the image as a form of financialized monetary abstraction, securely tied neither to the (commodity) body nor to appropriate regulatory oversight. As Fredric Jameson has pointed out, the global flow of capital has undergone a second process of abstraction beyond the initial abstraction necessary to produce the money-form of capital. The digitization of finance capital through globally interconnected markets enables these abstractions of the money form, as complex financial instruments, to exchange for each other without ever passing through the commodity form of Marx's general formula for capital.<sup>237</sup> Along somewhat similar lines, W.J.T. Mitchell has argued that the 'reproduction' in Walter Benjamin's 'age of mechanical reproduction' has now taken on a biological meaning, in which "*Reproduction and reproducibility* mean something quite different now when the central issues of technology are no longer 'mass production' of commodities or 'mass reproduction' of identical images, but the reproductive processes of the biological sciences and the production of infinitely malleable, digitally animated images."<sup>238</sup> In this sense, then, the question of 'authorization,' or a lack thereof, takes on a double valence in raising a question about the efficacy of regulations and legal protections on intellectual property, but also asserting the ambiguous authorship of digital images that circulate virally in ways that echo the dizzying abstractions of wholly digitized financial instruments. *Sinister* figures this disjunction as a kind of action at a distance, in which such images do in fact possess a supernaturally vitalistic ability to disrupt and ultimately destroy the human body. In doing so, it effects a dialectical reversal of the immateriality and abstractness of the digitally financialized economic forces that precipitate bodily dissolution.

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<sup>237</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," *Critical Inquiry* 24:1 (Autumn 1997): 252.

<sup>238</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 318.



Therefore, I want to suggest that the critical and cultural significance of this cycle of horror and science fiction films discloses substantial concerns with digital mediation and its role in culture more broadly. This, then, provides ample reason for the close study of a second cycle of horror films—of which *Sinister* is one of the key constituents—that appears to be reflecting critically on the wave of vérité/faux footage horror by self-reflexively incorporating the act of spectatorship, an act previously reserved for the viewing audience, within the diegetic world of the films' fictions. This loosely designated second cycle of found-footage horror films would include, among others, *V/H/S* (2012) and its sequels, *Oculus* (dir. Mike Flanagan, 2013), as well as the immensely financially successful *The Conjuring* (dir. James Wan, 2013) and *The Conjuring 2* (dir. James Wan, 2015), in which aural and visual surveillance technologies play a less central, but still significant role.<sup>239</sup>

In particular however, *Sinister*, a Blumhouse production starring Ethan Hawke, directed by Scott Derrickson, and written by Derrickson and C. Robert Cargill, distinguishes itself from its antecedents by shifting narrative and stylistic emphasis away from the vérité image as such, and towards the narrativized act of viewing such images, which is figured as deeply fraught by ambiguity regarding the empirical status of digital images, their authorship, and loss of control over both their circulation and value. Unlike *Paranormal Activity* and other similar films in which the fraught activity of spectatorship is performed by the spectator of the film, *Sinister*, like *Blow Up* (dir. Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966), *A Beautiful Mind* (dir. Ron Howard, 2001), and

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<sup>239</sup> Moreover, in the *Conjuring* films the clairvoyant capacities of paranormal investigator Lorraine Warren (Vera Farminga) also function in a way that effectively resembles surveillance. Indeed, *The Conjuring* cannily hearkens back not only to 1970s domestic horror films like *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973) and *The Amityville Horror* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg, 1979), but also indirectly invokes like *The Conversation* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974).

the proto-postmodern turn at the end of *Mimesis*, narrativizes that anxiety diegetically.<sup>240</sup> In doing so the film articulates a broad cultural fear regarding the loss of home value and economic stability during the post-2008 era to a specific concern regarding the pervasiveness and effectiveness of surveillance technologies in the digital era, and in doing so is exemplary of the second cycle of verité horror. Crucially, the film renders these anxieties around the economy and surveillance commensurable through the presentation of surveillance *as* economic labor, and indeed as the creative labor of narrative authorship itself. In doing so it anticipates the professionalization of supernatural detection in the following year's *The Conjuring*, a film which, both because of its financial success and popular reception, stands as a high-water mark for this second cycle of verité/faux footage films.

Julia Leyda has perceptively argued that the *Paranormal Activity* films function as “an ongoing post-cinematic allegory of debtor capitalism” in which “the digital is the link between the nightmare of debtor capitalism and the horror of the camera as non-human agent that captures the malevolent actions of the non-human demon.” She demonstrates how the franchise’s use of digital technologies and narrative concern with the haunted house allegorize and explore the post-cinematic condition of contemporary capitalism, focusing specifically on credit and debt

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<sup>240</sup> Notably, the financially successful *Unfriended* franchise (2014, 2018) shifts the mediatic terrain of this second cycle of verité/faux footage horror cycle from the diegetic spectatorship of film and video to the fraught use of online media platforms, perhaps also indicating a mutation of the key thematic element of spectatorship and narrative reconstruction into something more social, rhizomatically networked, and even ludic, rather than the isolated, linear, and work-like approach to media spectatorship evident in films like *Sinister* and *The Conjuring*. Indeed, the transformation of *The Conjuring* into a networked cinematic universe of films beginning with *Annabelle* (dir. John R. Leonetti, 2014) may also indicate a shift at a meta-narrative level toward a more networked mode of viewer interaction.

under transnational finance capital.<sup>241</sup> Likewise, Annie McClanahan has recently argued that contemporary gothic horror films express economic anxieties regarding post-crisis financial precarity by “explicitly link[ing] the formal trappings of horror to the context of real estate lending, mortgage speculation, and foreclosure risk.”<sup>242</sup> While these perspectives are astute, and much the same could be argued regarding *Sinister*, this chapter focuses more centrally on the relationship that the film constructs between images, labor, and speculative value, as opposed to an emphasis on anxiety regarding debt obligations and risk as sources of precarity, though this is undoubtedly a crucial factor in the way the film’s narrative and affective horror is constructed. What makes *Sinister* distinctive is the way the film figures the articulation between concerns regarding surveillance labor and property value in terms of the ontological transition from analog 8mm film to digital video, a transition which is accompanied by an attendant loss of control over the image that occurs in the process. The way in which these media ontologies seem also to mediate between national and economic forms of speculative securitization is especially prominent in the film’s use of rhythm and texture, in both its visual and sound design. *Sinister* braids intertwining economic, cultural, and technological anxieties pervading the contexts of the recession, the family, and the parallel ontologies of both digital images and digitally circulating finance capital. The structure of this analysis follows the film in this respect, attempting to follow the threads and knots of historical figuration at work in the film, beginning by establishing the film’s status as a narrative of anxiety regarding imagistic and economic control.

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<sup>241</sup> Julia Leyda, “Demon Debt: Paranormal Activity as Recessionary Post-Cinematic Allegory,” *Jump Cut* 56 (Fall 2014), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/LeydaParanormalActivity/text.html>.

<sup>242</sup> Annie McClanahan. *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First Century Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 143.

## 4.2 Recession Anxiety, or the Haunted House

*Sinister*'s narrative begins with true crime writer Ellison Oswalt (Ethan Hawke) moving his wife and two children from a spacious, expensive home funded by Ellison's book profits into a much smaller and humbler one. Unknown to Ellison's family for most of the film, the previous occupants of the new house, the Stevenson family, were gruesomely hanged in the backyard and are the research topic for Ellison's new book project. The film's narrative makes it clear that Ellison is under pressure to repeat the success of his single hit book, *Kentucky Blood*, after a string of duds has stalled his career as an author. An early exchange of words with the local sheriff (Fred Thompson) suggests that Ellison's recent failures may have come as a result of a failure to "get it right," indicating that the author's research and reconstruction of events was insufficient to produce a viable narrative either ethically or financially. In the sheriff's words, Ellison's "bad theory helped a killer go free. [Ellison] ruined people's lives," and the sheriff discourages the investigation, asserting that "you can never explain something like this," suggesting that the Stevenson family murder is something inexplicable and best left alone. Soon after the conversation with the sheriff, Ellison explains to his daughter Ashley that they had to move into the home because Ellison could no longer afford the old one, although he holds out the possibility of moving back to their old home once the book is successful. Later that night at the dinner table, Ellison's wife Tracy tells the children, Ashley and Trevor, that they won't be able to eat out in restaurants much until their old house is sold. When Trevor suggests lowering the asking price on the old home to help sell it faster, Ellison responds by claiming that they have already lowered it as much as possible and that poor market conditions are responsible for their tight budget while also noting that once his new book is written and sold, the family will be "on easy street."

Ellison's early conversations with the sheriff and his family not only do the necessary narrative work of characterization, but also connect together the ethical and economic pressures associated with Ellison's forensic reconstruction and authorship of a coherent and ultimately lucrative narrative out of research data. Since the livelihood of the Oswald family depends on Ellison's ability to piece together the story of what happened to the Stevenson family, his investigation into what befell the Stevensons is inextricably linked to preventing his own familial dissolution, even before any overtly supernatural elements come into play in the film. Ellison's early exchange with the sheriff allows scenes of Ellison screening home movie footage to be understood as a form of research labor inflected by an economic pressure to reproduce an economic success, with the value of such labor framed in terms of the ability to skillfully and accurately produce narrative meaning out of forensic data, and in turn to transform that narrative meaning into valuable media content. Just prior to Ellison's first examination of the home movie footage, Tracy informs him that if this research project goes as poorly as the last one has, she will take the children to her mother's house—a scenario that would resemble a marital separation—despite Tracy's self-proclaimed motivation of removing the family from the critical scrutiny of the unfriendly community. In short, the mystery at the heart of Ellison's investigation is as much about resolving a crisis of diminishing labor value and the disappearance of money, as it is about the murder and disappearance of human beings. For the film, these two exchangeable modes of suffering—economic and bodily—are intertwined and causally interconnected by Ellison's forensic labor, labor which is itself situated as necessary to affirm and maintain the security of the nuclear family in the face of a broader undoing of the social community.

The economic imperative informing his research becomes a central motivation for Ellison in the film, keeping the Oswald family in the haunted home even after Ellison begins to suspect

he and his family are in danger. The more Ellison learns about the case, the more obvious it becomes that his family is exposed to hazard, while at the same time the potential profitability of his book project escalates proportionally. Ellison's decision to place the economic prospects of the book above his family's comfort and safety is repeatedly emphasized through the fracturing of his initially happy relationship to his family over the course of the film. Trevor's night terrors, both children's troubling drawings of murder victims in inappropriate locations (including on the walls of the new home), and the revelation that Ellison has lied about moving them into a crime scene contribute to the intense straining of the family relationship across the film.

The children's "number one rule" —not to go into their father's office—also establishes the site of forensic investigation and labor as a forbidden site, marked off for the working father and distanced from the rest of the family. This prohibition also figures the site and scene of surveillance labor as both invisible and inaccessible, and to the extent that Ellison's speculative labor resonates with the speculative securitization of geopolitical surveillance, reflects the perceived immateriality and invisibility of both labor and surveillance as something that occurs either 'over there,' and/or 'nowhere in particular,' and that is performed seemingly by no-one.<sup>243</sup>

Eventually, Ellison's research leads him to realize that he has embroiled his family in a mortally dangerous relationship to Bughuul, a Babylonian demon that resides within and haunts images of itself. The structure of Bughuul's curse, which activates when a family moves into a home previously occupied by the curse's previous victims, but which propagates by murdering

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<sup>243</sup> I owe this latter observation to Cameron Kunzelman. *Oculus* also contains the forbidden father's office as a trope for the danger and uncertainty of labor, and makes it a much more central aspect of the narrative of the film, which is itself structurally organized around a temporal merger, and figural union, of past and present familial trauma. Indeed, *Oculus* also frames this traumatic merger in part around the interaction of digital video surveillance equipment and a trans-generationally circulating material commodity object, in the form of an ornate antique mirror.

families only after they move *out* of the cursed home, reinforces the film's anxious depiction of home ownership, in which the home is formally figured as a container of traumatic possession caught up in the seemingly viral nature of declining property values. The operational logic of the curse connects the families it destroys in a network that geographically spans a wide swath of the United States and reaches temporally backward to the 1960s, when the curse began and when the economic and social fabric of conservative midcentury American society began to unravel. Much of the film's home movie footage is drawn from the decade of the 1970s, a decade in which many American families experienced economic stagnation while American capital underwent explosively rapid transnational growth through financialization.<sup>244</sup> In *Sinister*, moving out of one's home and into a home that, as Ellison remarks, "came on the market and was a steal," seals one's fate as a victim of familial and, in The Oswalds' case, existential disintegration. It is as though the trauma of having one's home lose value, as much as the trauma of haunting and violent death, is what circulates among the interconnected families of victims, and it circulates via the mechanism of moving from one home to another. The film thereby puts an allegorical, and yet also oddly literal, twist on the Heideggerian notion of the uncanny as literally "not-being-at-home" in one's own home, haunted by the specter of "homelessness," a condition which, in *Sinister*, leads directly to flight from the literal home followed immediately by an encounter with, and the realization of, bodily death.<sup>245</sup> The operational logic of the curse installs movement, exchange, temporal relationality, and circulation as the rules of the game by which such *unheimlich* effects are generated.

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<sup>244</sup> See Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994), 300-24.

<sup>245</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 233.

The existential danger of moving is signified prominently through the presence of the cardboard moving box, which functions as a recurring element of the film's mise-en-scène. After the film's opening title credit image of the prior family hanging, the first image of the Oswalts moving into their new home is a Steadicam shot of the home and a moving truck that introduces a document box being slid by Ellison's foot, which the camera emphasizes and that the viewer sees before seeing Ellison's face (fig. 4.1).



Figure 4.1 *Sinister*

Cinematographically, the box itself is emphasized in the shot, while the closely recorded sound of the box rubbing against the floor of the moving truck singles it out as sonically important, especially coming on the heels of the aurally intense title credit. The curse of *Bughuul* is transmitted to Ellison and his family evidently through Ellison's screening of the film, which he finds in a moving box in the attic. In this respect, the moving box becomes more than a literal container for film images and their mechanical apparatus, but a kind of media object and



apparatus itself insofar as it functions not only as a storage container for images, but also plays a crucial role in communicating the material effects of those images to unsuspecting victims. In this sense the moving box also operates as a figure for exchange-value itself, as a container that abstracts its specific contents into a nondescript and homogenous form in order to mediate exchanges between use-values. The box therefore engages, albeit in a domestic rather than a commercial and transnational register, what Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle call a “poetics of containerization,” insofar as the process of moving homes is “marked by a certain fixation on the ‘box’ as refractory to feeling and cognition, but also as the possible source, when cracked open, of an insight into the freight of bodily suffering that the seamlessness of circulation renders invisible.”<sup>246</sup> This transmitting function of the box becomes especially apparent when Ellison destroys the 8mm film bearing Bughuul’s image and moves his family back into their old home, only to find that the box of film has mysteriously persisted, and is sitting in his attic in the same spatial position as it was in the other home. The box thus functions both metonymically and metaphorically as a symbol of the anxiety attached to moving as a feature of home ownership (and also as a marker of anxieties surrounding media, insofar as it functions *as* media, as I discuss below).

The moving box is a nearly universal component of the contemporary Western experience of changing homes, and its familiar visual and textural qualities give sensuous weight to moving as more than merely an abstract concept. If the box activates a poetics of containerization, in which the obstinacy of opacity is juxtaposed against the embodied affects it conceals, then *Sinister* understands this relation as an engine for generating anxiety regarding the

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<sup>246</sup> Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle. *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015), 200.

possibility of loss. Once again, Heidegger's notion of anxiety is useful here: the moving box, serves as a signifier of generalized existential anxiety insofar as it indicates both the temporary loss of those household objects, which would normally be ready-to-hand, and an attendant invitation to reflect upon the totality of one's material "involvements."<sup>247</sup> In a general sense, the flickering dichotomy of presence and absence expressed by the moving box produces anxiety because temporary loss implies permanent loss: the container can be forgotten and left behind, its valuable or sentimental contents lost forever. It is this severance from material origins, along with the possibility of a horrifying return of this original repression of valorization, that Toscano and Kinkle identify as problematic in the poetics of container shipping. In *Sinister* it is the fact that the box *cannot* be forgotten and relegated to the past that is invoked through the home movies' supernaturally cursed persistence through time and across national and domestic space. It thereby 'cracks open' the container, revealing its horrifying contents, and showing how the "freight of bodily suffering" is itself fungible, insofar as it circulates between homes, images, and bodies.

This anxious relation to personal property reflects the film's concern with material object loss on the one hand and the plague of that which continues to depress the value of real property on the other. The pressure that it exerts, not only on Ellison but also on the family is especially emphasized when Ellison finds his son Trevor having a night terror inside a moving box. Although this sequence functions spectatorially in part for shock value, it also resonates with the moving box as a container of terror—as a medium that holds and transmits uncontrollable effects on the human body and psyche. More than this however, it also reduces the subject to a container and transmitter for spasms of pure affective intensity. This spasmodic intensity is in turn relayed

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

through the formal shock of the “jump scare” to the spectator of *Sinister*, momentarily collapsing the film’s strata of speculation—economic, surveilling, and narrational—into a momentarily unified affective figure. In doing so, the film creates a figural constellation of the economic, securitizing, and meaning-making modalities of speculation. It uses affective intensity (what Whitehead would call prehension) as a kind of medium through which a diagram of speculation emerges as an expressive formation, and one that gives rise to a reconfigured understanding of the ways in which superficially distinct forms of speculation, for example stock market betting and cinematic narrative comprehension, can in fact share underlying schematic qualities.

The film draws a strong connection between containerization and mediation not only at the level of the body and of the moving box, but also in terms of the house itself, which takes on the functional role of a media object in the film. It serves as a container and conveyor for the demonic curse and its haunted images, but also becomes a text open to processes of inscription. Ashley’s practice of drawing pictures on the walls in her room makes this especially apparent (fig. 4.2).



Figure 4.2 *Sinister*

Initially, she and Ellison agree that the drawings are to stay inside the room, but as the film progresses, the art spreads beyond the boundary of the room while becoming more explicit in its reference to the Stevensons and the curse. The Oswalds' new house, and indeed many of the houses in *Sinister*, are porous, leaky containers that fail to hold their 'proper' contents.<sup>248</sup> What is distinctive about the curse, and telling of the film's post-recession context, is that it becomes activated precisely through viral movement, of people from house to house and images from person to person. Therefore, as a figure for the dialectical paradox of value itself, the curse and its related images come to stand not only for home value in a local sense, value that the

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<sup>248</sup> In this respect, the formal structure of the curse illuminates the problematic disjunction between the form and content of the commodity itself, in which value is never self-contained, but always (and only) established in a movement of exchange that transgresses the material boundary of the commodity object. See David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital* (London: Verso: 2010), 17.

Stevenson house is unable to retain and the loss of which seems to spread virally from one move to another, but also of a more global and financialized market value, which emerged from subprime home loans, proliferated through markets worldwide, and then leaked out from the market's every pore during the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>249</sup>

### 4.3 Spectatorship as Surveillance, Surveillance as Labor

Ellison's research connects anxieties around labor, value, and economic security, but it is also, as I have suggested, fundamentally a labor of surveillance and forensic scrutiny. Ellison's research takes a decisive turn once he discovers the box of Super-8 reels in the attic of the new home, shifting his attention to a close examination of the footage itself rather than an investigation of the lives of the murder victims or a tracing of the steps of the official police investigation. His labor of narrative reconstruction is intimately connected to a voyeuristic scrutiny of the ostensibly private 'home movies' of the previous families of victims, including footage of their grisly murders. In the film, the acts of narrative construction and of surveillance are increasingly blurred and intermingled. Describing what she terms "surveillance cinema," Catherine Zimmer stresses the "multiple mediations that occur through the cinematic narration of surveillance, through which practices of surveillance become representational and representational practices become surveillant, and ultimately distinctions between the two begin to fade away." For Zimmer, 'surveillance cinema' involves not only the iconographies of

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<sup>249</sup> The film's narrative also makes an oddly astute psychoanalytic connection between the economic and psychoanalytic senses of foreclosure. Lacan defines foreclosure [*verwerfung*] as a hole or lack in the Name-of-the-Father, which prevents proper signification and the functioning of the symbolic order, contributing directly to the condition of psychosis. In *Sinister*, the literal psychosis and absence of the father, and his symbolic role in maintaining structure of the household, leads to Ashley's failure to adopt appropriate behaviors, and eventually to her demonic possession. This prevention of proper symbolic and psychic functioning is seemingly caused by Ellison's inability to make payments on the Oswalds' original, larger home. (See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 465-6, 479.

surveillance but also the ways in which narrative structure performs the work of joining the form and content of surveillance together.<sup>250</sup>

*Sinister* does precisely this work, not by explicitly representing the activity of surveillance as it is conventionally understood (which is to say as involving the visual or auditory monitoring of the activities of others in such a way that they are thereby placed under control), but instead through the way in which the film problematizes twin concerns regarding the ability of the image to yield evidentiary truth and the troubled relationship between such imagistic evidence and narrative. Notably, despite Ellison's deep entanglement in (as it turns out, entirely justified) paranoia, he is in fact not the person who solves the mystery and finally puts the narrative pieces together 'correctly.' Rather, it is the apparently oblivious comic-relief character 'Deputy So and So' (the only name the character is given) who is able to complete the forensic reconstruction and author the 'correct' narrative of how and why the murders took place. For both Ellison and the spectator of *Sinister*, first-blush appearances deceive and do not provide a firm basis for evidentiary reasoning or narrative construction. The ways in which the film explores and articulates anxiety regarding surveillance can be organized along four more or less distinct modes of anxiety involving activities of surveillance: ethical anxiety, spatial/panoptic anxiety, textural anxiety, and material anxiety, ranging from the largely abstract and impersonal (ethical), to the concrete and medium-specific (material).

In the first, most impersonal sense, Ellison's surveillance labor is troubled by the ethically compromised nature of the research. Most obviously, Ellison intends to leverage the gruesome suffering and violent deaths of the Stevenson family to turn a profit with which to feed his own family. The ethics of the book project are called into question very early in the film by

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<sup>250</sup> Catherine Zimmer, *Surveillance Cinema* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 2.

the sheriff, who adds that moving into the actual home of murder victims is “in extremely poor taste.” The fact that the sheriff’s ethical critique is leveled in the form of an aesthetic judgment is particularly apt, reinforcing the tension between the ostensibly distinct domains of legal justice and commercial production. When Ellison initially realizes that he has found film footage of not just the Stevenson family being murdered but other families as well, his initial response is to call the police department to report the existence of additional evidence. This reaction demonstrates an awareness of the fact that, as Benson-Allott has described, Ellison is not supposed to be viewing these images, and that they are best handled by the proper authorities. As he calls the police, however, he comes face to face with several copies of *Kentucky Blood*, which seem to prompt him to hang up and fail to disclose the existence of the evidence to the police. Ellison appears to be hamstrung, caught between the economic imperative of writing another bestseller and the voyeuristic exploitation of the suffering of others, and seemingly pinned between the book and the film as two forms of media with competing moral and commercial imperatives.

Ellison is corralled by these contradictory impulses, and this ethical confinement is reflected formally in the film’s *mise-en-scène* through the spatial layout of Ellison’s office space (fig. 4.3).



Figure 4.3 *Sinister*

This room in the Oswald family's new home is separated from the rest of the house, kept under lock and key, and like Marx's factory in *Capital*, access to the room is clearly restricted to admittance on Ellison's business only. The room is structured with a screen hanging on one wall, on which Ellison projects the home movies, and an arc of bulletin boards on the opposite side of the room, onto which Ellison posts photos, documents, maps, and other bits of evidence and some of which, true to the conspiratorial nature of the investigation, are connected to each other with generically and iconographically appropriate lengths of string. In the context in which it appears here, the conspiracy wall functions diagrammatically to spatialize the speculative process of narrative construction as a figural constellation of aesthetic fragments. It is here in this space that Ellison will work on his forensic reconstruction of the Stevenson murder and the history of the curse. But the conspiracy wall, and diagram, also receive a specific textual inflection here, insofar as they both function to create a claustrophobic architecture. The circular



research space, in which Ellison is centrally positioned at the seat of projection, simultaneously evokes a panoptic structure while confining Ellison by surrounding him with images. The relationship between central viewing position and peripheral image evokes a panoptic set of subject/object relations that would place Ellison at the controlling center of the scenario, ideally positioned to survey the evidence and make appropriate connections between disparate facts. The rectangular shape of the bulletin boards, with both images and text pinned to them and which Ellison can manipulate, suggests the boards as a material extension of Ellison's laptop screen, and in this sense he is surrounded by screens containing various types of visual media. If the ability to panoptically survey media is initially aligned with empowerment and control, this position quickly becomes troubled, and ultimately reversed over the course of the film. The supernaturally haunted image seems to increasingly possess power over Ellison and the family, effectively inverting the power relations of the panoptic position, since the image is capable of looking back at the viewer, returning the gaze from a variety of spatial positions. Thus, the film figures subject-object relations not as static, but as unstable and contingent, and as malleably established through the processes of speculative looking.

The reversal of the panoptic gaze is literalized in the film when an image of Bughuul, in a paused digital video, turns its head to stare directly at Ellison, who is looking away and does not notice (fig. 4.4).



Figure 4.4 *Sinister*

This moment in the film, which is presented as a ‘jump scare’ for the audience, does more than simply demonstrate the haunted image’s supernatural, frightening sense of liveness through an unexpected reversal of subject/object relations. It also transforms the relationship between surveiller and surveilled as it becomes clear in this moment that while Ellison was looking for the mysterious murderer of families, Bughuul has been surveilling Ellison, and from a heretofore unknown position.<sup>251</sup> The reversal thus enacts a form of what Steve Mann, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellmann have termed “sousveillance.” As opposed to surveillance, in which power is asymmetrically held by the surveilling authority, *sousveillance* (‘sous’ meaning “under” in

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<sup>251</sup> This moment in the film also seems to literalize the moment in *Paranormal Activity* when Katie, who is being similarly haunted by a demon, explains to her husband Micah that the entity can hear everything they say, a moment that similarly enacts a reversal of the relationship between surveiller and surveilled. The reversal is extended in *Oculus*, where the agency of the mirror as an image-object is of primary narrative interest.

French, rather than the “over-sight” of surveillance) designates a mode of surveillance that makes use of “panoptic strategies to help [individuals] observe those in authority.”<sup>252</sup>

Sousveillance is theorized as a tool with which to hold powerful entities accountable by effectively surveilling the exercise of panoptic authority. Here, however, it is deployed as a troubling and vertiginous mise-en-abyme of power relations, which undermines the visual authority of the gaze through its reversibility. In her analysis of *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998), Benson-Allott observes a connection between Lacan’s reading of the anamorphic skull in Holbein’s painting “The Ambassadors” and this return of the gaze in horror cinema. For Benson-Allott the ‘death’s head’ in the painting traumatically, and like death itself, escapes meaning and signification, a structural role also shared by *Ringu*’s ghostly Samara and, more importantly, the videotapes her ghost haunts.<sup>253</sup> Like the anamorphic skull in Holbein’s “The Ambassadors,” Bughuul’s gaze functions as an annihilating trap for the surveilling gaze, insofar as it transforms the surveilling subject into the object of an even more comprehensive and controlling vision.<sup>254</sup>

But if Lacan’s point about the skull, however, is that it figures the anchor of the unrepresentable real at the core of the imaginary-symbolic matrix, then in *Sinister* this disruption of the real possesses an animate vitality that goes beyond the static gaze of Holbein’s skull, since Bughuul’s agency as a destructive force is tied directly to movement, of the head within the supposedly static image, and of the curse through the supposedly stable home and its value. Circulation disrupts the stable structural relations obtaining, even in the traumatic case of “The

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<sup>252</sup> Steve Mann, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellman, “Sousveillance and Using Wearable Computing Devices for Data Collection in Surveillance Environments,” *Surveillance & Society* 1, no. 3 (2003): 332.

<sup>253</sup> Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens*, 124-30.

<sup>254</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 88-9.

Ambassadors,” between subjects and objects of both vision and property. While this is also the case for the circulating cassettes in *Ringu*, the consequence in *Sinister* is that the entire imaginary-symbolic matrix is thrown into flux by the emergence of the traumatic real, rather than being structurally upheld by it. Bughuul is, in W.J.T. Mitchell’s twist on Walter Benjamin, a wholly biocybernetic image, paradoxically straddling the lines between movement and stasis, vitality and inertness, and subject and object.<sup>255</sup> As a biocybernetic image, Bughuul quite literally embodies these dialectical tensions of movement, vitality, and circulation on the one hand, and stasis, inertness, and objectification on the other. As a figure for the paradoxes of value, Bughuul’s demonic vitality does more than reverse the flow of surveillance, but does so in a way that compromises the subject/object relations upon which surveillance is predicated. Bughuul stands as the figure for a traumatic real that functions less as a Lacanian structuring absence in the field of vision, than as a Deleuzian vitality of affect that traverses and undermines the discreteness of the structural elements of subject and object altogether.

This tension between competing ontologies of desire is also reflected in the way the film troubles the ontological status of Bughuul’s existence as verifiable visual evidence, both in the scenes leading up to this pivotal scare and in the scares involving the demon that happen afterwards. Ellison initially notices the presence of the demon in one of the home movies, entitled “Pool Party.” As Ellison watches first-person handheld footage of a family being drowned, he notices the demon as a human figure underwater in the pool, who turns his head towards the camera. (Retrospectively, it is unclear whether Bughuul’s direct address is supposed to take place in the event depicted, or whether this is his first attempt to surveil Ellison.) Ellison stops the projector, holding the image as a still on the screen, and walks up to investigate the

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<sup>255</sup> Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want?*, 318.

image more closely, but the film, as though of its own will, suddenly catches fire, destroying the film frame with Bughuul most clearly visible. Although the fire is ostensibly the consequence of the flammable film stock, or perhaps of Bughuul's supernatural ability to destroy the image in order not to be seen and exposed, it is striking that the image catches fire not once Ellison sees it but once the shadow of his hand crosses the demon's face. Although Ellison does not touch the image, his shadow does, and this transmedial interaction between different types of images (and different forms of indexical signifier) is suggested as the true cause of the fire. This moment is the first but not the last in which competing ontologies of media, identified principally through texture, come into tactile conflict with disturbing results. Each jump scare in the film involving Bughuul, including the one previously described in which the image seems to move to look at Ellison, involves an ontological and textural transgression between forms of media.

The last and most strongly material form of concern surrounding surveillance is produced through Ellison's response to the rupture of the film medium, which is to physically splice the film back together. After the fire that ruptures the film, Ellison watches an online instructional video to learn how to edit film, then splices the Super-8 film back together. He also splices film much later in the film when he discovers the "extended cut endings" to the home movies, which reveal that the families' children are in fact the ones murdering their own families, rather than there being a single serial killer committing the acts. Montage, as a material and narrative practice, is closely imbricated with the logic of surveillance. Garrett Stewart begins his study of surveillance and narrative cinema by making the interrogative assertion that "All montage is espionage."<sup>256</sup> Stewart goes on to heavily complicate the ease of this identity over the course of

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<sup>256</sup> Garrett Stewart, *Closed Circuits: Screening Narrative Surveillance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), ix.

his study, but his central point is that the difference between cinematic *découpage* and surveillance turns on an open question of what it means to engage in motivated, quasi-illicit looking. This question in turn reinvigorates the concerns of apparatus theory regarding the capacities and limitations of cinematic suturing, and in ways that re-privilege the theoretically-informed formal analysis of cinematic narration. Hence for Stewart, contemporary “films of surveillance...are so fully keyed to the fantastic videography they narrate, given the cinematic distance from its electronics that their critique attempts to achieve, that the very plan of camerawork and editing can seem at times folded back into their plots as a quasi-magical intervention in space-time continuity.”<sup>257</sup> Similarly, Zimmer also notes that the innovation of continuity editing was developed to handle chase scenes, which are themselves predicated on visualizable crime and discipline.<sup>258</sup> The suggestion here is that continuity editing operates on a logic of motivated viewing of particular events in space and time—that events are viewed for some particular reason. Likewise, surveillance as a mode of information gathering is also motivated by the presumption that surveillance images produce factual information or intelligence that can be narrativized and made meaningful. Surveillance and narrative cinema both assume motivation and reply on practices of forensic spectatorship (frame scanning, inference making, hypothesis-testing) in order to produce a causal chain of events, that is, a narrative, out of a fragmentary *découpage* stitched together through montage.

Insofar as the folding of narratological form and content in on each other is the hallmark of narrative surveillance for Stewart, *Sinister* is indeed a film of surveillance. The fact that Ellison materially handles the film medium and physically splices the film back together evokes

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<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>258</sup> Zimmer, *Surveillance Cinema*, 7.

the relationship between continuity as a system of formal rules, technology as a prosthetic means, and knowledge as a governing goal. This knowledge is troubled by the structure of the home movies themselves, which in each case but the last feature two sections, separated by a jarring cut. The films open with evidently pedestrian footage of the families engaging in mundane daytime activities, meaningful only to the families themselves, before cutting to the more disturbing and valuable footage of those same families being hanged, drowned, and burned alive. In each case, Ellison is never able to see the murderer, nor is he able to understand the motivation for the murders. The one instance of Bughuul that appears on film makes an exception that proves the rule, since the immolation of the medium enacts the disappearance of the motivating force from the film image, at precisely the point where a suturing edit is located. The “extended cut endings” finally provide the necessary visual evidence by supplying additional footage that reveals who the murderers are, but they do so only after they are edited into, and onto the film at a material level as a form of narrative surplus. Ellison’s labor of meaning construction, ‘produced’ through the physical act of editing, is therefore intimately tied to the presence or absence of visual evidence from which to make inferences and draw conclusions via processes of surveillance. His ability or inability to author, or forensically reconstruct and re-constellate a narrative figure, and in turn to ensure his family’s financial stability, is inseparable from his ability, quite literally, to be a successful content creator.

#### **4.4 Media Transition and the Hauntology of the Digital**

The two primary threads of speculative anxiety that are articulated in and by *Sinister*—the trauma of economic recession and its deleterious effect on property value and the troubled nature of an economically necessary surveillance that bears witness to such familial trauma—are united together in Ellison’s spectatorship of the home movies footage, especially through its

remediation as digital video. The film stages the linkage between these two concerns through a series of textural and ontological transgressions, involving both the film/video image and its associated sound design, the medium-specific affordances of video compared to film, and the loss of control over the proliferation of digital images that sits at the core of the logic of haunting presented in the film. In this attention to texture and to the sensuous qualities of the film as highly significant stylistic parameters for understanding the stakes of the film's narrative and thematic content, I draw on Ian Garwood's study of hapticity and sensuousness in relation to narrative sense. Garwood claims that in certain films, "sound and images acquire a 'living' texture that engages the viewer's senses in a particularly intensive way," which Garwood identifies with the "sensuous quality of film." He argues that "a film's sensuous qualities can be intimately connected to its storytelling processes." In other words, the sensuous and textural qualities of film can function as highly relevant stylistic parameters that shape an audience's understanding of a film's story, and especially its story as a kind of aesthetic world unto itself. Following this lead, we can see how qualities of aural and visual texture articulate thematic concerns regarding the status of media in the film, and how the film's use of texture connects to its concerns with property and surveillance.<sup>259</sup>

The very first image in *Sinister*, prior to the Steadicam shot of Ellison pushing the moving box, is a title sequence shot that shows the Stevenson family being hanged on 8mm film (fig. 4.5).

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<sup>259</sup> Ian Garwood, *The Sense of Film Narration* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2015), 3.





Figure 4.5 *Sinister*

The perpetrator is hidden from sight behind a tree, barring visual access to the cause of the violence. Indeed, it may seem initially that there is no material, causal agent responsible for the hanging, as the image is composed to suggest that the pole saw used to hang the family is moving on its own, rather than being manipulated by an unseen entity. The image contains a number of aspects that gesture towards its status as a film image, including its noticeable grain and the extension of the image beyond the visible scene to the edges of the celluloid strip on both the horizontal and vertical axes. The image also seems to lack its own synched soundtrack. The sound design during this opening section consists of multiple overlapping scratching noises and sounds of static, which are eventually replaced by the dominant sound of a film projector's rapid clicking, the latter of which enters the mix when the title of the film appears and the moving image freezes to a static frame. The image and sound relations here establish the film's first kind of textural transgression through the intermingling of scarcely distinguishable noises of analog

and digital media technologies. The audio mix features three distinctive sounds of static, one a very high-frequency piercing sound, one a lower-frequency sound that evokes the sound of television static, and one an even lower pitched sound recalls the sound of an overworked hard-disc drive on a computer. Of each of these sounds, none properly belongs to the film image, either diegetically or technologically, a point that is forcefully clarified when the sound of a projector is finally made audible. Rather, this opening uses the sound of media other than film and sounds which suggest media in a form of mechanical distress (a television without a signal, computer components operating at maximum capacity) to produce a disturbing soundscape of media under duress. If the film image here can be said to possess the kind of “living texture” that Garwood supposes, that texture is skittish and anxious, evoking the sound of television static, and the connotation of a media transmission without content—an empty container. From the outset of the film, the mixing of media is associated with trouble, death, and an inability to identify the source of the problem.

Later in the film, when Ellison first cues up the film of this incident, this sound design is largely repeated, with the diegetic sound of the projector in Ellison’s office added as a component of the sound mix. The sounds of dysfunctional media, evoked through scratching sounds that would generally indicate the possibility of damage to the media object itself (celluloid being etched, a hard drive burning out), draw specially close attention to the materiality of the media as an object that is subject to damage, that does not persist immaculately through time but can (and in the case of the celluloid does indeed), like the film’s cursed families, come to a sudden and violent end. The emphasis on the material frailty of the image is also reflected through the visibility of the screen’s surface during projection. Ellison’s makeshift screen consists of a bed sheet safety-pinned to the wall, and while the film footage is projected,

wrinkles in the screen material are clearly visible. These wrinkles give the image a textural quality that forces the viewer to see, as well as hear, the image as having a material presence, embodied in a particular form of materiality. The physical embodiment of the image, coupled with its distressed sense of ‘liveness,’ are crucial elements in establishing the credibility of the supernatural entity that haunts the image itself and transcends the ontological boundary between an imagistic netherworld and normal, lived reality.

Central to the film’s concern with technologies of surveillance is the fact that Bughuul, whose living embodiment resides within images of himself, is only ephemerally detectable on film, but is consistently visible on digital video. It is only on his Macbook that Ellison is able to detect the presence of Bughuul in each of the other (non-swimming pool) home movies, whereas they were undetectable when projected on film (and in fact, as *Sinister*’s director and producer attest in on the DVD commentary track, simply not present in the film image at all).<sup>260</sup> It is only through the digital video camera’s surveillance of the act of film projection, and through the affordances of digital video in terms of the ability to pause a video, enlarge an image, adjust image contrast, and ultimately through the ability to print physical copies of the image, that Ellison is able to secure documentary evidence that Bughuul exists and was involved with the family murders. Citing films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (dir. Daniel Sánchez and Eduardo Myrick, 1999) and *Paranormal Activity*, Zimmer notes that found-footage horror films tend to employ competing logics of image quality and texture with respect to film versus video, with the cinematic image rendered as clear and transparent, while the video image tends to be rendered as low-grade, unclear, and ambiguous.<sup>261</sup> *Sinister*, interestingly, reverses this dichotomy, at least

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<sup>260</sup> C. Robert Cargill and Scott Derrickson, “Commentary,” *Sinister*, DVD, directed by Scott Derrickson (Santa Monica, CA: Summit Entertainment, 2013).

<sup>261</sup> Zimmer, *Surveillance Cinema*, 77.

initially, by presenting celluloid film footage as heavily textured and material, while the digital image appears not only clean and transparent, but actually enhances the viewer's powers of observation by making evident aspects of the image that were obscure and invisible on film. However, rather than identifying this visual documentary faculty with security and verification, the film depicts the technological capacities of video in terms of a terrorizing surplus value, effectively exchanging the materiality of celluloid montage and its extended duration for the resolution, enhanced access, and temporal flexibility of the digital image.

In *Sinister*, the video image carries something extra, a deadly dangerous kind of surplus visibility, which in turn produces a surplus of value in the form of Bughuul. Insofar as Bughuul persists through time, and across the series of exchanges of images from one family to another, and one haunted house to another, the demon represents what Derrida calls the 'hauntological' aspect of value: the commodity's distinct being of 'time out of joint,' since it carries within it the congealed form of labor-time.<sup>262</sup> The commodity form is haunted by the ontological transgressions of exchange between time and space, between quality and quantity, and between present and past. This hauntological aspect of value is greatly intensified by financialization which, through the innovations of the credit system, quite literally enables the separation of the temporalities of purchase and the sale that compose an act of exchange, as well as the recombination of these temporally disjunctive elements in other speculative configurations.<sup>263</sup> Bughuul literally embodies this hauntological quality of the digital image, which is stylistically manifested precisely at moments of transition and confusion between analog and digital media ontologies. Bughuul stands ultimately as a figure for the immateriality of value itself, and

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<sup>262</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 201-2.

<sup>263</sup> See the Introduction, 21-2.

especially of its increasingly digital form in the 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy. The demon figures a hauntologically unstable surplus value, both formally in terms of its excessive presence within the image and in a literal economic sense, insofar as Ellison's discovery of Bughuul forces him to accept far more than he has bargained for in investigating the Stevenson murders, ironically rendering the real true crime story Ellison never gets to write, one in which evidence of supernatural demons exists, both immensely valuable and potentially apocalyptic, given Bughuul's ability to spread through images of itself.

Anxiety associated with the surplus value of digital video is also identified with a transgression of conventional frame boundaries associated with visual media forms. If the spontaneous combustion of Bughuul's effigy indicates an evacuation of the film image, and his ability to take possession of the video image and move within it indicates a dangerous surplus, then this logic of the frightening danger of media ultimately extends to *Sinister* itself, qua media object, through Bughuul's two jump scares that come late and at the very end of the film, respectively. In each instance, the frame encourages the viewer to focus attention on an object deep in the represented space, while Bughuul's face pops out into the side of the frame, much closer in the visual field than the focus of attention, producing a particularly startling bodily jolt. These scares extend the logic of the curse's transmediality, that it moves from medium to medium, from film to video, video to house, house to movie screen, gaining strength with each new embodiment, eventually seeming to homologously take possession of *Sinister* itself, and even perhaps to seem to extend into the viewer's own home-viewing space, once again temporarily collapsing the strata of speculating relations that structures the film before retreating back into the image within the image.

#### 4.5 Conclusion: Speculation, Theory

*Sinister*'s greatest virtue as a reflexive commentary on the cycle of found footage/faux footage/verité horror may be its ability and willingness to explore the complex and changing relationships between media platforms and narrative construction, and between surveillance and labor, and perhaps most importantly of all, its attempt at mutually framing these sets of activities in terms of each other, generating a productive moment of conceptual and theoretical exchange between ostensibly discrete social and economic realms that in fact hinge on overlapping modalities of speculation. In doing so the film, like its protagonist, reveals a cultural, technological, and economic epistemophilia at its core, that is to say a desire for cognitive mapping which in this case is also to say a desire for speculation. In an entertainment economy and cultural ecology that is dominated by transmedia franchising and cinematic universes, *Sinister* represents a localized attempt to think the place (or better yet, the circulating movement) of smaller, more transient media objects within the totality, both within the context of entertainment, and within the broader economic context of finance capitalism, the financial crisis, and its continuing aftershocks. As Garrett Stewart observes, "routine screen narratives are often more interesting as film than as films, or now as digitized cinema more than as movies—interesting for the way their medium facilitates or defies the logic of their plots, abets or shreds it."<sup>264</sup> *Sinister*'s own particular contortions of cinematic narrative, stressed as they are by the force-fields of contemporary capitalism, index these transformations in both the economy and in meaning-making, both of which converge on the concept of speculation. In particular, the film performs this cognitive labor through its formal process of figurally constellating the various senses of speculation into an immanent affective figure that is as ephemeral and stimulating as

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<sup>264</sup> Stewart, *Closed Circuits*, 10.

the low-budget horror genre itself. Insofar as the film's investment in speculation addresses the value and circulation of images, it also seeks to do both for the entertainment industry and for domestic security what Fredric Jameson's conspiracy films did for the capitalist world system, namely to "constitute an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us" under the present economic and political circumstances.<sup>265</sup> Low-budget horror, with its own commercial disposability, is perhaps not a 'poor' but rather a precarious person's cognitive mapping, whose images of traumatic circulation are, in this instance, quite literally and meaningfully 'degraded' in form.

*Sinister* attempts to trace and map out the shifting social and economic forces of post-crisis financialized capitalism, and does so by foregrounding the parallel structures of the viral circulation of digital images and of the commodified financial abstractions that constitute finance capital as such. As Peter Osborne has argued, "In the digital image, the infinity of exchange made possible by the abstraction of value from use finds an equivalent form." The ontology of digital photography therefore echoes the commodity form, since neither makes visible its referential value, evincing no necessary bond between use and exchange-value. De-realized digital images, like commodities, are therefore subject to infinite exchangeability, and indefinite degrees of abstraction.<sup>266</sup> *Sinister* figures not only this ontological homology and potential exchangeability, but of its consequences for the body exposed to them, a body forced into the precarious self-employment of the neoliberal gig economy in which speculation, and its ambiguously productive and destructive vicissitudes, can be imagined as compensated and

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<sup>265</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), 2-3.

<sup>266</sup> Peter Osborne, "Infinite Exchange: The Social Ontology of the Photographic Image," *Philosophy of Photography* 1, no. 1 (January 2010): 67.

creative labor, as an explanatory *theoria* that helps capital circulate freely, in exchange for one's life—Ellison's bad theory does indeed let the killer go free. In this sense, Ellison's speculative labor, in its domestic and traumatic context, becomes a kind of dialectical inversion of the global and seductively glamorous, if also problematized, Wall Street financial speculation depicted in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2013), and one that refuses to disavow the body of the observer in the processes of narrative construction and financial valorization. Unlike Scorsese's sophisticated use of computer-generated special effects for the purpose of reinforcing the illusion and allure of classical cinema's unobtrusiveness and hermetically sealed diegesis, *Sinister's* understanding of digitality refuses to permit such a disembodied mode of spectatorial engagement.

Speculation itself, therefore, becomes the common term that unites *Sinister's* economically and nationally allegorical tendencies, and in a manner that formally and aesthetically draws together the spatial components of Ellison's detective work through his surveillance of the visible image and the temporal components of the investigation through his failed attempt at narrative construction. Speculation, as *Sinister* shows, stands as the unifying conceptual intersection at which questions about the relationships between economy and culture, as well as historical events and their aesthetic representation, can and must be reconsidered and rearticulated within the political-economic, historical, and aesthetic moment of the present. This is because, as the film adamantly shows, speculation cannot be divorced or abstracted away from the laboring body that performs it, nor from the material body in which the abstract circulations of financial speculation must ultimately land. Hence, the film articulates speculation, in the form of Ellison's active spectatorship and forensic narrative reconstruction, as a concept in a way that necessarily synthesizes both the figurative sense of the speculative, as well as the concrete,



embodied, and laboring subject of speculation, and of a speculative economy. Moreover, the precise point of conceptual connective tissue that articulates these senses of speculation is the figural dimension of each of these speculative modes: the constellative production of a coherent narrative form out of fragments in the former case, and the capacity for the realization of fictitious financial instruments via the process of circulation and exchange in the latter.

Yet, as the final image and closing jump scare of the film remind us, we too are perceptually, affectively, and economically implicated, both as embodied spectators and as speculators. In doing so, the film once again collapses its speculative strata into a singular, temporarily unified affective figure, and moves beyond a representational practice of cognitive mapping and into the realm of what Steven Shaviro helpfully theorizes as affective mapping, by productively expressing the speculative relation between observers and images as a relation between the audience and the film.<sup>267</sup> This is also to say that the film's affective figuration of speculation also aspires to a transformation in the nature of what it means to think or cognize at all, and that the film's formal figuration itself speculatively posits a different notion of what thought can be—a different image of thought, as Deleuze and Guattari might say.<sup>268</sup> *Sinister* thereby reasserts, in the register of our own material and embodied affectivity, what it claims in the register of semantic representation and allegory: the circulation, virality, and concrete bodily implications of speculation as a mode of imagistic and economic abstraction. In doing so, it reminds us that speculation is, in the end, relentlessly and frighteningly *productive*.

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<sup>267</sup> Steven Shaviro. *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester, Zero Books, 2009), 2-3.

<sup>268</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994 [1991]), 37-8.

## 5 “DO YOU KNOW WHAT FEAR STANDS FOR?” RACIALIZED EMBODIMENT AND ABSTRACTION IN *NIGHTCRAWLER*

### 5.1 Introduction

The film *Nightcrawler* (2014, dir. Dan Gilroy) chronicles the success of Lou Bloom, a psychopathic unemployed thief who, over the course of the film, becomes a self-employed news videographer, before ultimately founding his own independent newsgathering business at the end of the film. Over the course of his ascent, Lou learns how to maximize the value of his footage by exploiting the ability of TV news to stoke viewers' fear by suggesting that they are constantly exposed to risk, coerces his primary client, a broadcaster, into a transactional sexual relationship with him, and employs a homeless day laborer as a personal assistant, whom he later murders for profit. The film's tone presents Lou's success at the end of the film as an acid indictment of neoliberal self-help culture, in which vacuous platitudes lead to success at the extreme expense of others, and in a manner that breaks along gendered and racial lines favoring white masculinity.

In the middle of the film, while out trolling for emergencies to be recorded, Lou asks his employee Rick: “Do you know what fear stands for? False evidence appearing real.” This is the answer that Lou provides to his own question, a question posed rather more at than to Rick. It is an answer that is suffused with irony at multiple levels, not least because Rick will indeed come to know fear when Lou murders him later in the film, and he will also come to stand for it in a semiotic sense, as a sign of false evidence, when Lou literally and figuratively stages that murder as a tragic byproduct of racialized criminality. For Lou is a nascent crime scene videographer, and *Nightcrawler* chronicles his rise from amateur obscurity to corporate enterprise, an enterprise that is built on Lou's ability to transform accident and crime scenes, through an

alchemical process of racialized aesthetics, into lucrative video packages. Lou's question and answer are also effectively the thesis statement of the didactic film, or at least one side of it, the other side being the image of Rick's fearful dying. In the film's posing of this referential and affective question, *Nightcrawler* also posits a critique of contemporary capitalism for which the question of the relationship between appearance and reality, and the role of certain bodies of falsified evidence in mediating that relationship, is central.

Yet Lou is not correct in asserting a simple binary dichotomy between appearance and reality, as the irony of his aphorism makes clear, for he is, in expressing this bit of pithy self-help wisdom, also engaging in his own act of fabrication, or in other words just making it up. The dense irony of Lou's maxim also registers in the way it is itself, rather circularly, a piece of false evidence presented as real to Rick. Moreover, as the film shows us, Lou makes his entire career as a successful crime scene videographer through the creation of "false evidence appearing real," not the least of which is Rick's own murder. Hence, there is yet another level of irony in the fact that Lou is giving Rick this bit of advice to assuage the latter's anxiety, whereas the film will show us later on just how the appearing-real of fabricated evidence does indeed generate real fear for Rick, which in turn, again rather circularly, appears to legitimate the verisimilitude of the fabricated evidence. Thus, in Lou's figure of speech fear has the simultaneous and paradoxical capacities to 1) 'be only' false evidence, that is, to be dismissively equated to something other than what it is, 2) to have the functional power to *appear* real, even though it is in fact only a fiction, and 3) indeed to really *be* real, even if spurred by false evidence. In short then, Lou's turn of phrase functions as a condensed linguistic figure for the film's overall critical and textual structure, insofar as it encapsulates the ways in which the film offers a formal critique of capitalism that parallels the three modalities of fear enumerated above. The illusion of fear as

‘only’ an imaginary sensation parallels processes of equivalent exchange; the legibility of fear’s capacity to index a symbolic state of affairs parallels the process of valorization; and fear’s ontological self-positing parallels the fabulation of speculative and financialized fictions.

Hence, what is at stake in *Nightcrawler* is a certain kind of *formal* critique of the contradictions of contemporary capitalism, and one that attends to the relational structures that are intrinsic to capitalism as a concrete, historically unfolding mode of economic organization. Moreover, as I have already suggested, there is also both a formal and a conceptual obverse to the film’s critical account of these structures, namely the film’s emphasis on racialized embodiment as immanent to each of these aspects of capitalism, about which more below. Yet what is distinctive about *Nightcrawler* as a critique of capitalism, and what it shares in common with the objects of the previous chapters, is its ability to present the ostensibly discrete realms of material commodity exchange and abstract financial speculation as both intimate and immanent to each other, rather than as disparate zones of economic activity. Central to the film’s own critical maneuver is a conceptualization of the valorization process that is supple enough to account for both forms of circulation. This model of valorization is essentially predicated, like the conspiracy diagram itself, on the reconfiguration of fragments into a holistic formal unity. As we shall see, this valorizing reconfiguration is also fundamentally imbricated with the concept of the transgression of boundaries, both in the spatial and topological sense of the term, as well as in its ethical sense. The structure of this chapter seeks to follow the film’s own structure in its critique of value, first by establishing the significance of exchange as a general conceptual dominant, before more closely interrogating first the process of valorization, and then the implications of this process for abstract, financialized circulation. The manner in which

racialized embodiment subtends each of these structures will, as in the film, become apparent over the course of the analysis.

## 5.2 Boundary Transgression and Spatial Reconfiguration

*Nightcrawler* is a film that traffics essentially in the transgression and reconfiguration of boundaries and limits. To begin with, the film's narrative is teleologically structured around a series of commodity exchanges of increasing scale, one that sketches the historical trajectory of capitalism in miniature. The film's narrative trajectory follows its protagonist, Lou Bloom, as he rises from a kind of primordial state of unemployment to become the president and CEO of his own video news production company in contemporary Los Angeles.<sup>269</sup> Indeed, the film so explicitly signals its structure as a kind of *bildungsroman* of unbridled neoliberal accumulation that it threatens, like other similar films such as *American Psycho* (2000, dir. Mary Harron), to be confused for an enthusiastic account of the kind of toxic and oppressive behavior it presents. Yet the bald literality of its narrative structure belies a more nuanced critical posture. Unlike contemporary post-crisis science-fiction films like, for example, *Snowpiercer* (2012, dir. Bong-Joon ho) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015, dir. George Miller), which deploy either allegorical and metaphorical means of representing class struggle under capitalism, or else an explicit rendering of capitalist oppression, *Nightcrawler* effects its critique through a critique of the concept of appearance as such, through its presentation of the processes of exchange,

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<sup>269</sup> Not to be confused with, but perhaps in a wry and inverted allusion to, Leo Bloom, the reluctant wizard of finance capital in Mel Brooks' *The Producers* (1968). Both Leo's Bialystok and Bloom and Lou's Video News Production are entertainment successes built on deceptive schemes, but where Leo Bloom's exploitation of the white supremacy of the German Nazi Party inadvertently leads to unwanted profits from an amused and self-conscious theatrical audience, Lou Bloom's exploitation of the television audience's unselfconscious white supremacist fears leads to carefully planned profitability and industrial growth, along with Lou Bloom's mirth, if not amusement.

accumulation, and valorization. As Fredric Jameson has noted of neoliberal finance capital, “we sense that the problems of ideological analysis are enormously simplified, and the ideologies are far more transparent....the motivations behind ideology no longer seem to need an elaborate machinery of decoding and hermeneutic reinterpretation...” He continues, moreover, to suggest that “This means an older vulgar Marxism may once again be more relevant to our situation than the newer models; but we also face more objective problems about money itself, which had seemed less relevant in the cold war period.”<sup>270</sup> If Jameson is correct in asserting that the representational quandaries posed by the emergence of finance capital as a dominant form of contemporary capitalism alter the critical stakes for critically representing such a system, then *Nightcrawler* can be approached as an attempt to interrogate the concept of *face-value*, as it applies to both the money-form and to representation as such. This also implies that what is significant about *Nightcrawler* is not so much that it attempts to map and critique contemporary capitalism, but rather that the film’s explicit representation of processes of exchange *qua* exchange short-circuits the allegorical distance between form and content, revealing a profound immanence ‘between’ them, or indeed a mode of *figurality* binding them together in their immanence. In other words, the money form’s capacity to exchange and circulate at face value implies an immanence between its form as money and its expressive capacity for exchange; its form is, in a way, also its content, like a promise or other performative speech act. *Nightcrawler*, I am suggesting, is also like money in this way, insofar as its ‘vulgar’ emphasis on exchange should be understood as an immanent critique of both exchange and representation as such. Thus, in response to the film’s apparent self-evidence and privileging of aesthetic surface over thematic depth, this chapter engages with it through a close reading of its superficial narrative

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<sup>270</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Culture and Finance Capital,” *Critical Inquiry* 24:1 (Autumn 1997): 247.

and formal elements, taking the film at face value in order to understand how the film itself complicates any such notion. After all, Jameson follows his own suggestion that a return to “vulgar Marxism” may prove useful for approaching finance capital with a formalist, if not also ‘vulgar,’ exegesis on the significance of the aesthetic fragment.<sup>271</sup> As I have been indicating, however, and as we shall see, the film’s explicit, face-value representation of processes of exchange also, like money itself, belies a more complex process of valorization that is effaced in the production of face-value.

Nightcrawler’s narrative is, as I have said, structured around a teleological series of commodity exchanges that reproduces the movement of capitalism, from primitive accumulation to incorporation. After a meditative credit sequence featuring images of the greater Los Angeles area at night, including an ironically revealing opening image of a billboard with a blank face, the film begins in earnest with a scene in which Lou attempts to break into a rail yard to steal scrap metal. The trunk of his Reagan-era Toyota Tercel hatchback is full of various objects, including several auto wheels and a bundle of copper wire. When a security guard approaches Lou to investigate, Lou attacks the man and steals his wristwatch. The film fittingly begins its narrative accumulation with this scene of primitive theft, an act of what David Harvey helpfully terms accumulation by dispossession. For Harvey, accumulation by dispossession, that is, by means of blatant theft or privatization, helps ameliorate the problem of the overaccumulation of capital by making new resources available at a minimal cost, assets which can then serve as targets for capital investment.<sup>272</sup> Crucially, the term signals that ‘primitive’ accumulation does not cease after some initial, primordial act of resource hoarding, but continues as an ongoing and

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 149.

structurally necessary component of capitalism's necessary reproductive expansion. Moreover, as Harvey explains, "The umbilical cord that ties together accumulation by dispossession and expanded reproduction is that given by finance capital and the institutions of credit, backed, as ever, by state powers."<sup>273</sup> In other words, and as we shall see in *Nightcrawler*, it is finance capital that functions to articulate dispossession to the expansion of capital.

Having also pilfered a portion of the chain-link fence itself, Lou drives to a junk yard while listening to talk radio commentators describe the economic downturn and decay foreclosing and unemployment, one of them hawking an instructional book for would-be investors. Lou takes his stolen goods to a junkyard, where he ineffectively attempts to negotiate the price of the metals with the yard manager, ultimately accepting a price he decries as "below market value." The various metals, priced and sold by the pound, are in the most literal sense, commodities being taken to market by Lou. Lou asks the manager for a job, but the man refuses to hire a thief. On his way home from the junkyard, Lou drives by a traffic accident in which police are attempting to rescue a woman from a burning car. Lou observes a crew of cameramen recording the incident and notices the expensive-looking camera equipment in their van. He asks for a job, but is again refused. The next day, having seen the incident he witnessed on the local news, Lou steals an expensive racing bicycle and takes it to a pawn shop where he trades it for store credit, which he in turn exchanges for a camcorder and a police scanner. This transaction expands the film's narrative as well as its economic scope, as Lou comes into possession of the

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 152.



means of video production, which effectively enables him to transition from a largely 'primitive' mode of accumulation by dispossession to a properly capitalist mode of economic enterprise.<sup>274</sup>

Although untrained and unskilled, Lou begins driving to crime and accident scenes and recording the events. He begins selling his recordings to a local news station, thereby making a return on his initial investment and continuing his humble accumulation of capital. The station's head producer, Nina, encourages Lou to invest in nicer video equipment, which he does. Lou soon becomes a properly capitalist entrepreneur when he hires an employee, Rick, who he pays in cash below minimum wage, and continues accumulating capital by selling videos of graphic and violent crime scenes for money. Lou trades in his Tercel for a new sports car, outfits the car with high-tech recording, police-scanning, and GPS technology, and acquires a laptop computer for mobile video editing and upload. These technologies enable him to reach crime scenes faster, and to edit and upload his footage more efficiently. He coercively negotiates into a privileged professional, and explicitly transactional, sexual relationship with Nina, in which he promises to continue delivering valuable footage to her in exchange for more money and sexual favors. The speed of both his technology and his vehicle enable him to reach the scene of a triple homicide before the police can arrive, allowing him unfettered access to the crime scene. He sells the footage for \$15,000 by explicitly leveraging its exclusivity and the network's need to negotiate (during sweeps week) for the highest price possible. After artificially staging and recording a shootout and car chase between police and the pair of alleged triple-murderers, in which Rick is himself murdered and Lou is directly responsible for it, Lou earns enough money selling the

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<sup>274</sup> Although of course Lou's entire operation is predicated on extracting exchange-value from those suffering accidents and misfortune, often without their consent, which amounts to a continuation of accumulation by dispossession through the capitalist phase of the film.

footage to hire more employees and purchase two news vans, thereby moving into corporate video news production.

As this description indicates, the scale of *Nightcrawler*'s narrative expands steadily over the course of its running time, as though the entire film performs a steady zoom out from the intimate details of commodity exchange to accumulation and investment at a corporate level, and ultimately to the financialized circulation of representations of social risk embodied in the videos themselves. The film's extremely matter-of-fact presentation of these various scenes of exchange and accumulation constitute this narrative teleology in which, to paraphrase and adapt Marx's famous phrase, the film begins with a theft and a sale, and ends with a purchase and the exploitation of labor through wage employment. In this sense, the film dramatizes the transformation of material objects into financial liquidity: Marx's general formula for capital as a kind of narrative destiny. Moreover, the movement of exchange between commodity objects—a bicycle for store credit for a video camera for capital, for example—establishes the ontic transgression of the commodity form as the pulsion propelling the movement across economic and social scale itself, from primitive accumulation to corporate business. As Lou's enterprise expands in terms of its physical and geographical scale, it also simultaneously unfurls a compressed historical account of the history of capitalism.

By yoking the individual, molecular exchange to the molar, systemic, historical movement of capitalism, the film effectively and critically articulates the immanence of historical time to each individuated movement of exchange. Since the original stolen goods are exchanged for camera equipment, which produces images which are in turn exchanged for cash, which is in turn used to purchase labor power, and so on until the end of the film, *Nightcrawler*'s narrative structure encourages us to think of these two poles of capitalism—the originary and

dispossessive, and the corporate and impersonal—as existing on an immanent continuum of relative equivalence. Likewise, the film’s movement across geographic scale, as Lou’s physical speed and communicative reach expand to cover the entire metro L.A. area, articulates his initial, minor transgressions such as crossing police tape, to the larger ones of orchestrating the spectacularly violent shootout and car chase near the end of the film. If we take exchange in *Nightcrawler* to be a conceptual figure, then, it is one that operates across both temporal and spatial dimensions, and indeed connects these dimensions together into an interlinked representational and critical matrix.

Alongside this spatio-historical movement, Lou himself transforms from an inept negotiator who is pejoratively dismissed as an unemployable thief, to a savvy, if psychopathic, manipulator whose transparent regurgitation of entrepreneurial self-help manual bullet points *a la American Psycho* is equal parts black comedy in its manifest absurdity and distressingly effective in its successful practice. By the film’s end Lou is, importantly, no less a thief, but this theft has become socially legitimized as business. His social status is thereby reconfigured, as the same qualities that made him unemployable at the film’s beginning (a certain *connivance*) become ‘assets’ at the film’s end, when his lack of concern for others makes him an ideal entrepreneur, now responsible for the hiring and firing of others. In this way Lou represents the model neoliberal citizen who bootstraps himself from abject joblessness into independent wealth and passive income through the sheer power of gumption, grit, and self-interest. What is elided, of course, in such a description is the thoroughgoing violence that undergirds Lou’s success at every stage, and which an interpretation of the film that would focus primarily on the neoliberal rhetoric of self-reliance cannot effectively address. In other words, what remains to be explained

is just precisely how the neoliberal magic trick of wealth creation is accomplished, and more importantly, what (and who) has to be disavowed in order for such a transformation to occur.

Commodity exchange is the film's dominant conceptual figure, but the narrative and affective core of these transformative exchanges consists in Lou's filming of crime and accident scenes, which he sells for increasingly large sums of money. Thus, in addition to dramatizing exchanges between objects and objects, as well as between images and money, the film also dramatizes exchanges between 'events' and the videographic apparatus that captures them, and in the process valorizes them through an aesthetically violent reordering of space.<sup>275</sup> What makes *Nightcrawler*'s literalization of the exchange process more than an otherwise straightforward account of the perils of exploitation is this consideration of the process of valorization itself. Moreover, the film's rendering of the process of valorization as a process of aesthetic and spatial reconfiguration echoes, with disarming fidelity, how it has been theorized by Lindon Barrett. Barrett's theorization of value is grounded essentially in the relationship between valorization and racialization, about which more below, but to continue to track the film's critical trajectory I wish to approach Barrett first from the vantage point of reconfiguration. Barrett conceptualizes value in terms of differential boundaries, stating that "Limits and boundaries prove the "Essential" matter of value, because they delineate the point of, and therefore, instantiate the need for the arbitration undertaken by value in the first place. Limits and boundaries prove points of reckoning and ambivalence at which difference is formally reiterated or reconstituted by the

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<sup>275</sup> Though strictly speaking, it may be more accurate to refer to these accident scenes, following Grant Farred, as 'pseudo-events.' See Grant Farred, *In Motion, at Rest: The Event of the Athletic Body* (Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 3.

operations of value.”<sup>276</sup> Barrett argues that the differentiation inherent in value’s operation effects a kind of violence, through the forcible reconfiguration of existing forms:

In short, violence, the forcible disrupting and altering of Otherwise established forms, betrays the original instance of all value. First, value is an impeachment of the Other, the willful expenditure of the Other in an imposing production of the self. The perspective of the Other thus reveals the relativities of value as ratios of violence; the discovery of value from the perspectives of the Other reveals the exorbitant foundations and overdeterminations of value. Violence—to emphasize the point, is the opening that allows value. It remains the original mechanism by means of which valuation initiates, then resists, change....Always inherent in value is the trace of an original, violent expenditure. Value is violence, and, more to the point, value is violence disguised or dis-figured.<sup>277</sup>

Barrett anticipates Harvey in identifying a dispossessive violence at the heart of all instances of valorization, though for Barrett the concealment of violence by value is intrinsic to the structure of value itself, rather than only an outcome of the process of exchange. As Barrett explains, value appears in two modes: value as force, and value as form. In the rendering visible of the value *form*, the violent force inherent in its construction is displaced and “disguised.” This leads Barrett to a vividly cinematic metaphor for value as both an object brought into focus by a camera, and paradoxically also as the hand that focuses the image to bring the object into view:

In order to imagine this perplexity more completely, conjure a surreal television or movie camera that, by focusing on the background, distorts images in the foreground of its purview, and vice versa, as do all cameras. The coming into focus of an object pushes out of focus many Other objects. Imagine further the true agency of this flux as an invisible hand indistinguishable from its delicate movements that create the changes in focus. If, further, this camera-hand could, after each manipulation, embody itself as the object brought into focus, it would be the equivalent of value....In short, this camera-hand sees the work of seeing the work of seeing the work of seeing itself.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

Although Barrett's conception of the valorization process, with its mise-en-abyme of erasures of the Other in the operations of difference, is most clearly in theoretical debt to Derrida, Barrett's account of valorization as a process of becoming in which violent, disfiguring forces at once produce stable gestaltic forms, while disappearing themselves in the process of value production to remain only immanent to those forms, also sounds a distinctly Deleuzo-Guattarian theoretical note. Without arrogating to Deleuze and Guattari (or to Derrida, for that matter) Barrett's distinctive theory of valorization, I do wish to stress the continuity between the way Barrett theorizes value and the way Deleuze, in a more general sense, conceives of the relationship between molecular forces and molar forms as a process of unending de- and reterritorializations, a process of which the respirations of capital are exemplary. As the Introduction explained, in *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari characterize the general formula for capital, M-C-M, as a series of transubstantiations of the abstract into the concrete, and the virtual into the actual, and vice versa. To the extent that capitalism is representational, it is a figural, rather than semiotic regime of representation.<sup>279</sup> Barrett's account of valorization, in which the object of value is dialectically immanent to the subject for which value exists, and in which the process of differentiation is at the core of the reification of the subject-object relation, effects an inversion of Hegelian self-consciousness that parallels Whitehead's reversal of Kant. For Barrett, subjectivity, like value, emerges as the illusory consequence of a process of violent differentiation and expulsion without any reintegration, rather than any process of rational self-mediation or self-reflection. Likewise, Whitehead's reversal places aesthetic perception ahead of the organization of the rational subject who would perceive the objective world. Taken in tandem, however, Barrett reveals the distressing possibility that Whiteheadian beauty might be

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<sup>279</sup> See p. 13.

more properly understood as a mode of violence upon which the ‘superject’ is essentially founded.

In *Nightcrawler*, the increasingly violent aesthetic reconfigurations of space, from domestic space to geographic and social space, is precisely what valorizes Lou’s footage. Early in Lou’s career as a videographer, he sneaks across police tape into a crime scene (itself a transparent example of boundary transgression), and into a home where a violent robbery has been reported. Lou rearranges family photos on the refrigerator, moving them closer to bullet holes from the robbery, effectively producing a more affectively powerful and therefore monetarily valuable piece of footage for the station (fig. 5.1).



Figure 5.1 *Nightcrawler*

This valorizing operation is explicitly constituted by a semiotically violent spatial reordering of pictorial elements at the crime scene that produces a more semantically charged and saleable narrative; a kind of inverted mirror image of Kracauer’s view of the utopian potential of

photography—the foreclosure, rather than disclosure, of an unredeemed material reality, albeit one that (as we shall see) is materially productive on its own terms. Here, and elsewhere in the film, the logic of the conspiracy diagram is schematically immanent to the aesthetic process of valorization, insofar as the spatial reconfiguration of visual fragments functions to produce a temporally oriented narrative figure making claims to truth, and one thoroughly suffused with affective and financial investment. Although the conspiracy wall as such is never literalized in the film, its diagrammatic function is present everywhere in the aesthetic reconfiguration of fragments, whether photos or bodies, into figures of ‘truth’ in the service of the production of speculative value. In doing so, the film critically frames valorization itself as a kind of aesthetic violence and conspiratorial speculation.

After rearranging the photos, the film cuts directly to the television production studio where Lou and Nina are reviewing the footage. On video, Lou turns from the fridge to capture the victims on video as they are interviewed by the police, recording the interview through a bullet-riddled window, while Nina effusively praises the quality of the footage (fig. 5.2).





Figure 5.2 *Nightcrawler*

This second image in particular, of the family of victims being interviewed by police, while being filmed through bullet holes in transparent glass, effectively poses the paradox of value as Barrett describes it: value as simultaneously both an essential, objective property and as a formal process of schematic ordering that produces the object as a coherent and sensible form for the viewing subject. What appears as a more or less transparent document of an event unfolding effaces the labor of aesthetic reconfiguration necessary to produce such a transparent image in the first place, although this violent re-ordering does not occur without leaving a trace, here figured by the bullet hole in the glass as a kind of Lacanian absence as it were, a literal hole in the transparent symbolic matrix that prevents its completely smooth functioning. Indeed, later in the film Lou explains to Nina that he is “focusing on framing. A proper frame not only draws the eye into a picture, but keeps it there longer, dissolving the barrier between the subject and the outside of the frame.” Lou’s aesthetic sensibility is thus strongly linked to the transgressive

dissolution of spatial (as well as social and subjective) boundaries, while the notion of framing evokes re-ordering and a visual, spatialized sense of forcible reconfiguration that valorizes the visual field. Although Lou's ersatz film theory differs from Barrett (as well as Deleuze and Whitehead) insofar as it posits the content of the image and the image's "outside" as pre-existing, given categories that are blurred in aesthetic experience, rather than categories that are formed out of precisely such a primordially formative mo(ve)ment, it nevertheless asserts the permeability of the boundary between subjects and objects as an essential component of both aesthetic experience and the production of value.

Throughout the remainder of the film, this pattern of violent aesthetic reconfiguration continues and itself expands in scale. Lou moves a dead body at the scene of a car accident to produce a more affectively engaging image, then sabotages a competitor's van in order to produce a subsequent traffic accident, which he also records and sells to the station. Finally, Lou follows a pair of alleged murderers to a restaurant in a high-traffic neighborhood before reporting them to the police and warning (without evidence) that they are armed, thereby artificially staging a violent confrontation in order to create more lucrative footage during Sweeps Week. Over and over, value is not only linked inextricably to violence, but is produced through an increasingly violent process of spatial manipulation, one that begins in semiotic terms with the reconfiguration of photographs of people, and ends in visceral and socio-geographical terms with the reconfiguration and liquidation of human bodies, particularly bodies that are racialized as nonwhite by the news station, into videographic value. With icy and distanced literality, the film formally reproduces the logic of Marx's theory of exchange-value, in which "the physical body of commodity B becomes a mirror for the value of commodity A." The perceived value of each piece of footage is reflected in, and constituted in part by, the suffering physical bodies of the

individuals for which the moving image itself functions as equivalent, and which are forcibly impressed into the service of a TV news economy epitomized by a fellow videographer's cynical remark that "if it bleeds it leads."

Indeed, the rigorously teleological narrative movement of the film through this series of exchanges and expansions suggests that Lou's images are, even if separated chronologically, in an immanent relation to each other insofar as they are presented as mutually fungible. That is to say, if Lou's images (here taken broadly to comprise all of Lou's aesthetic constructions, from videotape to racialized social space) are figural in the sense that they are comprised of fragments that have been aesthetically reconfigured to compose a unified form, they are also figural in the sense that they mutually reinforce each other through the functions of prefiguring and fulfillment. At the smallest scale, Lou's aesthetically reconfigured crime scene videos are used to support a larger social narrative about the threat posed by racial minorities transgressively encroaching on private spaces tacitly designated as white. To the extent that these images are rendered both valuable and as authentically documentary through Lou's creative process of aesthetic figuration, they also function to reconfigure social space in ways that reinforce the racial differences subtending the news packages themselves. Lou's videos thus both prefigure and fulfill the sociogeographic organization of Los Angeles into racialized neighborhoods crisscrossed by the color line.

### **5.3 Valorization and Racialization**

Importantly, both for Barrett and for *Nightcrawler*, the violence that undergirds the value form is of a specifically racialized nature. As Barrett explains, a differentiating function is necessary in order to distinguish subjects from objects, and objects from each other, both of which are prerequisites for the emergence of commodity exchange and the money form—there

must be different, if potentially equivalent, objects in order for exchange to be possible in the first place. For Barrett, however, this differentiating function is inextricably tied, both structurally and within the history of the West, to race, which Barrett speculates may well be “the preeminent “New World” value,” insofar as it “amounts to a series of actions and transactions never represented as such, but represented as formal essences instead.”<sup>280</sup> Barrett looks to the emergence of the transatlantic slave trade as the historically originary event of differentiating violence establishing the distinction and disequilibrium between white subjectivity and the disavowed Otherness of blackness.<sup>281</sup> Barrett’s position echoes that of Hortense Spillers who writes, regarding the objectification of captive slave’s body, that it “brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for *value* [emphasis in original] so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless.”<sup>282</sup> For Spillers, famously, this split between white subjectivity and black objectivity of the flesh, which is here grounded in the operation of black flesh as money, forms the grounding opposition upon which the American socio-symbolic order is fundamentally founded, in what Stephen Best, describing the American slave’s assumption of the money form, has termed “its unique scandal of value.”<sup>283</sup>

The profound “interweaving” of race and value is not limited, however, merely to the money form or to the emergence of value as a conceptual and practical tool. As Ian Baucom argues, the transatlantic slave trade was, and is, an essential component of the emergence of

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<sup>280</sup> Barrett, *Blackness and Value*, 55.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>282</sup> Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer, 1987): 68.

<sup>283</sup> Stephen Best, *The Fugitive’s Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 2.

capitalism over the ‘Long Twentieth Century.’ If Arrighi innovatively pointed out how the history of capitalism is marked by alternating cycles respectively dominated by commodity production and speculative financialization, Baucom shows just how fundamental the transatlantic slave trade, particularly in its innovation of and reliance upon speculative credit and insurance contracts, was to the emergence of the *longue durée* of capitalism.<sup>284</sup> Rather than emerging at a chronologically late date, Baucom follows Arrighi (and Harvey) in asserting that financialization is not only an essential component of capitalism from its outset, but also that it is historically grounded in the way the credit system developed to allow slave traders to buy and sell black bodies using credit, which in turn transformed black flesh not only into money, but into abstract speculative value in the form of fictitious capital. As Baucom explains, the fungibility of slaves not only as commodities, but as loans among participants in the slave trade “is at once obscene and vital to understanding the full capital logic of the slave trade, to coming to terms with what it means for this trade to have found a way to treat human beings not only as if they were a type of commodity but as a flexible, negotiable, transactable form of money.”<sup>285</sup> It is on this basis that Baucom later claims, after quoting at length Jameson’s essay “Culture and Finance Capital,” that

Jameson is here describing the “today.” As he indicates, however—and as the utter appositeness of this description not only to the “situation in which we find ourselves today but to the eighteenth-century situation I have sketched confirms—he might equally, and indeed *is* equally, describing a yesterday this today replicates. At the heart of that yesterday-constellating-today is the separation of value from the concrete, the emergence of speculation as a hegemonic enterprise and of speculative forms as the bases for and objects of a new form of knowledge and power, and the global circulation of what, paraphrasing Derrida, he calls “specters of value.”<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 32.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-2.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 143-4.

As this quotation indicates, Baucom's assertion of an historical immanence between the eighteenth-century emergence of both finance capital and what he calls the "speculative culture," and the contemporary resurgence, since the early 1970s, of finance as an increasingly dominant organizational principle in the global economy, is grounded as much in a Benjaminian conception of time as an accumulation of wreckage as it is in Arrighi's circular or spiral model of a historical time that replicates the rhythms of commodity exchange.<sup>287</sup> Baucom's "yesterday-constellating-today" is a figural mode of temporality, one predicated on immanence and non-linear isometry, rather than chronological development regulated by strict linear causality. In this respect, Baucom's account of the historical resonance between our own contemporary moment and that of the slave ship *Zong* not only reverberates with Auerbach's theory of figural time, but demands that any account of contemporary "speculative culture" come to grips with the subtending role of racial blackness in the grounding of that culture.

Hence *Nightcrawler*, like Barrett's account of valorization and like Baucom's account of financialization, also posits the raced body as being transformed into a kind of speculative form of money, yet there are two key differences that must be addressed at this point. Firstly, *Nightcrawler* deals essentially with the contemporary, neoliberal regime of speculative capitalism, rather than with the historical moment of slavery as such. As the above discussion of Baucom's deployment of Benjamin and Arrighi suggests, the chronological disjunction between the temporal moments of contemporary neoliberal finance capital and eighteenth-century transatlantic finance capital does not necessarily obviate the formal-historical relation between them. Indeed, in a properly Benjaminian mode of understanding, the chronological gap may well

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 24.

serve to make possible the flash of recognizability necessary for historical understanding. Nevertheless, there is a key difference between the modes of subjectivity (or lack thereof) ascribed to the racialized body under these two subjective regimes. As Saidiya Hartman explains, the captive body's access to subjectivity is fundamentally, if ambiguously, transformed by the nominal end of slavery. Whereas the body of the slave amounts to no more than Spillersian 'flesh,' that is, objective matter that is only regarded by slaveholding society as minimally sensate, the freed slave becomes encumbered and re-fettered by new mandates of social and personal responsibility as a consequence of gaining access to the guise of formal equality.<sup>288</sup>

In the same way, perhaps, that Baucom and Arrighi argue for an historical homology between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, it may be worth speculating on the possibility of a similar resonance between the nineteenth-century encumbrance of personal responsibility as a means of reinstating social domination, and the emergence of neoliberal doctrines of self-making. Such a resonance plays out in *Nightcrawler* in the relationship between Lou and his employee Rick, which is entirely organized around Lou's delivery of the platitudes of neoliberal self-help and entrepreneurial rhetoric to his employee, while in fact using these vacuous principles as a mechanism of absolute exploitation, up to and including bodily liquidation. Lou's highly formalized form of speech and comportment, which the film suggests he has learned by taking an online business course, is rich with platitudes and riddled with the clichéd jargon of the neoliberal economy. During Rick's "interview," which takes place at a diner, Lou evasively describes the job as "a fine opportunity for some lucky someone," and appears to take scrupulous notes regarding Rick's answers. After suggesting that the job is in fact an unpaid internship, Lou

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<sup>288</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 155-24.

explains that he is “giving [Rick] a chance to explore career options and get insight into my organization,” an organization which is, at this point in the film, entirely fictitious since Lou is a lone freelancer (they eventually settle on \$30 cash, per night’s work). Indeed, Lou presents himself during and after the interview as an accomplished business owner, when in fact he himself has only just begun the trade and has scarcely more experience at it than Rick does. The authority that Lou assumes through formalized, even stilted speech effectuates the exploitation of Rick’s labor, as the latter appears to take Lou’s demeanor at face value. Later in the film, Rick is navigating Lou’s route to a location when Lou asks if Rick has read his “traffic memo,” which quickly becomes a conversation about Rick’s impending “performance review.” When Rick asks for a pay raise, Lou responds by asserting confidently that “trying to leverage your salary in this economic environment is near impossible,” brushing off Rick’s request despite the latter’s plea that he is sleeping in a garage, not to mention the fact that Lou will use Rick’s death to leverage his own financial value later in the film. Lou consistently deploys the language of neoliberal entrepreneurship (“Sell yourself!”) in conversation with Rick in order to create the appearance, on the surface, of formal equality between them, and of Rick’s freedom and independence to negotiate for himself, while in fact leveraging this formal equality to burden Rick with responsibility, to minimize Rick’s remuneration, and eventually to frame Rick as responsible for his own murder.

Secondly, the discussion of race in *Nightcrawler* is vexed to some degree by what might be called a structuring decentering of racial blackness as such in the film.<sup>289</sup> The only character that the film posits as racially black, or we might say, is assigned by the cinematic narration what

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<sup>289</sup> On the usage of “racial blackness” as a designation, see Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 259fn1.



Fanon calls the “racial epidermal schema” of optically perceptible blackness, is the narratively peripheral police detective who investigates Lou in the second half of the film, and who sees through his dissembling account of the pivotal triple murder he records.<sup>290</sup> Indeed, Rick’s racial identity is also complicated by the fact that the film carefully refuses to assign him, or allow the viewer to assign to him, any racial categorization other than ambiguously nonwhite, opting instead to evoke a plurality of diverse racial signifiers and stereotypes. His background as a professional landscaper prior to his employment by Lou raises the specter of the stereotype of latinx day laborers, while the circulation of video of his murder evokes what Tommy J. Curry has termed, in the wake of the murder of Mike Brown and in explicit reference to the contemporary proliferation of videos of young black men’s murders by authority figures, the genre of “black male death and dying.”<sup>291</sup> Moreover, the choice the British-Pakistani actor Riz Ahmed in the role in turn evokes yet another, more global and postcolonial scale of racialization. One way of approaching this quandary is to interpret the film’s complex negotiation of racial politics as a kind of serialized dialectical synthesis of local-Angelino, the national-American, and the global-transnational geosocial scales across which racial differentiation occurs. Under such an interpretation, Rick functions to visualize the transcendental intersection of these three scales of racialization, and in the process critically linking the local cash-for-labor economy to the distinctively American history of blackness as speculative capital, and on to global flows of speculative finance capital.

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<sup>290</sup> See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967 [1952]), 112.

<sup>291</sup> See Tommy J. Curry, “Michael Brown and the Need for a Genre Study of Black Male Death and Dying,” Supplement, *Theory and Event* 17, no. 3 (2014): n.p., <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/559369>.

Despite whatever hermeneutic value or political purchase such an interpretation might have, however, this is not the path this analysis chooses to take, at least not directly. Rather, I would suggest that the complex and racial signification at work in the characterization of Rick functions first to signify racialization in a more general sense, as a schematic construct that is predicated on racial blackness as the founding articulation of race and value *per* Barrett. Instead of figuring Rick according to any specific “racial epidermal schema,” the film’s calculated ambiguity turns such schematizing around on itself, making visible the process of schematization itself, but only as a necessary, yet paradoxically invisible, process of ordering. Through this condensation and displacement of differentiated racial signifiers, the film’s characterization of Rick simultaneously racializes him, and disavows the subtending function of racial blackness in the construction of an ontology and epistemology of whiteness that is capable of perceiving and receiving Rick as a raced individual at all.

Along these lines, Jared Sexton helps to clarify these schematic issues by modifying Lyotard’s assertion in *Libidinal Economy* that “capital cannot form a body,” by claiming that “whiteness cannot form a body.”<sup>292</sup> In his original formulation, Lyotard provocatively parallels the desire for conceptual closure across Marx’s oeuvre to the productivity of capital as a system always in excess of itself, stating that

...theoretical discourse ceases to be presented according to its closure even though this is what it *seeks* [emphasis in original]. What Marx perceives as failure, suffering (and maybe even lives through as resentment) is the mark on his work of a situation which is precisely the same as that of capital, and which gives rise to a strange success as much as to an awful misery: the work cannot *form a body* [emphasis in original], just as capital cannot form a body.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 192-3.

<sup>293</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Athlone Press, 1993 [1974]), 102.

For Lyotard the desire for closure, for the conceptual unity of a coherent body, both in terms of Marx's body of work and in terms of capitalism's structural fluidity, manifests as a double movement:

And this absence of organic, 'artistic' unity gives rise to two divergent movements always associated with a single vertigo: a movement of flight, of plunging into the bodiless, and thus of continual invention, of expansive additions or affirmation of new pieces (statements, but elsewhere musics, techniques, ethics) to the insane patchwork – a movement of *tension* [emphasis in original]. And a movement of institution of an organism, of an organization and of organs of totalization and unification – a movement of reason. Both kinds of movements are there, effects as force in the *non-finito* [emphasis in original] of the work just as in that of capitalism.<sup>294</sup>

In this remarkable passage, Lyotard turns Marx upside down by suggesting that the desire that animates Marx's attempt to theoretically survey the vast scale of capitalism's field of operations, this "movement of reason," is the same motive force animating capitalism's vertiginous expansion in excess of its own boundaries. Moreover, for Lyotard this "movement of reason" is always a double movement: on the one hand toward closure, boundary, and body, and on the other toward expansion, transgression, and "the *non-finito*." Crucially, the internal combustion that animates the double movement, of capital and its critique, is the speculative application of reason itself. Speculative reason paradoxically strives both to delimit, bound, and totalize, as well as to expand, surpass, and invent. In this respect, as Sexton notes, Lyotard comes close to endorsing the Deleuzo-Guattarian account of capitalism as a churning process of de- and reterritorializations that constantly forms and deforms the structures it creates and subjects to critique.

For Sexton, however, the key analytical content of Lyotard's comparison between Marx and capitalism lies in the application of Lyotard's speculative model to the process of

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

racialization. For Sexton, whiteness cannot ‘form a body’ for itself, but its desire for totalization and finality motivates it to “manufacture a particular type of delimited body” in order to achieve mastery over the “traumatically uncategorized, incoherent experience” that Sexton terms “the event of miscegenation.”<sup>295</sup> Thus, the invention of a kind of violently restricted racialized body functions as a necessary panacea for the fundamental paradox of speculative reason itself.

Importantly for Sexton, his concept of “the event of miscegenation” does not describe interracial sex acts or the existence of interracial individuals as such, but rather stands as a figure for “an abject scene of excessive passion and violent upheaval operating beyond or beneath the semblance of racialized order....It is a trauma wrought by...the knowledge that categories of racial difference obtain only in the force of convention, a pernicious and deadly cover story for the formation of power.”<sup>296</sup> Hence, the speculative formation of discrete, bounded, racialized bodies is undergirded by the conceptual threat of a vertiginous, traumatically inchoate ontological status, a kind of negative version of Deleuze’s concept of the ‘univocity of Being.’ Moreover, it is these bodies that bear the burden of speculative reason’s failure to adequately address its own fundamental concerns.

Thus, whatever analytical purchase the specific interpretation of *Nightcrawler*’s treatment of race sketched above, or any other such interpretation for that matter, may have, it is itself undergirded by this complex process of racialization, which is analogous to Barrett’s account of the process of valorization as a general form of the way in which forms, or bodies, are speculatively produced and subsequently reified into essential and eternal objects. Any particular interpretation of the film’s racial politics must first contend with the process of racialization

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<sup>295</sup> Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 193.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 193-4.

itself, and not only because it is ontologically prior to any ideological categories of racial identity, but also because the film itself emphasizes the speculative and processual manner through which such categories come about. It is in this sense that I claim that the film is far more concerned with the process of racialization than with the ideologically molar outcome of that process, namely white supremacist racism, which can be pessimistically predicted in advance.

As I have suggested above, Lou's practice of violent aesthetic reconfiguration extends across a series of scales, from the intimately photographic to the broadly social and geographic. Ultimately, these figural exchanges reach their apotheosis in the liquidation of Rick to the racist spectacle of value he is orchestrating for Sweeps Week. In this culminating event of violent valorization, Lou tells Rick to get a shot of a presumably dead criminal, but the man is still alive and fatally shoots Rick. The next scene, in which Lou shows the footage of the chase and shootings to an awestruck Nina, constitutes the film's affective and formal apogee. As Lou and Nina watch the footage, they are framed on either side by a monitor that sits between them (fig. 5.3).



Figure 5.3 *Nightcrawler*

Ethereal choral music plays nondiegetically as they watch Rick's dying moments, pausing the video on a still image of Rick's near-death return of the gaze into Lou's, and *Nightcrawler's*, camera. Lou and Nina turn to face each other, now with only Rick's face between them, as Nina softly remarks: "I'm floored. It's amazing....I mean, just amazing....I want it, obviously" (fig. 5.4).



Figure 5.4 *Nightcrawler*

“How much do you want it?” Lou replies. “You tell me,” Nina retorts, before *Nightcrawler* cuts away from them. In this climactic moment, the film articulates the spatial and racialized nature of value to an eroticization of price arbitration, as well as to the power of value to produce reality-effects on the basis of an aesthetic fiction. If previously in the film Lou’s coercive approach to establishing a sexual, if not romantic, relationship with Nina is treated as deeply disturbing evidence of Lou’s psychopathic drive towards accumulation and profit, Nina’s surprising reversal, and indeed her erotically charged *sotto voce* praise for Lou’s work transforms what was previously only a formally existing relationship into an evidently authentic and ‘real,’ actualized one, a relationship imbued with affective content. Thus, the film stages a visual exchange between Lou and Nina in the horizontal dimension, in which the two, visually separated by the frame, become one. What were isolated fragments in only a nominal relation to each other have become reconfigured into a new figure. That Nina’s erotic desire is ambiguously

directed both at Lou and also at the gruesome footage behind them yokes together the actualizing powers of speculative value, with respect both to the news event and to Nina's desire. This exchange transfers the weight of the moral revulsion of Nina's coercion from the sexual relationship to finance capital as such, with the former receiving an equally disturbing actualization as compensation for its displacement of violent harm and exposure to risk. In addition to the exchange the film stages on the horizontal plane, it also stages an exchange on the three-dimensional plane of depth between these spectatorial and profilmic ontologies, in which the violence of Rick's murder visually and ontologically subtends the erotic union on Nina and Lou. As in *Sinister*, the temporary formal-aesthetic collapse of ontological planes allows the affective exchange to occur.

#### **5.4 Financialization and the Derivative Form**

This figural image also functions to articulate the film's broader treatment of the relationship between the production and circulation of commodified images of racialized suffering, and in doing so it instructively indicates how to understand the speculative dimension of news footage in the film as a whole. In addition to the exchanges that take place between Lou and the television station, and between the suffering body and the camera that records it, Lou's sale of those violent images to the station, and their economic and social circulation around the Los Angeles broadcast area, elevates them into a textual and financialized economy organized by speculative value and fictitious capital. Bloom's videos are productive of a kind of additional, surplus, speculative value predicated not so much on the production of images, but on their circulation of representations of social risk. They are, in this sense, *derivatives*. As Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee have argued, financialization is distinguished from industrial capital by the displacement of production by circulation as the dominant principle shaping global



economic flows of capital.<sup>297</sup> In the film, the significance of circulation is nowhere more evident than in the meditative establishing shots and interstitial images of seemingly uninhabited landscapes and urban spaces situated between scenes of dialogue and action. These images, which not only open and close the film, but also permeate it, often depict cell towers against the backdrops of the hazy sky and the sprawling urban cityscape (fig. 5.5).

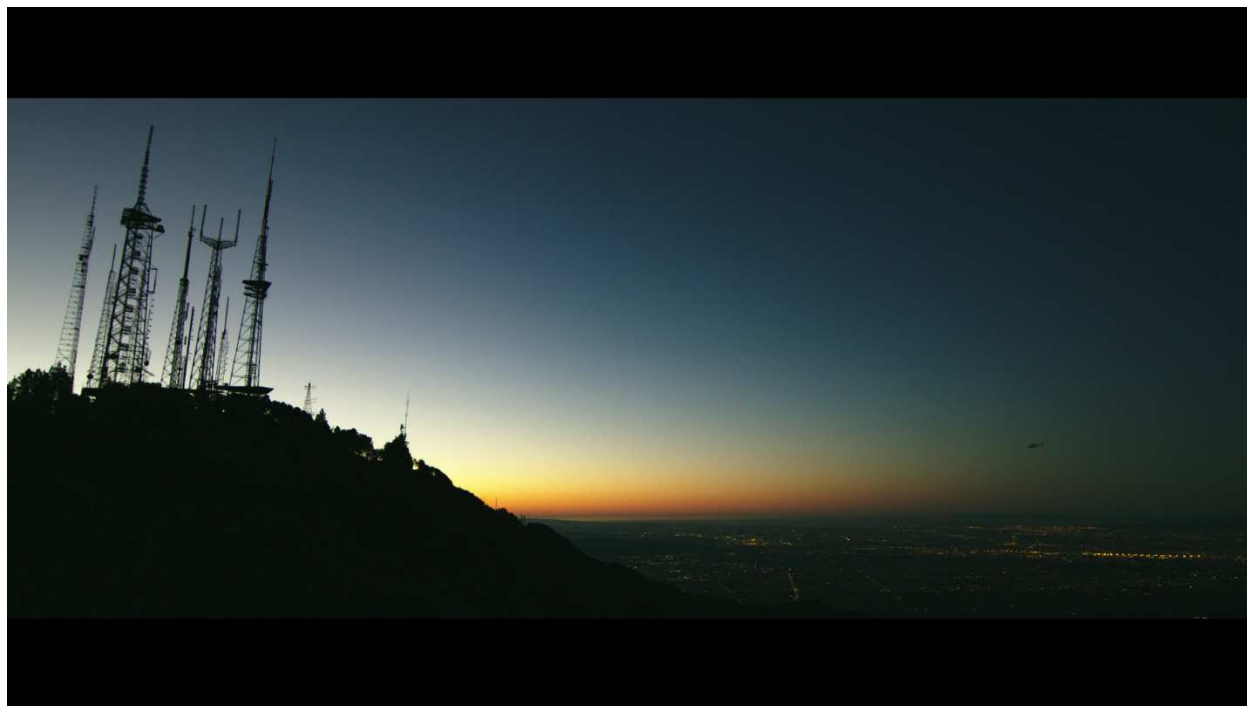


Figure 5.5 *Nightcrawler*

Fredric Jameson describes in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* how communications and information technologies, precisely in their function of economic reproduction, rather than production as such, allegorically figure the transformation of the object world into informatic capital within the globalized, financialized network of the capitalist world-system.<sup>298</sup> Here, it is not only the

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<sup>297</sup> Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 9.

<sup>298</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1992), 13.

presence of these images but their structural role as superficially empty spaces, a role supported by their sparse visual composition, that signals the significance of that which is not explicitly visualized: the transmission of digital information-capital itself. These images depict a material world saturated with an aether of circulating data, a swarming movement immanent to the landscape's placid appearance. Like Deleuze's description of Ozu's infamous 'still life' shots as time-images that "reach the absolute, as instances of pure contemplation, and immediately bring about the identity of the mental and the physical, the real and the imaginary, the subject and the object, the world and the I," the film's interstitial landscapes and ponderous night scenes give form to the abstract materiality of the circulation of commodified, financialized data.<sup>299</sup>

The fundamental economic instrument through which this shift to circulation over production is effectuated, LiPuma and Lee argue, is the derivative. As the Introduction explained, derivatives are essentially liquidity-producing wagers on changes in the price of an asset, and crucially the pricing of derivatives depends essentially on the ability to quantify the volatility in the price of the underlying asset, or in other words, to measure and represent the social risk inherent in the wager.<sup>300</sup> They are, in this sense, fictitious abstractions that are invented for the purpose of hedging financial risk. Importantly, LiPuma and Lee note that the kind of representability involved in quantifying social risk is heavily freighted with ideological assumptions about the nature of the underlying social relationships to which the representation is immanent (i.e. that South American and African assets are understood to be more volatile on account of ideologically perceived political instability and corruption). Lou's footage, like a financial derivative, is also priced according to the perceived volatility of the underlying asset,

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<sup>299</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989 [1985]), 16.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

which in this case is the threat of, as Nina plainly explains to Lou, “urban crime creeping into the suburbs. What this means is a victim, or victims, preferably well-off and white, injured at the hands of the poor or a minority.”

In learning how to aesthetically represent and render visible this hypothetically perceived social volatility, Lou learns how to create valuable footage that the network will circulate, which in turn naturalizes and objectifies the ideological figure of racialized threat to white, “suburban” order, which in turn spurs a demand for more footage. This cycle of production and circulation evinces Barrett’s ‘invisible hand’ at work, focusing itself to create an image of itself as something other than that same very act of aesthetic and ideological focusing. Thus, the full significance of Lou’s reconfigured images includes their figural operation, in Auerbach’s sense, as figures that mutually reinforce and presuppose each other. To the extent that Lou’s individual aesthetic configurations exist on an economic continuum with the geographic configuration of the color line in Los Angeles, they also exist in a relation of mutually imbricated and immanent co-figuration. This relationship is not unlike the relationship between financial models and actual trading activity, which relies on what Arjun Appadurai, building on the work of J.L. Austin, Judith Butler, and other scholars of finance, has recently termed “retro-performativity,” which he explains as a situation “in which certain performatives are seen to create, through their agency and effect, the very conditions of felicity that they also casually pre-suppose.”<sup>301</sup> This is most forcefully evinced by Lou’s orchestration of the film’s culminating car chase and shootout, which is both an effect of Lou’s own performative framing, as well as the presumptive condition that authorizes and legitimates his professional existence at all.

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<sup>301</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Banking on Words: The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 76.

LiPuma and Lee likewise note that derivatives are “quasi-performative,” in the sense that they “help to create the culture of circulation that they presuppose for their circulation.”<sup>302</sup> Alison Shonkwiler affirms the generativity of finance capital, claiming that finance capital functions by “comparing hypotheticals and actuals, and trading on the difference, thereby *realizing* that which had been hypothetical or unreal.”<sup>303</sup> This performative dimension of finance, which echoes Barrett’s theory of valorization as a process of form effacing a subtending force, is expressed not only through the actualization of Lou and Nina’s relationship through the mediating form of value, but in the film’s dramatization of the emergence of the news ‘event’ itself out of Lou’s aesthetically and epistemically malleable images. On Lou’s first night of work, he unsuccessfully attempts to record various scenes of police making arrests and attending to accidents. In one case, a police officer aggressively urges Lou to stop taping and back away. “I’m fairly certain I’m allowed to film this,” Lou tepidly states. “Film what?” the officer replies. Lou stammers: “I don’t know. What’s happening?” This exchange demonstrates Lou’s inexperience (and also his initial inability to discern socially appropriate spatial and ethical boundaries), but also raises a question, quite literally, about the circumstances under which Lou’s images are legible as an event as such. The event must be subject to a valorizing process of formal and aesthetic manipulation before it can be rendered as a narrative event; the situation must be created as such, as a narrativization that makes the event recognizable as such. As Hayden White explains in “The Modernist Event”:

...in conventional historical inquiry, the facts established about a specific event are taken to *be* the meaning of that event. Facts are supposed to provide the basis for arbitrating among the variety of different meanings that different groups can assign to an event for different ideological or political reasons. But facts are a

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<sup>302</sup> LiPuma and Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*, 9.

<sup>303</sup> Alison Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary: Economic Mystification and the Limits of Realist Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), ix.

function of the meaning assigned to events, not some primitive data that determine what meanings an event can have. It is the anomalous nature of modernist events—their resistance to inherited categories and conventions for assigning meanings to events—that undermine not only the status of facts in relation to events but also the status of the event in general.<sup>304</sup>

Modernist events, in other words, are characterized by White by a break between fact and meaning, which can only be rendered over through the process of narrative fabulation that reverses the intuitive causal relation between them. If convention and common sense dictate that the facts of the event precede and inform narrative accounts of the event, modernist events invert this relation, establishing a mode of historicism in which the narrative representation supersedes the event, and facts come only later, if at all. Lou's labor process, like White's examples of Oliver Stone's *J.F.K.* and the news crews that reported the O.J. Simpson chase, produces the historical, factual event as a function or outcome of aesthetic representation. Thus, as modernist events, Lou's videos are narratively and aesthetically performative, generating the 'facts' that they purport to be transparent, objective representations of in the first place. As Lou professionalizes, he comes more adept at forcing the formation of events, a process rendered cinematically by a montage of Lou renaming video files on his computer (fig. 5.6).

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<sup>304</sup> Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in *The Persistence of History*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (Los Angeles: AFI, 1996), 21.

		Dimensions	Size	Batch Archive	Field Group	File Status
	HORROR IN ECHO PARK	1920 X 1080	223.54 MB		Progressive	1/1
	NURSING HOME NIGHTMARE	1920 X 1080	75.12 MB		Progressive	1/1
	TODDLER STABBED	1920 X 1080	195.46 MB		Progressive	1/1
	D.W.I. CRASH CLAIMS FOUR	1920 X 1080	195.46 MB		Progressive	1/1
	CARJACKING/WOMAN DRAGGED	1920 X 1080	568.35 MB		Progressive	1/1
	MURDER/SUICIDE IN DUARTE	1920 X 1080	1.32 GB		Progressive	1/1
	BOTCHED SWAT RAID	1920 X 1080	304 MB		Progressive	1/1
	RAMPAGE IN RESEDA	1920 X 1080	172.31 MB		Progressive	1/1

Figure 5.6 *Nightcrawler*

As Grant Farred has claimed in a different context, “the event knows itself first through its own naming.”<sup>305</sup> The critical difference here is that *Nightcrawler*’s events are not naming themselves, but being themselves named, by Lou—a speculative formation, undergirded by the immanent forces of aesthetic judgment and ontological violence.

Lou’s footage is situated, therefore, at the nexus of the commodity form and the derivative form, insofar as it is tied on the one hand to the exchange of objects for representations of other objects, and on the other to the speculative act of objectifying and circulating representations of social, racialized volatility. What unites both forms of valorization, and what connects them ultimately to the film, is the abstract logic of commodity fetishism: the appearance of an objective, unified, and self-identical form that belies the violent force that

<sup>305</sup> Grant Farred, *In Motion, At Rest*, 14.

simultaneously undergirds that form and is rendered invisible in the form's production. For both Barrett and the film, this logic is also fundamentally a racialized one, in which value is, in Barrett's words, "forcefully emergent from and provisionally triumphant over a relative parataxis of Others."<sup>306</sup> Importantly, this is equally the case for the derivative form, in which it is the aesthetically and ideologically informed act of judgment inherent in the quantification of risk that is both necessary and elided in the production of speculative value.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to return once again to the pivotal moment at which Lou's value to Nina, and hers to him, and Rick's to them both, congeals, since the derivative nature of Lou's images also further explains the veritably aphrodisiac power of the image of Rick's death. On a macroeconomic level, one of the perceived values of the financial derivative is its capacity to create liquidity, or the ease with which assets can be rendered into cash, in the marketplace (at least until a crisis occurs, reducing liquidity). The ability to create a derivative instrument enhances the opportunity for fungibility and the consummation of exchange. This function is also aesthetically rendered by the film, in the sense that the liquidation of Rick that transforms him into a kind of financial liquidity also renders him, to borrow Alessandra Raengo's turn of phrase, as a kind of perverse "lubrication" for the figural union of Nina and Lou. Writing about the ways in which the ontology of racial blackness might be conceptualized as "liquid," both in the sense of its fungibility and circulation as an abstract commodity and also as its intimate sensoriality, Raengo identifies lubrication as an ethically troubling, eroticizing function of blackness's liquidity. Pivotaly, the liquidity of blackness, or I would argue, of any racializing epidermal schema, is grounded in the capacity to abstract a qualitative, aesthetically received component of the lived experience of blackness, and to make it

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<sup>306</sup> Barrett, *Blackness and Value*, 27.

quantitatively fungible and available for circulation. As Raengo points out, this situation is fundamentally shaped by a kind of chiasmatic disjunction between abstraction, circulation, and movement on the one hand, and materiality, embodiment, and stasis on the other.<sup>307</sup> Indeed, Saidiya Hartman concurs in explaining the problematic as one in which “the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master’s body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion.”<sup>308</sup> In the film, Lou exploitatively transforms Rick from a kind of raw material resource into a wage laborer, and then into an essentially fungible, valorized image. By the end of the film, Rick is both economically and racially liquidated, insofar as his transformation into an image that is also a circulating commodity crystallizes the dialectical union of movement and stasis, mobility and death, financialized abstraction and intense bodily suffering. Moreover, Rick’s liquidity functions as a kind of pornographic lubrication insofar as it is precisely his rendering into exchange-value that facilitates the transformation of the relationship between Lou and Nina from a formal into an affectively actualized one.

During this consecratory exchange, Rick’s face is positioned between the two, effectively functioning as a mediating boundary that visually separates Nina from Lou. As the boundary between the exploitation and eroticism of Nina’s and Lou’s relationship dissolves, Rick is situated formally as another kind of visual boundary between them, one onto which Lou’s coercive violence is, as I have suggested, effectively displaced through this framing operation.

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<sup>307</sup> See Alessandra Raengo, “Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity,” *liquid blackness* 1, no. 2 (April 2014): 4-18, but especially 12.

<sup>308</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 21.



The transgressive violence inherent in Lou's coercive exploitation of Nina is represented as a displacement onto the racialized Other, an Other that functions here *as* a differentiating boundary line, but it is a double displacement: firstly into the body of the commodity videotape from which Rick's gaze is produced, and secondly into the here-abstracted body of Rick himself, as a homeless day laborer paid in cash and murdered at work, and as registered in his fearful, uncertain facial expression. The aesthetic and thematic condensations and displacements of value, race, violence, and fetishistic desire in this image function to figure and articulate flows of economic, affective, and racial liquidity, and to transform lucrative volatility into a critical image of violent contemporary precarity. This figure also allows the commodified, displaced, and elided body if not the chance to speak, then at least the power to disquiet, and perhaps for a moment, even to haunt those who would see in it something other than value.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Throughout the preceding chapters, the concept of the figure and its variations—the figural, figurality, figuration—have been deployed as the project's central operative theoretical principle, rather than the more familiar and well-worn concept of allegory. Although Benjamin's notion of allegory, as a mode of representation through which the particularity of an immanent historicity can emerge through the accumulation of fragmentary ruins, is the basis for his later theorization of the messianic power of aesthetic constellation and the mimetic faculty, it is nevertheless not the operative concept here.<sup>309</sup> The reason for this is that despite Benjamin's melancholic appeals to a messianic futurity (or perhaps also precisely on account of their melancholic aspect), his theory of allegory organizes a relationship that obtains primarily

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<sup>309</sup> See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 166, 177.

between the past and the present, leaving the future ambiguous and highly ambivalent, and in Benjamin's later writings precariously balanced on the knife's edge separating redemption from annihilation. If, as Jameson suggests, "allegory is precisely the dominant mode of expression of a world in which things have been for whatever reason utterly sundered from meanings, from spirit, from genuine human existence," then its capacity for expressing the historical specificity of the present moment—in which the dominant relationship between images and history is not one of severance but of productive, if disturbing fungibility—must be reconsidered.<sup>310</sup> For, as the preceding chapters have argued, although the constellative dimension of Benjamin's theory of allegory remains a highly relevant feature of our contemporary economic and aesthetic landscape, the fact of the contemporary moment's ontogenetic productivity, as evinced not only by the structure of financial instruments and the logic of financial markets, but also by the textual forms emerging within the context of financial turbulence and crisis, indicates something else at work—a reversal, in fact—in the relationship between images and historical time.

Indeed, this has been the thesis of the project laid out here, that the ontogenic productivity of finance gives a novel and productively expressive function to representations, under the rubric of the concept of the conspiracy diagram and its figural logic. The concept of the figural diagram shares with allegory an emphasis on the significance of fragmentation and reconfiguration, but for the conspiracy diagram this figural aesthesis is immanent to the production of a future-oriented historicity, the operational logic of which is also shared by contemporary global financial markets. If allegory is a mode of expression turned toward the past, and moving into the future only facing backward, as Benjamin says of Klee's *Angel of*

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<sup>310</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 71.

History, the figural is posited here as a mode of expression that reverses the temporal polarity of the Benjaminian constellation, as the obverse of allegory, to preemptively produce the futurity it aesthetically constellates. Ultimately, this is the crucial distinction between Benjamin's theory of allegory and Auerbach's theory of figural prophecy: whereas the Benjaminian theory of allegory endows past with a "*weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim," Auerbach's theory of theological hermeneutics endows the present with this power, through which it makes a claim on the future by interpreting the past. It is in this sense that even Benjamin's desperate attempt to conceive of his own location in the stream of historical time, over against the forces of commodification and outright fascism that conspired to annihilate this historicity, has evidently been subsumed under capital, which find in the structure of allegory a convenient technique for producing new and increasingly abstract profit-generating objects. Financial speculation, then, functions as the obscene double of Benjamin's own melancholy: not a withdrawal of historical object-cathexis, but a manic overabundance of cathexes, fungibilities, and exchanges, through which the ambivalent future becomes determinate in its actualization.<sup>311</sup>

It is within this fraught context that I wish to turn at last to *Arrival* (dir. Denis Villeneuve, 2016), as a film that is essentially about the relationship between figural constellations and the capacity to actualize the future, and this across at least two distinct levels. At one level, *Arrival* is very much about the ways in which the constellative structure of the object of a formal analysis can reconfigure the epistemic and spatiotemporal schemata through which any such analysis is possible for a subject, and about the ways in which the ambivalent future becomes determinate in its actualization in the present. It is also, at another level, a film that articulates analytical strands

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<sup>311</sup> See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989), 584-588.

that are dispersed throughout the entirety of the project, effectuating something like a unity, although I wish here to leave the question of the film's unifying efficacy open, for reasons having to do with the methodology of the project that are made clearer below. For now, suffice it to say that it is precisely the question of the capacity of fragments to recombine that is at stake.

The film, which is based on the short story "Story of your Life" by Ted Chiang, tells the story of a linguistics professor, Louise (Amy Adams), who is called in by the U.S. government to help facilitate communication with extraterrestrial aliens, called heptapods, who have recently landed twelve spaceships at geographically dispersed sites around the world. Over time, exposure to the alien language, a nonlinear visual mode of communication in which semantic information is expressed through differential graphic appendages to a circle (fig. 6.1), causes (although the chronology of the plot complicates any notion of causation) a reconfiguration of Louise's phenomenal experience of time, along the lines of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.



Figure 6.1 *Arrival*

Louise's mode of apprehending space, time, and causality is transformed from a linear-sequential to a nonlinear, evidently a-causal mode of perception and thought. This reconfiguration becomes central to the resolution of the film's narrative, in which Louise's newfound(?) ability to perceive future events allows her both to ascertain the purpose of the alien visitation (to confer their nonlinear temporality to humanity), and to avert a geopolitical crisis between the nations involved in alien research.

The linguistic figures of the heptapod language, which the film refers to as logograms, form the conceptual and aesthetic core of the film. Like the photographs in *Blow Up*, and like their arrangement into a *dispositif*, which is implicitly quoted throughout *Arrival* (fig. 6.2), the legibility of the alien figures, along with the consequences of that legibility, animates the film's narrative movement.



Figure 6.2 *Arrival*

The heptapod language functions by presenting a circular visual figure, which is modified via the addition of inkblot-like radial articulations. These articulations indicate nouns, verbs, and other parts of speech, and are recombined and spatially modified in relation to each other in order to compose more complex ideas and statements (fig. 6.3).

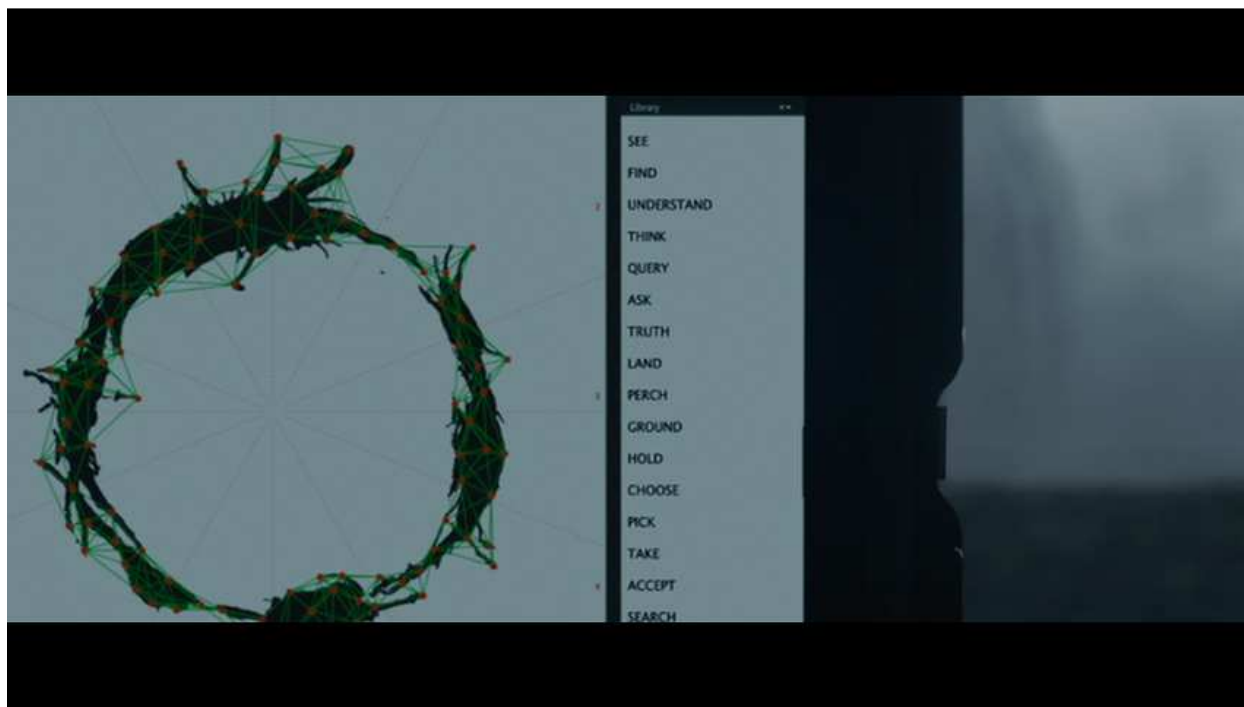


Figure 6.3 *Arrival*

They are, perhaps even more so than the photos in *Blow Up*, interstitially situated in the space between Lyotard's discursive and figural regimes, since they are simultaneously both linguistic sentences, and visual representations whose meaning is wholly dependent on the material and spatial transformations of the figures' radial curlicues. The plasticity of this mode of expression is emphasized by the strange materiality of the alien figures, which are depicted as smoky and gaseous clouds, which congeal into rigid shapes, only to disperse again.<sup>312</sup> The heptapod

<sup>312</sup> The film's choice of representing the logograms as wispy, ephemeral, circular formations that float suspended in air is also unique to the film adaptation of the story. In Chiang's story the

language, therefore, articulates the chiasmatic tension of Lyotard's concept of the figural to the respiratory rhythms of abstraction and materiality that are characteristic of the flows of capital, and of the dialectical tension between concretion and abstraction that is characteristic of financialization as such. This becomes especially clear when the ultimate purpose of the heptapods' visit, which involves teaching their language to Louise in order to allow humanity to achieve something like World Peace, which in turn allows humanity to provide aid to the aliens 3,000 years in the future, is explained.

Moreover, the absence of sequential order in the heptapod language generates confusion between interpreting parties, since the semantic fragments in each logogram can be reordered and reconfigured in a variety of ways. This is the case, for example, when Louise and the CIA bureaucrat disagree about whether fragments indicating that "many become one" and "weapon opens time" are expressing utopian benevolence or violent aggressivity. Hence, *Arrival's* logograms participate fully in the figural logic of the conspiracy diagram, as reconfigurable fragments that offer the potential of disclosing and providing experiential access to a geopolitical totality. The aliens' ultimate purpose is to teach their language to humanity, and in so doing to create a geopolitical figural diagram—a plan which is achieved by giving each of the twelve nationalities involved in the codebreaking operation a different piece of a representation of their entire language. It is only through the production of a geopolitical unity between the U.S., China, Russia, and others—a kind of benevolent conspiracy of international cooperation brought

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logograms are screen-rendered images, which are not circular but rather composed by "sticking together as many logograms as needed into a giant conglomeration." See Ted Chiang, "Story of Your Life," in *Arrival* (Originally Published as *Stories of Your Life and Others*), New York: Vintage, 2016 [2002], (107). Chiang's imagery is suggestively rhizomatic, but it lacks the film's addition of the visual concretion and rarefaction of the figures, which are particularly salient in the context of the diagrammatics of financialization.

about by the redemptive power of the aliens' messianic arrival, and what the film suggestively, and like *A Beautiful Mind*, refers to as a "non-zero sum game"—that the future of the human race can be secured. This production of a geospatial unity and of an historical futurity on Earth turns out also to be necessary, as suggested above, for the survival of the aliens, who reveal that they will need human assistance to deal with an undisclosed problem thousands of years in the future. Thus the film also effects a kind of subjective-objective reversal, in which Louise's and Ian's investigatory work and process of aesthetic reconfiguration in the service of translating the heptapod language becomes, on a grander scale, the object of the heptapods' own scheme to reconfigure humanity so as to be capable of saving the heptapods at a later chronological date. It is then, perhaps the heptapods that are the true Auerbachian interpreters here more so than the humans, since they are directly intervening to reconfigure the past, in order to produce a redemptive future.

If the aliens' production of a geopolitical aesthetic has a ring of preemption about it, the preemption of future time is essential to the formal structure of the film's narrative, based as it is around an editorial sleight of hand involving presenting interstitial proleptic flashforwards to domestic scenes of Louise and her daughter, disguised initially as analeptic flashbacks to prior events. This is how the film renders Louise's nonhuman experience of nonlinear time for the viewer, as well as how Louise is able to solve the puzzle and prevent warfare against the aliens, which she does by cognitively accessing a future interaction with a Chinese general, in which he provides her with information that she uses in the present to prove her good intentions and explain the nature of the heptapods' gift to humanity. Paradoxically, the event during which Louise learns this information is a peace celebration ceremony for the resolution of the alien crisis, which undermines any notion of linear causality within the film, instantiating instead a



preemptive logic of temporal immanence, in which the production of the future is foreclosed by the anticipatory present. This is also to suggest that the film resonates with the logic of financial securitization, insofar as it presents a world in which futurity itself is produced as a byproduct of preemptive speculation. The film's exploration of the logic of preemptive securitization reaches its ambiguous apogee in the film's denouement, in which Louise chooses (although again, the question of choice is very much in question here) to have a child, all the while knowing that the child will grow up to die young from a rare and incurable disease, and in doing so suggests an embrace of the fraught historical impasse, in which futurity, as embodied by the child, is both affirmed and, precisely through that affirmation, negated.

Through this structure of cinematic plotting, which is necessarily chronological, the film gives expression to the non-chronological immanence of preemptive time, the time of figural prophecy, what Auerbach calls the "plane of providential design," which here becomes legible as a form of Deleuzian pure immanence. This brings us back again to the question of immanence with respect to the figural relationships that obtain between subjects and objects, even as those poles are themselves constituted through a process of emergent articulation. *Arrival* stages this problem through its complication of subject-object relations; it is a film in which a subject's exposure to an object, in the form of an informatic diagram, effectively reconfigures the subject's mode of spatiotemporal experience. It is as though Louise shares Benjamin's experience of allegorical shock, but with the temporal vectorization reversed—it is the present and the future that are jarringly juxtaposed, rather than the present and the past. In this process there is a dialectical reversal that cuts to the core of what both financialization and the conspiracy diagram are about: the production of future time. This formal juxtaposition in turn functions also to

articulate the film's broader breakdown of discrete subject-object relations in the film, in favor of a transversal mode of embodied schematic reorganization.

Furthermore, as in *Nightcrawler*, the ability in *Arrival* to produce a sexual union between Louise and her counterpart Ian (Jeremy Renner), and in turn to reconstitute the nuclear family and the hope for the future it entails, is effectuated through the appropriation of schematic racial blackness. In *Arrival*, this is achieved through the film's intense cinematographic emphasis on the hapticity of the heptapods themselves, which are depicted as rather like seven-fingered hands, whose epidermal hue, despite its extraterrestrial origin, is evocative of blackness (fig. 6.4).



Figure 6.4 *Arrival*

Not only are the heptapods designed to resemble hands and to emphasize tactility, and not only is their spaceship designed as a rough-hewn, highly textured surface, but both the aliens and their

craft is consistently lensed by cinematographer Bradford Young so as to accentuate the phenomenal tactility of the image (fig. 6.5).<sup>313</sup>



Figure 6.5 *Arrival*

Indeed, in the same way that the heptapods are shrouded in opaque mist, much of the film is composed in shallow focus, which has the dual effects of generating a haptic sense of texture about the image itself, as well as of making the shapes background figures blurry and distorted, effectively complicating the image's capacity to transparently transmit information that can be readily assimilated in accordance with a pre-existing cognitive schema. It is only on account of the alien visitation that Louise is able to meet Ian, and only on account of the heptapods'

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<sup>313</sup> Note that the accompanying image (fig. 6.5) is lit so dimly as to be almost illegible outside the confines of a darkened theater. I have chosen to reproduce this image (and other similarly dark images from the film), rather than merely describe it, since I take its melding of tactility and visual darkness as a deliberate aesthetic provocation on Bradford Young's part, and one that gestures toward the ontological generativity of aesthetic experience within the film.

conferral of a new temporal and causal cognitive schema that Louise is endowed with the ability to produce a unifying future for humanity, a future that the film explicitly suggests also includes saving nations like Venezuela and Sierra Leone from collapsing into anarchic and racially-charged looting. Although *Arrival* makes no overt pretense to a critique of the transcendental capacities of white reproductive futurity, such a critique is nevertheless legible, or perhaps at least affectively sensible, in the way the film uses contrasting textures, juxtaposing the smoothness of Louise's features, particularly when she becomes immersed in the heptapods' gaseous cloud (which does at this point seem to take on a liquid, more so than a gaseous aspect, in no small way on account of the film's use of digital animation to render her floating hair) (fig. 6.6), with the haptic materiality of the aliens and their ship.



Figure 6.6 *Arrival*

The highly condensed analysis above suggests that *Arrival* has the capacity to function, in the analytical constellation that is this project, as a kind of unifying force, drawing together

disparate threads of the preceding chapters and articulating them into a kind of totality through which these threads all converge in the form of a discrete aesthetic object. As I have indicated above, however, I wish to leave any question of conceptual unification or totalization as open as possible, for the reason that both *Arrival* and the project as a whole are precisely about the question of whether and how the exposure to aesthetic form can transform the schemata of perception, and to productively and preemptively create historical time. These questions lie at the heart, not only of Benjamin's account of the transformations in the protocols of perception wrought by modernity, but also of Deleuze's appropriation of Foucault's concept of the diagram as a means of explicating the immanence of power and structure, as well as of Whitehead's inversion of the Kantian sequence of causal determinations. This is, after all, what is ultimately at stake in *Arrival's* narrative: the possibility of some kind of historically progressive alterity with respect to the subjectively restrictive and limiting synthetic a priori determinations of space, time, and causation. Yet it is precisely this isomorphic immanence between *Arrival* (or really any of the other objects under discussion above) and the analytical project itself, between the function of form within the objects of this analysis and the form of the analysis of the functions of those objects, that is both mediating and complicating any schematic application of an analytical method here. This is, ultimately, why the question of analytical unity can only be raised here in self-reflexively performative terms, rather than in terms that reassert a position of transcendental subjectivity with respect to the objects of analysis.

This peculiar recursivity is partially an effect of the generic orientation of the analysis, which takes as its objects texts whose forms deal essentially with investigation, formal analysis, and practices of knowledge production, matters that are also the essential content of the analysis. Hence, the synecdochic, highly dialectical and isomorphism between the objects of analysis and

the analysis of the objects, insofar as the theoretical logic of the conspiracy diagram becomes the method by which the inner workings of that logic are accessed and explained. In part it is also an effect of the nature of the diagrammatic itself. As Deleuze explains, “The diagram is no longer an auditory or visual archive but a map, a cartography that is coextensive with the whole social field. It is an abstract machine.”<sup>314</sup> Likewise, the diagrammatic methodology employed here is also coextensive with the “social” field of objects so constellated, and is also machinic in the same terms, insofar as the force of constellating objects into a formal structure is taken to be aesthetically and cognitively productive. There is a kind of vertiginous movement across the heuristic distinction between the subjective and the objective that is characteristic of, and also at stake both aesthetically and epistemologically, in the operation of the conspiracy diagram, and this both at the level of the particular case studies of the analysis and at the level of the general or whole analysis itself.<sup>315</sup> This in turn raises a problem for formal analysis, in that it turns out that the logical strength of such an analysis of form rests, ultimately, on whether the aesthetic objects it gathers do indeed cohere into something like a recognizable unity, or in Deleuze’s terms, do indeed forcibly cohere into an expressive form. That is to say it is, paradoxically and problematically, perhaps only on *aesthetic* grounds that the intellectual force of such a project

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<sup>314</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013 [1980]), 34.

<sup>315</sup> The term “operation” is used advisedly here to gesture toward the performativity of the figural as an analytical tool. In a similar context, D.N. Rodowick suggests that “perhaps philosophy can operate its own figural discourse.” He notes that in order to do so his own study of the figural (from which the present analysis has benefitted substantially) that the figural must circulate, as Shklovsky said of aesthetic estrangement, via “knight’s moves” through the theoretical network it activates. It may be that there is something inherent in the notion of the figural as such that demands, in the manner of a Kantian regulative concept, a certain degree of methodological deregulation in practice. Rodowick later suggests as much in his account of the theoretical movement from semiotic discourse to figural becoming. See D.N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), ix, 46.

can be adequately evaluated. Yet, this turn away from the deductive and toward the aesthetic is precisely characteristic of the contemporary historical situation of finance capitalism, and the concomitant inversion of the priority of the Kantian categories, that the analysis itself seeks to unwind. This in turn threatens to produce a vicious circle by which it becomes impossible to think beyond the limits imposed by our own determining conceptual schemata, even as this impossibility is itself a historical effect, with its own intellectual history. Philosopher Quentin Meillassoux colorfully refers to this problem, in which unmediated access to a thing *in-itself* could only even be access *for-us*, as “the correlationist two-step.”<sup>316</sup> Meillassoux’s solution to this intractable philosophical dilemma involves a valorization of speculative thinking, by which he means thought that claims access to the absolute in-itself, but only at the hefty cost of invalidating the principle of sufficient reason in favor of absolute contingency.<sup>317</sup>

This study does not purport to reply to Meillassoux’s sophisticated arguments, but perhaps the notion of contingency offers a useful clue. Fredric Jameson has recently and suggestively noted the similarity between artistic curation and the construction of financial derivatives, in that they both “put all these different elements or entities together, they last for a minute, and then they’re gone again; the individual work is no longer very significant.” “Theory,” Jameson goes on to add,

is also essentially a curatorial process. We’ve got various texts from the past, say Aristotle or Kant, and we put them all together in an ephemeral combination. Deleuze is the great master of this. You have a theoretical show in which these various things are plugged into each other, and then another one comes on line later on. Since theory is not philosophy—something I want to insist on—the

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<sup>316</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008 [2006]), 5.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-49, but especially 34 and 42.

question of what it is becomes an interesting one; it approaches the situation of arts as much as it does anything else.<sup>318</sup>

Under these terms, the preceding analysis effectuates something like a curatorial double articulation, in that it is itself a curation of theorists and aesthetic objects designed to produce a set of diagrammatic effects (i.e. reconfiguring how we comprehend the relationship between the financialized economy and the capacities of visual representation), and that these objects are themselves curatorial, in that they are also gathering fragments in hopes of articulating an expressive unity. This project's curatorial immanence then, is perhaps only expressive of the particular and ephemeral and contingent historicity it articulates.

“Historical ideas,” Kracauer writes in his unfinished *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, “are nodal points—points at which the concrete and the abstract really meet and become one. Whenever this happens, the flow of indeterminate historical events is suddenly arrested and all that is then exposed to view is seen in the light of an image or conception which takes it out of the transient flow to relate it to one or another of the momentous problems and questions that are forever staring at us.”<sup>319</sup> If the present study is capable of producing such an image, then it will have succeeded.

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<sup>318</sup> Nico Baumbach, Damon R. Young, and Genevieve Yue, “Revisiting Postmodernism: An Interview with Fredric Jameson” *Social Text* 34, no. 2 (2016): 145. I would add Fred Moten to the list as not only a great master of curatorial theory, but as a master theorist of curation itself, under the rubric of the aesthetics and politics of the ensemble. See Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>319</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *History, The Last Things Before the Last* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995 [1969]), 101.



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