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# The Ethics of Obstruction

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THE ETHICS OF OBSTRUCTION

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Rhetorics, Communication and Information Design

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by  
Joshua Mitchell Abboud  
May 2011

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Accepted by:  
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## ABSTRACT

This work engages the film *The Five Obstructions* (2003) as a configuration for multimodal composition. It explores a theory of general composition as a matter of confronting obstructions or creative constraints as a process of collaborative revision and pedagogy. Writing in this context constitutes ethical responses to the shifting constraints of communication and signification. The obstructions performed by the film as a series of revisions offer sources of proliferating rhetorical invention and play grounded on negotiated fields of operations.

The first two chapters explore the relations between image and ethics in a pedagogy of revision, while the third considers the position of creative freedom as its own compositional obstruction. The fourth chapter looks to psychoanalysis as a model for an interruptive or hesitant relationship that accounts for an ethical exchange between teacher and student. The final chapter proposes configurations for how obstructions and revision function as a compositional approach, and offers a general lens in which to attend to assignments. All five chapters are written alongside the five obstructions from the film and embody the ethical practice of composition discussed in the project.

## DEDICATION

To my children, Garret, Jonas, and Gretchen for re-teaching me the significance of play. Your response to my work: laughter. And to my wife, Kristin, without whom there are no obstructions.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to acknowledge all the work that happened off-screen that contributed to the creation of this project. My parents were an unwavering source of love and support as my own interests constantly blossomed and waned. Thank you for always being there and believing in me.

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It is with great respect that I acknowledge the work of my committee chair in realizing the failure of the perfect human. I leave you this work, Victor, as my response to you.

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## Introduction

In November of 2000 noted Danish film director Lars von Trier asked his onetime teacher and mentor Jørgen Leth to collaborate with him on a new film. The film would not be one film, but a series of remakes of an older film Leth had made earlier in his career titled *The Perfect Human* (*Det perfekte menneske*, 1967). In the introduction to an edited volume on the film *The Five Obstructions* (2003) Mette Hjort recounts an email exchange in which von Trier lays out the initial rules of the collaboration:

Dear Jørgen,

The challenge/The Film you are supposed to solve/make is called: The five obstructions.

As a starting point I would like you to show me a 10-minute film, you have made—*The Perfect Human*.

We will watch the movie together and talk about it—then I will set up limitations, commands, or prohibitions, which means you have to do the film all over again. This we will do five times—of this the title. I would find it natural if our conversations became part of the final movie—with the six small films, of course.

I hope you're happy with the assignment. Maybe the subject for the first movie should be something we came to an agreement about? Of course we would have the most fun if the subject is of a character that gives us as big a difference as possible between film one and six?

Let me know how you feel about this. Please write.

Best regards,  
Lars (*Dekalog*, xv)

Von Trier explains the film in terms of an assignment of revision, one in which Leth is required to respond to a series of restrictions by recreating the old film under five new circumstances. The obstruction is solved when Leth can successfully navigate the limitations. Leth eagerly accepts the challenge:

Dear Lars,  
I find the assignment tempting. I can see an interesting development between film and six, the route around the obstacles, the conversations, I'm sure we'll get a lot out of this. It is exciting. I look forward to your obstructions.

I really like the idea of having to change, adjust, and reduce according to given conditions in the process.

Best regards,  
Jørgen (*Dekalog*, xv-xvi)

What begins as an experiment in collaborative filmmaking between student and mentor develops into a complex performance of vision and revision of the perfect human as projected through the composition of the cinematic image. The obstructions serve as the framing device for each film as a strategy to regulate the roles of collaboration and determine procedure. In his response Leth cited his interest in having to change his filmmaking practices in order to find a "route around the obstacles" that will allow him to successfully resolve the obstruction.

For his part, von Trier perceives the obstructions less as adjustments and more as commands or limiting factors put into place to move Leth toward a climactic sixth film. While each obstruction will be defined through discussions between von Trier and Leth, the final decision is von Trier's. Through his films, however, Leth is able to respond by conforming or transgressing the obstructions, reframing the issues, or even by indifference to their authority. What we can see in the project's infancy is that although there is agreement about the procedure of revision, there is a disjuncture in the purpose of the experiment. Von Trier sees it as a chance to force Leth to explore unfamiliar filmmaking territory; for Leth it is a chance to hone his filmmaking chops. Both of them believe that the obstructions will facilitate their goals and resolve the project.

The disjuncture between what von Trier and Leth believe to be the central issue of *The Five Obstructions* is part of an ethical focus that the film engages through the difficult collaboration between teacher and student. Each new film projects the tension of this relationship through the various revisions of *The Perfect Human* as a question of ethos; von Trier discloses his ethos through the obstructions, while Leth's is revealed through his responses to each obstruction. As each new film must constantly reframe the images of the perfect human through revision, so the competing goals of teacher and student must undergo ethical reframing. The film *The Five Obstructions* is not simply a series of creative remakes through a process of collaboration, but a complex performance of rhetorical invention and compositional revision through the creative constraints of obstructions.

The obstructions channel the ethical uncertainty of the perfect human as a central figure to the project. As a result of the relationship between the restrictions of the obstructions and the constant revision of images, the film demonstrates a

process of collaborative multimodal composition as an ethical practice of theory, pedagogy, and production. Obstructions engage ethics not on the level of systems of principles, but through the tension of competing collaboration and the constant revision of images.

Von Trier and Leth's efforts in *The Five Obstructions* challenge this investment in a fixed notion of the image. For von Tier and Leth, composing in the form of obstruction and image is a continuous process of re-thinking, rewriting, and reworking. We encounter the ethical in a broad process of composition. It is not just that Leth must re-make his film five times in order to discover hidden ethical issues, but that the actual movement of negotiating obstacles for Leth to overcome reveals a pedagogical ethic between student and teacher that cannot be discerned within a hermeneutic or semiotic reading of the images as texts or final products. Each film moves toward von Trier's goal of "teaching" his teacher how to fail, or finding success in imperfection. So, each film cannot be considered as either a closed unit in itself, nor a fragment of an overall unified whole, but of an ethical movement found within the pedagogical challenges.

This film puts multimodal composition at stake by opening up the question of the image, or at least questions the grounds of those fields that are invested in an understanding of cinematic images as fixed within a regime of mimesis (aesthetically, politically, historically determined). This is not just to identify "practices of looking" as culturally and socially constructed, but to see how these practices themselves stabilize the making and reception of images, as well as interrogate the grounds of receiving and making images.

## **The Problem of Reading Images**

When we are discussing multimodal composition what is it that is being discussed? What is the object of study and how do we know when we have achieved it? There is great concern that scholars and students now learn to think and write in many modes, as if it has not always been necessary or even possible. In one survey funded by a grant from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) teachers in the field of composition were asked what they understood by multimodal composition. The researchers found that even if they understood a broad and inclusive definition of multimodal writing, teaching was still relegated to static images (Anderson et al. 78-9). The authors of the survey insist that these gaps between theory and practice reflect an understanding of multimodal composition that “may still be emerging” (79). Moving images and sound, it would seem, have their own place, and it is not with writing.

What the survey seems to whisper is a hesitation by instructors in general to fully disengage the boundaries of their discipline. Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen propose that the strong focus on visual images is the fact that writing itself is visual and other modes can be seen as a threat to writing (17). The practice of “reading images” would then be a logical step in order to embrace other modes of communication. Reading images, however, would be to regard the visual as text, rather than vice versa. The problem of the object remains top priority: if it is like text then we can figure out a way to read it.

So far, so good. The disconnect does not seem to be on the level of theory, or even of practice, as the concept of thinking and working in multiple modes has become a significant part of academic life in general, reaching across disciplines and stretching into new fields of study to enrich and inspire our own research. Even so,



the scary thing about multimodal composition is not that it could potentially erase writing, but its apparent boundlessness. We try to “read” images because it is a safe way to think about them, a direct way to teach them, and a good strategy of quality control for what is produced. What if we don’t have a good grasp on multimodal composition because, like reading an image, there is no way to account for all the possible modes and media in which we communicate? If the text is a “galaxy of signifiers” instead of an object of study, then it is the galaxy part that makes it visual; as Roland Barthes says, “it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances” (*S/Z* 5). We can see the danger that such an understanding poses to the orderly phrasing of writerly practices.

I will argue in and through this dissertation that the film *The Five Obstructions* performs a theory of multimodal composition that engages an ethical questionability about image revision through collaborative obstructions. It is significant to this thesis that von Trier chose Leth and his film *The Perfect Human* as the subjects of the experiment. The film pursues this ethical questionability of its images by revisioning “the perfect human” as both cinematic image and idealized concept. I am taking on a challenge of sorts in this project. It is not an insurmountable feat, nor is it especially unique. Many hopeful scholars have similar concerns and desires for the expansion of the possibilities of writing and communication. Rather than follow the thread of those scholars from a theory of multimodal composition to a practice thereof, implying that the issue is one of linear hierarchies and flow charts, I prefer to wrestle with multimodal composition by thinking it as a galaxy of production.

My entrance into this galaxy comes to me directly via *The Five Obstructions* as including many modes of composition, the most significant being the relationship

of *ethos* between the force of von Trier's obstructions and the performance of Leth's responses. It is both a lesson in composition (as process and as product) and in the creativity born of restriction. The obstructions are the rules of the game; they offer a restrictive field of operation as a source of proliferating rhetorical invention and play.

### **Moving from the Perfect to the Human**

Lars von Trier: A little gem that we are now going to ruin. That's the way it's got to be.

Jørgen Leth: A good perversion to cultivate.

*(The Five Obstructions)*

*The Perfect Human* is the film that provides the catalyst for the experiment of *The Five Obstructions*, but it is also the configuration that determines the concept of obstructions. Leth had shot *The Perfect Human* as an ethnographic film on what it means to be the perfect human through a series of prosaic and ordinary descriptions of body and thoughts that speak through space and movement. Voice-over narration asks questions as to what the perfect human could be thinking as female/male subject go about their daily activities, demonstrating the spectacle of the mundane. It is an examination of the human being as measure of perfection in ordinariness.

The above exchange takes place early in the film after von Trier and Leth have watched *The Perfect Human* together and are discussing how to proceed with the first obstruction. It is clear that both directors believe that the process of reproducing new versions of a film in which they both have heavy investment

will fundamentally change the original. They see revision as a way to “ruin” the perfection of the original and the site of a creative “perversion.” The scandal of the project is that Leth and von Trier are able to construct a new cinematic discourse or genre by disfiguring the original. The status of the originary text is a product of indifference toward its authority. What develops is the image of the perfect human as a visual contradiction: perfection cannot be human and the human cannot be perfect. This is an ethical revelation that impacts the emerging discussion of multimodal composition by a radical inclusion of media and modes. Reading images is only one mode of visual rhetoric, and not even an ideal method as it still relies on a discourse of exclusion (image = text). While the idea of obstructions is to limit the modes of practice on a particular film, the exchange of responses between obstruction and film could conceivably continue indefinitely.

The ethical movement of the collaboration proceeds out of the creative constraints of the obstructions. Von Trier confesses to Leth that his goal is to “move from the perfect to the human” by moving further and further away from the authority of the urtext. The obstructions allow Leth both the pleasure and anxiety of a release from the certainty of the first film. The series of imperfect revisions coalesce around Leth as the image of the perfect human: an image of the body removed from the grounding of a particular ethical discourse. In his study of film in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* Friedrich Kittler recognized a relationship between cinematic practices and the psychoanalytic notion of the imaginary through the analogy of the imperfect body in Jacques Lacan’s mirror event:

The imaginary, however, comes about as the mirror image of a body that appears to be, in terms of motor control, more perfect than the

infant's own body, for in the real everything begins with coldness, dizziness, and shortness of breath. Thus, the imaginary implements precisely those optical illusions that were being researched in the early days of cinema. A dismembered or (in the case of film) cut-up body is faced with the illusionary continuity of movements in the mirror or on screen. (15)

He goes on to note that Lacan used film technology to document the responses of infants to their images in the mirror (15). The cut-up body of the film occurs at the level of editing as well as the composition of the scene. The dismembered body does not belong to a frame, the camera or otherwise; images exceed the frames and are complicit in the illusion of continuity bound into frames.

By moving from the perfect to the human Leth and von Trier cultivate a perversion of modes that decompose and recompose the perfect human in various configurations. Although they feign indifference to the final product of the experiment, both Leth and von Trier have problematic and sometimes competing motives behind their participation. Von Trier claims to want to "banalize" Leth and punish his obsession for perfection. Hector Rodriguez identifies an antagonism in the process of collaboration as "essentially conflict-ridden" which reveals an *ethos* of play and suffering ("Constraint" 50). Leth and von Trier believe suffering to be in service to their creative play. The film explores these themes through the revision of image and the question of ethics.

The only goal they can agree on is the desire that the final film be as different as possible from the first. Whether or not they succeed in evaluating the difference between the two, the effort is on an ethical practice of composition in modes of

collaboration and rupture. The chapters of this dissertation will follow a similar configuration of obstructions and revisions with the purpose of exploring possible differences that each chapter provides.

The first chapter will come out of the rules von Trier prescribes for the first obstruction. Whereas the original “perfect human” was a slow moving body/film composed of long deliberate takes, Leth must conjure the same introspection with frenetic cutting. His success or failure hinges on the instability of the abbreviated scenes. In this chapter I will examine the de-centering that von Trier imposes on Leth, not only in terms of generating new films, but in Leth’s own cinematic ideology shifting from a distanced naturalism to montage dynamism. I will introduce the concept of “image” as a particular kind of cinematic expression excluded from the survey of multimodal composition mentioned before. I will discuss the submission of image to a discourse of representation and the possibility of disrupting the authority of the master text. The cinematic image can be seen in terms of the imaginary not just because it is cut-up and dismembered but because there is only a perception of fragmentation; image exceeds the frame of the scene. I argue that this excess escape the collective grasp of semiotic approaches to film. Instead I propose that images are the indeterminate results of a collaborative context.

The collaborative context of images proceeds from a dialectic between an ethos of suffering and the project as a game of rhetorical play. I will argue that to perceive the excess of images, to continue to reframe the decomposed body, engages ethos as a question of ethics. In the second obstruction von Trier moves away from challenging Leth’s technical abilities and confronts Leth with a dilemma of un/framing. That is, how can Leth engage both what is in the frame and what is excluded from the frame; the obstructions set the boundaries for an ethical framework. This

chapter will spend time tracing the question of ethics involved in composing images through Charles Scott's notion of recoil as well as John Rajchman's study of Michel Foucault and Lacan and the role of *eros* in pursuing the question of truth. Central to my discussion is Leth's decision to break the rules of the obstruction by building his own frame within the scene and von Trier's response to punish the offense. I will question Leth's response that only by showing the inhuman can we interrogate our notions of the human. It is the obstructions, however, that create the conditions for Leth's transgression so that there is an ethical relationship between obstruction and image (von Trier and Leth).

The third obstruction is imposed on Leth as a punishment for his refusal to obey the rules in the second obstruction. Leth is castigated for a fault of framing and his punishment, interestingly, is a choice: either return and fix the problem of the second film (which he refuses), or make a "free-style" film in which Leth is free to remake the film in any way he chooses. Leth struggles with the open possibilities, suddenly free of obstruction from von Trier, however, he is never free from his own prescriptions. Leth faces the abyss of possibilities as the impossible task of retranslating his own work. This chapter will look at his responsibility of creating something free of von Trier's guidance. The collaborative context is artificially removed and for one moment Leth is allowed to return to his old frames of reference. Again this is an issue of ethos and the composition of the perfect human in the absence of restriction. The idea of a "free-style" is an impossible film, given the context of the project, which can only claim to be free from the constraints of obstruction. There is no freedom from style just as there is none from the weight of obstructions.

As the fourth obstruction Leth must confront making an animated film while

confessing that he has yet to see one that he likes. For Leth animation is abject, an undesirable genre, but must find a way to bring it back into the realm of possibility. His strategy is to take the old footage from the other three films and recycle it. The result is a composition that makes the old new again. It also serves to defamiliarize Leth with his own organic project, suddenly revealing the materiality of the mechanical process of rotoscope animation. Cinematic practices become strange to Leth as he finds that he must make peace with the abject nature of the obstruction. This chapter will discuss the ethics of obstruction in image composition as a pedagogical context. I will draw on Avital Ronell's discussion of Freud's practices of analysis that configure the patient/doctor relationship as constantly shifting power structures that emphasize symptoms as detective work. In this way, the teacher/student relationship can be reconsidered as one determined less by transference of knowledge and more by negotiation and response.

The final chapter will follow the recoiling movement of the final obstruction as a way to question what has come before in terms of multimodal composition. Leth is required to read a narration that von Trier has written to accompany the last film. This film uses footage shot during the process of the last four films, and the obstruction is to completely lose control of the project. Leth does as he is asked and the result is that both teacher/student and student/teacher are revealed as perfect humans—perfect in their imperfections. Here I will bring to conclusion the discussion of the ethics of obstruction to the conclusion that there can be no such conclusive understanding of modes. Here I will have defined the modes and media of “multimodality” as alternatively, transformatively, un/frames, limitations and restrictions, ways of composing, styles of life, of and related to ethos, ethics, and eros, as well as pedagogy. Mostly I will refer to modes as obstructions. I will offer

some ways to think about obstructions in terms of assignments, and assignments in terms of assignation or composition itself as intimate relations between media, modes, and roles.

Just as *The Five Obstructions* represents another final version of the perfect human, this dissertation will represent another version beside that one, with each chapter speaking across to one another and always in dialogue with the films. I began the introduction with the question of what it is that we are discussing when we discuss multimodal composition. The difficulty that I hope to express throughout is that we are already in the collaborative context that we do not stop revising our thoughts on the matter.



# Chapter One



## An Exposition



As a way into the current project I want to offer the following story. During the summer of 2002 I traveled to Guatemala to perform research for an ethnographic video I planned to shoot on the cultural significance of maíz to the community of the small highland village of Nahualá. The idea was to allow the people of the village to tell their own stories about maíz as food and as their connection to the land

that was slowly depleting due to population growth and a variety of other factors. I found that I was able to perform on camera interviews with only a few of the residents of the community. This was primarily due to two factors: the primary language of the community was Quiché and not Spanish; and they were (rightly) suspicious of white males holding cameras. The result was that only a very small self-selected ring of confidants with whom I was able to nurture friendships were able to tell their stories in an interview context.

Before performing one such interview I approached my friend's house and was greeted by his wife who, working hard weaving at her small loom next to the house, informed me he had left but was expected soon. As I waited patiently for his return she sat back down on the ground and resumed her project, her hands deftly moving the material almost unconsciously without thought to the visitor staring on in amazement at her handiwork. When my friend arrived I started the work of composing the shot for the interview. He sat



in front of a doorway while I framed the lens around his house with him as the focal point, the doorway offering a secondary frame around his body. This was the perfect shot, framing out anything extraneous or exterior to the subject. As I commenced the interview I became aware of the faint noises of the woman at the loom who continued her own work a few feet away from the shot during my intrusion. The sounds of her weaving were too faint for the microphone to pick up, and yet loud enough to prick my own ears and remind me that she had been framed out. Her presence beside the frame had forced me to alter the shot enough to effect the shot; the sound of the loom signaling what had been cut out of the composition, and yet would always be there weighing heavily on the limits of the frame.



Later I would gain the confidence of one female who lived with the family I was staying with. With her permission I was able to record her and a group of friends while they made a traditional celebratory meal with corn tamales. They did not narrate their work, speaking only in Quiché, but their actions provided a new perspective on the stories told in the interview context by actually showing what it is that they do with maíz. Their actions would stand beside the words of their male counterparts as a revision of those narrated words into the images of the cooking scene.



While showing the finished video at a conference in Chicago for the American Anthropological Association (AAA) I was criticized for not interviewing any female participants and suppressing their voice. I responded by pointing to the obstacles to gaining access to such interviews. In

retrospect I can see that it was true that in the midst of those obstructions I had lost their voices in terms of interview as one mode of that communication. In its place I discovered an entirely different way of experiencing maíz as a cultural artifact, an experience for which words could not be enough. The same obstructions that prevented me from interviewing these female residents afforded an opportunity to explore and compose their experience through different modes of communication which included performance, sounds, gestures, and ritual. In short, these women provided me the images of their experience.

This exposition reveals the main threads that will run throughout the sections that follow. The main idea is to explore the notion of “multimodal composition,” which has been receiving more and more attention with the continued advancement and accessibility of communication technologies. Mostly this kind of approach has been in reaction to the dominance of writing through print cultures that Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia Selfe argue has produced 150 years of composition assignments that “consist primarily of words on a page arranged into paragraphs . . . occasionally interrupted by titles, headings, diagrams, or footnotes” (1). They point out that there are only two modes represented by this model: words and visual elements that supplement the words and are distributed as text. A multimodal approach would then acknowledge all the other possible models and media that could be used to create and distribute the ideas that have been relegated strictly to print cultures and its emphasis on text. Takayoshi and Selfe admit that most notions of multimodality still emphasize the text and its ability to “exceed the alphabetic and may include still and moving images, animations, color, words, music and sound” (1). In other words, multimodal composition is still though in terms of supplementing the text. If this is true then how do those who are so heavily invested in writing and print cultures confront these other modes of writing and communication without forcing them back into old models of writing? My answer is reverse the question and rebegin the work of multimodal composition not in terms of the advancing technology that now forces us to consider the capabilities of multimedia based writing, but in terms of returning to these other modes that

have never really left us.

In *Reading Images* Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen trace the movement away from textual writing to the mass presses toward the end of the nineteenth century. The dense printed page became more entrenched within institutions of higher learning as a form of “high culture” (185). Dense textual writing was valued by institutions of education as a way to differentiate research from entertainment, the modes of the masses from those of the learned. There is a political subtext to applying the word “text” to all media forms in scholarly contexts. The dominance of alphabetic writing had the effect of suppressing the performance of what Andrea Lunsford calls the “embodied delivery” behind printed writing (170). For Lunsford this includes voice and body and the physical interaction that occurs within language that is somewhat lost on the page. She mentions Walter Ong and his formulation of “secondary orality” as the term for the modes that drive electronic technologies and posits her own term “secondary literacy” as a way to consider “literacy that is both highly inflected by oral forms, structures, and rhythms and highly aware of itself as writing, understood as variously organized and mediated systems of signification” (170). The idea of the self-awareness of literacy and the status of writing as a created and creative system goes well beyond thinking about multimodal writing as simply the integration of visual and technological effects.

Lunsford cites Kenneth Burke’s notion of the human being as the “symbol-using, symbol-misusing animal” as a way to think about the uncertain exchange of modes of communication (170). Embodied delivery embraces critical thinking about the physical interaction of language, as well as the display of performance as images. This return to multimodal composition, or the return of modes that had been lost on the page, is not to simply supplement the already existing text (e.g. PowerPoint slideshows), or replace words with some notion of pure image, but to reconsider that which is human as an essential part of the writing process. This is a physical interaction with human performance that Vivian Sobchack is trying to identify in her essay “What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject,

or Vision in the Flesh,” in which she describes her experience with the film *The Piano*:

The film not only ‘filled me up’ and often ‘suffocated’ me with feelings that resonated in and constricted my chest and stomach, but is also “sensitized” the very surfaces of my skin—as well as its own—to touch. Throughout *The Piano*, my whole being was intensely concentrated and, rapt as I was in what was there on the screen, I was also wrapped in a body that, here, was achingly aware of itself as a sensuous, sensitized, sensible material capacity (99).

This physical awareness is multimodal, but also multi-directional and even multi- interactional. Instead of defining a set of multi-terms, however, Sobchack offers a list of sensorial descriptions that grasp at a way to recapture what the images had given to her. The play of the title of the essay, “What My Fingers Knew,” suggests that there are experiences with the images of the film (“vision in the flesh”) that elude discourses of knowledge and literacy and place this experience in no certain terms; there are no terms that are proper to it, or belong to it as a discourse.

In utilizing multiple terminologies for experiences of writing and composition I am essentially writing or composing in no certain terms, because, ethically speaking, there are no terms that are proper to it. Just as the logic of film editing is to create new significance by severing meaning (a practice of non-sense), the ethic of obstructions is to create new responses by restricting the possibilities (a practice of contradiction). In the following chapters this kind of writing will become many not only because there are many ways to write but because writing is a transversal practice. It cuts broadly across all manner of knowledge and media as much as it cuts deeply into our own bodies as subjects of “the perfect human.”

I am describing a very humanist notion of writing and inscription. But this is not

humanist in the sense of the image of the perfect human, but rather in the sense that it begins with the human who inherits a past. This is a heritage that Bernard Stiegler discusses in *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus* and inherits from Martin Heidegger as Dasein's "thrownness" and is composed of "an accumulation of faults and forgettings, as legacy and transmission" (206). According to Stiegler, the history of writing and technologies of writing is marked by an archive of hesitation as a politics of memory. The notion of the human is already part of this context in which Dasein is thrown *en media res*. Writing becomes one modality of heritage seeking to compose the human as an ethical endeavor: writing as both the obstacle and the continuation of the heritage of fault and forgetting. Within this project I will discuss this ethical situation that begins with the idea that composition is not just writing, but an activity that intervenes in the transmission of a heritage of "faults and forgettings" by reconstituting its principles within the limitations of the given context.

I am calling these compositional restrictions "obstructions" following the 2003 film *The Five Obstructions*, co-created by Danish directors Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth, which experiments with remaking Leth's 1967 short film *The Perfect Human* through five specific sets of restrictive criteria, or what they refer to as "obstructions." Although I will present and analyze many aspects of both films in both textual and visual descriptions, I encourage the reader to go and watch the film(s) before, alongside, or even after as a way to reread my project as an extension of what began with *The Five Obstructions*. This is necessary not only for the sake of better comprehension, but also to perhaps continue the challenge of obstructions to recreate the concept of the "perfect human" within new contexts that remain outside the scope of this limited document. The concept of multimodal writing advocated here arrives via a deep concern for the creation of moving images, as well an interest in how visuality is transferred into contexts of writing and composition, especially through rhetorical strategies of multimedia and literacies.



## Performing the Experiment: A Configuration

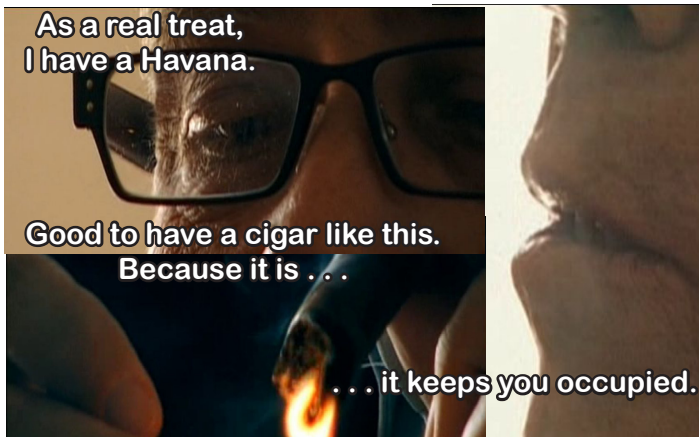
### OBSTRUCTION #1



For the time being I will explain the exigency that comes directly out of my viewings of *The Five Obstructions*. In the film von Trier freely admits his admiration for Leth's films, though there is little resemblance of visual and narrative style between the two. Leth is the more deliberate director, whose minimal sets expose the humanity of his subjects, while hiding his firm control of the composition. Von Trier likewise values the human if only to push it to its radical limits.<sup>2</sup> These differences produce particular teacher/student relationships between the two filmmakers that von Trier exploits when he approaches Leth about his concept for the film. The tension of *ethos*, style and expression, allows a collaborative context to emerge that forces a recoiling or reflexive examination of their own status as director.

The idea is to recreate or re-invent *The Perfect Human* five times under five different





sets of “obstructions” or technical and formal limitations. They sit down and discuss the possible sets of rules before deciding on them and allowing Leth to venture forth and bring back the completed film. There is no predetermined agenda for each obstruction;

they are decided based on previous experiences and in collaboration. The first set of rules, for example, makes several demands including making no shot more than 12 frames, not using a set, shooting in Cuba, and finally answering the questions that Leth had asked as part of the narration in *The Perfect Human*. Leth comments in the film that the process is “a good perversion to cultivate.” From the outset the game is explicitly perverse by violating cinematic protocol and, even more importantly, by confounding the easy attribution of authorship. By extension this challenges the priority of the original film. What sweetens the deal is that von Trier’s ethos of international auteur plays on the fact that Leth is somewhat of a mentor figure to von Trier. In challenging the instructor to remake his own film, they are flipping the pedagogical script. Furthermore, it becomes increasingly clear that von Trier’s motive is to prove to the old master his own fallibility and weakness that lies within an

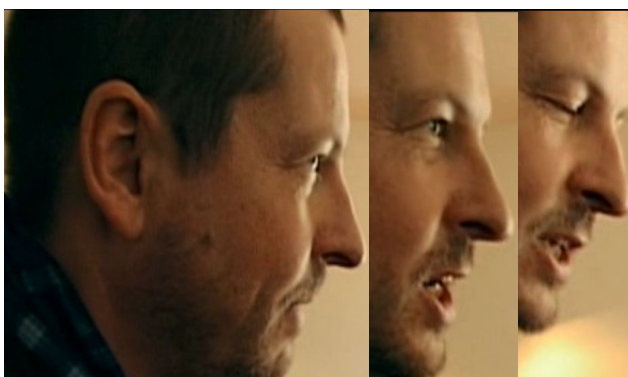




obsessive desire for aesthetic perfection. Leth and von Trier become two sides of the same coin.

By assigning a challenge to continually invent and re-invent obstructions and images, Leth and von Trier enact various scenes of ethical questioning that underlie the framing of cinematic compositions. The challenge of *The Five Obstructions* is to turn Leth's paradoxical filmmaking philosophy into a pedagogical practice of rethinking, reworking, and rewriting that is dependent on the ethical force of obstructions. As Leth makes his move from decision to action in the creation of a film the ethical field of choice itself is changed, delimited, and ultimately destabilized. The assertion of von Trier's obstructions, the dialogue that results from their collaboration, and the difficulties each faces within constant role reversal and value exchange have the effect of opening up the horizons of compositional invention.

The way that obstructions open up possibilities is through what Jean-Luc Nancy calls "dis-enclosure"—an ethical reopening of the world to that which is outside the frame (*Dis-*



**Really? I'd better not tell you what I am going to do then.**

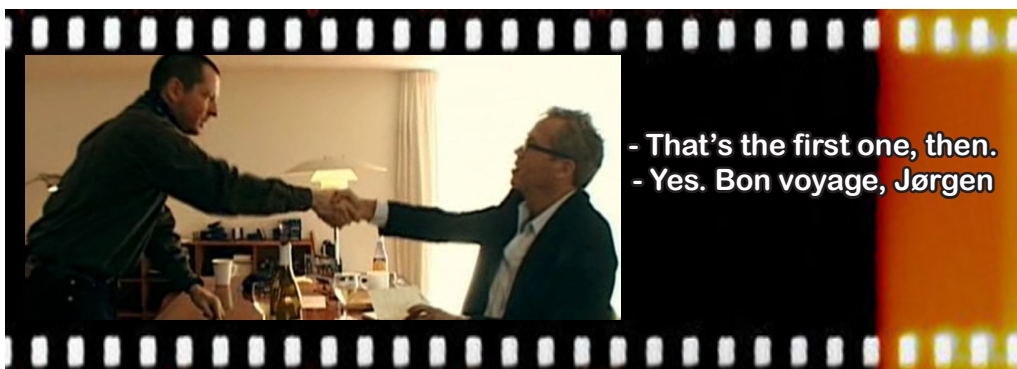
**-You've said it.**

**-No set . . .**

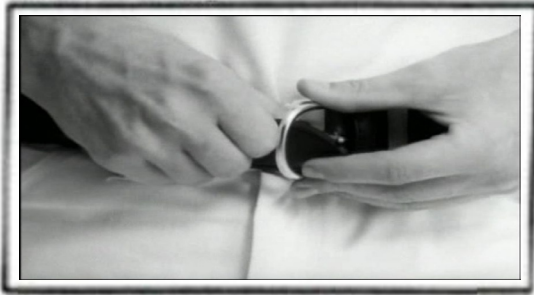
**Don't say anymore, Jørgen.**

*Enclosure 6*). According to Nancy the idea of dis-enclosure is that thought has the capacity to open up the world as living outside or beside of the concept of world as an “opening of the world into inaccessible alterity” (10). Obstructions provide a frame and engage a structure of separation and difference, but in so doing the obstructions dismantle themselves as the limit of the frame. If dis-enclosure is the opening of thought to the unthought, then obstructions open the frame to what has been excluded from it; the unframed provides a space for revising the frame as future configurations or what I will continually refer to as *re-vision*. By performing the five challenges through five new modes of obstructions, Leth and von Trier uncover or dis-enclose new configurations for investigating the perfect human.

In the first set of obstructions von Trier requires Leth to shoot the film using no shots longer than 12 frames. For the slow and deliberate Leth this obstacle will be a formal shift in his cinematic practice. The second part requires Leth to answer the questions that were asked as part of the narration of *The Perfect Human*. Von Trier is looking for Leth to solve the question of the perfect human which the narrator seems content to leave open. Von Trier then chooses to send Leth to Cuba to shoot the film as a completely unfamiliar location, a place Leth admits he has never visited. After reminding Leth that the choice is his whether or not he actually accepts the terms of the obstruction Leth lets slip that he plans on using a built set. Von Trier immediately prohibits the use of sets. The initial goal is to make Leth uncomfortable and respond to the specific demands of the assignment. Future obstructions will raise the stakes of the game by asking both Leth and von Trier to continually challenge one another with each passing obstruction.



**Begin with an Obstruction:**



Here is the human.



Here is the perfect human.



We will see the perfect human functioning.



What kind of thing is it?



We will look into that.



We will investigate that.

*The Five Obstructions* demonstrates the invention of a figure or performance that engages image not as representation, mimesis, or presence and absence, but as event, practice, choice, and action. An image is not only constituted from particular conceptual/sensual contexts, but becomes those contexts through obstructions and responses. I argue,

therefore, that multimodality is not just a buzz word for using visual media in composition contexts, but an ethical encounter with excluded and emerging modes of communication and signification that have yet to find a discursive home (*ethos*). What I will present are theories and pedagogies that will develop out of a practice of composition that is demonstrated by *The Five Obstructions*. Again, the keyword here is “obstruction” which will provide a configuration for the ethical questions involved with the teaching and creation of compositions of communication that utilize various modes of expression, including visual and aural. The theory and practice of obstructions in multimodal composition are related to the three kinds of knowledge that Aristotle discusses in the *Nicomachean Ethics*—knowing, doing, and making—and have arisen directly out of my viewings of this particular film.<sup>1</sup>

What I will argue, and continue to revisit, is how the film *The Five Obstructions* utilizes obstructions as a restrictive source of proliferating rhetorical invention and, thereby, how the concepts of obstruction and revision can be utilized within an ethical framework for compositional, oppositional, possibilities. The gap between the demands of composition and the response to those demands is a space where knowledge can be negotiated and produced or even performed. Through the process of revision images take on increasing demands for signification; the image is pregnant with meaning for which it can no longer account.

The idea behind multimodality is that human communication can successfully or usefully integrate multiple platforms of production and delivery. In the case of *The Five Obstructions*, however, the constant revaluation of images demands a discourse of failure and the emergence of new meanings. What I mean by the failure of images is related to the same paradox that von Trier perceives in *The Five Obstructions* as the idea of the “perfect human”: Leth’s insistence on his own technical perfection while he critiques the notion of a human ideal. This is the way that Roland Barthes discusses the violence of photography when he writes in *Camera Lucida*, “Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory . . . but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory” (91). By bearing



the weight of representation, images, as in writing, suggest any number of these counter-memories, or oppositional significations.

The difficulty of *writing* about *images*, especially when advocating writing in various modes, is the possibility of a performative contradiction. To confront this problem I will make two tentative proposals: one, to refrain from discussing image in any certain terms; and two, that with that uncertainty I transform this document into an image, or a series of images, or maybe even a quasi-film. With the first I am embracing a broad interpretation of what can be considered an image. This means that I understand that this document is not a film, but that I am writing about one. In the process of writing I am creating another image using both the film and text. The reason for the second is to be able to expand the model of *The Five Obstructions* so that my own project becomes a sixth, seventh, eighth, etc., obstruction, or revision of the paradigm. I take my uncertain lead about images from WJT Mitchell who, in *What Is an Image?*, defers to Wittgenstein's "language games" to examine the different ways in which we play with images (504). Mitchell even conjures up the image of theater to describe his grasp of image discourse:

Images are not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status, a history that parallels and participates in the stories we tell ourselves about our own evolution from creatures 'made in the image' of a creator to creatures who make themselves and their world in their own image. (504)

By putting forth these proposals I am confessing my own hesitation in excavating the genealogy of image and will agree with Mitchell's assertion that "images 'proper' are not stable, static, or permanent in any metaphysical sense; they are not perceived in the same way by viewers any more than are dream images" (507). I will follow Barthes one step further and argue that the instability of images make it such that there are no images

“proper” in the sense that they can take place “properly” or as some kind of sovereign entity. How we proceed with the instability, or uncertainty, of images is a question of *ethos* and ethical inquiry. By limiting the universe of choices, obstructions force our hand to accept certain sets of constraints or principles as contingent. The ethics of obstruction allow for the continual revising of both principles and constraints.

Appearance is a particular discourse of vision, or a transition from a general figure of vision to seeing as a discursive experience. This reading of figure and discourse comes from Jean-François Lyotard’s essay “Taking the Side of the Figural,” in which he writes,

the position of art is a refutation of the position of discourse [and] . . . indicates a function of figure, which is not signified, and this functions both at the edge of and within discourse. It indicates that the transcendence of the symbol is the figure, that is, a spatial manifestation that linguistic space cannot incorporate without being shaken, an exteriority that cannot be interiorised as *signification*. (37)

Lyotard describes the passing of vision to seeing as passing from “the world” to “fantasy,” or a shifting of the world as figure into a frame of discourse. This an integral event between figure and discourse that Lyotard registers in a transition of the status of the figure: “the figure is displaced: no longer is it only the image of presence or of representation, but the form of the staging, the form of discourse itself, and more profoundly still, a phantasmic matrix” (43). In *Lyotard: Writing the Event* Geoffrey Bennington explains that Lyotard’s aim is not just to embrace figure over discourse, but to demonstrate “an originary complication of discourse and figure” (88). As part of the first set of obstructions, Leth must confront his own “originary complication” and answer the questions that he posed in the original voice-over narration of *The Perfect Human*. The questions had originally functioned as descriptions about the images—they did not require responses or were indifferent to the

responses. The challenge becomes one of editing, of the cut, and the ultimate framing of the subject. In order for Leth to succeed he must fail by undercutting the deliberate duration of shots and ambiguity of the original film. This obstruction forces Leth to dis-integrate the film in terms of both discourse and figure.

### How to Make the Perfect Image



Rules provide an important working principle for me. I invent rules. A new set for each film – most often with the purpose of delimitating my technical possibilities.

Film is a series of images put together. Not a sequence, not a story, but a series of images, nothing more. The order of the images is less important than the single image. The final consequence of that assertion is that the images may be put together blindfolded. (Danish Film Institute 3)



Both of these statements were written by Jørgen Leth. Their significance lies in their apparent contradiction: the image as both arbitrary and essential; it constitutes the fundamental feature of cinematic arts while requiring no fundamental structure. And yet, Leth asserts a central importance to establishing sets of rules that will, in his words, delimit his technical abilities. But why limit the possibilities when the final result could be assembled blindfolded? Why a regulated image? What is the connection between image and invention within the event of the cinema? And, equally important, why Jørgen Leth? Many filmmakers have discussed their own film image orthodoxy, but what makes these statements stand out from the crowd?



Leth has the perfect answer for these questions. Or rather, his paradoxical style is the context for the kind of perfection which *The Five Obstructions* practices as a kind of image-making. Leth directed his short film *The Perfect Human* composed as a quasi-ethnographic study into the anatomy and *habitus* of the human being, complete with documentary style “voice of god” narration. What is so fascinating about Leth’s film is not just his use of the paradoxical regulations based style, but the conversation that this style has with the film’s title. It does not matter how much chance Leth believes is involved in the creation of the cinematic image, in the end he has filled the scene with his own delimiting factors. This is the quintessential film auteur move, leaving your signature all over the screen that was created within a system meant to erase such fingerprints. There is no question that this is a Leth film—he is the author of the rules and he has set the meanings by defining the procedure and form. Leth is himself, so to speak, the perfect human.

This constantly shifting field of ethical choice and act is at the heart of how Leth can speak about a discursive “perfect human” within the figural plane of the cinematic image. But the assignment implied by Leth’s aesthetic and technical paradox is not to identify and overcome the ethical difficulties of cinematic image-making, but to expose filmmaking itself to what Charles Scott has discussed as “the question of ethics”; a discursive recoiling action that turns concepts and logics on themselves to “rethink, rework, rewrite” (8). The recoiling question of ethics does not seek to find a new ethics but to expose the limits of knowledge and question established values. In other words, Leth’s paradox of the cinematic image demands a recoiling of the primary questions. The recoiling movement is a questioning that turns back on itself and places the practice and its author into question. For now I want to focus the question of ethics on the image of perfection. *The Five Obstructions* engages a peripheral process that undercuts the investments in authorship and hermeneutics and admits that there is no “perfect” universal code or fixed expression. The film illustrates what I will be calling a peripheral process as the re-vision of multimodal composition, by not only demonstrating the experience of peripheral process but by performing the experiment.

## The Peripheral Process of Obstruction

Let me ask a few questions that will enter into a discussion that will resituate film studies in a general cross-cutting of all visual fields. What exactly is at stake when we create cinematic images or images in general? What do I mean when I say that *The Five Obstructions* puts filmmaking at stake? What is the crisis or issue involved in the notion of obstruction in the image making process? What is the obstruction or difficulty that has created a concept like film studies within institutions of higher learning? How can we recoil at the concepts in order to reconsider these issues/difficulties as virtues?

I want to make clear that I am discussing this film in various ways; I am making distinctions that are not so clean cut within the film itself. There are issues with the multiple films involved, as well as the relationship between von Trier and Leth. These are in no way the only ones, nor can they be completely unlaced from each other. The various reproductions of Leth's original *The Perfect Human* can only be understood as completely contextual, that is tied up within the specific obstructions that von Trier prescribes. Each reproduction, however, takes on a life of its own through the prescription of each obstruction. In other words, it is the obstruction that gives life to each film. The composition of each new film is absolutely dependent on the tension that develops in the relationship between von Trier and Leth.

The issue for both directors is Leth's film *The Perfect Human* as both cinematic expression (the film titled *The Perfect Human*) and as humanist concept born from similar cinematic concerns that are revealed differently within each filmmaker's style. Leth's quintessential moment in *The Perfect Human* is watching his perfect human dance on screen as the voice-of-god narration suggests that the perfect human moves "in a room with no limits." Contrast this with von Trier's own *Breaking the Waves* (1996) in which the female main character is transformed into a kind of sacrificial lamb while subjected to all kinds

of sadistic experiences. There is a crisis of authorship, of style, of demand and expectation marked on the surface of von Trier's obstructions. If, as Eisenstein suggested, cinema is conflict, then, the relationship between these two filmmakers is cinema at its most basic level.

The task of the film (which is multiple) is to consider the perfect human as both humanist concept (that of the relationship that generates human expression) and cinematic concept (that of the fixed object of desire). The imperfection of humanity through the invention and use of technologies is one line that Stiegler traces in *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus*. In Stiegler's narrative, imperfection is embodied within the figures of Prometheus as provision and punishment and Epimetheus as fault and forgetting. Stiegler argues that the Prometheus "makes no sense by itself. It is only consistent through its doubling by Epimetheus who in turn doubles up on himself—first, in committing the fault of forgetting . . . [and] second, in reflecting upon it, in a re-turn which is always too late" (186). Prometheus represents presence and Epimetheus is absence, but it is by the failure of the latter to provide humanity with survival qualities that humans acquire an intimate relationship with technology.

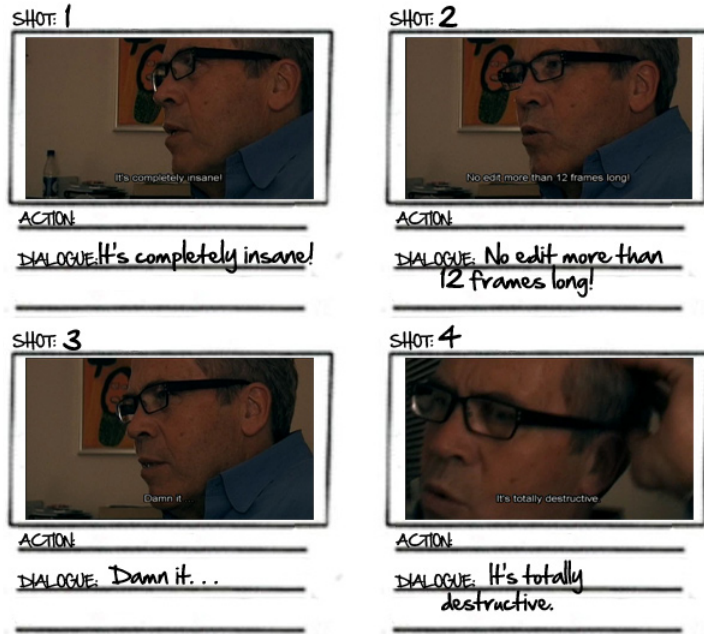
In *The Five Obstructions* von Trier and Leth take on the figures of Prometheus and Epimetheus respectively. By giving out each assignment, von Trier has taken on the role of naming the obstacles that Leth must confront, while Leth is given the opportunity to return to his original film and re-turn and revise the particular images that he chose to compose "the perfect human." On the one hand there is an issue of representation; who or what is the "perfect human," directly answered by Leth's original film ("watch the perfect human dance," "here is the perfect human's ear," "watch the perfect human eat"). On the other hand, there is the error of representation: as long as there is representation there is no perfect human present. Von Trier obsessively seeks to reveal this absence through the obstructions, while Leth holds on to his belief that his presence will overcome the lack of perfection.

The film confronts these errors through revision, or a recoiling movement between

the obstructions that von Trier produces and Leth's responses in the form of short films. Interactions are structured in such a way that the dialogue is always open-ended allowing for invention to occur in the midst of waiting for the response. These discussions are, however, always highly mediated between human and machine, whether through the apparatus of the camera or the screen. The set of devices and practices that produce cinematic images have a unique capacity for engaging compositional invention.

#### Moving image

technology began with the desire for faithful reproduction of life experiences, rather than the representation of narrative and aesthetic forms. In an essay titled "The Machine," A.R. Fulton reminds us that "motion pictures did not originate as art but as a machine. They were invented. That is, the machinery that makes the pictures, and that makes them motion pictures, was invented. The term *motion pictures* means the device as well as the art" (27). The tension between art and machine confronts the problems that André Bazin perceived in the first volume of *What Is Cinema?* as part of the primacy of the image. The central role of the image was a result of what he called the "myth of total cinema" or the idea that the cinematic screen somehow provides a window on the world, a reality that is more real than real, a horizon that obstructions come to (dis)figure (21). The myth of total cinema also posits that the accumulation of image technology necessarily serves a mimetic function—to get as close to nature as possible—that erases the boundaries between its technological origins and its artistic aspirations. As a result, the art of cinematic images obscure their



history of invention.<sup>3</sup>

The obscuring of technology for the benefit of reality that Bazin references is a paradox of mechanical reproduction. Walter Benjamin uses the phrase “equipment free aspect of reality” in his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” to describe what he sees as “the height of artifice” and that “the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology” (233). D.N. Rodowick explains in *Reading the Figural* that in these phrases Benjamin saw cinema as the perfect vehicle for erasing the distinctions of mediated experience because it “not only produced mechanical images whose illusion was to appear to be free of technological artifice; it also inspired the utopian longing for reality free of technological mediation” (39).

For both Bazin and Benjamin the cinematic is structured by its particular modes of reproduction, repeating the fault of Epimetheus by increasing the transparency of the image through enhancing its artifice and demanding that the technology be forgotten. The gift of presence can be celebrated by forgetting the lack which the proliferation of technology signifies. Epimetheus is not, however, a lack or even forgetting, but a surplus for Prometheus’ gift. According to Stiegler, the consequence of the failure of Epimetheus is that humanity now possesses “[d]iscovery, insight, invention, imagination” as flaws that force us to “invent, realize, produce qualities” (*The Fault of Epimetheus* 193). If we take the title of Leth’s film literally, then the perfect human would be the one without flaws, the naked human, and the one who is not capable of invention and creation—the being of pure survival. The imperfect human, the human that suffers from his own lack, is also the human of surplus *technē*, of the excess of fiction and who looks toward the future of invention. Stiegler views pros-thesis as “what is placed in front, that is, what is outside” and that it is this outside pros-thesis that “constitutes the very being of what it lies outside of, then this being is *outside itself*” (*The Fault of Epimetheus* 193). As artifacts of this technological imperfection, cinematic images inherit the same peripheral perspective of the human pros-thesis.

## **Sense, Absence and Absense: A Re-turn of Representation**

This is a chance to freeze the frame, so to speak, to now question the status of image as representation and to argue for revision as a way to consider the inventive sense of obstructions. Framing is the pros-thesis of obstructions. There is a literal framing that sets the boundary of the image and determines the scene. Obstructions function as a set of limitations that frame the conditions of the assignment and the possibilities of the response. In the case of representation, the framing of the image determines the discursive reference of the scene. The typical use of the term *representation* is to emphasize the simulated function of the image as a presence which points to an absence. The image as representation acts as the matrix of relationships between subject and object. It is not inappropriate to discuss images—paintings, photographs, films, etc.—in terms of media; images as representation do indeed “mediate” the subject’s experiences with objects. This would be Aristotle’s sense of imitation or reflection that gives pleasure based on its status as imitation (*Poetics*, 1448b5). In his description of the proper role of representation Aristotle closely tethers pleasure and learning (“gathering the meaning of things”) even in the presence of painful objects (“lowest animals” or “dead bodies”). By asserting this connection, Aristotle allows for a pleasurable response to the *execution* or the artistic delivery of a particular representation. He locates the pleasure derived from representation within its rhetorical qualities. Representation is the word for a continual “[re]gathering the meaning” of things through a deployment of rhetorical and artistic invention.

Although Aristotle’s emphasis seems to be on the empirical significance of imitation, the rhetorical implications allude not to a status of imitation, but of execution. This would mean that representation can not only serve as signifier, a presence pointing toward an absence, but as it is its own presence. In *The Ground of the Image* Jean-Luc Nancy interrogates the empirical value of representation by arguing that “[t]he *re-* of the

word *representation* is not repetitive but intensive” and, consequently, emphasizes an accentuation (“frequentative”) rather than an empirical value (35). Nancy returns to the Latin word *repraesentatio* as a translation from the Greek word *hypotyposis* was employed for manifestations or production of the figural: [*hypotyposis*] designates a sketch, a scheme, the presentation of lines of a figure in the largest possible sense“ (*Ground* 36). The value of representation is in its suggestion of revelatory performance; responses to particular assignments cannot be completely regulated by obstructions. The performance of invention occurs between the demands of the obstructions and the emergence of the response.



THE FRAME OF THE IMAGE

Written in response to

Jean-Luc Nancy and Roland Barthes

FADE IN:

INT. COLLABORATIVE CONTEXT - DAY

An empty room. No boundaries. Two humans dance in a room with no boundaries. One is named ABSENCE, the other ABSENSE. Their dances constantly intersect.

JEAN-LUC NANCY enters and smiles wryly at the sight. He is joined quickly by ROLAND BARTHES. They silently greet one another and return to watching the dance.

NANCY

Representation not only presents something that . . . is simply present: in truth, it presents what is absent from presence pure and simple, its being as such or even its sense or truth. . . .

[T]he absence of the thing . . . intersects with what I have already called *absense*, or sense inasmuch as it is precisely not a thing. (*Ground* 37)

He turns his gaze toward ABSENSE. In ABSENSE the image would make present that which the represented object cannot show of itself. There is something always hidden away or concealed among things ("beings"?) within their everyday situations. This is the sense of EXCESS within the pregnant image.

FADE OUT

Nancy does not employ the word "absense" to exterminate absence or representation. In fact, he is clear that the one "intersects" with the other; *absense* (rather than lack) and *absence* are two sides of representation. It is only when re-presentation is considered within a framework of intensity, rather than repetition, can absense be disclosed. Absense is ultimately that which is suppressed in order to maintain healthy subjectivity and to stabilize representation. At the same time this sacrifices the political implications of the conditions of subjectivity through aesthetics of representation. But just as absence and absense intersect one another, there is always a residue, a trace, of the image on the other side.

Nancy suggests that the residue of absence does intersect this other "knowing" which he terms *absense*. It is important to remember that it is not just that images contain this residue or trace that is a key to unlocking their true meaning. This is the discovery that Barthes writes about in "The Third [Sense]"<sup>4</sup> when he interrogates a film still from Sergei



Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible Part I* (1944). What Barthes is attempting to expose is a sense that emanates from the still image that slips through the hermeneutics of representation and signification. Barthes demonstrates how meaning would be part of the naming of the signifier, while a third or "obtuse" sense resists this naming and instead approaches the spectator from the side of fascination or pleasure.<sup>5</sup>

FADE IN

BARTHES interrupts the scene of representation. The OLD WOMAN'S expression is beyond description: unnatural, obtuse. She seems on the verge of SPEECH. There is no SOUND.

BARTHES

A question forced itself upon me: what is it in this tearful old woman that poses for me the question of the signifier? (*Third 56*)

One frame later she is CRYING. It is gone.

FADE OUT



Barthes performs his discovery as an interruption at the informational and symbolic levels of which he has just finished assessing and then acts surprised at his own fascination: “Is that all? No, for I am still held by the image. I read, I receive (and probably even first and foremost) a third meaning—evident, erratic, obstinate” (53). So surprised is Barthes, in fact, that he makes the mistake of saying that he *reads* the third meaning, before adding *receive*. The move is quite subtle, but by allowing both words to remain it problematizes Barthes’ role as spectator. Is he an active reader or passive receiver of meaning? Is there an active receiving that must take place to perceive this obtuse meaning? How could we understand this active receiving, or what would an active receiving *look like*?

Each one of Leth’s films actively receives von Trier’s obstructions in very contextually specific responses, suspended between obstruction and image. Therefore, these films cannot be separated from their pedagogical placement within the context of the collaborative effort. The react-and-respond structure becomes a game testing the ethical autonomy of the other and its implications for how images are created. For each response both obstruction and response are required to explore the image of *The Perfect Human* as an inventive logic of composition that involves framing and reframing the shot, composing the images and the mise-en-scene, animation as cinematic image, facilitating the figural event that Lyotard for the form of discourse and dismissing notions of image as purely representational.

The collaborative context of the film between von Trier and Leth is a negotiation of pedagogical roles and the criteria that define them. Their interaction puts into question the stability of the teacher/student relationship not simply by reversing the binary but by doing away with the binary itself. By engaging in such intervention, a recoiling pedagogy emerges that directly effects the surface of the cinematic image. With *The Five Obstructions*, von Trier and Leth have reintroduced us to the image as a pursuit of the “perfect” image, or the image as always placing perfection into question. This is an image that is never done with itself as illusion or representation, but as the libidinal image of “photographic ecstasy” that Barthes

mentions at the end of *Camera Lucida* (119). *The Five Obstructions* (or the five obstructions as separate but linked responses) constitute rhetorical vessels that reveal questions of ethics within the cinematic image.

### **Buried Stories: Inter-diction and the Split Subject**



In the first page of *Genesis*, Michel Serres recounts “A Short Tall Tale” in which the narrator finds himself sailing amidst the tranquility of the Saragosa Sea. He notices “thousands of tiny sparks” which turned out to be empty bottles also floating in the sea which the narrator describes as “countless little vessels, and each one no doubt bore its message.” Later, in danger of shipwreck, he collects some of the bottles together as part of a makeshift raft. The narrator does not discount the individual messages from each individual bottle (“each carried its hope and its despair”). These other meanings are subsumed, however briefly, for the sole purpose of survival. However, the thousands of gleaming messages of hope and despair remain, intact but shifting within the currents of the sea. It is no wonder that Serres sees unity as “dazzling.”

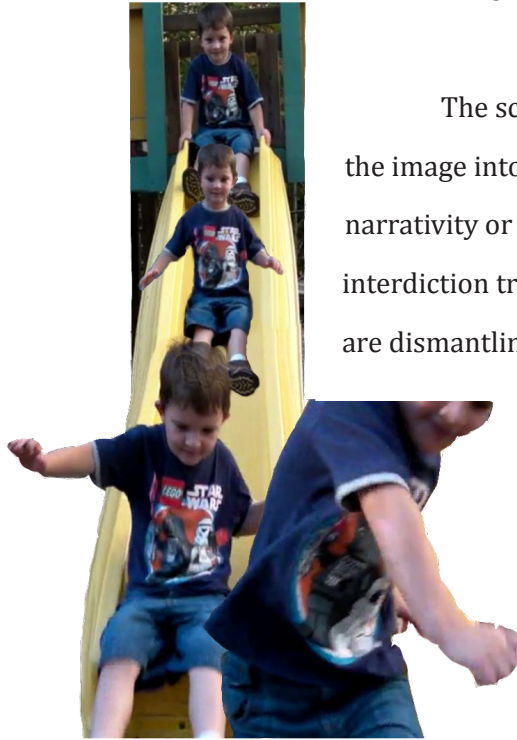
Lars von Trier called making *The Five Obstructions* a search “for something fictional, not factual. If one discovers or seeks a story, to say nothing of a point that communicates,

then one suppresses it" (*Danish Film Institute* 31). What von Trier is getting at is that there is never just one story. There is no totality of story, no being entirely at home (as either a *technē* or *poiesis*), and certainly no way of taking all story into account in a semiotic sense (language or *logos*). Story does not make sense; on the contrary, story makes too much sense. Much like the gleaming bottles that floating in the Saragosa Sea, there remain stories buried beneath stories, each one carrying the message of its hopes and despairs (1).

Here is where the water gets a little rocky. I will return to the Saragosa Sea and the discovery that by gathering those disparate parts floating in the sea together under one structure that survivability was possible. What I mean here by survivability is a concept of the reality principle in which something must die in order to sustain life—the pleasure principle must be renounced consciously and death must be simultaneously confronted and repressed to maintain an order in life. Story reveals a loss introduced by a cut; this is what Barthes referred to as a “perforated discourse” or an obtuseness that tears at the heart of meaning and significance having always moved between affirming and renouncing desire (*Pleasure* 8).

In his own confession of pleasure, that is, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes takes from Jacques Lacan an opposition between pleasure as the ability to express one’s desire in words (this would be found within a story), and bliss as an inexpressible counterpart that is, as he says, “inter-dicted” (stories buried beneath the story) (21). He is careful to note that pleasure and bliss are parallel forces that cannot meet and rendered incommunicable in which bliss is not simply a higher order pleasure as bliss arises out of the text “like a scandal” and is somehow “always the trace of a cut” (20). Finally Barthes asserts that the subject, caught between the articulation of pleasure and the inexpressibility of bliss, becomes a “split subject, who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the inconsistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall” (21).

*"This is how the perfect human falls."*



The scandal of *The Five Obstructions* is that it places the image into a “perforated discourse” extracting it from the narrativity or the survivability of story in which the pleasure of interdiction trumps the assurance of unity. Von Trier and Leth are dismantling the life boat and setting the bottles adrift upon

the Saragosa Sea. They do this not just through collaborating or negotiation but through confrontation of the obstructions. By reproducing Leth’s *The Perfect Human* in five different ways the obstructions serve not only as a revaluation of the film but as a way for Leth and von Trier to embody a split subject within perforated

discourse that cannot be repaired.

It must ultimately end with the collapse of the subject as the fall of the perfect human, only to rebegin with the intrusion of what Barthes calls “an eccentric, extraordinary term”<sup>6</sup> that re-places all terms into question—a trace of a cut (*Pleasure* 55). Story, in a compositional sense, frames the meaning as a matrix of forces, in the same way that Derrida sees structure as “always taken from a history of meaning [sens]” which is, as he remarks, a way “to conceive of structure on the basis of a full presence which is beyond play” (“Structure” 353). The rupture or absence of a central discourse allows for sens(e) alongside or within meaning and image is no longer grounded merely in representation. What I mean by discussing the image in terms of a trace of the cut is that it introduces a universe of significance that cannot be accounted for through signifiers.

## Technics in All Its Appearances

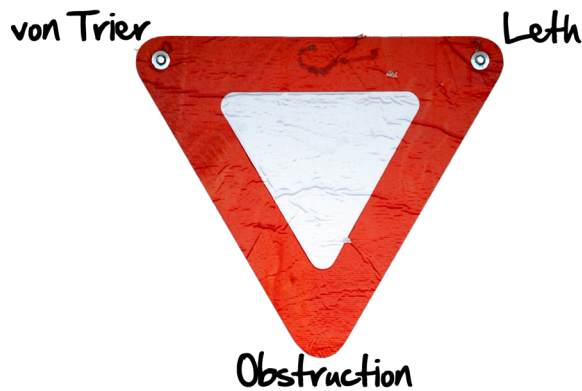
Let me pause here to review where we have been so far. The film *The Five Obstructions* provides a model for understanding multimodal composition as ethical re-vision. The obstructions that von Trier gives Leth sets the limits for Leth's visual responses, and in turn adjusts the possibilities for the next obstruction. Re-vision is an ethical method of performative invention that contests the authority of the urtext as an ideal expression. New significance emerges from within the "perforated discourse" of composition (the "composed" subject). Rather than dividing the duties of theory and practice, thinking and making, this method of re-vision foregrounds the dynamic role of *poiesis* in providing an ecology of invention for the *technē* of doing and making. Alterity is a symptom of ecstasis: the dis-ease of misrecognition and metamorphosis as something else is "brought forth" out of the process. To ignore alterity, or anomaly, is to repress *poiesis* and the possibilities of ecstasis that performance allows.

In his book *The Avant-Garde Meets Andy Hardy* Robert Ray advocates for invention as a way to inform *technē*. Ray demonstrates the value of various avant-garde techniques as recalcitrant pedagogical methods that can create the conditions for ecstasis. Ray is looking mostly at surrealism and how practitioners translated it to cinematic expressions. He takes their methods and turns them into teaching tools, or ways of generating knowledge through image making. Ray discovers, like Barthes, that there is significance outside of meaning that eludes meaning; this significance is lost to discourse. While Barthes struggles to write about the obtuse sense on the surface of the still image, Ray embraces this sense as a sublime moment of escape for the figural. Ray is able to identify ways to extend significance and sense toward pregnant expressions. Meaning is hardly lost; in fact, there is too much meaning to take into account. This is the para-logic of multi-modality that obstructions invite as the prospect of their own ethical questionability.

What is most valuable is how Ray suggests this as a way to teach through a model

of invention rather than of dissemination/insemination. By doing so he not only unfixes the object of study, but also destabilizes the roles between teacher and student. It is neither complete annihilation nor negative deconstruction (simplistic reversal) of the pedagogical roles, but a somewhat recoiling sense of how knowledge is created and shared. This is the affirmative deconstruction, the spiraling and rebounding question, that Victor Vitanza calls for as “Saying Yes twice” to the privileged and the supplementary reading (126). We cannot be satisfied with a simple reversal of binaries; multimodal composition encounters ethics when it is concerned with the tensions in the binary model. As for von Trier and Leth, they pose tensions within the film on a visceral and openly polemical level. As their roles move back and forth between mentors and students, friends and rivals, they never share a common goal for the project: von Trier has a distinct desire to force Leth to fail, while Leth is trying to find every conceivable way to get around the obstructions. What does intercede between them is that the obstructions dictate a horizon of ethical action.

The triangulation is as follows:



with the obstructions as the middle term, or the eccentric term that places the triangle into question. The obstructions that Leth faces in the first scene are meant to test the formal demands of his *ethos*; von Trier forces Leth to leave his *habitus* and confront the wild potential of the perfect human. It is from this ethical shift that Leth and von Trier must work through their own ideas of the perfect human. In the final obstruction/film that von Trier composes himself, the prescripts of the obstruction restrict Leth to providing only the voiceover narration which von Trier has pre-written. It also reuses some of the old documentary footage that is part of the film we have



already been watching, leading to the questionability of the limits of the obstructions: where and when do they begin and end? It is unclear whether von Trier has come to terms with his failure to make his teacher experience and embrace failure, but within the cinematic frame of this final obstruction the goals of perfection and failure cross paths.

This seems to me to be the stakes in composing in a multimodal context. Realizing the struggles and conflicts that occur in choice and action on the procedural plane is an issue of two things: how to make images that are not pre-determined by theoretical frameworks and how to teach this without reverting to those same kinds of frameworks. These kinds of pedagogical issues deal with both technical aspects of visual composition and how theoretical/cultural difficulties affect the technical/physical image-making process (rather than just an ideological or historical argument). This affects art, writing, communication, and anything that deals with “being” and being human, as well as technics in all its appearances. In this crisis there is a distinct post-hermeneutic resistance to producing meaning and a concern for the costs of representation. Like Barthes we must not be so quick to pass over that obtuse image or reject the “perforated discourse” not only because it may hold a potential for understanding but because those are the traces of the fault of Epimetheus, the very expression of the perfect human.

### **The Challenge of Obstruction**

The collaboration between Leth and von Trier is libidinal in the sense that they each have an unspoken desire to push their individual agendas. Each obstruction emerges from this pedagogical relationship as a generative resource. In this pedagogical context the perfect human is an image that is not made but rather unmade/revisioned out of the failure of representation. Cinematic images are themselves caught within a position of continual coiling and recoiling; a recoiling that Barthes seemed to discern when he could interrupt the movement, or expose it to infinite delay to summon its content back from the past—



distorted, indifferent, obtuse. This delay does not relate so much to its affect as much as its freedom of movement and against a static representation that Barthes saw as “the *final state* of reality, its intractability . . . what cannot be transcended, withdrawn” (*Pleasure* 45). Not only can obstruction be withdrawn, it demands to be withdrawn and re-drawn in order to delay this final state of representation.

*Disorientation* is the title Bernard Stiegler used for his second volume of *Technics and Time*, a contemporary disorientation he links to technologies of speed and the industrialization of memory.<sup>7</sup> Stiegler captures the idea of delayed action in images as part of the mechanical and chemical process of photo development:



The photographic vision is a re-vision. Its delay is originary. The past returns completely as the present that it was, without loss and yet only as a remainder: a spirit, a phantom. Returns as a past present for me even though it can never be a question of my past: it can only be a question of a past that I have not lived. Astral, emerging from a night of an infinitely distanced past, a photographed light links my present to a past I have not known, yet is familiar as a temporal maternity. (*Disorientation* 15)



Images record a familiar yet disoriented past. It is a past that was never lived; it is a framed past, or a phantom past that neither represents an experience from the front of the camera nor from behind. It is a developed and continually developing and changing past either

by virtue of the silver nitrates flammability or the instability of digital code. The delay of cinematic images is not just a matter of suspending movement, but of the resistance to a final state. Cinematic re-vision is a possibility of delay by re-drawing the frames of the image.

I am addressing cinematic re-vision by using the idea of obstruction to see how composing images is not just a matter of ideological difficulty, but as difficulty and obstruction—choice/action (leading of course to the ethical and how this connects to theories of images). This fundamentally changes how we could teach materials that involve any kind of writing or image making. We must first be willing to acknowledge the absence of the perfect human, or at least perfection as the fixed notion of an unchanging object. The constraints of obstruction allow for the emergence of a constantly changing object, or as the object of constant change. The question will be how to identify the difficulties, the restrictions, and the conflicts that students must face that will delimit their possibilities not as negation but as an affirmative deconstruction. This must be connected to the notion of continual vision and revisioning, working and reworking. The work becomes a “body without organs” that is distinguished not by its similarity but by its radical difference within its protean forms.

How does this connect to the idea of the “perfect human” as an ethical and practical concept? *The Five Obstructions* revolves around the use of obstructions coupled with Leth’s film *The Perfect Human* in order to create new valuations of the perfect human (or the cinematic image in our case). The films are a paired example that parallels the tensions of the relationship between Leth and von Trier, and is expressed through obstructions and visual responses. The concern from a semiotics perspective is the *transforming* being in the movement of meaning toward an ultimate purpose, as opposed to the *being* as the split-subject who *never steps in the same river twice*—an *ethos* of the perfect human relating not to *telos* (progress, destiny) but to *bios* (sensation, affect). If we must understand the ethical situation of the human as always in movement rather than the stasis of perfection, then the

emphasis would be on the possibility for change not structured by negation and would make perfection or stasis impossible.

We need notions of representation, of image-making, and composition that would recognize this multimodal situation as a decidedly ethical one. But how do we acknowledge the semiotic meaning making machine that film studies has inherited without reverting to hermeneutic approaches? This would seem to me to be the difficulty or obstruction that faces the teaching of a multimodal composition that allows students to go out with cameras in order to perform the experiment. Without obstructions, or a theory of composition that considers the ethics of obstruction, there will be a tendency to rely on old worn patterns and representations. If there is an *eros* involved in the pleasure of the experiential and experimental image, then there is an equally compelling death drive that survives on the promise of the fixed image. The coupling of obstructions with the constant changing of revision can have the added benefit of reintroducing desire and pleasure to the assignment.

### **“The Distribution of the Sensible”**

In *The Future of the Image* Jacques Rancière sees this very undecidability in Barthes’s work as a belonging to a trope of reversibility “between the silence of images and what they say” (11). *Obtuse* meanings are produced within economies of silence. While the inheritance of semiotics is to insist on discourse—that is, the hermeneutic demand that the silence speak—the obtuse sense remains indifferent to a response. Either way Rancière points out that both are translations of image that “conceive the image as speech which holds its tongue” (11). The cut, break, or seam is the site of the loss of meaning, which explains why the film still is so important to revealing the obtuse sense. The film still is the image of hesitation, always on the verge of the next image, always on the edge of the cut. The cut is negative space insofar as it remains open to creative revision—a space that Barthes engages with his own revision of his own semiotic methods.

I return here to Barthes because he provides the possibility of questionability or undecidability of images as pure presencing, yet continually slip back into the depths of concealment. In Rancière's formulation, Barthes' project is spectral because it is caught within the silence of the figure of the image; it is silenced within the very term "image" as a certain product of forces that determine particular forms of "imageness." The hesitation of Barthes' thought is a reaction to the rhetorical narrowness that constitutes the boundaries of image discourse. The tension that Rancière perceives in Barthes' work is the "scandal" of finding pleasure in this disturbance of *atopos*, or the condition of being in between (interdiction). Barthes writes that spatially, temporally, textually "we are all caught up in the truth of languages," a spatialized truth which refers to a proper place which offer the conditions for subjectivization, a *topos* which any kind of adjacency threatens.<sup>8</sup> He quotes Friedrich Nietzsche who also understands the spatialization of the conditions of truth as "a heaven of mathematically distributed concepts" from which truth is pulled as "conceptual god[s]" (*Pleasure* 28). What is interesting about the spatialization of truth is that for both Barthes and Nietzsche it requires conditions for the distribution of concepts to establish what can be considered truth. In *What is Metaphysics?* Heidegger formulated metaphysics as "inquiry beyond or over beings, which aims to recover them as such and as a whole for our grasp" (106).<sup>9</sup> The process of recovery is tied to the spatial metaphor by an assembling of truth concepts, a territorializing of *poiēsis* by *technē* that lacks the deterritorializing rupture introduced by the openness of adjacency or ec-stasis.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of images the use of spatial terms can be problematic. We can speak of photographic or cinematic space that continues the application of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's use of "geological movements" from their collaborative effort in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deterritorialization is the releasing of the "lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata, and territories" through an oscillation of rupturing movements. They describe the process as continually collapsing and reassembling conceptual relays that explode concepts like representation. Images perform these "lines of flight" not as a function of absence as

containers for meaning, but as excessive significance (4). As with Barthes's explanation of pleasure and bliss, the two processes of territorialization/deterritorialization cannot be separated, are two sides of the same coin (code), and cannot be contained nor sustained by the code:

The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but a wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome. (11)

Of course, Deleuze and Guattari's model of the rhizome breaks down the spatial imagery and calculation which characterizes the recovery and distribution within the spheres of Nietzsche's "conceptual gods" as explained by Barthes (*Pleasure* 28) They do not wish to be caught in the middle of the undecidability of the decision between the two sides. It avoids asking the question as to why Barthes must freeze the cinematic image in order to pervert the image, why freezing the image is a perversion at all. There is no repression in the rhizomatic image, just as desire does not lack, it is pure excess.<sup>11</sup> If the image is an assemblage, a body without organs, than it cannot be completely defined by a particular frame. The paradox of obstructions is that the regulation that they prescribe provides the opportunity to continually dismantle the regulating structure of the frame, or the revision of truth concepts as conceptual gods.

Rancière responds to the distribution of truth concepts by arguing that the only reason that we have any concept of image or imageness is because it has already been established as a political possibility beforehand, which for him is always on the level of community. This is what he refers directly as a "distribution of the sensible" or a "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. A distribution of the sensible, therefore, establishes at one and the same time something in common that is shared and exclusive parts" (*Politics* 12). The distribution of the sensible makes aesthetics into aesthetics *qua* politics which is itself regulated by "what is seen and what can be said about it" (13). Aesthetics is not a mode of representation, but a regime of processes and methods that establish "modes of articulation between doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships" (10).

Rancière makes certain not to confuse aesthetics as a political act, but as the surfacing of what determines the possibility of presence and absence in the alterity of the image. Accordingly, we can only discuss the image as image because of this ordered deployment of relations. This is how Rancière can declare that "*mimesis* is not resemblance but a certain regime of resemblance" (*Future* 73). The ethical sense of this expression is that the limiting effect that these distributions have is not one of constraint or negation but one that makes images and the creation of images possible.

By thinking of images as products of a distribution of ordered meanings not only do the images themselves become radically contingent but the interpretative authority of criticism is itself in a position of questionability. To speak of "aesthetics" or "images" is thus to always already be peering through a distorted lens, and methods come to us as the blind men touching different parts of the elephant. This should not be taken as criticism towards inventive methods of questioning and discovery, but an attempt to engage the hesitation and contingency of multimodality that haunts both *poiēsis* and *technē*: the interdiction of imag(e)inative presence.

### **Enfram(ed)ing Bodies: Film/Skin**

As mentioned before, to conceive of images as composed through a distribution

of systems of doing and making is not necessarily an act of negation. Indeed, Rancière is of the opinion that it is through the territorializing function of these seemingly discrete regimes that certain inventive opportunities become visible. Rancière says that *mimesis* is not a straightforward understanding of resemblance, but a system of understanding a certain kind of resemblance: “[m]imesis is not an external constraint that weighed on the arts and imprisoned them in resemblance. It is the fold in the order of ways of making and social occupations that rendered them visible and thinkable, the disjunction that made them exist as such.” This is how the imitation of art can be distinguished from the criteria of resemblance that other functions demanded in terms of the religious, the ethical, and the social (*Future* 73). So, *mimesis* was actually a system of differentiation, or folding of ordered criteria, that allowed images to exist as projections of art that could be made visible within a realm of artistic space—to come out from the background of mimetic order.

What this means for images is that they become visible insofar as they exist within a perforated discourse of interdiction; they are fundamentally obtuse because they are not inherently visible, and only surfacing through a tear or cut in the discourse of resemblance. It is within this tear that Barthes locates the unspeakable *jouissance* of bliss and desire in between the ordered expressions of resemblance. He argues that pleasure can only really come from distortion or perversion. When Lyotard refers to *Libidinal Economy* as his “evil”<sup>12</sup> book he is performing the scandal of the distorted, libidinal, text. Lyotard urges his implied audience to read (or see) the text spatially, as an image, configured around sites of perversions, “libidinal intensities,” as well as his own figure of the “Great Ephemeral Skin” constituting the political body, the politically charged representation of reality, or a kind of perceived and already distorted reality.<sup>13</sup> When he dissects this body and flattens it out into a skin (a film?), the perforated discourse disappears, interdiction itself disappears, on the surface of the Moebius strip:

There is no need to begin with transgression, we must go immediately to the very limits of cruelty, perform the dissection of polymorphous perversion, spread out the immense membrane of the libidinal ‘body’ which is quite different to a frame.



### *The Perfect Human*



It is made from the most heterogeneous textures, bone, epithelium, sheets to write on, charged atmospheres, swords, glass cases, peoples, grasses, canvasses to paint. All these zones are joined end to end in a band which has no back to it, a Moebius band which interests us not because it is closed, but because

### *The Perfect Human: Cuba*



it is one-sided, a Moebian skin which, rather than being smooth, is on the contrary (is this topologically possible?) covered with roughness, corners, creases, cavities which when it passes on the 'first' turn will be cavities, but perhaps on the 'second', lumps.

### *The Perfect Human: Revision*



But as for what turn the band is on, no-one knows nor will know, in the eternal turn.  
(Libidinal 2-3)

Lyotard's autopsy revels in the unfolding of the dis-figured body; the perverse dissection of the framed/enframing body(ies), ranging from the organic to the textual, produces the turning or the revision of the open Moebius skin. Lyotard asks as an aside if this skin is even "topologically possible," as if to question his own enframing of the skin within spatial binaries of inside/outside. The body, or scene, of image is composed of both inside and outside, what is framed and what is excluded by the frame, the obstruction that prescribes the scene as well as the failure or success of the response.

Image as body or as the reproduction (refuse, waste) from bodies apprehends this paradox of the embodied experience of the cinematic image as both framing (*mise-en-scène*) and topologically impossible (libidinal investments). There is a cruelty to this figure, as



Lyotard suggests, in the violence that he must do to these heterogeneous bodies in order to create the libidinal skin. It is Lyotard's translator, however, that confronts the politics of this cruelty when he makes the decision to translate the author's word *pellicule* as "skin" rather than "film" which is also implied in a more technical context. He justifies his use of "skin" rather than more technical "film" in the above quote, admitting, "I have chosen, in keeping with the imagery here, to take slight liberties" (*Libidinal 1*). Cinematic images constitute a libidinal band at once turning as both technical and organic "skin." The choice need not be made between skin/film; both inhabit *pellicule* and give it tension. The choice need not be made, except in an ethical sense. The translation of the French word is part of an ethical contract between the translator, author, and reader, in which the translator must make a decision based on a criterion of justification.



The effect of replacing *pellicule* with "skin" is not just that the technical context of the word is relinquished, but that the relations between the words "skin" and "film" become even more intimate in their substitution. These words denote analog modes of composition and production, whether it is found as an organic sensation, a photographic impulse, or cinematic movement. It is no accident that Barthes does not discuss a meaning at all, but a "sense" which is lost to the senses.<sup>13</sup> Whereas Barthes must freeze the movement to analyze the cinematic in terms of the still, the cinematic for Deleuze is made up of systems of movement images and time images. In both cases it is the image that acts as the nexus

of ontological and epistemological concerns. In *Cinema I*, Deleuze sees movement as the agent of change for the image: "Through movement the whole is divided up into objects, and objects are re-united in the whole, and indeed between the two 'the whole' changes" (11-12). He uses the "image" of sugar dissolving in water, the sugar interrupting the "closed" system of the water, radically opening it without respective parts or whole.

A semiotics approach would substitute the cinematic for the textual to overlay a language code that reads the image through a hermeneutic lens, forfeiting the hesitation of the frozen image and the dissolving sugar. There is always a choice that constitutes the hermeneutic impulse, based upon some foregrounded ethical principle. The image comes before that choice, before the foregrounding of a principle. Images and ethics are always already folded together into the skin/film of the cinematic, and therefore are already lost to the senses insofar as they exceed the senses.

Brian Massumi makes a case that the "superiority of the analog" over the digital is in the realization that the digital consists of analogical relays that include sensation and perception, not just the empiricism of the digital. But for Massumi even the analogical is composed of what he calls the "virtual," which, by definition, "is inaccessible to the senses. This does not, however, preclude figuring it, in the sense of constructing images of it. To the contrary, it requires a multiplication of images. The virtual that cannot be felt also cannot but be felt, in its effects" (132). The image, as skin/film, must not be thought in terms of categories of images (i.e. cinematic images) but rethought as an ethical encounter of the virtual. In other terms from Massumi, a multimodal composition must be reimagined as a "topological figure" under "constant transformation of one geometrical figure into another" (134). Multimodal would not just refer to the deployment of various media, or utilizing multiple modes of delivery (oral, print, digital); as a topological figure multimodality could be thought in different and contradictory ways, forming a relay of responses, a continual feedback loop, or even a skin.

## *An Ars Vitae*



Traditional notions of ethics rely on a discourse of moral codes or virtues. The question of ethics acts as an obstruction to discourse, foregrounding the question and restating it as discourses of difficulties and desire (or difficulties in desire). Regarding discourse, Maurice Blanchot wrote that “there are not two discourses: there is discourse—and then there would be dis-course,



were it not that of it we ‘know’ practically nothing. We ‘know’ that it escapes systems, order, possibility, including the possibility of language, and that writing, perhaps—writing, where totality has let itself be exceeded—puts it in play” (134). If we now return to the first obstruction as it is re-presented in the film we can see that while it would be easy to perceive the relationship between von Trier and Leth in terms of a range across Aristotle’s measurements of virtue, we can also see that Leth and von Trier absolutely need each other in the course of the obstructions. There are not two discourses between the two: Leth looks to von Trier for his responsibilities, while von Trier needs Leth to finish the cycle of obstructions. Von Trier’s purpose is to show Leth that he can be less than perfect, that there is no perfect human. Leth desires anything but failure, he breaks the rules (the golden mean) for the sake of aesthetics. Desire forces them both beyond into obscene excesses and deficiencies and to face the prospect that the flawed human is the perfect human.

Liotard expressed the hazard in pronouncing the virtues (or lack thereof) of being what he calls a “libidinal economist” by recognizing the dangers of “building a new

morality.” To avoid such pitfalls, what is needed “is not an ethics, this or another. . . . Perhaps we need an *ars vitae*, young man, but then one in which we would be the artists and not the propagators, the adventurers and not the theoreticians, the hypothesizers and not the censors” (*Libidinal* 11). Perhaps what I have been advocating here is not an ethics at all, but an *ars vitae*: an understanding of composition as ethical because it is always already implicated in life as *bios* that erupts from the distorted passions and desires of that life, rather than across communities as a drive, or *telos*. What I am advocating is not an ethics, but a film—and not *this* film or *that* film, but a film or a skin as retention, a restriction, a difficulty, that obscures as much as it reveals through obstruction.

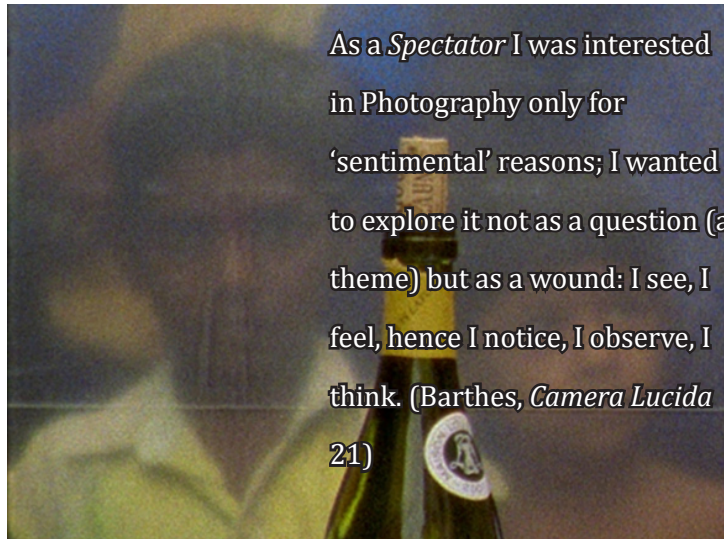


## Chapter Two



# The Ethics of Obstruction

## Opening the Wound



We finished the last chapter by discussing images in terms of an enframed and enframing skin/film, at once organic and mechanical, sensorial and sensible. The limiting force that obstructions place on images does not resolve these contradictions, but instead enables their emergence from a discourse of repression. Obstructions set aside “the available means of persuasion”<sup>1</sup> to explore that which previously was not available, or available only as part of a mode of excess, waste, or leftover—obstructions engage that which remains unthought in the discourse of composition. Rather than ensuring particular outcomes and meanings, restricting the means of persuasion through obstructions allows for the revelation of the gap between the intended vision of the one giving the obstruction and the result of the one accepting the challenge. This gap can never be completely overcome; in fact it, resists completion entirely. The constant failure of each composition to live up to the original intent of the challenge inevitably leads to another set of obstructions. In this exchange, failure is not negative but acts as the dis-enclosure for the next obstruction and, consequently, to the next project.

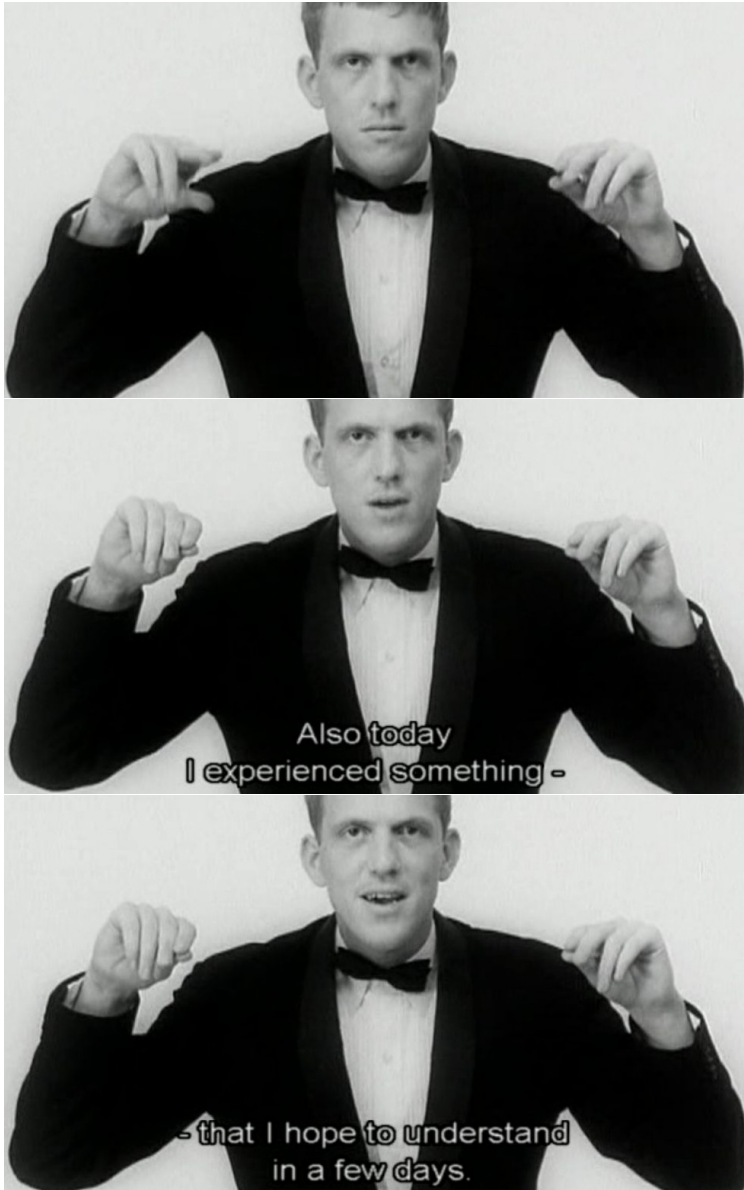
The exchange of obstruction and composition is as much ethical in its performance as it is aesthetic in its result. Obstructions make demands of the *ethos* of those involved in the exchange by leaving the question of intent and completion uncertain and unresolved. The ethical boundaries enacted in *The Five Obstructions* reflect more of an *ars vitae* with which I concluded the first chapter rather than any particular ethical principle or obligation. In moving from the first obstruction to the second Lars von Trier remains unsatisfied by Jørgen Leth's efforts to maintain control of the medium. He shifts from the formal values of the first obstruction to a more personal assault on moral and ethical grounds. As far as von Trier's purpose is concerned, the moral and ethical issues were always at stake in the proceedings of the obstructions, but he realizes that he must push the boundaries of the project further in this regard in order to achieve his teacher's failure. To do so von Trier makes the pain of the challenge more prominent; he must open Leth's perfect human to make it bleed. It is no longer just a question of the image as a possibility of sense as the unthought—the image must be the cause of dis-ease, and the questioning not just of composing the figural but the self in relation to composition. If, for von Trier, the only success is accepting one's own imperfection, then the only truly ethical experience would be that of confronting the possibility of failure.

Von Trier's disappointment with Leth's success in the first obstruction provokes von Trier to disregard the technical abilities of his teacher and confronts him with obstacles involved in framing/reframing the cinematic image as an object of ethical inquiry; that is, how can Leth engage both what is in the frame and what is excluded from the frame. Having failed to achieve the imperfect film through purely formal means, von Trier now challenges Leth's ethical sensitivity through what he is willing to show and not show on screen. This chapter will spend time tracing the ethical issues involved in composing the image in the midst of realities that lay beyond the frame. Already we can discern that von Trier is succeeding in his failure on both accounts as he struggles to use the obstructions to force Leth's hand toward self-revelation. In response Leth proposes that only in showing the



*inhuman* can we interrogate our notions of the human.

Having spent so much time exploring the possibilities of cinematic images in order to release the intractability of representation, I must now acknowledge my own problematic



usage of the word *image*.

The problem is related to the current ethical inquiry and how the hesitant condition of images can be thought in terms of *ethos* and even subjectivity. Giorgio Agamben proposes in his essay “Notes on Gesture” that cinema is made up of gestures and not images; the movement of film records and preserves these gestures for a society that has lost them. What makes Agamben’s view unique is that he is willing to connect the cinema to ethics through *ethos* by preserving the gestural qualities of images: “What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather

something is being endured and supported. The gesture, in other words, opens the sphere of *ethos* as the more proper sphere of that which is human” (57).<sup>2</sup> Agamben raises the point



that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle opposes *poiesis* and *praxis* as terms for means in which the ends are external and internal. Gesture, on the other hand, is pure means in that it “*is the exhibition of mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such,*” and he continues by writing that, as a display of mediality, gesture “allows the emergence of the being-in-the-medium of human beings and thus it opens the ethical dimension for them” (58). Mediality, the intermediate and indeterminate quality of modalities of expression, is the ethical manifestation of moving images made possible by a rupture between means and ends.

I concluded the first chapter by discussing cinematic images in terms of skin/film or *pellicule* to emphasize the relationship between sense and senselessness<sup>3</sup> in a context of multimodal composition. In this chapter I will go one step further by now breaking the representational consistency and stability of the skin/film through the ethical rupture introduced by the mediality of images. I will argue that, much like Agamben’s gestures, obstructions provoke an ethical instability by asserting an “exhibition of mediality.” In this way obstructions in a context of compositional modality neither prescribe to ends nor means, product nor procedure, but the “being-in-the-medium” that associates the concept of the perfect human to the collaborative relationship of von Trier and Leth.

I will be discussing representation as a consequence of the break between sense and thought introduced by multimodal discourse, rather than a more traditional view of coherence and stability in which the image is recognized as a self-sustaining object. Functioning on the level of mediality, cinematic images feel no need to mark their territory but instead open a wound that Antonin Artaud called in the preface to *The Theater and Its Double* “culture-in-action,” or a marked “rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation” (7). In terms of the project of obstructions, the concept of “the perfect human” is culture-in-action, an ethical bleeding out of the rupture of representation of the skin/film. Obstructions provide a wound which opens the body up to the outside, the out-of-field as the rupture of the frame opening up the

“perfect human” as a contradiction in terms, as well as the most proper sphere of that which is ethical.

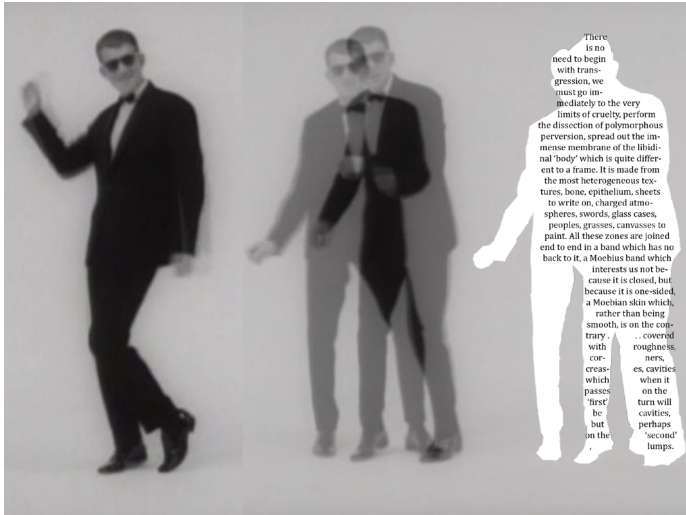
### **The Recoil and the Question of Ethics**

Ethics is a difficult term, or a term of difficulty. It refers to a kind of securing of subjectivity through a stable notion of *ethos*, related to an expression of identity. In this equation ethics is a governing system of values that determines what can be considered the right or wrong way of living by asserting the limits of correct conduct. One may be considered ethical by adhering to the principles that establish a particular value system. Through sets of negotiated principles, ethics facilitates subjectivity by fixing individuals within a culture; we can understand our culture and regulate our place within it by aligning individual and communal values.<sup>4</sup> In place of a unified concept of ethics Charles Scott asserts “the question of ethics,” or ethics as a question of the insufficiencies of assumed values and the failure of *ethos* as a coherent concept: “The ‘question of ethics’ indicates an interruption in an *ethos*, an interruption in which the definitive values that govern thought and everyday action lose their power and authority to provide immediate certainty in their functions” (4). This does not terminate their presence to the individual, but instead suspends their force to define the individual.

Scott believes that the interruption of *ethos* arouses a sense of anxiety that betrays ethical thinking as the roots of a suffering of subjectivity. By destabilizing the assumed systems of values the question of ethics presupposes a subject caught in a movement between “autonomy and subjection” and “self-realization and self-deconstruction” (5). According to Scott, questionability allows for “turning these concepts and logics on themselves, a turning that we shall generally call *self-overcoming recoil*,” a performative movement that continually turns and releases in both critique and application (5). If we can think about recoil as creating the conditions for re-vision without the demands of

completion or resolution, then Leth's drive for perfection and von Trier's fascination with his failure is an obstruction that recoils into a transformative collaboration. Scott interprets Nietzsche's concept of "eternal return" as a movement of affirmation without completion:

Returning returns. It is a recoil that ceaselessly unsettles the thought of



both eternity and sameness. No identity controls the process. Identity control is itself transvalued in the recoiling return. And the discourse is free for its multiple, struggling orders. No meaning rules over them in the recoil of eternity as return. There are surging powers in a quality of energy

that affirms them all in their countervailing lives. (31)

The recoil is self-overcoming because it overcomes even its own desire to extinguish the anxiety of excess or to resolve the questionability of the ethical subject. Obstructions display this self-overcoming recoiling movement within a structure that both determines and questions the authority of their limitations.

The ethics of obstruction is necessarily a contradiction of terms because the restrictions introduced by particular frames of reference also contain the means for overcoming their own limiting demands. Although his intentions are clearly to enact certain changes in his old mentor, von Trier's obstructions demand nothing more than a response from Leth, whose films subsequently require von Trier to rethink his strategies. The original exigency behind *The Five Obstructions* was to push the concept of the perfect human to its

compositional limits, but the practice of responding through obstructions expresses the modes of re-vision in collaborative terms. Multimodal composition engages re-vision by first entering the rhetorical situation and responding to an exigency. The ethical landscape of this situation is one of collaboration, a gift exchange model that allows the collaboration itself to perform the exigency of the project. The self-overcoming recoil of the obstructions turns each response back onto itself and requires its continuation.

The response to obstructions, much like Scott's question of ethics, arises from within the obstructions themselves and not from outside. What this means is that the question of ethics does not lead to a new ethics, i.e., a new moral code, and the question or questionability of obstruction *does not lead to a new method of composition*. There is no way to identify an obtuse image; it escapes the discourse of identification and representation. To approach multimodal composition in terms of the ethics of re-vision is an obtuse gesture, a kind of subversive *habitus*, or mode of living, that Scott perceives as a politics of "rethink, rework, rewrite" (8). Multimodal composition thought and performed as a recoiling movement reveals an *ethos* of collaboration as a requisite for changing the frame of the relationship.

In the recoiling movement of ethical questioning concepts and logics continually turn on themselves allowing even for the affirmation of contradictory structures. When discussing the second obstruction von Trier discloses that his intent is to "move from the perfect to the human" by forcing Leth to overcome the creative restrictions of the obstructions by succumbing to their limiting powers. While the first obstruction pushed the limits of Leth's aesthetic philosophy and asked him to reevaluate the image of perfection, the exchange to determine the rules of the second obstruction threatens Leth's ethical foundations:

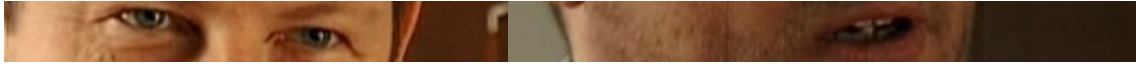


**My plan is to move from the perfect to the human, right?**

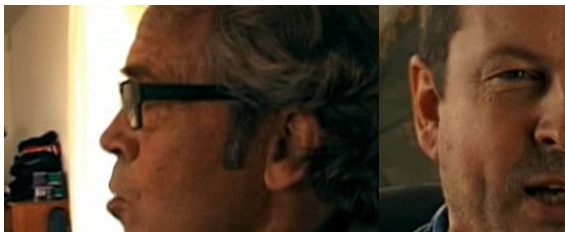
**That's my agenda.**

- Actually I want to “banalize” you. But how the hell do we do that?

- I don’t know.



No, you don’t. But that’s what I want you to help me to do. We may be able to do so by finding things that hurt. Like the 12 frames.



- I can’t identify my soft spots in advance.

- The 12 frames were a soft spot?

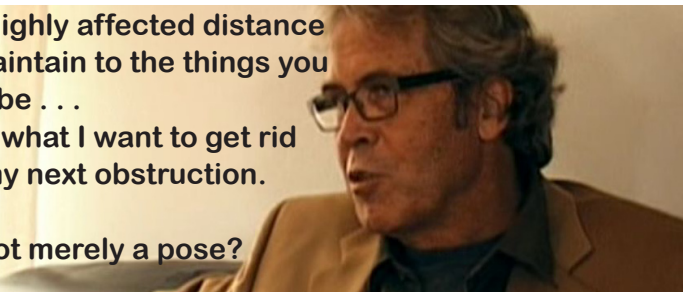
- Absolutely.



- The highly affected distance you maintain to the things you describe . . . That’s what I want to get rid of in my next obstruction.

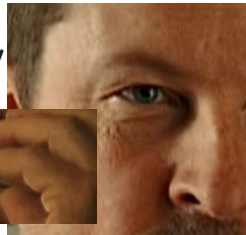
- It’s not merely a pose?

- Not at all. But I’d like to put your ethics to the test.



It’s my instinct.

That might be interesting. We talk so much about the ethics of the observer. The observer is my role of course.



I want to move you on from there. To make you empathize. I’d like to send you to the most miserable place on earth. That won’t cause you any problems. You’re good at going to the most miserable places.

As long as there is a hotel.





- I can't say. It's up to you to define the most miserable place. Can you think of any places, any themes one cannot exploit? No.

- No, not off hand. But I'm not that uncivilized. I might say there are no limits. But there might be situations...



from The Perfect Human?

-There is a degree of perversity in . . .

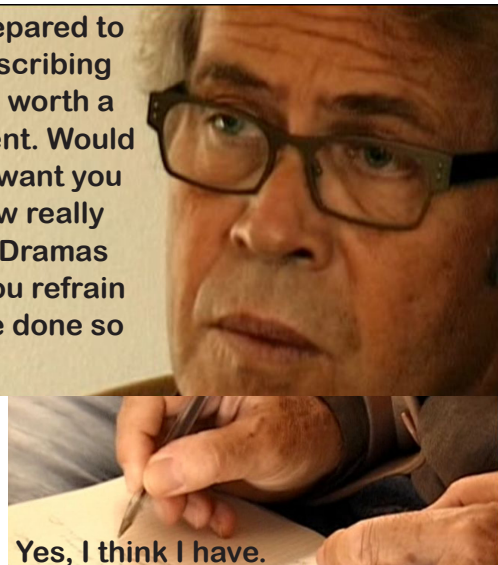
- In maintaining a distance?

- In the way you do things.

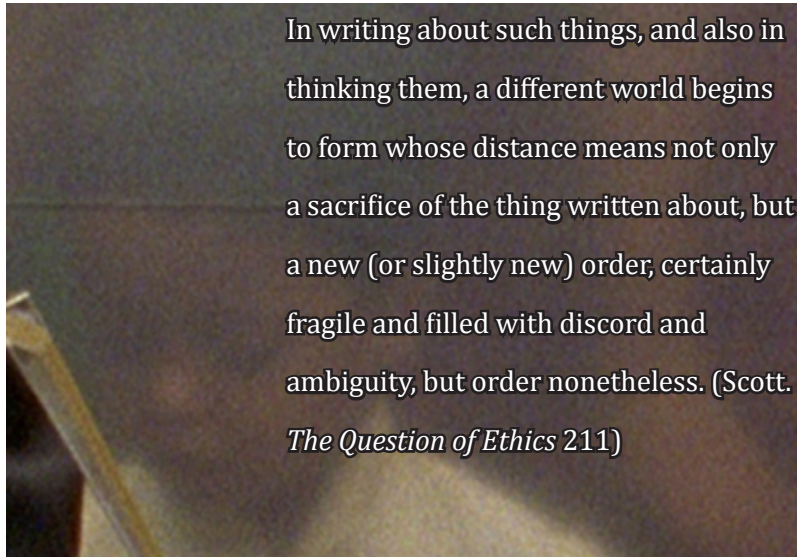


How far are you prepared to go if you're not describing something? It'd be worth a laboratory experiment. Would anything rub off? I want you to go close to a few really harrowing things. Dramas from real life that you refrain from filming. You've done so before.

How close can you get? And when you come back – you play Claus Nissen. The meal will be there but not the woman. It'll be rather Pinter-like not having her there. But the meal will be there. Have you thought it over?



## A Violation of *Ethos*



In the first challenge Leth must recreate the same introspection with a film featuring frenetic cutting. Whereas Jorgen Leth's original *The Perfect Human* was a slow moving film composed of long deliberate takes, his success in the first obstruction hinges on what he can make out of nothing, or next to nothing (12 frames to be exact). Von Trier imposed a technical de-centering on Leth that shifted the concept of the film from a quasi-documentary style to the more mechanised rhythm montage dynamism. This shift challenged Leth on technical grounds in terms of generating new films, as well as personal and *ethical* in terms of testing Leth cinematic *ethos*.

What we have to keep in mind is that the challenge to keep each shot to no longer than 12 frames is not only an attempt to formally deconstruct *The Perfect Human* as a model of mid-century European art-film, but also to make Leth a stranger to his own image-objects. For von Trier's part, the obstruction fails as Leth succeeds in navigating the rules while actually enjoying the experience. Von Trier can only succeed with nothing less than Leth's failure. The ethics involved here are not only questionable but in some ways impossible. What becomes clear by the second obstruction is that as long as Leth can actually respond to Von Trier's obstructions with a film of his own he has succeeded. The only response that could possibly succeed as a kind of failure would be for Leth to refuse to make a film. For

Leth to refuse the obstruction would not just be a breach of the rules of the game, but a violation of his own *ethos*. By responding in particular ways, Leth attempts to stay true to his *ethos*, at the cost of the possibility of failure. By continuing to force the issue of failure, von Trier mistakes his own desire as the truth of failure.

What I am trying to accomplish here is a movement, which can only be described as a recoiling, between the demands of a context of collaboration and the corresponding but resisting desires of these demands generate within the individual. This movement can ultimately be traced back to images which have traditionally been given the normative weight of arbitrary transcendent signification. In these terms images dwell within particular regimes of meaning, while questioning the authority of those regimes. I will take Jacques Rancière's idea of "the distribution of the sensible" one step further and propose that not only do images lie within particular regimes that make them sensible, they also question the terms of authority of those regimes. *The Five Obstructions* performs this movement as a continuation of the questioning of image that it began with the initial challenge. This is a movement that the film engages, most notably in the second obstruction segment, and which is the basis for thinking about the mediality of images as meaningful and questionable compositions. My attempt here is not to empty images of their meaning, but to push the limits of significance by suspending the authority of Aristotle's "man of practical wisdom" who would determine the mean(ing)s and allow the unethical or irrational excessive meanings to emerge.

In *The Five Obstructions* the relationship between obstruction and ethics is embodied in the figures of Leth and von Trier as an *ethos* that relates closely to the difficulty of their collaboration in the shadow of *eros*, or their personal desires and interests for the outcomes of the project. Although they have a mutual understanding about the general course of the project, they each have completely different expectations of its outcomes. I have already discussed somewhat the circumstances of their friendship and what initiated this particular project. Near the end of the film von Trier unabashedly declares that he is "an



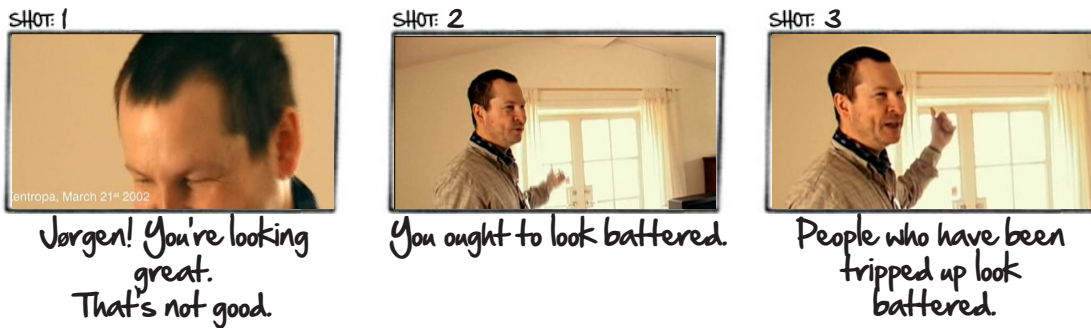
expert on Leth” not simply in terms of knowledge of his films, but also in how the images of those films flow out from Leth’s own body into a visual manifestation of internal erotic power. *The Perfect Human* cannot be reduced to a representation of autobiographical work; there is something physical which Leth has sacrificed for the virtual image. The resulting images are traces of that desire which drove Leth to create them in the first place. In an essay that explores how ethics is addressed in *The Five Obstructions*, Susan Dwyer explains that von Trier now raises the Brechtian stakes by displacing Leth from behind the camera: “It is not just that he (von Trier) makes Leth strange to himself, he has Leth create the very vehicles that manifest that strangeness” (7). By having Leth now star in the leading role, von Trier introduces the second obstruction to force Leth to take on the body of his own desire.

Forcing Leth in front of the camera pronounces further the pedagogical role reversal in the partnership. The student now removes the mediation that the actor represents to the director by forcing his mentor to be the physical manifestation of this work. His presence as image forfeits the guarantee of representation by erasing the absence of his body. The teacher is turned to object in terms of the rules of the game as a kind of regulated play; roles are not just reversed, but turned over to uncertainty. In other words, the child is toying with the father.

The difficulty for Leth is only partly in overcoming a particular rule. Writing specifically about the factors of play, Hector Rodriguez reminds us that although *The Five Obstructions* is a game of composing obstructions and images, “people do not always find playing pleasurable. . . . There is such a thing as *resistance* to playing” (48). This seems particularly true for Leth in the second obstruction in which he must visit what he deems “the most miserable place.” By choosing to respond in a way that bends the rules of the obstruction, Leth resists the constraints placed on him by von Trier’s drive for self-revelation. This resistance is a possibility built into the role constraints of the game. In fact only by resisting the constraints of the obstruction can Leth question the intentions of the obstructions that will also place von Trier within the same ethical uncertainty.

## The Dis-ease of Meaning or This Is How the Perfect Man Suffers

In *Negation, Subjectivity, and the History of Rhetoric* Victor Vitanza retells a story in which Lacan expresses regret “that when *psychoanalysis* came into being (because of female and male hysterics), it was unfortunately ‘discovered’ by a medical doctor [Sigmund Freud] whose predisposition or ‘trained capacity,’ was *to cure* (once and forever) the disorder” (330). What I want to point out here is Vitanza’s crucial use of Kenneth Burke’s notion of “trained incapacities”<sup>5</sup> as one explanation for Freud’s placing square pegs into round holes. But there is something else here that surfaces out of the cure and disorder—the reliance on a hermeneutical reading, the search for a universal meaning, that becomes a disorder.



There is a tendency in the discourses of ethics to look for sickness; where there is a symptom; dis-ease can be diagnosed. I want to suggest that the question of ethics, or ethics as an interrogative field, is a dis-ease or condition of unsettled unsettling that begins as a moment of crisis of subjectivity. The recoiling that is integral to the assertion of a collaborative context imposes obstructions to the assurance of subjectivity. Freud’s trained incapacities introduced the conditions for the discovery of psychoanalysis, which seeks to explore the unconscious, while at the same time preventing Dr. Freud access to the resolution that the medical model demanded, the visual/textual proof: the witness. There is a suffering that must go along with any dis-ease, but the search to provide this witness offers a particular sort of suffering that occurs as a result of the absence of interpretation.

Suffering is at the heart of the necessity for the witness. Nietzsche points out in *On*

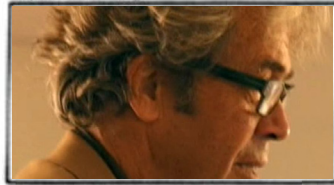
*the Genealogy of Morals* that the suffering man, having found himself devoid of meaning, turns the problem from himself back onto the suffering itself as the source of significance, however, “his problem was *not* suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, ‘why do I suffer’” (598). This turn allowed ethical man to cease as a figure of senselessness<sup>5</sup> and offered him a will that could only be expressed by a “hatred of the human . . . the horror of the senses, of reason itself” (598-9). Nietzsche knew a thing or two about the suffering of senselessness when near blindness caused him to purchase a typewriter as a solution to his dis-ease of writing.

SHOT: 4



Like I should've been walking on crutches.

SHOT: 5



I can't wait to show you, I must say.

SHOT: 6



- I'm already skeptical.  
- Of course you are.

In his analysis of this Nietzsche’s typewriter, Friedrich Kittler suggests that Nietzsche’s venture into mechanical writing marked a transition from the individual voice of the human to the white noise of information channels. This was the noise of modernity’s impending loss of sense—the human voice suffers the dis-ease not of the loss of information, but of its excess: “Within the realm of all sounds and words, all organisms, white noise appears, the incessant and ineradicable background of information. For the very channels through which information must pass emit noise” (183). In his desperation Nietzsche replaced the vision of the pen with the touch of the typewriter, and shifting the ethical expression of writing from an experience of subjectivity to the recoiling of mediality. Kittler explains, “Whereas handwriting is subject to the eye, a sense that works across distance, the typewriter uses a blind, tactile power” (195).

SHOT: 7



- I can't see how you . . .  
- No, you can't.

SHOT: 8



You can't imagine how  
we worked round things.

SHOT: 9

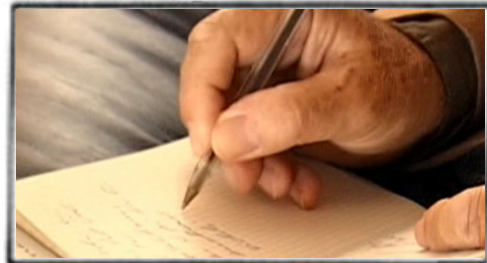


One always feel furious  
when it turns out that  
there are solutions.

The human scratch of the pen transforms into the inhuman taps of keys as the background noise of modern media is brought to bear on the clear meanings of human sense. Noise does not eradicate sense completely; it introduces a multitude of channels and the silent record of the individual was no longer silent—was never silent in the first place.

So why even discuss ethics in terms of noise rather than understanding how obstructions function within certain principles? How is it that obstructions engage the ancient question of achieving the “good life” by embracing ethical dis-ease introduced by the inhuman background noise? In his defense of virtue ethics, Alasdair McIntyre opposes what he calls Nietzsche’s “moral philosophy” to the Aristotelian version of ethics. McIntyre claims that “the defensibility of the Nietzschean position turns *in the end* on the answer to the question: was it right in the first place to reject Aristotle? For if Aristotle’s position in ethics and politics—or something very like it—could be sustained, the whole Nietzschean enterprise would

### the human scratch



be pointless” (117). In other words, Nietzsche obstructs our participation in true ethical inquiry. Such an understanding of ethics grasps at the consistency of idealized concepts and ignores the transition of discourse networks that Kittler describes as marked by the noise of modern information channels.

Robert Louden criticizes MacIntyre by reminding him that our world has changed substantially since the days of Aristotle, and that it “lacks the sort of moral cohesiveness and value unity which traditional virtue theorists saw as prerequisites of a viable moral community” (235). Accordingly, MacIntyre abuses Aristotle in presupposing a consensus for responding to what we could call the dis-order of ethics; the potential questionability of ethics is lost to particular modes of discourse. These questions presuppose the criteria for response and the question of ethics becomes a hermeneutics one that ends before it begins. The noble questions of the good life result from the suffering of meaninglessness that even Nietzsche was forced to confront by purchasing a typewriter. In other words, the choice between Aristotle and Nietzsche is a false one; the dissonance of Nietzsche’s typewriter demonstrates the difficulty of defining the principles of virtue. When ethics is equated only with ethical conduct its relationship to the instability of *ethos* is covered over and substituted with identity and representation. This is how ethics can come to be defined through simple issues of credibility and validation.

In *The Differend*, François Lyotard calls the demands for making something present or naming the object as *testimony*, and he makes it clear that “Negation is at the heart of testimony” (54). Images expose the impossible consensus that anchors ethical inquiry because they signify both absence and presence, and so cannot provide validation of either. In Lyotard’s terms, the question of ethics is very much a *differend* as there exists no rule or judgment with the capacity for resolution. Lyotard illustrates the stakes of differends when he contrasts the figures of the intellectual and the philosopher: while the philosopher is entrusted with “finding the (impossible) idiom” or the creation of concepts, the intellectual “helps forget differends, by advocating a given genre . . . for the sake of political hegemony”

(142). Covering over the differend is the result of arguing for particular modes of resolution. Creating images dissolves ethical inquiry by placing testimony back into question.

There is also a political imperative for dissolving demands made by particular modes of ethical inquiry, to which Lyotard attests. We must respond not through a hermeneutic approach that would be a will to resolve the issue, but by placing the field of ethics back into question. Scott explains that by retaining ethics in its indeterminacy, “questioning can occur in a manner that puts in question the body of values that led to the questioning. The reader will find that the question of ethics arises out of ethical concern as well as out of conflicts within structures of value, that ethical concern and suspicion of ethics qualify one another” (1). Ethical concerns are always questions of ethics or a questioning of human (inter)action, but most of all it is a recognition that thought itself is in conflict in that it originates from within these value structures. The work that von Trier and Leth create in the film recoils around particular image structures organized around the rules for each obstruction. The obstructions thus function as a field of questioning for the deployment of images as fixed meanings and values. A consideration of the ethics of images in this sense is to open truth to the possibility of *eros*, rather than simply of moral obligation and static representation.

### **Questionable Ethics?**

In the *Coming Community*, Giorgio Agamben suggests that the stasis point for the discussion of ethics “is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize. This is the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible—there would only be tasks to be done” (43). According to Agamben, ethics is not equated with actions, but on decisions—not that humans act in a vacuum, but that they must choose to

act in the presence of difficulties. Agamben's claim is that there is no essence of ethics, or anything essential to it. The existence of ethics is predicated on its suspension, its status of questionability that does not presume an answer. The ethics of obstruction is an examination of ethics as it has been conceived as a "question of ethics": prescriptions of thought and action rather than descriptions of moral virtues.

Central to this examination is John Rajchman's assertion that the question of ethics in the work of Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault is actually a response to "the ancient question of truth and *eros*; each of them in different ways re-eroticized the activity of philosophical or critical thought for our times" (1). Rajchman takes from Lacan and Foucault a relationship of "difficulty" between truth and desire/*eros* that manifests as a recoiling around their central concerns. Rather than begin with Aristotle's "golden mean," obstructions begin, as Lacan suggests, at the moment of *eros* and desire. This would be an ethical experience that emerges out of *The Five Obstructions* in the form of constraining obstructions that engender passions and style of as multimodal thought.

The telling and re-telling of Jorgen Leth's *The Perfect Human* is a demonstration of *eros* which emerges from ethical indeterminacy: how far can the student (who is now the teacher) push the teacher (who is now the student) in order to reveal some kind of truth of identity? The headstrong and spontaneous von Trier sees some inverse image of his messiness in the cool and collected and impossible "perfection" of Leth. Susan Dwyer sees this interaction as a relationship in which "there are no wholly self-made selves. Any human self . . . is not and cannot be a solipsistic construction. Crucially, we need others to understand ourselves" (13). This is the difficulty around which the decisions and passions of the film coalesce. Ultimately, the film is about both Leth and von Trier and the restrictive obstructions that define their interactions (Dwyer 3). But this still doesn't explain why there is a question of ethics related to this collaborative context. What is needed, as Lyotard proposed, is not that this questioning ends in any particular ethical form, but the opening for an *ars vitae*—the film presents the possibility of an aesthetics of life, a way to cultivate



the self as an *ethos* that surfaces through our relations with others.

### The Translucent Screen: Ergon/Parergon

*The Five Obstructions* enters the realm of ethics by insisting that processes of composition, and images that are ultimately produced, are part of *ethos*, not simply in terms of individual principles, but as a way in which creation is, according to Michel Foucault, “the care of the self.” This phrase identifies a crisis of how the individual forms himself as an ethical subject and what is sacrificed in this formation (*The History of Sexuality* 95). The subject, in other words, is not without difficulties, which continue as part of that formation from the outside: *ethos* would in this sense be *the negation of the ethical subject*. Lacan perceived something similar in ethics as a way to speak truly of oneself only insofar as it stands in opposition to desire and pleasure (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 39). What Foucault and Lacan see, and what Rajchman expands on in his book *Truth and Eros*, is that ethics is an economy of self-constitution which disregards desire or *eros*, but which is nonetheless absolutely penetrated by it. What I have been proposing here is that *The Five Obstructions* offers a view of *ethos* arising from the process of making images as the possibility of the unthought or inexpressible presence; that which ethical subject cannot tolerate (Rajchman 11). The obstructions become a heuristic for asserting the difficulty of *ethos*, the impossibility of speaking truly of oneself, and the *eros* of failure or withdrawal from resolution.



In the second film *The Perfect Human*, Bombay Leth is put at ethical dis-ease with his image objects, including, according to the rules of the obstruction, he himself as the perfect man. Von Trier requires him to travel to the “most miserable place in the world” to make his film without showing the surrounding people or realities they live in. Leth faces the



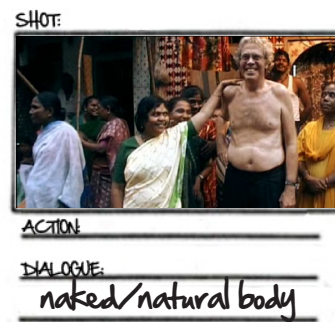
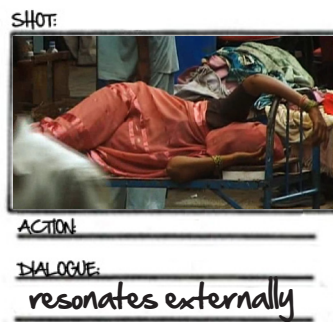
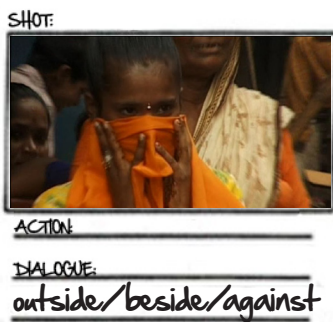
difficulty of shooting what is the most decadent scene of his original film, a banquet scene in which the perfect man dines on the perfect meal while pondering existential questions. To top it off Leth himself is required to play the part of the “perfect man” amidst the desperation of a city slum, while facing the ethical obstruction of not being able to show the poverty on screen during the banquet. This is a perfect man whose perfection is sustained by the ugliness around him which in turn has been bracketed by the obstruction. Leth’s solution is to bend the rules and construct a translucent “window” frame within the frame of the camera that will reveal the silhouettes of the crowd against which his feasting acquires a literal irony.



The requirements of the obstruction as well as Leth’s own ethically ambiguous solution generate an immense tension between the center/margins, point/supplement, or what Jacques Derrida calls *ergon/parergon*; these relationships, which parallel the von Trier-Leth relationship, create the conditions for all subsequent obstructions. In *The Truth in Painting* Derrida describes *ergon* as the logic of aesthetics—the work itself or fact of the work—while, *parergon* is the supplement, the excluded, or that which “comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon* stands outside or beside the frame.” He continues by

indicating that this is not an absolute exclusion as parergon “touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply inside nor simply outside” (54). In this case, representation is not enough for Leth; the banquet that Leth must re-vision is only the *ergon* of the scene, its object. What infuses the frame with its ethical/political power is what resonates externally from outside the frame always as an internal force.

Ergon is the representation of the image, what is intrinsic, that which belongs to the image. “What is represented in the representation” Derrida contends, “would be the naked and natural body; the representative essence of the statue would be related to this, and the only beautiful thing in the statue would be that representation; it alone would be essentially, purely, and intrinsically beautiful, ‘the proper object of a pure judgment of taste’” (57). If we



think of representation as the *ergon* of the image, then we must be prepared to examine the parergon and ask, as Derrida does, “Where does a parergon begin and end [?]” (57).

The translucent frame generates an ecstatic scene which stands beside and against itself. In French *mise en scène* means to “put into the scene” and the phrase resists the agent of the action: who is it that “puts” into the scene? The answer is uncertain. Herein lays the political difficulty of representation: the problem of control. As a certain regime of cinematic representation, the notion of *mise-en-scene* is a sanctioning practice of authorizing ways of seeing and imaging, which goes against theories of cinematic authorship. The distribution of the sensible ties the knot between aesthetics and politics and makes framing a political act by defining the compositional space. Reframing would then be the corrective as a

(re)appropriation and (re)presentation, of resistant, anomalous, or recalcitrant images. Reframing is a kind of imposed invention within the ethical domain of choice and act.

But can reframing really be thought of in terms of corrective?

### **Placing in the Scene (In)Correctly: Reframing and “the Out-of-Field”**

The literal translation of *mise en scène* appears innocuous—that a director of a film would “put in the scene” the artistic elements necessary to communicate his vision is at the very center of director-centric auteur theories since the critics of *Cahiers du cinéma* articulated such notions for film theory.<sup>6</sup> The term *mise en scène*, however, resists the agent of the action; who is it that “puts” into the scene? Herein lies the difficulty of representation: the problem of control. Walter Benjamin called the cameraman in the cinematic context as a “surgeon” who disregards the natural distance of the painter and “penetrates deeply into [the] web” of reality (233). The mechanical process of penetrating into a matrix of reality is the re-presentation of a reality free from mechanical intervention (234). The edges of the frame can only attempt to impose limitations on a scene that constantly extends beyond itself. There is no completely closed frame with which the surgeon can operate successfully.

In his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Benjamin is concerned with the close relationship between technology and violence evidenced in the art of the Futurists at the time. Benjamin has the cameraman of the cinema open a wound within the scene that necessarily turns the framed composition of the *mise en scène* into the object of surgery. He compares these surgical hands of the camera operator to the more ritualistic hands of the painter, rooted in tradition and mysticism. The “laying-on-of-hands” of the painter maintains a surface effect on the body that eludes the violence of penetration. In both cases, however, there are particular requirements of belief and understanding from the recipient in order for effective treatment to take place. Both sets of hands serve to frame the operation of affect which demand specific requirements of the

recipient (taking the role of believer or patient). The operative hands are then themselves transformed by this political context; they derive their power from the will of the actors to sustain their parts.

For composed images in a cinematic context the camera is just the initiator of a frame, it can only acknowledge that which lies within the frame of the scene. But as the surgical hands of the camera extend into the body of the *mise en scène* through the open wound, the frame of multimodal composition is affected (or become infected?) by the collapse of the surrounding body into the wound/scene. It is this collapse of the frame that will ultimately shatter the illusion of either the surgeon or the healer. What we can take away from Benjamin's analysis in the context of *The Five Obstructions* is that rather than embrace the ethical difficulty that the collapsing frame affords, cinematic images tend to dig deeper into the surgical event in an effort to maintain the framing distinction: image and audience; doctor and patient. Anomalies must be eliminated in order to preserve the political power of these roles, just as the unethical possibility of the ethical principle is forgotten. The irony is that the deeper the camera must penetrate to maintain the framing of the scene the more the frame becomes one with the body of the image.



Reframing would then be the corrective in terms of the re-appropriation and re-vision of resistant or anomalous images. In a passage entitled “The Moment Comes” Jørgen Leth writes about the difficulty of the work of the filmmaker who must apprehend images as objects and present them within a prescribed *mise en scène*:

In our work, we are armed with our instinct, our eyes and our ears. We concentrate on empty space as well as occupied space. We observe silence and noise. We trust in chance’s limitless gifts and yet the place in which we find ourselves isn’t necessarily a product of chance. The moment suddenly comes when we are no longer astonished by its appearance. There we are. We are ready to capture it, to come to terms with it. We don’t know where it will lead us. We follow the flow, we see where it wants to go and what it wants to do with us. We watch it take form and come together but we must ground it while it is still flowing and not too defined. We are in love. A feeling has hit us, we try to perceive it during its superficial passage yet are afraid of losing it again by understanding it too well. (*Danish Film Institute* 31)

In framing an image, the *mise en scène* becomes an epistemological apparatus for the distribution of ways of seeing and knowing. Framing is capturing the flow, a way of domesticating (*ethos*) the wildness (*ethea*) that is the pleasure of the image (*jouissance*).

Leth’s response to von Trier’s demand in the second obstruction to not to show the terrible conditions around his film set is to reframe the challenge by inserting a new frame. Von Trier tells Leth that he must travel to “the most miserable place in the world” to shoot his next film, but he is prohibited from actually filming any of the misery. They decide on traveling to the red light district of Mumbai, India (Bombay in the film), a place that has

particular significance for Leth. Von Trier's goal is to see if the despair around him will affect the scene without it actually appearing within the frame of the film. Leth expresses his concern for ignoring his environment and, rather than completely following the rules, he decides he cannot totally avoid showing the poverty of the neighborhood and constructs a giant translucent frame through which the surrounding conditions can be viewed in the background of the *mise en scène*. Leth has composed the cinematic event around two frames allowing the outside of the scene to have a very real visual force on the scene.

This violation of the rules stokes von Trier's ire; the reframing act is treated as a technical transgression of the obstruction rather than a question of the ethics of the scene. As his punishment von Trier offers Leth a choice between returning to India to remake the same film or make a new film without any restrictions from von Trier, or what he calls a "free-style" film. Leth refuses to return to the scene of the crime, so to speak, in order to atone for his breach of contract because he cannot face the scene that he had deemed to be "the most miserable place." The rule not to show the surroundings of the scene creates an ethical frame: the obstruction must be accepted to successfully accomplish the task, but it must also be violated in order to be true to the scene. In other words, this is a false choice that assumes that Leth can choose correctly.

Leth constructs the translucent screen as a response to what he sees as an abuse of the prescribed directives. He accuses von Trier of having "romantic notions" that by simply shooting the film in the midst of a "social drama" that the film will be affected in ways that Leth cannot control. The criteria for judgment had been given by von Trier, so the decision to reframe the obstruction through the screen as a way to foreground the social drama was a violation of the agreed ethical principles of the challenge. The collaborative context of this particular obstruction demonstrates Geoffrey Galt Harpham's thesis that an ethical choice is always unethical because it "is always a choice between ethics" and that the act of choosing a set of ethical principles must of itself violate some other set of criteria. To base ethics exclusively on the choice of how one *should* live is to create an exclusionary system in which



“includes within its internal structure a ‘nonethical’ element” (27-28). For Harpham the so-called active “choice” involved in practical ethics is actually a forced choice because we are always subscribing to particular directives while violating, or repressing, others.

The repression of these other systems does not make them disappear, but leaves open the possibility for their return. In *Cinema 1* Deleuze makes the observation that early film images were a function of a cinematic system that reproduces movement through the use of “privileged instants” (5). Framing is the action of producing these privileged instants to compose a *mise en scène*; the images that we see in a film have been divided and separated off from every other possible image for particular aesthetic or narrative affect. From this description it seems that framing is a fundamentally negative act of exclusion. Deleuze, however, explains that by framing and focusing on particular images the *mise en scène* (that which is put into the scene) also creates an “out-of-field” (that which has been excluded from the scene), and that “all framing determines an out-of-field” (17). The significance of the position of the out-of-field is that there is a symbiotic relationship between the inside and the outside because, while the frame determines the boundaries of the image, “every closed system also communicates” with what lies outside the frame.<sup>7</sup> According to Deleuze, “The out-of-field refers to what is neither seen nor understood, but is nevertheless perfectly present” (17). The image is a phenomenon of the perfect presence of its outside weighing down on the originating frame, a force that threatens to overwhelm the frame.

The threat of the “out-of-field” is part of the anxiety of “the perfect human”: how can one become complete without setting limits? Re-framing or re-vision would not answer the question of perfection nor does it represent a corrective. It does, however, acknowledge the constant movement of the frame as a place to begin to explore the “out-of-field,” or what lies beyond the frame and yet impacts the scene. What we have seen with these first two obstructions is a transvaluation of the pedagogical work of mentor and student through the unraveling of the ichnographic reel of the project. Upon evaluating the second film, von

Trier attacks Leth within the paradigm of his technical ability, testing whether or not he can transgress the limits of his own cinematic ethos. Leth's adaptability causes von Trier to challenge that ethos on the basis of the process of creating images rather than the product.

In an important pedagogical move, the obstructions now begin to come as much from Leth as they do von Trier. By establishing an ethical domain which requires particular modes of practice and results, obstructions also produce the conditions for the violation and questioning of those principles. The questioning of the image frame as the domain of ethics not only questions images as constructions of form and content, but also as the basis for such thought. Images reflect certain investments which go unquestioned and hide the active choosing of those investments to assemble representation.

### **The Intolerable: The Costs of Doing Business with Subjectivity**

The inclusion of the *parergon* or the frame forms an essential part of the *mise en scène*. Leth's decision to physically represent that frame through the translucent screen offers a glimpse into India's miserable economic conditions juxtaposed against Leth's recreation of the elegant banquet from *The Perfect Human*. The clouded screen, however, can only offer a distorted perspective of that scene; we are not allowed a clear view of the faces in the crowd and perspective itself becomes an unresolved obstruction. In his attempt to reclaim his ethical identity, Leth exchanged one obstruction (von Trier's directives) for another (his own blurred perspective). Rather than accept von Trier's challenge to see what kind of difference his surroundings would have without showing them on screen, he forces a resolution of the question of ethics: the screen is the *parergon* of truth encroaching on the illusion of the scene. The question is upheld, however, when juxtaposed against his unnerving exchange with a woman who approaches his car asking for rupees. The ethical wound is reopened and the screen becomes the cost of returning to his "most miserable place." The aesthetic inclusion of the screen is less an ethical statement on class





relations and more an act of individual redemption: it would be an intolerable possibility of the obstruction not to physically include the residents of the red light district.

Within the work of both Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, John Rajchman perceived that each were similarly facing the question of ethics, and each finding, in the absence of resolution, new ways to conceive of its possibilities. In *Truth and Eros* Rajchman demonstrates *how* the question of ethics for Foucault became the “question of the subject,” questions that were inseparable for him from the questions he had already posed regarding truth and power. The surfacing of the question of the subject resulted from the “abrupt ‘refusal’ of his earlier style [marking] a shift in the basic questions of his historical research” (4). According to Rajchman this shift came from the difficulty that Foucault discovered in his own work: “What does it cost for reason to tell the truth?” (11). These costs coalesce around a discourse of the “intolerable” in response to the aporia of his earlier work. In the context of obstructions, the “intolerable” is that which is excluded from the frame within the restrictions of the rules, and yet affects the scene in its absence.

The difficulty for Lacan rose out of a different sphere, that of the seminar. Lacan saw teaching as an important discursive site for the transmission of shared knowledge. He saw that our conceptions of the Good and Ideal as being at odds with our actual desires. According to Rajchman, Lacan’s ethic would be a “teaching of the difficulties we have with what is ideal in us, and with what we suppose is our Good, and thus with our passionate relations with ourselves and one another” (17). For Lacan, as with von Trier, the ideal

notions of Good we impose upon ourselves, the ethic of the good, is a misrecognition of our true selves, the impossibility of a “perfect human,” and potentially violent (or perverse, obscene). As Rajchman says, this “requires another sort of passion than the one that follows from the supposition of a Good or an Ideal, and the relations of rivalry, mastery and identification such a supposition would carry with it” (17). Lacan’s difficulty was to connect the content of intellectual transmission to its manner of transmission—to wed style and content within the *eros* of the seminar. This was a difficulty of style that addressed “what it is to acquire and to impart knowledge of the unconscious” (16).

For Foucault, as well as Lacan (and ultimately von Trier), the question of ethics comes down to a question of the costs of our decisions and how we experience these costs as an exclusionary discourse. This is what Blanchot meant in terms of discerning both a discourse and dis-course in which the discourse sets the conditions for what is outside of it, or what slips through its grasp of understanding. David Wellbury makes a similar argument when he says that Kittler’s discourse analysis, following Foucault’s lead, was not a matter of the content of discourse, but of the violence of exclusion that discourse itself introduces: “The object of study is not what is said or written but the fact—the brute and often brutal fact—that it is said, that this and not rather something else is inscribed” (Kittler, *Discourse Networks* xii). In the case of what is “intolerable” these costs would be measured in what cannot be attained through the deployment of forms of reason. Rajchman sees both Foucault and Lacan asking about ethics in terms of an economy of individual, social, and historical acceptability: “What are the ‘forms of rationality’ that secure our identity and delimit our possibilities [and] ‘how much does it cost Reason to tell the truth?’” (11). In other words, what does it cost us to act one way, and not another, or to inscribe one thing in the place of another? What is excluded by the losses and gains of these decisions?

In connecting the ethical work of Foucault and Lacan, Rajchman tells us how Foucault once remarked that “[Lacan] tried to pose the question, which is historically a ‘spiritual’ question: that of the cost the subject has to pay in order to say the true, and that of

the effect on the subject of the fact that he can say the true about himself” (14). This truth is what Charles Scott calls “games of truth” and “games of power” as catalysts for the uttering of phrases and subjects in dispute. The question of ethics is a question of costs and damages in the economy of “the new idiom.”<sup>8</sup> I want to extend Rajchman’s analysis of the unique work of Foucault and Lacan as aesthetic expressions of a passion or *eros* of thought, which Rajchman links to the question of ethics, to the ethics of obstruction and the composition of the perfect human (*Truth 4*). Both Foucault and Lacan displayed a similar concern for self-constitution within the framework of ethical inquiry. Although they did not collaborate in the same way as von Trier and Leth, their distinctive work does respond to the composition of the perfect human. Foucault and Lacan, von Trier and Leth, all express particular collaborative styles that respond to the uncertainty of identity by recoiling the question of ethics back into an expression of *eros*. These multivalent approaches to critical thought interweave form and content, figure and discourse, in a way that engages ethics as the frame for the event of creating obstructions.

### **“Styles of Life”: Ethics and the Aesthetic Connection**

Foucault provides a bridge between the aesthetic matrix of written and visual composition and ethics as a kind of relay between image and viewer or community to which it extends. The movement in his later work away from his earlier writing methods is a shift that Deleuze perceives as a change in the aesthetic quality of Foucault’s style. Foucault himself does not discuss the aesthetics of his own work, yet his work does become immersed in rhetorics of living—what Deleuze calls “ways of existing” that form a link between ethics and aesthetics. This is a way of recovering the whole range of possible qualities from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* which amounts to what Foucault calls “styles of life” or ways in which we negotiate our subjectivity.<sup>9</sup> Deleuze particularly perceived the aesthetic/ethical connection of Foucault’s projects as a way that Foucault performed his

own experiment. In an interview published in the book *Negotiations* Deleuze argues that, while moral codes put intentional constraints in order to judge based on certain values, Foucault's project suggests,

ethics is a set of optional rules that assess what we do, what we say, in relation to the ways of existing involved. We say this, do that: what way of existing does it involve? There are things one can only do or say through a mean-spiritedness, a life based on hatred, or bitterness toward life. Sometimes it takes just one gesture or word. It's the styles of life involved in everything that make us this or that. . . . What are we 'capable' of seeing, and saying (in the sense of uttering)? (100)

Here again we have the "uttering," the new idiom or the background noise created not through resolution, but rather in the midst of difficulty and change. Deleuze claims that Foucault's notion of subjectivization is not an issue of morality which "partakes in knowledge and power," but is ethical and aesthetic in that it generates its own constraints based upon our individual capabilities (*Negotiations* 114). It is important to note that while for Deleuze ethics involve establishing constraints or parameters for living in particular ways, the optional rules of ethics differ from a morality in the judgment of value. Morality must look to the transcendent values of metaphysics in order to establish meaning. Ethics, on the other hand, understood as "styles of life" are attunements toward the contingencies of the subject which create particular relations to the self and community.

In a series of lectures at the Collège de France in 1981-1982 Foucault argues for a break in ethical thought from more ancient ways of subjective composition. In what he calls the "Cartesian moment" Foucault notes that there is a shift from the requirement for a mediating transformation to have access to truth to the subject itself as the immediate source of truth (the "know yourself" Socratic influence) (*Hermeneutics* 14). In other words,

access to truth moves away from fundamental transformation of the subject and toward an act of knowledge (15). For the purposes of obstruction and multimodal composition, the ethical shift of the “Cartesian moment” displaces the transformative possibilities of *parergon* and places an emphasis on the discourse of the *mise en scène*. The notion of “styles of life” is a way to requalify the transformation, or re-vision, in the place of the effects of knowledge. In the light of “styles of life” the idea of the perfect human retains its obstructive status of ethical inquiry.

Foucault titled his third volume of *The History of Sexuality* “Care of the Self” as a hearkening back to Plato to reclaim the ancient Greek notion of *chresis* as an ethical and aesthetic notion of sexuality based on proper uses of pleasures. Caring for oneself stands in opposition to the Cartesian regime, and Foucault reintroduces desire as an essential and life-affirming power as a way to take “care of the self” before one can “know oneself” (43). Care of the self (a spiritual attunement) replaced by epistemic grasp of knowledge allows direct access to objects. In the visual composition of a cinematic scene, *mise en scène* descended from a Cartesian understanding of epistemic objects. This is how Foucault can argue repeatedly for a “style of life” which is not epistemic in the Cartesian sense and emphasizes rather ethics related to the *ethos* of “cultivation of the self” or the establishment of an *ethos* in relation to the self first and subsequently extending out toward the community (89). The connection between ethics and style or aesthetics is important in learning to care for the self. Arnold Davidson points out that “when Foucault says that the problem of an ethics is the problem of ‘a form [style] to be given to one’s conduct and one’s life,’ he does in fact link the notions of ethics and style of life in a conceptually intimate way.” (125) Care and desire are clearings inextricably linked in ethical “styles of life”; something that was not lost on Lacan in his own ethics of transmissions and pedagogical *eros*.

## Lacan's Difficulty: The *Sinthome* and the Seminar

In Lacan's work, desire is opposed to the very moral prescriptions of notions of Good and Ideal, in that we act counter to our desires and in so acting are not saved from feelings of guilt, anxiety, or internal neuroses. In his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Lacan reveals how these repressed desires form "an unconscious theme, the very articulation of that which roots us in a particular destiny, and that destiny demands insistently that the debt be paid, and desire keeps coming back, keeps returning, and situates us once again in a given track, the track of something is specifically our business" (392-3). Desire is the hidden meaning of our repeated actions that analysis seeks to reveal to itself; it offers itself as a destiny not in the way of *telos*, but in that we find ourselves unable to evade—we cannot not act, "forced" to decide.

The term "act" in Lacan's nomenclature cannot be equated with the mere "tasks to be done" that Agamben sees in the wake of determining substance and destiny. It is a shift in obligation—to act implies a choice of actions within a set of alternatives. As an interpreter of Lacan, Slavoj Žižek identifies this shift in obligation in the difference between *must* and *ought*, in which we understand that which we must do after deliberation and conscious decision "while remaining uncertain about it, and still very clearly seeing the powerful merits of alternative courses" (*Parallax* 49). According to Žižek then, to act is a realization of our limits and an acknowledgment that we must act because we "cannot do anything but this"; the individual is ultimately responsible, by placing themselves within the restrictive positions, for the destiny of the act (49). We act on desire and then desire acts upon us, and we cannot but respond. This is because of the polymorphous character of desire and its radical tendency toward excess.

Lacan's difficulty came in the form of the pedagogical transmission of knowledge of the unconscious—the seminar as a discursive site for the unconscious. He rejected any recourse to moral codes based on universal concepts of the Good and the Ideal.

These disavow the role of desire in coming to ethical decisions. Additionally there are costs involved in repressing desire, in physical and mental neuroses as well as missed opportunities and possibilities. In one particular passage of *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Lacan performs his difficulty as an examination of this question of ethics:



Opposed to the pole of desire is traditional ethics—not completely, of course, for nothing is new, or everything is new, in human thought. That’s something I wanted to make you feel by choosing the example of the antithesis of the tragic hero in a tragedy, an antithesis who nevertheless embodies a certain heroic quality, and that is Creon. With reference to this example, I spoke to you of the service of goods that is the position of traditional ethics. The cleaning up of desire, modesty, temperateness, that is to say the middle path we see articulated so remarkably in Aristotle; we need to know what it takes the measure of and whether its measure is founded on something. (386)

He makes reference to Aristotle’s “golden mean” and its utility to direct action and questions its grounding, its fundamental premise as a measurable object. But Lacan is also attempting to find a new “utterances” to convey not just an idea, but a feeling. This is an idea that Lacan wishes to make his students “feel” through the *ethos* of the tragic hero; how does one communicate the idea of desire, which itself resists communication? Desire deploys an excess of communication, and Lacan responds through appeals through various “styles.”



This response is an ethical act for Lacan, inasmuch as he acknowledges the difficulty of transmission and follows his desire: he declares, “I wanted to make you feel.” Feeling here is an appeal to *pathos*, to emotion, but also to *bios*, to the body and the flow of physical desires of the body. Žižek sees this appeal to the uncertainty of desire as a demonstration of Lacan’s notion of the *sinthome*: “in contrast to symptom which is a cipher of some repressed meaning, *sinthome* has no determinant meaning; it just gives body, in its repetitive pattern, to some elementary matrix of *jouissance*, of excessive enjoyment. Although *sinthomes* do not have sense, they do radiate *jouis-sense*, enjoy-meant” (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 226). *Sinthome* is a radically excessive patterning of pleasure; it is a “sense” without possessing sense or hermeneutic meaning, except in its meant-to-be-enjoyed, or an excess accepted in the place of repression or negation.

Lacan uses his seminar to retain an ironic sense of the term “ethics” as a way of revealing the problems of ethics, and opposing an expression of ethics to Aristotle’s “good” as a “Sovereign Good,” as a kind of fictional justification that can give substance to an experience of subjectivity. The image of the ideal subject, a subject firmly positioned within an order of truth, must inevitably fall under the weight of such demands.<sup>9</sup> I mention “fall” here to echo Leth’s image of the perfect man who falls at the end of the film, but also fall as the action of failing and which must project the illusion of success in order to continue its own hallucination, that of the pleasure principle. We are back to the notion that satisfactions here are a kind of obstruction to reaching that self-actualized sovereign subject, an ideal formed from negation and which is itself the very structure of obstruction.<sup>10</sup> Obstructions then take the character of discrete and bounded terms of a general discursive enframing.

The frame as obstruction, or *dis-enclosure*, cannot be separated from the image as the absolute limit to representation. Lacan frames ethics in the image of the exposed king defined by the absence of clothes he nonetheless believes to be present: “If the king is, in fact, naked, it is only insofar as he is so beneath a certain number of clothes—no doubt fictitious but nevertheless essential to his nudity” (17). Here we are treading lightly

around the negative, so to speak, as an obstruction to perceiving that space of nothing, the excluded place of the Real as constituting the generative gap of obstructions that von Trier and Leth find themselves composing around. Lacan suggest, “the question of ethics is to be articulated from the point of view of the location of man in relation to the real” (14). In other words, to be concerned with the frame, the human relations which situate perspective and valuation, is to enter the domain of the ethical, not only in terms of representation but as a cultivation of the self as a return to *ethos*.

### **The *Dis-Enclosure* of the Frame**

With the second obstruction von Trier raises the stakes of the game by introducing an ethical dilemma. No longer is Leth required to simply transgress his formal tendencies and experiment with different visual styles. Von Trier goes for the throat by setting up a false ethical choice: shoot the next film in what Leth deems “the most miserable place,” but not be able to show it. For von Trier the issue at hand is the possibility of the absent milieu to leave a trace on what is present within the images of the film. He is looking for nothing less than an acknowledgement from Leth of the impossibility of the request, and for the master’s ultimate submission to the student. For Leth the obstruction is a personal torture, a test of sorts, of his cinematic abilities. What discourages Leth is that the game of skill that he had entered was now suddenly something else that he could not control. His response to von Trier is to reassert his formal prowess by creating a formal solution to the ethical dilemma.

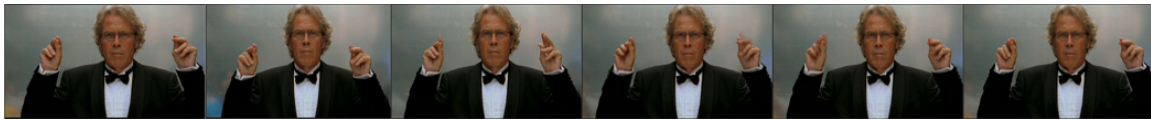
When Leth and von Trier use the word “obstruction” they are not speaking of the same thing. There is, in a sense, a lack of stasis between understandings of obstruction insofar as it becomes a strategy for productive collaboration within the film. While Leth accepts the obstructions as challenges to overcome it becomes increasingly clear that von Trier will settle for nothing less than Leth’s absolute and total failure. Both of these views

hinge on a misinterpretation of the project and its relation to Leth's original film *The Perfect Human*. For Leth's film human perfection is attained only insofar as it can be estranged from itself within a knowledge economy, that perfection is given over from knowledge about what it means to be perfect and how those qualities correspond to the human being. Humanity and perfection face each other from different sides of the coin of finitude. Von Trier's constant drive toward failure rejects the premise of perfection from the outset to force a moment of transformation. The obstructions for Von Trier are not an entrance into a dialogue about human finitude, but a fiery furnace of challenges to prepare the conditions to reveal that finitude within this discourse of perfection.

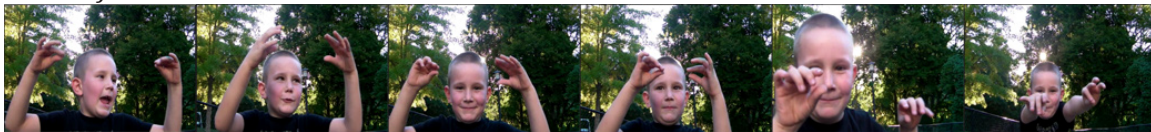
*The Perfect Human*



*The Perfect Human: Bombay*



*The Perfect Human: Revision*



The first chapter accepted the challenge *The Five Obstructions* makes toward cinematic images by considering images in their cinematic possibilities. Rather than trying to consider images outside of the cinematic, or vice versa, as a strictly ontological move, what I have discussed in terms of the cinematic cut is the opening of the enclosure of the self-referentiality of film images. In “the distribution of the sensible” Ranci re identifies a structure from which images appear *vis   vis* established ways of knowing and making. Ranci re is particularly concerned for the political and social aspects as distributions of the sensible are community built strategies for articulating meaning or significance (*Politics* 13). Through these strategies meaning and mode have already been determined beforehand as a

social construct. Even the so-called avant-garde emerges as an aesthetic possibility because the ability for the violation of certain rules and restrictions surface as a condition of the sensible: sense creates the conditions for nonsense.

What about the creation of sense itself? This would mean that communities develop these strategies in response to purely interior forces as a continuum of self-referentiality, and that these strategies are themselves only constitutive from within the enclosure of their own system. Surely these communities must respond to exterior forces outside of the sensible in order to sustain the sensible. These responses prompt shifts in regimes and indicate a destabilization of the accepted notions (disagreement?) of discursive practices and suggests that what used to be regarded as sense (sensation, sensible) is now the nonsense from which a new sense will emerge.<sup>11</sup> The nexus of sense and nonsense reveals a crisis that I will argue speaks to a crisis of *ethos* and its relationship to practice. leaving open the question of how should one live within the enclosures of particular ways of being. What are the possible lines of flight in-scribed and de-scribed within the ethical realm of images? If the obstructions or the concept of obstructions as related through von Trier and Leth's film lead us to consider such questions it is because the image that develops from them is not only aesthetic or political, it is acutely ethical as well.

I have attempted to think obstruction as it emerges from the film as the exterior force upon a particular regime which demands a response from the community. Indeed, not all challenges to the sensible result in a complete shift of meanings and values. Yet the implication of such obstructions or restrictions on the current regime is that systems of representation must function as a totality of referentiality. This is how Jean-Luc Nancy defines "closure" as a completion of the totalizing task of the metaphysical regime (*Dis-enclosure* 6). What Nancy discovers is that these systems lay the groundwork for their own self-overcoming, or *dis-enclosure*, by including in their totalizing models what the system must exclude, that is the exterior forces that shape the accepted strategies from which regimes emerge. For Nancy, this is possible because

the movement of thought, insofar as it cannot think the maximum of the being is to able to think, but thinks also in excess to that maximum, since thought is capable of thinking even that there is something that exceeds its power to think. In other words, thinking . . . can think—indeed, cannot not think—that it thinks something in excess over itself. It penetrates the impenetrable, or rather is penetrated by it (11).

By thinking in terms of closure or the limits of thought we also think the excess of that limit, that there is something beyond the frame which escapes the closure of thought.

What I am arguing here in terms of cinematic images and multimodal composition is that the *mise-en-scène* is not enclosed because its construction relies on the frame. The edges of the image, the screen, and the shot imply the excess of the image, the frame as what defines the composition of images but which itself is positioned beyond its own frame of reference. There are, of course, ethical implications to how images are composed. It is a matter of aesthetic and political judgment what is allowed within the frame and what remains on the outside, which speaks to the virtue of the space of composition.

### **One's Own: *Ethos* and Collaboration**

My concern in this chapter has been to explore the possibilities of obstructions to provide multimodal composition with the conditions for ethical inquiry. This concern comes from the collaborative conflict displayed by von Trier and Leth that leads to Leth's failure to provide a successful response to the second obstruction. In his failure, however, Leth leaves the familiar territory of his established patterns and beliefs and confronts strange external forces which serve to transform his own "styles of life." What was once most proper to the image of the perfect human, an image that Leth had created, becomes foreign and strange.

In his discussion of the lapse of Heidegger's ethical thought, Scott points out that although *ethos* is considered to be "one's own," or what is most familiar or proper to the individual, is not what is proper. *Ethos* is what is recalcitrant or inherently resistant to the proper places demanded by *nomos* (Question 144-5). To concern oneself with the question of ethics rather than ethics in general is to realize that ethics is already questionable in its relation to the field of *ethos*. *Ethos* is at home in its strangeness, in that it has no home as a proper place constantly enframed by *nomos*. To understand *ethos* as recalcitrant is to recognize that uncertainty of ethics, its constant recoiling movement.

The ethics of obstruction refers to an undecidability of how to respond to the obligation of response. There can be no resolution precisely because there is no proper response or corrective to the difficulty of the obligation; one's most own is that which is





least proper to the individual. This is what Caputo means in *Against Ethics* when he asserts that “Undecidability does not detract from the urgency of decision; it simply underlines its difficulty” (4). Despite the difficulty of ethical inquiry, Caputo sees a tendency in ethics to “keep this or any other scandal, stumbling block to reason and intelligibility, at a safe remove. Ethics wants to keep its good name, to keep its house in order” (7). If ethical understanding would remove the obstructions to truth, as the Cartesian regime removed the transformative requirement to access truth, then ethics is itself the ultimate obstruction to the concept of multimodal composition.

The obstructions that follow the second will respond to the fixed image of the perfect human and Leth’s failed attempt to express its ethical difficulty in *The Perfect Human: Bombay*. Leth’s stumbling block, his fall, his ethical failure, succeeds as von Trier embraces the scandal as the conditions for punishment. In the next chapter I will examine von Trier’s unique approach to Leth’s punishment by withdrawing, rather than engaging, from the limiting factors of obstruction and offering Leth the opportunity to create what he calls a “free-style” film. The reduced role of obstruction emphasizes more, as Caputo argued, the difficulty of responding to its urgency.



# Chapter Three



## Breaking the Rules: A Free Style

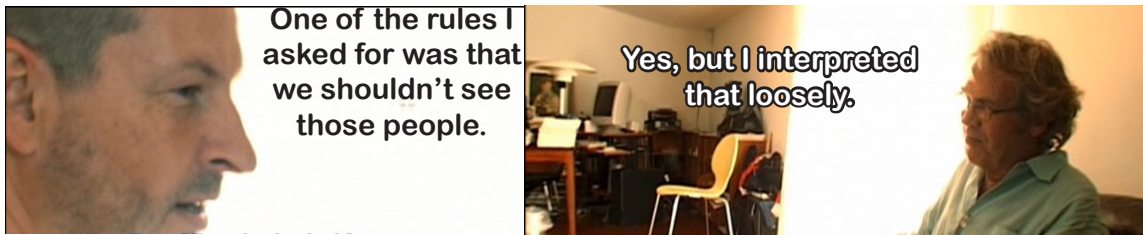
The third obstruction on *The Five Obstructions* is imposed on Jørgen Leth by his collaborator Lars von Trier as a punishment for his refusal to obey the rules in the Bombay film. Leth is castigated for ignoring von Trier's insistence to shoot the second film in what Leth would consider the most miserable place in the world without showing it and following his ethical drive to visually include the poverty of Bombay's red light district. The punishment, interestingly, is a choice: either return to Bombay and fix the problem (which he refuses) or make a "free-style" film. Leth struggles with the open possibilities suddenly free of obstruction from von Trier. In the wake of his failure in India and faced with an unguided revision of *The Perfect Human*, Leth feels the weight of freedom becoming a creative burden and is never completely free from his own prescriptive expectations.

In this chapter I will look at the responsibility of freedom in conjunction with revision and the suspension of the obstruction model as a penalty for Leth's ethical violation. I will argue that the "free-style" revision is never free from a dictation of style and that a withdrawal from a list of rules can productively disrupt a static transference of obstructions and responses by exposing the pedagogical relationship to necessary violations of the collaborative contract. This discussion will inevitably lead to the design of an obstructions model that can facilitate new understandings between students and instructors about their roles in pedagogical relationships.

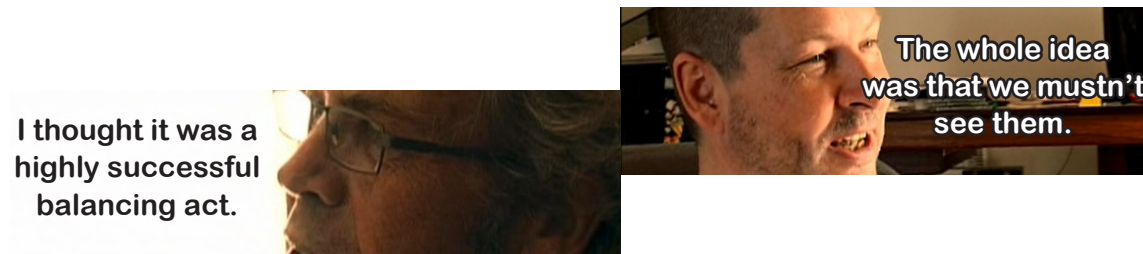
### Defocusist: "*The Story Is the Villain*"



- It was not the film I asked for.  
- I'll be damned! Let's hear why not.



After his old mentor successfully navigates the obstructions of the first film, *The Perfect Human: Cuba*, von Trier is somewhat disappointed in the outcome and confesses, "One always feels furious when it turns out there are solutions." When he accuses Leth of violating the terms of the obstruction in the second film von Trier leaps at the chance to penalize Leth's careless judgment. Because it does not follow the demands of the obstruction, *The Perfect Human: Bombay* must be revised into a valid response. "I'm sorry, Jørgen, but I am going to have to speak harshly," he informs Leth, "It was not the film I asked for." When Leth explains that he interpreted the rules "loosely" von Trier serves up his verdict that the director will have to return and reshoot the film in Mumbai.



What happens next demonstrates the ethical mediality of the collaborative context from which the obstruction assignments arise, or that the frame of reference for the second film can now change as von Trier must respond to Leth's resistance. Von Trier offers Leth the chance to return to the "scene" of the most miserable place in the world and recreate the film, this time strictly following the rules of the game. Leth, however, steadfastly refuses to revisit the scene of his crime. In response to the subsequent impasse between the two, von Trier decides to issue his punishment to Leth in the form of a choice: return and reshoot, or make a different film without any rules. The request is translated as a "free style" film, which

is, nevertheless, a misnomer of sorts; the finished film has the most stylized composition thus far.



**It's a marvelous film.  
I love it.**

**But I don't think it  
followed the rules.**

**Obviously this is a sophistic game.**

The result of the free-style condition is that in *The Perfect Human: Brussels* Leth is allowed to return to his *habitus*, or to the aesthetic and technical strategies that he has mastered and with which he feels the most comfortable. Relieved of the need to stick to the obstruction, the third film loses the struggle of revision between Leth, von Trier, and the obstructions. The paradox of “free-style” is that the focus of the project, the ultimate framing of the obstructions, the investigation of “the perfect human,” is buried underneath excessive stylization. The freedom of style actually promotes an excess of style that de-focuses the figure of the perfect human as the original object of study. The ethical challenge of the second film presented both von Trier and Leth the opportunity of revising their goals for the project. Von Trier withdrew the demands of the obstructions to allow Leth a choice, and Leth had to express “the perfect human” without external framing from von Trier.



**- I put up a screen  
and screened off  
this bit of real life.**

**- I do understand.  
And this film is  
most likely much  
better . . .**

**That's what you  
mustn't do. You  
always try to be  
too good.**

**This is therapy,  
not a film  
competition with  
yourself.**

The “free style” penalty that von Trier imposes on Leth in the third film could be

thought ethically as a frame that focuses the *mise-en-scène*. Free-style as an absence of obstructions is given no focus except the style itself. Von Trier had already envisioned the idea of “defocus” as an anti-narrative concept which he expressed with his participation in the *Dogme 95* collective. In a passage he wrote as part of his objectives for the experiment of *The Five Obstructions*, von Trier explains his vision of the *defocusist* as a call for peripheral vision for those who would resist the demands of narrative:

The story  
expense  
a point’s



is the villain. The theme presented at the of all decency. But also the case in which importance is presumably submitted for the audience to evaluate, assisted by viewpoints and facts counterbalanced by their antitheses.



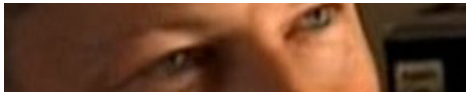
The worship of pattern, the one and only, at the expense of the subject matter from which it comes. How do



we rediscover it, and how do we impart or describe it? The ultimate challenge of the future—to see without looking: to defocus! In a world where the media kneel before the altar of sharpness, draining life out of life in the process, the DEFOCUSIST will be the communicators of our era—more, nothing less! (*Danish Film Institute 31*)

Even here von Trier composes his view of “defocus” in terms of “the ultimate challenge,” as a vision without vision. If the obstruction of the third film is to be denied the safety of a focused assignment, then the focus (what von Trier refers to as the “subject matter”) is what frames the scene. Freedom *from* style becomes constrained *to* style.

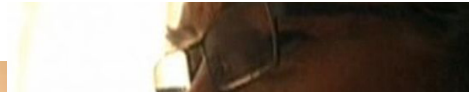




**Make the same film again,  
but with a background**



**-You've put me in a spot.**



**-I don't want to. I can't.**

It is important to keep in mind that the directive to make a "free-style" film was a penalty, not a reward, for Leth's ethical indulgences of the second film. In the context of obstruction responses, creative freedom encourages the composer to become a *defocusist* because the rules that would limit the scope of a project and provide a frame of reference for the subject matter is suddenly absent. In the absence of an imposed frame the composer must confront unfamiliar territory without the benefit of a clear (focused) subject.

Faced with this absence the tendency of *ethos* is to return to *habitus*, or to that which is most familiar, to fill the void. This ethical dimension to the struggle with obstructions is problematic because *ethos* itself is a recoiling term.



**- What should the punishment be?**

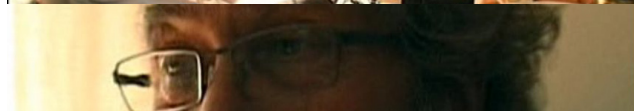
**- I can't say. I prefer you to make the decisions.**

**- So make a film with no rules from me!**

**Yes, and your punishment is to make  
a free-style film.**



**- I don't like it. I'd rather have some-  
thing to hang onto.**



In *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, film scholar David Bordwell formulates the urge toward the familiar as the terms of discourse when he writes, “when interpreting films, critics follow a set of craft-like reasoning routines which do not depend on any abstract theory” (26). The focused object is the justification for the hermeneutic impulse that attempts to deny “the question of ethics” by binding representation to sets of prescribed codes. Bordwell asks, “Must a theory prove its validity through interpretations of particular [images]?” (26). The “Post-Theory” that Bordwell invokes is not a rejection of theoretical discourses, but a *revision* of what it means to compose and discuss cinematic images apart from fulfilling a place within pre-determined hermeneutic frameworks. Bordwell’s project attempts to “defocus” the discourses of cinematic images to reposition the frames of reference and see the images rather than just their interpretations.

I would argue, however, that Bordwell challenges the frames of academic discourses only to refocus the image into his own fields of inquiry, including aesthetic and historical categories. It is difficult to defend a position of post-theory without instituting a theoretical structure. The ethical urge to focus, to return to a proper form, is drawn from the uncertain status of the *mise-en-scène* as a discourse that can be defined. Every *mise-en-scène* (or horizon of composition) contains a multitude of media and modes for which not all can be accounted. All media are multimedia and all modes are multimodal. To compose as a transversal process that cuts across media and modalities is to continually place and replace images within sets of unstable frames of reference.

Composition work is much like “the work of condensation” that Sigmund Freud described in *The Interpretation of Dreams* as part of the expression of dream content. Condensation is the phenomenon in which the image information of a dream evades complete interpretation because the sparseness of these elements betrays their infinite complexity, or in Freud’s word, “indeterminable” (212). The “indefinite quota” of image signification is a result of the excess (radical *access*) of images. Freud explains: “one might suppose that condensation proceeds by way of exclusion, for the dream is . . . an exceedingly



incomplete and fragmentary reproduction” (214). Interpretations of these images can only be based on what he calls a “mediating common factor,” namely, a middle element that acts as the semiotic bridge in a composite figure. This mediating factor negotiates the excessiveness of the image—the ob/scenity of *parergon* is that images must be restrained against the excessive force of the scene. *Mise-en-scène* includes within itself the conditions of the “ob/scene” or an excess of signification that stands against a scene or image as a completely static representational formation.

The defocused image, peripheral vision, disrupts this static structure of representation. This disruption of representational discourses happens on the level of visual composition, or the *mise-en-scène*, where the work of condensation emerges from the frame of the scene. This disruption is what I will call the “ob/scene” as the potential rhetorical styles and forms from without the scene that can inform a revision of the composition. The ob/scene always haunts the *mise-en-scène* in that, as Jean-Luc Nancy suggested in the case of representation, its absence implies its presence.<sup>1</sup> The significance in visual composition is always excessive, rather than simply representative. It is excess, or obscenity, that constantly threatens to overtake meaning with other modes of expression. The ob/scene could also be conceived in terms of Jean Baudrillard’s fourth phase of the image in which the image “is no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation” (12). The hyper-real, however, tends toward the totality of the “desert of the real.” The ob/scene is not of the order of the singular, the sacrament, but of the multiplication of sacraments. The banquet scene of *The Perfect Human* performs a sacrament of images and meanings with no quota of condensation. The excessive quality of the banquet, not only in terms of its opulent content but also in its parallel to the obscenity of perfection, was also the reason it was so important to von Trier that it be reenacted against a background of excessive misery.

Baudrillard himself is critical about the notion of the obscene which he posits as an “endless, unbridled proliferation of the social, of the political, of information, of the economic, of the aesthetic, not to mention, of course, the sexual” (“The End of the

Millennium” 451). Neil Leach reads Baudrillard here as commenting on this act of seeing as surface vision or mere representation: “the process of reading an object as a mere image, that object is emptied of much of its original meaning. The image is all there is” (5). For Leach it is the act of surface seeing—aestheticizing—that bloats and depoliticizes the image. In short, obscenity is an excess equated with obesity and bloatedness. The ob/scene image plays on what Roland Barthes called the obtuse sense that is related to excess but resists articulation or a complete account. The ob/scene is the sensation of non-sense.

### Perfection/Recoil

Socrates, practice music.  
(Friedrich Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy* 93)

In the second chapter we saw through the eyes of our esteemed ethical guides Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault the difficulty in establishing the ideals of a “perfect human” or a discourse of correct compositional models. This is not to simply state that there can be no perfect model to living a good or ethical life; there can be no perfection. It seems to me that this assessment has become somewhat of a naive platitude; neither Lacan nor Foucault allows us this comforting nihilist approach. Instead they approach ethics as the opportunity afforded by the failure or finitude of human beings. It is not an occasion to escape the question of identity or *ethos*, but, as John Rajchman notes, it is an opportunity to face the difficulty of “how to be ‘at home’ in a world where our identity is not given” (144).

Rajchman indicates that the shift from comfort to difficulty (from the perfect to the human) that Lacan and Foucault recognize is a matter of exchange that would suggest that



ethics operates on the level of various economies (10). But we must remember that he is defending *eros* as a shifting field of desires rather than *ethics* as a stable set of principles, and so the question is not about simple exchange values (1:1 ratios). For Foucault it is about the *intolerable*, or at what point are “we are still willing to *tolerate* the violence we do to ourselves [in order to constitute ourselves]” (12). So something is lost in our refusal to face the difficulty of subjectivity. For Lacan this loss drives the need or desire (*das ding*) that is not part of the system of needs. In Rajchman’s mind this is what makes the unconscious ethical: it is not structured as a language, but rather an *event* that lies beyond the grasp of discourse (21). In both instances ethics has little to do with universal signifiers and everything to do with the limits and possibilities manifested through obstructions.

Deploying images in various modes of composition somehow challenge their own significance or *ethos*; they indeed get in the way of their own understanding. In our current nomenclature we could say that images operate as their own obstructions. Any discussion of ethics cannot completely avoid the negative, and even an ethic grounded in the hope for the perfection of the human figure must confront human failings. In *The Rhetoric of Religion* Kenneth Burke explains the need for the possibility of failure in ethics when he links action to character “which involves *choice*” and that although “sheer ‘motion’ is non-ethical, ‘action’ implies the ethical (the human personality)” (41). For Burke the ethical arises out of choice, and for humans these amount to the role of perfection in defining what it is to be human, arising out of language.

Human beings, under the influence of signs, hold a stake in the *telos* of representations. Burke traces the teleology of “perfection” back to *entelechy* in Aristotle in which “each being aims at the perfection natural to its kind” so that there is an impulse toward human perfection, and this perfection is pure in itself; it has no need of additional beings (*Language* 17). The movement here is clearly from the human to the perfect; there is no sense, however, for what exactly is involved in this perfection. Purity of substance? A completion of movement? Of being? The impulse for perfection is far easier to identify

than the actual state of perfection, if indeed it exists. Instead, Burke secures the symbolic possibilities of perfection within our systems of representation, and this means that the term can be used ironically, as in his oft-quoted phrase that man is “rotten with perfection” (*Language* 18). This means that there can be a “perfect fool” or a “perfect villain” or even a “perfect enemy” (18). The movement that von Trier so desperately demands from the movement of perfection back to the human is his perfectly focused impulse to break Leth’s misplaced trust in his own images.

What has been taking shape around the first two obstructions is the opening up of the irony of the perfect image. Leth will accept each obstruction and always respond in some particular way that will fulfill the demands of the rules without exception. Leth has perfect control of his medium; he is the perfect filmmaker. At the same time we have seen nothing in the making of each obstruction but Leth’s human-ness, his weaknesses, and his desire to gain complete control of his projects. Take for example Leth’s thoughts on having to cut each shot to no more than 12 frames in the first obstruction: “No edit more than 12 frames long. . . . Damn it, it’s totally destructive. What the hell does he expect me to do? He’s ruining it from the start. It’ll be a spastic film.” Of course, he does not divulge his feelings to von Trier at the screening of *The Perfect Human: Cuba*. Instead he agrees with von Trier that the inclusion of this particular rule was a “gift,” implying that the obstruction that he had claimed would “ruin” the film from the very beginning facilitated the film’s successful revision. The perfect obstruction finds success in the struggle of the collaborative context.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche writes, “We talk so abstractly about poetry because all of us are usually bad poets” (64). I will rephrase this in light of the current conversation and affirm that *it is because we discuss poetry in such abstract terms that we are indeed perfect poets* in this ironic sense. Nietzsche traces the figures of Apollo and Dionysus as a way to illustrate the impropriety of defining principles through a perfect bifurcation of the creative impulse. There is an Apollonian tendency in the drive for perfection, the idealization of human representations. Burke sees this perfection directly attached to

language manifested in the “mere desire to name something by its ‘proper’ name, or to speak a language in its distinctive ways is intrinsically ‘perfectionist’” (*Rhetoric of Religion* 16). The Dionysian image, however, would not be concerned with language, its expression would be music, and thus it has an uneasy relationship with perfection. The image of Apollo, the “shining one” or “deity of light” as described by Nietzsche, is the beautiful illusion: the dream experience.

If Nietzsche presents Apollo as the figure of dreaming illusions, then Dionysus represents the intoxicated excess of the sublime. Nietzsche explains how the genuine poet demonstrate a vivid-ness—an urge, an irrepressible desire “to speak out of other bodies and souls” (*Birth of Tragedy* 64) that was a manifestation of Dionysian perversity. Nietzsche associates Dionysus with the image of the artistic Socrates who, visited with the dream to practice his music, realizes the limits of the intelligible (93). Even Socrates, on his deathbed, must make the transversal move across the human horizon.

It seems, at times, that Nietzsche extols the benefits of the Dionysian intoxication as a way to counteract the overexposure of the perfection of the Apollonian dream. He defends his position by explaining that in the Apollonian tendency, “despite all its beauty and moderation, [its] entire existence rested on a hidden substratum of suffering and of knowledge, revealed to him by the Dionysian. And behold: Apollo could not live without Dionysus! The ‘titanic’ and the ‘barbaric’ were in the last analysis as necessary as the Apollonian” (46). In his introduction to the essay, translator Walter Kauffman points out that the link between the two is the brutality of creative force, “that the achievements of the Greeks . . . cannot be understood adequately so long as we do not realize what potentially destructive forces had to be harnessed to make them possible” (10). The argument here is that, rather than having to withstand the violence of excess and unintelligibility, these forces are deployed by the freedom of creative thought and action. Whether it be the negation of exclusion and definition or the perversity of sense and sensation, both are bound to performing the recoiling movement from the human to the perfect and back again.

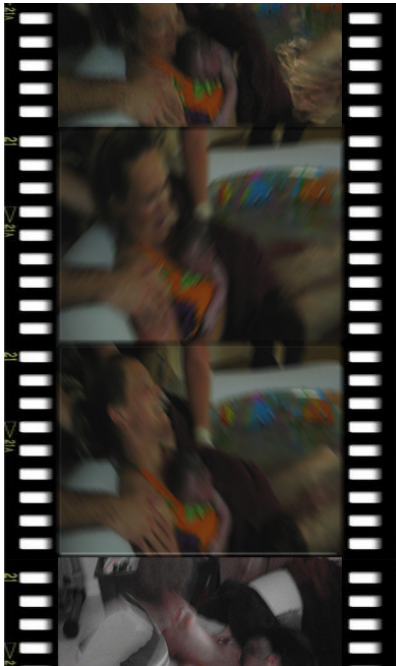
## The Ob/Scene (a primal scene?)<sup>2</sup>

So if Nietzsche has the benefit of the artistic Socrates then we need our own figure for the restrictive composing freedom of obstructions, one that I have been arguing for the extent of this project, which performs the same ethical recoiling movement of the image and which recognizes the excesses of perversity and intelligibility within the same image. What we are “aiming” for<sup>3</sup> is a way to include both tendencies. It is within this spirit of the ob/scene that I mentioned von Trier’s manifesto call for the “defocusist” who would “see without looking,” ignoring patterns and narratives to reclaim what has been lost to *mise-en-scène*. It is significant that, rather than romanticizing the benefits of improved technology or access to technology, von Trier falls back on an old cinematic device to usher in the communicators of the future, who will wield the focus lens as a weapon for the image against the tyranny of *looking*. This is the ob-scenity of Leth’s punishment for his sins of the second film; essentially, he must create a defocused image in the directive for a “free style” film. It is not the defocused image, however, that offers the directive of creative freedom. The directive comes from the figure of obstruction that demands the new film response to be perfectly liberated from von Trier’s demands.

What I mean by obstruction has conceptually formed directly out of *The Five Obstructions*, but as we have seen even within this film the obstruction model has taken on various configurations; its presence shifting from illustrative to authoritative, but always uncertain. This uncertainty takes on an identity of contingency in the form of the obstructions or challenges which anchor the film. Obstructions come from the figural in that they are interruptive forces of uncertainty and demand, out of uncertainty, a response. To differentiate between Lyotard’s discursive and figural, D. N. Rodowick explains in *Reading the Figural* that the latter “operates in another dimension, that of unconscious desire, and returns to discourse as an infernal repetition, the force of transgression” (12). Obstructions constantly return discourse to the distortion and perversion of the figural through what

Lyotard called an “other scene.” Within the project of revision, obstructions function as a constant force of desire or purpose that disregard the typical conventions of a static scene and call for immediate responses. Lyotard’s “other scene” is ob/scene, emphasizing its standing as operating from the outside the scene or image, and also as a force of irrepressible perversity and dissonance.

While the word *obstruct* suggests standing in the way of the object, the Latin prefix “ob” refers to something against or toward. I am thinking here of the idea of a midwife as obstetrician, not in a specifically medical sense but from the Latin “to stand by”—standing



in anticipation of the crowning infant.<sup>4</sup> This is not the image of violent opposition, but of uncertainty, of hesitation before the moment of separation. Mother and child are one and there is no inside or outside; the midwife stands poised on the margins of the frame of the birthing body as the scene of impending severance. She is the obstruction in the moment of ecstasis not because she is the originator of the spectacle, but as the witness to scene. In this way obstruction retains the generative significance of the idea of against and toward, while retaining somewhat the ethical notion of difficulty and conflict within a recoiling movement.

The perversity of obstetrics in standing by is the impossible performance of maintaining both intimacy and distance from the scene. The witness is already an excessive figure in the primal scene, but it is from this position that the dissonance of the scene originates. The crowning moment of anticipation before infant and mother become divided bodies is obscene in that it hovers between the expected and the unexpected. Maurice Blanchot describes a primal scene in *Writing of the Disaster* when a child raises his jaded eyes from the vision of his everyday space “toward the ordinary sky,



with clouds, grey light—pallid daylight without depth” (72). In the instant of the distorted vision the boy sees/seizes:

the sky, the *same* sky, suddenly open, absolutely black and absolutely empty, revealing (as though the pane had broken) such an absence that all has since always and forevermore been lost therein—so lost that therein is affirmed and dissolved the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is that there is, and first of all nothing beyond. The unexpected aspect of this scene (its interminable feature) is the feeling of happiness that submerges the child, the ravaging joy to which he can bear witness only by tears, an endless flood of tears. He is thought to suffer a childish sorrow; attempts are made to console him. He says nothing. He will live henceforth in the secret. He will weep no more. (72)

Raising an eye toward the expected and encountering the unexpected occurs from an excessive looking from a standing outside of looking: the ob/scene. In Blanchot’s scene the boy is irrelevant to the presence of the sky and the clouds; he is necessarily irrelevant for the sublime to it have its affect. What does affect the scene is its unexpectedness in both its challenge to discourse (he says nothing) and to sense (tears of joy). The process of image composition is ob/scene when it must perform the authority of both distance and intimacy from within the context of an object from a position outside of the (primal?) scene, and, whether considered textual or visual, must face the unexpected challenge to discourse and sense.

SHOT:



ACTION:

DIALOGUE: Hiya! My name is...

SHOT:



ACTION:

DIALOGUE: hahahaha!

A PRIMAL SCENE  
(in two parts)

FADE IN:

EXT. FRONT LAWN SUBURBAN HOME - LATE EVENING

The boy, SETH, is about 4 years old. He is pointing toward the sky, the same sky, at an airplane as it slowly cuts a line across the boundless space. The rapid movement of his arm obstructs his view of the flight path (as though the pane had been broken) and he wonders if he shall ever find that plane again - that it is not his arm that has moved the heavens.

His brother JOSH, 6 years old, is talking to his DAD who is holding a video camera.

JOSH

I like to climb trees. I  
like to climb on the  
basketball court. Hello my  
name is Josh- bye-bye.

JOSH moves out of the way to allow his brother a turn to answer. As SETH answers his vision is broken.

SETH

Hiya! This is . . . my  
name is Josh.

Laughter interrupts the spell of the scene. The plane is gone.

## The Fictions We Write

The distortion of the *defocusist* does not only result from the unexpected use of a strictly cinematic function. Besides, to defocus one aspect of a scene only pulls focus to another aspect. If an image is blurry you will notice that flaw. The longer an image, a shot, or a scene continues unfocused the more likely it will reveal the colors, shapes, and patterns within the frame. The frame may even begin to take shape. One could argue that avant-garde and experimental films like Stan Brackage's *Dog Star Man* (1962) were thinking in terms of defocusing narrative aspects to create abstract images. The difference between the experimental images of Brackage and von Trier's *defocusist* is that von Trier does not want to replace narrative with a notion of pure image. Instead he makes the story the villain and insists on engaging it as an ethical pursuit.

The *defocusist* does not break free of story because he is still anchored to his own self-sustaining fictions. Jacques Lacan thought of identity and trauma in terms of composing fictions that sustain the illusion of speaking true of ourselves.<sup>5</sup> The truth is that our "truth" is lost to us, just as *ethos* is identified as a kind of living experience that can only be grasped by external observation. We install fictions that give the trauma of the lost experience a double function: 1) to continue the repression of the lost object of desire in order to sustain desire, and 2) to give the object an excessive presence through proliferating stories and images. The truth *hurts* too much. There can be no such thing as a pure *defocusist* or even a "freestyle" film as the frame is still anchored by the fiction of freedom, or the unobstructed access to the perfect image. There are both centrifugal and centripetal forces at play in composing narratives. Internally, the centrifugal force of trauma pushes out under constant repression, as in the drive to respond, rather than disregard, an obstruction. The centripetal forces insist that the subject serve as the external representation of the internal fiction, illustrated by the effort of *The Five Obstructions* to reveal "the perfect human" as an external visual expression of a hidden virtue.

The inertia produced at the nexus of these fictional/factual forces is a direct achievement of developments in image making technologies, the same general technologies that Paul Virilio has called “the vision machine.” I will leave the term singular, as Virilio does, to emphasize the common vision between various visual technologies in various fields of study. Virilio offers a sobering warning that the artificial visions offered by these digital technologies create a “relative fusion/confusion of the factual (or operational, if you prefer) and the virtual; the ascendancy of the ‘reality effect’ over a reality principle already largely contested elsewhere, particularly in physics” (60). What I take Virilio to be suggesting is that the rise of digital technologies has contaminated the pure divide between fact and fiction making reality out to be an effect rather than a principle.

Virilio not only makes the point that cinematic images offered a new way to imagine the intersection between fact and fiction, but that the conditions for the development of the cinema initiated biological shifts in our understandings of visual media. In the next paragraph of the essay he returns to the birth of cinematic history as the moment when we could have learned our lesson about modern image technologies. He asks,

How could we have failed to grasp that the discovery of retinal retention that made the development of Marey’s chronophotography and the cinematography of the Lumière brothers possible, also propelled us into the totally different province of the mental retention of images?

How can we accept the factual nature of the frame and reject the objective reality of the cinema-goer’s virtual image, that visual retention, which is not produced solely by the retina, as we once thought, but by the way our nervous system records ocular perceptions? (61)

Virilio goes back to Marey and the Lumières as a place to identify this major technological shift, tracing a line from image to audience. These particular images were a product of a

new capacity of the body as archival technology to “record” the image, rather than a factual presence that enters by the eye. Virilio considers cinematic images a kind of writing, or memory technology, in the figure of the image machine that ultimately led to a confusion between the factual and the virtual.

But if filmmaking or image-making in general is a kind of writing, how is it that the invention of the cinematic apparatus can be such a crucial moment of physiological and technological change? Have not the stories of Marey and the Lumières become themselves archived fictions that provide a fiction of origin? Instead these stories stand beside each other as external forces that weigh down on a social retinal retention, write across the visual memory of the body, and demand a response. In the case of cinematic arts, the new images and their technologies have likewise demanded a new way for the human body to perceive and understand these experiences.

Still, why describe an experience so firmly entrenched in the conditions of visual archive, especially in terms of the current obstruction of freedom, which lacks the parameters of memory that the others have engaged (particular scenes or locations that recall the original film)? In a sense, Leth is now left to the excesses of his own desires, and this is much different than having the analyst in the same room guiding the questions for the analysis. In a similar paradox, Lacan is famous for having said that the unconscious, the site of desire and excess, was “structured like a language” (*Seminar XX 48*). He may have argued this a little too persuasively as the semioticians have demonstrated how everything can indeed be structured like a language. We are left wondering as to why Lacan insisted on the image of language for something that seems to refuse structure altogether.

In an essay titled “The Other Lacan” Jacques Alain-Miller reconsiders Lacan’s statement about the unconscious structured as a language of the analytic experience between analyst and analysand. According to Miller, this “other Lacan” believes in a precise routine of analysis which runs around in a circle: “The circle is called the fantasy” (Miller). According to Miller the old Lacanian cliché about comparing the unconscious to

language ignores the force of fantasy that drives desire, a force that includes “the function of repetition in fantasy, the inertia which fantasy provides to the desire, its stifling effects on desire’s metonymy, the sense of no progress, the tedium of redundancy which it gives to the experience” (Miller). The vision machine could be said to work through fantasy rather than memory; the eyes fasten the moving images down to sensorial fragments that can be absorbed through desire into the fantasy. The reason that Leth literally recoils at the prospect of making a film free of guided obstruction is that he must now rely on fantasy rather than memory. He faces the very factual possibility that he could fail to continue the fantasy of his project. And as we can learn from the unconscious, fiction has always been a part of the fantasy of the factual.

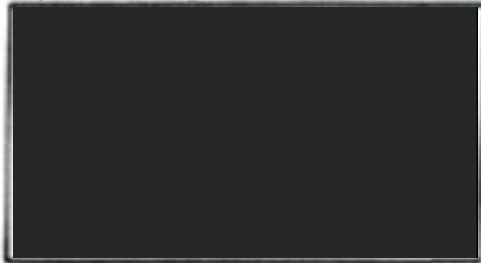
SHOT:



ACTION:

DIALOGUE: fly on a plane

SHOT:



ACTION:

DIALOGUE: Fade.

CUT TO:

SETH turns to the camera to continue to answer the interviewer’s question.

SETH

Ok, I’m Seth. This is  
Seth’s diving board.

SETH liked to dive. The water mirrored the sky and broke into pieces when he jumped. The unexpected aspect of this scene (its interminable feature) is the feeling of happiness as he sinks below the surface. The sky does not break so easily.

SETH  
I like to fly.  
To fly . . .

He can only bear witness to the joy of the scene through tears, an slow-moving path of tears. JOSH moves in and whispers something inaudible into his ear. He speaks.

SETH  
. . . fly on a plane.  
He will weep no more.

FADE OUT.

### **From Replicator to Witness**

Foucault notes in *Hermeneutics of the Subject* that up until the time of Descartes the concept of “care of yourself” had been practiced anciently as an access to truth only within the parameters of a spiritual transformation of the subject. Foucault recognized the “Cartesian moment” as an event in thought when the transformative properties of encountering truth (*epimeleia heautou*) were disqualified by an intellectualized direct access to truth for the subject through knowledge (*gnōthi seauton*). The “Cartesian moment” discredited the transformative truth of “care of the self” and instead “made the ‘know yourself’ into a fundamental means of access to truth” (14). Foucault concludes that while in a spiritual understanding the subject as is lacks truth, but can become transformed by truth; in the modern age, however, “the truth cannot save the subject” (19). Care of the self can no longer grants the future promise of a complete subject in the modern age. The subject is now formed through the infinite accumulation of progress.

The “Cartesian moment” functions as a “reality effect” for ethics: no longer is the subject concerned with the fictions of spirituality, but can now be the witness to his own status as subject. There is a move here from the mediating transformations and simulations



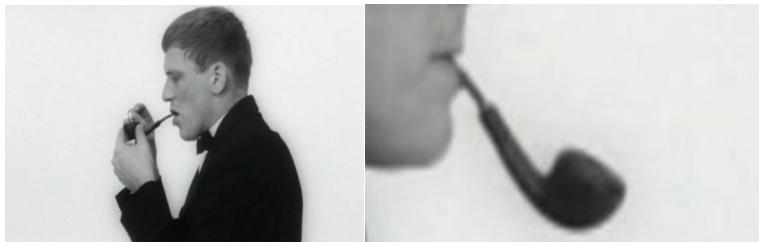
of spirituality to the more documentarian ideology of replication.

The concept of a “reality effect” has been part of film discourse since the early days of the Lumières and their Cinématographe. Later moving image technologies, such as video, were heralded as accessible instruments against the monopolizing power of the Hollywood narrative. Video quality seemed especially capable for rendering the reality of an image, as in its use as surveillance tools, but especially for use in documentary projects. In *The Electronic Disturbance*, the Creative Art Ensemble (CAE) demonstrates a concern surrounding the “hegemony of documentary” for video as a possible medium of resistance. In a chapter entitled “Video and Resistance: Against Documentaries” the authors claim that the central role of documentaries “moves the question of video technology away from its function as simulator, and back to a retrograde consideration of the technology as a replicator (witness)” (35). As cinematic images moved away from strictly silver nitrate based projections the possibilities for moving images still seemed to carry on film’s mimetic vision of truth in representation.

According to the CAE, video appeared to serve an activist role by responding to the illusion of narrative (replication) with the objectivity of documentary (witness), which “Split the task of observation into as many categories and subcategories as possible to prevent observational integrity from being distracted by the proliferation of factual possibility” (36). The move from replicator to witness obscures the role of style and aesthetic in the creation of the factual. The truth of documentary has been since Marey’s horse experiments the camera’s primary function as the replacement for the flawed human eye. Leth inherits the weight of this function in the absence of obstruction. The freedom that he is afforded in the third obstruction makes this the most difficult for Leth because he cannot rely on his ability to replicate the rules. He must now take on the responsibility of the impossible witness: compose a factual account of the fictional idea of “the perfect human.”

## The *Parallax Image*

With the addition of fantasy to the ever present reality drive the movement between ideology of the replicator and the simulator loses a distinctive dialectic quality. The choice for factual possibility is not between the reality of documentary or of representation and the illusion of narrative or compositional image, but in closing the gap between a symbolically mediated reality and a reality for which there is no account, the distortion of sense, or, as Barthes called it, the obtuse. The obtuse, if we recall, is sensed and not regulated to the seen (scene), and escapes the logic of perception as a signification without representation. In *The Ticklish Subject* Slavoj Žižek goes to great lengths to express a similar obtuseness in the “spectral” and “elusive” Lacanian *Real* that precedes the ontologically constituted reality. In this equation fantasy “is the endeavor to close this gap by (mis)perceiving the pre-ontological Real as simply *another*, ‘more fundamental’, level of reality—fantasy projects on to the pre-ontological Real the form of constituted reality” (57). What Žižek discovers is that although we can *sense* the Real, there is not a way to *make sense* of the Real except through the distorting influence of fantasy (what he calls “the murmur of the Real”).

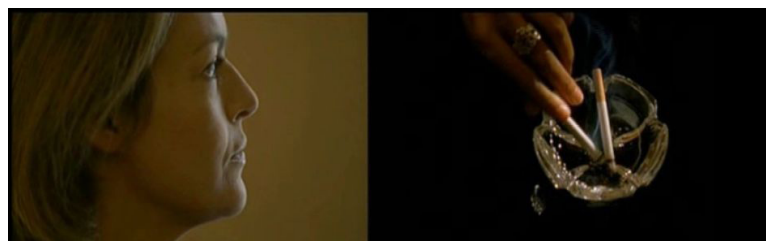


Fantasy functions as the relay between the fictions of replicator and witness as a manifestation of the desire to close the gap of representation and the human. Žižek identifies this within dialectical-materialist language as the “minimal gap”<sup>6</sup> or the “delay which forever separates an event ‘in itself’ from its symbolic inscription/registration” (57). The minimal gap is an imperceptible interruption that introduces the alterity of the

Real into the consistency of reality. By *imperceptible* I mean *impossible* in the way that it cannot occur within its official registration; Maurice Blanchot says of the disaster that it is “unexperienced” and that it “escapes the very possibility of experience—it is the limit of writing. This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes” (7). The disaster de-scribes, the artist de-signs, by working at the limits of registration and discourse.



Images are composed within a minimal gap, formed in the (mis)perception of the fantasy that would seek to eliminate the hesitation of reality and the distortion of the Real. The figure that Žižek uses to explore these limits is the “parallax view”; in one sense Žižek uses the parallax view to re-describe a “minimal difference” as the gap exists within vision that cannot be overcome or resolved in any sense of the real (or the Real for as the excluded space of perception) (*Parallax* 18). Early in the first chapter he clearly lays the book out as a response to *The Ticklish Subject* by asking “what is tickling the ticklish subject?” and answers “the *object*—however, *which* object?” The undefined tickling object plays at the limits of perception and, rather than in terms of a gap, Žižek describes the parallax view as the “guise of a stain.” To be more precise, and as a departure from the elusiveness of the Real, the parallax view is a short circuit of reality in which “the reality that I see is never ‘whole’—not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it” (17).



In *The Five Obstructions* there is no perspective that can adjudicate between Leth's and von Trier's understanding of obstruction; there remains an insurmountable gap that Žižek posits as an irreducibly generative site, neither the one nor the many. As we have seen, to *obstruct* suggests a standing in the way, or an inhibiting of the resolution of perspective. Obstructions engage an aesthetic of alterity, but they do not necessarily function through alterity. On the contrary, obstructions approach the ob/scene, which, far from representing that which lies outside of representation, is territorialized by that which is seen. The un-seen, the off-screen, the distortion or disruption that must be excluded from the scene by the distribution of practices that defined the conditions for the possibility of cinema: the *scene is seen* insofar as it stands against the *unseen* as unscreened. The unscreened stain can only ever have implied the presence of the subject as its revelation could only be ob/scene or excessive.

### **Nothingness and Meaning**

The issue that the third obstruction must confront in the wake of Leth's violation is the punishment of freedom. Von Trier literally castigates Leth with absolute creative freedom and the absence of any prescribed set of rules. He calls it a "free-style" film, which is anything but free from style; Leth is first at a loss for how to go about shooting a new film without the guidance from the obstructions. Von Trier is openly frustrated with Leth's decision not to reshoot the second film and declares that he "has no option" but to demand Leth return to India and reshoot the film. When he hears of his punishment Leth exclaims: "It's a place I can't go back to." Faced with this impasse von Trier relinquishes control of the obstruction. The subsequent third part of the film follows Leth as he confronts his own film without the restrictive security offered by the obstructions. Obstructions offered him the limits of his vision; he was free to play within the safety of their shadow. Without the obstructions Leth suddenly becomes the face of the ascetic ideal, marked by

the fascination with the pain of loss and the constant search in vain for meaning (a logos, a hermeneutic account rather than an *ethos*, or a recoiling account). The desire to close the gap between perceived reality and the Real is also a desire for the meaning offered by this fantasy, a notion that the simple act of suffering the impossibility of *nothing* offered man the possibility of *something*.

Nietzsche demonstrates clear disdain for the ascetic ideal that encourages “a certain impoverishment of life” introduced by the drive for meaning (*Genealogy* 590). This is the context for Nietzsche’s famous phrase about man’s “will to nothingness” as an “aversion to life,” but that “man would rather will *nothingness* than *not will*” (599). This is an interesting turn of the negative by Nietzsche: in willing nothingness man imbues himself with the power of negation, exclusion, and lack, turning his back *not* on its opposite (what would be the opposite of nothingness? *Somethingness?*) but on *excess*. Victor Vitanza refers to the excess that human beings must constrain as the “nonpositive affirmation,” which,



**He serves hard again. A deadly serve.**



**And we have to pull our best shot out of the bag to return his serve.**



**It’s very much a dialogue, playing back and forth across the net.**



**He serves hard and we return as hard as nails.**

in his words, “denegates negation by *reincluding*,” and is the possibility for a “sublime *ethos*” (*Negation* 63-4).<sup>7</sup> This is reminiscent of what Blanchot said of the unexperience of disaster and its de-scription occurring at the limits of writing. The advantage of nonpositive affirmation rather than simply the excess of affirmation is that there remains the possibility of a positive function of negation, something that Vitanza finds in Nietzsche and Foucault and in which there is “a negation (or denegation) of negation itself.” The “double negative” of nonpositive affirmation leads to an “affirmative deconstruction,” a situation in which even Deleuze alleges that negation “becomes the power of affirming . . . and passes into the service of an excess of life” (qtd. Vitanza 275). By turning a blind eye to the (*k*)*not will*, the possibilities of something which is not will but something else (obtuseness, sense-less, the excess of life), the perfect human accepts his *will* as the ultimate (ironic perfection) limit.

The refusal to give Leth obstructions is a strategy of nonpositive affirmation that takes the lessons of the first two obstructions, of image and ethics, and presents Leth with the chance to break those lessons. Von Trier punishes Leth for his violation by violating the law himself and responding with a non-response and not providing Leth his instructions. What Leth finds is that he is neither completely free of the bounds of the original film, nor the context of the documentary project. The illusion that von Trier proposes of complete creative freedom is in fact a more restrictive kind of obstruction that requires Leth to negate what he has helped to construct. For Leth the obstructions offered him a way, as Nietzsche says of the ascetic ideal, to interpret his perfect film; it would not be “sense-less.” In the absence of obstructions Leth “suffer[s] from the problem of his meaning” (*Genealogy* 598). This strange mix of suffering and context makes the creative freedom a “problem of meaning” that is ethically restrictive and imparts a dimension of pain to the image. The pain and desire associated with the problem of creative freedom binds Leth and von Trier to a masochistic contract that functions within a (perfectly) restricted aesthetic. In other words, there is no free style; there is a cost exchange of pain and suffering that Leth is willing to accept in order to continue the game.

## The Forced Choice of Freedom

So it is not completely true that von Trier does not give Leth an obstruction; he creates a new context in which to make the third film and gives Leth the false choice of creative freedom. Taking a lead from Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler regarding the recoiling of decision as both the origin and result of decisions, Žižek sees the freedom of choice as grounded in a fundamental exclusion: “something must be excluded in order for us to become beings which make decisions” (*Ticklish* 19). This would mean that choice is never made without a particular context, and no context exists without having been first delimited from a series of possible contexts. Creative freedom along the lines that von Trier gives to Leth is free only within the context of the obstructions; this is manifested in the fact that Leth is “free” from the initiation of rules for a free-style film, but the film must be made in the context of *The Five Obstructions*. The narrative of *The Perfect Human: Brussels* still follows the general structure of *The Perfect Human* and Leth deliberately chooses an aesthetic unlike the other two films. This third film returns to the slow moving pace of the original while maintaining the self-reflective character of both *Cuba* and *Bombay*.

Following Harpham’s claim that all notions of ethics exist by the exclusion of other ethical principles, the conception and response of the third film demonstrates creative choices can only be made within pre-determined contextual structures that create the conditions for choice. In *The Ticklish Subject* Žižek forwards Lacan’s idea of the “forced choice” to dissect the paradox of free choice and the lack of a “pure” context.

Does not the primordial ‘exclusion’ which grounds decision (i.e. choice) indicate that the choice is, at a radically fundamental level, forced—that I have a (free) choice only on condition that I make the proper choice—so that, at this level, one encounters a paradoxical choice which overlaps with



its meta-choice: I am told what I must choose freely. . . . Far from being a sign of ‘pathological (or politically “totalitarian”) distortion’, this level of forced choice is precisely what the psychotic position *lacks*: the psychotic subject acts as if he has a truly free choice ‘all the way along.’ (19)

Although he tries to consciously avoid the political allusions of his words, Žižek nonetheless implicates the ethics of choice with political stakes, and charges the psychotic subject as the harbinger of the apolitical position that lacks this forced choice. The performance of the psychotic acting free “all along the way” is also indicated by the lack of position, which is both political and contextualized by the forced choice. Von Trier clearly forces this meta-choice onto Leth by requiring him to choose and offering freedom as long as he makes the “proper” choice, which would be for Leth to fail. The truly free choice for Leth, and the only one that would avoid his failure, would be to refuse to act and not shoot the Brussels film at all; but again the conditions for Leth’s refusal would have been determined by the structure of the obstructions model. It could also possibly result in the end of the collaboration between von Trier and Leth, which would also end the experiment and render the other two films meaningless. Leth would rather shoot nothing (the film free from style) than (k)not film.

The context of each obstruction is uniquely developed through the conversations and responses of Leth and von Trier to each other. While choice is dictated by context, context in terms of the obstructions occurs as a collaborative event that can only be registered through a corresponding revision of the rules within each individual film. The ethics of the experiment require von Trier to remain unsatisfied with the results, as when he sits down with an awkward laughter to view the first film and snickers “One is always furious when there are solutions.” The development of the obstructions is interdependent with the continued failure to complete the purposes of the project rather than by any success either one could claim. To satisfy the requirements of the obstruction would be

to stabilize the recoiling movement of each obstruction and revision, end the game, and demand the institution of one specific *ethos* or style of life.

Leth and von Trier's collaborative *ethos* is one based on the structure of struggle or suffering that resists completion or resolution in the tradition of the ascetic ideal. Better said, the two figures represent neighbors in the most literal sense of Freud's notion of the *Nebenmensch* which Lacan articulates as the divided and alien equation of "beside yet alike, separation and identity" (*Ethics* 61). Lacan understood that there is an association of desire between the *Nebenmensch* and *das Ding* (the object of desire) in that the alien nature of the neighbor is its presence as absolute Other (again, the ironic perfection) that can only represent complete lost-ness. The joy of the game is to continue to respond to the Other indefinitely, with the understanding that the presence of the Other in the collaboration, von Trier as the reverse projection of Leth, sustains more than just the game: "It is in this state of wishing for it and waiting for it that, in the name of the pleasure principle, the optimum tension will be sought" (63). The pleasure of the project is to sustain the tension of the relationship, with that tension visually emerging from each film.

Lacan's complex revision of psychoanalysis through his seminars can be assessed as a driving desire to be found by his Other (Freud) by developing, as we have seen in Rajchman's perception, his analysis as a "*desire to know*" (49). This is a way to understand master/student relations as exchanges and responses to the desire of the other: this purpose or *eros* can lead to an ethical event. For Lacan these events are ethical because they can lead us away from idealism and toward the Other to acknowledge difference (24). It is not so much that we comb through the details of a structure like psychoanalysis as a strictly hermeneutic project, but that we can see this thought as a continuous suspension of the completion of his revision to sustain the pleasure of pursuit. In *Enjoy Your Symptom!* Žižek defends Lacan's project of repetition by allowing for revision as an ethical possibility of the restriction of the forced choice: "the Lacanian definition of the authentic ethical act: an act which reaches the utter limit of the primordial forced choice and repeats it in the reverse

sense. Such an act presents the only moment when we are effectively ‘free’” (88-89). The constant turning of the psychoanalytic project expresses an opposition to its completion by investing its desire in the infinite deferral of the forced choice, but it also represents a dedication to repetition and revision demonstrated in *The Five Obstructions* by the innovations of each new obstruction.

### **Masochism and the Restricted Image**

The concern over the absence of objects within the presence of the image seems to be an indication of excess within the image, or as something that is left over from the image and remains unrepresented or excluded. For film scholars like Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey, Lacan’s mirror stage presented a way to both account for absence and for the excess of pleasure involved in seeing images. In *The Imaginary Signifier* Metz identifies the paradox of viewing pleasure when he states that “film is like a mirror,” however, “there is one thing and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator’s own body” (45). To maintain the pleasure derived from the mirror effect, spectators must (mis)recognize themselves with the cinematic image. The repetition of mis-recognition restricts eros to a notion of desire for the image and prohibits the creative function of revision. This is the scopophilia that Mulvey intends to “destroy” in her early work.<sup>8</sup> And while the regime of the mirror essay has been critiqued by many since Metz and Mulvey, the specter of scopophilia continues to haunt the desire to account for the pleasure of the image.

The deployment of psychoanalytic terms has become a primary model of cinematic hermeneutics in order to identify how films and other moving images create certain kinds of subjects. In *The Difficulty of Difference* D.N. Rodowick argues that despite these very claims “films, like other cultural artifacts, do not produce subjects but symbolic positions of subjectivity, and those positions are virtual, not actual” (134). Part of the inability for cinematic arts to offer more than a symbolic position of subjectivity is their own status

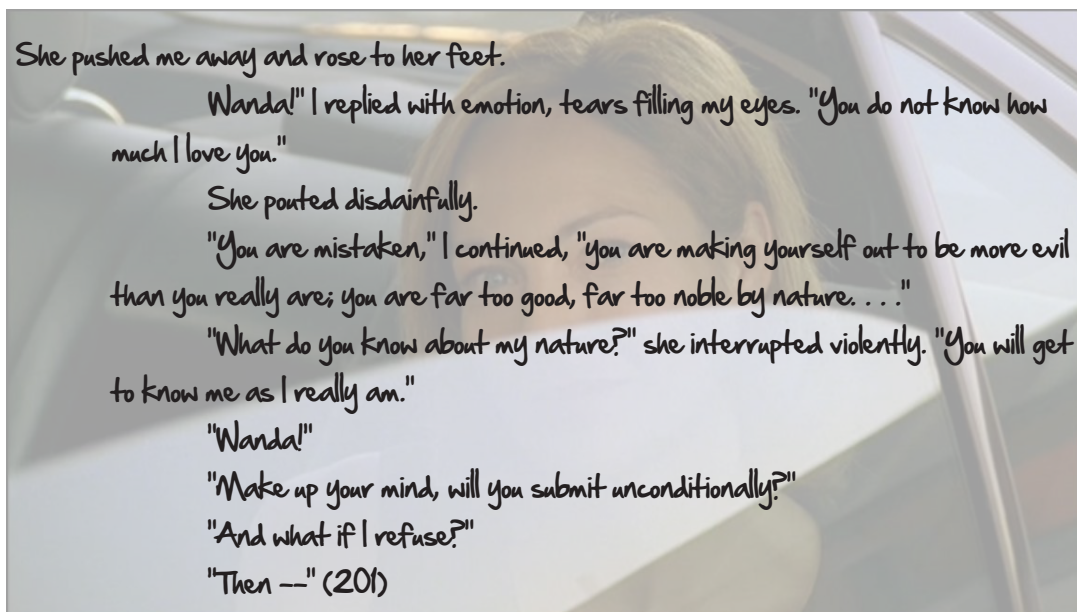
as composed artifacts. In other words, a film strip is not only a series of frames projected at 24 frames per second, but a series of cuts that constitute shots themselves broken into smaller fragments in the gaps between frames. In a passage that returns to the origins of cinematic arts, Mary Ann Doane isolates the introduction of the cut to the development of film editing, not the construction of the camera as image making device, as the crucial event of cinematic invention: “frame, of course, constitutes a spatial limit, but it is intriguing to note that histories and theories of early cinema continually pinpoint the temporal limit of the *cut*, the interruption of the linear movement of the film strip, as the crucial moment in the elaboration of film language” (31). Rather than the image in itself, which is the territory of still photography, there is a certain pleasure derived from the temporality of the images. The paradox of semiotic film theory was that while the scopophilic drive of Lacanian film analysis fetishized the image as absent object of desire, the image occupied a more or less stable position. Cinematic films were structured by repetition, a circling back of past and future into a present image. The kind of repetition that these theories engage could not elaborate on the revision that resulted from the distortion of fantasy and perspective.

The fantasy of *The Five Obstructions* is that there can be a “perfect human,” and that either von Trier can achieve his goal of humbling his mentor or that Leth can successfully respond to the obstructions. The model of composition that obstructions and revision express is not one of a collaborative synthesis, but a parallax view comprised of challenging perspectives that can never be completely integrated. Rather than reducing the interaction between demand and response, teacher and student, or even screen and spectator, this model imposes a masochistic contract in which the participants must disavow the promises of their individual desire in order to sustain the integrity of the game. Drawing from a critique of Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*, Gilles Deleuze recognizes a recoiling movement that he refers to as a “double suspension” in masochistic texts that interweaves desire and delay. A masochistic aesthetic would thus play with the parallax view by extending the delay of the minimal gap and finding pleasure, rather than disturbance, in the incapacity to ascertain its

resolution:

On the one hand the subject is aware of reality but suspends this awareness; on the other the subject clings to his ideal. There is a desire for scientific observation, and subsequently a state of mystical contemplation. The masochistic process of disavowal is so extensive that it affects sexual pleasure itself; pleasure is postponed for as long as possible and is thus disavowed. The masochist is therefore able to deny the reality of pleasure at the very point of experiencing it, in order to identify with the 'new sexless man.' (33)

In delaying resolution indefinitely the Real disrupts the limits of perception and opens the door to reconsider the ideal, or what it means to be "the perfect human," or even the possibilities of writing in creating in multimodal senses. We can read masochistic dialogue exchanges within *Venus in Furs* as hinging on the written imposition of these seemingly infinite moments of hesitation and disavowal:



She pushed me away and rose to her feet.  
"Wanda!" I replied with emotion, tears filling my eyes. "You do not know how much I love you."  
She pouted disdainfully.  
"You are mistaken," I continued, "you are making yourself out to be more evil than you really are; you are far too good, far too noble by nature. . . ."  
"What do you know about my nature?" she interrupted violently. "You will get to know me as I really am."  
"Wanda!"  
"Make up your mind, will you submit unconditionally?"  
"And what if I refuse?"  
"Then --" (201)

What we can discern is that the pauses and gaps are crucial to the continuation of the contract; they frame the content of the dialogue as the force of the exchange. The ellipses and small gestures are not just interruptions, but a significant part of the suspension of content and disavowal of pleasure. This is how Deleuze can claim that in reading the tension set by the suspension of pleasure, “it is the moments of suspense that are the climactic moments” (33). For the masochist contract, the final dash is an image, not as absence of pleasure, but of the promise of completion (the promise of subject-tion), which can never be fulfilled and must always fail in order to continue the fantasy.

Indeed Leth continues his own suffering by freely choosing to continue to pursue von Trier’s request for the third film. I have already mentioned the minimal gap or delay as essential to the fantasy of the perfect human, and it is the temporal delay that provokes the disjointed or ruptured experience of cinematic images. In the second volume of his cinema books titled *Time-Image* Deleuze wrote of the unique temporality of the cinematic image itself to always be an image of the present, “necessarily of the present”; however, he continues, “there is no present which is not haunted by a past and a future, by a past which is not reducible to a former present, by a future which does not consist of a present to come. . . . It is characteristic of cinema to seize this past and this future that coexist with the present image” (37). Nevertheless, in a film the “present image” cannot exist but for a moment amidst the constantly changing cinematic frame. While Barthes is “held” by the still image, arrested in its movement, Deleuze sees a unique experience that comes from the constantly changing “present image.” In either case the authors both demonstrate a desire to extend the presence of the image, to seize the instance of pleasure that the image evokes, and to suffer the pain of that lost instance.

### **A Collaborative Site of Invention**

The freedom with which Leth is endowed does nothing to free him of the context

of obstructions. He accepts the conditions of the obstruction because he cannot but shoot the film; he is obligated by his *ethos*. It is a forced choice in the ethical sense that he realizes that the perfect human has yet to be made and yet follows the call with the painful understanding that it is an impossible project and he is doomed to failure as it keeps slipping from his grasp. Yes, obstructions do structure the context of the restricted image, and that structure does inscribe the figure of the imperfect subject that must “traverse the fantasy” of pleasure and pain.<sup>9</sup> The structure of obstruction, however, is always a response to the Other, and so obstruction is always recoiling around a collaborative site of invention, rather than a transmission model.

This masochistic exchange also illustrates the literal tickling of the subject (as submitting oneself) by the object (the objecting/disturbing entity). In Žižek’s parallax model it is the object that tickles the subject, the reflection of the blind spot that is the very terms of the subject’s presence (*Parallax* 17). It is an exchange, a contract, for which mere representation does not account and which sets the terms for the discussion of a nexus of politics, ethics and aesthetics that is also an anti-aesthetics or obtuse sense of aesthetics stripped of its Platonic function.





The context of the free-style obstruction of *The Perfect Human: Brussels* is determined by Leth's exceptional violation of the rules in *The Perfect Human: Bombay* and represents von Trier's reaction to the transgression. Von Trier's presence as the architect of the obstructions and his relationship to Leth as a student of sorts of his work gives Leth a particular set of possible stylistic choices that already negates the excess of absolute freedom. What the first two films set up, and what the third film now points to, is the nonpositive affirmation of a compositional pedagogy that acknowledges and attempts to denegate the negation of rules restricted creative efforts. The recoiling paradox of rule-restricted work is embodied through *The Five Obstructions* by the model of obstructions invented collaboratively through the dialogue between both Leth and von Trier and negotiated individually through uniquely developing contexts.

# Chapter Four



## What Is (to Be) Learned?

Up until this point each chapter of this project has focused on a particular issue that is directly addressed within the terms of each obstruction from *The Five Obstructions*. I have discussed image and obstruction, visual composition and the question of ethics, and the conditions of creative freedom in relation to collaboration. These are all specific issues of a generalized multimodal composition revealed by the unique ethical approach of the obstructions model initiated by *The Five Obstructions*. This approach is not dictated by any anticipated outcome; the interrogation of “the perfect human” as a discursive subject will remain inconclusive, and the goals of both Jørgen Leth nor Lars von Trier will linger unsatisfied. In light of the question of ethics and the central role of ethos in determining how each will respond to the successive obstructions, the failures of both Leth and von Trier ultimately become their success embodied by the film itself, *The Five Obstructions*. Rhetorically, Leth’s film *The Perfect Human* represents the exigency of the project, the tutor text that determines the form of the subsequent revisions. By responding to the film under the demands of obstructions, and by calling into question the fundamental premise of the original (the ordinary existence of “the perfect human,” the tutor text has not only lost its ordinary status, but has also become subsumed beneath the even larger project of *The Five Obstructions*. *The Perfect Human* is only one version among many possible revisions.

The lesson of the third obstruction is that “the perfect human” maintains a kind of freedom by refusing to make the choice between possible revisions. This is the undetermined figure that Michel Serres called the “blank man” or the “universal man.” He invokes the image of Adam and Eve departing Eden: “This is their fault, a fault is a lack, they lack everything. And we still lack any determination. Then they left, so we leave the page blank” (48). The perfect film would be one of indeterminate framing, blank for all

intents and purposes. It is a film in which there is a transparent dis-enclosure in place of the *mise-en-scène* in the same manner as Leth's constructed frame in *The Perfect Human: Bombay* inviting a constant visual flow between the scene and the ob/scene. And like the constructed frame of the second obstruction the blank frame allows the emergence of the poverty and misery of the external and excluded; in short, the blank page is an abject page. While Adam and Eve confront their faults by leaving the limits of Eden, von Trier and Leth must confront the abjectness of their creations under the terms of obstruction. In both cases fault or abjectness is realized as a pedagogical challenge. Simply put: What, if anything, is learned through the use of obstructions and how are obstructions to be taught or presented to students?"



There is no easy answer to this question. Obstructions occupy positions of difficulty, rather than facilitation, in a pedagogical relationship. To insist on a pedagogy is to assert a synthesis or convergence of identity, which is always the threat of embracing a particular theory of multimodality; as soon there is something produced called “multimedia” the multiple aspect is lost. This kind of pedagogical encounter presupposes an object (of desire?) with the goal being to transfer the object to the waiting vessel. Success is measured by the capacity to fill the student, displace the lack, and erase the fault. The two must become a single flesh. There is purposeful sexual allusion to the work of pedagogy in the multimodal composition.

Obstructions work on the level of diversion and division, which is also a logic of the cut or hesitation (pausing motion) that produces only new responses. To continue our present imagery, we might say that obstructions promote a kind of sexual difference, not in terms of any arbitrary physical trait, but in the absolute similarity of desire. Lacan

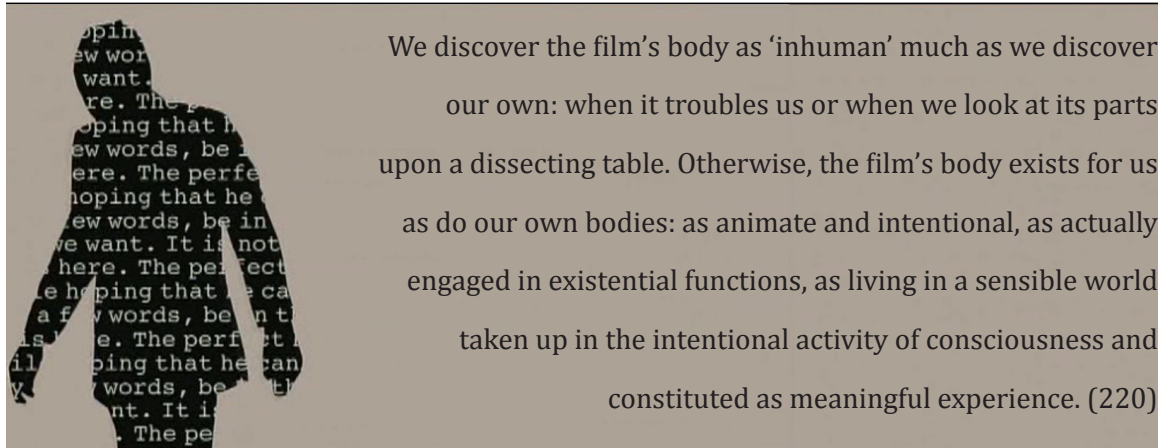
infamously articulated this pedagogical difficulty in his *Seminar XX* when he declared that “there is no such thing” as the sexual relationship (9).<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek translates this difficulty as the obstruction of difference: “Sexual difference is not a firm set of ‘static’ symbolic oppositions and inclusions/exclusions . . . but the name of a deadlock, a trauma, an open question” (“The Real of Sexual Difference” 61). There is no resolution because of the incapacity on the part of both partners to realize a conceptual ideal and so “any ‘actual’ sexual relationship is always tainted by failure” (71). In other words, although the specificity of objectives changes for each individual, the radical similarity of purpose generates a dis-enclosure for that difference that keeps open the possibility of change for all parties involved. Perhaps we may even have the makings of a political unrest that leads to a new “distribution of the sensible.”<sup>2</sup>

### **The Pedagogical Event as Body**

The first chapter asserted that the task of this project was to investigate image as a kind of compositional tendency to cut transversally across modes of expression. This is a way to imagine various analogies of the body which have stood in for a transversal or multidirectional compositional body.<sup>3</sup> Cinematic arts have retained the film image of the skin even while the ontological presence as a celluloid object has diminished in the past decade or so. The chapter on ethics opened by quoting Barthes’ desire to study the image as one would open a wound: to explore image is not simply a matter of rhetorical processes, but a tearing of the flesh, a reopening of a fissure of significance, a mark of physical and temporal difference. The masochistic contract of obstructions between von Trier and Leth engages the ethical questioning of “the perfect human” through discursive suffering from their respective dis-ease. The failure to achieve their individual purposes recoils back on the success of the overall collaborative project.

I compared the ob/scene to the position of the midwife standing against or before

the emerging infant at the moment of birth. She is not only witness to the separation of the body of infant/mother, but is part of the body or composition of the event, or becomes such through her silent intervention. In *The Address of the Eye* Vivian Sobchack makes a related comparison when she observes the “film’s body” as the systems of instruments and procedures that compose an individual film or cinematic experience:



At least for a while, the body of the infant cannot be separated from that of the mother. The midwife’s presence is excessive and her position toward the infant’s separation from her mother is marginal. And yet, the birth event makes room for the attendance of the obscene as part of the “sensible world” and which facilitates a “meaningful experience.” The birth event, like a cinematic experience, forms a body that recoils around varying modes of understanding its place in the world as a matter of *ethos*.

The pedagogical event of *The Five Obstructions* occurs between von Trier and Leth as an interrogation of *ethos*, or the uncertainty of the proper roles that each assumes during the film. Leth had entered the project as von Trier’s mentor, a revered predecessor and teacher to his beloved career path. Von Trier had initiated the project in the role of pupil desiring a chance to work alongside the master. The master/student roles, however, do not hold within the figures of obstruction. These roles have theoretical groundings as a configuration of G.W.F Hegel’s master/slave dialectic which is primarily a conflict before

unity can emerge.<sup>4</sup> Immediately von Trier positions himself as the teacher who offers the obstruction as an assignment to Leth, now the student. Having completed the first film, however, Leth's success challenges von Trier to reconsider his position to the project. The mentor/student relationship recoils around the exchanges of obstruction and response by putting the stability of the roles into question. Although von Trier gives himself the responsibility of pronouncing the list of obstructions, he must rely on Leth's suggestions to help form a suitable challenge. And each of Leth's new films function as an assessment on von Trier's ability to move the film forward; there is no final act of assessment, but continual assessment throughout the game. Obstructions not only engender a capacity to invent new ways to respond to the tasks of writing, but it also rejects pedagogical models of transference that would reinforce a hierarchal authority of knowledge.

Through the remainder of this chapter I want to demonstrate how obstructions perform a pedagogy of failure rather than transmission. In *Finitude's Score* Avital Ronell contrasts the transmission model of pedagogy to pedagogy as a site of open struggle. She explores this struggle through Sigmund Freud's analytic discourse in terms of a "suppository" intervention, or a pedagogical encounter that resists the demands of pedagogy. Ronell is concerned with the body as a site of knowledge exchange, and in *The Five Obstructions* von Trier and Leth become the sites of transformative role exchanges between master/student. Like Lacan's claim about sexual difference, failure is based on the deadlock between parties that leaves open the question of success. Failure or fault as a default mode of living (style of life) is related to questions of human finitude and its place as the ultimate obstruction for images of "the perfect human."

### **The Threat of *Parergon* and the "Retrospective Man"**

In *Book X* of the *Republic* Plato makes his case for excluding the artists and poets from his ideal State on the basis of the image. Plato's general attitude toward the imitative



nature of the arts is that images are only fragments of the pure forms of truth or knowledge. He assesses that the imitator that wields these fragments “is a long way off the truth, and can do all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them, and that part an image” (1901a). Plato’s great opposition to art and rhetoric is in the fractured reproduction and its flawed appearance; visual presence is the flawed reminder of what cannot be touched by human hands. Although he does not say it directly, the connection between the imitative arts and human hands disqualifies the *technē* of artists and poets as knowledge that can provide a foundation for a community.

In more recent times, Walter Benjamin identified a similar position arising amidst the machines of artistic replication. Mechanical reproduction substitutes fragmented imitation for virtual simulation, and by so doing dissolves the “aura” of the original instance: “By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (221). But Benjamin does not follow Plato in dismissing the entire idea of reproduction as fundamentally flawed. He bifurcates the process of imitation as having both a “destructive” and “cathartic” effect, adding, “in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced” (220). A plurality of copies may have the disadvantage of undermining originary value, but it also allows for a supplemental value, a new value that is not centralized and is dispersed and increased by communities of meaning.<sup>5</sup>

Images are a problem for writing in the same way as rhetoric was a problem for philosophy; they permit a plurality of supplemental values, *parergon*, to the originary practice or object. This is not to say that print cultures do not allow for the emergence of supplemental meanings. This would be to simply confuse literacy as an originary mode of communication. Writing, however, carries the burden of defining communities and their places within populations through the measuring stick of literacy.<sup>6</sup> The notion of media literacy would be to train media to follow the rules of literacy. Multimodal writing poses a challenge to print cultures because it responds to the disciplined notion of literacy with

excess, or a plurality of imitations that question the dominant force of literacy. Engaging a transversal approach to writing introduces too many variables to the familiar space of composition; obstructions do not just make use of visibility, but also literacy, and orality to construct an ethical frame of reference that does not belong to any particular mode. Jacques Derrida said of *parergon* that it “means the exceptional, the strange, the extraordinary” (*Truth* 58). If that is true, then the kind of writing that emerges from obstructions is sublime, abject in both form and method. Just as poets and artists were not welcome in Plato’s organization of his Republic, likewise images are abject quantities in a culture of literacy

**I’m going to make a very, very, very, simple rule for the next film.**



**I’d be thrilled if it was crap. But there is one single condition.**

because they introduce the threat of *parergon*.

Leth conceived his original film, *The Perfect Human*, as

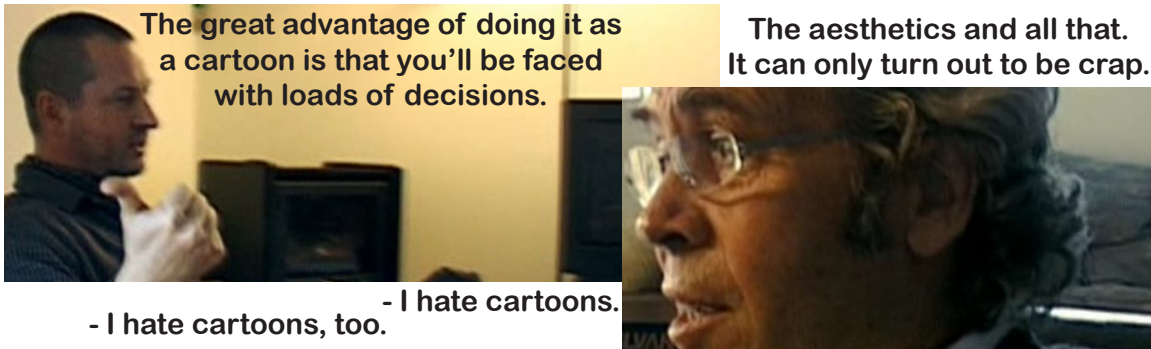
a minimalist

**I can’t imagine it’ll be anything but crap**



**It’s got to be a cartoon.**

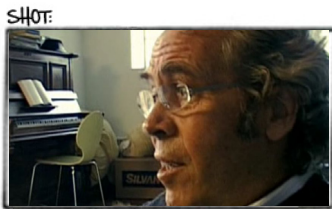
ethnographic film. He reduced all aspects of production design to nominal elements: a bare white set with basic furniture for certain scenes and two actors who become the examined subjects within the sterile environment. Each scene was carefully composed as a series of tableaux that feature essential aspects of the life of a human being. Lev Manovich has commented on cinema’s relationship to art, suggesting that the move toward the computer processes of digital video has now made cinema “a particular case of animation which uses live action footage as one of its many elements” (“What Is Digital Film” 410). Computer editing and special effects give filmmaking the malleability of animation. As cinematic arts make more use of digital formats it becomes more akin to painting than to photography.



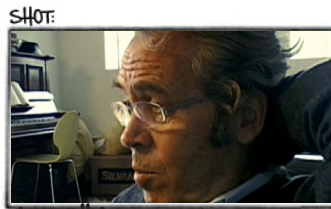
It is clear that Leth would rather photograph than paint. His displeasure at the request to make an animated film demonstrates his frustration at the loss of control resulting from his unfamiliarity of the medium. He is quite vocal in announcing he wants nothing to do with an animated film and he makes a bold move to take advantage of the requirement not to film any new scenes: he hires an outside specialist to animate pieces of the past three obstruction films. *The Perfect Human*, *Cartoon* is the only one so far that repurposes footage from the other films, and Leth's motive is to avoid the obstruction. The stark computer generated stylization of the rotoscope animation demonstrates in a literal way the transformation of film to painting that Manovich indicated; but it also signals Leth's increasing indifference to the goals of the obstructions. Recycling what worked in the past is one way to ensure a degree of relevance to the obstruction, while attempting to turn the tables of power by deciding not to fully participate in the production of the film.

In the conclusion to the first section of his book *Expanded Cinema*, Gene Youngblood makes a passionate plea to overcome what he sees in cinematic arts as the redundancy and mediocrity of what he calls the "retrospective man," a figure that finds comfort in only looking backward. As an image of the cinema, the retrospective man "discovers the truth about himself too late to make use of it" (66). The tragedy of the repetitiveness of the modern cinema is, according to Youngblood, the fact that it is blind to the future possibilities of what has become an echo chamber of commercial entertainment. He implores those that

would compose with cinematic images to step out of the repetition of the retrospective man and look forward toward a “new cinema” or one which “takes us to another world entirely. John Cage: ‘Where beauty ends is where the artist begins’” (72-73). This other world, beyond the notion of beauty, resides uncertainly amidst the sublime, or that which has yet to be determined.



I can't be bothered to invent the technology or learn about it.



Nor will I spend time at a stupid drawing board or whatever.



No damned way.

Youngblood’s new cinema is an abject cinema, or a decomposing and still-yet-to-be-determined site of obstructions waiting, always waiting, to become a cinema. It cannot be simply an experimental cinema because that would be an empty gesture, unethical, it could not respond nor encourage response: “The notion of experimental art . . . is meaningless. All art is experimental or it isn’t art. Art is research, whereas entertainment is a game or conflict” (65). Here the author is still suspicious of the entertainment industry, but he suddenly places entertainment in an abject position. While all art is allowed its experimentality, only the repetition of the retrospective man is specifically labeled as a “game” and its mode of expression as “conflict.” The promise of this new cinema finds its realization in *The Five Obstructions* when Leth stresses that the obstruction “has to be a cartoon of the kind we don’t like.” This means no “clever artistic devices” that would make the requirements more palatable to the director. He responds by reactivating old footage, resonating with the general recoiling movement of the project. “We’ll write a new text into it,” Leth asserts to the camera, “a new context, and breathe freshness into it.”

If Leth is a “retrospective man” it is because, at the moment of this film, he desires not to respond and not to continue the game under the current circumstances. In effect,

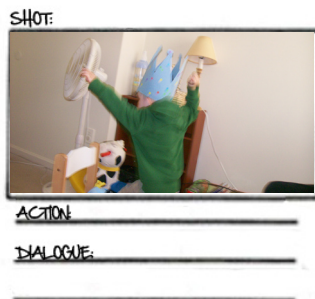
Leth pushes against the obstruction as an ethical response to the demands of pedagogy because he must respond and his only response can be to continue the conflict. He ingests the obstruction only to expel it as a film of recycled waste (not in terms of its quality, but its position as abject). The pedagogical encounter does not produce something new, but traces a “new cinema” or a “new composition” by the pedagogical conflict that cannot be resolved. The experiment of *The Five Obstructions* is not to make a new film, but to see how each of the participants will respond to the Other. This ingesting and expelling is the pedagogical encounter of obstructions provoked by an ambivalence or uncertainty of how to respond. Leth responds with feigned indifference at the notion of an animated film. This response, however, is as an ethical response to obstruction. It is aimed at more than just the category of animated films, but to the future that the retrospective man cannot tolerate.

### **Abject Pedagogy or “I Hate Cartoons.”**

When von Trier approaches Leth about making the fourth film in the form of an animation his response borders on disgust: “But I hate cartoons,” he objects, and von Trier responds “I hate cartoons, too.” For Leth (and apparently von Trier) the animated film is abject in that it is the form itself that repulses him; Leth says, “I’ve never seen a cartoon that I liked.” The usually hands-on Leth himself keeps his distance for most of the production of *The Perfect Human: Cartoon* and hires a rotoscope animator to do most of the work. For Leth the animated film is an abject form that presents a measure of anxiety that we have not yet seen with any of the obstructions. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva calls the abject the “jettisoned object” and places the basis of abjection in the “[revelation] that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being” (5). Leth’s reluctance to engage this obstruction is connected to his own expectations of what cinema should be and the realization of its failure, which parallels von Trier’s desire for Leth to realize his own limitations through the difficulty of obstructions.

In a section of her book titled “Hans Is Afraid of the Unnameable” Kristeva responds to Freud, who is responding to Little Hans, who in turn responds to the fear of horses, which is responding to . . . the *Unnamable*:

What is striking in the case of Hans, as little as he might be, what Freud does not cease to be astonished by, is his stupendous verbal skill: he assimilates and reproduces language with impressive eagerness and talent. So eager is he to name everything that he runs into the unnamable—street sounds,



that ceaseless trade activity involving horses in front of the house, the intensity with which his father, a recent convert to psychoanalysis, is interested in his body, his love for small girls, the stories and fantasies that he (the father) sexualizes to the utmost; the somewhat elusive, somewhat frail presence of his mother. All of this, which has already considerable *sense* for Hans

without having found its *significance*, is doubtless distributed, as Freud says, between narcissistic conversation drive and sexual drive. It all becomes necessarily crystallized in the epistemophilic experience of Hans who wants to know himself and to know everything; to know, in particular, what seems to be lacking in his mother or could be lacking in himself. (34)

In the pedagogical encounter of obstructions, the challenge requires a response; the



challenge is itself to continue to respond to “know everything” as a way to “know . . . what seems to be lacking” in the reverse image of the Other. The student desires to confront her teacher with her own weaknesses, while the teacher desires to prove her wrong. Amid the noise and imagery of the ob/scene, as well as the continuous demands from obstructions, the pedagogical relationship can no longer account for a teacher/student dichotomy. In the process of responding ethically to each challenge, they have lost the capacity to name their relationship as such; however, they continue to respond anyway. This is not to say that there is no relationship, but that the obstructions present a *sense* of a relationship before it has found its *significance*.

Leth admits that this strategy to reactivate his old footage could potentially backfire because von Trier may be looking to undercut any idea of invention: “[Von Trier] might prefer not to have any freshness, inspiration, ideas, or poetry. He’d like it to be sloppy or stupid.” When Leth declares that “I hate cartoons” what he wants to say, what he cannot express, to von Trier is “I hate *you*,” inasmuch as von Trier is the object substitute for Leth’s disgust at the obstruction. Lars von Trier, Jørgen Leth; Jørgen Leth, Lars von Trier: each functions as the abject image for the other.<sup>8</sup> The pedagogical relationship that develops between Leth and von Trier is one that is constantly reversing the roles of master/student. Von Trier entered the game having studied Leth as both director and individual and claiming boldly in the film that he “knows considerably more about [Leth] than he does.” Leth entered as the old veteran of the Danish film industry. Each obstruction turned these roles on themselves as Leth was forced to respond to von Trier’s rules, and von Trier was presented with the challenge to respond to each new film with new obstructions. By this time any stable notions of master/student roles have collapsed into a recoiling of *ethos*. They are no longer only responding to challenges laid before them by the other, but are now responding to the *other* as the embodiment of *obstruction*.



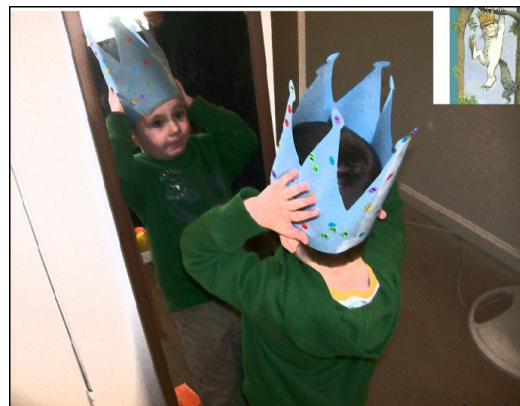
## Reverse Psychology

Obstructions are pedagogical because they directly address the tensions between students and mentors; they institute a site of knowledge exchanges between roles by questioning the place of traditional classroom dichotomies between teacher/student. This is not meant to undercut the position of the teacher as the initiator of the process, but to integrate the contributions of the student who challenges that authority at every turn. Every completed assignment presents a new opportunity for the instructor to respond and continue the game. This does not necessarily lead to the achievement of particular objectives, or produce some integrated knowledge. In fact, it is quite the opposite. What is (to be) learned is that the pedagogical encounter itself recoils on itself as a question of ethics. The site for such recoiling is the ob/scene, including what has not been framed by the structure of the student/master relationship. Obstructions create the conditions for an abject pedagogy that reveals the phobias of both master and student and reverses the authority on which those distinctions are based without doing away with the roles altogether.

The hierarchy of the master/student distinction is based on a transmission model of pedagogy. Transmission proposes the student as an empty vessel waiting to be filled by the master who possesses knowledge and bestows this knowledge on the grateful student. This is a strictly one way street that provides a simple way to ensure the continuation of particular modes of training while repressing others. In an essay uncertainly titled “*The Sujet Suppositaire: Freud, And/Or, the Obsessional Neurotic Style (Maybe)*” Avital Ronell asks a similar question in terms of subject formation: “Can a knowing subject constitute itself, or even be receptive to the seed of knowledge, where the effects of juridical shutdown reorganize the very conditions of an authentic pedagogy?” (104). Ronell draws from Freud’s extensive analyses of the case of the “Rat Man” as an instance of an abject pedagogy, or an ethical “intervention” in analysts terms, which is to recognize or eliminate a counterpart

as a subject.<sup>9</sup> Her claim is that through the ambiguity of sign systems in analysis “Freud has made us inquire into the modes according to which the pupil, or analysand, receives the so-called intervention. What constitutes an intervention?” (104).

For Jacques Lacan the intervention would be language, more specifically speech, as in Freud’s “talking cure.”<sup>10</sup> In the case of composition or writing it is obstructions that give occasion for the intervention to continue the recognition of subjects. Friedrich Kittler made a direct connection between the composition of cinematic images and the process of “the talking cure.” Freud’s talking cure, he argues, “replaces images with words,” so that the analyst creates a narrative logic from the composite logic of the unconscious (*Gramophone* 142). The challenge for the analyst is to look at the image sequences of patients as an “inner film,” a code for understanding what cannot be verbally expressed by the repressive body. According to Kittler, the tension between doctor and patient in any capacity is that there is inevitably violence done to the inner film of the patient as the doctor can only treat symptoms as the visual sign of originary trauma: “Literally, psychoanalysis means chopping up an internal film” (143). The film will be cut very differently depending on the director, and the owner of the film will resist its being cut at all.



The internal film

The concern of transmission pedagogy is that, between teacher and student, the “truth” of teaching is based on employing the student as a test of difference. Ronell purposefully makes use of the sexual metaphors that accompany notions of planting seeds of knowledge as she describes the transmission model: “As empty receptacle, virginal space, and originary innocence, the student has come to receive the desire of the teacher. The teacher fills this subject with the pedagogical deposit whose nature resembles that of a phallic desire” (104). Transmission

promotes phallic desire because it simulates an insemination model, but it is also grounded in a mirror vision of the student as empty and lacking and must be formed in the image of the master. Ronell calls this “Oedipedagogy,” in which the teacher is in the ambiguous place of the interspecial and, sometimes, self-effacing Sphinx, who transmits to the Other who responds as “sujet suppose” and receives the sexual marks as a condition of knowledge: the answer to the Sphinx’s challenge is “*anthropos*” (109). There is a certain fixing of the gender within the answer, which is guaranteed by the method of transmission. Oedipus’s reward for answering the Sphinx correctly is also his fall.



### ***Composition Fatale***

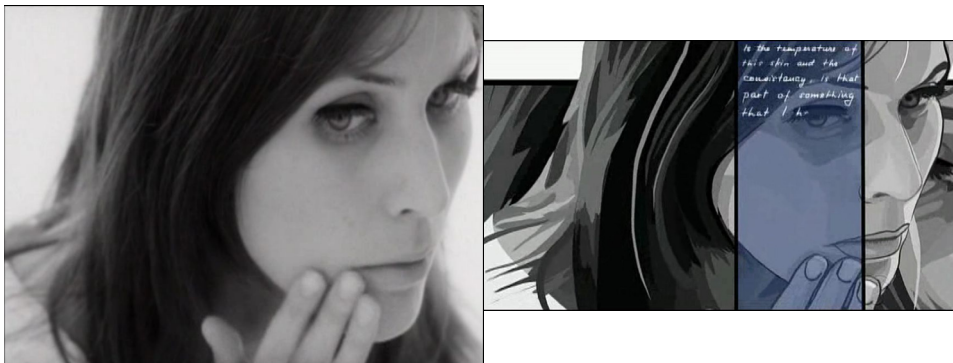
In contrast to the insemination or mirror-image model, Ronell posits the primal scene as a model for a different pedagogical relationship that emerges out of intervention. Freud’s analysis of the primal scene of one of his more famous patients, Paul Lorenz, also known as the “Rat Man,” does not take place in virginal space but in abject torture, specifically a military torture Lorenz had recounted to Freud in which rats gnawed into the body of the victim through the anus (Perelberg, *Freud* 179). This scene became the crux of Lorenz’s obsessional neurosis, but it also became the general motif of the analysis. Phallic desire is replaced by abject pleasure that is more ambiguously embraced as both horror and curiosity. Although the analytic relationship is pedagogical in the establishment of

roles (analyst/analysand, with the authority of knowledge on the side of analyst), during the course of analysis these roles begin to blur, reversing the logic of transmission by giving the power of language to the analysand. The logic of psychoanalysis permits the patient on the couch to direct the conversation, while the analyst responds by listening to what the patient has to say as well as what is left unsaid. Freud intervenes in the Rat Man's symptoms through analysis.

What the patient does not say, what escapes the discourse of the patient, is part of the logic of symptoms that the analyst promises to reveal by intervening on the systems of the unconscious that obscure the code. Systems such as repression and sublimation bury originary trauma beneath layers of composite memories and physical symptoms. The originary trauma escapes the language of the patient because it cannot be spoken; it is outside description, ob/scene. Intervention, however, seeks to speak the unspoken, recollect what has been lost, and reveal the originary trauma. In the relationship between analyst and analysand each becomes the inverse image of the other, the analyst pursuing what is constantly concealed by the language of the patient, and the patient's own continuous response resisting without knowing the advances of the analyst to resolve the problem.

In Ronell's view this places the analyst in the position of detective who is able to grasp for clues behind the scene of the law. The detective can work beyond the rule of law because, unlike police work, they are indifferent "to the performative telos of an arrest" (112). What Ronell leaves unsaid is that the ob/scene work of detectives which exceeds the grasp of the law is still subject to the master narrative of the case which puts up roadblocks at every turn to keep the crime under wraps. The ubiquitous *femme fatale* of film noir serves little narrative purpose but to perform the role of obstruction to the trespassing anti-hero, the urban setting as disorienting labyrinth, and even the lengthening shadows distort the detective's ability to string together a coherent narrative. There are no facts to be found for the detective, only guesswork, and supposing the outcome by series of clues. What is to be learned is a matter of rhetorical supposition, based on the available clues or means.

An ethical approach to multimodal pedagogy is abject in the same way that detective work is abject to police work: it exceeds the rule of law, but does not spiral into chaos. Instead, this pedagogy is grounded in the ungrounding of supposition or a stasis point based on the available clues. Obstructions rhetorically frame the narrative of pedagogy by imposing rules and encouraging guesswork rather than promising an arrest of the subject.



### **Intervention of the Suppository Subject**

The work of supposing in pedagogy does not remove the role of desire between analyst/analysand or master/student, or however the equation will be written. The master may still want to stubbornly pass on his knowledge to the student, while the student will maintain a need to escape the safety of the master's gaze. The analyst pursues the patient to find the cure, and the patient must sustain the conversation to continue the masochistic pleasure of the association. Nevertheless, supposing allows these desires to be permissible responses to obstructions of the respective counterpart. In fact, it is the intervention on the part of the Other that stimulates the continuation of the pleasure of the interaction. Freud notes in his conversation with Lorenz that the patient took a somewhat unconscious pleasure, only visible to the analyst, when explaining the details of rat torture (Perelberg, *Freud* 179). Conversely, it must be considered that the disturbing intricacies of the Rat Man's case

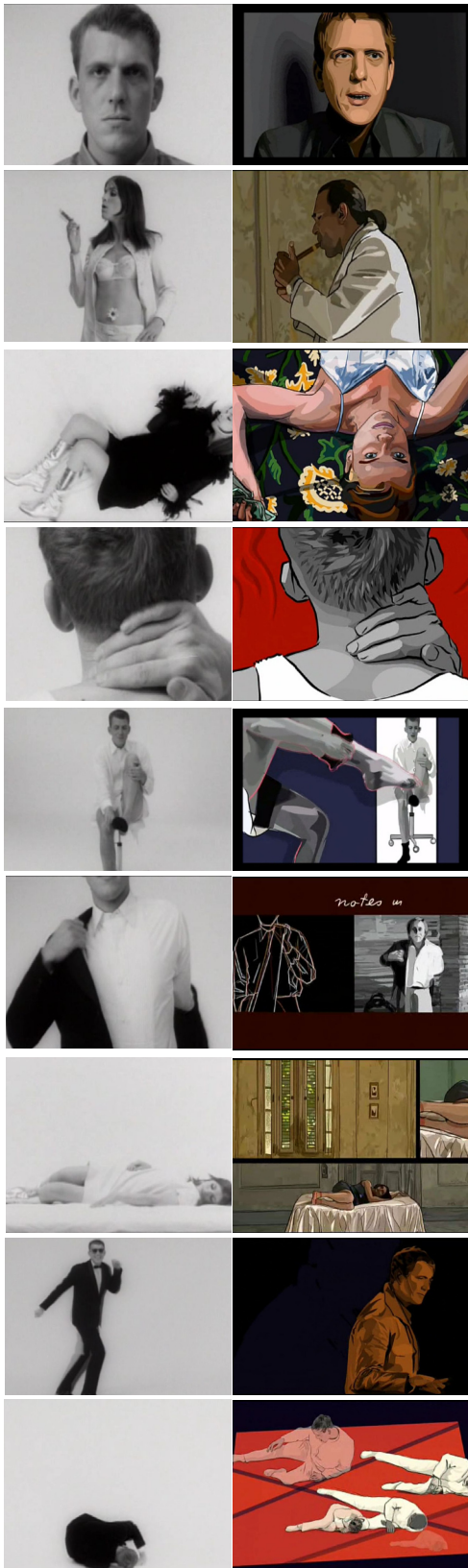
became a source of obsessive fascination for Freud.

The title of Ronell's essay refers to the mode of pleasure found in this pedagogical relationship as an "obsessional neurotic style" that follows closely with the masochistic contract of the subject that must "traverse the fantasy" of pleasure and pain already discussed. But it is also the subject that intervenes on the pleasure and pain of the Other, and so traverses the fantasy of the Other. This is the *sujet suppositaire*, or supposing subject that is also the obstruction, as a form of impetus for response.

As the Rat Man's symptoms include constipation connected to his issues of bodily torture, Ronell extends Freud's intervention from supposing to "suppository" as the stimulus for the release of unconscious knowledge and sensations. Freud performs the function of suppository by intervening in Lorenz's symptoms and guessing at their cause by following the trail of clues his patient leaves behind. The logic of the suppository is that the supposing induces a reaction to overcome the unconscious obstruction. The suppository itself doubles as an obstruction to the cure as a symptom that resists a cure and demands a new response from the patient. Ronell describes Freud's role as a release to the block of the unconscious: "What gets things stirring is Freud's insertion, at the paralyzed moment of the analysis, of the suppository discourse" (122). One of the Rat Man's paranoid thoughts was that his parents (the focus of most of his symptoms) could read his thoughts, and it is this neurosis that Freud re-enacts when he continues his guesswork. Freud is left guessing (supposing) through strings of puns.







In *The Five Obstructions* von Trier applies the suppository stimulus to Leth to get things “stirring” to lay bare his old mentor’s flaws and incite self-reflection. Leth’s response, however, is to resist the intentions of his student and reverse the challenge. Like the case of the Rat Man, teacher and student participate by intervening on the desire of the other. Von Trier inserts his suppository which, in turn, starts the chain reaction. Unlike Freud’s case, however, Leth resists and even challenges his student’s own suppositions of what should be the aim of the project. Von Trier stands in for the ambiguous space of the Sphinx subjecting Leth to vague restrictions resulting from Leth’s films, which continually fall short of von Trier’s expectations. The student’s assessments of each new composition exceed the intervention; Leth’s responses are always the wrong ones, the unintended leaving von Trier unsatisfied. But it is this unfulfilled desire that drives von Trier to now respond to Leth’s challenge. It is in the exchange of desire that supposing/suppository is at its most intense. Von Trier expects literal cinematic diarrhea, while Leth stubbornly hangs on to his excretory flows.



Here we have anything but an equitable exchange of knowledge, but a confrontation of *ethos*. For von Trier the obstructions are pregnant with meaning and possibilities, while the enunciation or expression of such will always fall short of the intended outcome. Žižek translates this inevitable failure of the human being to live up to desire in abject terms: “the birth of meaning is always an abortion” (*Ticklish* 58). This could mean that there is a moment before every utterance which carries with it a multiplicity of significance and is repressed for the sake of communication (although, meanings are never completely lost, they just become subsumed under neurosis). The crude side of this statement is that meaning aborts unmeaning; the birth event intervenes on the infant’s *in utero* life and ushers in the inception of originary trauma the infant can never express. The scene of writing is an attempt to recover this disaster which is always lost to us.

Speaking of recovering the disaster, Maurice Blanchot notes, “It is upon losing what we have to say that we speak” (21). Blanchot’s concern is the finitude of language and the expression of what cannot be said: “We speak suggesting that something not being said is speaking” (21). He is of course playing with the various meanings of “being” and “speaking,” with the “not” conspicuously intervening between the words “something” and “being.” If in Žižek’s equation life interrupts unlife, terminates the possibility of anything but life, Blanchot sees “something” as the “not being said” coming into being when it “is speaking.” The birth event, the originary trauma, insists on recurrence through the scene of writing. But not just writing, writing as the intervention of the past, or the composition of the *ethos* of the supposing and suppository subject (the *sujet suppositaire*). Leth gave birth to von Trier, at least in terms of his influence on the style and *ethos* of the younger director. As a good analyst, von Trier returns the favor and intervenes on Leth’s filmmaking life, the perfect human having already been “said,” to offer his teacher the chance to recover his lost trauma. The gift of *The Five Obstructions* is that Leth’s work is now recovered and given new life amidst an unfamiliar public, *The Perfect Human* rescued from the repression of a cultural unconscious.

## The Ultimate Obstruction

The final obstruction in the film will require little in terms of action from Leth. Von Trier takes over production duties and makes his own version of *The Perfect Human* requiring Leth to only read a scripted narration that von Trier writes for the film, and then, as a final test, he asks Leth to attach his name to the film as director. This is a radical reversibility of the pedagogical relationship at the scene of writing. The assignment is to not act but wait, to hesitate and admit to the uncertainty of authorship and the recoiling of ethics (as discussed in earlier chapters) that questions the authority of *ethos* to determine action. The pedagogical *ethos* is split between teacher and student, beside itself supposing/composing a response to continue speaking as a mode of being, or composing as a mode of living. Responding to obstructions requires a great deal of courage; to respond to the intervention of *ethos* is another option of *praxis*, as Žižek writes that it is neither the destruction of revolution nor the inaction of conservative thought, but a third way which is to choose neither, and to wait (*Enjoy* xvi).

Waiting is ob/scene; it is not the waiting of inaction, which fits easily into the transmission model (not wanting to learn is a valid response to an assignment, but it is a response of negation). Waiting as *praxis* requires patience and reflection to allow the suppository to take effect, and this willingness to wait is a characteristic of the mediality of using obstructions as a way to compose. In *Crack Wars* Ronell extends an image of drug addiction as a mode of being that takes effect between beings. She describes an “ethics of decision” as a need to make a decision within the experience of hesitation: “Some hesitations are rigorous. They own up to the fact that no decision is strictly possible without the experience of the undecidable. To the extent that one may no longer be guided—by Truth, by light or logos—decisions have to be made” (58). Yes, decisions have to be made, and obstructions are not exempt; in fact they demand a decision. But they also demonstrate that in each new composition, each new obstruction from von Trier and accompanying film

from Leth, these decisions become more and more difficult to make as we get further from the truth, or the truth of the matter (*sujet suppositaire*).<sup>11</sup>

Here is a note of caution about trying to champion obstructions as a methodology for teaching in a classroom. Brian Massumi spends a lot of time in his book *Parables for the Virtual* discussing the pitfalls of cultural studies that relies on charting these suppository movements (as biological and detective work) in order to identify a logic of learning. He argues that although a multi-positional grid concept allows for varying positions of subjectivity, these subject positions still rely on positionality, or fixed sites of subject position (2). The sites may allow for overlapping, but they remain fixed and subject to ideological coding; he asks,

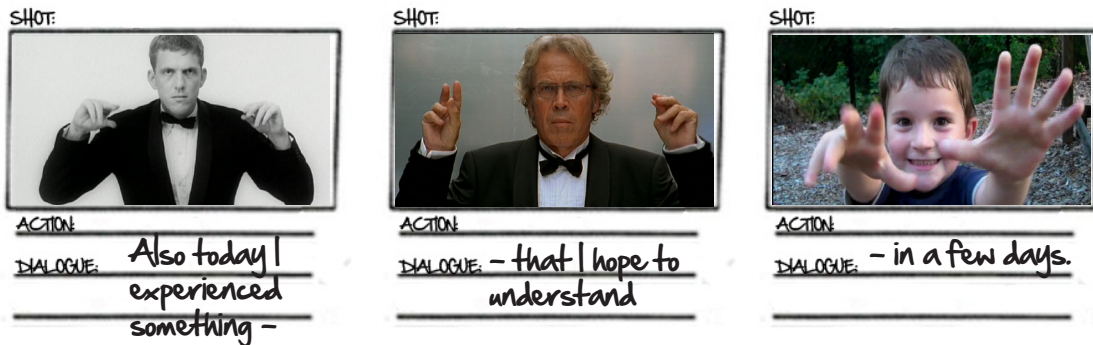
Where has the potential for change gone? How does a body perform its way out of a definitional framework that is not only responsible for its very 'construction,' but seems to prescript every signifying and countersignifying move as a selection from a repertoire of possible permutations on a limited set of predetermined terms? How can the grid itself change? (3)

Massumi claims that these pre-defined positions on the grid ignore movement between spaces, not the spaces themselves but the movement—the protean transformation between figures. But it is this last question that describes the site of writing in terms of obstructions.

This is a question for Barthes and the undetermined third sense, as well as Agamben's notion of mediality as neither means nor ends. Massumi's concern with affect or "sens-ation" of course echoes Barthes' own third sens(e). In Agamben's *The Coming Community* mediality gets extended into discussions of ethics with his "whatever beings," or the unthought composition as the composition of the ob/scene (1). These are three authors very much concerned with what happens in the midst of supposing, inserting the suppository drug for bodily effect. Massumi understands the grid as a real-but-abstract

concept from Deleuze, in which a grid may have abstract properties, but its effects are real (4). This all has to do with the idea of *being*, but not just as a hermeneutics or definition of *being* (Heidegger) but as potential (*potenza*) that exist before the possibilities are set within the grid of methodology, which is very much an ethical concern. The “minimal gap” or “delay” is Žižek’s way of writing the disaster through the waiting or interruption between an event “pregnant with meaning” and its symbolic, methodological representation.

How does this connect to the idea of “the perfect human” as a pedagogical concept? All of these authors are discussing the transforming human being in the movement of meaning, as opposed to the being of static subjectivity—the perfect human not as *telos* or temporal construction but as *bios* or body of sensation and affect. To understand the ethical situation of the human as always in a movement that would make notions of perfection impossible places the emphasis on the possibility for change not structured by negation. We need a knowledge and practice of composition that would respond to the ob/scene of writing not only in reactionary or revolutionary ways, but by waiting.<sup>12</sup>



# Chapter Five



## Accepting the Challenge

The connection between the fourth obstruction, *The Perfect Human: Cartoon*, and the fifth and final obstruction, *The Perfect Human: Avedøre, Denmark*, is the issue of pedagogy and writing. This returns to the concerns that began in the introduction about multimodal writing and what it means to compose not just in terms of text, but in images, sound, gestures, performances, and any other media that has been designated to particular technē. After an overview of how obstructions engage both conflict and play in terms of the figural games of assignment, I will compose several assignments that will perform the pedagogical maneuvers of obstructions. This will then bring the discussion of obstructions to a tentative conclusion that reimagines the project as a whole in the way that *The Perfect Human: Avedøre* reimagines not only *The Perfect Human* but *The Five Obstructions* as sites of ethical composition.

This obstruction is unique in that it requires very little of Leth as far as actual film production. Von Trier takes the directorial reins and asks Leth to only read the narration that he writes for the film. The caveat is that he must sign his name to the film as director no matter the result of the film. He acquiesces and von Trier uses unseen documentary footage from the film to present Leth as the subject of the project all along (the perfect human, so to speak). Not only are the roles reversed, but von Trier attempts to erase that reversibility by crediting Leth as the director of the film. This final chapter will trace the steps of the final obstruction through a series of assignments and will,



ultimately, inevitably, lead to another final assignment to make yet another revision of *The Perfect Human*. The idea to make a sixth obstruction is not unique, but it is an assignment that must be met not only because it demands this as part of an engagement with multimodal writing, but also because it invites those that participate by watching the films to also participate by taking up the challenge. I will accept this challenge.

### **The Czar's Hair**

This project set out from the start to critique notions of multimodal writing as an extension of print based writing and that approaching images as literate devices does nothing to address the different modes that compositions come into being. If there is no reading images it is because they were never meant to be read but to be *seen*. The distinction, however, between reading and seeing is one of production and genre rather than of medium. Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen assert that the rich and vibrant illustrations that appear early in a child's life through books are quickly transformed into the maps and diagrams of academic life, "away from 'expression' and toward technicality" (16). Expression does not vanish completely, but is sublimated into the need for "reading" to produce an economic benefit. Reading and writing drifts away from expressions of play to the production of specialized labor. Kress and Leeuwen suggest that the play of visibility reemerges when reading silently without vocalization is the sign of the "fully literate person" who can "treat writing as a visual medium" (17). But this neither proves that writing is visual, nor that images are textual; it does, however, demonstrate that any operational definition for either text or images will inevitably recoil back onto itself (as proper semioticians, Kress and Leeuwen's book is productively titled *Reading Images*).

The pedagogy developed in the previous chapter intervenes on the scene of writing at this recoil, the gap between reading and seeing, and responds with a third option which I referred to earlier as *waiting*. The notion of a third choice brings the analysis of



obstructions back to the ethical difficulty of Barthes' third sense and the way that images do indeed possess a kind of literate informational and symbolic meaning. And yet, as Barthes says, there remains something that is not part of the language system, something hidden from both reading and seeing; meaning is not relegated to any one system, but "remains suspended between the image and its description, or between definition and approximation" ("The Third [Sense]" 61). The difference between obtuse meaning and the informational and symbolic levels is that it substitutes the economy of semiotic production (the exchanges of signs and signifieds) for the play of the ob/scene.

Barthes begins to explore the obtuse meaning through the film still from Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* by simply describing the visual elements of the scene. The obtuse, however, escapes these descriptions because, as he writes, "[the obtuse] has something to do with disguise" (58). In this case, disguise refers to the visual composition of character which emerges as *parergon*, or the additions made to informational and symbolic meanings; the character is always in disguise. In this condition, Derrida was right to question where *parergon* begins and ends for the scene. Eisenstein wraps the czar in a disguise "twice over," as both actor and character, "without one disguise destroying another" (58). To make some sense of the obtuse, Barthes identifies one aspect of the movie czar's disguise as containing the intervening affect: "The whole of the obtuse meaning (its disruptive force) is staked on the excessive mass of the hair" (58). Not only is this scene characterized by the play of disguise, but the force of the obtuse is overdetermined in every possible visual element: hidden/ present, back/forth.



The czar's hair intervenes in the representational value of the image, functioning as part of the actor's costume, to disguise identity, while calling attention to itself as ob/scene composition and something more than what the frame can hold. Wavering between absence (lack) and absense (excess) the image turns the tables on the frame by playing with the relationship of sign/signified. When Freud discovered his grandson playing his own version of *fort/da* it came as a surprise to the doctor that the child would ignore the productive knowledge that the toy's intended use provided. The child turned the tables on the hermeneutics of psychoanalysis by switching the use value of his toy and Freud reveals his bewilderment as he describes the game: "The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied around it. It never occurred to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 9). Freud disguises his own confusion of the game by citing the child's deviation from what he sees as a more culturally productive use for the toy. It is only later that Freud imposes an interpretive matrix for the play event, but for the moment the narrative posits the image of a grandfather whose understanding is suspended while waiting on the absent toy to reemerge from its hidden location. The teaching of pedagogy gives way to the play of figure.

Of course, pedagogy never really vanishes. It always dangles on the end of the string ready to be yanked back into view. There is always something to be learned in the play of the figure, something that the intrepid professor can transform into productive knowledge for the student's use value. Games can be fun, but dangerous; always ask your doctor before using. There is no game, however, without ethical difficulty, an obstruction which has made the game necessary, a reminder of Gene Youngblood's belief about the difference between art and games in his idea of an "expanded cinema": "Art is research, whereas entertainment is a game or conflict" (*Expanded Cinema*, 65). According to Freud, his grandson turned the trauma of the absent mother into a game of "fort."

## Assignment 1: Assigination, Seduction

SHOT: 1



ACTION:

DIALOGUE: We will formulate  
a few obstructions.

SHOT: 2



ACTION:

DIALOGUE:  
It's completely insane.

What is given when a teacher gives a student an assignment? There are aspects of play and research found within the assignment. An assignment is a game and a contract; participation is about obligation and care. There is a seductive quality to the assignment, it initiates challenges, requires loyalty, and calls for completion. The game of the assignment is to articulate goals while offering the opportunity for unintended outcomes.

This assignment asks the student not to meet the expectations of the assignment, but to become seduced by the play of assignation. Write the script for a short scene between two people; choose a setting, a time, a stage. Pass this script to another, and select a new script to record yourself. What is the back story for this strange new scene? What do you hate about it; what do you love? How does it call to you? What new obstructions arise that your own creation did not require?

The law of seduction takes the form of an uninterrupted ritual exchange where seducer and seduced constantly raise the stakes in a game that never ends. And cannot end since the dividing line that defines the victory of the

one and the defeat of the other, is illegible. And because there is no limit to the challenge to love more than one is loved, or to be always more seduced—if not death. (Baudrillard, “On Seduction” 22)

Teachers face an ethical conflict similar to Freud’s grandson when they must decide how it is that students will learn. They place a retroactive play value on assignments to resolve the tension of best practices, but the original ethical conflict arises once again when assignments must suddenly be evaluated. Patricia Donahue offers an example of the obstruction of pedagogy when she explains how she uses Barthes’ essay “The Third [Sense]” as a model for teaching students how writing can produce different kinds of knowledge. After explaining how Barthes plays with meaning and encouraging her students to do so through various assignments, she justifies her method by pulling the pedagogical string back: “We can translate this method into the classroom idiom, into pedagogy, and use it to design assignments and to comment upon student writing as real writing, as a complex recoding of a social story” (Donahue 75). This is a hard sell; Barthes’ essay resists exactly this kind of methodological design. He writes not knowing what it is he is writing about, but follows the clues and ultimately can only suppose what they can possibly mean. The translation that Donahue approaches, but cannot finally grasp, is one of rhetorical analysis, how Barthes writes about writing or imagines about images. Assignments would have to be thought in terms of ethical difficulty, not translation or design principles, to allow the pedagogical string to disappear once again.

An assignment acquires the character of a contractual obligation between teacher and student as a result of assessment as the intended outcome; the expected result is not only productive knowledge but production itself, the student’s placement into the mold of labor specialization. But the assignment also has the hidden character of *assignation*, or the secret arrangement between intimate partners that has been socially or culturally regulated as forbidden, and has the implication of a seduction of sorts. Thought of in terms of assignation, assignments are not just extensions of methods or the functions of design,

but sites of obstruction and reciprocity, multivalent spaces of learning that consider art (as research, *technē*) and play (as games and conflict) as part of an “expanded” composition. Assignments happen in a location and between human beings that care for one another, a caring that is disguised and framed out by the context of the scene of writing.

If assignment contains the seductive features of the assignation, then it is important to consider what it is about the assignment that is seductive as distinct from purely sexual uses of the term. Seduction is useful also as a contrast to production as a pedagogical outcome of assignments. Seduction plays the *fort/da* game of the ob/scene in the face of the bloated obscenity of systems of production and consumption. Jean Baudrillard makes this case for seduction as a counter-narrative to the modern obsession with production. He argues that seduction is the opposite of interpretation; while the latter sets out to disclose meaning in order for truth to emerge (discourse), the former is more interested in hiding meaning behind the superficiality of appearances. For Baudrillard, “Seduction is that which extracts meaning from discourse and detracts from its truth” (“On Seduction” 152). The act of “leading astray” is more than just fulfilling the promises, but a holding back of those promises in opposition to clarity and transparency.

Baudrillard maintains that the production of discourses cannot help but be implicated in the tension: “Every discourse is complicit in this abduction of meaning, in this seductive maneuver of interpretation; if one discourse did not do this, then others would take its place” (153). But the reason that these narratives of discourse are not crushed under the weight of their own hidden meaning is that seduction also implies a certain play of signification. Rather than a battle, Baudrillard sees it as a game:

All appearances conspire to combat meaning, to uproot meaning, whether intentional or not, and to convert it into a game, according to some other rules of the game, arbitrary ones this time, to some other elusive ritual, more adventurous and more seductive than the mastery of meaning. . . .

And if [discourse] must overcome something, it is not the fantasies and hallucinations, which are full of meaning and counter-meaning, but rather the brilliant surface of nonsense and all the play that it makes possible. (153)



Baudrillard's seduction is a game implicit in an object, causing it to turn away from its own production based use-value. This allows the conversion of objects of production to turn away from an original meaning and, through the seduction of appearances, engage in the play of modes and media. Assignments can transform from their role as training practices to a game of strangeness and intrepidation. Baudrillard presents seduction as a rhetoric of hidden meaning, simultaneously indulging and drawing back from the viewer's desire for full disclosure.

Are *The Five Obstructions* and the five new films which makes up the larger film this film and series of films examples of pulling the pedagogical string back and forth? Do they acknowledge a game of knowledge production while performing a ritual seduction? If there is an ethic of obstructions, do obstructions also provide a way for this notion of ethics to emerge from its hiding place? Can there possibly be a successful obstruction? If so, what would it look like? Answer: it would look like this: [pause]. In other words, it would be an image of critical writing that exceeds the expressions of both reading and seeing, and whose stakes remain within the discursive realms of aesthetics and writing. In the film(s) *The Five Obstructions* each new assignment between von Trier and Leth is an assignation, an intimate recognition that not only demands but deserves a response. In terms of assignation, *ethos* is a designation of attitude or composition of assigning an obstruction toward the Other

receiving the gesture, and vice versa. If assignation happens in a location, or at a site of writing, then composition is a general term for determining the various configurations of the complex interactions that occur at the level of ethics.

There is no need to critique Donahue's use of Barthes' essay as a pedagogical model. Her essay is a rewriting of Barthes, and it accepts the assignment that Barthes offers the reader. Donahue repeats this assignation, and offers us as readers another configuration, another disguise, for the scene of writing that invites us as intimate guests to respond. In "Abandoned to Writing," Victor Vitanza is also responding to Barthes (but, of course, countless others) when he connects the difficulty of *ethos* and disguise to the scene of writing an abandoned location of assignation (ob/scene): "There is something about 'writing' that not only 'we' hide from ourselves but also that writing itself hides from us. Though hidden, 'it' cannot be found. If supposedly found, 'it' is easily lost again. Actually and Virtually, 'it' is not hidden! Nor is it ever found." No wonder there is so much controversy about the place of multimodal writing; we have yet to discover what writing is. I mean this literally, of course!

The example from Donahue demonstrates how the need to justify pedagogical tactics can lead to missing the forest for the trees. Different methodologies will interpret the pedagogical clues in ways that structure the answers for particular systems of consumption. It is where methods end that ethics intervene and pedagogy must begin: how ought a teacher to teach when a method has failed. This is how the perfect teacher falls.

Robert B. Ray makes this same objection on ethical grounds in his book *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy*. Ray makes the point that scholars who endlessly repeat the procedures of semiotic, ideological, psychoanalytic, etc. approaches keep making the same kinds of arguments, or a kind of revision that lacks the ethical context of the collaborative context. In Ray's estimation, academics who engage in such research become adept at wielding particular vocabularies or canons of work, but they "have ignored [the] lesson" of those who first invented them (6). This is assignment without assignation. In this case,



theory becomes theology, implementing sets of proper questions and procedures that will result in known quantities and reliable outcomes. Ray suggests that to overcome formulaic pedagogy we need to ask the *improper* questions while allowing for moments of surprise (8). He structures his book around assignments and proposes the benefits of avant-garde approaches to writing. Whether or not all scholarly teaching could take advantage of the surrealist techniques Ray describes is open to debate, and it is important to note even an avant-garde method is still a method with the capacity to structure knowledge in specific ways.

Ray, however, understands that any frame will both structure and police a scene. The making of compositions, written or otherwise, is not dependent on any one methodological system, or mode of being, but there are power relationships that assure compliance. Rancière described this as a political issue in terms of “the distribution of the sensible,” which requires the particular materials and practices for the form to be acknowledged by the community. To escape this regime one must invent something new within community standards, something that cannot yet be articulated within the confines of a certain regime of knowledge. In Ray’s view, Barthes’ attempt to escape the regime involves a rhetorical process of *extraction* and *fragmentation*: “In both, the individual segment, image or detail is isolated from the narrative that would circumscribe it” (36). The third sense is not framed by any particular regime; it does not properly belong to the scene.

The obstruction of the scene compels Barthes to extract and fragment significance from the scene, and he does this by freezing the image. Pausing the scene extracts the image from the temporal flow of the cinematic movement and allows him to fragment the scene into different parts that conflict with the informational and symbolic levels of meaning. What these levels do not account for is Barthes’ emotional and enthusiastic reactions to Eisenstein’s film, as well as his declaration that he is “not sure if the reading of this third meaning is justified” (53). Justifiability is a proper pedagogical question. Pausing the film is not proper practice, but it does respond to Barthes’ assignation with the scene. What is it

that makes him literally pause in his tracks? This is critical writing that is both multimodal (it must engage many modes of production, despite being relegated to print) and makes use of revision (creates a new scene, an ob/scene). In short, the assignation of the image contains an obstruction that offers an assignment; Barthes' assignment is to rewrite the film not as orthodoxy but as experiment or game. The rest of the chapter will continue the pedagogical game with *The Five Obstructions* and tease out a few more assignments that will investigate what it is about this film that makes us pause in our tracks.

### Assignment 2: The Perfect Remake

SHOT: 3



ACTION:

DIALOGUE: The obstructions  
will come from you.

SHOT: 4



ACTION:

DIALOGUE: I couldn't say  
what they would be.

The obstructions in *The Five Obstructions* require Leth to remake his film in multiple modes and under varying conditions. He responds to von Trier with very different results from the original *The Perfect Human*. Instead of offering a list of limitations that will fundamentally change the approach and style of the original film, this assignment asks the student to create an exact reproduction of the original *The Perfect Human*. All shots, colors, angles, costumes, sets, speech, actions, film stock, and running length must be strictly followed. The only deviation allowed is the casting of different actors. This is not only for convenience sake, but absolutely mandatory. The change in actors provides the point of intervention for the

perfect remake and will emphasize the small differences and gaps between the original and its remake.

In *Notes on Gesture* Giorgio Agamben sees cinema as leading images “back to the homeland of gesture” (55). The movement that Deleuze also theorizes in his cinema volumes remobilizes the “posed-ness” that had paralyzed images by the end of the nineteenth century, right before the vaunted birth of motion pictures. With its emphasis on disclosing gesture, as Agamben notes, cinema belongs not just to the realm of aesthetics, but to ethics and politics as well. Gesture, movement, infuses cinematic arts with ethical and political possibilities not inherent to the static image alone.

At first glance this seems to be at odds with Barthes’s conception of the third sense he perceives within still frame images of films. What must be considered, however, is how this action of freezing the movement itself is essential to the revelation of the “prick” of the obtuse in film images. Barthes himself notes the tenuous presence of the obtuse as it quickly vanishes between two contiguous frames of Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* [1925] (“The Third [Sense]” 57). What has changed in the transition between the frames? The tectonic foundation for relations between the viewing subject and the static object on the screen has shifted. For the viewing subject, movement must be meaningful; choice and action must communicate an ethical value. Freezing the movement does not halt movement altogether, but suspends it in such a way that reveals the mediality of gesture. The image fascinates the subject, fastens the viewer to the screen, subjugates the subject to another sense, and interrupts being.

We have already noted that Agamben sees gesture as a “third type of action” distinct from “acting” (*agere*) and “making” (*facere*). These are productive actions that he borrows from Marcus Terentius Varro, who derives them from Aristotle. Gesture is suspended between the ends and means of production as an action of mediality from which “the being-in-a-medium of human beings” emerges (“Notes” 57). Rather than produce meaning,

cinematic images sense meaning as they enact the libidinal tics and gags that are suppressed by narrative flow; early screen figures like Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton turned images into pure gag or pure gesture. Tom Gunning traces the excitement and surprise of early film back to the pleasure of the thrill ride. He derives his famous expression “the cinema of attractions” from the fairground, placing these new images not with the aesthetics of traditional arts but with the sensory acceleration of thrill rides, noting that the development of cinema occurs alongside the rise of amusement parks like Coney Island (Gunning 65-66). The excitement of thrill rides becomes a scene for the revision of sensation as the desire to ride recoils around both attraction and fear. The fear of turning control of one’s self over to a machine is the fear of the loss of subjectivity, and it is assuaged by the repetition of the scene and the anticipation of a quick exit.



Early in his book *The Parallax View* Žižek performs a similar recoiling of subject and object in order to interrogate the libidinal investments involved in subject (mis)identity. In his explanation subject and object difference must be considered as a difference in verbs: subject is passive (subjected) and related to Nietzsche’s idea of *amor fati*, accepting freely that which is necessary; object is “that which objects” or disturbs and intervenes on the subject (*Parallax View* 17). Žižek provides an interesting approach to compositional revision

that accepts this subject/object recoil as an obstruction. If the representational quality of images is based on a subject/object relationship, then images become symptoms, ciphers for repressed meaning, or the outward sign of originary trauma that must be resolved. This could be termed a symptomatic practice of composition. Žižek supplements the *symptom* with the *sinthome*, which he borrows from Lacan as a concept for that which possesses no determinant meaning: “it just gives body . . . [to] excessive enjoyment” (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 226). In the *sinthome* Žižek provides a bridge from gesture to pleasure (*jouissance*) and revises the struggle of Freud’s Eros and Thanatos as the sensation of a thrill ride, recoiling around attraction and fear. As *sinthome*, gesture or the mediality of images produces nothing but a third sense, or, as Žižek says, the tic is nothing in that it is the “fullness of libidinal investment” (227). This investment is ethical because it shares the recoiling movement of *ethos* between the desire and fear of losing control.

Here we get two words for this kind of ethical investment: *jouis*-sense and enjoy-meant, significance as sensation not in terms of sense (reason) but as pleasure (ethics). Ethical pleasure can be considered a *sinthome* because, according to Žižek, it does not require any particular reading or translation: “in contrast to symptom which is a cipher of some repressed meaning, *sinthome* has no determinant meaning; it just gives body, in its repetitive pattern, to some elementary matrix of *jouissance*, of excessive enjoyment” (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 226). It is an empty cipher of excessive meanings which he also relays into the gesture as an excessive sign of all possible signs.<sup>1</sup> The weight of the ob/scene continues to be felt within the frame of the *mise-en-scène* even through the hegemony of symptomatic readings. These excluded possibilities “give body” to the composition and maintain a kind of medial presence outside the scene.

Unfortunately, Žižek does not recognize the game that the *sinthome* plays with symptoms, and thus he misses the part that obstructions play in revealing the constructed character of compositions. He sees invention itself as a negative gesture that limits and determines choices, rather than the positive act of offering a new order. Žižek escapes

into negation at the very moment of dis-enclosure. This negative view of invention gives obstructions a purely regulating role within composition; but what is missing from this view is the act of response as a counter-gesture and that invention with restriction happens in a context of collaboration. Part of Žižek's reluctance to embrace obstructions is that he objects to remakes in general and specifically bemoans Gus van Sant's 1998 remake of Alfred Hitchcock's venerable *Psycho* (1960). Supposedly van Sant had maintained the integrity of each shot from the original; however, Žižek calls it a "failed masterpiece" in that he did not fully realize his idea, ultimately making both narrative and formal changes to the original. This turns van Sant's effort into just another remake or homage to a master, and as a master Hitchcock is reverted back into a symptom as the sign for repressed meaning that must be released through the remake. The remake becomes a means to an end and subverts its own gestural qualities.

The Five Obstructions



The Perfect Human: Avedore



Without realizing, Žižek is approving of the challenges, or obstructions, that van Sant had established and believes that the problem with the film is that the director did not go far enough to accomplish the challenge of a remake. Žižek's solution is to strive for the radically same film, complete formal identity that would show its cracks and fissures all the more through nuanced differences such as lighting, color, acting. This radically same film would become an absolute other film, a totally different film because of the "the uncanny effect of the double," and it is "on account of this very sameness we would all the more powerfully experience that we are dealing with a totally different film" (235). The radically similar film approaches "Hitchcock" not as a symptom or container for whatever it is that the director



desires, but as a sinthome or response to the obstruction that is the impossible challenge of the radically similar film. By staging exactly the same scenes without interpretation, the gaps in identity suddenly surface as uncanny and infinitely different.

The second obstruction to overcoming negative invention is to explore the ob/scene by staging those excluded scenes which weigh down on the original. Žižek suggests that staging other scenes that were never shot would also speak to this kind of sublime invention. For example, what happens when Žižek watches a truncated version of *Vertigo* (1958)? The happy ending of the film is delayed, suspended infinitely, the gesture of the final fade is paralyzed, and the libidinal investments are intensified (237). Suddenly the composition is not complete and the truncated images project the discontents of a fragmentation; any given scene (of composition, of reality) always implies *another*.

These obstructions have already been (dis)figured by von Trier and Leth in *The Five Obstructions*. In fact, von Trier pushes Žižek a step further by having the filmmaker himself create his own remakes to reveal scenes that had always been implied by the original. The game of obstructions works to reclaim the sinthome, as the notion of the “perfect human” becomes less and less a goal of which the film was originally intended. The final obstruction contains a parting gesture which discloses, under the very limitations that Žižek described, the sublime reality of human perfection. It is important to remember that the film literally ends on a deictic gesture that accompanies an image: “This is how the perfect human falls.”

### **Assignment 3: Interruption**

In the essay “The Third [Sense],” Barthes discusses his notion of the “obtuse meaning” that he experiences, or gains a sense of, through his viewings of different films, but particularly Sergei Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible*. To investigate this obtuseness within certain films, Barthes observes still frames that make him pause, distorting his narrative understanding of the film. The movement that characterizes cinematic media is interrupted, suspended



in time, and the rhetorical energy of his argument flows out of the frozen image. The interruption of the scene is an obstruction to narrative understanding, but it allows for other discussions to emerge. Barthes even claims that slight changes in the chosen frame will shift the meaning so that the obtuse sense is covered over again so that the contingency of the scene is lost.

This assignment asks the student to perform the impossible task of the third sense.

The student is to record and edit a short narrative sequence so that video stills can be extracted. Pause the sequence multiple times until one frame jumps out at you as having some strange sense that it does not belong to the scene. Keep the image frozen in place and stare at it until it begins to change and slip out from beneath the original narrative context. It may begin to speak, even scream for the scene to continue. Persistence will be rewarded, the image will fall silent—it will no longer speak as part of the scene, but from the unseen, out-of-field, or ob/scene.

Now allow the scene to continue. The image is gone. This assignment is impossible.

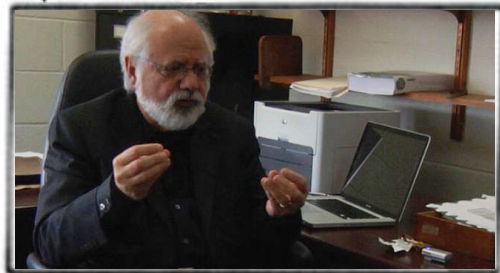
SHOT: 5



ACTION:

DIALOGUE: The task is, in every sense, impossible.

SHOT: 6



ACTION:

DIALOGUE: But here we are responding to it.

When von Trier proposes to Leth the requirements of the final obstruction he admits to Leth that he will be using the footage shot during the other obstructions and that “Hopefully we captured something human as we talked.” Leth accepts the conditions of the

film without discussion, eager to allow von Trier the burden of creation. The entire project in the eyes of von Trier has been to “capture something human” in Leth and his work, and there is a sense that he has thus far failed. This final obstruction is a last ditch effort to force the issue of the perfect human. If there is something human in Leth, then von Trier is hell bent on revealing it, if not by the constraints of the obstructions, then by the obligation to speak the words that von Trier will write for him. After claiming that he knows more about Jørgen Leth than even Leth himself, he admits that he had envisioned the whole experiment of obstructions as a “Help Jørgen Leth Project,” and then goes so far as to tell Leth not to be nervous about his voice over narration because “All your guilt I have taken upon me. You are guiltless. You are like a little child. You don’t have to do a thing.” While driving to complete his obligation to the film, Leth calls the script a “fiction. . . . A letter to him from me.”

Von Trier and Leth create a fiction for the final obstruction, one that relies on the religious imagery that von Trier explores so regularly of human failings and redemption, guilt and sacrifice. Ultimately, the final obstruction for Leth is as von Trier describes it, “You don’t have to do a thing.” There is nothing to be done, nothing for him to do. He is suspended by the obstruction, his role as director deferred to another, and he is obligated to read a fiction that seems to know him better than the truth. The script is intolerable in the way that Foucault described the connection between fiction and *ethos*.<sup>2</sup> For Leth it is intolerable that von Trier has interrupted the project by forcing him to suspend his desires and read the words of an/other.

The flow of responses that has been up to this point the mark of the obstructions is suddenly suspended for the sake of a “fiction.” This is how Leth and von Trier follow Barthes’ lead in “pausing” the image of the film without actually stopping the film. Barthes’ decision to freeze the image was to explore a sense of the obtuse that quickly appears and vanishes in cinematic movement. For Leth and von Trier, the fictions introduced by the voice over narration and Leth’s misplaced credit as director interrupt the flow of obstructions by demonstrating the intolerability that the project in general was, from the outset, a fiction,

and that the film itself suffers from a crisis of *ethos* and the question of ethics.

Early in her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* Mary-Ann Doane differentiates between “rationalization” and “contingency” as temporal terms for the unraveling of the cinematic experience. For Doane, rationalization denotes the smooth progression of time as the fictional representation of real time. Contingency, on the other hand, is the revelation of interruption and chance as a resistant structure of a composition. While rationalization relies on a logic of literacy to “read” the scene and apply the appropriate understanding, contingency is marked by event (*Ereignis*), or a misunderstanding that threatens representational whole (11). For Doane there is a political imperative as rationalization is necessary to the perpetuation of capitalism, but even more important is that temporal contingency interrupts this apparent sense of the unalterable progression of time.

Cinematic images, still or in movement, provide contingencies through indexicality or potential for meaning. Doane explains that the indices of the cinema are not a slave to the sign and that contingency “explains the overwhelming multiplicity and diversity of detail which contributes to the sense that a film must be experienced rather than described, that it is fundamentally alien to interpretation or translation” (25). One way that cinema exposes contingencies is through what she calls “dead time” or the moments in films that appear to lack narrative motivation or that just hang silently between plot points. “Dead time” is temporal excess that is sacrificed as waste or surplus that is inextricably linked with representing the event; rationalization creates meaning by reducing the waste of dead time (160). But cinema can, through its indexicality or potential for multiple meanings, become a record of time “unanchored” from the propensity for rationalized temporality (162).

Contingency also explains why Barthes felt it necessary to view Eisenstein’s film as a still image composition rather than as a scene or sequence, or even an entire film. Robert Ray sees the pause as a visual apparatus that can detach the image from the narrative: “if the movies’ relentless unrolling prevents your noticing anything except the narratively underlined details, the only response is to stop the film” (103). Pausing not only suspends

narrative action, but Ray submits that it introduces the viewer to the film *en media res*, in the midst of the film as an event already in progress, emphasizing its place as a fragment of a composed scene. Dead time would refer quite literally to a decomposed or decomposing scene that begins to show the cracks and fissures in the fiction of the unified reading of the film event. If contingency reveals the multiple meanings present in cinematic compositions, then it is the interruption of obstructions that finally gives Leth and von Trier the opportunity to step back and see the ethical aspect of their project—that neither of them has controlled the obstructions from the beginning. Every film has far exceeded the original premise of discovering the perfect human.

Interruption does not just suspend time, but it is also a difference that introduces change. In her book *Death 24X a Second* Laura Mulvey also engages Barthes and the still image as a reach into Lacan's field of the Real as an interruption or distortion of the fiction of the congruently

composed film. Mulvey points to the problematic nature of the cinematic image as both moving and still image(s). The desire for the fiction of real time is connected to Freud's



death drive, *is* the death drive or reality principle, because, as Mulvey indicates, a movie watched in the “correct” way (without pausing) “is elusive” because the nostalgic technology and conditions of the cinema make it difficult to interrupt the scene: “The insubstantial and irretrievable passing of the celluloid film image is in direct contrast to the way that the photograph’s stillness allows for the presence of time to emerge within the image” (66). For Mulvey it is the speed of the image as a series of static shots and the ability to pause the succession, to halt the movement, beyond narrative necessity that interrupts the death drive

of the nostalgic technology of the cinema. Pausing allows details to be revealed that may have only been before registered as unconscious specters.

Pausing has always been essential to the editing process, but has now become a feature of modern cinematic experiences outside of the theater. The interruption of a scene allowed by the technics of modern “film” watching introduce unintended anomalies into film composition. This occurs as different modes of creation and viewing: for example, how von Trier and Leth explore these same sorts of interruptions as obstructions, but then interrupt their own obstructions in the reversal of the final obstruction. Experimental filmmakers have always tapped into this interrupting impulse, shedding the death drive for the possibilities of desire and pleasure. In a way *The Five Obstructions* is an experimental film, as its emphasis is not on producing and watching, but first watching and then responding as creative processes of thinking, making, and doing.

#### **Assignment 4: “How is this scene possible?”**

There is the potential for violence in every image—every scene of writing presents the possibility for shock or surprise. The shock of an image is not quantitative; it cannot be measured, and it affects individuals in different ways. What is shocking to one person may not be so much to another. This assignment asks the student to explore individual comfort zones in terms of the confusion of shock. The student will investigate a subject matter that stirs this sense of the recoil, not only as violence but as a feeling of incredibility and uncontrollability. Decide on a general scene that causes this disturbance as a sense of estrangement and perhaps shame at being completely powerless to understand the meaning of the scene. This assignment asks the student to find a composition that forces a pause, literally and figuratively interrupting the movement of the scene. In short, the image will force the ethical question of “How is this scene possible?”

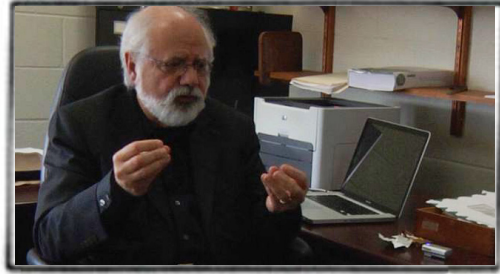
SHOT: 7



ACTION:

DIALOGUE: But isn't there  
a kind of violence in this  
task?

SHOT: 8



ACTION:

DIALOGUE: Yes, there is  
always that risk involved  
in a response.

Kate Millet has a lot to write about invention and multimodal composition. In her book *The Politics of Cruelty*, she argues that “Technological means are incapable of serving the demands put upon them by ideology” (58). This means that multimodal composition is in some respect an obstruction to writing—that media have a difficult time responding to the burden of ideological requests. Her example is how the small capacity of the gas chambers in concentration camps made ideological mass murder difficult. As a response to this “problem” of efficiency those in charge of this method had to employ a great deal of invention. What are the ethics of obstruction in this situation? What are the stakes in continuing to leave the question of ethics in its recoiling movement? Can an image be interruptive and ethically questionable, as well as offensive to our sensitivities? Is it time to draw lines?

These are all important questions that have been raised throughout this project and that Millet is most concerned with in her book. She is also writing about images, specifically images of torture and violence, and she is questioning in a very personal way the meaning of these visual spectacles. In a way, the brutality experienced in a scene of torture is only heightened by the presence of other banal and everyday objects, sights and sounds. But Millet does believe that there are “certain objects by their very frailty and triviality seem to

resist this metamorphosis" (37). She mentions a green enamel coffee cup that a prisoner of the Lubyanka in Moscow was given by the guards with an image of a little spectacle wearing cat reading a book and watching a bird. In noticing the odd décor of such a location of violence, the prisoner laughed from the irony, but also from the small bit of life that the cup had afforded him (37). Later she imagines "the worn steps of the Lubyanka," perpetually crossed by both guard and prisoner, constant stepping that transforms those stairs into the evocative architecture of cruelty (39). These are images whose meanings become distorted and virtually incomprehensible due to the conditions of their appearance.

When these images do appear they perform the same violent interruption committed by the act of cruelty. As Millet describes, the scale of these everyday images become monstrous and pregnant with meaning not sustainable by language (61). Violent imagery takes the obtuse sense to its radical limits where the recoiling movement becomes one of shock and horror. But it is a recoil that is disinterested, as the technological apparatus that captures violent acts renders a distance from the scene which the viewer cannot completely close. In any case, whether it is a green enamel cup or the photograph of a torture victim, the image serves simultaneously as the embodiment of the event and a mediating representation. The extent of the experience can never be fully realized and the depth of emotion felt can never be fully grasped.

The disinterestedness of the spectator is not from lack of caring, but from the inability to fully comprehend the scene. This confusion of context is what Millet describes as "shock" and she admits to her own inability to fully grasp some of the scenes she witnesses. She reserves her most difficult feelings for images of sexual violence, or for those images that seem to mix sexuality with brutality. She voices her reactions to these as "the shock I am trying to fathom" and a "blinding experience of shame," wondering as to the meaning of these images (159). Later she will shift the question away from meaning and toward being: "How is this scene possible?" (164). She abandons her search for meaning and questions generally how the scene could have come to exist. Millet could have directed her question to



those involved in the torture, asking how it came to be that they could perform such acts on other human beings. But she also could have meant the question in terms of the technology of composition. How is it that a scene such as this was made possible? What ethical lapse led to the creation of scenes of brutal torture? Just as the capacity to pause a film offered the capacity to expose one frame for an unlimited duration, this same technology keeps the image of torture alive indeterminately.

The images with which Millet most struggles are three photographs from the end of Georges Bataille's *Tears of Eros* that depict a man subjected to the Chinese torture *ling chi*, translated as "death by a hundred cuts." Bataille perceives within these images of extreme cruelty an intense ecstasy that surpasses even eroticism. It is this juxtaposition of eroticism and brutality, sexual excitement and the horror of torture, which forces Millett to pause her writing to make peace with her inability to grasp Bataille's obsession with these images. These brutal images, she argues, can only communicate cruelty as images of pain and suffering (166). Bataille would not disagree except to say that cruelty is no reason to ignore the ecstatic anguish communicated through the photographs. Of this scene of violence he writes, "This photograph had a decisive role in my life. I have never stopped being obsessed by this image of pain, at once ecstatic(?) and intolerable" (*Tears of Eros* 206). The intensity of the image is left open to the question of the intolerable; what is lost or sacrificed within this scene of violence? Do we gain anything through its existence?

The photographic apparatus makes it possible to delay death and suspend the victim's suffering infinitely. What is intolerable is the inability to resolve the contradictory terms of the images: "What I suddenly saw, and what imprisoned me in anguish—but which at the same time delivered me from it—was the identity of these perfect contraries, divine ecstasy and its opposite, extreme horror. And this is my inevitable conclusion to a history of eroticism" (206-7). His conclusion is that there is no resolution because it has been deferred in the image. Bataille extends the "obtuse sense" of the still frame to its radical limits, and for Millett, as well as Bataille, these limits are the interruption of the experience of the

image, shock for Millett and ecstasy(?) for Bataille. Together the authors declare “How is this scene possible!”

There are no images of torture or extreme violence in *The Five Obstructions*, although there is the presence of extreme poverty which is a kind of cruelty. The ethics of obstruction and revision, however, must at some point question the place of these kinds of images in the scene of writing. What we learn from both Millett and Bataille is that the experience of these kinds of images causes its own kind of interruption which paralyzes the act of writing, at least temporarily. The images in *Tears of Eros* disrupt and challenge Millett’s mode of thinking about the cruel, and she must stop and work through her ambivalent feelings. Even Bataille admits to the disruptive power of visual violence noting that looking at one photograph “was so awful my heart skipped a beat.” It was not just his heart that was paralyzed.

I must have stopped writing. As I do sometimes, I went to sit by the open window. No sooner was I seated then I fell into some kind of trance. Unlike the other night when I doubted it painfully, this time the fact this kind of state is more intense than erotic pleasure was clear to me. I don’t see *anything*—which is not a thing to be touched or seen. *That* makes you sad and heavy from not dying. (*Guilty* 32)

The fact that Bataille concludes his narration with a deictic indicator (*That*) confuses the subject and addressee of the final phrase. What exactly makes him sad and heavy? Who is being made to feel this way? These are rhetorical questions, of course. But are they? He confesses that he does not see “anything,” he sees nothing, which is not a thing that can be touched or seen. And this nothing can only be indicated with the gesture of “That,” which becomes ambiguous to the reader who cannot stand witness to the gesture. Yes, Millett and Bataille have stopped writing, and in the place of writing Bataille offers an image, a gesture

of writing.

There is no need to draw lines, at least universally moral lines in the guise of ethics. But there is a need to continue writing, perhaps in a different mode, in order to break the infinite suspension of pain. The question “How is *this* scene possible?” also contains a deictic gesture that suggests that, by the capacity to question the scene opens the possibility to return and respond.

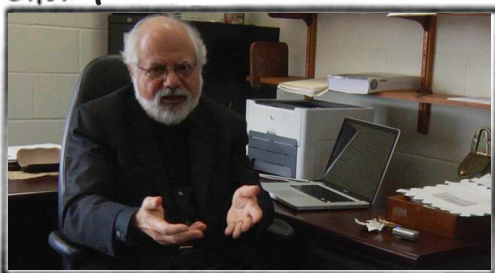
### Assignment 5: Falling

Jørgen Leth spends a lot of time in the film during the second obstruction practicing his fall.

He has a difficult time controlling the movement so that it does not look choreographed.

This footage reappears at the conclusion to *The Perfect Human: Avedøre* which is a film all about Leth’s attempts to resist von Trier’s obstructions. The final assignment will be a gesture, a movement suspended between control and uncontrollability, understanding and shock, constraint and freedom, and the frame and the ob/scene. Practice falling. Do it again. And again. Turn around and fall to another side. Try it at different heights. Make up a story about your falling. Don’t hurt yourself. Keep falling until you get it perfect.

SHOT: 9



ACTION:

DIALOGUE: How does the perfect human being fall?

SHOT: 10



ACTION:

DIALOGUE: This is how the perfect human falls.

“How does the perfect human fall?” This is the question that ends *The Five Obstructions*. The whole idea of “the perfect human” has been, from the inception of the project, the focal point of each obstruction. It is not simply a question of tragedy, though it could mean that, nor does it look toward some event of redemption, although it is not out of the question. Falling has direction and movement; performing the fall is the perfect gesture, so to speak, as the perfect simulation of the controlling/uncontrollable libidinal act. The final obstruction is a composition of falling in two ways: Leth loses the capacity to direct his own film, and yet must sign his name to it as the director and then he must speak the words von Trier writes for him as the voice-over narration. Under the terms of both conditions Leth is restrained from creative input and his voice is effectively silenced. Falling becomes his only means of expression and it is tied to the perfect human through writing, speaking, image, and, finally, gesture.

Silence is important to falling in this final obstruction because it suppresses Leth’s ability to respond to von Trier. Response has been the hallmark of the collaborative context of the obstructions all through the film. Instead of responding to the obstruction with another film, Leth must respond through his body on the screen and his voice in the narration. While practicing his narration, Leth recites one of his lines: “Jørgen gets the rush of Sartre and Hemingway’s historical wings, to waft away the discomfort and insecurity because he hasn’t the guts to take wing for himself!” Von Trier laughs and interjects, “You put the stress on ‘take wing’ instead of ‘himself.’ You are doing everything you can to evade the text. It’s ‘take wing for *himself*.’ That’s the point.” Leth can only respond by escaping the limitations set up by the text, as von Trier tries desperately to reel him back into the frame he has placed.

In *Counter-Statement*, Kenneth Burke cites the use of silence and banal statements in Karel Čapek’s science-fiction play *R.U.R (Rossum’s Universal Robots)*. Lacking the verbal ability to express the inexpressible, the humanized Robot in the play, upon seeing his first sunrise, declares simply “Oh, see the sunrise” (38). It is at this moment that form and

content implode into a verbal stasis represented by the event of an iconic phrase. We are told to look at the sunrise, and it is this deictic gesture of referring to something outside the realm of the expressible that the Robot speaks what cannot be said. The energy under the verbal surface cannot be uttered in any efficient or logical way, and yet it overwhelms the scene with desire, figure, discourse—image.

The voice-over narration comes from beyond the frame, is superimposed over the scene from outside. But the narration and Leth's voice becomes an integral part of the composition, a way for Leth to "evade the text." In the old adage of silent film critique "there never was a silent film" because there were always music and sounds accompanying the images. Melinda Szaloky takes this one step further by arguing that even if there were a film that lacked a musical accompaniment, the images themselves were never meant for a silent world and that "the hidden acoustic dimension of silent cinema should be sought in the spectator's head" (110). There are pieces of the composition which do not originate from within the scene, and in this case from within the film. For the first time the obstruction is not meant for Leth alone, but for the "spectator's head" who has been participating in the composition of the film from the beginning. This obstruction is ultimately addressed to those who would continue the project from the outside of the film.

Falling is a gesture, but it is also a vocalized phrase. In *The Five Obstructions* falling is accompanied by the phrase "This is how the perfect human falls." This phrase uttered without the image of Leth falling to the ground is much more of a confusing statement: how does the perfect human fall, and where is this human being that we can watch him fall? But this is not just a case of the image clarifying the spoken phrase. Indeed, it is an answer to a proposed question in the narration, and it is Leth himself who is asking/ answering the question about his own image of falling. Jean-François Lyotard writes of deictic gestures such as "this" in *The Differend* as belonging to a "universe" that indicates how the phrase should be translated (33).<sup>3</sup> The position of these gestures to other phrases determines meaning, but the deictic indicator also relates the phrase to a space through a

spoken gesture: the phrase literally *takes place*. The particular universe or composition that surrounds the deictic gesture will suggest meaning, but will also leave open the question of the indicating subject. Geoffrey Bennington translates Lyotard's understanding of deictics as "place of a certain collapse of the distinction between *langue* and *parole* on the one hand, and on the other, of the distinction between signified and referent" (63). Question: Who is falling? Answer: The perfect human. Does this indicate that Leth is the perfect human? Or does this gesture back toward von Trier? Is this perfection marked by success or failure, or "rotten with perfection" as Burke says? Does either success or failure make an appearance—*fort/da*? The ethics of revision that permeate the film could not sustain an answer to any of these questions. Instead, the answer is expressed as a gesture, leaving open the possibility for viewer-participants to place themselves in the position of the perfect human as an image that is subject to infinite revision.

The final shot of *The Five Obstructions* is Leth in his hotel room practicing for a scene in which he must reproduce a fall to the ground. Leth reads the voice over that von Trier wrote for the film:

"How does the perfect human fall?"

This is how the perfect human falls."



## Conclusion

In fact even the gesture of writing, which alone permits one to envisage slightly less conventional human relations, a little less crafty than those of so-called intimate friendships—even this gesture of writing does not leave me with an appreciable hope. I doubt that it is possible to reach the few people to whom this letter is no doubt intended, over the heads of my present comrades. For—my resolution is all the more intransigent in that it is absurd to defend—it would have been necessary to deal not with individuals like those I already know, but only with men (and above all with masses) who are comparatively decomposed, amorphous, and even violently expelled from every form. But it is likely that such men do not exist (and the masses certainly do not exist). (Georges Bataille, “The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade [An Open Letter to My Current Comrades]” 91)

We can now clarify a second and quite different sense of this ‘re-.’ Essentially linked with writing in this sense, the ‘re-’ in no way signifies a return to the beginning but rather what Freud called a ‘working through,’ *Durcharbeitung*, i.e. a working attachment to a thought of what is constitutively hidden from us in the event and the meaning of the event, hidden not merely by past prejudice, but also by those dimensions of the future marked by the project, the pro-grammed, pro-spectives, and even by the pro-position and the pro-posal to psychoanalyze. (Lyotard, “Re-Writing Modernity” 5)

This project has been a performance, a gesture of writing, which imagines the presence of some virtual collaboration between author and audience. It has been a re-writing or “working through” of the assignment of *The Five Obstructions*. This document is a continuation of the assignment of the obstructions as an open letter of sorts to the work of both Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth. By writing an open letter to those he called comrades,



Bataille's gesture is to write as if there was such a thing as an audience, instead of the individuals with whom we have multifaceted relationships, even, sometimes, at a distance. In effect, his open letter is a gesture of writing to no one. It maintains the fiction that writing is not itself a gesture, a movement of libidinal investments that subjects the writer to the shock and confusion that there is no originary writing, no writing that can properly be called "one's own."<sup>4</sup>

Friedrich Kittler explained the transformations in human communication as a form of media conversion: "If writing proceeds from reading and reading proceeds from listening, then all writing is translation" (*Discourse Networks* 97). All writing is subject to translation because there is no originary writing, nor any other medium that does not do the work of translation or rewriting. Writing is the fiction of re-writing without an originary source. During the final obstruction it is easy to forget from what source film von Trier and Leth were supposedly working. At this point Leth's original *The Perfect Human* fits nicely into the procession of obstructions as yet another version of "the perfect human," or even an *ex post facto* translation of *The Five Obstructions*. Performances are always works of translation, works of culture-in-action that Antonin Artaud had described as "a new organ" or "second breath" that is subject to change and revision (8).

An obstruction in the context of multimodal composition is not writing but a gesture of writing, a movement of the writing instrument produced by the tectonic shifts across media affecting a social translation that is also a fundamental change in how we relate in a context of cultural collaboration. This is the thesis that Walter Ong forwards in *Interfaces of the Word*, declaring that "major developments, and very likely even all major developments, in culture and consciousness, are related, often in unexpected intimacy, to the evolution of the word from primary orality to its present state" (9-10). Johanna Drucker takes this idea a step further to claim that the present state is a visual state: "Visuality is a primary mode of understanding, but also of our production as social and cultural beings" (4). The challenge she writes is that we not only learn how to "read" visuality, but understand it

as epistemological in the way that Ong says it shapes how we relate to one another. She bemoans the lack of sufficient theorizing of visuality and the structures that produce it as a practice of knowing.

The challenge, as I see it in regards to obstructions, is that visuality is difficult to pin down as a discursive mode. We could say that all visuality has an aspect of “vision,” but is vision something that can be “seen” so that it can be theorized? Lyotard submits that visuality is produced through vision and that “vision is not ‘seeing.’ Seeing is vision seen, witnessed. The third party sees seeing. Vision itself is not seen by any eye” (“Fiscourse Digure” 351). The difficulty of “seeing” vision is a reason why, despite the popularity of multimodal composition among current writing curricula, the ghost of textual discourse will continue to haunt the use of images in composition.

In his analysis of Velázquez’s “Las Meninas” Foucault makes the observation that one must see an incompatibility between vision and language that is the possibility of the discourse of representation rather than an obstruction, so to speak (*The Order of Things* 9). Discourse may lay bare the “illuminations” of the visual: “We must therefore pretend not to know who is to be reflected in the depths of that mirror, and interrogate that reflection in its own terms” (10). Vision does not preclude language when discussing images; there is, however, a certain incompatibility between the two that requires a rhetorical sleight of hand. I have approached obstructions in the same way that Lyotard referred to being able to see vision, or how Foucault looked at “Las Meninas,” pretending that I don’t see the image in order to be able to discuss that which resists discourse.

The final obstruction is, of course, not the final obstruction, nor was it ever intended to be. As Leth finishes his fall, the credits to *The Five Obstructions* roll and show both Leth and von Trier as directors of the film. The obstruction *The Perfect Human: Avedøre* in which Leth had to accept directing credit for something that was not his creation disrupts the importance of authorship to revision. The ethics of obstructions is not to come to consensus but to continue to work through new responses. This idea of revision is, of course, not one

that originates within von Trier or Leth as directors, or me as author of this project called a dissertation, nor does it end at the fall, or the roll of the credits, or even here on the page. Others have already picked up on the call to respond and have created their own revisions of “the perfect human.” At the moment there are several remakes that have been posted on the Internet including *The Perfect Chicken*, *The Perfect Zombie*, and *The Perfect Human (A Science Fiction Tale)*, as well as one titled *The Sixth Obstruction*.<sup>5</sup> Surely these will not be the last.

All of these videos, and many others like them, take the film *The Perfect Human* as their point of stasis in order to extend the composition of “the perfect human” in a multitude of versions. For example, *The Perfect Chicken* disrupts the sterile approach of the original film with the shock of a woman giving birth to a cooked chicken. Meanwhile *The Sixth Obstruction* attempts a more strict approach to using the same shots as Leth’s film, but includes colors and other distorted video stylizations to respond to the clean documentary approach of the first. There is nothing groundbreaking in any of these revisions, except that the little experiment that Leth and von Trier began over email back in November of 2000 has continued to solicit responses from its audience, who now has the means and access to both produce these small revisions and distribute them over web-based technologies and social networks.

This is the conclusion, in the most gestural way possible of announcing a conclusion to something that has no possibility of actually concluding. As though any work can conclude absolutely. The challenge of obstructions will continue, and this project is a realization of my own participation in that challenge. In addition to this mostly print document I will add a supplement to the frame with another video revision of *The Perfect Human* that cannot be present within the limits of these pages. The video will interrupt the scene of writing with a different mode of translation that will find its proper place beyond the margins of the page, working through this obstruction in the ob/scene. This is my gesture of writing to those with whom I can only silently envision a collaboration.

## Endnotes

### *Chapter One: Composing the Image*

<sup>1</sup>In Book IV of *The Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle distinguished between theoretical and practical knowledge by outlining *epistêmê* (scientific knowing), *technê* (making, skill), and *phronêsis* (doing, practical knowledge) (see 1139b31-35, 1140a9-10). *The Five Obstructions* engages knowing, doing, and making as modes of compositional discourse. The film has already been “made” as a created object; however, it also demonstrates the process of making throughout. The project in this document is meant to extend the making process to a literate form (text) while also taking up the challenge of making by continuing the challenge of obstructions to different modes of composition.

<sup>2</sup>In 1995 von Trier was part of the Danish film collective called *Dogme* that famously agreed to a “Vow of Chastity” or set of manifesto rules with the expressed purpose to “force the truth out of [their] characters and settings” (*The Danish Directors*, Hjort 9). Participants in the collective made films expressly following the directives of the vow or would face certain punishments. In an interview with Ib Bondebjerg, von Trier explained in his own contributions to the *Dogme 95* movement he “tried to use [his] left hand a bit there, but the whole idea behind the rules is that we, in setting limits to freedom, enhanced freedom within circumscribed limits” (*Danish*, Hjort 220). Von Trier’s participation in the *Dogme 95* collective had an obvious effect on his goals for *The Five Obstructions*. However, the procedures of the *Dogme* group followed a very religious discourse and followed a very different ethical trajectory than the obstructions experiment; the history of the group is beyond the scope of the present study. Mette Hjort has done extensive work on Danish film as a global market presence and her work on von Trier and the *Dogme 95* collective is invaluable on the subject (cf. Bondebjerg and Hjort, *The Danish Directors: dialogues on a contemporary national cinema*).

<sup>3</sup>Bazin says “The primacy of the image is both historically and technically accidental.

The nostalgia that some still feel for the silent screen does not go back far enough into the childhood of the seventh art. The real primitives of the cinema, existing only in the imaginations of a few men of the nineteenth century, are in complete imitation of nature. Every new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, take it nearer and nearer to its origins. In short, cinema has not yet been invented!" (21)

<sup>4</sup> The traditional English translation of the French word *sens* is "meaning" rather than "sense," and replace any notion of the term sense with by meaning. A careful reading of the essay finds, however, that the meaning implies a much more defined accounting of what the obtuse represents, while Barthes' intention, if he has one, is to reveal a sense of the image which has no account. I will continue with the more apt term *sense* in place of *meaning* when referring to this essay.

<sup>5</sup> Barthes explains, "I do not know what its signified is, at least I am unable to give it a name, but I can see clearly the traits, the signifying accidents of which this - consequently incomplete - sign is composed" ("Third" 53). Barthes now offers a list of descriptions rather than an explanation. This is the signifier (description) with no signified (meaning).

<sup>6</sup> Barthes recounts Bataille's discovery of extraordinary terms: "Bataille, who eludes the idealist term by an *unexpected* materialism in which we find vice, devotion, play, impossible eroticism, etc; thus Bataille does not counter modesty with sexual freedom but... with *laughter*" (55).

<sup>7</sup> Stiegler relates this disorientation to "an incapacity to achieve epochal redoubling." What he means by "epochal redoubling" is a break in the technical system that "suspends the behavioral programming through which a society is united." By disallowing this redoubling, technologies employed in the service of speed prevent resistance and alterations to the technical system (7).

<sup>8</sup> Agamben here discusses the doubleness of adjacency in the terms of ethics in

which the proper space can only go with the improper place, or “the free use of the proper” as he quotes Friedrich Hölderlin (cf. Agamben, *The Coming Community* 25).

<sup>9</sup> On page 106 he writes that “the nothing is the origin of negation, not vice versa.”

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger adds to the coin metaphor when he discusses ec-stasis as “intrinsically exposing” (126) and that “[t]he insistent turning toward what is readily available and the ek-sistent turning away from the mystery belong together” (133). Here we can discern Agamben’s recovery of ec-stasis in his own discussion of “easement” and adjacency in *The Coming Community*.

<sup>11</sup> In *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari foreground excess in the mechanic qualities of desire: “Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the subject that is missing in desire or desire that lacks a fixed subject; there is no fixed subject unless there is repression. Desire and its object are one and the same thing: the machine, as a machine of a machine. Desire is a machine, and the object of desire is another machine connected to it...As Marx notes, what exists in fact is not lack, but passion as a ‘natural and sensuous object’” (29). Ultimately, desire does possess organic “passions” that appeal to the physical senses.

<sup>12</sup> See Introduction to *Libidinal Economy* (xx) in which Lyotard admits to the perversity of his thought in his “evil book, the book of evilness that everyone writing and thinking is tempted to do.”

<sup>13</sup> This is how Lyotard can declare that his book is not really a book: “The present writing would not be a book; for there is no book that is not the ideal of the immobilized organic body.... Not a book, only libidinal investments” (*Libidinal* 256).

In a footnote Barthes sees the connection when he points out the “happy coincidence” that the tradition in the Middle Ages had hearing as the third sense. He admits that there is more listening involved in what he perceives than seeing (*Image* 53).

## Chapter Two: The Ethics of Obstructions

This is Aristotle's famous definition for rhetoric to begin the *Rhetorica*. George Kennedy translates it as follows: "Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion" (36). There is a presumption that "the means of persuasion" would be determined by the specificity of the situation. He limits this to a visual sense ("an ability . . . to see") which Kennedy explains is translated from *theorēsai* as "to be an observer of and to grasp the meaning or utility of" (37). Obstructions set aside this concept of rhetorical invention by restricting the available means before they can be "seen" and utilized. The ethical component of creative constraint lies in the uncertainty restricting access to a range of possibilities. What the project of the film emphasizes is the question of how does one choose between means and then how does one respond.

<sup>2</sup> Agamben claims that cinema is in a unique ethical position because motion pictures preserve the movement of gesture, rather than fragmentary representation ("Notes" 56). Duration of movement "liberates" the image from production to expose its mediality, Agamben believes that the cinema carries image back to ethics because its center lie in gesture and not image, duration and not fragmentation.

<sup>3</sup> This is to mean sense as a cultural logic that attempts to overcome senselessness with agency. Friedrich Nietzsche ends *The Genealogy of Morals* by pointing to the metaphysical power of sense: "man was *saved* thereby, he possessed a meaning, he was henceforth no longer like a leaf in the wind, a plaything of nonsense—the 'sense-less'—he could now *will* something..." Senselessness, or non-sense, is not a negation of sense or meaning, but an affirmation of sensation as a mode of knowledge.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Scott notes that this definition of ethics is indistinguishable from cultural notions of morality. He recognizes the tautology of this understanding of ethics: "[ 'right principles] function within a given ethos will ordinarily be operative in evaluations of them within the ethos" (4).



<sup>5</sup> Burke also uses the term “occupational psychoses” to describe how “society’s ways of life affect its modes of thinking” (*Permanence* 3). In the example of Freud, his dedication to a medical model remains a trace for the process of psychoanalytic analysis.

<sup>6</sup> Francois Truffaut’s “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema” in *Cahiers du cinema* (1954) no. 31 January is one of the first and most cited texts on *auteur* theory. The figure of *auteur* has been one of components to defining an artistic and scholarly field for film studies.

<sup>7</sup> Deleuze illustrates this in *Cinema 1* through the film set which is always part of a larger set, and which prevents itself from becoming a completely closed system: “a closed system is never absolutely closed” (18).

<sup>8</sup> The idea of the “new idiom” and the aforementioned “phrases in dispute” come from Lyotard who proposes, “at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them” (*Differend* 13). He claims this is the job of the philosopher whose “responsibility before thought consists . . . in detecting differends and in finding the (impossible) idiom for phrasing them” (142). Lyotard is aligning the philosopher with the artist, or the “bricoleur” from Levi-Strauss, as a figure who plays with structures opposed it to the “engineer” and seeks a totality of structure.

In “Structure Sign, and Play” Derrida notes that the play that the bricoleur values is only possible within the discourse of the structuration of the engineer. Derrida even says that the idea of the engineer was created by the bricoleur. “As soon as we cease to believe in such an engineer and in a discourse which breaks with the received historical discourse, and as soon as we admit that every finite discourse is bound by a certain bricolage and that the engineer and the scientist are also species of bricoleurs, then the very idea of bricolage is menaced and the difference in which it took on its meaning breaks down” (*Writing and Difference* 360-361). The figures of bricoleur and engineer need the challenge of the other to sustain their identities and discourses. The new idiom is made possible by the aporia of

differends.

<sup>9</sup> Just as Leth's perfect human must fall as the closing image of *The Five Obstructions*. The failure must be complete under the weight of von Trier's demands and Leth's own desires for perfection. The film was always a project of failure.

<sup>10</sup> According to Lacan, the equation of the *Nebenmensch* is that it is "beside yet alike, separation and identity" (*Ethics* 61). The opposition of the pleasure principle and reality principle functions through a desire/negation dialectic (without synthesis): this is the difference and repetition pattern also seen in Derrida's engineer and bricoleur, and plays out through Leth and von Trier in the film.

<sup>1</sup> Rancière argues for three distinct regimes in "Western Tradition": the "Ethical," the "Representative," and the "Aesthetic." The Ethical is defined through the Platonic polemic against simulacra, "images are the object of a twofold question: the question of their origin . . . and the question of their end or purpose. . . . In this regime, it is a matter of knowing in what way images' mode of being affects the *ethos*, the mode of being of individuals and communities. This question prevents 'art' from individualizing itself as such." (*Politics* 20-1); the Representative (or poetic) regime he defines, "within a classification of ways of doing and making, and it consequently defines proper ways of doing and making as well as means of assessing imitations [mimesis] . . . a fold that renders the arts visible" (22); and the Aesthetic regime asserts the singularity of "art" but destroys the criteria for isolating singularity (art as art objects), it is "based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products" (23).

### *Chapter Three: The Freedom of Obstruction*

<sup>1</sup> Nancy says in *Ground of the Image* that an image not only appears as presence

but “presents what is absent from presence pure and simple, its being as such or even its sense or truth” (37). Something seems to be hidden from the image or is excluded from the scene that frames the conditions of presence. By building his frame and showing the people behind it in *The Perfect Human: Bombay* he made an attempt to include this outside frame.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase/question comes from Maurice Blanchot in *The Writing of the Disaster* (72). The primal scene provides an effective image for the crisis at the center of a mise-en-scene between the restriction of the frame and the desire to include everything. The desire subsists once it is repressed and the image returns to its frame.

<sup>3</sup> To include both tendencies would be to stretch the conditions of virtue, in the best possible Aristotelian sense!

<sup>4</sup> From the *Online Etymology Dictionary*: “Ob- prefix meaning ‘toward, against, across, down,’ also used as an intensive, from L. ob ‘toward, against, in the way of, about, before.’” Here I am playing on the suggestion of ob- as a directional prefix, in any direction other than in the direction of representation. In the case of ob/scene the frame and the external scene that lies beyond the frame imposes a force on the mise-en-scene. Von Trier’s purpose in disallowing Leth to show the surrounding poverty in *The Perfect Human: Bombay* is to experiment with what impact the location will have on the film without its actual appearance on film. The misery of the location stands as a silent witness against the extravagance of the banquet scene. The ob/scene refers to the excess or indefinite external force of the unframed external force on the composition of the mise-en-scene. The *Online Etymology Dictionary* also explains “obstetrics” as referring to the midwife as the “one who stands opposite (the woman giving birth).”

<sup>5</sup> In *Truth and Eros* Rajchman analyzes Lacan’s use of fictions as a way to cover up the trauma of the hidden “truth.” (32-33) Truth here is the layering of fictions in order to suppress the trauma. Revision is a way to tear away those layers of fictions and expose the trauma as an illusion, or an illusion insofar as it can no longer be recognized outside of the

context of fictions.

<sup>6</sup> The minimal gap is a concept Žižek sees playing out in Derrida's notion of the gift. Žižek says of Derrida's concept of gift: "as long as a gift is not recognized, it 'is' not fully a gift; the moment it is recognized it is no longer a pure gift, since it is already caught in the cycle of exchange" (*The Ticklish Subject* 58).

<sup>7</sup> The strategy of "nonpositive affirmation" is from Foucault, but Vitanza also finds it in Deleuze and Guattari as simply "affirmation," and in the case of Lyotard he argues "[nonpositive affirmation] could have been Marx's affirmation if he (Lyotard/Marx) had not begun with the negative investment" (*Negation* 120)

<sup>8</sup> In Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," she theorizes a spectatorship of sexual difference focusing on the negative representation of women on in motion pictures. She defends her use of psychoanalysis by explaining "[it] is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (6). She describes how the gaze of the spectator at the screen is always phallogentric scopophilia. Although Mulvey leaves women little room for visual pleasure, her use of psychoanalysis demonstrates that movies are not just the products of political machinations, but psycho-political processes that happen on the level of the unconscious.

<sup>9</sup> Žižek elaborates on Lacan's notion of "traversing (going through) the fantasy" by noting that it does not mean getting rid of fantasies (distortions of reality), but that we identify with the work of our imagination "in all its inconsistency": "pure void of subjectivity" confronted by "spectral 'partial objects'" (*Ticklish Subject* 51). "Traversing the fantasy" is another way to discuss the ethical work of obstructions that maintains a recoiling position of nonpositive affirmation.

*Chapter Four: Abject Pedagogy*

<sup>1</sup> “Il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel.”

<sup>2</sup> In *The Future of the Image* Rancière announces the obscene as “the unrepresentable,” but then further as “the unthinkable, the untreatable, the irredeemable” (109). There is always a question of how to develop a politics without some kind of representation or meaning, some kind of subject that can resist power structures. Rancière echoes the difficulty of the obscene to be represented, but then also as that which is “irredeemable” or as a fallen or not quite whole composition. This describes those that have not only been excluded from social communities but have been rejected or vomited out of a particular community (the “aura of holy horror”). This is the groundings for a general politics of composition.

<sup>3</sup> In *Libidinal Economy* Lyotard spoke of the “Ephemeral Skin” as the body politic. The body will become the site of politics through pedagogical encounters with obstructions. Body also refers to the pedagogical body that exchanges obstructions as well as *ethos* which recoils around the roles of teacher/student.

<sup>4</sup> Hegel approached the master/slave dialectic in *Phenomenology of the Spirit* as a relationship of recognition that happens both internally and externally. The point for this chapter is that there is an initial confrontation between two “abstract” entities that leads to a struggle and, eventually, a (more or less uncertain) resolution: “On approaching the other it has lost its own self, since it finds itself as another being; secondly, it has thereby sublated that other, for this primitive consciousness does not regard the other as essentially real but sees its own self in the other” (§ 179, 111). It is this initial encounter of struggle that obstructions provoke.

<sup>5</sup> Rancière believes that Benjamin made a mistake thinking that mechanical reproduction assumes artistic process. Rancière claims that practices of mechanical

technology must first fall into the aesthetic regime before they can even be labeled “art”: “they first need to be put into practice and recognized as something other than techniques of reproduction or transmission. . . . [I]t is actually this regime that made [mechanical reproduction] possible by its new way of thinking art and its subject matter” (*Politics* 32). This artistic status is acquired through the concept of community: “the technological revolution comes after the aesthetic revolution. . . [T]he aesthetic revolution is first of all the honour acquired by the commonplace” (33).

<sup>6</sup> Paulo Freire has discussed the problematic political implications of teaching literacy. In an essay titled “Literacy: Reading the Word and the World” Freire and Donald Macedo discuss “literacy” as part of a social agenda that subscribes to “a deficit theory of learning” that strives to redistribute knowledge across economic rifts: “At stake here is a view of literacy steeped in a notion of equity” (3). According to Freire, literacy training only provides a “catalog-like approach” to instituting privileged forms of knowledge and skills, without consideration to the needs of a plurality of communities.

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*, (New York: Harper Collins 1991).

<sup>8</sup> This final sentence is taken from a discussion in Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* about Freud’s analysis of little Hans’ fear of horses. Kristeva argues that “to be afraid of horses” is the “hieroglyph” or the object signifier for Hans who substitutes horses for all fear and anxiety. As a *hieroglyph*, the image becomes a text or mapping for what previously appeared inexpressible. The image, however, remains outside of text because, as Kristeva writes, as metaphor, the image is “taxed with representing *want itself*,” as opposed to the object of desire—*objet petit a* (35). Likewise, the abject image does not simply represent an object related phobia, but is one that “condenses *all fears*, from unnamable to nameable” (34). This will lead into the next discussion about abjection and pedagogy.

<sup>9</sup> This chapter focuses on Freud’s Rat Man case as it is the primary source for Ronell’s analysis. This case alone, however, hardly scratches the surface to the psychoanalytic

resources of the suppository/supposing interaction of doctor and patient. Later, Freud would encounter a similar theme of neurosis and anal fixation in the case of Sergei Pankejeff, better known as the “Wolf Man” whose symptoms included difficulty in bowel movements (Cf. Freud, “From the history of an infantile neurosis.”) Peter Gay notes in an introduction to the Wolf Man case that Freud explained in a letter to Sándor Ferenczi that during his first session with the Wolf Man he had “confessed to me the following transferences: Jewish swindler, he would like to use me from behind and shit on my head” (*Freud: A Reader* 401). Freud’s analysis of the Wolf Man’s famous dream included references to a primal scene in which he witnessed his parents having sexual intercourse *a tergo*, adding to the image of reversal that the anus implies.

Freud also had studied the famous case of Judge Daniel Paul Schreber who confessed to divine sexual penetration from what he referred to as “rays” representing God: “as soon as I am alone with God, if I may so express myself, I must continually . . . strive to give divine rays the impression of a woman in the height of sexual delight” (Schreber 249). Deleuze and Guattari pick up on this aspect of the Schreber case beginning their book *Anti-Oedipus* that Schreber had “sunbeams in his ass. *A solar anus*” (*Anti-Oedipus* 2). D&G are critical of Freud’s analysis of Schreber’s delusions as simplifying the richness of his honest confessions to Oedipal desires (64). All three of these cases are famous for the difficulty that they gave Freud as suppository encounters.

<sup>10</sup> “The talking cure” was coined by Anna O., a patient of Josef Breuer, and friend to Dr. Freud. Breuer found some success with his patient by talking through some of her symptoms. Peter Gay recounts in *Freud: A Life of Our Time* that it was a pivotal moment for the development of psychoanalysis when Breuer introduced the case of Anna O. to Freud: “[The talking cure] proved cathartic as it awakened important memories and disposed of powerful emotions she had been unable to recall, or express, when she was her normal self. When Breuer took Freud into his confidence about Anna O., he did not neglect to tell him



about this process of catharsis" (65).

<sup>11</sup> Truth appears here without scare quotes; it is meant in the platonic sense of ideal forms. Each new film indeed distances itself from the original *The Perfect Human* in various ways: as a remake of a remake of a remake, etc., as a temporal distance (the original gets lost in the past), and their styles become more and more distant from the intent of the original. There is a case to be made, however, that these "distances" actually serve to bring the film more into the public domain: each remake gives the original a new importance, it is never really lost as the new films resurrect it from the past, and each new style is a response to the original style.

<sup>12</sup> This issue of waiting was suggested by Žižek in *Enjoy Your Symptom!* as an ethical third way of responding to a situation that does not require revolution (xvi). Waiting here means not just to wait around for a new solution, but to not choose either way which opens up the composition to new modes of responses.

#### *Chapter Five: Figural/Games*

<sup>1</sup> Zizek recounts a story told by Joseph Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva, about the final moments of her father on his death bed. After he suddenly opened his eyes and glanced around the room at those staring at his dying body, Stalin performs a gesture:

Then something incomprehensible and terrible happened that to this day I can't forget and don't understand. He suddenly lifted his left hand as though he were pointing to something up above and bringing down a curse on us all. The gesture was incomprehensible and full of menace, and no one could say to whom or what it might be directed. The next moment, after a final effort, the spirit wrenched itself free of the flesh. (*Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 227).

Zizek asks what this gesture could possibly mean. His answer is nothing, “yet this nothing was not an empty nothing, but the fullness of libidinal investment, a tic that gave body to a cipher of enjoyment” (227).

<sup>2</sup> In chapter two “the question of ethics” was discussed in terms of subjectivity, and John Rajchman had identified the notion of the intolerable as an aspect of Foucault’s notion of ethics. Rajchman sees the intolerable as a key moment in Foucault’s work in which he turns his eye on the difficulty of his own work and asks “What does it cost for reason to tell the truth?” (*Truth and Eros*, 11). The intolerability of von Trier’s script is that there is no room for revision or creative input, it must be spoken as written, and then Leth must take credit as director. The costs are that Leth may not accept the meanings of the script, and his *ethos* is now tied to something that is not properly his own.

<sup>3</sup> What is so special about deictic indicators is that they are meaningful within a universe of phrases, but that this meaning creates reality. In *The Differend* Lyotard writes, “Deictics relate the instances of the universe presented by the phrase in which they are placed back to a ‘current’ spatio-temporal origin so named ‘I-here-now.’ These deictics are designators of reality” (33). These words, and accordingly the phrases that contain them, enact a double rhetorical gesture by indicating to something beyond the phrase which in turn urges the listener to turn in a particular direction.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Scott, *The Question of Ethics* 144-5.

<sup>5</sup> The videos *The Perfect Chicken*, *The Perfect Zombie*, and *The Perfect Human (A Science Fiction Tale)* can all be accessed on *YouTube* with the first two both appearing on the Newport Doc Film TV Class 2012 sub-channel as an assignment for a Film and Video course at the University of Wales, Newport. The latter claims to be an assignment for a Documentary Film and Television course, as well as a response to another video titled *The Perfect Chick Flick*. There are actually a few videos on *YouTube* with the title *The Sixth Obstruction*, but the one that I accessed for this project was one that featured a short

conversation in the comments about whether or not this indeed constituted an obstruction:

I'm sorry to disagree, If it is supposed to be a remake with obstructions then where are they? Jorgen when made to remake his films in the documentary used the obstructions to his advantage where he possibly could yet the obstructions were clear. Especially 12 frame edits in the cuba version. I can't see any obstructions in the making of this and an obstruction needs to be placed by a 3rd party because placing your own leads to going easy on yourself. This is just opinion it is a good remake (EnterSkywalker )

I have to agree with andydoro: there is a lack of an obstruction here. Or, at least, there is not one that is made clear to the audience. I do enjoy the camera work and imagery, but in order to create something truly Lethesque you ought to have someone create an obstruction for you as it will provide you with more creative stimulation. It looks like you made this one year ago. Don't give up! Rework it! (jmccormick23)

Bravo! It's really an interesting take on the concept of the "sixth obstruction". I have created my own version. The two conditions of my version (of which I may incorporate into the first scene) are that the man must have a sore neck and that the film must stand by itself (for those who are not familiar with The Five Obstructions). Would you be willing to view it and let me know what you think? (JimPerr)

i agree with the second tag to your video, for anyone that hasn't noticed that already it's 'bullshit,' interesting tho, i a bullshit kinda way. (havfunky)

what was the obstruction? no dialogue? why the violence? (andydoro)

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