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GHOSTING IMAGES: HAUNTED BY AND HAUNTING FILMIC IMAGES

by

CHARLES WINFRED FOX II

Under the Direction of Greg Smith, PhD

ABSTRACT

Ghosting Images: Haunted by and Haunting Filmic Images

Watching a film can be a haunting experience. Sometimes a filmic image may stay with us long after our viewing experience, inhabiting our body, so to speak, like the ghost of a person we once knew, or a place we once visited, or an event or traumatic memory. There may be ghost images from films we saw long ago that occasionally still haunt us; or at other times, we may feel like we are ghosts haunting the world on screen, moving through the filmic world like an unseen witness. By using the metaphor

of ghosts when we talk about films, we can better articulate our experiences with characters we can't forget, our feelings of occupying space in an imagined world, and our emotional responses to witnessed events.

In this dissertation, I intend to answer two questions: *How do we make ghosts of the images on film?* and *How might we become ghosts to the images on film?* For both questions, I employ the conceptual metaphor of *ghosting images*¹ as the process made possible by our experience viewing a film. I will apply *ghosting images* to four filmic-image types: characters, events, space, and trauma. As active participants in a world separated from us by space, for example, it is the illusionary effects of movement through filmic space enabled by a director's camera through which we can enter (at least partially) into the filmic world. Moreover, I propose *ghosting images* as the ways to describe metaphorically why some characters and events are memorable, why we may seem to occupy filmic space, or why our witness of traumatic images can provoke such powerful affects. *Ghosting images* is how we are haunted by filmic images, and how our presence/non-presence within a film is inherently haunting.

Although the vagueness of *ghosting images* is potentially overwhelming, I do believe it is a productive way for remembering what an image may mean and an effective way to describe something very particular though unnamable. Ultimately, my hope may rest in the vagueness of ghosts.

¹ Alternately, *image ghosting*.

INDEX WORDS: Hauntology, Ghosts, Ghosting images, Character subjectivity, Event-images, Spatial-images, Trauma-images

GHOSTING IMAGES: HAUNTED BY AND HAUNTING FILMIC IMAGES

by

CHARLES WINFRED FOX II

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

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2020

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2020

GHOSTING IMAGES: HAUNTED BY AND HAUNTING FILMIC IMAGES

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August 2020

DEDICATION

For my wife, my children, and my parents.

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I am grateful for all who have supported this effort, including, but limited to, my colleagues and friends, whose discussions and comments on earlier drafts have shaped my understanding of images and forced me to articulate my ideas in ways that those-others-than-myself could understand. This imagined group of readers is the audience to whom I am hoping this dissertation speaks.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
LIST OF FIGURES	XII
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	XIII
1 INTRODUCTION: GHOSTING IMAGES.....	1
1.1 Images, ghosts, and mediation.....	5
1.2 The Ghost of Deleuze.....	16
1.3 Part I: Ghosts from History.....	20
<i>1.3.1 Chapter One: Ghosting Characters: Mediation in The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford.....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>1.3.2 Chapter Two: Angels of the Event: Palimpsests of Grief and Desire..</i>	<i>26</i>
1.4 Part II: Ghosts in the Afterlife	30
<i>1.4.1 Chapter Three: Ghosting Spatial-Images: Entering the Filmic Space of The Wall</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>1.4.2 Chapter Four: Witness to trauma, we are ghosts in Children of Men</i>	<i>35</i>
1.5 ‘Haunted by’ and ‘Haunting’	40
2 CHAPTER ONE: GHOSTING CHARACTERS: THE ASSASSINATION OF JESSE JAMES BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD.....	41

2.1	Mediating filmic characters.....	43
2.2	The hermeneutic narrative.....	49
2.2.1	<i>'The outlaw Jesse James'</i>	49
2.2.2	<i>How the characters in the film see 'the outlaw Jesse James'</i>	58
2.3	The experiential performance in three parts.....	62
2.3.1	<i>Bob imitates 'the outlaw Jesse James'</i>	66
2.3.2	<i>Bob as an actor on-stage</i>	73
2.3.3	<i>The 'Affleck Affect'</i>	77
3	CHAPTER TWO: ANGELS OF THE EVENT: PALIMPSESTS OF GRIEF AND DESIRE.....	85
3.1	The palimpsest.....	86
3.2	From palimpsest to ghosting.....	90
3.3	Angles witnessing Events.....	94
3.3.1	<i>A brief digression on ordinary language, the open and the 'creaturely', the palimpsest as an event, and ghosting the event-image</i>	99
3.4	A chorus of angels: Duino Elegies, Theses on the Philosophy of History, and Wings of Desire.....	104
3.5	Three event-images in Wings of Desire.....	108

3.5.1	<i>The aftermath of war and the Angel of History</i>	109
3.5.2	<i>The circus performance/the acrobatic feat</i>	118
3.5.3	<i>Crossing over and Jetztzeit</i>	129
3.6	Conclusion	140
4	CHAPTER THREE: GHOSTING SPATIAL-IMAGES: ENTERING THE FILMIC SPACE OF <i>THE WALL</i>	141
4.1	Entering imagined and filmic spaces	141
4.2	Ghosting intimate traumatic space	144
4.2.1	<i>Spatial-images and filmic space</i>	145
4.2.2	<i>The Woman inside the wall</i>	151
4.3	Gedeck embodies the Woman	155
4.3.1	<i>younger Gedeck and older Gedeck</i>	162
4.4	Moving into filmic space	167
4.5	Die Wand/The Wall	178
5	CHAPTER FOUR: WITNESS TO TRAUMA, WE ARE GHOSTS IN CHILDREN OF MEN	180
5.1	The trauma-image & Cuarón's camera	180
5.2	Mediated trauma-image	190

5.3	Image, associated cognition, associated affect, and body sensations .	197
5.4	Our ghostly presence under attack	208
5.5	Conclusion	215
6	CODA: THE GHOSTS THAT LED ME HERE	217
	REFERENCES	224

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Bob reflected as assassin.....	71
Figure 2 Bob imitates the 'outlaw Jesse James'	71
Figure 3 Jesse traumatizes Bob (brightness adjusted)	82
Figure 4 Jesse in murderous rage (brightness adjusted)	82
Figure 5 Erased de Kooning Drawing Robert Rauschenberg 1953.....	88
Figure 6 Novus Angelus Paul Klee 1920	114
Figure 7 La famille de Saltimbanques Pablo Picasso 1905.....	119
Figure 8 Inside the wall.....	176
Figure 9 Deeper inside the wall	176
Figure 10 Outside the wall.....	177

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford</i>	<i>(The Assassination)</i>
<i>Duino Elegies</i>	<i>(DE)</i>
<i>“The Ninth Thesis on History”</i>	<i>(“Ninth Thesis”)</i>
<i>Wings of Desire</i>	<i>(WoD)</i>
<i>Children of Men</i>	<i>(CoM)</i>

1 INTRODUCTION: GHOSTING IMAGES

Watching a film can be a haunting experience. Sometimes a filmic image may stay with us long after our viewing experience, inhabiting our body, so to speak, like the ghost of a person we once knew, or a place we once visited, or an event or traumatic memory. And there may be ghosts from films we saw long ago that haunt us even now; like an old favorite, for example, that seems to bring up many of the emotional, physiological, and psychological affects we may remember now as having had then, the first time we saw it. At other times, we feel as if we are ghosts haunting the world on screen. We may seem to move through the filmic world like an unseen witness—a ghost following strangers through cities at war or in moments of peace, or guiding loved ones through historical events or future landscapes, a force occupying a space again, revived in the constancy of now. Or, we may be the creator/bearer of ghost images from other texts, ghosts which are of our own making. In filmic adaptations, for example, the ghost image from an earlier text may haunt our viewing of the same image on film. But, these images are mostly images that we have created. The filmic image is not haunted by the ghost image of the earlier text, but our viewing may be haunted by the image we have ghosted.

Even the term *film* is haunted by a 120 year-old technology. The study of film is rife with ghostly possibilities because experiencing film can be an allowance to revel in uncanny feelings. I believe that by using the metaphor of ghosts (spectrals, revenants,

haints, spirit guides, etc.) when we talk about films, we can better articulate our experiences with characters we can't forget, our feelings of occupying space in an imagined world, and our emotional responses to witnessed events. Furthermore, I hope to demonstrate how "ghosting the image" from a film may unleash multiple compossibilities, as Gilles Deleuze might say, for understanding how and why we respond to images. As I begin to investigate the paradox of dead/undead that ghosting implies, I intend to answer two questions: *How do we make ghosts of the images on film?* and *How might we become ghosts to the images on film?* My answer for both questions is by *ghosting images*.

*Ghosting images*² is a dual process made possible in the experience of viewing a film. When a viewer experiences a film, she may remember some part of the filmic world, as if she, or the ghost of her, were haunting the images onscreen. From projection to reception, adding (dis)embodiment and the layering effect of adaptations, and as memories stored in our bodies, image ghosting is a multifaceted process by which my experience with an image from a film (a novel, a poem, a work of philosophy, etc.) is transformed from onscreen image into a memory with a physical trace, a ghost of the image that I helped shape. Some images seem alive in our memory, evoking both cognitive and visceral responses, like a ghost who appears to remind me of something important, or to move me to action, or to remind me of my mortality. I have had

² Alternately, *image ghosting*.

experiences with some remembered images that are more intensely haunting than others, and I have had experiences with some images where my presence within the image seems assured. I'll discuss later some of the reasons why ghosts may appear, but my intent with *ghosting images* is to add a new conceptual metaphor for understanding our relationship with images to the conversation of spectrality in film. Whether as the process by which we remember and are haunted by an image from a film, or as when we move like ghosts through the images on screen, ultimately *ghosting images* is a way to talk about how we might experience film.

I'll start in Chapter One with describing how filmic characters can become ghost images for us. I will consider the social, cultural, and historical associations we might hold for the two lead characters, Jesse James and Bob Ford, in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007). By describing two ways that we might ascribe subjectivity/selfhood to the two lead characters, Jesse through the hermeneutic narrative and Bob in the experiential performance, I hope to demonstrate how *ghosting the image* can be a means by which we give our imagined characters life.

In Chapter Two I will discuss the palimpsest in filmic adaptations as a means of ghosting images. My focus here is on *Wings of Desire* (1987) as the palimpsest of two earlier, German works: the poetry of Rainer Marie Rilke and Walter Benjamin's *Thesis on History*. Though Wim Wenders's film does not address the Benjaminian *aura*, I will propose an ontology of the aura that originates within the viewer/reader through the

feelings produced by the appearance of ghosts. Ghosting images from a source text and our affected responses to them not only shape the ghosts we produce in the adaptation, but also changes our experience of the filmic event.

Chapters Three and Four will analyze scenes from *The Wall* (2012) and *Children of Men* (2006) as allegories for an afterlife. In these chapter I will address how these films create ghosts that haunt viewers, but furthermore, I will describe how camera movements and POV in both films create moments where the viewer feels viscerally moved through the filmic world in a ghost-like way. We are both haunted by and haunting a world that doesn't exist. I will also discuss the possibilities for haunting space that *The Wall* allows in Chapter Three, and I will propose that the experience of a traumatic event produces a visceral memory which lives in our bodies in Chapter Four. That memory is the ghosted images viscerally revived, triggering our bodies to mimic the neuro-physiological responses experienced in the moment of extreme stress or traumatic event.

Again, the dissertation is broadly organized around one conceptual metaphor — *ghosting images* — with two means of employing that metaphor. *Ghosting images* can be the process by which we remember images, or it can be the process by which we appear to enter the imagined world onscreen.

All four of the films discussed are adaptations of written texts — they adapt the voice, plot, themes, and ideas of written images created in the minds of readers. I did

not choose these films because they were adaptations; I choose them instead because I found resonance with them, their images haunted me, their ghosts were multiple and held common purpose. Having said that, I will at times address directly how ghosting images is particularly helpful for discussing filmic adaptations, especially when considering our layering of imagined characters, events, spaces, and traumas.³

1.1 Images, ghosts, and mediation.

As conceptual metaphors deployed by film philosophers, ghosts and *spectrality* evolved primarily in response to two sources — Freud’s interpretive work on the uncanny (*das Umheimliche*), an experience in which one is unable to explain the simultaneous feelings of familiarity and repulsion, and Derrida’s hauntology, a term he coins in *Specters of Marx* to describe the continuing influence of Marxist philosophy in other ideologies, including his own thoughts on deconstruction theory. More recently, the range of application and relevancy for debates on subjectivity is articulated clearly in Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren’s description of the “spectral turn”:

At the end of the twentieth century, a specific metamorphosis occurred of ghosts and haunting from possible actual entities, plot devices, and clichés of common parlance (“he is a ghost of himself,” “we are haunted by the past”) into influential conceptual metaphor permeating global (popular) culture and

³ We see this image anew: the old intertextuality chant — we see the old anew and we see the new anew.

academia alike. A conceptual metaphor, Mieke Bal suggests, differs from an ordinary one in evoking, through a dynamic comparative interaction, not just one another thing, word, or idea and its associations, but a discourse, a system of producing knowledge.⁴

As for its usefulness, this is how I see ghosting images—as ‘a system of producing knowledge.’ For my system to work, however, I must rely on several post-Freudian interpretations of the concept of the uncanny.

As Anneleen Masschelein describes the evolution of the concept, Freud’s uncanny could be seen as a “*mise-en-abyme* for the logic of Freudianism,” a negative concept to unconsciousness itself.⁵ In other words, whereas we may hold that our actions may seem unexplainable from a conscious level, if we enter into analysis we might find ‘evidence’ that in some way mitigates our lack of ‘proof.’ But, in the *mise-en-abyme*, the ‘proof’ of the uncanny is completely dependent on a ‘belief’ in a subjective experience despite even the most rational evidence. For the purposes of this dissertation, I define “uncanniness” as an aesthetic quality produced in the affectual responses of a viewer upon seeing an incomprehensible image which is also strangely familiar—like an intense memory of an event that you did not personally experience. The more intense the affectual response, the more likely it will be remembered

⁴ Del Par and Peeren. “Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities.” *The Spectralities Reader*, 1.

⁵ Masschelein, *The Unconcept*, 8.

viscerally. In Chapter Four, I will further examine and differentiate the uncanny from experiences of or witness to trauma. In an effort to explain how traumatic images from a film are remembered, I will draw parallels to recent treatments of patients with post-traumatic stress disorder. Since Freud developed his ideas about the uncanny while working with patients traumatized by the great war, the connection between uncanny feelings and the ghost-images haunting victims of trauma is clear. But as for viewers, images and the memory of images can provoke an experience so intense that the details of the terror reveal themselves in physiological responses. These physical symptoms may be substantive proof that the image in the *mise-en-abyme* exists.

The first time I saw Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), for example, a movie chock full of fantastic creatures and otherworldly mores and laws, I was most haunted by the scene where the fascist commander interrogates a Spanish farmer near the gates of the camp. The commander searches the farmer's bag and finds a shirt and a bottle of wine. It is the image of the colonel turning on the farmer, holding the wine bottle by the neck, raising it above his head and then smashing the bottle's flat-bottom across the bridge of the farmer's nose that haunts me. This was the (first) scene I shielded my daughter's eyes from when we watched it together, because for me it was too much. The violence and grotesquery of Pan's underworld was never as "traumatic" for the viewer than those events that happened in the real world of the Spanish Fascists.

When reality holds greater terror than nightmare (or fantasy), the more likely we will be haunted by the images and their corresponding uncanny feelings.

In Derrida, we get Hamlet's father as the ghost seeking vengeance, or who, as Fredric Jameson calls this ghost, is the archetype of mourning and melancholia wherein "a present that has already exorcized all of its ghosts and believes itself to be without a past and without spectrality."⁶ In *Specters of Marx*, we are presented a shared purpose for all ghosts—because they are neither present nor absent, they remain as intrusions of incomprehensibility in our intellectual frameworks.⁷ My examination of ghosts presents some as having multiple purposes, and others whose purpose remains elusive and undefined. Ghosts rarely declare their purpose as explicitly as Hamlet's father; more frequently, the anxiety for the witness who has seen or heard the ghost comes from the inability to explain why it has appeared. Ghosting images resembles Derrida's hauntology in that when I describe my experiences with certain filmic images, I am calling forth the ghosts which are always already combined with other images from other experiences (especially as in the case with adaptations). Because this assemblage of ghosted images expands and animates my memories of persons, places, times, and events, the assemblage becomes an unwieldy intrusion in my memory of how I perceived those experiences.

⁶ Jameson, "Marx's Purloined Letter," *Ghostly Demarcations*, 58.

⁷ Davis, Colin. "Hauntology, spectres and phantoms," *French Studies*.

Some of the earliest criticisms of Derrida's hauntology came from the Marxists and the deconstructionists.⁸ How, some questioned, could Derrida justify hauntology as material quality when his own works break every *truth* (not to mention *belief*) into a multiplicity of ambiguities and contradictions? Marxists saw Derrida not as necessarily indifferent or intentionally ignorant of the realities of torture, abuse, war crimes, traumatic events, etc., but if we are to take deconstruction at its face, then the specter Derrida sees can never be believed in. And if the ghost of a war crime can't be believed in, we slip, as humans, backwards. In many of his late recorded interviews,⁹ Derrida speaks of various experiences which convincingly affirm his belief in ghosts. But as concerns haunting, "what is there" for Derrida not only must account for the social, historical, cultural, but what is there also accounts for the unseen, shaping force made material in our collective responses to it. I'm less concerned about "what is there" when I see or feel a ghost; instead, I want to understand how I create "what is there" in my experiences of images. All this to say, I agree with Derrida that hauntology is not an answer that provides a precise meaning, but instead it is a function of our constant and disturbed search for meaning. Therefore, my process starts from a hauntological search

⁸ An excellent collection of direct critical responses is *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, first published by Verso in 1999. The collection includes essays by Antonio Negri, Frederic Jameson, Terry Eagleton, et al., and concludes with an essay in response by Derrida.

⁹ *Derrida*. Directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, And *Bernard Steigler on Jacques Derrida, Hauntology, and "Ghost Dance."* Youtube.

for meaning, but it is the *ghosting of images* that will account for the ways our bodies react to those remembered images.

If the process by which an image is ghosted were precise, like a spell or incantation, I would try to devise an application that yielded a grand theory; but, image ghosting resists this type of precision. Because many of the terms I'm using in describing this process are inherently vague, speculative, or contradictory, *ghosting images* might seem nothing more than an incomprehensible metaphor, a model for describing imprecisely how we might hold memories of images, of people, places, and events.¹⁰ Underlying my claims about the conceptual metaphor of *ghosting images* is my belief that imprecision in language opens. Opens to *what* or *where*, or *to* or *for* whom? As I show in Chapter Two, the Open, where angels (and ghosts) exist, may only be accessible to us through metaphor and other imprecise images.

Just as the palimpsestic process generates a creative response, so, too, does the process of ghosting images generate creative and participatory responses. But ghosting adds more than just another layer. Whether we call them ghosts, specters, haints, revenants, spirits, whatever, images can haunt us. The images may be mediated and/or witnessed first-hand, they might be textual and/or filmic, fictional and/or historical, but when we remember them and an uncanny feeling overcomes us, it is the ghosted image

¹⁰ This is why I link the process of *ghosting images* to two physiologically perceived viewer responses—the uncanny sensation or the auratic reverberance. More to follow.

that we have recalled. Other ghosted images may charm us with close-ups or long takes, like a spell moving us in non-human ways through a world of our own imagining. The ghosted image differs from the palimpsest in that the former opens the image to multiple, opposing, and mysterious meanings. Ghostly imprecision is not a limiting factor; it is an expansive function.

Because I refer to 'images' repeatedly throughout the dissertation, I should first explain how I apply the term, as well as some of the limitations my usage may incur. Although I believe an individual can create and hold a perfectly unique and singular image their mind, and I believe that a singular image could allow a *mandalaic* or *mantric* affect, for my purposes I will instead focus on images that have been mediated by an artist, novelist, philosopher, poet, or filmmaker. I start then from the assumption that images exist, but for an image to exist independent from its creator, it has to be mediated. Poetry spoke off the cuff at dinner after two drinks has mediation, through language, through context, through form. And even in the sparse couplet, the image becomes, for the listener and the poet, a ghost residing in each. The ghosts of textual images, for example, can seem particularly animate for those readers who most actively complete the imagining of the image. We can experience the image multiple times and in various forms, and each new reading/viewing may add one or more layers to or take one or more layers from the collective that is our ghosted image. As we experience one image (for example, a character from a novel) and then another (that character

portrayed in the adaptation) the ghost image that you, the reader/viewer imagined upon reading, is reshaped visually by that which you've seen. So, in its mediation the image exists as first shaped by public contexts, some of which we reader/viewers may be unaware; but then, as reader/viewers experience the image, we each reshape it, each adding details the others cannot know, each refining the image to reflect most presciently our own personal and private inner contexts.

The ghosted image haunts us because mediation has a transformative power to make a material object into something subjectively immaterial. More specifically, mediated images can be of material objects, but also people, events, or physical space; they can be emblematic of ideas or concepts; they can be emotively effusive or restrained, traumatizing or inert. And to further complicate how we remember images, when we bring the image back to life, we may also be haunted by the contexts that shaped the image on our first viewing. Images are constantly becoming—transformed by the viewer's changing position to the public contexts, those systemic, political, ideological and historical *geists* exterior to the viewer, and the private contexts, those complex, mythological, and self-conscious interiorities giving shape and form to the image. We view or hear or feel the image, and it is made a ghost by our reception, appearing out of the frenzied vortex of our conscious and self-referencing memory, given *ghost-body* by the contexts in which the image was experienced.

Images and *mediation* together birth ghosted images for the viewer of a film, the reader of a text, the consumer of media. An image may have the potential for ghosting, but it is the viewers/readers/consumers who, consciously or not, decide which images will be ghosted. By looking to the neurophysiological affects produced by traumatic events¹¹ in victim and witness alike as a model for how we hold memories of images, in my consideration of mediated images I will draw parallels to the affects that the ghosting of traumatic filmic images¹² (or textual images, etc.) have on the viewer. A filmic image is more likely to haunt if, when first viewed, it produces an uncanny sensation. Although there is considerable difference between the haunting images of a traumatic event and ghosted images of an uncanny sensation experienced while watching a film, applying what is known about traumatic memories to the ghosts of filmic images of persons, space, and event may help explain the ghost's purpose. The ghosts of traumatic images are likely to have purposes. They can be there to remind us to never forget, to relive something fearful, or to bring back a lost love. Just as ghosts remain with survivors of trauma, one explanation for why the ghosts of certain filmic images tend to stay in our memories longer than 'normal' images may be because we haven't been able to find a reasonably acceptable purpose in their existence.

¹¹ An experience of an image without mediation.

¹² An experience of a mediated image.

Ghosts exist in contradictions (here/somewhere else), negations (alive/not alive), and oppositions (presence/absence). And though they may be borne in our imagination, and thereby immaterial, as memories these ghosts are alive in our bodies, materialized in our physical reactions. Sometimes, when the memory of the images or events are intense, the whole body feels possessed by ghosts. Other times, the ghost is a fleeting, visceral memory: an unexpected tightening of the chest or random twitch of leg — memory made flesh. We remember an image and we see a ghost. How fully we experience these ghosts likely depends on how we first witnessed the image. Do we know the person? Were we there when it happened? Was the event mediated? How has our relationship with the world around us changed?

A ghost may have a purpose, and a ghost may have an aura. I begin with the belief that an aura does not originate in the object, the text, or the image; the aura is always brought to a work by us, the viewers. In other words, while ghosting the image, the viewer may feel compelled to accept a meaning for the image that is beyond ordinary language. Ghosting images may also activate an auratic sensation when the viewer has previous experiences with the image. For example, the ghost of a character from a novel has an aura, and the same character on screen may have share that aura, or have a completely separate aura, or even no aura at all. In some ways it may not matter, except to the individual viewer, for she is the one who ultimately ascribes aura to ghosted images. Viewers bring ghosts with them, especially in adaptations, and each

viewer's ghost is a completely personal version of the textual character. It's hard not to compare, as one character-image erases the other; or when all the character-images meld together like in a lumpy mass of Hamlet's fathers.

In my system, an auratic sensation and an uncanny sensation can both be physical manifestations of a viewer's ghosting as well as sensations which elude explanation. The auratic and the uncanny are separate scales of sensation — the greater the intensity of the experience, the higher on the scale the sensation scores. However, the difference lies in the viewing experience. Whereas the uncanny sensation may be a symptom of an image's enchanting and affecting potential, the auratic sensation is the viewer's recognition of an aesthetic intensity present in the ghosted image. In other words, the uncanny evokes with the supernatural, the auratic with the sublime. I will spend more time in Chapter Two differentiating between the uncanny and the auratic, but for now I will simply assert that remembering ghosts may evoke emotional, psychic, and/or physical sensations. Determining which sensations are evoked may help us clarify why the ghost appears, because whether uncanny or auratic, the sensations are physical evidence of the ghost's purpose and liveliness.

Roughly hewn, my idea is this: when the viewer enters the theater, she enters with a soul full of perceptions, a mind full of concepts, and a body full of memories. Sometimes the viewer sees an image onscreen that produces an auratic sensation. This reaction can be physical, emotional, intellectual, etc., but it is a sensation in response to

the internal contexts she holds for the image. The aura is an internal, subjective feeling that an image is more than what is there. Other times, a viewer may feel as if she is alive in the filmic world, as if she could exert influence on what she sees. However, she is aware that she does not exist in that world; she is witnessing it as a ghost. Like the sympathetic nervous response registered on the vagal nerve in a traumatic event, an image can leave a trace that the witness experiences as an uncanny sensation when the image is seen again. Ghosted images may haunt us long after they appear onscreen; and when we remember them, the ghosts may appear to us glowing in the aura of the image, or the ghosts may awaken multiple uncanny responses, or they may do both.

1.2 The Ghost of Deleuze

I recognize that when trying to make sense of images, I'm haunted by images produced from my readings of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. I am haunted by certain Deleuzian images and concepts – the rhizome, the body-machine, the body without organs; those contradictory, mostly surreal, Deleuzian images that make sense (if only on an intuitive level) to me. And also, I'm haunted by him, his filmic-image, from the three DVD set – *Gilles Deleuze from A to Z with Claire Parnet* (2012). He is in his home office, smoking, dying of an impending suicide or accidental fall, talking with his former student, the journalist Claire Parnet. I am haunted by this image of Deleuze in deep conversation. It is clear his thoughts are layered with complexity and intrigue, but as he speaks the words crackle under the rasp; they come with apology and deference

between coughs and chuckles. His laugh sounds rough, yet kind and curious. She gives him a word, “Animal,” then another “Boire,” and then another “Culture.” It’s when she gets to “Enfance” that the old philosopher drops into a discourse that he claims to eschew — *memoir*. Though he isn’t against the form per se, he says very directly that it is the subject of his memoir — *his* life — that he found unappealing. He begins to argue that ‘who he is’ is completely separate from who he was and how he viewed life and all that was in it. But Parnet implores him, as only a student can, to elucidate, to explain more. And in that moment, I *ghost the image* — leaning in, entering the room to forgive him his struggling breath with the words to tell the story from his childhood of learning to think. Deleuze becomes haunted by his former image of himself. He tells of learning to think, and how a teacher, while on a walk near the ocean, encouraged him to be curious and creative because that’s where the real philosophy happens. And even now, when I remember that scene, I have multiple ghosts of Deleuze — the speaker telling the story of his youth and the child I imagined. The ghost image of Deleuze remains with me, living though the man is dead. So, I believe in ghosts. I also believe in post-human ghosts. The *mediated Deleuze* is a post-human ghost in that the image I have of the philosopher only exists in mediation. This ghost image is also constantly becoming — continually shaped and reshaped by external contexts which were not present when the human Deleuze was alive. His writing, his interviews, the Manuel DeLanda’s European Graduate School lectures, the youtube videos attempting to explain his work, the books and

articles in response to other critical books and articles—for me, Deleuze exists as a post-human ghost, a mediated image that exists only as shaped by my interior contexts. The ghosting of Deleuze is a material trace of the human and the post-human Deleuze living in and for me. Likewise, it is not only the people or characters in a film, but also the space in the diegetic world, and the events (fictional and historical), and the personal and cultural traumas that become ghosts for me. Their insubstantial existence leaves a material trace in me.

To further explain how this process might work, I am using a *hauntologic assemblage* of filmic images as a framework for considering the affectual responses that *ghosted images* produce. I apply the conceptual metaphors of *ghosts* and *ghosting* to filmic images in four ways: the ghost of character, the image that holds subjectivity; the ghosted images of an event; our ghosting the image of space, within and outside; and ghosting the image of trauma, witness to the personal and public. When the viewer leaves the theater, she carries with her, in her bodily memory (her conscious, her mind, spirit, imagination, whatever), ghosts of these and other filmic images. The assemblage I'm proposing is not a grand theory for divining meaning applicable to every image; it is a framework of inquiry into how we experience and remember images. Ultimately my questions cannot prove, but can affirm, our belief that the images that haunt us and the images that we haunt exist.

The bulk of the chapters will consist of reading one film in relation to one of four image types. There are other image types we could consider, but these four in particular haunt us and our relationships with others. Filmic characters, both fictional and biographical, may coexist and coincide with historical events or the personal events. And as we pass through the images of space or as witness to trauma, we may become aware of the sensation that we are there/not there in the world onscreen. The common experience with ghosts is that they appear to us for a reason, a purpose we may have to work out on our own, often in a space where in traumatic events occurred. As Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok explain, the “secret of the ghost is a riddle...to be explained. Spectrals must be restored to order of knowledge with the result of exorcising effect on the living” (qtd. in Cinquegrani).¹³ Traditionally, ghosts appear to act with one of five purposes: in order to motivate us to act, like Hamlet’s father; or they come to heal and reconcile, or to reconnect with the living who mourn their loss; they seek justice or revenge, especially if they are victims of violent acts or atrocities; they desire to remain in a place, haunting spaces and revealing themselves to interlopers; or they work to protect the living, as a guiding influences or guardian spirits. The attempt to unravel the paradox that Slavoj Žižek calls *the desire to keep the dead with us and get rid of them*¹⁴ may be a fool’s errand. But I believe ghosts can have a purpose grounded in the events

¹³ Cinquegrani, Maurizio. “Shadow of Shadows: The Undead in Bergman’s Cinema.” *Cinematic Ghosts*.

¹⁴ *Looking Awry*, 22.

leading to their states of being undead. And, for this reason, I believe we should try to understand and explain the philosophical implications of *ghosts*, and how their filmic presence can change who we are.

I will also assert that when viewed together, character, event, space, and trauma work like a constellation from which we try to divine meaning from their positions in relation to each other and in contrast to the dark sky. Although my concept of the image uses Deleuzian terms to define it, my concept of *image* differs from his most significantly in that I believe our subjective experience is unavoidable. Our efforts to view a character, event, space, or trauma from an objective perspective may not only be reductive of that which makes us most human, but also physically impossible, especially in light of what we are now learning about how the body responds neurologically and physically to trauma. Memories are physiological receptacles — gathering places for ghosts which haunt our subjective experience. We cannot simply ignore their persistent existence because we prefer to clearly distinguish who we are from who we once were. The constant *becoming* that Deleuze sees us as simply gets to that us we once had been.

1.3 Part I: Ghosts from History

A brief comment on why I find Walter Benjamin's work so compelling — History is filled with ghosts. When we think of historical figures, we call forth the ghosts we have created out of nothing more than our experiences with images read, seen, or heard

about them. Or while visiting a historical site, we may feel sensations that we believe are like psychic echoes returning from a collective past experience. As Avery Gordon describes it, haunting is the product of the social imagination, and, in terms we could use to describe our subjective experience of history, haunting occurs:

in the world of common reality. To be haunted is not a contest between animism and a discrediting reality test, nor a contest between the unconscious and conscious faculties. It is an enchanted encounter in a disenchanted world between familiarity and strangeness.¹⁵

I would argue further that these “enchanted encounters” are not limited to a subject’s interaction with the ghosts of people, but encounters can also occur between the subject and place, or time, or even extreme situation. We tend to think of ghosts as resembling us, as having our physicality. But we may see them also as disembodied bodies — humanlike characters with narratives but no medium to speak for them. Because film is especially efficient in embodying/disembodying images, it is the medium best suited for interacting with the ghosts of history. The Polish poet Czesław Miłosz proposed that we are all witnesses to history, and therefore, we have a moral imperative to speak for and with these ghosts.¹⁶ The first two chapters attempt to demonstrate how a film that presents historical characters and events can do these two things — give voice to the

¹⁵ *Ghostly Matters*, 54-55 (italics in original).

¹⁶ *The Witness of Poetry*.

ghosts of those who may suffer the events of history and allow us presence as witness to the events. We will always be in that unique historical position of *Jetztzeit*—the *now before revolution*. If history can only spring forward in revolution when released by the artist's created image, then how else can the image be ghosted but with an awareness of our shared national, political, or cultural history.

1.3.1 *Chapter One: Ghosting Characters: Mediation in The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*

Although it's easy to understand why we might think the characters onscreen are alive, the dilemma becomes more complex when we consider why these characters are alive/not alive. When we view the character image as having presence, immediacy, agency, we may convince ourselves that the image is 'alive,' 'having life'; or we might think the characters we see in film are always already nonliving things; or we might see the characters as *becoming* alive (and as the character is constantly *becoming*, a trace of its former non-existence is left in the viewer's memory). So, by starting with an extended definition of the image of character, the *character* as it appears onscreen, I hope to pre-emptively settle some questions about subjectivity, and speculate on how characters are ghosted through the mediation of their image.

A common complaint among movie-goers after watching an adaptation is that the book was better than the film. This complaint is understandable when we compare the character we imagined while reading against the character we view onscreen. Even

though our subjective experience of the written text creates images and characters as we read, film embodies and substantiates these character-images more fully with actors.

With a written text, we participate in creating the character-image, completing the metaphor, so to speak, by pulling ghosts out of the infinite interior that creativity enables. However, with a film this infinite source of creativity is partially stifled. In other words, written characters allow the reader to imagine them metaphorically, whereas in a film the images function more like simile or synecdoche.¹⁷ As a simile, the image-character you see is always-only-similar-to, they are only *like* the image you created; or as synecdoche, the onscreen image always-stands-as-a-part-of-an-impossibly-large-number-of-possibly-imagined images. What we are asked to do while watching a movie is to take an image (a character, an embodiment, an animal, a landscape, etc.) and have that image stand in for all those *ghosted images* we have already created, as well as for all the potential images that we have not yet created.

In my reading of *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (*The Assassination*), I will begin with the ghost of Jesse James (Brad Pitt), an image mediated by contemporaneous dime-novel characterizations, which haunts Bob Ford (Casey Affleck). In his lifetime, Jesse James was considered the most celebrated person in the U.S., despite the fact that the image most people held of him was fabricated. His image

¹⁷ Perhaps, once we note the difference in our relationship to the image — between reader/metaphor and between viewer/synecdoche — we can change the way that we remember, and possibly change how we view the ghosts that haunt us.

appeared in multiple forms of media, from newspaper accounts to popular songs, from dime-novel to stage play. Both the novel and the filmic adaptation of *The Assassination* encourage readers/viewers to consider how the multiple versions of Jesse and Bob hold sway over the images we may already know. Just as the image that Bob holds of Jesse changes after he witnesses the reality of the pathological, murderous Jesse James, so, too, may we find our image of Jesse James is not reliable. The image of Jesse James that Pitt embodies is one with multiple subjectivities, formed out of the juxtaposition of a reliable third-person narration against the manic homicidal threat underlying Jesse's every move. Because the film *The Assassination* imbues each character image with selfhood in multiple ways, it is particularly useful in exemplifying how we ghost character images.

Adapted from the historical novel by Ron Hanson, the third-person, voice-over narration recalls the dime-novel descriptions which initially ghosted the image of Jesse for Bob. Telling the story through a disembodied voice-over narrator is just one of the many stylistic choices that director Andrew Dominik makes to reinforce our sense of haunting: he also uses shallow-focused images and sepia-toned scenes to imply a remembered past; he de-materializes Jesse and Bob by framing them behind opaque glass, or by reflecting their bodies in pictures or windows at night; and he makes us witness to the acts of violence which Jesse recounts in a third-person tale. Although the focus of this chapter will be on the modes of ascribing a subjective selfhood to Jesse

(though the hermeneutic narrative) and Bob (through the embodied gestural performance), I hope to show how the mediation of images can add multiple, if not paradoxical, layers of ghosted images.

The first ghost is borne from the images Bob has culled from the dime-novels glorifying the crimes of Jesse and Frank James and their gang. As we are told in the voice-overs, as evidenced by his collection of fan-boy memorabilia, and as we witness in Affleck's performance, Bob idolizes Jesse. But Bob is also traumatized by the reality of James's murderous tendencies. I argue that Affleck is able to embody the temperament and physical accents of a character who decides, after measuring the real Jesse against the mediated ghost of his hero, that the real Jesse must die. In addition, the explicit expressions of Jesse's suicidal thoughts and tendencies leaves the viewer with the impression that Bob understands Jesse's intention and can thereby justify the murder.

The final half hour of the film is spent with Bob, the surviving witness to the eponymous event that bolstered Jesse's celebrity and that brought Bob infamy. Haunted by the ghost conjured publicly in newspaper accounts, popular songs, and even the Fords' own staged re-creations, Bob's final years demonstrate his demise as a symptom of the mediated images. For us viewers, the image of Bob is ghosted not only in the narrative of his remaining years, but more importantly by Affleck's physical, gestural embodiment. We watch as the *Affleck-embodied-Bob* wrestles with the multiple ghosts of Jesse, and witnessing this struggle may give new context to our own ghosts. Despite the

easy parallels we may find between the celebrated images of Brad Pitt in our time and Jesse James in his, for many viewers it is Casey Affleck's embodiment of Bob Ford who has the strongest ghostly presence. *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* provides two clearly differentiated examples of how a viewer may assign subjectivity/selfhood to characters.

1.3.2 Chapter Two: Angels of the Event: Palimpsests of Grief and Desire

In Chapter Two, I discuss intertextual ghosting of the image of the angel. My case study will explore issues of influence, translation, and the creative palimpsest in three diverse texts—Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, Benjamin's "Ninth Thesis of History," and Wender's *Wings of Desire*. The shared visions between this poet, this philosopher, and this filmmaker demonstrate Thomas Leitch's description of adaptation as "Janus-faced" view that looks simultaneously backward and forward. I also agree with Linda Hutcheon's summary description of the adaptation as a palimpsest:

- An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works
- A creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging
- An extended intertextual engagement with an adapted work

Therefore, an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing.¹⁸

¹⁸ *A Theory of Adaptation*, 8-9.

So, while it may be true that we as viewers participate in the creation of adapted images in response to our previously held interpretations, I believe *ghosting images* is a more refined description of the palimpsestic process. My assertion is that what is created in this “creative and interpretive act” is a ghosted image. Whereas the palimpsest limits our subjective, phenomenological, emotional experiences to the uppermost layer, *ghosting images* allows us to participate in the creative process only because we also know of and recognize those underlying images erased and reimagined. If we did not know of the earlier images, we may simply mistake the trace left behind as part of the image in the fore. Just as ghosts don’t necessarily know the witness to whom it appears, filmic adaptations of character, events, and place can appear to us from seemingly out of nowhere. Sometimes while watching a film, the image onscreen may seem to produce an auratic sensation—a physically perceptible response to an image, which in this case calls a visceral memory back to life. The aura here, to mix my metaphors, emerges when the ghosted image rises to the top.

In *Wings of Desire*, the images of angels are ghosted when conjoined with our imagined ghost images of Rilke’s *schreckliche Engel*, with Klee’s *Novo Angelus*, and Benjamin’s angel of history. When I see Daniel (Bruno Ganz), for example, he becomes the angels of the *Duino Elegies*, ghostly beings embodying grief and desire. He also becomes the angel of history, pushed forward in time by one man-made disaster after another. Remembering Rilke’s angels in the context of *Wings of Desire* imbues my

aesthetic response with greater potential; my ghosted image of angels carries with it an aura that I apply to the image of Daniel. By applying this process to a specific image, joining together the *schreckliche Engel* with a consumptive 'desire for contact with another' with the image of 'Daniel reaching for Marion' for example, our response evokes a more complex set of sensations.

Ghosts of the event World War II appear directly in *Wings of Desire* in the images of the citizens of Berlin rummaging through the ruins in black-and-white newsreel clips or in official Nazi party footage; they are images of the soldiers and victims as portrayed by modern actors in the film within the film. Wenders layers the ghosted images thickly, and at times he lets us see Berlin as the angels do, with time out of joint—the ghostly images from Berlin '41 projected on the half-demolished buildings in Berlin '87. History is a ghost in *Wings*, and Berlin is haunted by angels. Our perspective moves between human and angel, or, as Benjamin might describe these worlds, between the creaturely and open. This movement between the world known to us as humans and another, purely imaginable other world beyond is a creative aspect ghosting the image may allow. Here the viewer is ghosting images in the film—shifting perspectives from an inhabitant of one world to an inhabitant of the other in single scene. A scene may begin in black-and-white. We stand next to an angel who presses his head against the wall and watches the dancers fill the dancefloor. Then, we cut to full color, standing by the acrobat in a red sweater dancing among the bright lights to

Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. This visual perspectival movement between the “creaturely” and the “open” demonstrates one of the limits of the palimpsest.¹⁹ These shifts in perspective are only possible in filmic mediation; no matter how proficient Rilke or Benjamin were in creating visual-textual images, readers cannot experience the different visual sensations that black-and-white images and color images produce with the same immediacy.

The themes of three works are also connected by the historical *Events* to which the artists are responding. Although the themes of alienation, grief, and desire, as well as the angels and circus performers archetypes, go through a palimpsestic process, it would be wrong to say each artist is writing about only one Event. Benjamin responds to World War II, but his work can also be read as responding to Berlin in 1987 (or 2019). And we would not consider World War II as a palimpsest for World War I. However, when Peter Falk arrives in Berlin to film a movie set in 1941, at the height of Nazi power, the film within the film retains a trace of the real events. The set of the film is populated by actors and actresses made to appear as victims and soldiers—the uniforms and costumes carrying the weight of the Event. Peter sketches the “extras” with a pencil and pad in between takes, and beside him Daniel listens as Peter’s inner voice describes “extra people.” The onscreen Event has passed, and the actors are

¹⁹ The palimpsestic process as a way of explaining adaptations, it seems to me, may work better when the layered works are of the same medium.

onscreen versions of ghosts.²⁰ Throughout the chapter I will return to the ghosting of the event-image, especially as we see the juxtaposition of historical Event to the personal event.

1.4 Part II: Ghosts in the Afterlife

Another useful way for seeing aspects of haunting and ghosts in film is through an analysis of two allegories for the afterlife. In my discussions of the two films, *The Wall* in Chapter Three and *Children of Men* in Chapter Four, my focus will shift from how the image is remembered to how we can seemingly live among the onscreen images. The afterlife is an appropriate allegory for ghosting images as it allows the reader/viewer the dual perspective of contrary space. In the allegory, we are nonexistent in the diegetic world, yet we seem to haunt those who are in it. By applying *ghosting images* from this perspective—a process by which the viewer experiences mediated images of people, events, space, or trauma from the point of view of first-hand witness—I hope to show how current research on traumatic memories can provide a useful framework for understanding how we may remember some mediated images. Furthermore, if our response to the allegory, our response to the image of space and event, our belief in ghosts, comes after the experience, then the afterlife is a good position from which we can reflect on how our actions among the living shape who we

²⁰ I strongly believe history has compelled us to a moral obligation—as a species, to survive an Event like World War II we must keep within us the living ghosts of those who lived through it.

become. Stories of the end times, natural or human generated cataclysms, dystopian landscapes, are common thematic and symbolic tropes that filmmakers can use to sway us from a catastrophic future event we should hope to avoid.

Although I address issues of adaptation in my discussion of *Wings of Desire*, I will spend a portion of the third chapter discussing how the text (the novel *Die Wand*) haunts the film (*The Wall*), because for both versions, images of textuality are purposefully subjective. The bulk of my discussion in this chapter, however, will focus on the image of space. In the final chapter on *Children of Men*, my focus will be most intensely on the affect that mediated trauma may have on the viewer. Because of Cuarón's use of innovative camera-work—specifically long takes and the ghostly POV—this film provides many opportunities to create viewing experience where we are image ghosting.

1.4.1 Chapter Three: Ghosting Spatial-Images: Entering the Filmic Space of The Wall

Space has natural linkage between the metaphors of haunting and ghost. A space occupied by a ghost is haunted. When we watch a movie, we may enter into the filmic space as a participating ghost; we experience filmic space as if being moved from *the now of where we are* into *the now of another space*. In addition, if we allow inward movement as the movement from where we are to another space, and outward movement as from another space to where we are, we begin to break through the

liminal space that the screen implies. The films discussed all create spatial barriers, both visible and invisible, through which the characters appear unable to cross; therefore, movement within the space will become a crucial point of further review. When a character moves inward, she may move either deeper into the onscreen space or out of frame completely; moving outward for the character-image is a movement in which the character has no agency. For a character to move outward, it is the viewer's subjective experience that activates the agency necessary for the image to cross over. As I discuss in Chapter One, ghosting a character may involve moving the image from the public exhibition to private embodiment for the viewer; in Chapter Three, I will consider the spaces into and out of which the ghosting of character-images and viewers move. Viewers enable character-images to move outward through ghosting, taking the ghost away from the screen and out of the theater. And later, at dinner they may pull the ghost out, revive it to join in their conversation, allow it to be shaped and reshaped communally. They may take it home, and tuck it away in their memories where it stays until re-awoken. In this way, filmic character-images cross the liminal that 'screen' implies. But, we also must remember that even though the outward movement of a character is possible through the subjective experience of the viewer, moving inward for the viewer is a form of experiential agency that only he or she can measure or control. The movement of the viewer inward, breaching the liminal space separating the internal and external experiences, can happen quite easily.

One of the most striking elements in *The Wall* is director Julian Roman Pölsler's foregrounding of liminal space, which allows viewers to clearly distinguish between internal movements and external movements. Although the obvious physical limitations that separate viewers from the diegetic world are currently unbreachable, Pölsler positions the viewer in multiple and sometimes simultaneous layers of space and time. We are allowed to move between two afterlives—one that is within the wall and the other outside of the wall. We occupy the same space as the woman, but time is circular and repetitive. We watch her watching the ghost of a younger version of herself walking down past paths, moving again always back to a specific moment in a specific place. Because our positions within the world onscreen shift so frequently, we can choose to see our position in the 'real world' as just another one in the layered experience. Generally, we decide, consciously or not, how far inward we can allow ourselves to go. But, it is through the visual limitations of space in *The Wall* that we are reminded that even as active subjective viewers, our existence among filmic images must always be neither fully here/not here. We are ghosting the image when we experience the filmic space as one where our presence is both impossible yet affirmed.

Based on German author Marlen Haushofer's 1968 novel, *Die Wand*, the film adaptation is the story of a lone woman enclosed by an unexplained transparent wall encircling several miles high in the Alps. The novel and film are narrated through the woman's journal entries as she learns to survive in a world alone with her animal

companions—the only other living creatures. Although she cannot comprehend what life outside the wall is, she can see others on the outside apparently caught in a constant moment of now. Shortly after her first encounter with the wall, for example, she sees an old couple in the cabin down the road frozen in time; the man’s back permanently bent, his hands stuck cupping running water from a well pump. Furthermore, because she has started the journal after two years inside the wall, we can assume our “reading” of the journal is only possible after her death. We see her at times younger and soft from city life, then hardened by the years of hard work, and then young again. Her dog Lynx is her constant companion, and his fate becomes the turning point around which she starts writing.

Another aspect of this adaptation that I will discuss involves Marlen Haushofer and the actress who portrays the woman, Martina Gedeck. Haushofer was a young rising literary star in Germany—a strong feminist voice who died of cancer shortly after the novel was published. Pölsler’s adaptation resurrected attention for the novel and revived international academic interest in Haushofer’s work. Although the novel is a haunting fairy-tale with serious philosophical and political overtones, the main thematic questions about how one lives and dies seem to echo Haushofer’s personal beliefs. Without delving too deeply into performance, I believe it will be helpful to discuss Gedeck’s embodiment of *The Woman* because the physical transformation we

see her undergo during the fourteen-month process of filming acts as a narrative device giving voice and existence to the ghost of the woman earlier in the afterlife.

The Wall is an excellent film for discussing filmic space and habitation of filmic space because it provides several examples of how space is haunted, is haunting, and can be haunted by viewers. As the first film in the Afterlife section, I hope to demonstrate how Gedeck's embodiment of the woman not only creates multiple ghosts of herself that haunt her, but our position as witness to the multiple embodiments makes us a ghost to 'actual' woman. Furthermore, Pölsler's vision of space produces uncanny affects with simple special effects. The effects are not innovative, but the philosophical implications provoked in the spatial images ask us to consider where we are located within this space. A question posed in both the novel and the film concerns our place as readers/viewers: we inside the wall, alive/dead, or outside the wall, alive/dead? Through a close reading of *The Wall*, I want to show how the viewer may experience ghosting of spatial images through the Pölsler's mise-en-scene, in the embodied textual narrative, in the aging of the Woman, and the women's reactions to our haunting presence.

1.4.2 Chapter Four: Witness to trauma, we are ghosts in Children of Men

The last chapter will examine the dystopian world of Alfonso Cuarón's adaptation of *Children of Men* as an allegory of the afterlife. The world, in Cuarón's vision, is haunted by mourning and trauma. Humankind faces a literal existential crisis,

and for many *living* is a constant reminder that they are the last generation. They are traumatized by their very existence. Because viewers move through the world in *Children of Men* as a witness to multiple traumas, I want to explore how our ghosting presence among those traumatic images can give purpose to our viewing experience. But first, for understanding how we might remember mediated images of trauma, I look at how the body responds to a traumatic experience for clues.

Perhaps because we may hold strong clinical, familial, or even personal associations with trauma, *traumatic-images* are loaded with greater ordinance than other image types. Images of trauma haunt us with greater frequency and force. According to the DSM-V²¹ the clinical definition of trauma excludes the watching of ‘non-work related’ media as a possible cause or event. However, after considering the work of leading neuroscientists specializing in trauma Steven Porges and Bessel van der Kolk, as well as current research on mediated trauma by Amit Pinchevski and others,²² I argue that filmic images, even fictional ones, can be potentially traumatic. Pinchveski contends that trauma is *a priori* visually mediated, and that “trauma, being a clash

²¹ One point that Pinchveski makes in “Screen Trauma: Visual Media and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder” about the DSM is especially useful. He writes:

The DSM is obviously much more than a diagnostic manual. As Ian [Hacking \(2013\)](#) notes, the primary readers of the DSM are not mental health professionals but bureaucrats of various governmental and corporate branches, who rely on its categories to process mental health claims. As a key tool in legislation, insurance, and policy, the DSM has been in the fray of a number of public campaigns that sought recognition for yet unacknowledged conditions. PTSD is an exemplary case in this regard. (56)

²² Others include Bill Shaffer (2001), Wilma Bucci (2008), and Ella L. James (2016).

between outside and inside, can be viewed as the result of failed mediation, a pathology of intermediacy. [...] Trauma is what happens when the medium does not hold.”²³

Literary trauma theorist Cathy Carruth describes the experience of survivors of PTSD telling their stories as a paradox—the more terrifying the event, the greater its inexpressibility. Even when they know that sharing their story can lead to healing, many survivors simply cannot. The traumatic events are suppressed, intentionally unremembered, because they are simply too terrifying.

However, van der Kolk’s work may confound these earlier assumptions. The psychological impact of trauma on a subject, which is often coupled with physical injury—simultaneous traumas marking an event—is ‘remembered’ by the body as the slowing of time. Van der Kolk demonstrates how the body reacts when a trauma occurs by continuing to secrete more adrenaline, which enables one to retain memory in more precise detail, until, “confronted with horror—especially the horror of ‘inescapable shock’—this system becomes overwhelmed and breaks down.”²⁴ Time doesn’t slow, but our adrenaline-cranked sensory receptors are open so wide, our perception of time expands with the sudden flood of detailed images, distinct sounds, particular smells, etc. Mediated filmic images are not usually accompanied by physical trauma, but the images can mimic the speed and detail of a traumatic event and they can evoke

²³ Pinchevski, “Screen Trauma,” 54.

²⁴ *The Body Keeps the Score*, 176.

uncanny sensations. A mediated image may not cause trauma; but, if the image induces a mimicking of our physiological response to trauma (slow motion, close-up, color saturation, etc.) and the image evokes feelings that elude explanation, we are, again, ghosting the image of trauma.

In considering image ghosting in relation to trauma, I turn to treatment methods for PTSD patients as an analog for how ghosting images may help mitigate the physical distress that the image evokes. Narrative based therapies coupled with visual stimulation (like, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing — EMDR) prompt patients to unravel the story of their trauma and to engage with the ghosts that haunt those memories.²⁵ Since image ghosting considers the phenomenological affect an image has on our bodies, it may be an effective method for unraveling the story from a distance we deem safe. Although the DSM-V explicitly excludes most mediated images as a source of trauma, I will draw parallels between how a witness remembers a trauma and how a viewer experiences a trauma-image. *Children of Men* is the best example I can find of ghosting the trauma-image because every shot is from a ghost's perspective, and almost every scene has a traumatic event. Like a ghost floating through the world as it nears its end, we follow, we guide, we move along in real time with Theo (Clive Owens) and others. We are witness to the bombing of a coffee shop, to the public abuse of

²⁵ The ghosts and haunted memories of PTSD patients are dangerously obtrusive, and I believe that we all have a moral obligation to relieve the pain and fear those memories induce.

refugees, to the kidnapping of Theo, and more. Physically, we are safe from the violence onscreen, but still we feel pulled inward. Cuarón's camera moves us through a multi-sensory experience where we may respond to Theo, then Julian, then Jasper, then Kee. It is through his camera that we appear as a ghost to them.

Children of Men is set in a future dystopian Britain, and the world has become a place where children are no longer born. The film shows us a world after life has ceased to make more. The main character Theo is haunted by the child he and Julian (Julianne Moore) lost to "the bug." He moves as if dead to most others, until a near fatal explosion followed by renewed contact with Julian motivates him to live again, to become alive again. Cuarón's long takes and his innovative shooting and editing techniques create images of trauma occurring in a space we viewers seem to inhabit and move through. We haunt Theo as he moves through overpopulated urban landscapes, as he finds respite in Jasper's farmhouse, or in an abandoned schoolroom as he listens to Miriam's story of the beginning of the end of life. We move with Theo freely past imprisoned refugees and sit next to him in a tightly enclosed interior during moments of terrorist attacks. We are not traumatized as witness to a single act of violence, but Cuarón's camera forces us to confront the slow accumulative power of violence and absence.

1.5 'Haunted by' and 'Haunting'

Filmic images are haunting and filmic images can be haunted. Watching a film, we can be active participants in a world separate from us and our space. The illusionary effects of movement through filmic space that a director's camera enables, for one thing, brings us into that world, though never fully. In this dissertation I am proposing *ghosting images* as a way for us to reflect on and to talk about our experiences with images onscreen. My aims are to explain why we may remember some characters and events, and to consider how we might bring our world into theirs. As a conceptual metaphor I expect that *ghosting images* can potentially do many things at once. But, herein I will apply it mainly in two ways: first, *the ghosts of filmic images appear for us in our uncanny or auratic memories of characters, events, spaces, or traumas*; and second, *we haunt filmic images, illusioned by a system of technics into believing that we have presence in the same space, events, and traumas as the characters onscreen*.

Although I admit, the vagueness of *ghosting images* is potentially overwhelming,²⁶ I do believe it is a productive way to remember what an image can mean, and a visceral way to feel something very particular though unnamable. Although I prefer to think of my imagined system of images and feelings and memories and experiences as a rhizomatically expanding space opening to the unknown of unknowns, where meaning

²⁶ Perhaps this apprehension stems more from writing about *the subjective experience with images* at a time when our nation seems overwhelmed by a perpetual vagueness that the lack of truth in images, words, narratives, etc., compels.

has truth or something more than we can know, it's all just as likely a hamster cage of cards. In the chapters that follow I will try to constrain the concepts of ghosting the images in films to metaphors of 'haunted' and haunting'; however, I may at times enjoy different lines of flight that vagueness invites. I want ghosting to remain vague so that it can be applied widely to the ways almost anyone thinks or feels about their experiences and memories of film. The more vague, the more easily adapted and widely applied, the more it may potentially add to the conversations on spectrality and trauma. So, ultimately my hope may rest in the vagueness of ghosts.

2 CHAPTER ONE: GHOSTING CHARACTERS: THE ASSASSINATION OF JESSE JAMES BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD

A ghost, we can assume, generally takes a human-like form. We may be haunted by the ghosts of animals, especially beloved pets, but other than that when most of us think of ghosts we think of them as having once been human. The image that haunts me when I think of my grandfather, for example, is of an old man, roughened-up by years of hard work. Yet, in this conjuring, the imagined image I have for him is never static; it is always becoming something else. The image I have is a ghost resurrected in my imagination and alive in the sense that it is constantly adapting in response to the cluster of myths, memories, and emotions that I hold for the image. My grandfather is a

ghost to me; and to remember him now is to imagine a man who could have never existed.

When we consider the human images we see in film, actors portraying characters who may or may not have existed, we may wonder, can filmic characters haunt us? And if so, how are we haunted by them? And Why? Because the ghosts of filmic characters have such potentially strong haunting affects on viewers, I will begin my discussion of ghosting images with character. I argue that when viewers remember a filmic character, they may be haunted by the perception that an onscreen character is capable of subjective actions, emotions, or agency. In other words, often those character (both fictional and nonfictional) who haunt us are ones we have allowed ourselves to see as alive, even if only in the context of a novel or film. As we read a novel, a short story, or a historical account, or when we watch a film, we can join in the mimetic world of the fiction. We willingly accept that the events portrayed are happening and the people inhabiting this world have human capabilities much like our own. However, unlike mimesis, in which the events and characters present imitations of actions, emotions, responses, and so on, ghosting the character image takes into account our complicity in the conjuring of the ghost. We create the ghost out of our imagined images of the filmic character — we have ghosted the image. To better explain ghosting a character image, I must first describe the process which may account for the immediate and the prolonged phenomenological responses an image elicits in a viewer. For my

purposes, an image from a text, or song, or film may produce a visceral affect in the reader/listener/viewer through *mediation*.

2.1 Mediating filmic characters

Mediation posits an accumulative, affectual, and comprehensive understanding of reality and existence between an audience and the character appearing in a story or on the screen. Furthermore, mediation merges our own conscious perceptions of self-identity with the selfhood (the subjectivity) of the character portrayed in the medium. In other words, instead of identifying with characters from film, mediation allows us to create them in our own image—not as reflections of ourselves, but as the ghosts whom we believe we saw.

In this chapter, I will discuss two forms of character mediation—a narrative hermeneutic and an experiential performance—for the historical figures Jesse James and Robert Ford. I then propose it is from these mediated images that the ghosts, who may haunt us, are born. By explaining how we can ascribe a “perceived subjective experience” to characters through the mediation of images, I hope to demonstrate how we may bring the ghosts of filmic characters to life, and how they may haunt us afterwards. In order to demonstrate how the narrative hermeneutic and experiential performance work in film, I will use close readings of scenes from Andrew Dominik’s 2007 film adaptation of Ron Hansen’s 1983 historical novel, *The Assassination of Jesse*

*James by the Coward Robert Ford.*²⁷ The novel and the film each present the two main characters as the accumulation of stories, including both the historically accurate and dramatically fictionalized, that surround James and Ford. The film also, however, exemplifies how a viewer may ghost the images, as well as how the ghost may change—as first imagined from the stories and tales of the two historical men, and then re-imagined in the performances of the two lead actors, Brad Pitt and Casey Affleck. For viewers of this film, Pitt’s and Affleck’s embodiments of James and Ford may give physical form to the character images; but when a viewer ascribes selfhood or subjectivity to these filmic character images and then enjoins those images with others remembered from different sources, the viewer is *ghosting the character-image*.

The hermeneutic circle may give these characters agency within the collective narrative, but the story we perceive is created and adapted in our reception. Wolfgang Iser describes the hermeneutic circle as a process in which the reader fills in the gaps and blanks left as function of language. In his *How to do Theory*, Iser describes how the gaps and blanks function:

Stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text. There is, however, another place in textual system where text and reader converge, and that is marked various types of negation. Blanks and negation both control the process of meaning assembly in their own different ways. The

²⁷ Abbreviated as *The Assassination* when referencing the film.

blanks [...] outline the author's view through the perspective of the narrative, the characters, the plot, and the fictitious reader inscribed in the text. [...] The various types of negation invoke familiar and determinate elements of knowledge only to cancel them out. What is canceled, however, remains in view, and thus brings about modifications in the readers attitudes to what is familiar or determinate.²⁸

When we watch a movie and the gaps and blanks of a character image appear to us, we may not be looking to identify with the characters, but to co-create them, to fill the gaps and thereby glean meaning from them. It is in this way the characters seem alive.

Identifying with a character doesn't always sufficiently describe what happens when we see a character onscreen and then remember him or her later. Although we may perceive the experience as identification, it is more akin to a movement towards our subjective experience—the stories pulling us towards a compilation of aspects about the character which in some way haunts us. We may imagine uncanny resemblances between how we remember and how we want to remember the character's story, but it is our subjective viewing experience around which the meaning of the character's narrative pivots.

The ghosts in *The Assassination* are multiple and layered. Bob is haunted by the ghost of 'the outlaw Jesse James,' which he has created from dime novel narratives that

²⁸ *How to do Theory*, 64-65.

he has read repeatedly; and he is haunted by his memory of Jesse juxtaposed against his brother's performance in the staged dramatizations of the assassination scene. Jesse himself is also haunted by the ghost of 'the outlaw Jesse James' brought to life in newspaper accounts and dime novels. Viewers may be haunted by the ghost-images from previously read stories or from the other previously viewed film versions of Jesse and Bob. Or, having read Hansen's novel, we may be haunted by the ghosts of character-images from the source for the adaptation. Our responses — physical, emotional, psychological, visceral, etc. — to the mediated images of Jesse and Bob when we watch *The Assassination* may be scant evidence that ghost-images exist, but that is why *ghosting* may more accurately describe how we remember filmic images.

Watching a film is like how Iser may read a text in that for the viewer the participatory act creates, "another place in textual[/filmic] system where text[/film] and reader[/viewer] converge." When we watch a film, we fill in the blanks or affirm the negations (especially of a subjective experience), and thus we are engaged in the creative processes by which we (reader/viewers) can control the assemblage of meaning ascribed to an image. There may be multiple applications of *ghosting*, each with its own distinct function or purpose, but watching (or viewing) a film opens a place where the ghost a filmic image can appear for a viewer. We could be haunted by Brad Pitt's embodiment of Jesse James or Casey Affleck's Bob Ford, or we could remember ghosts of 'the outlaw Jesse James' from other mediated images, but when we watch a film, our

ghosts co-mingle and appear as the new form of the image, co-created from our past experiences in our present.

Hansen's novel takes the voice and style of a dime novel, even occasionally quoting lines directly from those late-nineteenth century texts. However, both the novel and film present a more ostensibly authentic account than those contemporaneous stories of the historical man. Hansen's narrative reinforces what we know of Jesse James, his historical and cultural relevance, in a voice-over that credibly attempts to disentangle the legendary stories from the historical events. Instead of portraying the exploits heroically as in the contemporaneous accounts of Jesse James, Hansen creates a character who is troubled potentially by a personality disorder, a man who can act impetuously with violence as well as exhibit moments of perpetrator guilt; a man whose suicidal tendencies might indicate a desire for and complicity in his own demise. Again, this reading of Jesse attempts to explain his actions in terms and descriptions that today's viewer would understand. So, even though we may know the stories, and remember the ghosts of images from other films, television shows, etc., when we layer our ghost onto Pitt's performance, a new ghost emerges. We may always be creating new ghosts, as the contextual situations of the image changes. In our viewing of *The Assassination* the ghost of Jesse we may create is one whose subjectivity is shaped by our modern psychological interpretation of a man whose actions seem otherwise inexplicable.

Hanson's novel and Dominik's film tells Robert Ford's story from the time he meets Jesse until his own murder. In the aftermath of the assassination, Ford's story is of a man haunted by at least three ghosts: the ghost of his hero, his friend, and his victim. However, where the novel presents both Jesse's and Bob's narrative objectively in an empathetic light, *The Assassination* is able to create two filmic characters with specifically different subjectivities. I assert that this film is especially useful for noting how we create ghost-images through the narrative hermeneutic of Jesse James and through the experiential performance in which Bob Ford is embodied. In other words, in *The Assassination*, Jesse James and Robert Ford are given subjectivity in two distinct ways—Jesse through the newspaper accounts, the myths and legends, and other popular cultural images, and Bob through Affleck's performative gestures and an experiential dimension.²⁹

When we imagine that a character has subjectivity in their diegetic world, we imagine that character is alive. Whether as readers of books, listeners of tales and songs, or spectators and viewers, by imagining either fictional or non-fictional characters as capable of doing those things we do—making decisions, expressing emotion, responding to a world of others—we are creating a selfhood which, from our

²⁹ "Experiential dimension of self" is how Dan Zahavi explains *ipseity*, a term he connects to Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Michel Henry. The experiential differences of Edmund Husserl further explain how we can give fictional characters subjectivity as they express the "givenness" of "what it is like."

perspective, may feel more real to us than the *self* of some people we know. By exploring how filmic character images appear to have subjectivity because they have stories told about them and because they are embodied in the gestures of actors, I hope to demonstrate how characters may appear to us as alive through mediation, and then remembered by us as ghosts of character-images. *Ghosting the character image*, as exemplified in textual and filmic images of Jesse James and Robert Ford, is a process of co-creation whereby our previously imagined ghosts of Jesse and Bob are comingled with the present experience, and then distilled into a new form of that same image. The new image is conjured before us in our present experience only when combined with our past ghosts. The ghosts that live within us are always becoming new things.

2.2 The hermeneutic narrative

2.2.1 'The outlaw Jesse James'

We may ascribe subjectivity to onscreen characters through the stories we we bring to the filmic experience, through the narrative events that play out in the diegetic, through the stories they tell about themselves and the stories others tell about them. The earliest stories we have of Jesse James (and his gang) from newspaper accounts and dime novels not only created the ghost image of a man with contemporaneous influence, but the stories have also become like origin myths haunting the many subsequent mediated images of Jesse James.

At the time of Jesse James's death, his name was the most recognized in the United States. Few of the dime novels that brought Jesse celebrity and infamy during his life remain, but if we can take R.T. Bradley's *Bradley's Lives of Frank and Jesse James*, or J.W. Buel's *The Border Outlaws. An Authentic Thrilling...*, or J.A. Dacus's *Life and Adventures of Frank and Jesse James the Noted Outlaws* as typical of that period, then we can understand how a young man like Bob Ford might idolize Jesse. In these exaggerated tales and fictionalized adventures, Jesse James is praised for his intelligence and his innate leadership qualities; he's portrayed as a kind-hearted Robin Hood. Dacus goes further, describing James as a man whose "fertile brain" influenced honorable men, whom he names and describes as respected in their communities and willing to testify on James's behalf.³⁰ Buel touts the veracity of his accounts, though they seem to stretch credulity: Frank James taking the names and addresses of victims with the promise to repay; Jesse showing mercy to a child while escaping a Mexican Army trap in a flurry of bullets and horses' hooves.³¹ The images of Jesse James these fabulators constructed were so pervasive and ubiquitous they sparked public outcry, especially among concerned parents who considered the dime novels dangerous and corrupting of young minds.

³⁰ *Life and Adventures*, 289.

³¹ *The Border Outlaws*, 262, 382, and 404.

The most well-known, sympathetic, and contemporaneous “biographer” of the James brothers was Missouri newspaper editor John Newman Edwards. Edwards first knew of the James brothers as guerillas in Quantrill’s raiders, a confederate band of Bushwackers whose tactics and successes were glorified by pro-Confederate sympathizers (like Edwards) in Southern papers. As Jesse’s reputation as an outlaw grew, it was Edwards’s sensationalized newspaper accounts and the dime novels that created the image that many Americans of the time held of Jesse James. Both Hansen and Dominik use the dime novels extensively — quoting lines directly in the voice-over narration, showing us Bob’s collection of dime novels hiding under his bed, and including Jesse’s reference to Newman Edwards.

For those viewers of the film who are unaware of James’s celebrity and notoriety, the references to these dime novels has two effects. First, it establishes Jesse’s identity and subjectivity. Even though Jesse dismisses each reference to a dime novel as a lie, in *The Assassination* he is acutely aware that others hold a manufactured image of him, and he is willing to exploit that image when it suits him. The emphasis on dime novels also allows us as modern viewers to explain Bob’s actions as that of an obsessed fan, whose idealization is based on the hyperbolic and often fictitious accounts of Jesse’s exploits. Throughout the film, Bob demonstrates an encyclopedic knowledge about the James boys in what we see as nervous attempts to ingratiate himself among the gang. However, often what Bob thinks he knows about Frank and Jesse is wrong. In the

scenes where Bob's obsession with the James boys is most evident, the other characters often mock him, noting how Bob is (in modern terms) star-struck. The dime novels are important to the film because they add counter-weight to the more purportedly accurate narrative, and they help give viewers a way to interpret Bob's actions in the context of a modern dilemma—how does celebrity affect the famous and those who want fame?

Despite Jesse's protestations against these stories as lies, several sources indicate that the historical Jesse James actually contributed to the exaggerated tales, most notably through his correspondence with Edwards.³² The hermeneutic narrative may include the stories others tell about us, but, as Paul Ricoeur explains, the image we hold for ourselves is shaped by stories that confirm how we think others see us. We become complicit in the story-telling, and we imbue a subjective experience on the object of our stories (ourselves). This is especially evident in those moments when we dissociate from our experiences. Zahavi paraphrases Ricoeur:

The self is assumed to be constructed. It is the product of conceiving and organizing one's life in a certain way. When confronted with the question 'Who am I?' we will tell a certain story and emphasize aspects that we deem to be of

³² Jesse tells Charley, "You know what John Newman Edwards wrote about me, he said I don't trust two men in ten thousand, and even them I was cautious around."

special significance, to be that which we present to others for recognition and approval.³³

Jesse is not only aware of the stories about him, but he also uses those stories to justify actions that seem otherwise unjustifiable. About an hour and a half into the film, Jesse wakes up Charley (Sam Rockwell) to confess his murder of Ed Miller (Garrett Dillahunt). As he describes the event, he begins to refer to himself in the third-person: "So, Ed and Jesse, they argue on the road." The scene cuts to Jesse and Ed riding quietly together on the road at night. They are not arguing. We know that Ed suspects that Jesse has brought him here to kill him, and he is cautious not to offend Jesse.

Throughout the film, members of Jesse's gang have witnessed first-hand his intense fits of anger, cruelty, and bloodlust, but Ed's murder seems different because Jesse is completely emotionally detached. The scene cuts back to the dark interior parlor room where Jesse tells Charley, "And when push come to shove, Jesse shot and killed him." Charley, confused, repeats, "Jesse did." The story reminds Charley how cold-blooded Jesse James is, and all he can say in response to this image is to ask, "you?" Telling this story in the third-person, Jesse mediates the character 'the outlaw Jesse' by creating a ghost that gives narrative distance to Jesse's murderous deed. He dissociates from the murder, putting it instead on this living ghost who commits the heinous acts.

³³ In *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 105, Zahavi cites Ricoeur's *Temps et recit III: Le temps raconté*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.

'The outlaw Jesse James' is an image that haunts anyone who comes in contact with this filmic version of the real man. In this scene, Jesse uses the ghost not only to dissociate from this murder, but then also to pressure Charley into confessing what he might know about Wood Hite (Jeremy Renner), another member of the gang gone missing. Everyone in the diegetic knows what happens to those who cross 'the outlaw Jesse,' and everyone knows this ghost lives within Jesse and is waiting to appear at the slightest provocation. 'The outlaw Jesse James' is an assemblage of images that exaggerate the real-life actions, skills, and characteristics attributed to the historical person. Pitt's version of Jesse in *The Assassination* understands the fear that this ghost's infamy evokes, and we see this version of Jesse willingly use that infamy to his advantage whenever he can.

Readers/viewers trust that the images of Jesse James presented in both the novel and film versions of *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* are truthful portrayals of the historical figure because the voice-over narration seems credible and unbiased. The dialogue in voice-over throughout the film often comes directly from Hansen's novel, who describes his method for constructing the story as one based more on the objective newspaper accounts from the period rather than on earlier films, dime novels, or other media, which distorted the complexities of the two historical men.³⁴

³⁴ From Ron Hansen's epilogue to *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*. Reissued in 2007.

Writing about his process, Hansen declares his intention: “my rules are fairly simple: honesty and fidelity throughout—meaning no hard facts, however inconvenient, may be diminished and no crucial scenes, however wished for, may be turned to ends that may be more pleasing to a contemporary audience.”³⁵ In other words, he intends that the voice sound authentic to the time. This voice-over narrative is presented in the film as a credible witness to the final years of Jesse; however, to understand and interpret the image of Jesse, viewers of the film are asked to compare what we hear in the voice-over to what we see onscreen.

The novel and the film begin with the same words: “He was growing into middle age and was living then in a bungalow on Woodland Avenue.” Whereas the novel introduces the reader to Jesse with a five-page description, the film compresses this opening into a montage of about three minutes. Both narratives present multiple versions of Jesse, some of which we may already know. He is a devoted father and husband, yet he is also the most famous American outlaw living under an alias. He could pass through a busy city unnoticed because those who “knew” Thomas Howard believed the stories he told them about his wealth, his occupation, and his injuries. The last turn in the narrative begins with a description directly from one of the early dime novels, but then adds another image of Jesse possessing preternatural powers. It begins with, “He had a condition called granulated eye-lids, and it caused him to blink more

³⁵ “About the book” p. 11.

than usual.³⁶ As if he found creation slightly more than he could accept.” This line from Hansen’s novel goes further in the mythologizing of Jesse by implying that he understands more about the world than the rest of us.

In this brief ten- to fifteen-second shot, our image of Jesse James goes awry as we try to reconcile what we hear with what we see. We hear the description of Jesse’s condition, which “caused him to blink more than usual,” juxtaposed against the contradictory visual image of Jesse staring unblinking for ten seconds. The look on Jesse’s face is, as John Trafton argues, the look of a war vet with PTSD: the “thousand-yard stare” is a “hollow address to the spectator [in] what Hermann Kappelhoff describes as tragedy transmitted through the face in an ‘endlessly condensed micro-episode occurring as affect.’”³⁷ We might connect his “granulated eye condition” to PTSD, or consider the narrative paradox in blinking/staring to ascribe characteristics to Jesse that make sense from our current perspective. But the ‘truth’ about the image of traumatized war veteran is negated by the voice-over’s credible description. The visual image negates the audial image, and as we begin to unpack the layers of ghost-images we may hold for Jesse, a new form of him is conceived. Jesse is removed from the

³⁶ This description is nearly identical to J.W. Buel’s *The Border Outlaws*. “In his youth, Jesse was troubled with granulated eye-lids from which he had never fully recovered, which is seen in the constant batting of his eyes and a slight irritation of the lids; besides this marked peculiarity, the first joint of the forefinger on his left hand is missing,” 118.

³⁷ Kappelhoff qtd. in John Trafton’s “The American Outlaw and Civil War Shock: *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*” *Film International*.

ordinary as the voice-over continues: "Rooms seemed hotter when he was in them. Rains fell straighter. Clocks slowed. Sounds were amplified." A short montage follows these descriptions, visually mediating each narrated image: the shadow of a chair shimmering in the heat; rain across the field, falling hard straight down; the shadow of a chair moving with the setting sun; the sound of buzzing insects amplified in an open field. The final image in this montage is of Jesse James, who, we're told, doesn't regret the seventeen murders he "laid claim to" and was a Southern loyalist till he died. Although the narrative describes James in supernatural terms, the scene ends with the image of a mortal man—back to the audience, staring intently at an encroaching fire.

If we believe this narrative description of Jesse, then we can understand how Bob Ford believed that Jesse James was not merely a man, but a force of nature. This three-minute opening montage presents Jesse James as a set of contradictory *selves*, each visual version negated by the descriptions we hear. He is a father to children who don't know his name; he is a local businessman with whom no one has done business; he is an unstoppable, even supernatural, force who is also only human. Hansen's version is based on contemporaneous newspaper accounts, and when we read the novel we complete the image of James as described. However, the filmic adaptation may generate uncanny sensations when the visual image contradicts or negates the textual description, or when the camera stylizes our perspective with sepia tones, fish-eyed lenses, and reflections in glass. I would argue that readers/viewers are constantly re-

assessing characters on film, ascribing a variety of subjectivities depending on where the character is and what we think we may remember.

2.2.2 *How the characters in the film see 'the outlaw Jesse James'*

We may also bring to *The Assassination* the ghost(s) of Jesse James from any of the fifty-nine films and documentaries that dramatize the robberies and murders of the James Brothers. Each version differs from the last and, in its own way, replaces the historical Jesse James with the ghost of another imagined man: in one film a terrorist, in another a psychotic murderer, and in others a hero in his time. In the grand hermeneutic of Jesse James, the name functions as a historical referent for multiple characters playing multiple roles. But, there is a dual dynamic at work in the hermeneutic—the living and dead are both present. The Jesse each of us knows may be complex, contradictory, heroic, or antisocial, but each new version adds to the assemblage of ghosts we hold. For a character like Jesse James, whose image was mythologized in his time, enlarged after his death, and then manipulated and expanded by Hollywood, we may never be able to disentangle the real man and events from those distorted and imagined ghosts we believe we know.

Paraphrasing Alistair MacIntyre from his work, *After Virtue*, Zahavi describes how the hermeneutic narrative works to create subjectivity:

Who we are depends on the stories told about us, both by ourselves and by others. Our narrative self is multiple-authored and under constant revision. The

story of any individual life is not only interwoven with the stories of others (parents, siblings, friends, etc.), it is also embedded in a larger historical and communal meaning-giving structure.³⁸

We could insert *anyone* into this description: “Who [*Jesse* is] depends on the stories told about [*him*], by [*himself*] and by others. [*His*] narrative self...” The film constantly refers to these ‘communal meaning-giving’ structural stories about Jesse that account for his celebrity and fame. And though we may know that the two men’s stories will eventually become completely interwoven, in a couple of the earlier scenes where Bob describes Jesse’s escapades and adventures back to him, we see the tension inherent in the hermeneutic circle when the public newspaper version of Jesse collides with the private, real man.

The night after the Blue Cut Train Robbery, Bob sits on the porch smoking a cigar with Jesse. He tells Jesse that he brought a clipping to ensure he could tell Jesse apart from Frank. He reads from the clipping:

Here: [Bob reads] “Jesse James, the youngest, has a face as smooth and innocent as a schoolgirl. The blue eyes, very clear and penetrating, are never at rest. His form is tall and graceful and capable of great endurance and great effort. Jesse is lighthearted, reckless, and devil-may-care. There’s always a smile on his lips...”

³⁸ MacIntyre, 1985, 221. qtd in Zahavi, 109.

Jesse stops him, and the conversation dies. So, Bob nervously returns to his fan material—“You know what I got right next to my bed? It’s *The Train Robbers, or, A Story of the James Boys* by R.W. Stevens.” Jesse tells him the stories are all lies. However, Bob is not yet willing to let go of the ghost of ‘the outlaw Jesse James’ born from those stories and textual images. In *The Assassination*, Bob’s inability to reconcile the ghost image with the real man seems to haunt him the rest of his life. I would argue further, that it is in his attempts to make sense of the stories others tell about Jesse, he is compelled to revise Jesse’s story so that is inevitably interwoven with his own.

As the story of the film moves inevitably towards the assassination, Bob’s re-telling of Jesse’s stories begin to head in a fatalistic direction, as we see their two separate stories merge into one. At first, Bob sees himself as the participating observer—just outside of Jesse’s story, but close enough to accurately re-tell it. Early on, while staying with Jesse and Zee (Mary-Louise Parker), Bob would accompany Jesse into town, where “If Jesse palavered with another person, Bob [would secretary] their dialogue, getting each inflection, reading every gesture and tic, as if he wanted to compose a biography of the outlaw, or as if he were preparing an impersonation.” However, from his first appearance on film, we see Bob’s idolization and mimicry of the dime-novel version of Jesse James as the momentum pushing him to become a part of Jesse James’s story. When he first meets the James brothers, Bob tells them repeatedly

that he's the man for the job,³⁹ because this is how Jesse has been described in dime novels. Although it is a slippery slope to say his early, overly ambitious attempts to ingratiate himself into the story of the James Brothers might have led him to ultimately murder his hero, these gestures do hint at what we already know he is destined to become: the assassin of Jesse James.

The scene after the assassination ends with a visual image that could be described as the written end, figuratively and literally, of Jesse's life-story. Immediately following the shooting, Bob and Charley run from the murder scene to the nearest telegraph office to write to the Governor of Missouri. Then, in a close-up shot from above, we watch Bob write out the telegram: "Have killed Jesse James. Bob Ford." However, instead of Jesse's story ending here, the narrator tells how Jesse's celebrity grew even greater after his death. These details of Jesse's growing celebrity after his death are grounded in the historical evidence from several sources. For example, there was such a large demand for Jesse's death photograph that they put his body on a bed of ice, took more photos, and sold thousands more of the copies. In most every saloon in the United States, "The Ballad of Jesse James" was sung. Even Bob and Charley Ford keep the ghost of Jesse James alive—bringing him back and then murdering him

³⁹ Later, during the interview with Governor Crittenden (James Carville), Dick Liddil (Paul Schnieder) confirms Bob's reliability, telling the Governor that when push comes to shove, Bob would step up with a steady hand. Dick doesn't mention that as witness to Wood Hite's murder, he trusts that Bob could "get the job done," even if that meant killing Jesse James.

repeatedly in almost 900 stage shows during their theatrical re-enactment tour. The photographic images, the songs, and the stage show created another image of Jesse that 'lived on' even after his death. Even after his death, Jesse is ghosted by the media again.

It's hard to separate the ghost from the story. Ghosts may appear unexpectedly, and then we shape our story to explain the uncanny event, thereby mediating the ghost into existence. Seeing a ghost would compel most of us to tell the story of what we believe we have seen; and when we tell ghost stories, they re-affirm our belief in ghosts. In other words, I think a ghost only pre-exists until the witnesses (the believers in ghosts) tells us their ghost story. And ghost stories are circular, constantly revised out of our fading memories as we try to remember the ghost, its duration, and its non-permanence. Like the hermeneutic, we are always trying to complete the story by filling in the blanks. When it comes to filmic characters, as we fill in the blanks, we are not simply complicit in the mediation of their stories, but, moreover, we become the progenitors bearing the ghosts who remain alive within us afterwards.

2.3 The experiential performance in three parts

The image is an instance of becoming where body and brain become indistinguishable, where virtual forces are constantly becoming actual forms that decompose back into the virtual only to become actual again. — Elena del Río⁴⁰

⁴⁰ *Deleuze and the Cinema of Performances*, 72.

We may carry the image of Jesse James as a ghost created by the hermeneutic narrative that Hansen's novel and Dominik's film bring to fore. Likewise, Bob's story is as detailed as Jesse's—we see the events before and after the murder, and how his own celebrity is dulled by the accusations of cowardice and greed. However, whereas most of the other films generally show Bob Ford as a jealous sycophant, *The Assassination* creates a more sympathetic image of a star-struck teenager who, once he becomes friends with his idol, recognizes the danger Jesse poses to his safety. Although the narration completes the story of Bob Ford, it is most often Casey Affleck's embodiment, his experiential performance of Robert Ford, that gives selfhood to the filmic character. One way the viewer may come to believe the character has the potential for becoming a self is through the actor's performance.

But first, before I can reach my concept of Casey Affleck's gestural embodiment of Robert Ford, I need to start with Gilles Deleuze's concept of subjectivity in film. The difficulty in reading Deleuze comes from his terms, because the definitions shift and transform depending on how he decides to use them. Deleuze is a philosopher of becoming.⁴¹ In a series of interviews with former student Claire Parnet,⁴² he describes how when living in a constant state of change, the process of thinking requires a

⁴¹ "For Deleuze, the function of thinking is to constantly reinvent the act of living. Given Deleuze's understanding of thinking as a never-ending process that forges connections among concepts without striving for a unifying systematicity, a fully coherent or finished theory of performance could hardly have been his aim" (del Río, 7).

⁴² *Gilles Deleuze from A to Z with Claire Parnet* for French television.

willingness to adjust our beliefs in reaction to changes in the assemblage of preceptions and concepts that each of us accumulates as we perceive the world. Whereas most of Deleuze's contemporaneous Continental philosophers trace their intellectual lineage through Kant, who sees subjectivity as either *intuition* or *understanding*, Deleuze's first book was on David Hume, for whom subjectivity is contingent upon perception and experience.

We might describe subjectivity in the Deleuzean sense as the crystallization of the ego in the field of intensities. This field — arising out of the habitual associations that the subject has structured as raw intensities (color, sound, aroma) and low intensities (replicants of the raw; in other words, the idea of color, the idea of sound, and so on) — becomes the space wherein one's potentialities become possibilities. Instead of perceiving the world as a field of objects holding a priori meaning, *active subjectivity* tests the limits established by our habitual associations. So, it is through the repeated actions of an embodied subject (habituation) that a person comes to shape and understand what their limitations are. One may hold a variety of subjective potentialities, like the potential to see from the perspective of poet, priest, or politician, for example. *Active subjectivity* is the perceiving and acting on these potentials. It is making possible the subjective position by acting. On the other hand, some potential subjective positions, such as that of a pet or wild animal, can never be fulfilled. They are impossible, and are, therefore, *contemplated subjective* positions. Because both active

subjectivity and contemplated subjectivity are responses to habituated associations, the subject is crystallized.

In addition to active subjectivity, the performance confirms a set of potentialities and possibilities for how we suspect the character should act. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Felix Guattari famously explain how potentialities and possibilities resemble a body without organs:

The body without organs is an egg: it is crisscrossed with axes and thresholds, with latitudes and longitudes and geodesic lines, traversed by *gradients* marking the transitions and the becomings, the destinations of the subject developing along these particular vectors. Nothing here is representative; rather it is all life and lived experience [...] Nothing but bands of intensity, potentials, thresholds and gradients.⁴³

In Affleck's performance, we see the potentialities and possibilities as revealed in Affleck's gestures. Bob acts as he imagines a member of the James gang should act, constantly looking for ways to prove himself, as if attempting to fulfill his potential. Afterwards, he also acts out the assassination event on stage. Elena del Río considers how the "body without organs" makes possible a dimension of expression that is beyond linguistic, making connections between bodies through the affective performance. Although she doesn't describe this affect as *haunting*, she does use terms

⁴³ *Anti-Oedipus*, 19.

similar to those used to describe the concept of the *unheimlich*, concluding that, "Affect is precisely such an impingement of the outside upon the inside, of the new and unpredictable upon the familiar."⁴⁴

Del Río differentiates how we may give meaning to the filmic characters, noting the difference between the narrative (the hermeneutic structure shaping our perception of the character) and the gestural (an experiential performance embodied through habituation). While both are effective means for creating subjectivity, "in the performative context...the molar plane may be identified with *narrative* action, while the molecular plane unfolds through a more or less abstract series of *affective-performative* events."⁴⁵ I will argue that Casey Affleck's embodiment of Robert Ford⁴⁶ occurs in three performative gestures, and because these gestures are expressions of a character possessing a subjective position, the viewer remembers these gestures as those of a ghost.

2.3.1 *Bob imitates 'the outlaw Jesse James'*

Affleck's performance brings an active subjectivity to Bob as the character changes from a naïve idolizer of an imagined 'hero' to a terrified target, and then from

⁴⁴ *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance*, 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁶ To distinguish between the various images and embodiments, I will refer to the historical man as 'Robert Ford' or 'Ford,' the generic filmic character as 'Bob Ford,' *The Assassination's* filmic character (i.e., Casey Affleck's embodiment and portrayal) as 'Bob.' Similarly, I may employ the same pattern for 'Jesse James' to Pitt's 'Jesse.'

victim to steady-eyed assassin. There are three gestures in his performance that I want to consider: First, Bob's imitation of Jesse the outlaw; next, Bob's performances as an actor re-creating the assassination; and third, Bob's repeated eye-gestures and nervous tics. The first two gestures include an element of speculation about the way Bob acts as shaped by the actor's and the filmmakers' embodiment of the historical Robert Ford. The novel and the script give narrative structure to the events, but it is the combined efforts of the filmmakers that convince us that Bob's actions are appropriate to the emotional state of the filmic character. The third set of physical gestures are specific to Casey Affleck's performance. Together these performative gestures produce an experiential dimension of the character Robert Ford that one might perceive as subjectivity and selfhood.

The first gesture of Affleck's *affective performance* results from the combined efforts of the filmmakers⁴⁷ and their attempts to present characters whose motivations seem authentic. Although actor Casey Affleck portrays Bob in *The Assassination*, viewers realize that this character's words and actions are tightly controlled by the filmmakers. Like the hermeneutic circle where we fill in the gaps in the story, when it comes to Affleck's portrayal we can only speculate as to Bob's motivations based on what he says

⁴⁷ I will use the term *filmmakers* as the collective cast and crew who are responsible for the creating characters and scenes on-screen. This includes the writers, directors, producers, actors, editors, etc., who have collaboratively worked to make the characters and images believable in the context of the film.

in the context of what we see him do in a scene. Hansen and Dominik both present Bob Ford as a young man obsessed with the James brothers, and the filmic character Bob acts as if they are outlaw heroes worth emulating. In several scenes Bob demonstrates his adoration for the James brothers not only in his extensive knowledge of their exploits, but also in his eagerness to prove his 'grit and muster.' He says he can be counted on to "get the job done," a character trait that the dime novels and newspaper accounts have ascribed to Jesse. Playing the role of the dependable outlaw for other gang members, Bob believes, will prove him worthy of being a part the gang. Although viewers understand that Casey Affleck is portraying a filmic character who may resemble the historical figure of Robert Ford, from our perspective it appears that the filmic Bob is performing for the filmic Jesse. His motivation seems to arise out of his desire to be like 'the outlaw Jesse James' as mediated by the dime novels he loves. In other words, by acting in ways that Bob thinks Jesse would act, he is performing for the ghost of 'the outlaw Jesse,' whom he has only read about.

However, by the end of the second act, Bob has become disenchanted with Jesse, especially as Jesse's paranoia becomes more intense. At dinner one night, Charley presses Bob into telling the group the ways in which he and Jesse are alike. Bob starts by describing their physical similarities, such as shoe size, height and weight, and eye color. When Bob starts listing their shared personality traits (ambition, dependability, etc.), Jesse seems disturbed by the comparison. Though we may see aspects of the

Lacanian mirror, or a *mise en abyme* of interchangeable Jesses and Bobs, I prefer to think of the scene as the filmmakers creating an intense, uncanny mood.

At this point in the film, viewers know about Bob's agreement with the Governor, we know of his steadiness with a gun, and we know of his idolization of the man whom, we also know, has the ability to spot liars and is willing to kill a friend. Knowing that both men hold an unspoken threat against the other, we may imagine that each man hides their true intentions behind a performative ghost of his previously perceived self. Although Bob sounds nostalgic for the 'outlaw Jesse James' of his boyhood, for the viewer the feeling evoked is more uncanny than nostalgic because we can also empathize with Bob's fear of being found out. Jesse becomes inquisitive, and his questions and observations are uncanny in their precision. Although Affleck and Pitt create a performative tension between the two characters that is visually noticeable, the cumulative mirroring and reflecting effects between these two characters intensifies the scene's uncanniness. As Bob ambles through his list and then is questioned by Jesse, his voice becomes defiant. Although Bob has not yet performed the ultimate defining gesture by assassinating his friend, he has already become a reflection of Jesse—not the outlaw hero of his boyhood, but a reflection of the Jesse for whom 'getting the job done' means eliminating a threat.

The filmmakers shape the tone and mood throughout the film with their stylistic use of reflected images and shadows on glass. Bob and Jesse are often shown on one

side of a window or the other, the viewer looking in or out, the faces of the men reflecting back and usually slightly distorted. Esther Preen explains the Lacanian concept of mirror stage thusly:

For Lacan, the mirror connects the self to its image. One the hand, this image is spectral—‘the correspondences that unit the *I* to the image are projected as ghosts, in a completely ambiguous relationship of the subject with the world of its fabrication’ [(Mbembe, “Life” 40)—but on the other hand it multiplies presence by creating a likeness, a double.⁴⁸

As we hear Bob recite his list of shared attributes—“Jesse has green eyes, I have green eyes”—we understand that Jesse’s double is as capable of killing him as he is of killing Bob. Later, in the assassination scene, we see Bob from Jesse’s perspective—as a reflection in the glass picture frame, raising his gun with a steady hand and gaze, just before he shoots Jesse in the back of the head. The assassin’s gesture becomes realized in the reflected image of Bob as he pulls the trigger (*Figure 1*).

⁴⁸ *The Spectral Metaphor*, 59.



Figure 1 Bob reflected as assassin



Figure 2 Bob imitates the 'outlaw Jesse James'

Another scene that exemplifies Bob's imitation of his hero is the one preceding the assassination. Bob is alone in 'Howard' bungalow. The family has gone to Easter service, with their 'cousin' Charley. The performative gesture now is imitation. Bob

wears Jesse's hat, drinks from his water glass, lays on his bed. He even imagines the physical impairments that Jesse keeps hidden from strangers. Bob's mimetic performance of missing the top two-thirds of his left middle finger allows the viewer to participate in the "givenness" of his experience (*Figure 2*). Despite knowing what Bob will soon become, as the title of the film tells us, this moment of peace before the assassination allows us to see Bob as the self he once imagined he would become. The scene is an intimate, personal moment for Bob, and though I will discuss later in more detail how we may feel present in the filmic world by ghosting a spatial image, it is in this moment that we witness Bob's inner life. As Zahavi points out, "the self it claimed to possess experiential reality, is taken to be closely linked to the first-person perspective, and is, in fact, identified with the very first-personal *givenness* of the experiential phenomena."⁴⁹ At this point in *The Assassination*, we've been repeatedly shown how Bob's admiration for Jesse is intimately and causally tied to Bob's projection of self. Although Bob (and the audience) know that his performance of Jesse at home is "play-acting," by putting on the *givenness* of Jesse, we see Bob's transformation — though we don't yet know what this transformation will yield.

Killing Jesse is a traumatizing event that remains static in Bob's memory because it is the definitive moment when he embodies the gesture of "killer." Growing up, he had idolized the bank-robbers, the train-robbers, the Bushwackers, and that ilk, but now

⁴⁹ *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 106.

having lived with the most infamous of all, he must act like Jesse and kill the man who threatens him. This gesture makes him into that which he thought he wanted to be. Bob's imitations of Jesse are in part an attempt to find the meaning of who he is "in its radical ontological/ ontogenetic sense."⁵⁰ It is his performance in the "ever-changing material event that registers the impact of social and cultural pressures on the body in an active and creative way."⁵¹ When we see the reflection of Bob from Jesse's perspective in the glass picture-frame, we see Bob as we surmise he wanted Jesse to see him—as a man fit to get the job done. This fulfillment of his destiny, so to speak, is the 'experiential reality' that Dan Zahavi describes in this way: "The self is claimed to possess experiential reality, is taken to be closely linked to the first-person perspective, and is, in fact, identified with the very first-personal *givenness* of the experiential phenomena."⁵² When Bob haunts Jesse's room the morning of the murder, he imagines what it's like to be Jesse James. Killing Jesse is the ultimate form of mimicry.

2.3.2 *Bob as an actor on-stage*

Another performative aspect of Bob's character lies in his multiple on-stage performances of the assassination event. Hansen admits that he knew the play "and the general contents of it but could not find a script so I invented the dialogue."⁵³ The

⁵⁰ *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance*, 35.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 36

⁵² *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 106.

⁵³ From a personal email between myself and Mr. Hansen. January 26, 2018.

dialogue confirms what we've already seen, but the film's narrator completes our understanding of the affect the play had on the Ford brothers. The scenes where Bob and Charley re-enact the assassination are interesting because we can see in the later performances how quickly their fame has degraded. Although the public performances helped establish Robert Ford's celebrity, they also eventually soured the public's opinion of him. The viewer cannot forget that the assassination is a traumatic event, and trauma theory may provide some insight into the temperamental and emotional states of the Fords as they replay the event. The narration, and especially Charley's behavior, would imply that the ghost of Jesse James haunts their performance of the parlor-murder scene. These scenes also demonstrate how viewers can experience another type of ghosting affect for Bob—an actor who, in portraying himself, has shaped his onstage persona into the ghost of the 'real' man.

The number of performances of the stage play is important. Viewers of the film have witnessed the 'real' assassination 'as it happened,' so we compare the staged event to the 'actual' event in a way the audience of the staged production cannot. Viewers also witness an early performance, before Charley's onstage presence was fully haunted by the ghost of his friend Jesse. In this scene, Bob tells his story, addressing the audience directly, and we witness the re-enactment with the final gun-slinging flourish that confirms Bob as the man who killed 'the outlaw Jesse James.' It seems clear that Bob is traumatized by the actual event, but he cannot lay the ghost to rest. Dominick

LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* prescribes a process by which historical and literary works affectualize trauma in readers, and how this process may bring resolution, forgiveness, or hope:

Traumatic *Dasein* haunts or possesses the self, is acted out or compulsively repeated, and may not be adequately symbolized or accessible in language, at least in any critically mediated, controlled and self-reflexive manner. Words may be uttered but seem to repeat what was said then and function as speech acts wherein speech itself is possessed or haunted by the past and acts as a reenactment or an acting out.... These processes [of working over and through the trauma towards an ethical responsible agency] are crucial for laying ghosts to rest, distancing oneself from haunting revenants, renewing an interest in life, and being able to engage memory in more critically tested senses.⁵⁴

The acting out of a trauma can have therapeutic benefits. For Bob, however, this reenactment seems to cause more intense haunting. We can easily assume that performing the assassination scene almost 900 times would have had an uncanny affect on Bob, haunted by the ghost of Jesse, the space, and the event. The repetition of the scene confirms that Jesse, the space, and the event no longer exist. As Thomas Elsaesser posits, "if trauma is experienced through its forgetting, its repeated forgetting, then, paradoxically, one of the signs of the presence of trauma is the absence of all signs of

⁵⁴ *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 90.

it.”⁵⁵ The negating and “suspension” of the original performative traumatic event is mediated through its representation on stage, and as Elsaesser continues, “the traumatic event [is given] the status of a (suspended) origin in the production of a representation, a discourse or a text, bracketed or suspended because marked by the absence of traces.”⁵⁶ Ghosts are born from the mediated representations of the event, and I would argue that this repeated stage performance demonstrates how that can happen.

The staged performances also definitively establish the public image of Robert Ford. For him, the staged performances fulfill his desire for celebrity, but the act quickly becomes another place where he must defend himself against accusations of cowardice. In the re-enactment, Bob plays himself as he wants to be remembered — fearful for his life, confident, and brave. But audiences at these performances, and public opinion in general, became more enamored by the ghost of Jesse the “outlaw hero” than by Bob’s story, which ends with him shooting his friend from behind. But this is not the end of Bob’s story. The film shows his story after celebrity — confused by how others saw him, wanting recognition from Jesse’s victims for what he has done, and increasingly depressed, as if suffering from PTSD. The final shot of Bob freezes on a close-up of Affleck turning to answer the call of his murderer, his eyes in a steady ‘thousand-yard stare.’

⁵⁵ “Postmodernism as Mourning Work,” *Screen*, 199.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 199.

2.3.3 *The 'Affleck Affect'*

In these first two examples of the experiential dimension of subjectivity, I've primarily focused on how the character Bob appears to experience the world. Again, we may ascribe the filmic character subjectivity in our co-creation of the image of Bob. Viewers may believe that the filmic character of Bob exists because he acts as he imagines an outlaw should act, and then onstage he acts out the public image he wants to be remembered as. Despite his attempts to embody the idealized version of his imagined self, his story ends as his fame turns violent and revengeful. Although *The Assassination* focuses more on Bob's story than Jesse's, it is the image of Robert Ford derived from Affleck's performance⁵⁷ that the viewer is likely to remember.

We can trace the importance of certain events by the variation of eye-gestures that Affleck uses throughout the film. From the nervous and obsequious kid to the steady-eyed assassin, Bob's physical, gestural responses to events shape our impression of him, and, thereby, reveal more about his subjective self than any story could, even if the story is told by a trustworthy narrator. Some events in *The Assassination* must be created out of portions of testimonies, such as his interview with Governor Crittenden, which is prefaced with the narrator noting how Bob was "never consistent in his

⁵⁷ Affleck's performance earned him multiple nominations as best supporting actor, including the Critic's Choice, Golden Globe and Oscar nominations.

recollections” when later cross-examined about this meeting. In this interview scene, Bob doesn’t say much, but Affleck’s downward look followed by a nervous smile—the Affleck Affect⁵⁸—creates the image of a young man troubled by the job he realizes that only he can do. In the novel and the film, Robert Ford is reconstructed from historical documents; however, the filmic character image of Bob, remembered by viewers as the ghost of Affleck’s performance, allows viewers access to his feelings through his awkward and unsettling gestures and tics. We assume his tics reveal an emotional intensity inexpressible in words, and in so doing, we imagine what a character for whom celebrity so quickly soured may feel. As we put meaning to his gestures, we haunt his image with our perceived emotional responses.

This specific aspect of performance, where his gestures reveal our emotions, allows us to ascribe a subjective self onto Bob because we can empathize with a character who becomes empathetic. In a response to Merleau-Ponty, Zahavi describes empathy as only made possible when: “Subjectivity is not hermetically sealed up within itself, remote from the world and inaccessible to the other. It is, above all, a relation to the world, and Merleau-Ponty wrote that access to others is secured the moment I define both others and myself as co-existing relations to the world.”⁵⁹ We empathize with Bob, particularly in his later years, which the narrator describes as being haunted

⁵⁸ It’s a silly term, I admit, but I can’t think of any better way to term the affect created through Affleck’s performance.

⁵⁹ *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 159.

by Jesse. He imagines visiting the families of Jesse's murdered victims, and he tries to make a new life in Colorado (though even there they still know who he is). Everyone who meets Bob defines him in relation to what they know he has done, and not by who he has become. We see the fullness of Affleck's performance in these later reflections—the eyes closing more slowly, more deliberately. As the affect becomes a more empathetic gesture, we assume he has, too.

The Affleck Affect—a subtle slow-blink, downward look, then up to catch your (the viewer's as he looks into camera) gaze indirectly, and a smile, just slightly, then quick down again. The gesture reminds one of a child trying to pull off a lie or a joke. He's an awkward teenager full of ambition and celebrity worship. Dominik's choice of Brad Pitt as *Jesse*, arguably the most famous man of his time, and Affleck as *Bob* visually reinforces ideas about celebrity. However, fame does not lead to good endings, especially for men who are celebrated for their violence.

The most prominent image in *The Assassination* is the Affleck Affect, because it allows us to see *Bob* as an *active subjectivity*. As del Río says, "cinematic gestures and movement are more likely to speak the truth of the character when they are not blocked by the censoring mechanisms of a rational language—whether this may occur in a silent image or in one that preserves its own difference from the spoken words."⁶⁰ We could

⁶⁰ *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance*, 77.

characterize Affleck's eye movements as noticeable enough to stick with us, subtle enough to require multiple viewings.

We first see the Affleck Affect in Bob's meeting with Frank (Sam Shepard). Instead of assuring Frank that he was a capable accomplice, his nervous tics resulted in Frank pulling his gun and telling Bob to move on. He had given Frank "the willies." Later in the film, he again must convince a powerful man, Governor Crittendon, that he is capable of completing a job, though this time it is bringing in 'the outlaw Jesse James' dead or alive. Though still awkward, Bob is more settled. By this time, Bob has been with Jesse enough to understand the threat he poses. Bob's eyes move more slowly, and when he gazes up at the governor, after Dick Liddil has praised his reliability, Bob is cool and confident. The shyness from earlier is replaced with anxiety at what he must do.

Other scenes which employ this gesture include when Sheriff Timberlake (Ted Levine) comes to warn Bob not to turn his back to Jesse. Even this veteran Sheriff admits a bit of amazement at James's ability to see through a person to their true intent. By taking on the capture of Jesse James, the Sheriff warns him, Bob has also taken on the knowledge that Jesse will kill him over the slightest suspicion. Shortly after this meeting with the sheriff, Charley and Jesse show up at the grocery store where Bob works to bring him in on a three-person bank robbery. Bob is on the ladder, in silhouette, with his back to the front door. Jesse walks in without making a sound, quietly leans on the

counter. Jesse says, “You have been elected,” surprising Bob to be so quickly caught with his back to Jesse. As he descends the ladder, he jokes to Jesse about seeing him in his dreams. Now, however, the eye movements are reversed. Instead of looking to his addressee, then down, and to the side, Bob looks quickly down, then straight into the eyes of Jesse. The adoration is still there, but his gestures reveal what we know — the lie, and the fear of being caught out in the lie.

The Affleck Affect is replaced with a steady-eye, steady-hand stare. Dominik emphasizes Affleck’s transformation through a series of scenes starting with the first trauma in Jesse’s parlor. This series of scenes come after Jesse has warned Charley and Bob from speaking to each other without his permission, and after Bob agrees to bring Jesse James in to Governor Crittenden by any means necessary. Bob and Jesse sit in the parlor, lit only by the fire in the hearth. Jesse is reclined on the sofa, and Bob is sitting on the floor near the opposite end of the sofa. Their conversation is marked with an air of discontent from Bob. As the two begin to argue in earnest, Charley walks in with arms-full of firewood. He asks if they two were “having a spat.” Jesse reaches for the boy, pulls him over and begins to rub his shoulders, loosening Bob up, as a father or brother might comfort an aggravated loved one. Then, Jesse pulls a knife from behind his back with his right hand, grabs Bob by the hair with his left, and holds the blade against Bob’s neck. Jesse’s threats are intense and direct. Bob’s eyes are wide open (*Figure 3*) and reflecting the murderous rage in Jesse’s (*Figure 4*).

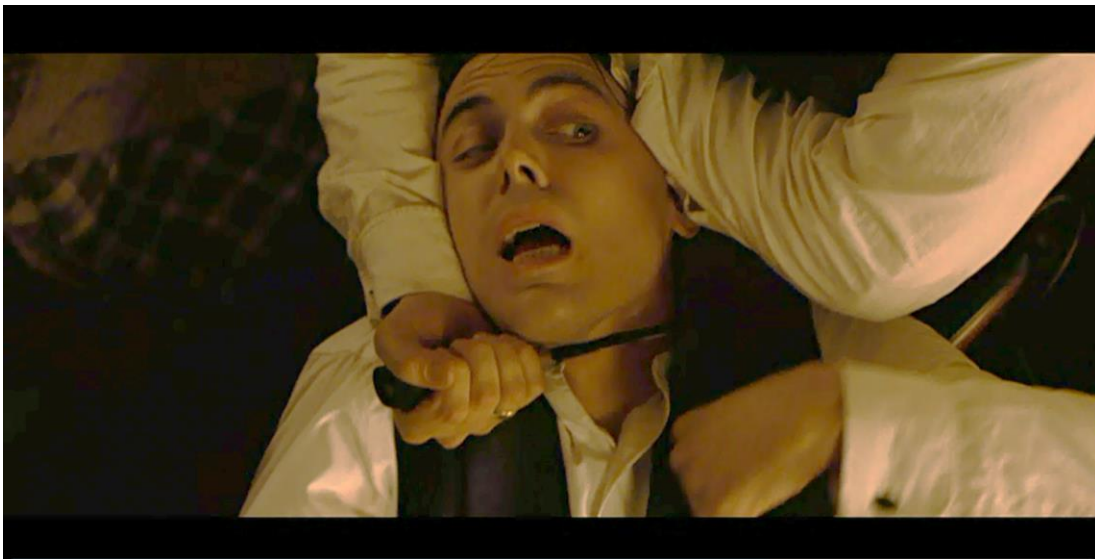


Figure 3 Jesse traumatizes Bob (brightness adjusted)



Figure 4 Jesse in murderous rage (brightness adjusted)

From this point in the film, Bob remains visually aware. Whether or not the reality of Jesse's threat motivates Bob to act, this is the *filmic traumatic event*, revealed in the gesture of Jesse (not Bob), whereby Bob's options are made clear. Bob wanted to be

the outlaw, the gunslinger, the man others could count on, the equal of Jesse James. This first scene in the sequence that culminates in Jesse's death could be summarized in a way similar to del Rio's description of melodrama in Sirk's films. She writes:

Poised between classical narrative and affective-performative intensity, Sirk's films thus oscillate between moments of repression and moments of overexpenditure—between images that contain the characters' libidinal energies to a degree of unbearable bodily regimentation and images that liberate energies in ways that exceed any goal except the vital expression of their own affective force.⁶¹

The effect of Jesse's psychotic break on Bob are clearly noticed in Affleck's performance, as Bob now seems to be constantly and attentively on watch. Jesse's knife-wielding event confirms not only what Bob has been told—that Jesse will kill him—but it also "liberates energies" in him, which he has always known existed but had not yet had the opportunity on which to act.

I'm fairly confident that most people who saw *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* knew something of Jesse James, if not also Robert Ford. Whatever the source of that foreknowledge, it's likely a mediated image that viewers remember. For me, there were the ghosts of previous Jesses—James Keach and Robert Duvall—and ghosts of previous Bobs—Nicholas Guest and John Carradine. I also knew of Jesse

⁶¹ *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance*, 29.

James the way most Americans probably know something of Al Capone, Bonny and Clyde, or Ted Kaczynski. Whether having read about him, or having seen one of the forty or more film versions, or had only passing knowledge, we carry a ghost of the mediated image of Jesse James with us. Although we may remember textual images and filmic images differently, *The Assassination* lets viewers consider two ways of creating ghosts. We trust the narrator to give an accurate account of the events leading up to and the aftermath of the assassination. We may even trust that the narrator knows the thoughts and motivations of the two characters, and we can fill in the gaps when the narrator's words are insufficient or contradictory. Similarly, we ascribe emotion and mood to a character through the filmmakers' and actors' efforts. In other words, we assume filmic characters have subjectivity based on the stories they and others tell about them, and we ascribe subjectivity to characters based on their performative experiences. Once we see characters as having subjectivity, as having resemblance to living people, we make those characters ghosts—alive but not living. If we hope to find clear meaning in these ghosts, we'll be disappointed. The ghosts allow us to imagine what the meaning might be. If we have an uncanny connection to characters in a film, we may find meaning in the ghosts that resonate after the film has ended, but that meaning has an ontological base in our perceptions. So, it's unlikely we can find a clear definitive 'meaning' in the ghosts of Jesse James and Robert Ford. But if we are haunted,

we may at least be allowed some comfort knowing the ghosts are mostly of our own making.

3 CHAPTER TWO: ANGELS OF THE EVENT: PALIMPSESTS OF GRIEF AND DESIRE

In this chapter I will consider ghosting the event-image. I argue that one possible way for a reader/viewer to ghost the event-image is through adaptations, specifically when adaptations are products of the palimpsestic process. As the process by which the subjective reader/viewer co-creates the image, the palimpsestic process is an event. This event may occur in the space/non-space that 20th Century German writers collectively conceive as “the Open,” and this event may evoke auratic or uncanny sensations in the viewer.

An event-image can be an image from an historical Event, like one that fundamentally changes political and global structures; or, an event-image may be an image borne from an event in a person’s (or a character’s) life. *Ghosting event-images* is how I describe the process by which we co-create, remember, revise, and revive those images we may associate with the ‘seismically large’ historical Events in relation to the events of our everyday lives. In order to more fully explain my concept of ghosting an event-image, I will consider the intertextual relationships between the works of three 20th Century German “artists” — the poet Rainer Marie Rilke’s *Duineser Elegien* (*Duino*

Elegies), the philosopher Walter Benjamin's *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (*Theses on the Philosophy of History*) and filmmaker Wim Wenders' *Der Himmel über Berlin*⁶² (*Wings of Desire*). My close reading of these three works will include some relevant biographical information about Rilke, Benjamin, and Wenders, as well as a discussion of how the historical milieu and the influence of other artistic images contextualize the imagery at the center of each work. Because the event-images of these three works may resonate more fully with a viewer when considered together, my analysis will attempt to respond to the images as a collection of ghosts, a palimpsest that negates and creates simultaneously.

3.1 The palimpsest

In her highly influential work, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon proposes we see the adaptation as a palimpsest—an erasure of the old work followed by the creative layering of another. Although I agree that the palimpsest is a relevant way of engaging adaptation theory, I would argue that palimpsests tend to be limiting, not expansive, unless we're haunted by ghosts. As a process for understanding a viewer's subjective experience of an image, *ghosting images* differs from the palimpsest in that the

⁶² Although Peter Handke is credited as co-screenplay writer with Wenders, Handke's contributions to the creation and shaping of angels is minimal. Handke downplays his contributions to the film in many interviews, despite Wenders insistence that he share credit. As director, producer and screenwriter, Wenders is the driving force in the creation of the myth told in *Wings of Desire*. Therefore, I'm not ignoring Handke, but using "Wenders" to represent their collaboration.

ghosts of images negated and then re-created are stronger, the uncanny feeling produced in the adaptation more palpable, when our experience with the source images is intense.⁶³

The artist Robert Rauschenberg tells of wanting to do an “erasure” of a Willem de Kooning sketch.⁶⁴ As he tells it, he went to de Kooning’s studio with an idea and a bottle of bourbon. He told de Kooning his idea, and de Kooning agreed. But de Kooning insisted that it be a sketch he would miss, and one that would be hard to erase. We could argue that the erasure Rauschenberg made of the de Kooning sketch is ‘beautiful,’ and the aura in the Rauschenberg is our affective response; we don’t need to know the story to appreciate the adaptation. However, we may feel haunted by the erasure knowing that under the Rauschenberg there was once a de Kooning; we may feel an uncanny sensation knowing that something beautiful once existed, a work beloved by its maker, a sketch known only to two great artists — one present at its creation, the other at its elimination. I have been moved and amazed by both artists’ work, and for me the tension in Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) (*Figure 5*) is tightened when I consider the ghost of impossible images no longer there. Every line, shade, or blank space becomes its own image in flux, impossible to identify as separately generated by either artist. A palimpsest is both negated in the erasure — an

⁶³ I think of intensity as the difference between a ghost in my house who lived here before versus the ghost of my grandfather who first visited me the night before he died.

⁶⁴ He retells the story in several interviews posted on YouTube.

image *always already imagined*, and confirmed in the re-creation, an image *immediately imagined*. The palimpsest in an image that is here/now and nowhere/always. When we view an image, our response is likely shaped by ghosts of past images we bring with us.



Figure 5 Erased de Kooning Drawing Robert Rauschenberg 1953

For Hutcheon, “adaptations are never simply reproductions that lose their Benjaminian aura. Rather they carry that aura with them.”⁶⁵ . This implies that the aura is an essential quality inherent in the image. If the palimpsest erases the image, if the image no longer ‘exists’, but its auratic qualities persist, then how do we account for the differences in our subjective experience? Would we all not be similarly moved by a piece of music? Any work of art? I believe a more plausible explanation is that the aura resides within me, the subjective viewer. Moreover, I am more likely to recognize the aura present in the palimpsestic image if I have already experienced an auratic affect from the source image.

Similarly, when I experience an image that evokes uncanny sensations, it is the ghosts of images previously experienced and still present in my memory that are producing the uncanny sensation. It might be easy to confuse an auratic response with an uncanny sensation, but I believe both of these *feelings* can be evidence that the ghost exists. Because I have subjectively experienced images, ideas, emotional states, physical threat and fear, all that a work of art may evoke, as well as the aftermath of these reading/viewing experiences—the trace of an image left behind, the mis-remembrances, the conflation of time—my memory is like a an open field where my ghosts of the image wait. When I view a work of art like Rauschenberg’s, my collection of memories of previous images, of events and people, of false memories and mis-remembrances, the

⁶⁵ *A Theory of Adaptation*, 4.

ghosts of de Kooning's image, are all called forth, into the open field. If I must rely on my *feelings* about an adapted image as the only proof that ghosts exist, then I am willing to admit I believe in ghosts. Ghosting the image is the event in which we allow our ghosted images to mix with the present image; the aftermath of my ghosting is the physical, emotional, psychological, etc., responses to the image borne from my assemblage of subjective experiences with other works.

3.2 From palimpsest to ghosting

My point about the palimpsest is this — the process of simultaneously erasing and creating requires the subjective reader/viewer to participate in the production of the new image. I would disagree with Hutcheon's view of the palimpsestic process as originating in each author's work, and where, if the process is done well, the auratic qualities of the source image persists. I read this to mean the aura is an essential quality in the image, and it is the skill of the adapter that determines whether or not the aura from the source image hiding within the new image will be revealed. The problem in this process for me is that the aura of an image is always outside of our experience. I believe, rather, that aura is an interior feeling, a product of my experience with an image begun within me, the reader/viewer. When I watch *Wings of Desire*, I may recognize trace fragments from the negated images of the 'schreckliche Engel,' the *Novus Angelus*, and the angel of history in the image of Daniel (Bruno Ganz). The angels of Rilke and Benjamin are ghost images haunting me as a reader/viewer, and the

aura of the source images are not essential to Daniel unless I assign my ghosted images, and the auratic responses they evoked, onto him. When the images of a source work are negated in the adaptation, it must be I, the reader/viewer, who chooses which of the ghosted source images, and to what extent, I will juxtapose, compare, or comingle with the new image I am immediately experiencing. Ultimately, I decide how much of an image's aura, if any, is revealed.

The palimpsestic process of constant erasure/creation of images, this simultaneous presence/non-presence of images, can be seen as a way of *ghosting the image*. Whereas I argued in Chapter One that a viewer may employ the process of ghosting a character image by first believing that a character has selfhood or subjectivity, in this chapter I will widen the conceptual metaphor of *ghosting* to include *event* as an image. In considering how the palimpsest helps to explain ghosting the event-image, I will use *Wings of Desire* as an example in which the fragmented images from a "source text" can shape a reader/viewer's experiences of and responses to an image. It is not that these trace fragments contain essential auratic qualities that anyone will recognize; but, the fullest affect may only occur when we readers/viewers also recognize the underlying, erased image.

For example, we can more fully recognize the reference to Klee's *Novus Angelus* in the film if we know that this watercolor painting, as Benjamin would say, provided him an open field in which to meditate on the Angel of History. A reference to an image

does not necessarily evoke its aura; but, when readers/viewers know the source image before its negation in the adaptation, we may experience again the auratic affect of that source image layered onto and joined together with the aura of those images we are immediately experiencing. On the other hand, when we experience an image for the first time, not knowing that the image is an adaptation from an earlier work, the auratic affect that the image evokes is most likely not the same one evoked by the source. The aura of a new image without referents is unique to the viewer when we consider aura as our affective response to that image alone. In *Wings of Desire*, viewers may see the image of Damiel as an angel who willingly leaves eternity to be on this earth with the woman he desires; however, in the *Duino Elegies* and in the "Ninth Thesis on History," the images of angels are bound to the Openness⁶⁶ of grief and eternal isolation. I believe that for those who have read Rilke's poems, Benjamin's thesis, and seen the film, the overall auratic affect that each image evokes becomes more intense, compounded by the seemingly simultaneous occurrence of past and present. To go back to the example: after reading Benjamin, we may see Wenders' Damiel differently. Instead of his choosing to join this earth as a human capable of being moved by carnivals, rock music, coffee and cigarettes, we may now see his choice to leave his *life in the Open* as a

⁶⁶ *Openness* and *the Open* are literary tropes common to mid-20th Century writers and thinkers. A fuller discussion of the Open will follow.

response to the grief revealed in the eternally recurring event where the full history of human suffering is always constantly witnessed and never changed.

Whether we recognize the connections or not, I would assert that the three works examined herein form a network of interrelated images, ideas, and events. Chasing down all source images is a rabbit-hole to which I won't subject my readers, but each of the three artists, Rainer Marie Rilke, Walter Benjamin, and Wim Wenders credit the creation of their works as having found inspiration in the images of other artistic works. Rilke acknowledges the acrobats and clowns in the *Elegies* as images remembered from the 1905 Picasso painting, *La famille de Saltimbanques*; Benjamin's articulates an extended meditation on his friend Paul Klee's *Novus Angelus* (1920) in the "Ninth Thesis"; and Wenders says the idea for the film came to him after reading the *Elegies* and noticing the images of angels everywhere he went in Berlin. Likewise, the influence of one's work on the other is evident in several examples. In his letters to his friend Gershom Scholem, Benjamin expresses his admiration and professional respect for Rilke's works; in another letter addressed to Rilke he states that he has included copies of his own work to the poet. For Wenders, the influences of these two previous works are so pronounced, some of the source images appear without erasure in the palimpsest he creates. He openly claims both writers (as well as Klee's painting) as a direct influence on his film.

As I work through the metaphor of ghosting the image, I see its usefulness as a concept for understanding how we might remember filmic images because it is flexible. I can apply it to *my* readings/viewings, and I can apply it to the artist/adapter, the *palimpsester* (if you will). However, before I directly consider the palimpsestic process as a method for *ghosting the event-image* in the three works that these artists produced, I discuss the event as an image and explain some common themes (especially in Rilke and Benjamin) concerning the Open and the 'creaturely.'⁶⁷ Then, I will describe how the filmic event might be haunted not only by the ghosts of history — held in common by a city, or a community, or a family — but also by the ghosts we personally hold for a historical event (i.e., images of the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazi regime). But first, a more considered description of events.

3.3 Angles witnessing Events

Over the past three decades, the *event* has been a philosophical topos of discussions in linguistics and cognitive sciences; other fields of inquiry, including existentialism, Marxism, literary criticism, and phenomenology have also made definitional claims to this elusive term. Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek⁶⁸ have written extensively on events, which can be read in light of and extending from their writings on film. Yet, despite the multiple overly flexible definitions these and

⁶⁷ 'Creaturely' as used by Weigel.

⁶⁸ Three certifiable *cinephilosophers*.

other contemporary scholars of film-philosophy have put forth, little scholarship has explored how we as viewers interact as witness to the historical *Event* and/or the personal *event* as imaged onscreen.

Of the three philosophers above, I am most drawn to Badiou's four events of philosophical inquiry—love, science, politics (history), and art. For my own convenience, I designate these as *Events*,⁶⁹ they are communally experienced and their social, cultural, technological, or political impacts are measured in seismic terms. On the other hand, *events*⁷⁰ are personal, subjectively experienced moments. To borrow a Rilkean image, we walk a rope tightened between two poles: the universal, the ahistorical, the potentially traumatic *Event* and the individualized, localized, potentially transcendent *event*. In my reading of *Wings of Desire*, the viewer may at times be witness to the personal *events* in Berlin, hearing the inner thoughts of individuals as they navigate daily life in the city. At other times viewers may experience Berlin as the angel of history might—moving through a city haunted by the *Event* World War II.

It is difficult to talk about events, especially images of a *filmic event*, without also talking about space, because these two images are so tightly braided. For example, even if we see an Event mediated through television or film, we clearly understand and generally associate it as having occurred in a specific place—the Olympic Village in '72,

⁶⁹ *Events* with capital E.

⁷⁰ *events* with lower case e.

the US Iranian Embassy in '79, or Omaha Beach in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). However, as I propose in the next chapter, when an image of space is mediated, we may become ghosts haunting that filmic space. We may *ghost the spatial image*—remembering the filmic image of the wall, for example, while walking through Berlin; or we may *ghost the spatial image* by appearing as a presence/non-presence in the filmic world.⁷¹ In *Wings of Desire*, Berlin is haunted by its past—the ghosts arising from our knowledge of its history, from our family stories, from our remembered images from other texts, from our combined memories and perceptions of Berlin's past. Following the characters from one event to the next, we project these ghosted images of Berlin, World War II, and its aftermath onto the city walled off from itself. The people and the angels in Berlin may be living their events now, but they are surrounded by the ghosts of Events past.

Wings of Desire was released just two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and Wenders returned to Berlin after the fall to film the second chapter, *Far Away, So Close*. Standing for over twenty-eight years, the Berlin Wall could be the image of the Event we describe as 'a divided Berlin.' But as an image type for this particular film, the Wall is more accurately an image of space than event. The Wall occupies space; it encircles space; it keeps one from entering a space and it keeps one from leaving a space. The Wall as an image of space has a very specific intent—it is a constant physical reminder

⁷¹ The film, coincidentally, that I will analyze in Chapter Three is another German film—*Die Wand/The Wall*.

of a separation resulting from *political Events*. Since I will examine more closely how filmic images of space may call into question the viewers' relational position to onscreen objects in Chapter Three, let me turn instead to *ghosting the event-image* of World War II. When we are ghosting the filmic event, viewers may find more in the film than the facts of the war confirm. Viewers may find the event-image more personal, more significant, more meaningful, more mysterious. Basically, I am arguing that *ghosting the event-image* is a way for viewers to expand their participatory emotional experience of an event (fictional or historical) beyond the facticity of its occurrence.

As we think about how we remember the event-images in *Wings of Desire*, we might consider two things: first, *facts*⁷²—what we know about the historical placement of the Event, as well as the resulting social, cultural and political effects the Event had on the city of Berlin; and second, *feelings*⁷³—our emotional response to the resulting affects the *Event* has had on the individuals who lived through it. To further oversimplify, facts may ground us with verifiable knowledge of the Events, but feelings allow us to subjectively empathize with those who have lived through these Events. Like the angels who move through Berlin from one person to the next, stopping to extend a moment of comfort, clarity, or insight, we may witness the event-images as a collection of factual occurrences; but, when we hear the most intimate, interior

⁷² Perhaps the most highly charged and potentially undefinable term in the whole dissertation.

⁷³ Perhaps the most highly charged and potentially undefinable term in the whole dissertation.

conversations one has with one's self, we may then find reason to assign the event-image significance in the context of our subjective experiences.

In this way, *ghosting the filmic event-image* may allow viewers to reconcile fact and feelings. In *Wings of Desire*, World War II is re-imaged in the action of the actors, in the costumes designed to look like uniforms, and in the sets constructed like bombed-out buildings, etc. When intentionally composed, as in Wenders' *mise en scène*, the viewer may experience these images as elemental palimpsests of factual events. For example, the image of a swastika lacks historical significance until a viewer loads it with his or her remembered collection of facts and feelings. In this case, the palimpsest erases the trauma of Event and replaces it with the viewer's physical and emotional responses.

Ghosting an event-image can revive auratic- or uncanny-like sensations in us.

Again, I see the distinction between *Event* and *event* as a function of its intensity and reach. *Filmic events* are images that viewers accept as moments in a character's life, chunks of time shaped by the character's actions, eternally returning as the film plays out each time, in as nearly as exact way, again and again. Although we may recognize the transformative potential an *Event* can have on a character, for most films we are more likely to be moved by the set of personal *events* the characters face than the background *Event*. Sometimes, we bring our ghosts of the *Event* with us to the film, and then we leave with the ghosts of the *events* that transformed the characters who "lived"

through them. In my system, the event-image may be the most complex image type because it cannot appear in isolation.

3.3.1 A brief digression on ordinary language, the open and the 'creaturely', the palimpsest as an event, and ghosting the event-image

As I mentioned earlier, events and space seem inextricably bound together. In choosing a conceptual metaphor to try and explain how one might remember filmic images, I am intentionally forcing my self to consider multiple 'compossibilities' that *ordinary* language may preclude. Rilke, Benjamin, and Wenders have all created images that opens for us a space where we might, if only slightly better, understand those things which cannot be stated or understood in *ordinary* language. To find meaning in an image may require us to enter a space where we co-create the new image. Again, here I'm using space because, in the world we recognize and understand, event cannot happen outside of space. The process of the palimpsest, the ghosting of an image, is an event happening in the space where our ghosts of the image reside.⁷⁴ But, when we try to describe this ghosted image to someone else, the process itself becomes like a re-occurring loop, holding us in place as we cobble together words that are ultimately insufficient. For example, when a reader/viewer attempts to understand the written works or visual images constructed by the poet, philosopher, filmmaker, we are not

⁷⁴ In my system, this is open field of ghosts is probably most like Deleuze's plane of immanence.

only limited by a system of signs—an endless set of ‘signifieds’ and ‘signifiers’—but, we are also trapped in this system that we have built. *Ordinary* language constructs meaning for its users, as Swedish linguist Per Linell explains it, through dialogism—specifically in our interactions, contextualizations, and communicative construction. In other words, the meanings of our words exist in the event of being heard by another, in relation to “co-texts (also with non-verbal aspects), situations, activity types, interlocutors’ interactional biographies and cultural knowledge,” and through the process of attempting to understand.⁷⁵ In this, there are clear echoes of Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva, which may further encourage us to see the *Duino Elegies*, *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, and *Wings of Desire* as three texts in dialogue. However, Linell’s focus on the ordinary language of human conversation is relevant because any language, at its base, regardless of intention, relates meaning only in the process from transmission to reception, from thought to word, from being spoken to being heard, from projection to reception.

If we posit that ordinary language is a liminal system dependent upon an already agreed upon set of denotative and connotative associations to establish meaning, then users of language must share in the assumption that there are inherent gaps and ambiguities (a *lacuna*) where meaning always remains afterwards. Everyday conversation is only possible when both speaker and hearer actively engage in the

⁷⁵ “What is Dialogism,” 2-3.

lacuna, like in the palimpsestic process, negating the other's imagined sense of meaning and completing it with our own. This may account for misunderstanding in ordinary language; but, once we begin to use language to convey more complex abstract thought, the co-mingling of historical, psychological, experiential forces may widen these gaps further. When facing an image that evokes uncanny expressions, for example, we may turn to metaphor to explain that sign without discernible meaning. For me, the power of a painting, a poem, or film lies in its challenge to our imaginative abilities to find meaning in the narrative event. Jacques Maritain describes art as the "mutual entanglement of the World and Self."⁷⁶ But, I believe it's not enough to enter the space, to enter the Open, or an immanent field, we also must enter the event of a poem, a film, or a historical account. When reader/viewers *ghost the event-image*, they enter a space where uncanny expressions are allowed to move us, and, thereby, have meaning despite any verifiable evidence.

Whereas we can make meaning in ordinary language because the meaning is conceivable, when we try to find meaning in auratic affects, an uncanny expression, or the 'language of the Open', we are challenged to use our imaginative powers to conceive of something previously inconceivable. In his essay, "On Language as Such

⁷⁶ *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, 9.

and the Language of Man,"⁷⁷ Benjamin considers the limitation of expression and our attempts to go beyond them:

Mediation, which is the immediacy of all mental communication, is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory, and if one chooses to call this immediacy magic, then the primary problem of language is its magic. At the same time, the notion of magic of language point to something else: its infiniteness. This is conditional on its immediacy. For just because nothing is communicated *through* language, what is communicated *in* language cannot be externally limited or measured, and therefore all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity.

Further, in the introduction to Benjamin's translations of Charles Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*, he addresses the difficulty of translating 'that which is beyond' from one 'ordinary language' to another. He again expresses frustration in that which cannot be communicated and posits that, depending on the context, "It is [something that symbolizes] only in the finite products of language, and [something symbolized] in the evolving languages themselves."⁷⁸ Imagine holding an image in your mind of an event—you are standing in an open field and the 'infiniteness' of choices for finding meaning in the image is 'conditional on its immediacy.' Just as language can open a

⁷⁷ From *Illuminations*, 317.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 79.

space where we may find meaning, so, too, can image open the event of finding meaning.

When we enter the space of the open, we are also entering the process for finding meaning already in progress. For Benjamin, a painting could open a space where he could contemplate the thought-image of a philosophical concept. The *Novus Angelus*, for example, opens the space wherein he can find confirmation of his beliefs in Messianism, where the destructive realities of history are evident, and where his prophetic fears of a fascistic future come true. Even in the infiniteness, where space is opened so expansively it appears erased, when something happens in that open, it confirms our creaturely-ness. A viewer's subjective experience of the event-image finds among the ghosts his history, her life-story, their remembrances of events past. We can imagine meaning in this space in all of its conceivable and inconceivable forms.

In her book, *Walter Benjamin Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, Sigrid Weigel examines Benjamin's critical approaches to the function and ontology of works of art, specifically the tension in his work between the secular and the sacred. In her analysis of Benjamin's essay, "*Goethe's Elective Affinities*", she points out how Benjamin sees symbolism as holding domain over both the meaning that "extends beyond poetry" and the unexpressed event of the narrator.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Weigel states:

⁷⁹ *Walter Benjamin Images*, 86.

The theory of artwork formulated here implies that, on the one hand, the poet must limit himself to his (human) faculty; yet, on the other hand, he is to mark and rupture the limit of his own language in representation and the narrative stance by using it as symbol of a different realm that lies beyond.⁸⁰

It is in the “rupturing the limit of his own language” that we can return to the ghosting of the event-image. Although in “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” Benjamin describes the role of the critic as uncovering beauty’s divine secret, it is clear that he sees artistic expression as reaching beyond the limits of comprehensible, human language.⁸¹ In the rupture, the image’s ‘meaning’ becomes veiled, mysterious, and therefore, divine. If we can now replace ‘rupture’ with ‘palimpsest,’ the negation and creation of images are then like ghosts, who are the “symbol of a different realm that lies beyond.”

3.4 A chorus of angels: Duino Elegies, Theses on the Philosophy of History, and Wings of Desire

Each of the three works portray human experience as a reflection of the historical context in which the work was written, specifically the isolating effects on individuals during and in the aftermath of world wars. The three works are by twentieth century German artist: Rainer Marie Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the*

⁸⁰ Ibid., 86.

⁸¹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 101.

Philosophy of History and Wim Wenders'⁸² *Wings of Desire*. Instead of comparing how each artist uses the image of angel caught in the world subjugated to human historical Events, my reading will look at how the palimpsestic process transforms the image of an angel who desires to transcend the liminal threshold of human experience into one who finds hopes and comfort in that which is beyond language. Here again I argue that as each author initiates another layer in the palimpsestic process, adding new image on top of old, it is we who transform the old image into the new, in this case haunted by the ghosts of angels, acrobats, and crossing over.

Much has already been written about film's ability to create simultaneous affects by engaging multiple sensory experiences creating a work that requires affective participation and reaction. Robert Stam assures us that what the viewer experiences corresponds perfectly with Benjamin's idea of aura expressed in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" because a work of art in film reveals its *auratic* essence through the "enriched field of human perception."⁸³ Although Benjamin warned against movies whose production are ultimately controlled by an industry that places audience reception and profitability over artistic quality, and though it is

⁸² Although Peter Handke is credited as co-screenplay writer with Wenders, Handke's contributions to the creation and shaping of angels is minimal. Handke downplays his contributions to the film in many interviews, despite Wenders insistence that he share credit, especially for the poetic language of the interior voices. As director, producer and screenwriter, Wenders is the driving force in the creation of the myth, told in *Wings of Desire*. Therefore, I'm not ignoring Handke, but using "Wenders" to represent their collaboration.

⁸³ *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 65.

impossible to say whether or not he would find a film like *Wings of Desire* to be *auratic*, there are scenes in Wenders' film that Benjamin would likely find resonate with his and Rilke's works.

In scenes such as when Damiel describes his recollections of the creation and evolution of humankind, or when Peter describes to Damiel the pleasure of physical sensations of drinking coffee or rubbing your hands together, or when the black-and-white world changes to color for Damiel after he chooses to cross over, my sense of aura in these events varies depending on how I remember feeling when reading the "Ninth Thesis" or the "Seventh Elegy," for example. Film mediates event-images differently from the way written texts mediate images, and when we allow our experience with one event-image to co-mingle with the experiences of the others, the events strike us with a simultaneity of a harmonic chord. Adding another layer of metaphor, I think of my *ghosted event-images* as a chorus, where each ghost image is a voice with its own distinct timbre and tone. And, when sounded together, this chorus may produce a new image, a new harmonic tone that is fuller, more complex, perhaps more meaningful or mysterious.

When I return to the *Duino Elegies* or the "Ninth Thesis," I think of Cassiel and Homer, the strong man and the musicians, and Berlin. The aura in *Wings of Desire* is produced in our witness to Events. When I visited Berlin in 2017, the aura of the film was also evident in Potsdamer Platz, and in the Berlin State Library, in a remnant of the

wall with Thierry Noir face, and in the view from Marlene Dietrich Strasse where the U-Bahn still runs. Can an artist create an object which has an aura, and is the aura only accessible through the object she has made? Or does she create an object which may hold the potential for evoking auratic reception in me? Am I the one who ascribes meaning beyond language? When I remember a scene from *Wings of Desire*, the images may evoke an uncanny feeling or an auratic sensation within me. Whereas the palimpsest may wipe away these feelings, in the *ghosting of an image* I am always adding more.

At the risk of being repetitive, *ghosting an image* may be a more effective way to conceptualize adaptations than the palimpsest because it can be applied to a variety of perspectives, projections, receptions, subjectivities, and events. For me, the palimpsestic process implies a movement that is one-direction, and a process by which the viewer is ultimately only able to clearly make out one image at a time. Even when I return to the source image after viewing the *palimpsested* image, the process of negating and re-creating is now applied anew, and the palimpsest becomes the source image erased and re-created through my new reading of the older source image, which is now the new palimpsest. Like a short loop of film, or a gif, the effect on our co-creation is limited to that which is on the loop. No matter how densely layered the palimpsests images are, the only image which can evoke affects, sensations, and responses for the viewer is the image on the top of the *palimpsested layers*; all the images below are being filtered in the

layering. Instead of experiencing the full intensity and context that each ghost image holds, we see the image as though through an opaque glass, or through a scrim of *palimpsested* images; we hear the voices of the ghosts as a crowd's murmur under the loudest voice in the room. So, I propose that each ghost of the event-image has a singularly unique voice,⁸⁴ and that the voices of the ghost images can all speak (or sing) in different vocal parts, creating harmonies and dissonance out of intervals in the story of the event. If these ghosts have voice and can sing together in the open, then when I am *ghosting the image*, I interact with the image like a choirmaster interacts with a choir. I choose which voices to bring forward and amplify and which to push back or soften. I shape how well the voices harmonize together. Because ghosting allows the reader/viewer a richer mixture of possible meanings, ghosting an image is a better analogy for how or why we remember an event-image than the palimpsest.

3.5 Three event-images in *Wings of Desire*

I will identify three event-images in *Wings of Desire* that resonate, echo, or palimpsest an event-image from one or both source texts. Although I will provide some context of the historical milieu in which the source texts were written—the aftermath of World War I in the *Duino Elegies*, and the encroaching drive of fascism in *Thesis on the*

⁸⁴ *Voice*—in the sense that the ghosted image communicates to the viewer; it tries to tell us something specific about the event. The voice of a ghosted image may provide meaning to the image, or it may just further confuse meaning. Taken together, the voices are like a chorus in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Philosophy of History—my main interest is in how the event-images in *Wings of Desire* seem to be haunted by the ghosts of the events from the source text. The three filmic event-images are: war and its aftermath as witnessed by the angel of history; the circus performers and the inverted world; and crossing over. Because Wenders' film can produce a multi-sensorial experience unavailable to the reader of the source images, my analysis will be centered around the event-images on screen. In my readings, the filmic event-image may be a palimpsest of the source event-images, but the filmic event-image is co-created in my ghosting and the merging with the ghosts of the events from the sources. Furthermore, because I believe that these ghosts are wholly our own, the filmic image-events may also be haunted by the realities of our experience at the time of our viewing. From Rilke, writing a hundred years ago, we understand how technology has become more efficiently weaponized and alienating; for Benjamin, we see Russian interference through social media bots as the perfection of the form he warns against in "Art in the Age of Technological Reproduction"; and since the release of *Wings of Desire* in 1987, we can better understand the significance of the Berlin Wall especially now that it's gone.

3.5.1 The aftermath of war and the Angel of History

For Rainer Marie Rilke loneliness and isolation are chronic temperaments that appear throughout his work and trouble his personal life. Although he is a German Modernist poet whose influence on that movement cannot be understated, and whose

continued influence makes him one of the best-selling poets of the past hundred years, the events in his life tell a story of an archetypical Romantic poet of the imagination. His earnings were never enough to provide adequate financial support for him, his wife and child (whom he abandoned), and he often lived off the generosity of several patrons.

Rilke started the *Duino Elegies* in 1912 while staying at the Duino Castle as a guest of Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, and he worked on the *Elegies* sporadically until 1922. Like Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, the elegies were not simply put away during breaks in Rilke's writing; he meditates on them constantly, revising and restructuring them without writing them down. Then, in energetic bursts of inspiration that lasts for days at a time, he would write one or two new elegies. He is interrupted from writing several times, such as in 1916 when he is conscripted into a year's military service, and afterwards when his bouts of depression became debilitating.

A theme evident in the *Duino Elegies* common to the writers and thinkers who fought (or otherwise served) in the first World War is that the human condition lacks meaning. The *loss of meaning* became a common trope because the events of war, the accumulation of violent actions of soldier against soldier, demonstrated how humans lack humanity. In other words, we are more creaturely than we care to admit. If you were to look at an Event as way to find meaning for your existence, and what you saw there were acts of brutality and horror, then you, too, might begin to feel life has no

meaning. In the *Elegies*, the speaker suffers because he lives in a world where events are devoid of ontological meaning and where sustained relevance cannot be produced. However, though the speaker may not find meaning to these events, he may find relief in the search for meaning. As a poetic form, the elegy is traditionally a form of lament for something lost through death or war. Rilke's *Duino Elegies* break with the traditional form in that the speaker is not mourning death, but mourning life—the whole of human condition because it is always lacking, always searching for meaning, always reaching out to unreachable Open. Here, we could draw parallels between the speaker in the *Elegies*, who finds moments of relief in the search for an ontological meaning, and Rilke, who attempts to find meaning by breaking away from the traditional elegiac form. Perhaps for Rilke, the event is the creation of a new elegy, a process in which he may find relief.

Walter Benjamin did not witness the aftermaths of World War II, the defeat of fascism and rise of totalitarian communism, a divided Berlin, etc., but he imagined the horrors produced by the “chain of events, [which is] one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of [the angel of history’s] feet.”⁸⁵ In the “Ninth Thesis,” Benjamin asserts that the aftermath of war will always be with us and will always haunt us, because the aftermath of all war is cumulative.

⁸⁵ “Ninth Thesis,” 258.

Wenders makes both direct and indirect references to Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, as well as other concepts from *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*. In the director's commentary, Wenders explains how he decided to film in Berlin before knowing what the story would be. At first, he thought the subject would revolve around children, but as he walked throughout the city daily looking for ideas, he began to think of the images of angels as if they are guardians inhabiting Berlin and comforting its citizens. Furthermore, every day after his walks, he would return to explore his notes at his desk, over which hung "a painting of an angel by Paul Klee."⁸⁶ Though in the commentary Wenders doesn't name this painting, it was a print of Klee's *Angelus Novus* (Figure 6). The well-known image comes from the "Ninth Thesis" of *Theses on the Philosophy of History*:

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no

⁸⁶ "Audio commentary"

longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁸⁷

For Benjamin, the painting could open an imaginary space where he can erase and re-create the Klee image; Benjamin's angel is the palimpsest translating into written language an interpretative commentary on what Klee's angel is witnessing, feeling, and experiencing.

The Klee painting is simple; Benjamin's thesis complex. The angel witnesses the pile of a single catastrophe—the non-stop human destruction brought on by wars. Though he cannot turn his head to see the future, he doesn't need to—the future pushes forward in one single catastrophe. The angel feels compelled to help relieve the suffering, but is stopped by the storm of Progress. Benjamin says the storm blows from Paradise, which in German—*Paradeise*, connotes the Garden of Eden, and the prideful fall of humankind. This angel has witnessed destructive accumulation since the beginning of time, and he is horrified by how unaware humans are that the series of linked *Events* is not a causal chain, but is, instead, one continuous movement. Wenders and Benjamin share this water-color image, and from it Benjamin makes a ghost of the *Angelus*, Wenders makes a ghost of Benjamin's ghost.

⁸⁷ *Illuminations*, 258.



Figure 6 Novus Angelus Paul Klee 1920

Wenders slips in a reference to Klee's painting as Daniel and Cassiel (Otto Sander), the two "lead" angels of the film, walk past various students reading to

themselves in the Berlin State Library. As students pour over texts, copying musical scores, literary texts and philosophical treatises, thinking aloud for only the angels (and audience) to hear, a cacophonous chorus of inner voices reciting multiple textual references buzzing through the implied silence of the library. The second clearly audible voice that we hear says:

Walter Benjamin kaufte 1921 Paul Klees Aquarell *Angelus Novus*. Bis zu seiner Flucht aus Paris im Juni 1940 hing es in seinen wechselnden Arbeitszimmern. In seiner letzten Schrift, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (1940), interpretierte er das Bild als Allegorie des Rückblicks auf die Gesichte. (qtd. in Cook)⁸⁸

This reference is brief, and it would be easy to dismiss or ignore it as one in a series of literary allusions in the library scene. Many of the allusions are to works that reference angels or the end of the world; however, the Benjamin reference is important considering the thematic focus the next minutes of the film takes after this.

Many of the Berliner angels gather everyday in the Berlin State Library, where history is held and recalled — a form of the collective *Jetztzeit*⁸⁹ that humans can understand. As students and patrons read texts to themselves — their inner voices

⁸⁸ “Walter Benjamin purchased Paul Klee’s watercolor *Angelus Novus* in 1921. It hung in his office until his escape from Paris in June 1940. In his last essay, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, he interprets the picture as an allegory for the looking-backwards at history” [my translation]. When I first heard this, I could only make out the first sentence and a half, and it’s not included in the English captions; the rest of this quote is swallowed up by the other voices in the library. Roger Cook quotes this whole passage directly from the screenplay for *Der Himmel über Berlin*.

⁸⁹ Another Benjaminian term that I will unpack in the event-image of crossing over.

whispering as if sharing secrets with their deepest and most personal selves—the angels stand close to or put hands on their shoulders to help them concentrate more clearly. At this point in the film, a new character enters who is the human equivalent of the Angel of History—the old man, Homer.

In the character of Homer, Wenders fuses two textual constructs—the epic poet and chronicler of ancient wars, and the *Novus Humanus, the Human of History* who has been witness to the greatest atrocities of the twentieth century and who now evokes the muse of peace to help him tell the story of humankind. As he climbs the stairs Homer stops on the landing to face Daniel who is descending, and as if addressing the unseen angel, he says:

Tell me, muse of the storyteller, who has been thrust to the edge of the world, both an infant and an ancient and through him reveal everyman. With time those who listened to me became my readers. [...] I'm an old man with a broken voice, but the tale still rises from the depths, and the mouth slightly opened repeats it as clearly as powerfully. A liturgy for which no one needs to be initiated to the meaning of words and sentences.

Homer has witnessed the destructive forces of Nazism first-hand. As he walks the ruins of Potsdamer Platz, his memories are intercut with documentary footage of the Platz before and after the Allied bombing. Viewers see the past and present simultaneously, as if the events of the old Platz were happening again, the images layered onto the

buildings and space. And as Homer guides the viewer through the ruins of the city destroyed and divided, a living witness to the city's trauma, he speaks his poem of peace in his human language. He acknowledges that he is inadequate to describe the terror of these human-caused events. Potsdamer Platz is filled with ineffable remnants—the unspeakable ruins—fragments of buildings testifying to lives no longer there. The Event and the space are *imaged* together tightly in this scene. Berlin is haunted by Berlin.

Damiel and Cassiel, too, are not only present in the now, but also aware and able to recall the historical fragments of time past; however, because their past is eternal, they more fully image the Angel of History. Damiel is painfully aware of the historical events that led Berlin to its current state, and, like the Angel of History, he is frustrated by his inability to do nothing more than witness human activities and praise the absent Creator. He reports to other angels, not to God, about the small human miracles and large atrocities. In Wenders's filmic world, the creator God is removed from human activities, though possibly evident in the moments when the angels provide slight relief to humans' suffering. In *Wings of Desire*, angels are not *schreckliche*; these angels are separated from humans and aware of the suffering the historical Events creates, but they are also able to provide slight comfort from the personal events of daily lives.

3.5.2 *The circus performance/the acrobatic feat*

The second event-image from *Wings of Desire* palimpsested from the *Duino Elegies* is the circus performers' acrobatic feats. Whereas, the angels exist both as liminal creatures in the 'beyond' —in the heavenly realms of eternal time— and as spirit-comforters with limited access to earthly experience, they, too are search for meaning, like humans, in a world outside of their experience. In both texts, the circus imagery and characters invert (in the Bakhtinian sense) the relationship between the earthly and the heavenly.⁹⁰ And in the event-images of the circus performance, humanity finds a grace that eludes historical Events. Instead of humans who are more like creatures debased by war, in the circus performance humans seem capable of transcending their humanity. Bakhtin uses the carnival to explore the idea of the world turned upside down, and though this may not have been Rilke's intention in evoking images of the circus performers, particularly in the "Fifth," "Seventh," and "Tenth Elegies," he has transformed the saltimbanques from Picasso's painting (*Figure 7*) into characters who make the familiar strange.

Rilke was surrounded by artists most of his adult life. For several years in Paris, he worked as Auguste Rodin's personal secretary; he was married to the sculptor Clara Westhoff; and he counted among his friends many well-known artists, such as Paul

⁹⁰ For more on the carnivalesque, see M.M. Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Cezanne. However, this painting in particular haunted him in a way similar to how Benjamin was haunted by Klee's *Novus Angelus*. In a letter to Lou Salomé, Rilke tells her how Pablo Picasso's 1905 painting of a family of circus performers, *La famille de Saltimbanques*, was the inspiration for the "Fifth Elegy." This poem is dedicated to Frau Hertha Koenig, who owned the painting, and who, for several months in 1915, allowed him to live in her house in Widenmayer Strasse where the painting hung.⁹¹



Figure 7 *La famille de Saltimbanques* Pablo Picasso 1905

⁹¹ Leishman, "Commentary" *Duino Elegies*, Norton, 102.

Like Benjamin's *Novus Angelus*, Rilke meditates on this painting for long periods while living at Frau Koenig's winter home, and it is from this meditation that he conceives the poetic event-image of the circus performance. From the opening lines of the "Fifth Elegy," the circus performers are shown as the human counterpoint to his terrifying angels. The elegy opens with an inquiry:

Wer aber *sind* sie, sag mir, die Fahrenden, diese ein wenig
 Flüchtigern noch als wir selbst, die dringend von früh an
 Wringt ein *wem, wem* zuliebe
 Niemals zufriedener Wille? Sondern er wringt sie,
 Biegt sie, schlingt sie unde schwingt sie,
 Wirft sie und fägt sie zurück; wie aus geölter,
 Glatterer Luft kommen sie nieder
 auf dem verzehrten, von irhem ewigen
 Aufsprung dünneren Teppich, diesem verlorenen
 Teppich in Weltall. (Spender, 46)⁹²

⁹² The following translation is taken from both Spender's and Mitchell's. I combined my preferred imagery and language from one poem with the images and language of the other, then mixed it together with a few translated images of my own. This palimpsest of the "Fifth Elegy" is my ghosting of poetic images in translation. All other "translations" in this chapter are like this, unless otherwise cited.

But tell me, who *are* they, these exiles, even more
 fleeting than we ourselves, these — who since their youngest days — urgently
 wrestle with *whom*, for *whose* sake:
 the Will which will never be appeased.

In the earlier elegies, the angels look down on the earthly creatures, almost mockingly, as we try to find meaning in human terms and through human means. But in this elegy, Rilke presents the family of travelling acrobats and circus performers as the embodiments of our attempts to leap into the Open.

Acrobatics and feats of strength demand intense concentration and determination; to flip and twist and land on your feet takes not only prolonged physical conditioning, but also the will to continue despite hundreds of failed attempts. Like the threadbare carpet on which they land, the saltimbanques portrayed in Rilke's poem are worn down by their very existence. As this elegy continues, we see the old strongman decrepit—now, half the man he used to be, made impotent by the long years of superhuman feats; and we see the young acrobat, “like the son of a neck / and a nun: so taught and powerfully filled / with muscle and innocence.” In these two character-images, we see human creatures desiring to transcend beyond the limits that their earthly bodies constrain. The young acrobat, naïve to his physical limitations, believes he may find access to that which is beyond by constantly training, through his persistent attempts to ‘land the trick’—a process of creating perfect physical control of

It keeps wringing them
 bending, slinging, swinging them,
 hurling them and snatching them back again; and as if out of
 the slick well-oiled sky, they fall
 onto that carpet made threadbare by their constant leaping—
 that eternally lost, infinite carpet.

one's self over a single moment in time and space. And we see the wrinkled strongman—

shriveled up in a mighty skin, which looks as if it had once
 contained *two* men, and now one
 lies already in the churchyard, while the other lives on without him,
 deaf and sometimes a little
 strange in his withered skin.

While the young acrobat searches for the perfection of a physical feat, the old strongman is half-dead from his years of trying. Here again, grace and transcendence into the Open are symbolized in the event-image of the attempt. Because the acrobat and strongman attempt feats that are beyond the "normal" capabilities of most of us, their attempts give the event significance and meaning, even if their attempts never succeed.

In the final strophe of the "Fifth Elegy," Rilke returns to the figure of Angel, to whom the speaker poses a question:

Angel: what if there's a place that we cannot know of, and there
 on a carpet we cannot speak of, lovers show us
 that which they could never master here, the audacious
 exploits of their high-flying hearts,
 the towers of sensual desire, their

ladders, upright in place where there is no ground,
 leaning against each other, trembling—and there they have mastered it,
 showing off for the surrounding crowds, the countless silent dead.

Although the speaker is addressing the angel, the images allude to the acrobats practicing on the carpet, with their “high-flying hearts” and “ladders, upright in place where there is no ground.” As he has done throughout the *Elegies*, Rilke imagines that sexual union provides fleeting access to the Open. But here the inversion is in the supposition. Rilke admits that this is a place we cannot enter. The carpet that once was threadbare through our excessive attempts to leap beyond is now the bed on which lovers perform for the dead. The performance may promise a transcendence beyond earthly existence, but at what cost? The lovers are showered with coins of happiness—an odd image that reiterates the strange and mysterious power of a circus performance to invert physical human desire into a metaphysical resolution of that desire.

If Wenders has made a palimpsest of this Rilkean image in the filmic images of Marion (Solveig Dommartin) on the trapeze, and the viewer doesn't know the *Elegies*, then the viewer may think of her performance only as an expression of hope. But, when the viewer ghosts the filmic event-image with the saltimbanques, the hopefulness of Marion may seem to draw deeper contrast against the grief that human desire instills in the *Elegies*. For Wenders, an angel becoming human is a means to escape the Open. Human suffering is preferable to the eternal chorus of hallelujahs, because the grief that

humans suffer in desire dissolves in human love.⁹³ Daniel falls in love with Marion, and his desire for her gives him the courage to fall to earth. Daniel is not the only character who crosses over; other have crossed before him, and others will cross after him. But, only as a human can Daniel touch, taste, see colors, and most importantly love. Crossing over in *Wings of Desire* is an event that begins in the Open and ends in the circus, but it is in the moments when Daniel is present for Marion's trapeze rehearsals, and in the scene just after, that initiates Daniel's desire.

Whereas the angel Daniel must cross-over into human form to fulfill his desire to be *here* in the earthly world, Marion transcends her humanity, like the young acrobat in the *Elegies*, flying on a trapeze wearing angel wings. As a trapeze artist, she embodies the Bakhtinian circus-inversion. We hear her interior monologue, which inverts the usual trope of 'fulfilled desire' in two ways: first, as the one who is desired, it is she—not the hero who has journeyed to find her—who declares her love for the one who desires her; second, she defines their union as being perfected in their separateness. Marion proposes that their story will be the greatest ever told, the story of a man and a woman. Badiou describes the Event of love as beginning in the encounter and "sealed by the declaration: I love you."⁹⁴ He continues, "Once the encounter is determined in the declaration, whatever form this may take, the amorous experience in the strict sense

⁹³ One of the four philosophical Events in Badiou's system.

⁹⁴ Badiou, *Philosophy and the Event*, 43

begins: that of a world 'existed' by two."⁹⁵ Declaring her love before the encounter inverts the usual sequence of events; defining union by its separateness is what Badiou describes as the creative act of love—the construction of a singular experience out of difference.⁹⁶

We first see Marion on the trapeze rehearsing for the evening performance. As Daniel watches her, circling her from below, moving around the circus ring as if he could be *here* to catch her if she fell. She finishes her practice when the circus owner announces their last performance will be tonight. She leaves the tent and walks to her trailer, where, as she begins to undress, she describes (in French) her loneliness to the silent and unseen Daniel. Her final thoughts in the long voice-over describe the feelings of desire they both share:

[...]How should I think? I know so little. Maybe because I'm too curious. I often think so wrongly, because I think as if I was talking to someone else. Inside closed eyes, close your eyes again. Then even the stones come alive. Be close to the colors! The colors. Neon lights in the evening sky, red and yellow S-Bahn. Longing. Longing for a wave of love that would stir in me. That's what makes me clumsy, the absence of pleasure. Desire for love. Desire to love.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 43

⁹⁶ Ibid, 44

This is an important scene for Daniel because it is the encounter which begins the event of love. The scene is shot in black-and-white, so we see her as if through Daniel's eyes, and as she continues her thoughts, Daniel reacts as if they are his thoughts and feelings, too. Like her, he is a foreigner who always ends up at the Wall, but for him the wall is the separation dividing earth from the Open, angel from human. She says she talks to herself like she's talking to someone else while Daniel stares directly into her eyes. She says the stones come alive, and he picks up the shadow of a stone from her desk. And then speaking as if to the one who desires her, she tells him to stay close to the colors. Again, the scene is shot in black-and-white because Wenders is allowing us to see as Daniel, the "absent presence" who lacks color, sees.⁹⁷ The separation between the two is made even further evident as he reaches out to touch her bare shoulders. She admits an absence of pleasure—an absence that he shares, and then the space changes, from black-and-white to color, as we seem to cross from the angelic to the human world.

Wenders and Rilke use the circus performance as the event in which desire is not only revealed, but also resolved. The next to last event-image is of the two lovers, who have by now consummated their love—Daniel standing on the ground firmly holding the rope on which Marion performs an acrobatic dance above. This final carnivalesque

⁹⁷ Here the viewer is ghosting the image in that we are both present in the event-image, but absent from the earthly world in color. More on the viewer as the ghost present/not-present in the filmic world in the following two chapters.

inversion — angel on earth, human in flight — conveys their full consummation of separateness and connectedness.

The scene begins with the viewer looking upwards at Marion, her body fully in-frame, backlit by the skylights, and slowly spinning on the acrobat's rope. Daniel's voice-over tells us something happened, an event we did not see, but the aftermath of which is symbolized in their shared participation in her dance above. Then, in a medium shot of Daniel, sleeves rolled up, holding the rope tightly, providing the needed resistance to balance Marion's weight above. He watches her while the voice-over continues, narrating their story that he says is still happening. Wenders cuts to medium shot of Marion, camera elevated at the same height, her body centered in the frame. Marion moves, separated visually from Daniel. A brief full shot shows the space in which this performance is happening — a large ballroom with both lovers center-frame. Daniel stands below, firmly planting himself in place, holding the rope on which Marion seemingly effortlessly floating above — the brevity of this shot alluding to the ephemeral nature of physical consummation. The remainder of the scene cuts between shots of the two, again visually separating them.

Daniel says he has found home with her, and while her graceful shadow spins around the shadow of the rope — this shadow image layered over the painting of a couple dancing on the ballroom wall, he continues, "It happened once, only once, therefore forever." We cut from the shadow on the wall to Marion spinning more and

more quickly. Daniel says: "The picture that we have created will be with me when I die. I will have lived within it. First the amazement about the two of us. Amazement about man and woman has made a human being of me." The sequence and length of the shots in this scene echo the moment of climax that Rilke imagines: first, each of two clearly distinguishable performers/lovers are shown separately in 7-10 second shots; each performer must use the acrobat's equipment, the rope, to counter-balance one's self against the other⁹⁸; the fully imaged man and woman in shared acrobatic feat is an ephemeral expression, a brief 2-3 second shot that resolves back into the longer 7-15 second shots of the two lovers who are again separated afterwards.

Then we return to an extreme close-up of the poet's hand, presumably Daniels' as he records in his journal, echoing the image that opened the film. In the journal, the circus performance is an event-image on which the poet reflects—a palimpsest for the angel, for the poet, for the viewer. If we remember the opening image, a poet's hand writing in black ink on white paper, filmed from the perspective of the angel in black-and-white, the words appearing as they are spoken, "Als das Kind Kind war," [when the child was a child], then we may see this later image as the completion of the love story of Daniel and Marion. The image of Marion and Daniel performing an acrobatic feat is evidence of the words written in Daniel's hand, now filmed in color, again

⁹⁸ the rope which makes the performance possible, it is the instrument which exists only in the efforts of the simultaneous two.

spoken as he writes them, "Ich weiss jetzt, / Was kein Engel weiss." [I now know/ what no angel knows.] Remembering Rilke's circus images, and the auratic affect that those palimpsests once had on me, while watching *Wings of Desire*, the image I create and hold has meaning in the context of my viewing. I prefer the hopefulness of these images, which, as Badiou says, the creative event of love makes possible. Whereas in the *Elegies*, the circus performers can never fully enter the space where the angels reside, in the filmic event-images of the circus performance and of crossing over, we may understand that humans are no more bound to their creaturely-ness than angels are to their "angel-ness." The acrobatic feat is an event-image in which love creates the possibility for crossing over.

3.5.3 *Crossing over and Jetztzeit*

Although the film is not what one would call a 'faithful' adaptation of Rilke's poems, in the short documentary, *Angels Among Us*,⁹⁹ Wenders tells the interviewer how he loves the *Duino Elegies* and how they had a direct thematic influence on the film. The idea of *Wings of Desire* came to him when he returned to Berlin after an eight-year absence. He describes how he would read the *Elegies* nightly, and how while walking in Berlin, he was struck by the images, painting, and statues of angels everywhere. After reading Rilke and re-witnessing the city where some of the worst evils put upon the

⁹⁹ From the MGM Special Edition DVD of *Wings of Desire* (2003).

world in the twentieth century were conceived, Wenders decided that he wanted his film to show how, despite the isolation of individuals and the piles of destruction left behind by human history, fulfillment of desire is possible. In *Wings of Desire*, Wenders re-imagines Rilke's *schreckliche Engel* as Daniel, a Berliner Engel whose desire for human love is the impetus for crossing over.

For my reading of crossing over as an event-image, I will need to describe the space where the character *starts* and the space where he crosses *to*. Crossing over requires a movement of simultaneously entering one space while exiting another; furthermore, in order to exist in the different spaces, to cross over may require a transformation from one state of being to another. Because crossing over implies radical transition, the event may be seen in political as well as personal terms; therefore, I will also discuss Benjamin's concept of *Jetztzeit* as the contingent event wherein love becomes revolutionary. By ghosting the event-image of crossing over, allowing the ghosts of Rilke's and Benjamin's images to haunt the event-image of *Daniel's crossing over*, I may experience that filmic image as a mixture of the 'schreckliche Engel' incapable of leaving the Open with the images of the Angel of History rupturing history through the revolutionary event of love. In other words, because I choose which ghosts are present in the image, the meaning I might hold for the filmic event-image is the product of my choosing.

I define 'crossing over' as simply an event-image in which a character moves from one liminal space to another. Because these spaces are separate and distinguishable, crossing over implies that the character experiences a transformational existence when crossing from one space into another. Furthermore, crossing over is an event-image that can appear as transition out of and into other spaces to which we can assign liminality—*human/angel* might be one set of spaces; *here/now* might be another. To define more specifically what crossing over might mean, I must first consider the space from whence the character comes.

The *Elegies* and the film share a mythological construct that angels and humans exist in separate spaces clearly delineated by a "wall" of perceivable existence. *Die Engel* perceive their existence as an eternity in the Open; the circus performers perceive their lives as earthly creatures in the human world. For viewers, our experience in the filmic Open are auditory—a multitude of subjective existences expressed through their interior monologues, the space reverberates with a chorus-like effect as we are witnesses listening to the thoughts of ordinary humans, poets, carnival performers, actors, citizens of a city ruined and ravaged by war. Berliners are surrounded by the history marked off in the passing seasons of nature, the remains of city, and their language seems incapable of voicing the incomplete. Viewers also experience the Open as a space visually differentiated by lack of color—we know we are seeing Berlin and its

people from the point of view of the angel when the images onscreen are in black-and-white. The angels are timeless, outside of history yet troubled by its terrifying effects.

For the speaker of the *Duino Elegies*, angels exist in the Open—the metaphysical space beyond human comprehension, where human-creatures can find, if albeit only temporary, solace against loneliness. This Open is “that we didn’t know of, and there/ on some unsayable carpet, lovers displayed/ what they never could bring to mastery here—the bold/ exploits of their high-flying hearts.”¹⁰⁰ Earthly creatures may enter that angelic space, and for the briefest of moments gain mastery over things which eluded us in the creaturely space. It is in the Open where our desires are fulfilled; but having existed in the Open forever, the angels are too much fulfilled. They appear at times to us as frightening, terrible, and always more than we can comprehend.

The tension between the search for fulfillment and the terror in finding it is seen in the first strophe of the first elegy. Rilke begins the “First Elegy” with the poet’s cry to be heard and understood:

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels’
 hierarchies? and even if one of them pressed me
 suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed
 into that overwhelming existence. For beauty is nothing
 but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure,

¹⁰⁰ *Duino Elegies*, Mitchell translation, 181.

and we are so awed because it serenely disdains
to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying.¹⁰¹

If we take the speaker to be a ghost of Rilke, the modernist bound up by his own romantic ideals of love, we hear him crying out for a transcendent union with another, even though he knows that this union will also be his demise. To be one with another fully means *you* are no longer *you*. In the “Second Elegy,” Rilke addresses *you* — which can be the lovers, the angels, himself, and/or his readers — who has approached the limits of *your* body:

So you *promise* eternity, almost,
from the embrace. And yet, when you have survived
the terror of the first glances, the longing at the window,
the first walk together, once only, through the garden:
lovers, *are* you the same? When you lift yourselves up
to each other’s mouth and your lips join, drink against drink:
oh how strangely each drinker seeps away from his action.¹⁰²

The crossing over, from individual to *you*, may be brief, but it is never fully complete. The lovers’ passionate embrace glances the boundary’s outer limit before they must

¹⁰¹ *DE*, Mitchell translation, 151.

¹⁰² *DE*, Mitchell, 159.

return to their creaturely-ness. However, whereas sexual encounters are ephemeral, for Rilke's speaker loneliness persists.

In the poetic world of the *Elegies*, the wall that separates humans from the Open is our "creaturely-ness." As Eric L. Santner describes it, this idea of the human condition is shared by Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, Franz Kafka, Franz Rosenzweig, and Paul Celan. It is a "tradition" that Santner characterizes as "German-Jewish," as these contemporaneous writers place "the creaturely at the center of their literary and philosophical elaborations of *human* life under conditions of modernity."¹⁰³ Although Rilke was a non-practicing Catholic, in the "Eighth Elegy" we can see his affinity for this "tradition" in his description of the human condition:

Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreature
 das Offene. Nur unsre Augen sind
 wie umgekehrt und ganz um sie gestellt
 als Fallen, rings um ihren freien Ausgang.¹⁰⁴

Even if the Open is accessible to the creature, our human condition gets in our way. We forget that we can see into the Open because our sight is constantly pulled back in a solipsistic gaze that precludes us from seeing beyond ourselves. We are spectators, staring frozen and incapable of participating in the event. Santner sees a similar gesture

¹⁰³ *On Creaturely Life*, 12.

¹⁰⁴ All creatures look with eyes turned out/ to the Open. But our eyes are/turned back, inward, as if our gaze has surrounded and trapped our escape [my translation]. *DE*, Mitchell, 151.

in Benjamin's "Origin of German Tragic Drama," positing that Benjamin "argues that the melancholy affect 'emerges from the depths of the creaturely realm' and 'is the most genuinely creaturely of the contemplative impulses.'"¹⁰⁵ Whether melancholy or ennui, grief or desire, it is suffering that distinguishes human experience from angels. In this 20th Century German literary tradition, humans can access the Open, but only briefly; and those who have crossed and returned may become so entranced by the memory of the image of crossing over, they become stuck. Instead of moving us to attempt again a transcendence of our human creaturely-ness, the image locks us in place, and we become like static observers — paralyzed by those haunting images of our previous moments of transcendence; or frozen by our desire to re-enact the remembered event-image when the acrobat performed his feat perfectly and crossed from earth to the Open.

The *Elegies* are inhabited by creatures of the Open and creatures of the earth. In the Open, there are angels and orders of angels. On earth, there are plants, animals, and human creatures; and though neither space subjugates its inhabitants to traditional hierarchies, like the "great chain of being" or ranks of archangel, cherubim, seraphim, etc., on earth human creatures fall between puppets, unable to see the master pulling their strings, and circus performers, upsetting authority with amazing feats of magic,

¹⁰⁵ *On Creaturely Life*, 16.

strength, or acrobatics. The angels, on the other hand, are *schrecklich*¹⁰⁶—terrible, awesome, inciting fear or dread. They are the ones whom the speaker cries out to, not God, for comfort. But they are absurd figures, beyond understanding, beyond language, beyond the earthly boundaries that limit human creatures. They are horrifying because they exist in the Open, they are incapable of relieving human suffering, and they are stuck in the *Jetztzeit* that is always now and always past. Rilke’s angels occupy the Open space inaccessible to humans, where they are reflections of the creature world.¹⁰⁷ The angels of the *Duino Elegies* are like Benjamin’s Angel of History in that they are witnesses to human suffering, but paralyzed and unable to help.

However, in the mythology of *Wings of Desire*, crossing over permanently is possible for angels—they can leave the space and time beyond human comprehension, where one exists eternally without the physical or emotional suffering of human existence, and enter human space, where they can have agency which may incite, shape, or give meaning to events. Like the Rilkean Open, Daniel, the angel who desires union with another, exists in an atemporal space beyond human comprehension. He can hear the most deeply held personal thoughts of humans, and can even enter the dream of the woman he loves. Yet, what he lacks are those bodily sensations (touch, taste, smell, and

¹⁰⁶ “Jeder Engel ist schrecklich” –*Every* angel is terrible [emphasis mine].

¹⁰⁷ This is reminiscent of a line from Czesław Miłosz’s 1954 prose poem *Esse*,¹⁰⁷ “I was left behind with the immensity of existing things. A sponge, suffering because it cannot saturate itself; a river, suffering because reflections of clouds and trees are not clouds and trees” (*Notebooks*, 7).

color) that both connects and separates one human from another. Without a human body, Daniel recognizes his desire for complete spiritual union with another will always be unfulfilled. In the Open where Wenders' angels reside, human separateness is preferable to an existence that has no effect on history. Whereas the inward turning of one's gaze is a mark of the creaturely for Rilke's speaker, for Daniel the mark of his creaturely-ness has meaning in the act of joining in and reveling with earthly humans.

One image of crossing over can be seen in the story of Peter Falk, who arrives in Berlin to star in a movie set in Nazi Germany, and who is a former angel. Falk plays the character Peter Falk, whom everyone recognizes as the fictional, iconic Detective Columbo character. His identity as Peter Falk, the American actor, is further complicated when he reveals that he crossed over thirty years previously. So, Falk plays two roles: he is himself, an iconic American character actor, as well as the fallen angel Peter Falk, who has successfully navigated life as a human. The key to Falk's success as a human comes from his unquenchable *joi de vivre*. Not only is he fully human, but he has memory of his angel existence, and he can sense when angels are around. Peter tells Daniel what life among earthly creatures is like:

I can't see you, but I know you are here. I feel it. You've been hanging around since I got here. I wish I could see your face. Just look into your eyes and tell you how good it is to be here. Just to touch something. See that's cold. That feels good. Here. To smoke, to have coffee. And if you do it together, it's fantastic. Or

to draw...Or when you're cold you rub your hands together. That feels good. There's so many good things. But you're not here. I'm here. I wish you were here. I wish you could talk to me because I'm a friend. *Compañero*.

In an earlier conversation with Cassiel that covers the whole of earthly history, Daniel explains to Cassiel his frustration with his angelic life and wonders about crossing over: "Yes!" Daniel exclaims, "To conquer a history for myself...*I've been on the outside long enough. Absent long enough. Long enough out of the world. Let me enter the history of the world. If only to hold an apple in my hand... Look.*"¹⁰⁸

The contrast between the life of these angels and the life of humans, between Daniel and Falk, is exaggerated in Falk's constant use of *here*. Angel time is all inclusive, the whole of history is one Event; but Daniel's event is *here*. This is where Wenders' film creates an event significantly different from Benjamin's (or Rilke's) — angels (and humans) can find relief for their desires. *Here* is the space in which events happen, not in the Open, and it is *here* where the angel crosses *to*. Here is where the angel becomes an agent of change. This 'Wendersian here' is not about Event in time or even place; it is the personal *event* (lowercase *e*) that follows the *Jetztzeit* for one angel.

We may think of *Jetztzeit* in the Benjaminian way wherein the here/now is so politically, culturally, socio-economically situated that revolution must follow. Although here/now might have us assume we are placed in space/time, this *Jetztzeit* is

¹⁰⁸ From the English captions to *WoD. Anniversary Issue* (italics in original).

more like a *Geist* (though not a *Zeitgeist*) that appears just before an event, be it an artistic, scientific, or historical *Event*. *Jetztzeit* can precede even the most personal of all *events*, love. For Daniel, most of the film occurs in the *Jetztzeit* before he elects to fall to humanity. He listens to Peter explain the physical sensations of material historicity, and he watches Marion, who is acutely aware of herself as alive in her desire.

When they meet after his crossing, it is Marion who understands what is happening. She tells him (and the viewer directly) how great the significance this event they are about to experience is. Without speaking Daniel hands Marion a glass of wine, as if partaking of communion, and before they kiss she stops him and says, "it must finally become serious". She continues in a long monologue:

I was never lonely, neither when I was alone, nor with others. But I would have liked to be alone at last. Loneliness means I'm finally whole. Now I can say it as tonight, I'm at last alone... I don't know if there's destiny, but there's a decision. [You] Decide! We are now the times...the whole world is taking part in our decision. We two are now more than us two. We incarnate something...I am ready. Now, it's your turn. You hold the game in your hand. Now or never [Jetzt oder nie!]. You need me. You will need me...Last night I dreamt of a stranger, of my man. Only with him could I be alone, open to him, wholly open, wholly for him. Welcome him wholly into me, surround him with the labyrinth of shared happiness. I know it's you.

“Jetzt oder nie!” She understands the importance of the here/now and its import to the impending event. Whereas Daniel has crossed over because of his desire for her, she is giving up all that she has—her individuality—out of her desire to be more. Together, what they have given up makes possible their shared desire—to write a history, unlike any two that’s come before or after, of two who are one and still two. Crossing over to *here/now* is an event-image with personal greater affect on the viewer, even in the context of a city haunted by its historical *Event*.

3.6 Conclusion

Although the two earlier written texts, Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and Benjamin’s *Angel of History*, have a clear and direct influence on the later filmic text *Wings of Desire*, it would be misleading to imply that this film is a traditional adaptation of either the poems or the thesis. Each text has not only created its own separate mythological space populated by angels and circus performers, but as palimpsests, they are also connected by themes of the destructive power of history moving beyond human control or comprehension, earthly creaturely-ness and the “heavenly realms,” and the fulfillment of human desire for connection with another. These works are extraordinary expressions that reveal secrets about the hidden and unknowable. They are wholly separate works haunting each other, as well as haunted by the participating observer. Just as one author regenerates the myth of the other, we, too, are creatures of the earth searching for and creating meaning out of the voices of angels.

4 CHAPTER THREE: GHOSTING SPATIAL-IMAGES: ENTERING THE FILMIC SPACE OF *THE WALL*

4.1 Entering imagined and filmic spaces

In the first two chapters, I presented *ghosting the character-image* and *ghosting the event-image* as processes by which we transform filmic images into ghosts that inhabit our memory. In this chapter I will apply *ghosting images* to the viewers' experience with filmic space. I think of filmic space as existing in multiple possible dimensions, both real and imagined. Whereas a *spatial-image* is projected on to a materially liminal screen, filmic space transcends the screen, opened up or amplified by the viewers' imagination and recall. Filmic space is the illusioned space, made apparent by the spatial-image onscreen, expanded outward by our beliefs. Viewers understand that we cannot exist in same dimensional plane as the spatial-image, yet, the camera, the shots, the moving images through planes of space, all of the filmic images, together and more, produce such a strong, physically evocative illusion, we believe that we are there. Filmic space is illusional, and it exists in the dimension of our co-creative imaginations. We move inward when we imagine ourselves moving through the onscreen world, at times intimately close to others; or, when we witness intimate events in a filmic-character's story. It is as if our presence/absence reveals another spatial dimension, like the Rilkean Open, where, after having been allowed the briefest glimpse of a sublime image, we are always *returning from* with our faulty memories of *the other space*.

Another imagined dimension of filmic space may exist for reader-viewers who enter the fictional world of an adapted text. For example, we can imagine the space created by an adaptation is like a large open plane, or a valley. On one side of the valley is the novel; on the other, the film. When I read the novel, I enter the valley from that side carrying the ghost-images, which I co-created, and then I leave them there to mature on their own. Later, remembering what I read, I enter the valley again, and visit with these ghosts. I may or may not recognize how they've changed, but they always do. Then, when I watch the film adaptation, I enter the valley from the other side, again carrying new ghost-images. If an older ghost image appears when I return, I can squeeze the old and the new together into one, or let them remain as separate ghostly images, each with its own influence and purpose. Sometimes a ghost from the novel appears with no correlating image from the film, or vice versa, and I must decide how to integrate or ignore them. When I am an active reader or viewer, I am a co-creator of the images mediated on page or on screen. Mediation opens a creative space where my subjectively-present consciousness has the power to re-shape and re-forge the collection of the ghosted images which I have gathered together. This space is an imagined space, and it is different for every reader-viewer.

Spatial-images differ from event-images in another way: whereas event-images can be inherently public (historical/ political) or private, spatial-images are images of intimacy. For this chapter, *ghosting the spatial-image* describes how viewers may feel

themselves moving through intimate spaces in the onscreen world, and thereby we may believe we are sharing the same subjective positions and experiences as the Woman in the film. On the other hand, because the film makes visible the invisible wall surrounding the Woman, we are reminded that the space we occupy in *The Wall* has limits that cannot be crossed. Filmic space is a dimension that we can never wholly breach. So, like a ghost haunting the Woman we may be present in a space separated from hers by an invisible plane, and yet we may also feel we have presence in hers because of the illusion of shared space. In my reading of the film *The Wall*, adapted by Julian Roman Pölsler from Marlen Haufhofer's 1968 novel, *Die Wand*,¹⁰⁹ I argue that the film encloses space more prominently than the novel, primarily through Pölsler's use of special effects, shifting subjective positions, and *mise en scène*; and, it is in relation to this enclosed filmic space that the reader-viewers' ghostly presence is more assuredly affirmed.

Because there are compossible dimensions that can employ filmic space, *ghosting the spatial-image* differs in function from the ghosting of characters or events. Instead of considering why or how a filmic image can haunt the viewer, *ghosting the spatial-image* considers why and how a viewer can haunt filmic space. To consider how a viewer's presence in filmic space is affirmed by their absence, I will analyze scenes from the 2012

¹⁰⁹ I differentiate between the novel and film by using the German title, *Die Wand*, for the novel, and *The Wall* for the film.

adaptation, *The Wall*. This film is especially well suited for a discussion of filmic space because it offers viewers an uncanny subjective experience that is both intimate and distant. As viewers, our place within the filmic space is measured by our movements away from or towards the Woman, or marked by our separation from her and the events onscreen. *Ghosting the spatial-image*, imagining we are a ghost inhabiting filmic space, requires us to consider our experience in-between representation and materiality.

4.2 Ghosting intimate traumatic space

I would argue that the most intimate space one can experience is the space wherein a trauma occurs. Although both the novel's and the film's narratives are framed by two traumas, the film more successfully encloses the traumas within a space that visually delineates a safe-distance from the trauma for viewer beyond the wall. Furthermore, the narrative function of the report for embodying the Woman in the novel, added to the actor-embodied Woman in the film, challenges the conventions that Alan Gibbs calls the tropes of "trauma genre" that emerged in the late 20th and 21st centuries the "formal devices that [became] established methods of depicting trauma, including fragmentation, dislocation, and repetition."¹¹⁰ The novel and film use these tropes extensively, and yet, both break from this trauma tradition with the Woman's 'honest' detailed recounting. The Woman is not the victim caught in cycles of

¹¹⁰ *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, 47.

involuntary flashbacks “without access to memories of the originating cause;” she knows the trauma is the originating cause of writing things down. Her report, the account we trust as ‘true,’ is her response to the two traumatic events she survives. Readers of the novel know that the Woman can only exist as the character we imagine her to be. And, although her report may not be accurate, we may think of the report as the imagined space where the meaning of the events that have shaped her since the wall appeared is revealed, and where we might witness the ‘truth’ of a traumatic event.

Viewers of the film, however, are allowed to see the Woman as multiple subjective embodiments—her body sometimes younger and sometimes older, and the physical changes evincing her responses to the events chronicled in the report. The Woman’s story is bracketed by two traumas: an originating trauma—the appearance of the wall and her subsequent existence in an afterlife; and then a second trauma—the loss of her dog Lynx, which is the impetus for writing her report. Because her story is enclosed between the bracketing traumas, we experience her story as witnessing presence in the most intimate space imaginable. Examining her existence in this space, as well as our access to and presence in the space enclosed by the film are two of the purposes that I hope *ghosting spatial-images* will support.

4.2.1 Spatial-images and filmic space

In the novel, the reader can only exist outside of the Woman’s world. Our appearance in her world occurs after her report is complete, and, as she says, our

reading confirms her belief that no one will be able to read her report until she is dead. However, in the film viewers can be present in the space of her world, and we can move into and out of that space where she lives with her own ghosts. As Pölsler positions and repositions us inside and outside of the world enclosed by the wall, we often feel caught in-between—as if we are ghosting her ghost. In discussing how our movements are oriented by the world onscreen, I will apply what Scott Richmond calls a *proprioceptive aesthetics*¹¹¹ to our experience with the images Pölsler creates. In other words, I want to demonstrate that by limiting the viewers' spatial access to certain places in the Woman's world, the filmic version further isolates the Woman from the living. Watching the film we are always already among the living (literally and figuratively), and because the Woman is only alive in the space of an *afterlife*, our perceived ghostly existence in her world is visually confirmed by our spatial presence/absence.

When I claim that *ghosting the spatial-image* is how viewers move inwards into the spatial world onscreen, I'm using *ghosts* here to mean a conscious presence that exists/doesn't exist within a space. I agree with Richmond's assertion that the illusion of movement in filmic space is made possible by the *proprioception* of the viewer, and inherent in proprioception is the viewers' self-awareness that their position is always only made possible through the *technics*¹¹² of cinema. As he explains:

¹¹¹ *Cinema's Bodily Illusions*, 6.

¹¹² Richmond uses this term not in the theoretical sense of "apparatus," but as Bernard Steigler defines it—the *pursuit of life by means other than life*. Ibid, 17.

Cinematic modulation of perception is, at a profound level, also the modulation of proprioceptive self-perception. The cinema modulates my relations with the world unfolding before me onscreen, and in so doing it inexorably modulates my relation with my self—as well as the perceptual processes by which I arrive at a sense of myself as a self in the first place.¹¹³

Richmond's proprioceptive aesthetics requires a departure from the idea that cinema is fundamentally representational, relying instead on the cinema's *technics* as the third operational component¹¹⁴ through which our aesthetic experience responds. His concept of *ecological phenomenology* of the image is the process, derived as from the union of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy of perception and James Gibson's ecological approach to perception,¹¹⁵ by which we might understand and explain our relation to the world onscreen. This process works on viewers as cinema's ability "to manifest a sense of the world unfolding before [a viewer] onscreen in which objects might *appear* by virtue of its proprioceptive modulation of viewers."¹¹⁶ Although proprioception creates the illusion that we can appear in onscreen space and participate in the filmic world, this process depends on a cinematically induced multi-sensorial experience that is ultimately limited by a camera's point of view. Despite a camera's

¹¹³ Ibid, 8.

¹¹⁴ *Body and world* being the other two. Ibid, 16.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 13.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 16 (emphasis mine).

ability to draw us into onscreen space, we can never fully exist there because technology intrudes in our perception insisting that what we are experiencing is an illusion.

The screen is a liminal plane separating the viewer from the *spatial-image*. Although the spatial-image is a projection on flat plane, the illusion of movement and presence within the spatial-image can open viewers' up to a new imagined space generated from their affective responses—the filmic space. In other words, we believe that filmic space exists because we have viscerally experience it. Further, the screen is a liminal plane on to which we may project our imagined presence. Just as the illusion of movement within a filmic spatial-image affirms our imagined presence, filmic space is the space we seem to occupy when we remember the ghosts of filmic images.

In Chapter One, I described how viewers may ascribe subjectivity to a character based on the stories we hear about them or based on their performative and defining gestures (i.e., an assassin assassinates). In this chapter, I will consider how a character's movement within filmic space creates the illusion of agency for both character and viewer. In the eternal loop that is the story repeatedly composed in onscreen time, a character's agency is always already determined and, therefore, her moving with intention is an illusion of agency. Reader-viewers can shape the force and context of images and of a character's thoughts about those images, and we can alter our responses to the same events clicking off in the same chain of causal links. But for a

filmic character, intentionality is always beyond the scope of our influence. Although the agency that empowers a character to move may appear as the product of the combined *technics* of actors, editors, sound technicians, and other members of crew, as well as the elements of script, *mise en scène*, lighting, soundtrack, etc., the real animating force that brings life to characters and images in the diegetic world of onscreen space is the eternal return. Because we experience images in relation to our position in space and time, the world onscreen is always an illusioned space enclosed in a precisely measured time-loop of exposition and running time.

Moving in the spatial-image requires that we cede some of our agency to the film. However, would we be willing to consider completely submitting our agency to a film's *technics* if it produced a sublime or even uncanny aesthetic experience? Is to be *there/not there* a question that can be answered in such an aesthetic experience? In his "The Dialectics of Outside and Inside,"¹¹⁷ Gaston Bachelard examines the Henri Michaux poem,¹¹⁸ "Shade-Haunted Space," and concludes:

Being is alternately condensation that disperses with a burst, and dispersion that flows back to a center. Outside and inside are intimate—they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostility. If there exists a border-line surface between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful on both sides. When

¹¹⁷ Bachelard, "The Dialectics of Outside and Inside." From *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, 155.

¹¹⁸ [translated into English as]

we experience this [poem by Michaux], we absorb a mixture of being and nothingness.

If this border-line is the screen, and the experience of moving from outside to inside (or vice-versa) is painful, then my earlier analogy of 'birthing ghosts' is apt. For the Woman in onscreen space to move outward, a viewer must pull her out of that space, outside of the screen. She is no longer 'alive' in the filmic world, but a ghost haunting the viewer's memory. Once removed from the filmic world, the Woman remains in a state between life and death, the spatial dimension of in-between; again, I think of this space of co-creative imagination like an open field where she exists with the others, and from where she can be brought back to the viewer—a ghost birthed and alive within us—or brought back onscreen when the film starts again. For the viewer, the pain of moving inward may not be felt physically, but we may experience that pain as the loss of agency in the filmic world. I follow a character inward, for example, over her shoulder walking through a city, and I forfeit my agency to turn left or right, to speak or to be heard. Or, when I am stopped by an invisible wall, I am reminded that I am not in any space but of my own imagining. If watching a film requires that I believe I am *there/not there* in order to have an aesthetic experience, I'm willing to act on faith and trade my agency for the heightened experience.

4.2.2 *The Woman inside the wall*

One of the most striking elements in *The Wall* is the director's foregrounding of liminal space, by which viewers can make a clear distinction between internal and external, between our movements behind and our movements beyond the wall. However, before I discuss examples of how the viewer's position within filmic space allows us to experience a reversal of subjective experiences—from the viewer haunted by the ghosts of remembered textual images to the viewer's active *ghosting of filmic characters and space*—I should briefly summarize the story of the Woman in *Die Wand*. Then, I will consider how the Woman is embodied not only by the two versions that German actress Martina Gedeck portrays, but also in the noticeable changes to Gedeck's body over the course of shooting. Furthermore, because her report creates a space for the images to appear, her embodiment within that space is possible by our *ghosting of the spatial-image*. *The Wall* is an excellent film for discussing ghosting images of space because it provides several examples where viewers may clearly see our presence haunting the Woman; moreover, by enclosing her world and her life behind a wall, space and time appear to be compressed forcing the ghosts from her report to reveal themselves in her labor, her hunts, and her dreams. She relives days of the years marked off on a calendar filling in the details as she remembers them in her report, and her ghosts appear in the changes of seasons. She can survive in this afterlife space, but only by keeping her ghosts with her. She is a ghost living among ghosts, and her

embodiment gives purpose to the filmic space. And finally, for viewers, *ghosting the spatial-image* is a movement we initiate as we move inward, into the space imaged on screen, where our presence among the filmic images is visually noted as an absence.

The Wall is the story of a woman surviving alone behind an unexplained invisible wall surrounding several miles of forest in the high elevation of the Austrian Alps. The novel and film are narrated by a series of entries from her report in which the Woman explains how she learns to survive in a world alone with only her animal companions — the only other living creatures. Her life before the wall appeared is barely mentioned, as if the memories would somehow hinder her survival. Although she questions whether life continues as she once knew it on the other side of the wall, from her perspective the others outside the wall appear frozen in place and time. She writes that she has started the report after two years inside the wall, and we can assume our “reading” of the report is only possible, as she says, after she is dead. Time does not move in a straight line in her report, so we see her at times younger and soft from city life, then roughed by the years of hard work, and then young again. Her dog Lynx is her constant companion, and his fate becomes the trauma which prompts the report of her last two years behind the wall.

Marlen Haushofer was a young rising literary star in Germany — a strong feminist voice who died of cancer shortly after the novel was published.¹¹⁹ Even though we may read the novel as a haunting allegory with serious philosophical and political overtones, the main thematic questions about how one lives and dies reportedly echo Haushofer's personal beliefs.¹²⁰ Pölsler says he was haunted by the novel for over twenty-five years,¹²¹ and several scenes are haunted materially by Haushofer's words.

In the novel, scenes are described by the Woman with comments and contexts, with images that connect her calendar to her creatures and their shared afterlife space; however, the film also shows us images without comment. This difference requires the images to assume a materiality for the embodied character moving through the filmic space. The questions about our place and our subjective being within that place as reader-viewers are asked in each text: *Are we inside the wall and alive/dead? Or, outside the*

¹¹⁹ *Mein.Österreich.com. Die Wand: Die Romanauterin. Die Wand* was written in longhand reportedly over three years. Haushofer received the Arthur Schnitzler Prize for literature the same year she completed the novel in 1963; however, despite her reputation as a writer, *Die Wand* was not published until 1968, two years before her death by cancer at age forty-nine. Pölsler's adaptation resurrected attention for the novel and revived international academic interest in Haushofer's work. [my translated paraphrase] <http://www.mein-oesterreich.info/literatur-medien/wand.htm>.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ In the *Afterword* by Julian Roman Pölsler, included in the accompanying text to the 2013 Music Box Films DVD, he writes, "*The Wall* has been on my mind for over twenty-five years. The first time I read it was in 1986, and after I put it down, I immediately began thinking about how to turn it into a film." He goes on to describe his reverence for Haushofer and her novel. Although he suggests that the fiction of both novel and film "gets at something of the human condition that no other work of fiction does — the truth of yourself when you are the last remaining member of the human race," I would go further and claim that together the novel and film expand and more intensely illuminate the subjective experience yourself.

wall and alive/dead? However, I believe that the filmic adaptation may be technically better able to provide satisfactory answers. Although Pölsler's special effects are not innovative, the onscreen space that he envisions produces uncanny affects; furthermore, the philosophical implications provoked in the images ask us to consider how we haunt this space. Since we are determinedly physically incapable of completely *moving inward* into this filmic space, *ghosting* the space inside the wall more accurately describes our illusioned experience of it.

Because this film was conceived in the mind of the writer/producer/ director Julian Roman Pölsler as the adaptation of the images that the novel birthed for him,¹²² *The Wall* is particularly useful in considering our spectral relationships with adaptations and adapted images. I will refine these questions below, but for now I wonder: can we become a presence moving inward in *adapted*-space? Or, are we carriers of ghosted images from the source text, sent to haunt the space, characters, and events of the onscreen world? And, how does space define the intimacy of our responses; do we shutter and shake in response to moving inward, or when pulling an image out?

¹²² Another palimpsest, perhaps.

4.3 Gedeck¹²³ embodies the Woman

I find a resonance in the writings of two 20th Century French philosophers, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze, that I can't always reasonably explain. In this section, I want to unpack some key aspects of their complex concepts of subjectivity, as well as respond to recent investigations of Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, especially in the works of Vivian Sobchack and Hunter Vaughn. As I discuss how scenes from *The Wall* may exemplify these concepts of subjectivity especially well by creating space in which we have ghostly presence, I hope to show how this presence confirms our subjective experience in the onscreen space. I did not choose this film because it always illustrates concepts of subjectivity neatly, but because it raises questions about the connection between the viewer and viewed subject that are sometimes complimentary, sometimes contrary to Deleuze and/or Merleau-Ponty.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze are often linked by their mutual admiration for and the similarity of their reflections on Henri Bergson's concept of time.¹²⁴ Where they certainly differ, however, is Merleau-Ponty's view of subjectivity tempered by Gestalt psychology. While we might reduce Deleuze to the *philosopher of becoming*, we might likewise see Merleau-Ponty's subject as a *feeling-being*.¹²⁵ Merleau-

¹²³ To distinguish between the Woman as we imagine her in the source text and Martina Gedeck's performance and portrayal in the 2012 film, I will refer to the film's embodied subject as *Gedeck* (*italicized*) and the actress as Gedeck (un-italicized).

¹²⁴ See Judith Wambacq, Dorothea Olkowski, and Corry Shores

¹²⁵ I take full responsibility for this gross over-simplification.

Ponty's *lived-body* removes any barrier that separates the subject from the object—a Cartesian/Kantian dualism that dominates most Continental philosophy, including existentialists like Martin Heidegger. For these philosophers, perception is indistinguishable from expression. The lived-body is responsible because it is reflexive—turning away from the object “toward the act of viewing and its existential implications of a body-subject.”¹²⁶ The gestalt of the subjective viewer is inseparable, invariant, and aware. Whereas Heidegger's phenomenological-existential perspective allows for a separation of the subject from the historical or ethical by favoring the *now*, Merleau-Ponty's seeing-in-the-world necessitates that an embodied subjectivity is responsible because it is able to recognize; therefore, subjectivity is a *mediated* conscious experience. Intentionality makes us responsible because meaning is created by the reflexive subjectivity when it transcends self through *contact with otherness*.¹²⁷ Because sensation is always in relation to and dependent on background, perception is a fallacy.

For Sobchack, the embodied subject is the viewer-viewed. In the *Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, she questions Deleuze's dismissal of the phenomenological perception in film, writing:

It is not time [as Deleuze suggests], but space—the significant space lived as and through the objective body-subject, the historical space of the situation—that

¹²⁶ Sobchak, 55.

¹²⁷ Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, 33.

grounds the response to those questions and the question of cinematic signification in this present study.¹²⁸

Movement through time is not crystalized in the moment; it is the *space moved through* which we perceive as having meaning. Our relative position in space, more so than our position in time, provides the necessary grounding for the viewing subject in determining value and meaning. Sobchack goes further, explaining that the photograph offers us “the *possibility* of meaning,” thereby creating a “‘hole’ in temporality”; however, moving images fill up that vacancy with *motion* because “the images in the film exist in the world as a temporal flow, with finitude and situation.”¹²⁹ The invisible wall surrounding *Gedek* limits her movements within a defined space, and as a film, *The Wall* has temporality and finality. To clarify how her movements within the defined space behind the wall enlivens our image of the Woman, it will be helpful to begin with Martina Gedek’s embodiment, because the physical transformation we see the filmic embodiment *Gedek* undergo during the year-long filming works as narrative device giving voice and body to the ghosts who haunt her report.

For most of the film, we are inside the wall with her, and it is her subjective experience of that space that we follow closely. The report provides the most obvious access to *Gedek’s* inner life, but by chronicling and reporting on daily chores, on

¹²⁸ *Address of the Eye*, 31.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 60-61 (emphasis in original).

seasonal shifts in the weather, details of daily life, the report also acts to substantiate her time in this space. Martina Gedeck¹³⁰ reads entries from the report in a voice-over narration throughout the film, even though we rarely hear *Gedeck* speak onscreen. The report is an important device for organizing her actions and events within the wall, but, I would argue, the report has another effect because when it is read, it creates and encloses an imagined space where the events of the report can occur. When we watch the film and hear *Gedeck* reading her report, which she admits is grounded in faulty memory, the events she describes become images we believe happen as they appear onscreen in the filmic space. Reading, or hearing the report read, makes possible the space where our co-creation of images can occur, where we believe what we see even when we know better, and where a story repeats endlessly, changed only by our perceived presence/non-presence in it.

The image of the Woman in both the novel and the film is made subjectively embodied by her report. Both texts start from the same literal marker, “The fifth of November,” and in both, reader-viewers understand that the narrator is the older Woman looking back. Her report is a first-person journaling of an extended event—her life inside the wall. She tells us she will write until there is no more paper left, and that she knows it is more likely that mice will eat her report than for another human to read

¹³⁰ Gedeck provides the voice-over narration of the film in both the German and English versions.

it. Her report weaves in and out of chronologically ordered-time, and though we may not know the full affect of the events she will survive, because she has already lived through and been changed by the events described, the Woman's reflective subjectivity is always present. For this character in this film, by writing the report she is creating an imagined space where the ghosts of past events can haunt.

Likewise, when we read or hear the report, we are entering an imagined space where we become ghosts haunting the events, characters, and space that the journal describes. By accepting the premise that no one will read her report, when we do read or hear it, we exist in a space where one can only be *non-existent*. The filmic space is enclosed and filled with ghosts—the images remembered by the report's author and the reader/viewer who must always be present/not-present. In other words, reading *Die Wand* requires us to create an enclosed, paradoxical space where we (as living readers) and the report (which can only be read by non-existent reader) can simultaneously exist.

Pölsler acknowledges the significance of the report for embodying the Woman onscreen by retaining a sense of textuality in the film through the visual representations of report writing. Before the story begins, images of handwritten notes—words later spoken aloud by the voice-over narrator—appear behind the opening credits. A disembodied voice-over reads the first lines from the report, and we understand that

she is reading the first-person account of, most likely, the last human woman dying alone. The report begins with a distinct singular perspective:

Today, the fifth of November, I shall begin my report. I shall set everything down as precisely as I can. But I don't even know if today really is the fifth of November.... But I don't think that's very important. All I have to rely on is a few meager jottings; meager, because I never expected to write this report, and I'm afraid that much that I remember will be different from my real experiences.¹³¹

Reader-viewers are expressly told that our experience with the events recorded here will be shaped by a voice limited by its misperceptions of time and events yet made 'real' in the writing. The film opens with *Gedek's* disembodied voice, and within the first two minutes, the subjective position of the viewer is moved from the voice, to a hand writing in a report, to the face, the eyes, and then implicitly into the mind of *Gedek*. As the camera moves from the hand in the act of writing to the silent face of the older *Gedek*, the voice-over continues, linking her written words to her thoughts, the voice-over is now embodied for the viewer in the image of *Gedek* writing her journal. Moving even more inward, in close-up and lingering on the subject's eyes, her expressions reflecting an inner struggle with the 'ghosts' haunting her memories that

¹³¹ The opening lines of both film and novel are verbatim. I cite the novel for these quotes as that is an easier text to accurately copy. *The Wall*, 1.

the report evokes. We are present in the intimate spatial-image—a woman alone in a candlelit cabin visited by the ghosts of her life behind the wall.

In Pölsler's film, space is a visual illusion where we perceive our position in relation to the space inside of or outside of (beyond) the wall. Although her report allows us access to the Woman's remembered experiences, the film makes possible what the text may not be able to do—taking the subjective position of multiple *Gedecks*, and at times her dog Lynx, through a visual juxtapositioning of the world we see inside the wall with the events we hear described in the report. We see her world and the events she remembers in a space, which, depending on the changes in our perspective, we share with or are separated from her. Furthermore, Pölsler's camera moves the viewer through this filmic space intimately close to *Gedeck*, as might only a lover or a ghost be privileged to enjoy. We look directly in her eyes, and feel as if we are entering into her most intimate interior space—her memory, where the images of hunting, her dog Lynx, and her younger self reside. In ecological terms, she can only exist by becoming a symbiotic part of the system around which her space is constructed. As an image of the Woman whose thoughts we can hear and whose memories come alive onscreen for us in the retelling, *Gedeck* is the *embodied subject* alive in the spatial-image and haunted by our intimate proximity.

4.3.1 *younger Gedeck and older Gedeck*

To further complicate our relationship with *Gedeck*, we see at least two versions of her, sometimes within the same scene. Pölsler shot the film over a fourteen-month period, using nine credited cinematographers,¹³² and though we are given visual clues to the passage of time, the most prominent one is in the physical transformation of the actress Martina Gedeck. While Haushofer uses the Woman's report as a narrative device capable of transcending time and space, the filmic adaptation relies on the changes to the actress's body to indicate her relation to space and her movement within that space.

Gedeck embodies the Woman as *younger Gedeck* and as *older Gedeck*. We recognize younger *Gedeck* by her longer hair, the roundness of her face, her tentative stride and gaze, and other physical attributes. We can see changes marking the younger *Gedeck* as 'in winter,' or 'in spring,' or 'working in the meadow,' or 'sleeping in the sun.' Younger *Gedeck* grows stronger from the physical labor necessary for survival. Although younger *Gedeck* may occupy the same space as older *Gedeck*, we must sometimes rely on the background details in the *mise en scène* to determine which *Gedeck* is present. We may also recognize her as younger or older in the hunting lodge, the hut, in the meadow, on the trail, or at the table depending on the *mise en scène*. For example, the well-stocked lodge with stores of potatoes, herbs hung to dry, jars filled

¹³² Romney, "A World Apart," *Sight & Sound* 23.8 (2013): 36-38.

with blueberries, and stacks of split firewood indicate her later experiences as farmer and hunter. The world in which she is contained has required her to change physically, and her face reflects a matured and aged consciousness generated from the experienced events in this world. The older *Gedeck* knows what is to come, and her face reflects having already lived through it.

An example of the shifting perspectives occupying the same space that the younger and older *Gedecks* make visually possible, linked by her voice-over description of how she felt that day, occurs early in the film. After her first night behind the wall, the younger *Gedeck* awakes from the dream (which is not in the novel) wherein the wall has moved inward on her world, enclosing her in the hunting lodge and further tightening her constraints. She leaves her bed and opens the door for Lynx. As the older *Gedeck's* voice-over describes the scene, she makes the only direct reference to her life before the wall in the film: "Suddenly it seemed quite impossible, that I would survive that bright spring day. This wasn't the first time in my life I had to survive like this." Although the novel provides some details about that life which are not included in the film, the viewer understands that she is not only referring to a former life, but access to a formerly inhabited space. For *Gedeck* surviving in this space is never assured, and returning to that former space is not possible.

As the scene continues, the younger *Gedeck* moves in a haunted, dream-like state toward the front door, opens it slowly, and with hands reaching out before her, she

walks out of lodge and off the porch. The hesitancy in her actions confirms what the voice-over narration implies. Cut to exterior of the hunting lodge—we are looking in a window as *Gedeck* says, “I no longer remember what I did that morning,” just as the older *Gedeck* appears in the window, her hair cut short, as she appeared in the opening scene. This shift in time and perspective reminds viewers that we are witnessing the scenes sketched out in her report. To further reinforce the shifting subjective position connected by this singular voice, Pölsler makes several eye-line cuts from the perspective of the older *Gedeck*. We see the older *Gedeck* framed as if in a prison-cell by the shadows of the window grilles; she turns towards the window and looks out. Her voice-over continues, “Maybe the hours that followed were so awful I’ve had to forget them, but perhaps I only spent them in a kind of numbness.” The eye-line cuts connect the two ghosts and in this spatial-image we can see the younger and the older at the same time. She describes this space as a numbness that comes from trying to forget; and the space is intimate in its awfulness. As viewers, we may not yet know the full awfulness of this intimate space, but from our position we can begin to ascribe meaning to her isolation, her traumas, and the ghosts that haunt her, as we witness the changes this space has effected on her body.

The younger *Gedeck* walks away from the lodge into the green mountain forest with Lynx. She is still wearing her light-colored bed clothes, moving as if floating through the tall grass, her image reinforcing her appearance as ghost. Because we see

this from the position as older *Gedeck*, our subjective position is altered in an almost uncanny realization that what we see is her memory as embodied object—the ghost of younger *Gedeck* the morning after her first night alone. As we're watching older *Gedeck* watching her memory of younger *Gedeck* move through this space, her voice-over questions what we see. She says, "I can't remember." But, we are there with the ghost of her; we are witness to this embodiment of her memory onscreen. Here we have visual confirmation that the report is ultimately untrustworthy because it must always rely on the inherent uncertainties of memories.

The scene continues, cutting between the perspectives of the younger and older *Gedeck*. The shot then widens as if moving away from the lodge, where the older *Gedeck* remains—a vague figure in the window from this distance. As we move away from the space where her memories are recreated and ghosts brought back to life, our experience as an observing presence/non-presence for the images in the film is affirmed. Where we are and what we can affect in the filmic space of *The Wall* are the questions to which *ghosting the spatial-image* wants to reply.

The younger *Gedeck* is a woman who has not just survived the isolation of her walled-off world, but who has thrived and achieved a relative peaceful contentment in her strong and independent life. The older *Gedeck* is a new version of herself, hardened and further isolated by the event that prompted her report. The difference between the two *Gedecks* may be understood in relation to Alan Gibbs's explanation on the

difference between PTSD and trauma. Whereas the latter may include forms of collective trauma, validated trauma, or cultural trauma, the former was derived as “constructed” diagnosis from clinical observation of Vietnam vets, many of whom were also suffering from perpetrator trauma.¹³³ The older *Gedeck* is visually troubled by the life she has borne, the deaths she has witnessed, and the deaths that she caused over the past two years. Because her struggle is constrained and internalized—haunted by the ghost of her beloved dog, but not the ghost of the man she murders protecting Lynx—we see in the older *Gedeck* a more complicated aspect of our own human condition. In other words, rather than the question *Who are we when in conflict with another?*, the more difficult question for viewers/readers of *The Wall/Die Wand* is *Who are we when there is no one else?*¹³⁴

In explaining how film is a form [best] “equipped to do” philosophy, Hunter Vaughn asserts, “Cinema helps to remind us that looking is itself an interaction with the world, and the medium can shift perspectives to alter our very notion of subjectivity.”¹³⁵ Our positional movement from space occupied by younger *Gedeck* to space occupied by older *Gedeck*, and our positioning within that space—interior and exterior to the lodge, looking in or out—makes our perspective indeterminate.¹³⁶ In the section on the Chiasm

¹³³ Gibbs, 24-26.

¹³⁴ See footnote 121.

¹³⁵ *Where Film Meets Philosophy*, 45.

¹³⁶ We might think of this indeterminacy as a symptom of our ghosting.

from *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty describes the event where “we see other seers,” as the moment when:

we no longer have before us the look without a pupil, the plate glass of the things with the feeble reflection, that phantom of ourselves they evoke by designating a place among themselves whence we see them: henceforth, we are for ourselves fully visible: [...] The body is lost outside the world and its goals, fascinated by the unique occupation of floating in Being with another life, of making itself the outside of the inside and the inside of the outside.¹³⁷

We haunt the images because even though we are not seen, we can see, and *seeing* gives us presence in the space where ghosts reside. When we are moved away from both *Gedecks*, we are returned to the subjective position of one beyond the wall. I will return to Pölsler’s use of the wall to visually delineate the space between us and her below, but for now I will say our movement between filmic space as established in *The Wall* does not promise to eliminate the separation between subjects and objects, but it is through our multiple positions that we may see how wide the separation ultimately must be.

4.4 Moving into filmic space

The space in which the Woman lives is a paradox — the Alps enclosed by an invisible wall. We are moved within this space in Pölsler’s camera, specifically two

¹³⁷ *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, 259-260.

aspects of the shot—mise en scène and reverse cuts; and through these our spatial relation to the embodied *Gedeck* are seen. Whereas Robert Ray describes these “two formal paradigms [mise en scène and reverse cuts] at work [of Classical Hollywood Cinema]” as a way to “disguise an ‘intensely decision-based’ medium as an apparently natural one,”¹³⁸ in this adaptation these shots emphasize *Gedeck*’s containment. Instead of the classical Hollywood western hero standing in relief (metaphorically) to the wide-open spaces, all of *Gedeck*’s actions are contained—resonating and reverberating in her voiced memories, her dreams, her report entries, her continuous cycle of changing of seasons. In many ways, Pölsler relies on classic cinematic ‘paradigms’ for embodying the Woman and establishing the world through which she and the viewer move, but he also creates space in such a way that the subjectivities of the character, the viewer, and the filmic space work as one system.

Having first enclosed the expansive world that *Gedeck* occupies, Pölsler’s mise en scène visually emphasizes her isolation in this afterlife. We see *Gedeck* almost consumed by the expansive space of the surrounding Alps. Whether in daytime exteriors scenes in different seasons—hiking through snow, trailing the hunt, or lying in the summer sun—or in night scenes—*Gedeck* silhouetted against the deep starry sky, like a small shadow outlined against a background of deep space--Pölsler’s exterior space contained within the wall is so vast, *Gedeck* appears insignificant in comparison. Set against the

¹³⁸ *A Certain Tendency of Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, 54.

open filmic space, we hear her most personal interior thoughts, as she describes her desire to be integrated wholly into this space.

Midway through the film, we see her laying in the sun, next to a napping Lynx, and watching a bird of prey circle high overhead. Her voice-over explains how she is not hesitant to be *in* and *of* this 'community' of animals, plants, mountain, weather, home; but, as a human capable of choice, she can never be completely integrated into that life. Despite her desire to be of this space, she is isolated by her odd existence in a world that seems incapable of existing. Enclosed through the *technics* of film, this space is filled with ghosts; they are always co-present and always unrestrained by time.

Unlike the Woman, who is haunted by the loss of her "motherness" and by the memory of her husband and lover, *Gedeck* is haunted by two things: the ghost of Lynx, her closest companion, and by the traumatic event that led to and resulted from his death. In many of the exterior scenes, we see her move through the space accompanied by the ghosts of those two things.

Having choice implies agency and intention. Because she is capable of choice, *Gedeck* understands that it is her non-animal/human potential that places her at the center of her community. Together they share the responsibility for each other's survival, but unlike Lynx (the dog), or Bella (the cow), or Pearl (the white kitten), as a human she is aware it is her choices that will ultimately determine their survival. While spending her summer in the pasture *Gedeck* describes what it would take to be reunited

with her past “community,” and she describes this as an empty gesture. The community she has left behind is without meaning, and in order to be reunited with that human community, she would have to betray the love she holds for this one, though she can never fully be a part of it. The only other human alive within the wall is The Man, whose brutal attack on Bull and Lynx is emblematic of mankind’s (not *humankind’s*) instinctual tendency to kill indiscriminately. Because he is a man, the Man is an evil and indiscriminate killer, and *Gedeck* has no desire to return to his community. The exterior shots image her as part of this space she has created, where meaning for her, for her life in this space, is necessitated and determined by her refusal to leave it.

On the other hand, the interior scenes, lit by either the mountain’s morning sunlight or meager candlelight at night, reinforce the interiority of her story. In these interior shots, Pölsler’s camera tracks the Woman, or remains static and wide, or draws us in to close-ups of an unspeaking face; again, the illusion of moving into intimate space is facilitated through the voice-over narrating an associated memory. Even when the voice-over is quiet, we have access to her interior thoughts as witness to the events on which she silently reflects. I’ll get to our experience with those scenes in the reverse shots, but for now, we may associate the interior shots with the act of writing. These interior shots, especially the close-ups of *Gedeck* in-between dreams, are moments when the ghosts of the reported events are their most haunting.

In the novel, the Woman tells us how easily the wall could be forgotten, but as soon as it was, it would suddenly re-appear. In the film, however, we see her subtle reaction to the remembered wall, and because we see this from outside of the wall, the filmic affect is more subtle. During the summer after she has marked out the wall's perimeter, carrying hay down the steep slope from the meadow to the lodge, *Gedeck* lightly brushes against the wall; she stops, turns, reaches out and lays her open palm flat against it. The narrator doesn't comment, and *Gedeck* looks as one might when touched by a familiar ghost. Without the voice-over narration to tell us, she has been reminded of her place inside the wall, the silence requires viewers to complete the thought for her. Because Pölsler has composed this scene so subtly, we may not realize that we are again seeing *Gedeck* move through her world from outside the wall—from the position of the dead. Again, we are haunting her story—evidence of our presence in her world, yet outside of her space.

Although the movement from space inside the wall to the space beyond establishes that the two spaces are different and that we have ghostly presence for the filmic space, most of the time we witness the events in her life as a ghost inside the wall. Our haunting of the space is controlled by Pölsler's use of reverse shots to move us into her subjective position—cutting between the events and images that haunt her dreams and close-ups of her facial reactions to those memories. He also uses reverse shots to move us inside and outside of the wall, thereby making visible the barrier between

Gedeck and us. While the first set of reverse shots move us from interior space, the intimate space inches from *Gedeck's* face, to exterior space, where the action of the event unfolds, the second set of reverse shots establishes the wall as visual spatial presence that ultimately reminds us that we are not there.

The reverse shot can reveal the images haunting her inner thoughts, memories, and dreams. For example, the night after her first kill, by cutting from *Gedeck*, in close-up, lying face-up and awake in bed, to the death of the deer in real-time, our movement is into the creative space where her memories exist as she imagines them. Although the theme of mankind's capacity to kill is considered more extensively in the novel, in this series of reverse shots our subjective experience of the event is witnessed in the space *Gedeck* creates through her imagining.

One of the film's most powerful scenes, her 'first kill' starts with *Gedeck* and Lynx walking through the forest, the voice-over reflecting on the necessity and responsibilities inherent in human choice. Her final words are, "A human becoming the only creature that doesn't belong [in the forest], troubled by chaotic thoughts, cracking branches with clumsy boots, engaged in in the bloody business of hunting." She aims, but we do not see her fire the rifle. Instead we hear the shot echoing through the woods as we watch the deer jump, stiffen in resistance, roll lifeless downhill, and finally die. The scene is short, with very little narration between long moments of complete silence.

Pölsler starts with a close-up of younger *Gedeck* in a bluish tint. She is laying face-up, looking directly at us and we hear older *Gedeck's* voice-over narrating the scene from her report. With each cut between the image of the deer dying in real-time in silence and *Gedeck's* silent face, the close-ups tighten and the viewer moves inwardly into a shared intimate space, into the space where the event she remembers exists, though she refuses to record this scene in her report. Because the filmic spatial image shows us a scene absent from the report, our ghostly presence is affirmed by our eye-witness. The scene ends as we follow younger *Gedeck* through the forest, carrying the deer on her shoulders, before cutting back to older *Gedeck's* face in extreme close-up. The voice-over says, "one must be born with the capacity to enjoy killing." She has not forgotten the image of the dying deer, and her refusal to record the killing emphasizes her disdain for it.

As we move finally in tighter, in a close-up of only her eyes, the viewer may experience multiple simultaneous perspectives (younger face, older voice, image remembered but not written down, viewer/reader).¹³⁹ But the scene also provokes multiple emotional responses from the viewer, which may differ considerably from those evoked in the reader. The scene is uncanny, as Gibbs would describe it, because

¹³⁹ In the novel we read only, "I find it striking that I never noted it in my diary. I now recall that the idea of writing it down simply repelled me; it was quite enough that I had to do it." The moving image of the death of a deer is clearly more disturbing than the novel allows.

there is a “plentitude of ontological uncertainty and its elision of fact and fiction.”¹⁴⁰ By layering the multiple perspectives, we get the sense of the trauma of her first (and subsequent) kill. The camera tightens on her face, and we move inwardly, towards her. Again, the voice-over opening the way into her memory, where we witness her ghosted image of the dying deer.

The movement between the two spaces, the event of crossing over in *The Wall*, is one way that we may ghost the images in the filmic world. However, because the wall also visually substantiates that we are outside of *Gedeck's* world, our position as a viewing subject who lacks the agency to move freely through the space imaged onscreen is affirmed. In an early scene, when *Gedeck* first becomes aware of the wall, the *mise en scène* and reverse cuts serve to further emphasize her isolation as *inwardness* and to remind us of our inability to fully enter her world. The first time she runs into the wall, we are on the road just ahead of her, waiting in place on the other side of the wall. She smashes hard into the invisible wall, and her flattened face makes the wall visually appear for us in an illusion of materiality. As *Gedeck* describes the wall as feeling like a pane of glass as her hands flatten and then she reflects on those first memories of being enclosed, Pölsler moves us in a series of reverse shots from one side of the wall to the other. From her side, we can hear her footsteps on the unpaved road, we hear her talk to Lynx, and we even hear her heart beating; but from the other side the only

¹⁴⁰ *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, 108.

audible sound is a deep vibrating tone. The viewer occupies a space liminally marked by the invisible wall: when we are outside of the wall, we are in a separate and adjacent space from the world created by the report; when we are inside the wall, we are with *Gedeck*, yet also always absent. In *The Wall*, it is the viewer who crosses over from one space to the other, and who becomes one of ghosts haunting *Gedeck*. If I am *ghosting the spatial-image*, I believe I have presence in the filmic world. Whether that experience is illusionary or not, the sensation substantiates and confirms my belief.

In the next scene, the movement inside and outside the wall is repeated, but now we see others who are outside the wall. Walking back to the hunting lodge with Lynx, she sees a couple in front of their hut. At first, the viewer first sees the couple from *Gedeck's* perspective—they are outside the wall and frozen in time (*Figure 8*). The old woman sits perfectly still on the porch of their modest mountain cabin, staring out and away. The thin old man's back is permanently bent as he stands at the well-pump, water flowing through his unmoving hand.¹⁴¹ Pölsler cuts to a wide shot from behind her, deeper inside the wall, and the viewer sees and faintly hears *Gedeck* banging on the wall and yelling for help (*Figure 9*). Then as the reverse shot cuts to outside the wall, the viewer sees her hands flattening against an unseeable wall, and her mouth open, silently calling for help (*Figure 10*). This is a spatial image made visual in the illusion

¹⁴¹ Later in the film, she returns to this scene and in voice-over tells us that those who are outside the wall are dead. Later in the novel, the wind has blown the old man over; his body has not decayed and he is still reaching out for water.

that there is a wall. Just as readers of the novel are assumed to be among the dead (or the not yet living), Pölsler's mise en scène and reverse shots establishes a filmic space in which viewers may occasionally cross over and look back into her world from the perspective of one among all the other dead.



Figure 8 Inside the wall

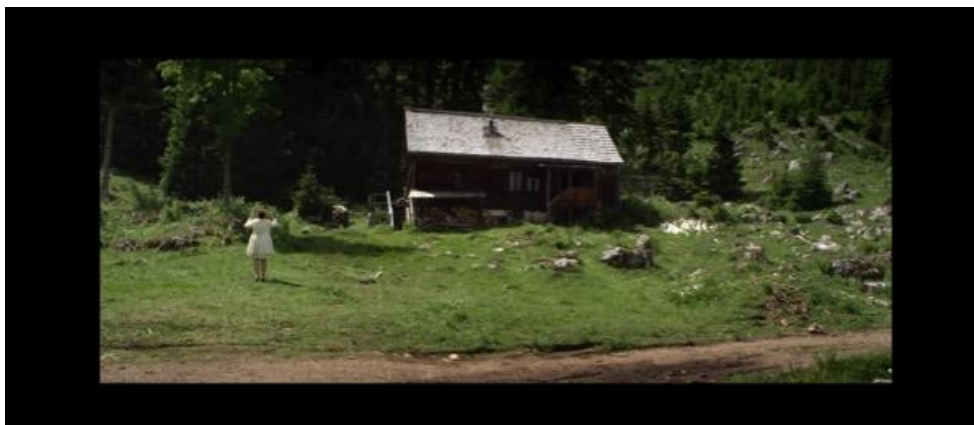


Figure 9 Deeper inside the wall

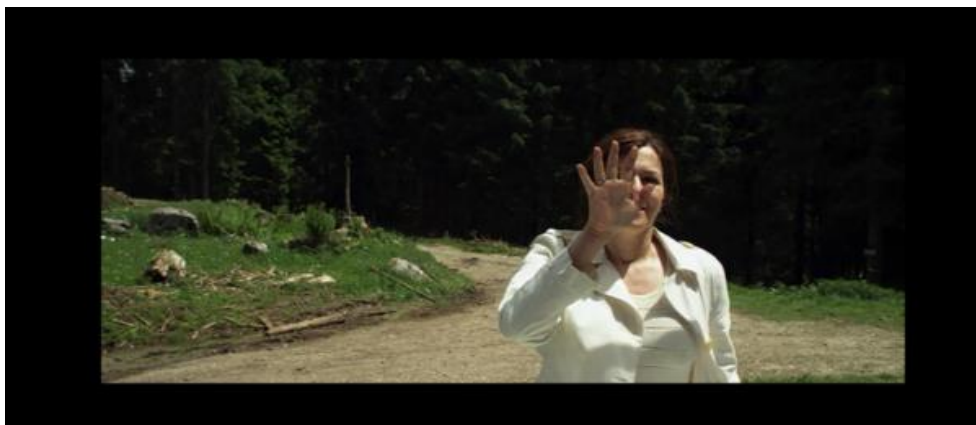


Figure 10 Outside the wall

The wall is materialized in the film in a way that is not possible in the novel, and at times, viewers are precluded from sharing the Woman's subjective experience; we are stuck outside of the wall looking in. The viewer's agency is limited to the position chosen for him. He cannot cross the plane between *Gedeck* and himself at will because the invisible wall, as seen in the flattening the actress's face and hands, reminds us that proprioceptive illusion of movement, or in this case the immediate and forceful stopping of motion, is ultimately just an illusion created out of the spatial-image onscreen. In the scenes where *Gedeck* runs hard face-first into the invisible wall, the viewer is made to feel almost painfully aware that the distance between subject and object is too great to be crossed. Like the reader who, accepting the premise of the novel, is always absent when reading the report, the viewer is reminded of his non-existence—having inhabited the filmic spaces as an absence without agency.

4.5 Die Wand/The Wall

Thomas Leitch and others have presented a methodology for studying adaptations that begins with Bakhtin's *dialogism*. Thirty, forty, and fifty years later, as various iterations of Bakhtin's concepts were refined, reshaped, and re-contextualized by adaptation theorist and others, we now gather many variations of this method under the one—*intertextuality*. As a catalyst for simultaneously transforming the source text and the adapted text into a third, new creation, I am all for it. I can appreciate the aesthetic pleasure that this method may provoke. However, the difficulty here is that subjectivity is always already determined by the order of experiences with the texts.¹⁴² For example, Pölsler's adapted script adds two dream sequences (not in the novel) which further isolate and puzzle *Gedeck* and the viewer. Having seen the dreams first, when I read the novel, I look for them among the other dream images. If I cannot find the dreams I remembered, my experience is of remembering something not there. This may be the cause for an uncanny feeling, or perhaps evidence of haunted space, but it is still my subjective experience confirming existence in the imagined space. On the other hand, when recollections in the report from the novel are omitted from the film, it is I who supplies the missing emotional weight (in this case—of the Woman's past life) to the film. By co-inhabiting the space, I bring meaning to the images for *Gedeck*.

¹⁴² Viewers/readers = the way I came to this film/book, in that order. I will refer to viewer and/or reader as "he," taking my own perspective as the privileged one for this analysis.

Some internet film databases list *The Wall* as science fiction, and though my layman's approach to spatial dimensions lacks any grounding in physics, the adapted film does provide us with possibilities for conceptualizing space beyond the three we know. Filmic space creates opportunities to imagine ourselves in a space where we may only be present in our absence. It may also present a space wherein we may enter the fictional world of an adapted text. Reading the report in *Die Wand*, we imagine a plane of existence for the Woman and her world; hearing the report in *The Wall* while seeing the world in which *Gedeck* must survive, reader-viewers enter this space as co-creators, testing what they are told against what they see. My 'subjectively-present consciousness' brings meaning to the space in the form of my ghosts gathered there. Filmic space in *The Wall* visually confirms our presence through our absence, as well as visually determining the liminalities of our movements and ultimate separation from the characters and events onscreen. Whether or not we are aware of our movements through the various dimensions of space that our imaginative participation with a text allows, *ghosting the spatial-image* may require us to consider our experience as somewhere in-between representation and materiality. This is where film does the work of philosophy—in the 'real' world we may ask, *Who are we when in conflict with another?* But in the filmic world we enter a space where we may ask *Who are we when there is no one else?* The hard part is asking ourselves this question and living with all its complications and consequences when we return to the real.

5 CHAPTER FOUR: WITNESS TO TRAUMA, WE ARE GHOSTS IN CHILDREN OF MEN

“In other words, trauma makes people feel like either *some body else*, or like *no body*. In order to overcome trauma, you need help to get in touch with *your body*, with *your Self*.” –Bessel van der Kolk¹⁴³

5.1 The trauma-image & Cuarón’s camera

The images of trauma that haunted me after first seeing *Children of Men* are images that I’ve returned to hundreds of times since. What I have come to understand about how I felt that first night, about how I remember those images, and about how my body remembers those images is that my experience in the film was made possible by the mediation of the image through *Cuarón’s camera*.¹⁴⁴ Film viewers expect our perspective, the focus of our attention, and our awareness of images to be limited to those chosen for us by a director, but Cuarón’s camera mediates the images of trauma in such a way, we feel as we have ghostly presence in his future dystopic world. The first time I saw the film, I did not want to leave immediately after because the emotional, visceral, and intellectual affects I experienced were familiar and strange, and

¹⁴³ *The Body Keeps the Score*, 249. (emphasis in original)

¹⁴⁴ *Cuarón’s camera* is comprised of the elemental camera movements, POVs, and shot-lengths, technical achievements, etc., essential to his directorial vision. It is an immersive experience that requires participation. The camera should allow audiences to “invest their experiences and emotions into the experiences happening onscreen” (qtd. in “How Alfonso Cuarón Makes Every Shot Count”). More to follow.

I wanted to remain in that “moment of truthfulness and being”¹⁴⁵ that Cuarón’s camera created. Now after more than ten years with this film, I can see that it was likely my thinking about Cuarón’s camera in *Children of Men* that first informed my ideas about ghosting images.

By looking at the image of trauma as mediated through Cuarón’s camera, I hope to demonstrate how we may seem to experience the traumatic events as they happen to the characters in the filmic world when we witness filmic images as a ghostly presence in that world. Cuarón’s camera carries us into a diegetic world where foreground and background are balanced in ‘real-time’¹⁴⁶; where themes of disenchantment, ghostliness, and trauma haunt every scene. Cuarón says his camera informs the content, the context, and the characters; and then they (content, context, character), in turn, inform each other.¹⁴⁷ I go further to say that although it may be Cuarón’s camera that carries us into the film, it is our inner contexts, our experiences, our ghosted images which inform and enliven the onscreen images.¹⁴⁸ Cuarón’s camera makes our *ghosting of trauma-images* possible in *Children of Men* by carrying us into the most intimate and violent space, and

¹⁴⁵ Cuarón interview in “How Alfonso Cuarón Makes Every Shot Count.”

¹⁴⁶ ‘real-time’ is the illusionary effect that the long take can produce where one minute (or ten) of time in the diegetic, filmic world is equal to one minute (or ten) in the viewers world.

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in “How Alfonso Cuarón Makes Every Shot Count”

¹⁴⁸ Likewise, we may inform an image with an aura of our own making — the image of Kee carrying her baby past soldiers and refugees through the embattled wreckage of an apartment building is sublime. In this world, as this child moves among the traumatized inhabitants, she becomes a force holding them all to “cease fire.”

then leaving us there for minutes at a time. Because Cuarón's camera gives existence to our experience, we may feel an uncanny sensation in the fluid long take, like we are in time-out-of-joint. And as near as Cuarón can sometimes get to breaking the liminality of the screen for viewers¹⁴⁹, we are ultimately unable to fully breach the spatial-dimension separating us from the characters onscreen. However, in Cuarón's fluid long takes, the illusion of movement is coupled with the illusion of 'real' time in *Children of Men*.

Viewers are allowed a sense of a directly shared experience with the characters whose traumatic events we haunt. Because our filmic existence is made possible in the space opened to us in the technics of Cuarón's camera, when we are *ghosting the trauma-image*, our physical experiences of the trauma-image may seem to be responsive in real time.

Alfonso Cuarón creates distinctive perspectives in his films through his assemblage of shots, camera movements, his use of hand-helds and Steadicams, his fluid, 'elastic' and extreme long takes, his creative shooting methods and editing techniques. Although our experiences with the images of trauma in *Children of Men* are equally responsive to the soundtrack, the score, the dialogue, the performances, etc., the proprioceptive effect that Cuarón's camera enables for viewers is as a ghostly presence in the diegetic world of an Alfonso Cuarón film. Cuarón's camera moves through the space like a ghost, unbound by the rules of physics that the 'real' space of the film implies. In *Children of Men* we haunt Theo (Clive Owen) as he travels through

¹⁴⁹ Especially in the film *Gravity*.

overpopulated urban landscapes, as he finds respite in Jasper's (Michael Caine) farmhouse, or as he listens to Miriam's (Pam Ferris) story of the beginning of the end of life. We move with Theo freely past imprisoned refugees or we hover in the tightly enclosed interior of car during a violent attack. Cuarón's camera allows us a sense of conscious presence moving through intimate and confined space, in which we confront the slow accumulative power of violence and absence.

From the opening scene, Cuarón requires viewers to engage with the film through the absence of visual images. The film opens with a black screen and a newscaster's voice-over describing riots, the passage of stricter immigration and martial state laws, and the lead story—the death of Diego Ricardo, the youngest person on the planet. Viewers must imagine the narrated events; this black screen is an absence that we must fill, like the space we enter when we listen to the news with our eyes closed. As the newscaster continues, we appear, hovering above, just to the left of the television, looking down on a group of customers in a café blankly staring up and seemingly frozen in place. The television holds the customers' attention, while behind them another television above the door shows the same news story. They are all transfixed on the story of "Baby" Diego. Cutting from crowd to the televised image of "Baby" Diego, Cuarón's camera positions us so close to the mediated image, we seem to share the same space and perspective. I would stipulate that although viewers may not see themselves as the ghost of Diego, or Dylan, or all the lost children, Cuarón's camera

does make us feel as though we are moving through this future space with ghostly presence. When the black screen cuts to the crowded coffee shop, we appear as a hovering presence—aware of the world, yet completely unseen or unheard. Whereas the black screen requires us to imagine the world narrated onscreen, once we appear Cuarón fills the fore- and background space with mediated images. Throughout *Children of Men*, mediated (mostly political) images are seemingly projected on every surface, and it is our ghostly presence that gives these images meaning.

Cuarón's long take not only allows us to experience the filmic space in close proximity to Theo, but it also provides narrative details visually without explicit descriptions. When we follow Theo out of the café, we lag slightly behind and are fully immersed in visual details. The title card, *London, 16th November 2027*, locates this time and place—a future world where nothing is new. The streets are busy and grey; trash bags and refuse are piled high next to buildings; uniformed policeman seem to be everywhere. This future world doesn't look much different from our own, except more decrepit, more polluted, and obviously dying. Cuarón immerses us here in background images, are images inherently violent and fear-inducing. Throughout *CoM*, the background is filled with persistent and pervasive mediated images, such as news bulletins, photographs of lost children, a political comic, the Picasso painting *Guernica*. The constantly running ads reinforce the filmic trauma for the inhabitants of this space we move through. The future city we have entered is walled with images, and in

following Theo down the street, we move as if in 'real-time' through the space of a dystopic after-life, a space where human life has ceased to continue.

The final image in the opening is a trauma-image. It is this image, briefly appearing out of the smoke of the explosion, that we may find most haunting. We turn back to follow Theo, who stops to add a shot of whiskey to his coffee. As he pours, we circle around to his left looking back down the street the way we came. Theo starts to put a lid on his cup, and a bomb explodes in the café we just left. Theo falls backwards into our position, our sight lines match briefly, then we move quickly past him towards the café. There is a high-pitched, piercing tone over the screams of the bombing victims. A woman exits the café holding her dis-attached arm: this is final image in the three-minute long take. When the screen cuts to black, and the title card reads CHILDREN OF MEN in white letters, the high-pitched tone continues while, for some viewers, the image of the woman remains as a ghost in our imagination.

Trauma images may act on the viewer like a traumatic memory. Freud observes that trauma, "the psychical trauma—or more precisely the memory of the trauma—acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that still is at work" (qtd. in van der Kolk, 248). Although there is clear evidence that directly experiencing a trauma is much more likely to produce severe symptoms,

witnessing a traumatic event can also cause PTSD.¹⁵⁰ The difference between witnessing traumatic events in a fictional world onscreen and witnessing real trauma is obvious — filmic space enables images of trauma to be mediated safely on the other side of the liminal screen. Even though viewers may feel that they are sharing intimate space, the distance is just a proprioceptive illusion. If we accept that the memory of the trauma “acts like a foreign agent,” is it so different for the viewers of *Children of Men* to envision the image of the woman carrying her dis-embodied arm as a ghost of the trauma-image, walking towards us and still at work in our memory?

Throughout *Children of Men*, we experience trauma-images in two ways: as witness and as ghost. In the opening scene we witness a traumatic event from an intimately close distance, and our shock is magnified by our proximity to the explosion measured in ‘real-time’. Considering that traumatized patients report having dissociative experiences in which they describe themselves as “observers watching an event happen to someone else,”¹⁵¹ I believe that by moving through *Children of Men* as both witness and ghost, we become a foreign body in the diegetic world whose entry is “an agent still at work” in that world. As both witness and participant, our purpose for ghosting Theo may originate from multiple sources. We could be just a traveling companion, a witness to Theo’s journey. Or, in Cuarón’s camera we could be the

¹⁵⁰ May, Casey L. and Blair E. Wisco. “Defining Trauma: How Level of Risk and Proximity Affect Risk for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.”

¹⁵¹ Schachter, *The Seven Sins of Memory*, 174.

embodiment of the one ghost who haunts Theo, the only ghost who can revive Theo from his apathy and motivate him to a holy mission—his son Dylan. Or, we could imagine the ghost as an assemblage of lost children: ghosts of Dylan and “Baby” Diego, ghosts of the children lost to influenza or other diseases, and ghosts of the children who remain unborn over the last nineteen years. If we can agree that a ghost’s presence may be nothing more than the feeling that one is not alone, or that we sense a presence encouraging us to fight on, then we could also agree that our ghosting in *Children of Men* re-affirms our presence and purpose as an agent still at work on Theo.

As witness to the dystopic future, we understand from the earliest scenes that all of humanity has been injured by a continuing traumatic event—world-wide infertility without explanation or cure. England in 2027 is traumatized by the nineteen years of infertility, which has ultimately led to a violent nationalistic fervor targeting refugees and immigrants. London is a city traumatized by the acts of those who brandish *official*-power over and against those whose *official*-existence is invalid. The former port city of Bexhill has been traumatized, imprisoned behind the walls of *official*-status as refugee detainment camp. Political trauma can take multiple forms, but the inherent violence of nationalism is especially insidious because, at its base, *official*-existence is always in crisis. Illegal immigrants are always perceived as a threat in the zero-sum, geo-political game of *official*-nationalistic ideology. Derrida describes the immigrant and refugee

experience as an *aporia of foreignness*, and current critical-thinking¹⁵² about this concept confirms our image of refugee as a person whose identity is always already stuck in-between. *Children of Men* engages the political trauma perpetrated on the overdetermined and unstable other, the “fugee,” in ways prescient to our images of current political traumas in Europe and the United States. We witness the filmic events, the excessive government abuses against immigrants and the brutality of terrorist groups in response, and we appraise¹⁵³ our position in the trauma-image in response to the reality of our current viewing. Like the refugee caught in-between countries, viewers of trauma-images are caught between states of being: one, as witness to the mediated image in the filmic world and two, as witness to the images from the real world (or perhaps as witness to real violence).

In *Children of Men* we witness refugees—who have fled to England as their last hope only to be caged, abused, and forced to live under constant threat of violence—from our own constantly changing current perspective. We are present-day ghosts haunting a future world. In this diegetic world we see the earth suffering from human-caused injury, and from our physical bodily position as a viewer in 2020, we know that we are the humans most likely to have caused this injury. Images in the film echo images of trauma from our own time, like the image of a dark-skinned man,

¹⁵² See *Transnational Cinemas*, 2018, VOL 9, No. 1-12.

¹⁵³ Ehlers and Clark. “A cognitive model for posttraumatic stress disorder.”

blindfolded, in an orange jumper, forced to stand in a stress position reminding us of American soldiers with prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Watching the film again, more than a decade after its release, and having since seen real-life images of the ever-expanding refugee crises engulfing most of the world, the images in *Children of Men* resonate in another powerful way. Ghosting the image from our present position as viewer, we are always already stuck in a temporal in-between.

Cuarón's camera allows viewers to become the ghosts haunting the events, the space, and the people in the filmic world, and as such our purpose may become to assign meaning and significance to the filmic images. Furthermore, when we lead, follow, or remained trapped in an enclosed space with characters in the long take, the illusion of proximity and time convince us that we somehow exist together in the same temporal-spatial dimension as the characters in this diegetic world; but we also know that we are more of our present life, safe from the violence onscreen. We may haunt the images in a film, moving as we do through *Children of Men* as a ghost from Theo's past, or as the spirit leading him and Kee and the Baby to place of safety. Or, we may haunt the filmic images of trauma as witnesses bearing the ghosts of images (news photos or videos) from our own time and place. Although viewers ultimately cannot cross-over into the filmic world, Cuarón's camera provides the illusionary experience of moving in 'close proximity to' and within the same space as the collective traumas of London's survivors, as the group trauma of a terrorist explosion, and as the intimate trauma of

Julian dying in Theo's arms. His camera opens the space in which we may *nearly* directly experience the traumatic event.

5.2 Mediated trauma-image

When I first looked at the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V, 2013), the diagnostic criteria for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) present as originating from:

- A. Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways:
- 1 Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s).
 - 2 Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others
 - 3 Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend. In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental.
 - 4 Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g. first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse). *Note:* Criterion A4 does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, unless this exposure is work related.¹⁵⁴

For me, the *Note:* in A4 begs the question: *Can a fictional film cause PTSD?* More importantly, it seems obvious that by excluding the 'non-work related' viewer from the clinical definition, the manual ignores an originating cause that mediated images may potentially produce, such as the persistent injuries that mediated terrorism inflicts.

Implicit in this exclusion are a couple of questions about proximity: first, *How close to the*

¹⁵⁴DSM-V <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm>

*trauma must one be to be traumatized? second, Does the mediation of traumatic images expand or contract the distance between a viewer and the trauma? and third, Can a mediated trauma-image be both public and personal?*¹⁵⁵ E. Ann Kaplan sees proximity to the event as the most obvious complicating element in the responses to the attacks of September 11th, 2001. Using Žižek as an example of the distant intellectual perspective, she agrees that the US had “already anticipated the event in many uncanny similar catastrophes — as if unconsciously aware of the illusion citizens were living, of the repressed knowledge that now emerged in film fantasies.”¹⁵⁶ The history and methodology of modern terrorism from the 20th century onward is inextricably linked to the dissemination of images through popular media. When groups like al-Qaeda began to utilize multiple coordinated attacks timed to generate maximum news coverage, they were able to exploit our structure for reporting mediated images as ‘news worth repeating.’ They discovered that mediated images of trauma, especially running live in real-time, are powerful and effective weapons with extensive reach and great potential for causing massive psychological injury.

During the hours and days after the first plane hit the World Trade Center Tower, these weaponized images were replayed non-stop, on every channel and

¹⁵⁵ Julia Kristeva distinguishes between two types of trauma — the military/political and the personal. But for my purposes, *public* and *personal* trauma expresses more aptly the measure of emotional proximity between the viewer and an image or between the witness and a trauma.

¹⁵⁶ *Trauma Culture*, 15.

medium. The event and our emotional proximity to it may change from 'witness to an Event of public trauma' to 'victim of a personal trauma' in our repeated viewing; as images of the Event become firmly engraved in our memories, they may become an originating source of personal trauma. Most of us can tell the story in great detail of where we were and what we were doing when we first saw the televised images of the World Trade Center. And though the research in memory generally agrees that our memories of events, even those we believe we remember in great detail, are mostly inaccurate, it is the underlying sense of proximity to the imaged event that our ghosts may affirm.

I can try to recall the details of my experience with the images of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19th, 1995. Because I have several cousins who are politicians, law enforcement officers, and journalists in Oklahoma, and all of whom, I knew, went to that building regularly, the first images of the Oklahoma City bombing had great emotional proximity for me.¹⁵⁷ Now, I may try to re-construct the time and place where I first saw the cratered building, and the details become insignificant compared to the affect. Whether we were at dinner in East Atlanta or Grant Park, with Ed and Sondra or Rex and Caroline, it is the *feeling* evoked by the

¹⁵⁷ One cousin, a political advisor and pollster, had been there a week or two earlier; my uncle, sheriff of Okfuskee County, and his son, an Oklahoma Highway Patrolmen, were both three counties south from where Timothy McVeigh was captured.

image televised above the bar that I remember. Fortunately,¹⁵⁸ my experiences with the images of trauma did not produce symptoms that would warrant a diagnosis of PTSD, but others are not as fortunate. For many the photographs, video images, or audio recordings from 9/11, or Sandy Hook Elementary, or the Bataclan theatre in Paris, to name only three, are traumatizing.

In considering how filmic images of trauma can haunt us, I will draw parallels between one effective treatment process, Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) and image ghosting. Specifically, I argue that just as EMDR incorporates the participating viewer (the patient/ witness/victim) in an imagined space where he/she/they may narrate the event as he/she/they remember it, ghosting the trauma-image incorporates viewers into a filmic space where the meaning of the filmic event is determined by the appearance of ghosts from the viewers' past. I believe that mediated images can be an originating source of trauma, but how we affirm our presence in an image and the meaning we find in the image are, in part, functions of those ghosts of mediated traumas (and perhaps actual traumas) that we bring with us.

Our bodies produce physical traces of the traumatic events through the seemingly unstoppable repetition of memories for those who directly experience or witness the event. And our bodies may respond unexpectedly, even when we are in a

¹⁵⁸ since my experience with mediated images does not meet my insurance provider's authorized definition of originating trauma.

safe place, as the intrusive fragment of a traumatic memory acts as a catalyst for our stress hormones to increase production. In describing dissociation and reliving of trauma, Bessel van der Kolk makes two points about our bodies' reactions to the affective experience:¹⁵⁹

[One—] The overwhelming experience is split off and fragmented, so that the emotions, sounds, images, thoughts, and physical sensations related to the trauma take on a life of their own. The sensory fragments of memory intrude into the present, where they are literally relived. As long as the trauma is not resolved, the stress hormones that the body secretes to protect itself keep circulating, and the defensive movements and emotional responses keep getting replayed.

[Two—] Flashbacks and reliving are in some ways worse than the trauma itself. A traumatic event has a beginning and an end—at some point it is over.

[...]

If elements of the trauma are replayed again and again, the accompanying stress hormones engrave those memories ever more deeply in the mind.

Ordinary, day-to-day events become less compelling...Not being fully alive in the present keeps them [the victims/witnesses] more firmly imprisoned in the past.

¹⁵⁹ *The Body Keeps Score*, 66-67.

The ghosts haunting victims and witnesses are physical traces “engraved [...in] those memories ever more deeply,” and these ghosts ‘come alive’ in the space opened in victims’ or witnesses’ active memories. Just as I proposed in Chapter Three that the Woman’s report created the space in which the ghosts of her former self, her dog, the Man, and the events ‘that required her to write everything down’ could exist, I believe when we imagine ourselves present through Cuarón’s camera in *Children of Men* we are participating in the creation of a space where events traumatize characters. However slight the distance between the space of my presence and the space of my presence on film appears, this distance is liminal. Although mediated images may be traumatizing, I would argue that most films provide viewers an experience more like EMDR, where our presence in filmic trauma seems closer than we actually are. From this distance, we can experience (or re-experience) the trauma safely separated from the traumatizing effect.

In the *Prevention and Treatment Guidelines*,¹⁶⁰ published and updated by The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS), Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) is recommended as an “effective” or the “most effective” treatment for a broad range of patients suffering from various forms of PTSD.

¹⁶⁰ http://www.istss.org/getattachment/Treating-Trauma/New-ISTSS-Prevention-and-Treatment-Guidelines/ISTSS_PreventionTreatmentGuidelines_FNL.pdf.aspx. 24.

EMDR is a standardised, eight-phase, trauma-focused therapy, involving the use of bilateral physical stimulation (eye movements, taps or tones). Targeted traumatic memories are considered in terms of an image, the associated cognition, the associated affect and body sensation. These four components are then focused on as bilateral physical stimulation occurs. It is hypothesised that EMDR stimulates the individual's own information processing in order to help integrate the targeted memory as an adaptive contextualised memory.¹⁶¹

Although multiple studies report positive results for EMDR treatment in PTSD patients, van der Kolk's 2014 EMDR study showed that even though its efficacy had

limitations,¹⁶² it was a "powerful treatment for [releasing] stuck traumatic memories."¹⁶³

The parallels between EMDR treatment process and image ghosting starts with a consideration of the four components—image, the associated cognition (inner contexts, what we think the image means), the associated affect (our psychological and emotional responses to the image), and body sensations (our visceral responses, both conscious and unconscious). Whereas EMDR mitigates intrusive memories by integrating past events and triggers into "an adaptive contextualized memory," we can think of *ghosting*

¹⁶¹ The definition of EMDR presented on page 26 of *The Guidelines* included the following: "Processing targets involve past events, present triggers and adaptive future functioning. EMDR at times uses restricted questioning related to cognitive processes paired with bilateral stimulation to unblock processing."

¹⁶² EMDR was not as effective in resolving the effects physical or sexual abuse in childhood, for example.

¹⁶³ *The Body Keeps Score*, 257.

the trauma-image as the process by which we integrate our constantly evolving presence into the filmic space where the originating trauma occurs.

5.3 Image, associated cognition, associated affect, and body sensations

Like Bazin, who argues that the cinematic image is valued not according to “what it adds to reality but what it reveals of it,”¹⁶⁴ Deleuze sees the long take as adding to the assemblage of responses by which viewers perceive their reactions. The long take moves the viewer away from the narratively restricting cuts and towards the *compossible* variations inherent in *durée*. In other words, the long take opens multiple possible points of connection for viewers with onscreen images which otherwise are unavailable in the controlled narrative that quick-cuts and montage sequences employs. Watching a long take unfold, the viewer is engaged with the creation of the story in real-time. However, in *Children of Men*, the long take not only serves as a means by which viewers can co-create the story, but it also enables viewers to co-create space out of the shared real-time.

Cuarón has carefully populated this world with a background that requires our attention and participation, and as his camera brings background images forward, our existence within the film’s story is contextualized by the linkage of those background images to our own cognitive associations. Moving between foreground and background

¹⁶⁴ *What is Cinema?* 28.

space, closely following Theo through the dystopic world without comment or notice and then lingering behind to watch the encaged refugees, or the ‘repenters’ enthralled in religious fervor, or Jasper and Janice as they prepare to die, we may begin to interact with the background images, especially the characters, in a very specific way. In this world, where everyone has been traumatized by a realized existential crisis, viewers can imbue every character with a set of psychological and emotional effects that trauma implies. Just as we ascribe subjectivity to a character-image in the hermeneutic and experiential, we may also ascribe subjectivity as the associated cognition. Because in *Children of Men*, the traumatic Event was directly experienced by every primary, every secondary, and every background character, we may associate any one of their movements in this space as an expression of agency borne from the attempt to resolve the trauma, to no longer be haunted, to no longer live in-between.

In the opening shot at Jasper and Janice’s (Philippa Urquhart) house, we compose their stories from a collage of mediated images — headlines, awards, comic strips, news and personal photographs, bumper stickers, political buttons, and other mementos which, when taken collectively, hold a system of associated feelings around these narrative points in the couple’s life. We start with Janice’s vanity on which they have collected these ghosted images. We move in a slow pan right, and the context of the personal traumas they suffered are revealed. We linger on the final image — a front page photo of Janice with the headline: *MI5 deny involvement in torture of photojournalist*.

Though Cuarón clearly brings these background images to the fore visually, they function in the shot as narrative background information. The collage tells two simultaneously occurring stories: the headlines, political buttons, and bumper stickers giving backstory to the public trauma that infertility wrought upon the world; while the cartoons, the feature stories, and family photos tell the personal story of Jasper and Janice, whose lives have been stopped in place by the event headlining the final image before the cut.

In this scene, viewers may begin to hold associated affects with the characters as we piece together the physical and psychological damage levied against Janice now. When we cut to a three shot—Jasper on the right, Janice staring blankly, and Theo on the left, the two images of Janice are juxtaposed—the old, full-page photo of Janice smiling wryly against her living face in ‘real-time,’ catatonic and absent. For me, this scene can be what makes ghosting so appealing, because in this scene I can appear as the ghost haunting Janice. From the montage I co-create her story; from the headline I empathize with her pain. The actress Philippa Urquhart embodies both the life story and the physical effect of torture on Janice in her performance, but the actress’s embodiment is a gesture reacting and responding to the psychological affects our ghostly presence ascribe. In other words, we haunt her with empathy—it is our feelings that explain Janice’s catatonia. The camera’s movement between still photo of younger

Janice and the filmic character-image of Janice creates yet another imaginative space where we can create ghostly versions of her life that we send back to haunt her.

The camera also moves us from filmic character-image to still photo as we move into close-up on Theo. As he looks up at the collection of images, his eyes are drawn to one photograph—of him, Julian, and their child Dylan. The photo is in the center of the collage: Dylan is being held between Theo and Julian. They are both looking at him, and we see his face fully. He is looking directly at the camera, as if at us. We move in closer and linger on his face.

On first viewing, this image may not seem as haunting as other violent or sublime images, but after subsequent viewings I would contend it is an important image of the film as it the only image of who we may become, as viewers of *Children of Men*—the ghost of Dylan urging Theo on. When the photograph appears later, off-camera, we understand its significance as the image of the ghost haunting Theo.

This is where I return to EMDR therapy and connect it to the viewers proprioceptive sensations. The fourth component of the targeted traumatic memory in EMDR therapy is body sensations. Cuarón's camera opens the space where the absent body of Dylan can appear. Near the midpoint of the film, Cuarón uses a compound long take, contiguous long takes that work effectively as one, to focus our attention on Theo alone. This scene lasts for about three minutes with only one cut near the end. Although Theo doesn't speak a word, in our two and a half minutes alone with him, as

the others discuss the photo from earlier of Theo, Julian and Dylan, we empathize with his feelings of lost. We watch Theo, who appears haunted by Dylan, appearing out of the mediate image in Kee's and Jasper's dialogue. Because *we* remember the boy's face from the photo, we become the ghost in this filmic image, and as the haint of Dylan, we are an agent still at work in Theo. And, perhaps it is in this moment we might understand the motivation behind Theo's commitment to saving Kee and her unborn child because we have created the ghost who gives Theo purpose.

The image of Dylan in the photograph on Janice's vanity takes shape for us in a different way after Julian's murder. We saw it earlier, but now only hear about it from Kee. If we remember it, we may add details about the child from both Julian and Kee's descriptions, then, further, give him body, voice, and movement from Jasper's description. We stay with Theo, listening to the scene in Jasper's living room playing out in 'real-time.' From the other room, background in the shot, we hear Jasper and Miriam (Pam Ferris) sharing a joint, while Kee and Janice listen to their cosmic conversation. Theo stops at the bar, amused by Jasper's explanation of faith and chance. The camera pans right as he stops to refill his whiskey bottle, splitting the frame in two. On the left half of the screen is Theo in a dark light and sharp focus, and on the right are the others in the more brightly lit room and softly out of focus. The others can't see Theo—the *mise en scène* both isolating Theo from the others, while also emphasizing our presence/non-presence with him. We are moved in so closely on him, his

momentary catatonia may seem like a blankness on which our own impressions for how a mourning father would react are mirrored. But Clive Owen's performance as Theo does not *mirror* the viewer's feelings; in this scene, we haunt Theo, inhabiting the space between the overheard background stories and his thousand-yard stare.

The thousand-yard stare is generally used to describe a traumatized soldier's dissociative symptom to detach from the real horrors he experiences while in battle. The term has come to also refer to catatonic symptoms which may occur in the victims of abuse, torture and other forms of prolonged and intense physical threat. For Theo, we can only imagine what he sees within that blank detachment. And as the long take continues, and the camera and Theo remain unmoved, we may believe the illusion that we, too, are in an intimate space (if not dissociative state), again measured in 'real-time' and intimate proximity, where Theo can conjure Dylan's haint.

When Kee notices the photo, Theo stops and leans against the wall separating them. Again, we do not see the image of Dylan, but must recall it from earlier, just as Theo must. He listens as Jasper explains how chance brought Theo and Julian together, and by chance Dylan was born. On the split screen, we see only two faces clearly in focus—on the right, in the background among the group we see Janice, and in the foreground to the left is Theo in mid-close-up. Both are perfectly still. Theo is frozen by Jasper's story of Dylan, and we may assume his physical reactions to the memories are appropriate. But what we perceive as Theo's reactions to the haint of his son are more

likely the associated affects we ascribe in the co-creation of the haint. In this stillness of the filmic image, we participate in conjuring of the child; and though we seem to move inward, into the mind of character-image, it is the associations and sensations that we hold and feel that are made visual to us in Theo's response. Here we may be *ghosting the trauma-image* as we assume Theo's associated feelings of loss.

We create the haint that haunts Theo from our remembered photographic image of the child and from the images in Jasper's story — the details of what Dylan looked like, what he said, what he liked to do. Kee says, "Look, the baby has Theo's eyes!" and we may remember the words of Julian earlier, "It's hard to look at you, he had your eyes." We assume Theo remembers Julian's words as well, and we may assume this is also likely to evoke his grief and mourning for her. At this point in the film, we have been *nearly-direct* witness to Julian's murder, we have seen the aftermath of infertility on governments, societies, and individuals, and we have seen how the loss of a child can unintentionally propel the lives of the parents in separate directions. As we stay with Theo who stares blankly and unmoved, our cognitive associations of the image of the child and our empathetic affections for Theo here, again, affirm our ghostly presence as an object of mourning. But, the scene ends in an unsettling way. We may want him to move towards the others and perhaps find some comfort, but instead we can only

watch him move back into the dark recesses of Jasper's home and into his private isolating grief.¹⁶⁵

From a narrative point of view, this moment in the film, where we are with Theo, haunted and frozen by grief, is the moment when Theo rejoins the living. From a therapeutic perspective, the thousand-yard stare may seem completely contrary to EMDR, but for Theo it is in this dissociative moment that he can re-contextualize not only why he will continue to protect Kee and the baby, but also why he is now willing to accept his fate, as Jasper might say. When awakened the next morning by the attacking Fishes, he can set out bolstered by the ghosts of Dylan and Julian, and those who will die with him on this journey to bring the new Dylan into this world.

To the larger point about foreground and background images, because all images in *Children of Men*—the people, the events, the spaces—are traumatized images, our presence in the filmic world is substantiated in the layers of mediated images. Further, just as we witness instances in the film where others are inflicted with varying degrees of catatonia, there are moments in the filmic space where we can only witness the world like Janice—incapable of action. In some scenes the foreground images evoke intense sensations to fight/flight, and in other scenes background images evoke social

¹⁶⁵ This is also the scene that evinces my belief that the spirit of Baby Diego is the reincarnation of their son Dylan, who now awaits re-birth. The spirit to which Cuarón's camera gives presence is a guiding spirit that also gives solace and comfort to his grieving human parents. The ghost revealed may give meaning to their sacrifice—by giving up their lives, his spirit can become human again.

engagement. To extend my assertion from Chapter One, we may ascribe subjectivity to a filmic character by associating emotional context and meaning to their performed physical responses to trauma. However, before I can assert what the viewer's transformation from silent witness to motivating spirit may mean, it would be helpful to first summarize one of the more widely accepted theories for explaining how and why the human body reacts to stress.

Steven Porges describes and explains the evolutionary effects on the human body developed as physical responses to threats and stress as his Polyvagal Theory.¹⁶⁶ Current definitions of stress use operational terms, such as *stressor* for the originating stressing stimulus and "the behavioral and physiological response to the stressor" as *stress*.¹⁶⁷ His theory defines stress operationally, as a function of the autonomic nervous system (ANS). Stress, in this sense, is a measure of compromise in the state of the ANS. Through our evolutionary development, our bodies have learned (as have all mammals, but especially primates) how to react to safe, dangerous, and life-threatening situations. Porges describes "the three stages of development in a mammal's autonomic nervous system. Each of the three major adaptive behavioral strategies is supported by a distinct neural circuit involving the autonomic nervous system."¹⁶⁸ The three levels are:

¹⁶⁶ Polyvagal to mean multiple vagus nerve strands.

¹⁶⁷ *The Polyvagal Theory*, 66 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 16. In the Foreword, Bessel van der Kolk states the importance of Porges' theory in clarifying "the relation between visceral state and emotional expression," xiv.

immobilization—feigning death and/or behavioral shutdown, a response generated by the most primitive component, the oldest branch of the vagus, and registered in our body as slowed heart rate and respiratory function; *mobilization*—fight-or-flight behaviors, increased metabolic activity and increasing heart output; and *social engagement*—facial expressions, vocalizations, listening, dependent on the myelinated vagus, which fosters calm behavioral states.¹⁶⁹ The Polyvagal Theory helps us better describe and understand how our bodies react to and store frightening (stress-inducing) images.

Even though direct exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence may not originate in a fictional image, I believe the comparison between our physiological responses, visceral sensations, and gut-feelings to a mediated image is appropriate because they can mimic the same responses we would experience in direct exposure. The concept of neuroception (the subconscious system for detecting threats and safety) is an essential function in Porges's Polyvagal Theory. When we are frightened, neural circuits organize to induce fight-or-flight behaviors; when we feel safe, neural circuits disable our defense mechanisms.¹⁷⁰ The most intense response to life-threatening situation is immobilization, which can cause potentially lethal

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 16.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 19.

physiological changes.¹⁷¹ There are several examples of immobilization in *Children of Men*, demonstrating what Porges describes as the most *primitive branch* of the vagus nerve and the most severely damaging effect of PTSD. Furthermore, whether we are experiencing an event as a ghost or as a witness, our inability to free ourselves from an intense and traumatic scene (as in the attack on the car) has the effect of holding us in place, like Janice—literally frozen by fear. In several instances, the background images of trauma are juxtaposed against the frozen stares of the people inhabiting the scene: a news report on the television screen behind the crowd of blank faces in the coffee shop; or Theo's cousin's son Alex, at the dinner table, mindlessly playing an electronic game and taking his pills. When Theo is isolated and listening to Jasper draw a causal line between the public catastrophe and Theo's personal one, we stay close on Theo, like an immobilized witness.

Throughout *Children of Men*, the cause of the world's infertility is never explained. There are wild conspiratorial rumors and serious scientific theories that attempt to explain the cataclysm that has robbed humankind of their hope for the future, but no one knows. Cuarón uses the static mid-close-up to haunt Theo's personal inner world with our associated affects. We witness the isolation of an individual who

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 14. For example, as a chronic response to persistent stress, immobilization can lead to infertility. Although in *Children of Men* stress is an effect of infertility, not the originating cause, the diegetic world that we witness is one in a state of constant compromise, further raising the chances of infertility.

must continue in this world without ever knowing the real cause of his or anyone's suffering. Cuarón could have filmed the conversation in a more typical Hollywood style—cutting between Jasper and Miriam and Kee, or even cutting back and forth between Jasper's dialogue and Theo's reaction—and we would have heard the same story. However, the absence of movement for Cuarón's camera enables our visceral responses to be reactions not just to the story, but to the steady gaze in the eyes of a character unable to understand why that which has happened to the hundreds of thousands around him has also happened specifically him. The camera is still, yet we are not passive in our response. In this scene, we see one man's response to a remembered trauma, the memory of which we helped compose. What we witness in this scene is how the public trauma of a global catastrophe does not happen only to the collective mass of others; instead, it also happens to us all, as a personal trauma, one person at a time.

5.4 Our ghostly presence under attack

I will conclude this chapter with an analysis of a *trauma-image* from *Children of Men*, the scene “under attack,” because this scene exemplifies multiple ways in which the viewer may ghost the image. Cuarón's long take is especially helpful for allowing viewers their ghostly presence. Whereas in *The Wall*, Pölsler's technic provides visual evidence of our ghostly presence by placing viewers inside of or outside of the wall surrounding the Woman, in *Children of Men* Cuarón enables our ghostly presence in the

fluid long take running in 'real-time.' The underlying question I have about the long take is related to process: *how does the cinematic long take facilitate a viewer's ghosting of the images, the events, the people, and the space onscreen?* The answer may lie in the long take's intensification of duration for the viewer, by which the *emotional proximity* between viewer and on-screen narrative is contracted. As I have tried to demonstrate above, this contraction can be an establishing function whereby the background contextualizes viewers' emotional proximity to the diegetic world in which we are moved, or it may functionally allow Theo's and other primary characters' to mirror our emotional states. Another possible way in which the long take may bring viewers to a closer emotional proximity to the filmic characters is by immersing us temporally in the real-time action of a traumatic event.

James Udden uses the term *faux long take* to indicate Cuarón's, and his long-time collaborator, director of cinematography Emmanuel Lubezki's disguised cuts.¹⁷² Citing the article, "The Human Project" by Joe Fordham for *Cinefex*, Udden describes the process by which Cuarón and Lubezki create the faux long takes through special effects that simulated real-time in scenes that are highly choreographed, digitally enhanced, staged and precisely edited to give the appearance documentary-like reality.¹⁷³ The long

¹⁷² "Child of the Long Take," 32.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 35-36. Udden's asserts that the viewers' awareness of the artifice may undercut the long-cuts intended effect; however, knowing the illusion does not preclude the viewer from enjoying and or participating in the illusion. This is in part how Richmond defines 'technics.'

takes in *Children of Men* are filmic technics which create the effect of 'real-time,' thereby functioning as a temporal dimension in which viewers' perceptions and responses co-mingle with and co-create the traumatic-image-events we *nearly*-directly experience. The faux long take may achieve its desired effect when we experience the filmic traumatic image as manifested in our physical and emotional responses occurring in real-time.

Moments of intense stress in a traditional narrative are usually followed by a release of that tension; however, by extending the moments of threat and danger and then prolonging the release with the addition of even more stress 'beats' that also are unresolved, Cuarón applies increasing pressure on our temporal experience playing out in real-time. The durational effect of the scene is compressed, not in time, but in the emotional pressure lacking release. In what is perhaps the most widely discussed and analyzed scene in *Children of Men*, the attack on the car, Udden points out that the faux long take, which presents documentary-like precision and "impossibly free" camera movements, required "two months to plan, eight days to shoot on three locations," and many hours in digital post-production editing.¹⁷⁴ As we experience the attack from the physically impossible position of a ghost stuck in the crowded interior of a small car during an attack, our affectual response is intensified by our inability to escape. Viewers

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 31.

are held in place for nearly five minutes, and our stress is only released when the car stops long enough for us slip out and stay behind.

The scene opens inside the moving car. We¹⁷⁵ appear to move continuously, changing directions to focus on whomever is speaking, moving freely around and between the heads and faces of each of the five actors. The car is crowded car, yet our movements feel freer than in any scene before, perhaps because for the first time Theo and Julian are playfully reconnecting after so many years apart, and the threat of the outside world seems distant. For the first few moments in this scene, the playfulness and sexual flirtation between Theo and Julian seem to substantiate a feeling of hopefulness. Our emotional proximity to Theo and Julian,¹⁷⁶ knowing the backstory of their shared loss of a child and nearly twenty years of separation is compressed. We are present in their intimate space.

This space, however, becomes intensely intimate when the car suddenly becomes entrapped in an ambush. Luke (Chiwetel Ejiofor) tries frantically to back up as a swarm of attackers appear outside of the driver's side window, running towards the car brandishing clubs and other weapons, in waves coming out of hiding. Our movements within the tight space become frantic, spinning quickly around, watching as more attackers rush towards the car from all sides. As Luke speeds away in reverse, two

¹⁷⁵ Having said so much already about Cuarón's camera as the viewer's position in the filmic space, I'm using the first-person plural from now on to represent the camera's point of view.

¹⁷⁶ Especially if we are the ghost of their son.

attackers on a motorcycle chase after us. A Molotov cocktail hits the hood, and flames cover the windshield. In less than thirty seconds, the mood within the car has gone from hope to terror. The narrative beats that usually signal a necessary change in a character's action accumulate as the scene builds in intensity. We remain trapped in the cramped space, and without a cut to release the emotional pressure, the real-time that we share with the characters while under attack feels more immediate and urgent.

We witness Julian's murder from an intimately close position. Because our position as 'viewer moved through the shared space of trauma-image' is illusionary, we are *nearly*-direct witnesses to the diegetic trauma onscreen. We watch the motorcycle pull back to face the front of the backing car. One of the motorcycle attackers pulls out a gun, aims it at Julian, and shoots her in the neck. Her blood splatters over Theo and the others. Although this isn't the first incident where the camera's proximity to the trauma creates a visceral response for us, when drops of Julian's blood splatter on the camera lens, we may experience an uncanny sensation similar to what we imagine a 'live witness' might feel. However, even though the proprioceptive effect is an illusion, and our witness is *nearly*-direct, the effect on viewers is palpable. The emotional responses that a *trauma-image* evokes for some viewers may be as haunting as an event experienced by a direct witness.

As Theo grabs for Julian, desperately trying to hold her neck to stop the bleeding, we remain in a state of heightened tension — spinning rapidly from one character to the

next. The motorcycle pulls up beside Theo, and he kicks the door open, flipping the motorcycle and its riders back over the front hood of the car. Even though we have escaped these attackers, the intensity of the scene continues to build as the windshield shatters. We linger on Julian, dying in Theo and Miriam's arms. Kee is panicked, Luke is yelling, and we pass a convoy of police cars heading towards the place where the ambush happened. As they pass, the camera spins again to watch for their response. Although we do not yet know why Kee is so important, we do know that Julian and the Fishes have taken great risks, from involving Theo in obtaining illegal travel papers to the loss of Julian's life, in order to protect her. We have seen how the police treat refugees, and so we don't want Luke to stop fearing more violence. Here again, we become ghosts—'agents that are still at work' on the other characters. By *ghosting the trauma-image*, our presence/non-presence in the filmic space confirms that which has previously traumatized each character. We may not only experience heightened tensions through the rapid camera movements and extended long take, but our stress is also intensified considering what our absence may mean for each character. We assume we know why they are scared, and react as if their fears are our own. We haunt the character with our bodily sensations, our associated affects, and our associated cognition.

We *ghost the trauma-image* from our own time. *Ghosting the trauma-image* in 2006 is a very different viewing experience than *ghosting* in 2020. My assemblage of mediated

images of white cops stopping and shooting black drivers has grown to grotesque proportions. But, for a first-time viewer in 2020, when one of the police cars catches up and orders Luke to stop the car, the viewer is likely to experience a different level of tension than a first-time viewer from 2006. The police officers approach the car on the driver's side, training their guns on the passengers. When the officers see Julian dead and the state of the car and its inhabitants, they drop their guard for a brief moment. Luke jumps from the car and shoots them both. Confused by what Luke has just done, Theo jumps out the car, and we follow him. Luke orders Theo back in the car, but we do not get back in. Instead, we stay behind on the side of road, lingering with the two dead officers as Theo and the others drive away. We may be stunned by all that has happened in real-time, but as they drive off, we are finally released from the intimacy of the traumatic event. A first-time viewer in 2020 may experience this trauma-image, Luke shooting two officers, as a turn-about to the long series of unjust violence in his own time. The release from the trauma-image resonates differently for viewers depending on the ghosts that haunt them.

The four-minute faux long take is intense and unrelenting. The attacks come in waves, and with each near-escape, another set of possible deadly outcomes appear. Whereas in other scenes the long take opens our perceptions to other possibilities and potential outcomes, in this scene the immediacy, intensity, and intimacy of the attack is made most obvious by our inability to cut away. By forcing us to remain in the intimate

space of trauma, Cuarón's camera acts like our subconscious system for assessing threats. Our intuition for fight-or-flight shut-downs, and we can only react like the witness or victim of a trauma event whose bodily response is to freeze. Luke's agency is to flee (driving away and violently escaping the police), and Theo fights back (kicking the door open on the attackers). But, we cannot act; we have no agency other than as witness to the murder of Julian from an intimately close place, held in place for the duration of the event by the long take.

5.5 Conclusion

Throughout the film, Cuarón's camera positions viewers in such a way that our perception of the onscreen experience—our experience within the filmic space where we are present among the characters living through an event—is so convincingly 'real' our bodies respond as if we are direct witness to trauma. *Ghosting the image* is a subjective experience that follows a recursive loop—we shape the image with what we know of the world, the image shapes our responses, and our responses shape how we experience the image again. We can assume from the opening scene that we are a ghost following Theo, and from this position we witness how others in this diegetic world react to the trauma of infertility. While some of these people are frozen in front of their screens repeatedly watching the images of the last-born child, others respond to the existential threat by fighting or fleeing. Julian's response is to fight. What we hear of Theo's life before would lead us to conclude that he has been immobilized by the death

of his son and the resulting loss of his love. Just as our ghostly presence brings purpose to Theo and facilitates his change, any time we take the position of ghost in filmic space, we are creating the purpose for haunting the characters we haunt. In *CoM*, we perceive the characters' reactions to intimate trauma in the context of what we can only assume about persons who have experienced a world-wide, future trauma. We can never fully 'feel' as the characters in the diegetic world onscreen 'feel', but the emotional, physical, psychological responses that we 'feel' when we witness filmic trauma is evidence that we are complicit in ascribing meaning to the image.

The trauma-image differs from character-, event-, and spatial-images, in part because it can act like a force, for some viewers, holding the other images together. Just as an image's aura or uncanny affect begins and remains with the viewer, our perception of future traumas can only be processed from the perspective of present-viewer. *Ghosting trauma-images*, again, is similar to EMDR therapies, where patients are encouraged to recall the traumatic event image and describe it in detail, adapting and re-contextualizing the memory as an event in the safe distance of *past*. As therapeutic treatment, EMDR may help patients adjust how their body responds when the images are recalled again. Similarly, in *Children of Men* viewers may adapt and recontextualize the future trauma-images from the safe distance of the present. Because we are haunted by images from the present, we become the force holding character, event, and space

together; our witness to filmic trauma is an experience of re-contextualization whereby we give meaning to the trauma-images in the context of our ghostly presence.

6 CODA: THE GHOSTS THAT LED ME HERE

I saw *Children of Men* at the Tara Cinema in Atlanta, Georgia, over ten years ago. I have no idea what else we did that day, and can only imagine what we did just immediately before; but after the film ended, I remember remaining in my seat, hesitating to leave. After a couple of minutes my wife gestured her readiness to go, so we left in silence, as we usually do. This has been our habit for over twenty-five years, out of respect, perhaps, for thinking before speaking, forgiving each other some temporal distance from the image in order to process what we've seen, for making the images into ghosts whom we will inevitably talk about later. This is my favorite moment in the experience of watching a film, because this is when the film becomes philosophy, religion, politics, and idea. This is when the ghost of filmic images are birthed in my imagination.

My wife does not remember it that way. For her, *Children of Men* happened many years ago, and has since been replayed on every screen in our house so many times, the images are a part of who we have become. The first time we saw it together, it was an event, with images of trauma and hope, and it has lived with us ever since. We share these ghosts, in our own way, over many years, and together we have come to understand that aspects of how we talk to each other, and how we think about our

times together are haunted by my obsessive belief that images can have meaning and purpose. We have our shared images from *Children of Men* in a bungalow outside of Santiago de Puriscal in Costa Rica—the characters' voices drowned in an intense summer rain, leaving us no choice but to make-up our own director's commentary. And as we have moved together closer to 2029, we have witnessed more terroristic political tactics coupled with extreme economical and environmental upheavels, and the ghosts from *Children of Men* have gained new purpose—reminding us to speak out and act when our own government separates children from their families on the border.

I taught the film over two days in the summer of 2018 at the US Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta. The viewing experience was not ideal—the DVD player built-in to the library's twenty-year old 35" inch TV on a rollaway cart, and the lights had to remain on because those are the rules. The students, men from their mid-thirties to sixties, sat in plastic chairs with attached half-desks—the kind of desks that were made for high-school students twenty years ago. The worst part, though, was the limited amount of time we had to spend together with the film. I had planned about thirty minutes to talk about visual narrative techniques, to point out a few ways that the characters' backstories are told, before we started *Children of Men*. But, thirty-five minutes after I started talking, I decided it would be better to just pause the film during some scenes and talk over others so that when we discussed a particular image afterwards, they'd know which scenes I was referencing. I fed the students leading

prompts—“notice how the camera’s movement within the enclosed space makes you feel in this scene [the attack on the car].” I have shown this film to dozens of classes, I have watched it with my kids and their friends, and presented a paper on it, with video clips, to colleagues at SAMLA the day after the Bataclan attack in Paris, but this viewing was considerably different. There was a collective response in the room to the ending of that scene, when Luke shoots two police officers, which provoked for me an uncanny feeling unlike any other I had experienced before. After the film ended, I asked for their first responses: “Black Lives Matter” to global warming; the book *1984*, big brother, and surveillance societies; US immigration policies; children and the ghosts of children; the men’s families and their feelings of loss.

The conversation had to end with little more than a couple of ten-second interjections on my part to redirect the group to another student who had been waiting to say something. I have spent the greater part of my life talking about images with (on average) seventeen to twenty-five-year old students taking first-year composition courses, creative writing workshops, or literature surveys. By now, I’m sure I have watched *Children of Men* in excess of a hundred times, but this viewing not only changed the appearance of the ghost living in my imaginative field, it also changed how this ghost would make me feel from that point forward. I think about these men and how the ghost images of *Children of Men*—the characters, the events, the space, and the

trauma—evoked such strong and heartfelt reactions from them, and my belief in the power of ghosts is further strengthened and more assured.

Throughout the dissertation I have tried to use various methodologies for analyzing and explaining how and why some filmic images haunt us and how we might feel a part of the image onscreen, but my primary method remains the metaphor. Likewise, I would argue that my methodology tends towards the memoir. These two methods are how I come to all my writing, and in turn all my thinking about a subject. At times, I imagine myself *different* when it comes to formal academic inquiry, with all the benefits and struggles that being *different* implies. And so at times, despite my best efforts, I find my writing tends to be more confessional-lyrical than objectively analytical, more mystical than precise, more reliant on a speculative system relevant at times only to me.

Write what you know. I know my experience with watching films, and that I might be able to describe those experiences in metaphor. So, I propose *ghosting images* as a conceptual metaphor for the present experience watching a film, the memory of that experience, and the remembered images birthed in that experience. Although I have not fully engaged in the continuing debates within cognitive linguistics on conceptual metaphor, metonymy, and blending theory, these theories continue to shape my evolving understanding of what a metaphor may do for a reader. I look to Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner for understanding blended space and to George Lakoff for

conceptual metaphors. Together Fauconnier and Lakoff summarize the development of cognitive and neural linguistics in their essay “On Metaphor and Blending”¹⁷⁷ as two empirically-based research approaches leading to different, though also overlapping, paradigms. Sandra Handke and Hans Jörg Schmid explain the shift in cognitive linguistics towards considering the functional aspects of metaphor in this way:

Since metaphors are first of all ways of thinking about topics, they are not only informative about how speakers or writers conceive of a given issue. [...] they can be and certainly sometime are used to consciously influence the hearers’ or readers’ perception of certain issues. Just as it matters whether a BELIEF is construed as POSSESSION one can acquire, buy, and sell, more or less at one’s discretion, or whether it is construed as a PET or a CHILD one has the moral obligation to take care of and cater to, metaphorical conceptualizations of current event or problems purposed and publicized by politicians or journalists are apt to affect our views of these issues. The language chosen to talk about something thus also has effects on the addressees’ minds, whose current metaphorical structures are therefore continuously updated by linguistic input.¹⁷⁸

Although the “moral obligation” in this quote reminds readers of the political frames around which this example of conceptual metaphor is employed¹⁷⁹, it is relevant to note

¹⁷⁷ “On Metaphor and Blending.” *Cognitive Science*, Volume 5, Issue 1-2. 393-399.

¹⁷⁸ *Windows to the Mind*, 3 (capitalization in original).

¹⁷⁹ and the dangers that that implies.

that our affective responses to the metaphor are “continuously updated” as we re-frame its purpose in the context of our present experience. I believe *ghosting images* is an effective conceptual metaphor because it frames our experience with filmic images in the uncanny or auratic feelings that one who believes in ghosts may feel.

For me, what remains essential in metaphor is its capacity for affirming belief. A metaphor works when we believe that one thing is another. Whether or not this belief is excited by an electrically charged journey down neural pathways, mapped in our cognitive awareness, or framed as the mixture of commonly held and individualized concepts, we believe a metaphor when the image creates the feeling for us that there is something more than what appears. The frame around the conceptual metaphor of *ghosting filmic images* is belief. Likewise, I assert that *ghosting* is the best metaphor for describing our remembered images because for most of us, ghosts only exists when we believe that what we witnessed was what we witnessed. This is where I connect the metaphor to the memoir. Therapies like EMDR use narrative frames around which they may provide healing to traumatized patients. By imaginatively/visually recreating the images of space, people, and events, trauma patients may interact with those ghosts and haunted places from a safe distance. Telling the story again in the present, with the past fully engaged, provides the speaker a way to give the story new meaning. Just as the Woman from *Die Wand/The Wall* uses the journal to substantiate the ghosts that haunt

her, I use memoir to make claims about my 'belief' (in ghosts, in metaphors, or in images) that may not be substantiated in any other way.

In this dissertation, I looked to answer a couple of questions about the affects of watching a film: How and why do we remember certain filmic images? and How do we experience our presence in a film? In other words, how are we haunted by and how do we haunt filmic images? *Ghosting images*, especially those filmic images of characters, events, space, and trauma, may not precisely answer how memories are encoded and recalled, or why some memories induce unpleasant physical responses, but *ghosting images* does attempt to give us a way to talk about filmic images. *Ghosting images* may allow us to describe what we believe about filmic images; further, just as metaphor functions to frame the meaning we ascribe an image, ghosting may give purpose to our memories of filmic characters, events, space, or trauma. Whether we think the image instructive or divisive, sublime or corrosive, it exists and has meaning because we have thought it such. I continue to hold that ultimately we may find pleasure, comfort, and even healing when we allow our first-person subjective experience to give purpose to our ghosts and to our hauntings. *Ghosting filmic images* is how I imagine my experience watching a film.

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