THE EXPERIMENTAL ETHOS OF NICOLE BRENEZ AND CINEMA AS A VISIONARY CRITICAL ACTIVITY

BY

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Abstract

This dissertation is the first substantial academic study of the film criticism of Nicole Brenez (b.1961). Brenez currently holds influential teaching positions in Paris and since 1996 has selected the experimental film program at the Cinémathèque Française. Two major collections of her film analyses have been published in French. Scattered English translations of her criticism have appeared since the late 1990s, chiefly thanks to Australian critic Adrian Martin. The goals of this study are to extend the relatively small English-language reception of Brenez's writing to date and describe some of the critical territories it opens up. The dissertation does not attempt to construct a Brenezian theory of cinema, but to elaborate Brenezian *strategies* inside the discourses of film studies.

The theoretical point of departure for the thesis is the aesthetic concept of the 'figure' and its cognates the figurative, figuration, figural, etc. The field of figural thought is diverse and resistant to stable definition. This study approaches the figure as the irreducibility of the visible to language, the dynamic shaping of image plasticity, a movement of thought that highlights association, transformation and variation, and as an experimental laboratory for recreating the image of the body in radically new ways. For Brenez, the figure designates an experimental zone for thinking in images. Additionally, she elaborates a specifically political exigency to the field of the figure and argues, in the wake of the seminal work of Jean-François Lyotard, that figurality designates the critique of discursive codes of visuality and a reconfiguration of sense.

Brenez's figural thought is expressed most concretely in her criticism. She builds on a tradition of film analysis she terms "immanent critique", which is characterised by the fusion of poetic and exegetic activities. Her analytical methodology strategically disintegrates any apparent perception of the image as an integral unity and reconfigures the work of film as an economy of relations organised by different figurative logics. Yet one of Brenez's primary strategies is to affirm the critical powers of cinema and its ability to *study the image*, to essay its essential features and comment on its historical expressions. Her focus in this regard is a radical practice she names 'the visual study' which I discuss with reference to Harun Farocki, Al Razutis, and Jean-Luc Godard. I offer a reading of Brenez's book-length essay on the films of Abel Ferrara as similarly committed to the study of the image by means of the image itself.

In this early phase of the reception of Brenez, my goal in this research has been to consolidate a body of work that has circulated at the margins of academic film studies, analyse some of her critical strategies, and amplify her central thesis that cinema is a 'visionary critical activity'. I argue Brenez offers scholars a model for an experimental ethos, a rigorous and poetic analysis of film practices that range from militant pamphlets to gallery installations to slyly subversive commercial narrative cinema. Brenez celebrates the cinema as an instrument of critical awareness devoted to observing the nature, role and workings of images in the individual psyche and collective imaginary.

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List of Illustrations

Table of Contents

3. Somatization: The Body as Methodological Field

4. The Logic of Delirium: Reading Brenez's 'A Cinema of Negation'

Conclusion: Tarrying With the Negative

Introduction:

The Experimental Ethos of Nicole Brenez

La Chinoise (Dir. Godard, 1967)

Things are there, but only cinema can see them for what they are. In other words, it measures itself to their unstable, disorderly, relative, and unintelligible nature. Real presence requires shifting toward the figurative; the phenomenon – a face, a river, a speed – must be recovered from the perspective of its strangeness. And this strangeness does not refer to a mystery, to something dark and shameful ... but to an essential alteration, to the profoundly unidentifiable and impure dimension of things that cinema detects, welcomes, and develops.

- Nicole Brenez[1]

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[1] Brenez. "Ultra-Modern: Jean Epstein, or Cinema 'Serving the Forces of Transgression and Revolt'" in *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*. Eds. Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul, University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 236.

Résumé

This dissertation is the first substantial academic study of the film criticism of Nicole Brenez (b. 1961). Brenez holds a teaching position at the University of Paris-3 Sorbonne Nouvelle. Since 1996, she has selected the experimental film program at the Cinémathèque Française in Paris and since 2017 served as Director of the Département Analyse et Culture Cinématographique at La Fémis. Brenez pursues the analysis of film in strikingly original and unorthodox ways that depart significantly from the tone and approach one finds in much academic writing. She uses literature, in the genre of criticism, as a means to live cinema as a kind of spiritual exercise and historical reckoning. Two major collections of her writings in French have been published: *De la figure en général et du corps en particulier: l'invention figurative au cinéma* (De Boeck,1998) and *Manifestations: Écrits politiques sur le cinéma et autres arts filmiques* (De l'incidence éditeur, 2020). She has edited the critical writings of filmmakers Jean Epstein and Masao Adachi, participated in several curatorial and programming initiatives in Europe and North America, co-edited collections of writings dedicated to anarchism and cinema, and helped mobilise a radical film collective, *Outrage & Rebellion,* in response to police brutality during widespread public demonstrations in France 2009. Along with filmmaker Philippe Grandrieux, she has produced a series of films that "pays tribute to known and unknown filmmakers who have participated with guns, cameras, or both simultaneously, in the struggles of resistance and of liberation throughout the 20th century", collectively titled *It May Be that Beauty Has Strengthened Our Resolve*[2]. In 2018 she assisted on Jean-Luc Godard's collage film *Le Livre d'image* as an image researcher and archivist. Her

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[2] Brenez & Grandrieux. "Cultural Guerrillas ." Moving Image Source, 2012.
http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/cultural-guerrillas-20120301

diverse efforts at building a wider critical film culture reflects her commitment to filmmaking as a radical activity.

The diversity of Brenez's activities puts pressure on the common categorisations by which we tend to differentiate the agencies of intellectual discourse on film such as the 'theorist', 'historian', or 'critic'. Against such specialisation, but not against their specific languages of practice, I characterise her as a 'field worker' of the image. The denomination of field worker is meant to encompass the other specialisations and indicate that Brenez's approach is a highly mobile and flexible one, determined by the exigencies and contingencies of the field as she takes note of it. The figure of the field worker is *not* an argument for the obsolescence of the other perspectives but is presented as something like a hypothetical gesture for an agency that traverses disciplinary borders and asks questions as to the efficacy of those borders' constitution for the health and vitality of the field. Studying Brenez provides a model for how a cinematic intellectual can occupy several positions within the discipline.

Brenez's first critical point of departure is always the films themselves, not in any attempt to exhaustively explain their meaning or to instrumentalise them for a cultural critique but to reflect on what she calls their "problematic virtues"[3]. She means this in two directions. Firstly, in terms of the problems films pose and the questions they ask: what do films tell us about the expressive capacity of images or about the functioning of imagery today in the individual psyche and collective consciousness? Secondly, films can be problematic in the ways that they resist and thwart our attempts to understand them, to derive any ready-to-hand

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[3] Brenez. *De la figure en général et du corps en particulier: L'invention figurative au cinéma.* Brussels: De Boeck Université, 1997. "Comment l'œuvre peut-elle retrouver son épaisseur, sa fécondité, sa fragilité, sa densité propre ou son opacité éventuelle, en un mot, ses vertus problématiques?", p. 11.

meaning from them, to alter our sensibility and shatter our preconceptions. Brenez will frequently refer to the 'opacity' or thickness of films, emphasising their plastic materiality and objecthood, over any 'transparent' signifying potential.

Brenez complicates an ingrained bifurcation within the discipline of film studies: the line between cinephilic criticism and rigorous theoretical analysis. Her work is informed by a deep understanding of the history of film theory and larger critical frameworks such as psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and post-structuralist philosophy. However, she does not deploy theory as explanatory framework, but focuses on how theoretical principles are inscribed in the formal, figurative and critical work of the films themselves. For example, in her monograph on the American director Abel Ferrara, Brenez references the philosophies of Hegel and Bataille, but does not do so to conduct a Hegelian interpretation of the films. Instead, she describes how material and figural elements of the films embody principles and concepts advanced by these philosophers. Similarly, though Brenez does not do cultural criticism explicitly, she nonetheless champions films and filmmakers as politically engaged and indeed revolutionary.

One of Brenez's most original contributions is proposing a critical methodology that builds on a tradition of film analysis she terms "immanent critique", which is characterised by the fusion of poetic and exegetic activities. Her analytical methodology strategically disintegrates any apparent perception of the image as an integral unity and reconfigures the work of film as an economy of relations organised by different figurative logics. Yet one of Brenez's primary strategies is to affirm the critical powers of cinema and its ability to *study the image*, to essay its essential features and comment on its historical expressions. Brenez's critical methodology is not meant to be doctrinal or set up any fixed and stable set of parameters;

rather it is premised primarily on the aesthetic encounter with the film. As she explains, in a letter to her fellow cinephiles, "the only possible method has been a principled empiricism: always placing your confidence in the film, always presuming that a film can think as well as a theoretical text...the basic principle is that the cinema is not illustrative but has its own figurative powers"[4].

All of Brenez's diverse activities, her original imbrications of theory, criticism and method, are all to the purpose of more concretely and passionately attending to this fundamental feature of the medium as she sees it: that films are modes of thinking in images. If we can ascribe a grand idea under which to situate her critical enterprise it is a claim that reads as beautiful as it appears absurd, that cinema is a "visionary critical activity"[5],

Scattered English translations of Brenez's extensive writings in French began appearing in the late 1990s and increased especially since the late 2000s, chiefly thanks to Australian critic Adrian Martin. Many of these translated texts have circulated on the fringes of 'official' academic discourse; they have been mostly published in online journals such as *Rouge, Lola,* and *Screening the Past*, and in exhibitions catalogues for artists such as Harun Farocki, Jean-Luc Godard and Jean Vigo. Her work on recovering revolutionary and militant initiatives in the history of film has appeared in the journals *Third Text* and *Framework* and a text on Raymonde Carasco appeared as a book chapter in *Film as Philosophy*, an anthology edited by Bernd Herzogenrath. The most substantial example of her writing available in English is her book-length essay on the hypernoir films of Abel Ferrara, which appeared for the University of

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[4] Brenez. "A Letter From Nicole Brenez (Paris)". *Film Quarterly*, Vol.52, No.1, 1998, p. 49.
[5] Brenez. "The Ultimate Journey: Remarks on Contemporary Theory", trans. William D. Routt. *Screening the Past,* 1997.

Illinois' 'contemporary film directors' series, titled *A Cinema of Negation* and translated by Adrian Martin. Brenez's most recent publication, *Manifestations,* which collects several years of work on the different 'fronts' on which a politics of contemporary cinema are being staged, remains unavailable at the present to English readers. In this dissertation, while I refer at times to untranslated material from *De la figure,* I focus mostly on the available corpus in English.

In this early stage of Brenez's reception in English-language film studies the aim of this thesis is to help initiate and extend the study of Brenez's writing and the critical territories it opens up. I do this by consolidating a body of work that has circulated at the margins of academic film studies, describing some of her critical strategies, and amplifying her central thesis that cinema is a 'visionary critical activity'. I argue Brenez offers scholars a model for an experimental ethos, a rigorous and poetic analysis of film practices that range from militant pamphlets to gallery installations to slyly subversive commercial narrative cinema. Brenez celebrates the cinema as an instrument of critical awareness devoted to observing the nature, role and workings of images in the individual psyche and collective imaginary.

In this dissertation I focus on tracing the roots of the theoretical background that informs her approach and elaborate on the concept of critique Brenez advances as a shared pursuit of both cinema and written criticism. I offer a close reading of a corpus of her texts that focus explicitly on a figural analysis of the cinematic body and, in the final chapter, I examine her book on Ferrara in terms of the ethical impulse that animates her overall project. One of the primary questions that animated this project from the start was the desire to seek out and investigate a critical approach to the cinema that took its unique matters of expression as its main point of departure. That is, to think the cinema from the point of view of the image itself, and not, as is common in theoretically informed film analysis, from the perspective of an

existing body of knowledge. In an essay on Adorno's fraught and complex relationship with the cinema, Brenez makes the claim that "the fact that one can think *with* certain films, and not simply about them, is the irrefutable sign of their value"[6]. It is the question of this *with* that animates what follows. The key conceptual device through which that question is posed is the aesthetic concept of 'the figure'. I explore some of the meanings and histories of this resolutely unstable term below, but in brief, the figure raises the question over the irreducibility of the visible to language, the dynamic shaping of appearances or their *plasticity*; it refers as well to a movement of thought that highlights association, transformation and variation; lastly, there is a close relationship between notions of the body and the figure, but, and Brenez is absolutely adamant on this point, the cinematic figure is heterogeneous to the real body, it marks a discontinuity and a differentiation. As such, the figure designates an experimental zone of thinking in images. The dissertation investigates the methodology of Nicole Brenez as one possible model for how to translate such a thought into critical writing, that is, to think with the films.

The trajectory of the remainder of the Introduction involves a discussion of the relatively small reception of Brenez's work within English-language film studies to date, a broad characterisation of her approach as embodying an experimental ethos, and a brief genealogy of the concept of the figure. These sections set up the parameters, critical vocabulary, and lines of inquiry the rest of the thesis will explore in more depth.

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[6] Brenez. 'T.W. Adorno: Cinema in spite of itself - but cinema all the same', Trans. Olivier Delers and Ross Chambers, *Cultural Studies Review,* Vol.1(13), 2007, p. 73. Emphasis added.

Reception of Brenez's Work

While Martin is often quoted by others as saying that "[i]t is Brenez who, it can be very exactly and truthfully said, forged the word *figure* (and all its derivations: figurative, figurable, etc.) for contemporary European film studies"[7], it can perhaps equally be said that it is Martin who has opened the space within English-speaking film studies for the reception of Brenez and the idea of the figure. When Brenez's name and ideas appear in English-language film studies they do so mostly through the mediating figure of Adrian Martin. A number of Australian critics such as Bill Routt, George Kouvaros, Saige Walton and Lauren Bliss, have referred to or taken up some of Brenez's proposals along three specific lines: the concept of figuration as a heuristic for analysing the dynamic and immanent process of film construction, her critical methodology and writerly practice, and on the idea of the body connected to the cinematic figure.

Brenez appears in these scholars' work as a particular methodological lever within their own larger critical projects. Lauren Bliss, for example, deploys Brenez in her investigation into the 'maternal imagination' of film and film theory as a "source of inspiration" and a means to shift from a "socio-political" critique of the ways cinema produces ideologically prescribed notions of the body to "a model of thinking" that "offers an affirmation of the living and inventive capacity of cinema [that] rejects the idea of objectification"[8]. In Kouvaros' study of the films of John Cassavetes, he connects Brenez's notion of "the figural capacity of the body in

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[7] Martin. *Last Day Every Day: Figural thinking from Auerbach and Kracauer to Agamben and Brenez.* Brooklyn: Punctum, 2012, p. 6.

[8] Bliss. *The Maternal Imagination of Film and Film Theory.* Palgrave Macmillan. 2020, p. 61.

film"[9] to the theories of direct cinema proposed by Jean-Louis Comolli, in particular the idea of the "filmed body [as] a transformation, an alteration of the nonfilmed body"[10], and Deleuze & Guattari's understanding of the body "not in terms of individualised acts, essences, or stable identities and subjects but rather in terms of constantly shifting vectors of relation and transformation". "In these writings", argues Kouvaros, "the body goes beyond a purely functional role in the narrative or as a prop to a particular theory of the subject…the body is more than what is seen…It becomes a meeting point for a whole series of transferences"[11], or what Brenez would call different 'figurative logics'.

William Routt's extended review of *De la figure* for *Screening the Past* is a common touchstone for English-language scholars. Routt emphasises Brenez's writerly acts of reading, what he calls her "experimental hermeneutics"[12]. Such a critical practice derives, as a kind of first principle, from the affirmation of the film over and above its contextual determinations and the foregrounding of their critical capacities *as* images. As Routt succinctly puts it, "What is involved is thinking of images as critical acts, analysing them for the questions they pose and the questions they create"[13]. Routt notes Brenez's analytical strategies of discerning 'figurative economies', or the internal, immanent process of figuration, and 'figurative logics', the networks of associations and regimes of imagery a particular film can be seen as responding to and developing (Routt is particularly interested in Brenez's thesis that certain of Howard Hawks' films propose cinematic figurations of the Hegelian notion of 'the Great Man').

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[9] Kouvaros. *Where Does it Happen? John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point.* University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. 170

[10] Comolli. Cited in Kouvaros, *Where Does it Happen?,* p. 163.

[11] *Where Does it Happen?,* p. 170.

[12] Routt.Routt, William. "For Criticism", *Screening the Past,* 2000. http://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-9-reviews/de-la-figure-en-general-et-du-corps-en-particulier-linvention-figurative-au-cinema

[13] Ibid.

For Routt, Brenez's "*l'expérimentation des textes*" distinguishes her from other mainstream forms of film criticism. This distinction cuts across not just the 'formal' aspects of the method but also something we might like to call its ethic. Routt observes in the general discourse of film writing a tendency to take what are actually volatile and unstable figures as settled and agreed upon entities. Such consensus can facilitate communication and consolidate disciplinary boundaries, but what are erased are precisely the problematic virtues Brenez claims are essential. At a more macro, political scale, Routt claims this habit to fix and consolidate embodies the "imperative...to realise an essence-in-common (a community even) on the basis of a figure of that in-common. It is this realisation that *identifies* a community as and with itself, in which case the figure would be seen as the identity principle of community"[14]. Against such 'mythic' reasoning Routt points to another "mode of writing" associated with certain currents in French philosophy (Nancy, Bataille, Blanchot) in which he includes Brenez. This mode of writing would never settle on the figure as an identity-principle but on its "continuing transformation" of the fields of common sense. And a measure of this commitment is in the facture of the writing itself which traces *economies of relation* rather than, as Routt notes, "'reasoning from effect to cause', as more scientific thinking is presumed to do"[15]. Figural analysis deploys "scrupulously detailed and evocative descriptions", guided by a general principle of "the impossibility of definition and the inescapability of understanding"[16]. We can see here how critics have perceptively responded to the way Brenez's critical strategies mimic, in writing, the dynamics and resistance to epistemological closure she evinces in the audiovisual work of cinematic figuration.

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[14] 'For Criticism'
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

Martin himself, as well as being one of Brenez's primary translators, has incorporated elements of her work into his own critical practice. He celebrates Brenez's work as a point of synthesis, "a way to bring together, in a refreshed manner, textual logic, hermeneutic interpretation, theoretical speculation, and socio-political history"[17], after the "epistemological rupture" created by the semiotic and psychoanalytic paradigms of film analysis dominant in the 1960s and 70s[18]. Martin explains, "The entire semiotic enterprise (across all fields) allowed us to think the autonomy of signifying, textual systems. It allowed us (as Brenez might put it) to grasp the radical degree of the break between aesthetic, formal works and the 'real' to which they refer"[19]. Such a break, for Martin, allows Brenez to "go all the way with figuration"[20]. In his own work this has meant a focused emphasis on the *plasticity* of cinematic bodies. For example, in 'The Body Has No Head', an essay on the films of Robert Aldrich, Martin critiques the presupposition of much classical *mise en scène* analysis of an already constituted and homogenous 'profilmic' field of bodies "just waiting to be photographed"[21]. Instead, Martin's Deleuzo-Brenezian manoeuvre is to suggest that "cinema does not 'reproduce' bodies, but 'composes' them"[22]. Martin's own attempt to 'go all the way with figuration' makes the recommendation that we

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[17] Martin. Synopsis of *Last Day Every Day* provided on the publisher, Punctum Press's website. https://punctumbooks.com/titles/last-day-every-day/
[18] Martin. "Ultimatum: an introduction to the work of Nicole Brenez" Screening the Past, 1997. http://www.screeningthepast.com/2014/12/the-ultimate-journey-remarks-on-contemporary-theory
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Martin. "The Body Has No Head: Corporeal Figuration in Aldrich." *Screening the Past*, no. 12, 2014. http://www.screeningthepast.com/2014/12/the-body-has-no-head-corporeal-figuration-in-aldrich
[22] Ibid.

think of the constitution of bodies in cinema as a more energetic, dynamic and varied

process, and also sometimes a more gradual one: bodies that fade in or fade out, bodies

brought to the light but also destroyed, obliterated by light; bodies attached in

fluctuating degrees to sounds, words, emissions of all sorts; bodies pulled apart,

truncated, distorted in often subtle pictorial and scenographic ways. Bodies sometimes

with a character and even a soul; but at other times bodies as just husks, ghosts, wispy

things.[23]

Other articles by Martin, such as 'The Havoc of Living Things' on the multiple regimes of

corporeal space figured in the films of David Lynch and David Cronenberg and 'Tsai-fi', on the

figurative logics of connection and disconnection in the films of Tsai Ming-Liang, are excellent

examples of where certain Brenezian concepts of the figure and commitments to "think cinema

atomically", have been inscribed in contemporary criticism[24]. I return to other aspects of

Martin's extensive body of work at different points in the thesis, as his dialogue with Brenez has

been a constant point of reference in my engagement with her work.

The reception of Brenez's writing in English to date, while relatively small, has been

perceptive and opened up some compelling pathways for film studies to take in the

contemporary moment. There is clearly an interest in Brenez's ideas especially in their ability to

pull writers into closer material contact with the fine grain materiality of cinematic figuration

and in her experimental and affirmative methodology that celebrates films as thinking, critical

acts. My aims in this thesis are to expand and elaborate on the pathways indicated here: to

provide a more thorough investigation into the theoretical and philosophical roots of the

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Martin, 'The Havoc of Living Things', *The Third Rail,* Issue no.6, 2015; 'Tsai-Fi', *Tren de Sobras,* No. 7, 2007. [no longer online]. <http://www.trendesombras.com/articulos/?i=57>.

concept of the figure, to unpack the tradition Brenez extends of critical film writing that is also creative and poetic, to outline Brenez's critical taxonomies of cinema's ability to open up the body as a methodological field of transformation, and to describe the principles by which Brenez suggests films are able to study the image in a myriad of ways that fuse the political and aesthetic.

Brenez's Experimental Laboratory

I characterise Nicole Brenez's activities as following an 'experimental ethos'. This ethos informs both Brenez's vision for cinematic as a critical activity and her own writerly practice. Both constitute, to use a term that resonates like a refrain across several texts, an "experimental laboratory"[25]. Brenez herself curates the experimental and avant-garde film program at the Cinémathèque Française in Paris. And, of course, cinema itself emerges from an experimental laboratory at the end of the nineteenth century: the Station Physiologique in Paris run by Étienne-Jules Marey dedicated to the study and analysis of moving bodies. Part of this usage can be traced, perhaps, to Jean Epstein - a key ancestor for Brenez - who claimed film was an 'experimental device'[26], like the microscope and other technical optics, for investigating aspects of the real otherwise obscured from the limitations of organic human perception. Brenez aligns the cinematic apparatus with the scientific gestures of close observation and description of phenomena but also its ability to intervene and plunge into, like the surgeon's knife in Walter Benjamin's well-known metaphor, the 'opacity' and thickness of the real. In an interview conducted for Fergus Daly's film *Experimental Conversations,* Brenez makes some

[25] For example, "Cinema offers humanity its experimental laboratory in continuity and discontinuity..." ('Document', np); "The body is an infinite laboratory" ('Incomparable Bodies', np); "the actor, an experimental laboratory of identity..." ('Actors', p. 62); "...this work on images becomes an experimental laboratory investigating the determinations of human vision" ('Study', p. 167); "Each film is a laboratory..." ('Conversation', np)

[26] Epstein. Cited in Brenez, 'Ultra-Modern', p. 229.

programmatic statements regarding her vision for the experimental capacities of the cinema to expand our horizons. She says,

> Experimental cinema involves the entire field of the passions. The so-called standard cinema standardises the emotions, sensation, perception, and belief. In that cinema you don't find anything except what you've known and felt already. Of course you can love this in the same way you love the same stories, read every evening, read by the same voice, your mother's. Faced with this considerable restriction of sensible and emotional experience, experimental cinema re-opens the entire field of experience...

> Experimental cinema is the field of investigation of the very modalities of our apprehension and in particular modes of vision. The horizon in which this research is inscribed was sketched out by a minor character in Godard's *La Chinoise* who posed this very beautiful question: 'what if reality hasn't yet been seen by anyone?'[27].

The position that reality is in fundamental ways *other* than what we think and experience it, that it is outside and different to the dominant regimes of sense by which reality takes 'effect' in consciousness and representation, that reality, in fact, names an ever-expanding horizon of experimentation, defines the experimental ethos of Nicole Brenez. These comments also differ significantly from a common, almost reflexive way of understanding experimental cinema only in negative terms: *not* narrative, *not* commercial, etc. Brenez, rather, defines it through its positive powers of exploration into sensory and psychic experience and an open-ended critique of dominant images and restrictive common sense. Additionally, these experimental powers, for Brenez, are not exclusive properties of the avant-garde. She has celebrated cases where the

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[27] Brenex. Interview in *Experimental Conversation.* Dir. Fergus Daley, featuring interviews with Philippe Grandrieux, Raymond Bellour, Jackie Reynal, Gabriel Byrne, Vivienne Dick. Time-Image Films. 2006.

standardised industrial mode of cinematic production is hijacked and turned toward subversive ends. This gesture is most substantially and brilliantly demonstrated in her monograph on Abel Ferrara, who she describes as "a bold attempt to conjugate genre cinema with the theoretical essay, inventing an alliance that weakens neither the accessibility of the former nor the exigency of the latter"[28]. Hence my claim that 'experimental' names a more general *ethos* or disposition toward the potentiality of the cinema *as such,* and not a prescribed genre. Brenez denies the charges of simple eclecticism in forwarding this notion. Instead, she says, it stems from the belief that the cinema is "before anything else an ensemble of psychic experiences and that this is how they relate to the real"[29].

Thus, every type of film, regardless of genre or context of production has the capacity to propose something new, radical and unthought of before. Films themselves, according to Brenez, are experiments with reality, with life. They are less 'things to know' than they are 'ways of knowing', which is to say, they are not things strictly speaking but practices. Her commitment to experimentation radiates throughout her work, accounting for her incendiary rhetorical flourishes as well as her, at times, gnomic pronouncements. As a critic, she plays no power games and gives completely to the cinema the power to stop thought, puzzle and problematize our understanding and shake our senses. To think and practise the cinema as an

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[28] Brenez. *Abel Ferrara* [A Cinema of Negation]. University of Illinois Press, 2007, p. 140. [CN]

[29] Brenez. 'A Letter'. She continues, producing a wicked ensemble of filmmakers that embody an experimental ethos even if they are typically understood to exist across the divides of avant-garde and narrative cinema: "Today it has become possible to love Tsui Hark and Paul Sharits (two great filmmakers of cruelty), John Woo and Malcolm LeGrice (each of whose work on speed clarifies the other's). It has become possible to see that Cassavetes is one of the greatest plastic artists of the century. To see that *Body Snatchers*, which comes from the lowest rung of the Hollywood industry, is a more experimental work than those who are mimicking the magisterial films of Jürgen Reble. To see that the same forms of plastically beautiful destruction were achieved at the same time by Paul Sharits and Monte Hellman but to completely different ends", p. 50. These sketches of 'ensembles' of films or filmmakers is a common textual strategy.

experimental laboratory means to value and emphasise the encounter between the cinematic apparatus as experimental device and life itself. "Being true to life means having an *experimental ethos*", she writes, regarding the work of philosopher-filmmaker Raymonde Carasco; it means, most of all, "to invent descriptive forms faithful to the event of encountering the world while considering, at every moment, the unheard and infinite richness of its multiple physical and mental movements"[30].

In such ways, Brenez challenges the disciplinary boundaries and epistemological habits of film studies. She asks scholars and cinephiles not to worry over the classification of films in neat and tidy fields of inquiry, but to approach any possible cinematic encounter from an experimental point of view. Such a position does pose the risk, however, that the field of inquiry dissolves into a kind of churning chaos of sheer heterogeneity; but this is, I think, where Brenez's pleasure in forming ensembles, in proposing different kinds of logics within the chaos, in patiently and dedicatedly describing the specificity of each encounter comes in. This pleasure in pushing the limits of the discipline evokes what Akira Lippit has called the practice of an 'erotic epistemology'. He writes,

> Among the drives that motivate any intellectual inquiry is a desire to challenge the epistemological contours that define it. That is, the thresholds of any discipline also serve as the limit beyond which thinking is compelled, as the vantage point from which new configurations of the discipline become visible. By striving to advance toward that limit, genuine thinking always threatens to destroy its own practice. To think, in this sense, is to risk destruction, even self-destruction. This possibility drives the task of thinking and renders thought, according to a classical definition, erotic...As energetic

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[30] Brenez. 'Thinking as Feast: Raymonde Carasco', in *Film as Philosophy.* Ed. Bernd Herzogenrath. University of Minnesota Press, 2017, p. 220.

properties, epistemologies are bound by that paradoxical tendency toward

self-definition and self-annihilation, self-definition as a form of self-annihilation[31]

The Brenezian experimental laboratory is the site of a sensory and speculative enterprise coursing with an energy that must be described apropos Akira as erotic. The drives and impulses of an erotic epistemology are especially embodied in the poetic richness and critical intensity of Brenez's writing.

In an interview with *Cinética,* an online magazine based in Brazil, Brenez laments the lack of "gymnastics" in the formal analyses of films. As a dedicated 'formalist', she questions the reduction of film form to a glossary of standardised types or techniques that can be learnt like a medical student learning the names of bodily anatomy. The real question, she says, is, "How is it breathing? How is it alive? For me you have to invent an *ad hoc* analysis for each film. If you are taking seriously the formalist analysis, each film or each body of work requires a singular analysis...each film is a laboratory"[32].

Brenez's writing has an affective force and level of precision that is quite singular in the field of film criticism. To a significant degree, I argue, Brenez's writerly practice flows from the potential offered by what she calls "the energy of the essay"[33], not just as a classification of a genre of writing, but more deeply in the sense of a mode of thought that *essays* the object of study, that walks a tightrope between systematic rigour and free association. An essential

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[31] Akira Lippit. '*Arche*texts: Lascaux, Eros, and the Anamorphic Subject', *Discourse,* Vol.24(2), 2002, p. 18.
[32] Raul Arthuso e Victor Guimarães. 'A Conversation with Nicole Brenez'. *Cinética.* Online interview. 2014.
[33] Brenez. "Harun Farocki and the Romantic Genesis of the Principle of Visual Critique", in *Harun Farocki: Against What Against Who?* Eds. Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun. Koenig Books, 2009, p. 132.

reference for this style of thinking is T.W. Adorno's reflection on 'The Essay as Form'[34]. In this text, Adorno analyses the essay as a "hybrid" genre of impure origins that mixes aspects of art, science and ethics while maintaining for itself an autonomy from all three. An early definition in the text describes the essay as a "speculative investigation of specific, culturally predetermined objects"[35]. It is the speculative part that distinguishes it from more conventional scientific methods and its immersion amidst the world of things separates it from a purely 'subjective' notion of artistic creation. Its status as an exercise in ethics emerges from an allergy to certain 'theological' notions of truth and knowledge, wherein thinking is reified into 'absolute' and abstract concepts against which all contingent actual experience is viewed as derivative and diminished. By contrast, Adorno argues, "the essay freely associates what can be found associated in the freely chosen subject"[36]. This combination of a "childlike freedom" and the insights afforded by "immanent criticism" are hallmarks of the essay[37]. This latter term, 'immanent criticism', in fact, becomes the formula under which she comes to understand both the creative capacities of critique and the critical capacities of cinema. I discuss this term and the principles by which it is deployed by Brenez in Chapter Two where I make some connections between them, Brenez's conception of figural analysis and the film analyses of Raymond Bellour and Thierry Kuntzel.

The methodology of the essay is a kind of wild empiricism, a poetically enriched objectivity. As an act of criticism, it *necessarily* approaches the poetic for "it is scarcely possible to speak of the aesthetic unaesthetically"[38]. And while the essay's style, which in a way is its

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[34] Adorno. 'The Essay as Form'. Trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor & Frederic Will. *New German Critique.* No. 32, Spring-Summer,1984, pp. 151-171.

[35] 'Essay as Form', p. 151.

[36] 'Essay as Form', p. 159

[37] 'Essay as Form', p. 152, 166.

[38] 'Essay as Form', p. 153.

whole being, is catalysed by the demands of the object of study it would be more accurate, argues Adorno, to say that the essay *expresses* rather than slavishly copies it. The essay is most creative and most critical when it can make visible aspects of the object that are obscured both by the semblance of the object (as opposed to its structure) and conventional methods of analysis. The elements of play and chance are "essential to the essay"[39]. To put the object into play, to improvise with it, to make it drift and to wander into errancy are the critical manoeuvres of the essay form.

The essay, Adorno writes, "draws the fullest consequences from the critique of the system"; it exhibits an "anti-systemic impulse"[40]. The essay thus makes a virtue of "smallness" and favours the fragment, the sketch, the study[41]. The essay form makes the case for thinking itself as proceeding in a sketchy, fragmented way and for ideas as fragments to experiment and play with. The critical attitude of the essay is also a resistance to the false coherence of taking things as identical with themselves, as enclosed and essentially apart from anything else. What the essay exposes and makes present is that *everything is a composition of relations*; every particular 'thing' is only a temporarily organised moment in the general movement of everything else and the essay becomes the surface onto which to make this movement palpable. Anything can be freely associated with anything else. Such 'cinematic' valency is not pure speculation either. Adorno writes that the essay, by being "a constructed juxtaposition of elements", exhibits a close "affinity to the visual image"[42].

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[39] 'Essay as Form', p. 152.
[40] 'Essay as Form', p. 160.
[41] 'Essay as Form', p. 157.
[42] 'Essay as Form', p. 170.

These speculative and experimental principles of the essay form are particularly valuable to understand "a central cinematographic form" that Brenez addresses across several texts and foregrounds as a particularly potent expression of the medium's capacities: the Visual Study. I analyse the principles and development of this form in Chapter Three. Brenez's proposals for the mode of critical writing she calls immanent critique can also be understood as embodying the principles and possibilities afforded by the essay form as I have outlined them here. Such parallels between a critical form of practice and the speculative practice of critique are characteristic of Brenez's experimental approach to the cinema.

To make some of these claims more concrete I will briefly sketch a Brenezian ensemble out of four anthological moments in Brenez's œuvre, four eulogies in fact for filmmakers she greatly admires: Jocelyn Saab[43] (1948-2019; Lebanon), Stan Brakhage[44] (1933-2003; USA), Koji Wakamatsu[45] (1936-2012; Japan), and Peter Whitehead[46] (1937-2019; UK): Four vastly different filmmakers but who are maintained in an identity in their respective commitments to the medium as an experimental practice and their critical engagement with historical, psychic and sensory reality. The eulogy (as essay) as form provides for Brenez a compelling forum in which to demonstrate her particular skills and interests. It demands an economy of expression that does not sacrifice the necessary and essential and within which one is required to capture the range and diversity of a whole life and a life's work; there is the responsibility to articulate the relation between the personal and the historical; and it provides the occasion to condense complex, artistic and political gestures into the most crystalline of phrasing, something of

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[43] Brenez. Jocelyne Saab: history's witness | *Sight & Sound | BFI*. 2019. Web

[44] Brenez & Martin. 'Seriously Mothlight: For Stan Brakhage (1933-2003)', *Rouge,* Vol.1, 2003.

[45] Brenez. 'Le cinéma à la hauteur des enjeux historiques', 2012
http://www.united-red-army.com/?p=293&language=fr [no longer online]

[46] Brenez. 'Peter Whitehead: The Exigency of Joy', *Rouge,* Vol.10, 2007.

which Brenez is an absolute master. Finally, it serves an historical function not only in the punctuation of a life that has come to an end but by inscribing into collective memory what otherwise might be forgotten or rendered marginal by the vicissitudes of official history.

Brenez's conception of an experimental ethos is embodied in these different filmmakers' works in the ways they question the links between distinct phenomena and refuse the borders that separates them, beginning with a certain agnosticism toward genre boundaries such as those between documentary, fiction, and the experimental film; in the particular case of Wakamastu between softcore pornography and militant leftist pamphlet. They all blur the lines between intimacy and historical actuality. Brenez describes Saab, a war journalist that worked in film, photography and, late in life, installation, as forging "new relationships between political analysis, subjective positions and artistic work". In *United Red Army* (2007) Wakamatsu describes the failure of the revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 70s by, Brenez writes, showing how "to 'become communist', they gave up having a body, a sex, feelings, desires, a family, they [become] nothing more than an aspiration to an empty purity", but in whose films she nonetheless sees a "revolutionary joy" articulated with "a superb factual and chronological perspective". Whitehead's films of the 1960s such as *The Fall* (1969) and *Wholly Communion* (1965) bring together "formal invention and political exigency". This latter dimension is absolutely central to Brenez's experimental ethos. Even, Brakhage, whose reputation hardly extends to that of a political *engagé*, is positioned as offering a materialist critique of "institutions of bodily control: the police, the hospital and the morgue", in his "'Foucauldian' trilogy" *Eyes* (1970), *Deus Ex* (1971) and *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971).

Brenez sometimes uses the term 'fresco' to describe the works of Wakamatsu, Saab, Brakhage and Whitehead. The mural as an artistic form further embodies qualities of Brenez's experimental ethos in terms of its syncretic nature: murals or frescoes aim to represent collective history and popular memory, often operate in a tension between the figurative and the abstract, and marry historical pedagogy with plastic invention. Brakhage's frescos are described as offering "a tutoring of the eye" and a "more expansive relationship to the phenomenal world". Brenez writes that Saab "always understands that images will be part of an emerging collective history, evaluating the role and importance for the construction of memory". While Whitehead's film *The Fall,* a famous sequence of which takes place in the midst of the violent confrontation between student protesters and police at Columbia University in 1968, is said to express moments of "fraternal euphoria amid an ocean of despair, a précis of everything in the human condition that is noble and beautiful".

This small ensemble within Brenez's pantheon can legitimately be characterised as 'visionary' in the sense that their work subtracts cinematic situations from historical actuality and presents them without an overdetermined logic of explanation. Instead, per Brakhage, they offer an experience of "dense materiality and fleeting affect" that "'pushes language into check'". Whitehead's intoxicating mixture of rhythmic montage and music produces a "deflagration of the senses" akin to a secular reprise of forms of ritual ecstasies and profane illumination. The visionary logic of the apparatus as such is raised in such statements as:

> The cinema's vocation is not to record appearances, but to deploy the powers of
> analogy. Analogy with what? Not the world as more or less tamed by our intellect, but
> the world as apprehended by the totality of our psychic apparatus, beginning from the

most obscure and mysterious zones: perception, sensation, apperception, intuition, imagination, dream.

Cinema practised under an experimental ethos is the joyful manipulation of plastic material and an intense psychic experience.

In sum, what we are dealing with here is a fundamentally moral idea of the cinema and the assumption of the responsibility of the work of art to confront the actuality of the present, expose its limits, and manifest a different configuration of sense: "Let the image become a visual shout in favour of the disinherited; let no one escape the consciousness of suffering and injustice; let humanity become a synonym for goodness and understanding: these are the tasks Saab sets for herself and for cinema". The task Brenez sets for herself is being the caretaker of such gestures, to remember them in vivid and passionate ways and to connect them to a larger dynamic unfolding of the medium itself. Brenez's writing overall shows a staunch admiration for the *work* of art and the creative figure of the artist. She doesn't shy away from the 'Romantic' connotations of this; Wakamatsu and Whitehead (but also the manifesto films of Third Cinema) are likened to the arch-Romantic Friedrich Schiller, but not in any kitsch sense of the artist as possessed by genius. Rather, the true romantic "identifies with injustice" and seeks out more intense and more effective ways of articulating the poetic and the political.

Insubordinate Histories

Brenez's experimental ethos of questioning of disciplinary presuppositions flows into one of her most significant projects, the questioning of the archive that constitutes the history of the moving image. Several times in interviews, essays, and most clearly in the evidence of her

activities as a programmer of films at cinematheques and festivals, Brenez affirms that "the less familiar the name, the more important it is"[47]. For her, it is a mistake and misrepresentation of the medium to base our thinking, teaching, and culture-building efforts most heavily on the products of commercial film industries. Brenez-as-historian seeks to demolish such ingrained hierarchies by re-centring the most fragile and vulnerable of images, "made outside the industry for ethical, political, economic or purely aesthetic reasons"[48]. And while she is, clearly, thoroughly immersed in the French critical tradition of art and thought, she is committed to a program of "internationalism", which she describes as still, for her, "a symbolic utopia"[49]. Questioning the way the general archive of cinematic history from an experimental point of view requires therefore that it be approached with new sets of priorities and historiographic techniques. As she writes in 'For an Insubordinate (or Rebellious) History of Cinema', "The history of cinema resistant to an industrial perspective remains entirely to be written"[50].

The principle that animates this aspect of her thought the most is negating what she calls the "fratricidal schism" between politically engaged cinema and the experimental avant-garde[51]. "A large part of my work", she says in an important interview,

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[47] Brenez. 'For an Insubordinate (or Rebellious) History of Cinema'. *Framework.* Vol. 50, No. 1&2. 2009. P. 199.
[48] Brenez. "The Secrets of Movement: The Influence of Hong Kong Action Cinema upon the Contemporary French Avant-Garde", in *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*. Eds., Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, Stephen Chan Ching-Kiu. Duke University Press, 2006, p. 163.
[49] 'L'Art Plus Politique', np.
[50] 'For an Insubordinate History', p. 198. Brenez's article is composed for the most part of a 'roll call' of some of this history's lesser known or not known at all practitioners and theorists, all of whom Brenez claims are more important than a single Hollywood blockbuster. The fragility and poignancy of such a project, however, is indexed in the fact that almost all the blogs and websites she lists as emblems of the struggle have been deleted or have taken on other agendas.
[51] 'L'Art le Plus Politique'

will have been to exhume and to highlight films that are as formally demanding as they are politically, a combination which should be self-evident since critiquing the world order entails critiquing the discursive order…films that attack simultaneously on both formal and social fronts are much more numerous than we think[52].

Brenez's efforts here to trouble the hierarchies and implicit value systems of film history, to re-think a political cinema in the 21st century, can be seen as constitutive gestures for the building of a critical film culture. Her experimental ethos to 'think with the films' means also amplifying and preserving those films that are making the most interesting and liberating moves in our reality. The care and dissemination of such an 'anarchist' archive, an 'an-archive', is one of the opportunities for contemporary film studies that Brenez opens up. The gauntlet is thrown: "My conviction and endeavour [is] dedicated to the hope that film studies in universities [does] not become a 'registration office' administering the corpus imposed by the industry"[53].

Along with filmmaker Philiippe Grandrieux, she has produced a series of films that "pays tribute to known and unknown filmmakers who have participated with guns, cameras, or both simultaneously, in the struggles of resistance and of liberation throughout the 20th century", collectively titled *It May Be that Beauty Has Strengthened Our Resolve*[54]. In 2018 she was one of the assistant editors on Jean-Luc Godard's film *Le livre d'image.* In 2010, with

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[52] Ibid.

[53]'The Secrets of Movement', p. 163.

[54] To date the films include *Masao Adachi*, dir. Philippe Grandrieux, 2011; *Salut et Fraternité. Les Images selon René Vautier,* dir. Oriane Brun Moschetti, 2015; *The Image You Missed,* dir. Donal Foreman, 2017; *Newsreel: du cinéma anonyme vers des luttes nommées,* dirs. James Schneider & Ivora Cusak, 2018. See https://nwfilmforum.org/films/the-image-you-missed-donal-foreman/ for a synopsis of the series by Brenez and Grandrieux.

Nathalie Hubert she mobilised a temporary film collective of over 40 artists (or "workers of the image") under the banner of *Outrage and Rebellion.* The project was in memoriam to filmmaker Joachim Gatti, who lost an eye during a demonstration in Montreuil in July 2009 when he was shot with a police flashball. Between December 10th 2009 and January 20th 2010 the collective released a film a day on the website mediart.fr. "The idea", Brenez explains, "was to ask people to do something immediate, and with images, on the causes of this situation: how did it happen that armed police shot someone who was not a threat? The films are *ciné-tracts*, without aesthetic constraints of any kind, except that they should not last more than ten minutes"[55]. Contributors included Jean-Marie Straub, Sylvain George, Laura Waddington, Peter Whitehead, Marylène Negro, Jacques Perconte, Marc Hurtado, Othello Vilgard, Fergus Daly, Marcel Hanoun, Chaab Mahmood, and Philippe Grandrieux[56]. The list of names is significant as they all maintain ongoing and past relationships with Brenez in her role as critic, producer or programmer.

She has curated several programs at the Cinéma du Réel festival including, with Nicolas Klotz, a special 40th anniversary program titled 'What is Real? 40 years of thinking'[57]. In 2021 Brenez collaborated with six other colleagues to produce screening programs at the Austrian

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[55] See Isabelle Regnier. 'Outrage et Rébellion: 40 films enragés contre la violence policière'. *Le Monde.* December 10th 2009. Online.
Original reads, "L'idée, explique Nicole Brenez, était de demander aux gens de faire quelque chose d'immédiat, et en image, sur les causes de cette situation : comment est-on arrivé à ce qu'une police armée tire sur quelqu'un qui n'est pas menaçant? Les films sont des *ciné-tracts*, sans contrainte esthétique d'aucune sorte, sauf qu'ils ne devaient pas durer plus de dix minutes".
[56] The relevant content on the mediart.fr website has been removed. The original 40 films have since been released on DVD. For a summary, in English, of Waddington's contribution and more information on the cause see 'Notes about *Still* and police violence in France',
https://www.laurawaddington.com/articles/44/notes-about-still-and-police-violence-in-france
[57] A catalogue of these proceedings was published by Post-Éditions in 2018.
https://www.post-editions.fr/reel.html

Film Museum 'in the spirit' of Amos Vogel's famous text *Film as Subversive Art* (1974)[58]. In the realm of publishing, she exhibits similar commitments to marginal historical figures, political engagement and formal experimentation. She has contributed to the editing and publication of the collected writings of filmmakers such as Jean Epstein, Masao Adachi, and Eduoard de Laurot. In 2015, with Sternberg Press she published a short pamphlet on the history of Lettrist Cinema titled *We Support Everything Since the Dawn of Time That Has Struggled and Still Struggles: Introduction to Lettrist Cinema.* With Isabelle Marinone she edited an anthology on cinema and anarchism, *Cinéma libertaire: Au service des forces de transgression et de révolte* (2015). The volume hosts over 50 contributors and explores the history of films, most of them unknown or little seen, inspired by anarchist ideals: armed struggle, non-violent direct action, social oppression, hedonism, and so on[59]. This line of activity culminates in the publication, in 2020, of *Manifestations: Écrits politiques sur le cinéma et autres arts filmiques*. In large part I have not consulted these most recent materials and they remain for the future reception of her work. In this dissertation I have restricted myself, with a few exceptions from her early writings, to the existing literature available in English. Nonetheless, to provide a satisfactory portrait of her scope and critical intensity it is essential that these interventions into the composition of film history be acknowledged.

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[58] 'Film as Subversive Art: Tribute to Amos Vogel". Part of 'Amos Vogel - 100 years of subversion' https://www.filmmuseum.at/en/amosvogel

[59] When asked by Donal Foreman about her anarchist perspective Brenez replied: "what anarchy, in all of its diverse dimensions, really is [is a] faith in the capacity of individuals to discipline themselves and to sacrifice themselves for the collective good...As for the Cinémathèque Française, it was founded by anarchists, Henri Langlois and Georges Franju: I am but their humble, distant grandchild and every Friday when I arrive there, I ask myself if they would be happy with the screening that is scheduled. And often, leaving, I feel sure that yes, they would be, thanks to the films, to the filmmakers who are present, and to the audience, who are at times as brilliant as the directors". 'L'Art le Plus Politique'.

As a multifaceted field worker in the image Brenez's activities traverse the standard geographies of film studies: criticism, theory, history, teaching and practice. But if we unite her activities under the axes of theorisation she identified in 'The Ultimate Journey' as her crucial lines of influence - powers of the image, figurability of the subject, rapport between image and history - we can describe her field work as a more general 'work of critique', an ethical, aesthetic and political impulse to call into question the status quo. To do the work of critique, embodies an experimental ethos toward the world and toward cinema as a visionary critical practice. The work of critique by no means needs to be restricted to textual exegesis. For Brenez, it refers to a collective effort at building a *critical culture*. In 'The Ultimate Journey', Brenez describes how sometimes the most memorable acts of theorising and critique occur in the informal and inter-personal spaces that constitute the forming and maintenance of such critical cultures: in open exchanges with colleagues, in the speech-acts preceding and subsequent to the screening of films, and in the various collaborative enterprises that inform the assembly, dissemination, discussion, and conservation of images and concepts[60].

The work of critique, rather than a strictly defined territory of intellectual discourse, is a "dynamic ensemble" of "theoretical movements"; a movement that passes through the otherwise distinct regions of discourse and practice[61]. In this more capacious sense of the work of critique I am reminded of theorist and filmmaker Kodwo Eshun's 2018 lecture memorialising his recently passed friend and comrade-in-theory Mark Fisher. In this talk, in tones both elegiac and resolute, Eshun celebrates Fisher's capacity, through theory and critique,

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[60] 'Ultimate Journey', np.
[61] Ibid.

to nurture "the self-authorising work of forming groups"[62]. In this speech, Eshun remarks on "the art of building scenes"[63] via the creation of an "interpretive community that gathers itself, that comes into existence, in and through the participation and metabolization of the possibility-spaces opened by concepts which are charged by beliefs whose leverage and whose traction emerges from the specificity of each intervention"[64]. The work of critique is, Eshun says, "the building of arguments, the architecture of neologisms, the manufacturing of vocabularies, affirmations through negations, distinctions and differentiations"[65]. For both Brenez and Eshun, critique provides an experimental model for practice, *is* practice in an experimental mode[66]. Critique provides points of (re)orientation for interpretative communities and their means of questioning certain presuppositions. The practice of writing in itself is one of the 'possibility-spaces' where the work of critique gathers together an interpretive community, constructs and describes an object of study, and where new critical architectures are put into play. A critical culture cultivates and nurtures individual and collective modes of attention, a critical comportment, in which the ability to respond to the present is confronted and rigorously thought, we could say 'figured', out.

Brenez's ongoing attempts at questioning the archive should be seen, therefore, in this wider sense of the work of critique: experiments in method, the formation of groups, the debate over principles and canons, the preservation and nurturing of dissident voices, the

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[62] Kodwo Eshun. 'Mark Fisher Memorial Lecture'. Department of Visual Culture, Goldsmiths College. 2018, 8:22. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufznupiVCLs. Uploaded by Department of Visual Culture, Goldsmiths Feb 7, 2018. Accessed Sep. 2022

[63] 'Mark Fisher Memorial Lecture', 8:51.

[64] 'Mark Fisher Memorial Lecture', 10:06.

[65] 'Mark Fisher Memorial Lecture', 11:32.

[66] The sympathies between theory, criticism, and practice are further highlighted by the fact that in 2019 the artist Tony Cokes, who Brenez as cited as a key practitioner of the visual study, made a video work based on citations of Eshun's memorial speech titled *Testament A: MF FKA K-P X KE RIP*

publication and dissemination of these activities…this is how one builds a critical culture. It is within such a dynamic ensemble, crossing now linguistic and geographic borders, that cinema has the capacity to encounter and expose "the structure of the present"[67].

The Figure

As well as offering a detailed analysis of the principles and forms of Brenez's critical methodology, this dissertation attempts to offer a more global overview of her project under the core aesthetic concept of the *figure* and its cognates the figurative, figuration, figural, etc. In *De la figure,* Brenez remarks that the semantic field of the term 'figure' is characterised by an "extreme plasticity"[68]. It can be a noun, an adjective, and a verb; a thing, its modification, and its putting into play. The figure inhabits conceptual, rhetorical and aesthetic domains; it has logical, linguistic and plastic implications. It can refer to psychic processes as much as artistic and linguistic ones. What such breathless concatenations reveal is that language has a hard time containing the figure in any definitive epistemological closure. The figure resists exegesis. While there is a lack of consensus amongst the scholarship of the figure as to the meaning and usage of the various nuances of figurative, figural, figurativity, or figuration, they share a common cause in affirming the figure as *a show of force*. Furthermore, and in keeping with the dynamics of her experimental ethos sketched out above, Brenez gives a specifically political accent to the field of the figure. Indeed she has described the cinema as "a field of figurative intervention"[69] and, in a lecture that I discuss in detail in Chapter One, she nominates Jean-François Lyotard's particular twist in the semantic chain - the *figural* - as designating "the *activist* operations

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[67] 'Ultimate Journey', np.
[68] Brenez. *De la figure,* p. 436. '…plasticité extrême du terme'.
[69] 'A Letter', p. 49.

linked to representation. This is no longer about representing but about *manifesting*"[70]. But before we get too entangled in the Lyotardian deconstructions of figure and discourse, I attempt in this section to introduce to the stage the kaleidoscopic faces of the figure.

Show of force, what does this mean? 'Show', of course, means bringing something into visibility, a vivid demonstration or spectacle. 'Force' suggests the expression of a dynamism or intensity; some qualitative transformation in the material state of things. We can begin to approach a sense of the figure as a 'show of force' by examining *Last Day, Everyday,* Martin's essay on "figural thinking", where he provides a useful gloss on some of the working definitions of the figure in Brenez's work.

Firstly, there is the notion of the figure as the outward appearance or outline of things but also a sense of the active, creative shaping of form; this is the *plastic* dimension of the figure[71]. An important source for this aspect of the figure, noted by Martin, is Erich Auerbach's essay's *Figura,* written in exile from Nazi Germany and first published in 1938. Auerbach traces the most ancient understandings of *figura,* the Latin root term for figure, from the poets and rhetoricians of pagan Rome to the early Christian Church Fathers[72]. The primary meaning, as already highlighted, is the sense of figura as "plastic form"[73]. Auerbach emphasises that it was more of "the activity of forming" than the end result which was most important[74]. To figure is to affect a *trans*-formation; it denotes "something living and dynamic, incomplete

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[70] Brenez. "The Archaeology of the Figure and the Figural in Cinema After Kracauer." Lecture held at Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main, 2011, 5:08.
https://www.kracauer-lectures.de/en/winter-2011-2012/nicole-brenez
[71] Martin, *Last Day,* p. 6.
[72] Auerbach. 'Figura', *Scenes From European Drama.* University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 11-76.
[73] 'Figura', p. 11.
[74] Ibid.

and playful"[75]. Auerbach remarks on the frequent reference to the protean nature of figures, that they reveal 'new manifestations' and possibilities of different formal and material things[76]. As well as this sense of creative shaping, figures can also refer to the perceptible forms of "living creatures and objects" as well as to purely abstract "geometric and stereometric forms"[77].

Secondly, Martin writes that the figure concerns "an idea of the body"; being an 'idea' suggests the figure occupies an unsettled position between materiality and immateriality, between fact and imagination. This is the sense of the figure as a *modality of presence.* In the crucial essay 'Incomparable Bodies', Brenez elaborates on this dimension of the cinematic figure, stating that it is defined by the encounter "between the ordinary plasticity of appearances and the indescribable evidence of each body"[78]. Again, the figure is less a stable substance or discursively classifiable concept than an uncanny mediator of the 'in-between'; the figure exists, *makes present,* the passage between different material states.

Thirdly, writes Martin, there is the sense of the figure as *the movement of thought,* a "figuring out, a continual essaying or experimentation"[79]. It should be quickly added that 'figural thinking' is a characteristic of both the work of film *and* figural criticism, it exists in-between visual art and figural analysis. The figure as a shared domain of art and criticism is a feature of Brenez's work that animates much that will follow. Figural thinking works on the *relations* between things, it is about forging new links between otherwise discrete phenomena or events; it is empiricist insofar as it involves itself with material things and cultural artefacts,

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[75] 'Figura', p. 12, 18.
[76] 'Figura', p.12.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Brenez. "Incomparable Bodies", trans. Adrian Martin. *Screening the Past*, 2011. https://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-31-classics-re-runs/incomparable-bodies
[79] Martin. *Last Day,* p. 7.

but it is also abstract insofar as it diagrams new kinds of association at the syntactical level of a noetic or plastic gestalt.

Finally, Martin's short typology of characteristics of figural thought defers to Brenez herself. Martin translates from a special issue of the French film journal *Admiranda,* edited by Brenez, a definition of the figure as that which "invents itself as the *force* of a representation, what forever remains to be constituted, that which, in the visible, tends to the Inexhaustible. In this sense, the figure can never be confined to Man, for it is the Unforeseeable, the Unpredictable…"[80]. The figure makes a show of force; it is both the *event* of representation, its coming into being, but also its continual active becoming that pushes representation to its limits. This latter aspect of the unfolding of the figure can be properly called *figuration* and Martin presents a final formula from the *Admiranda* glossary to summarise: "[Figuration] is the symbolic game or process aiming to establish a fixed, evolving, or unstable correlation between plastic, aural and narrative parameters able to elicit fundamental categories of representation…and other parameters relating to fundamental categories of ontology"[81]. What Martin refers to as these definitions' "slyly comic", slightly over-the-top degree of complexity is evidence of the acrobatics language must engage in to make contact with the plasticity and dynamic movement of figuration.

Constructing a coherent genealogy of the figure is as difficult and fraught as producing a sensible definition. Bill Routt's essay on *De la figure* constructs a lineage of figural thinking in the film theory of Christian Metz, Stephen Heath, Dudley Andrew, and David Rodowick in terms of the significance of the figure for reflecting on film rhetoric, characterisation, and

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[80] Brenez. Cited in Martin, *Last Day,* p. 7-8.
[81] Ibid.

ideology critique[82]. Martin's *Last Day Every Day* moves through idiosyncratic readings of the well-known Weimar intellectuals Siegried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Auerbach in terms of the allegorical dimension of figuration. An essay by Spain-based scholars Fran Benavente and Gloria Salvadó trace a figural line to the work Raymond Bellour has done on the concepts of 'amodal perception' and 'vitality affects' proposed by psychotherapist Daniel Stern, where the *force* of the figure is argued to be analogous to a dimension of experience emerging in the first years of life and remaining, indeed *insisting,* 'below' conscious awareness and categorical definition; instead existing "in terms of intensity, rhythm or formal pulsation"[83]. They further note that the "entire conceptual circuit" of figural thinking turns on a general "displacement of the text as epistemological paradise and its substitution by the notion of body…the consideration of the film *as* body…[and] a withdrawal of the importance placed on the visual and encoded organisation of space in contrast to notions of presence, matter, and sensation"[84]. There are a great many divergences among these scholars and their respective articulations of the figure; they cannot be said to form any kind of school or coherent doctrine. This may be a pitfall for scholars eager to find a footing in figural thought, but it is also one of its strengths. Its heterogeneity and pluralism mean it spontaneously resists being organised under a master discourse and maintains itself as an open-ended horizon for experimentation. The semantic field of the figure is another ensemble in which the unity of its constituent parts never over-determines their diverse specificity.

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[82] Routt. 'For Criticism'.

[83] Benavente & Salvadó. "From Figure to Figural: Body and incarnation in contemporary film", *Academic Quarter*, Vol.1, 2010, p. 130. See also, Bellour. "Going to the Cinema with Félix Guattari and Daniel Stern", in *The Guattari Effect*. Eds. Éric Alliez and Andrew Goffey. Continuum, 2011, p.220-234.

[84] 'From the Figure to the Figural', p. 131.

For Brenez, it is the cinéaste Jean Epstein, a central figure in her pantheon, who Brenez claims lays out the "foundations of figurative cinema", a mode of practice that deeply involves itself with the phenomenal world of things and the inner world of desire and the drives[85]. The ultimate aim of figurative cinema, the Epsteinian lesson Brenez will try to teach us, is to "demonstrate the real"[86]. 'The real' in Epsteinian poetics is the elementary reality of luminous "velocities, movements, vibrations", that is, of forces[87]. Epstein does not present these forces in a 'kaleidoscope' of purely abstract forms, however, but in the ordinary, recognizable phenomena of everyday life: faces, seascapes, ashtrays, popular attractions of the day like fast cars and merry-go-rounds. To say that Epstein produces 'a demonstration of the real' is another way of saying he makes a *show of force*.

Epstein serves as a model for an artist who lived the cinema as an experimental practice, as a figure who was able to combine theoretical work and filmmaking, who made few distinctions between documentary and fiction, and who, through his training in the sciences and his importance as a poet, becomes a point of synthesis for many of the claims Brenez makes for the cinematographic arts. In her essay 'Ultra-Modern: Jean Epstein, or Cinema "Serving the Forces of Transgression and Revolt"', Brenez moves freely between his film work and his theoretical and poetic publications, all expressing, for Brenez, some fundamental aspect of figurative cinema.

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[85] Brenez. 'Ultra-Modern', p. 232.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Jean Epstein. 'The Senses I (b)', in *French Film Theory and Criticism: Volume 1 1907-1929*. Ed. Richard Abel. Princeton University Press. P. 244.

From the work of Jean Epstein, Brenez discerns the "foundations of figurative cinema". These are "descriptive experimentation" and the "invention of real presence"[88]. A figurative cinema *investigates,* this is a key term in the text. As "an experimental device", the cinema deeply involves itself with the phenomenal world and the inner world of emotions - these are, so to speak, its reference points - but produces an exteriority to both. The particular genius of the cinema, the intelligence of the machine which Epstein celebrates in theory and in practice, is the central place of movement in its descriptive system. It would be fair to say that, for Epstein (and perhaps for Brenez too), inside and out, movement is *real*, is life itself.

Before unfolding what Brenez sees as the experimental results of Epstein's descriptive enterprise, let me first attend to the concept of 'description' itself. 'Description' is a word of practical language not commonly invested with special theoretical or aesthetic properties. Yet for Brenez, it is a term full of potentially transgressive and insubordinate energies. In another text[89] on the visual anthropologist/experimental filmmaker Robert Fenz, Brenez cites a 19th century, pre-cinema, *L'Encyclopédie méthodique,* which states, "Description is a figure of thought by development, which instead of simply pointing out an object, makes it somehow visible, with the vivid and animated exhibition of its most interesting aspects and circumstances"[90]. This notion of description encapsulates the sense in which Brenez uses it, bringing it up to date in the proposals of a figurative cinema. Description is not the transparent representation of an object, but a vivid *rendering visible* of a phenomenon taken equally in its singularity and its participation in the general movement of things. Nonetheless, there are two

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[88] Brenez. 'Ultra-Modern', p.232.

[89] Brenez. "Contemporary Experimental Documentary and the Premises of Anthropology: The Work of Robert Fenz." *Experimental Film and Anthropology*, edited by Arnd Schneider and Caterina Pasqualino, Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 63–77

[90] 'Fenz', p. 64.

obstacles to such an understanding, according to Brenez. "Systems of objectivism" have been built upon the technical media's facility for description and have been instrumentalized for the purposes of identification and definition, this last being the true antithesis of description[91]. What such 'objectivism' does is naively assume the sufficiency of the image qua object as a mere graphic stamp of its contours and outline of its surroundings. Furthermore, and more seriously, it fails to question the very nature of the real itself.

Against such practices of definition, description means, rather, a relentless form of questioning of phenomena, a technique of holding in suspension all prior certainties and habits of thought. Description works on the concrete level of things, people and their gestures, on the singularity of places and their embedded histories. To embark on a descriptive project is to go into hand-to-hand combat with the dense corporeal being of reality. Description separates, *cuts,* the motif from the referent and becomes a question of the plasticity of appearances, which is to say, a question of the *figure*. In this quite literal sense, figuration is the radicalisation, the *uprooting*, of reality.

Movement is both the target and technique of cinematic description. Movement is not a simple traversal of solid space by an otherwise stable body, but the always expressive and affective dis-placement interior to matter. Movement, in Epstein, is trans-formation, a description of "the essential mutability of things"[92]. This principle of non-identity is beautifully on show in a short passage Brenez quotes that expresses Epstein's joy in the fluctuation of things: "The dunes crawl: minerals flourish and reproduce; animals get bogged down in themselves and get transfixed; plants gesticulate and experiment towards the light;

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[91] ibid.
[92] 'Ultra-Modern', p. 234.

water sticks; clouds break"[93]. Things travel in "affective valences"; everything is always a happening, always on an experimental journey to something else; a series of events rather than a progression of cause and effect[94].

The practical means of cinematic description are its analytical facility for optical and audio recording and the synthetic properties of montage. Figurative cinema conducts an "analytical decomposition" of its respective phenomena, the visible and the audible[95]. The fluctuation of things is exposed in analysis and made visible by the effect of *framing*. Framing amplifies the detail and magnifies the close-up, it brings forth the physiognomy of things and the resonating acoustics of their interaction. The frame is an interface, a turning of things to face each other. Framing isolates the part from the whole and uncovers the tremor of movements in every part. Analysis denatures nature into its vibrating molecular parts (the etymology of analysis is literally 'to break up'). As Brenez writes, "the cinematic apparatus shatters or dissolves appearances; it grazes, betrays, anatomizes, and unfolds phenomena"[96]. Description experiments in telescopic fashion travelling 'deep' into the affective twitching of a thingly nervous system, and 'upward' to the constellations and orbits of more gross movements. The "lability" of things, revealed by cinematic description, is what, according to Brenez, Epstein's famous and controversial concept of *photogénie* refers to[97].

The constellating operation is the synthetic moment of description, when the analysed phenomena of sound and vision are thrown into chains of altered resemblances. The

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[93] ibid.
[94] 'Ultra-Modern', p. 239.
[95] 'Ultra-Modern', p. 233.
[96] ibid.
[97] Ibid.

'individual' or artificially isolated entity is only an accidental occasion of a larger process of continuous change within "channels of metamorphosis"[98]. In Brenez's analysis, a figurative cinema arranges its heterogenous elements into economies of variable treatments of specific motifs. The 'analytic' and the 'synthetic' are thus two-separate-yet-connected movements of descriptive experimentation. Individual films will drift toward either pole or seek a balanced passage between the two. At the analytical end, the light of the discontinuous, the pure plasticity of mutability, and at the synthetic end, according to Brenez, is the "erotica of continuity", that which, despite everything, links all phenomena together[99]. The foundation of figurative cinema is thus about the treatment of motifs, not the management of a narrative. Cinema experiments toward both particles and waves, the particular and the general.

In the frame of a figurative cinema, the world is a kind of great gymnasium, full of kinetic and vibrating entities. Filmmaking becomes an effort of 'affective athleticism' where "vibrant energy [is] triggered by the emergence and deployment of a gesture in time"[100]. Figurative cinema goes to work on 'real presence'. This is one of the most innovative and difficult aspects of Brenez's analysis of Epstein. It concerns the figurative relationship between image and thing, what Brenez calls the referent's "transposition into a motif"[101], and involves both analytical and synthetic movements of description. Real presence is the experimental result of "descriptive precision and critical intensity"[102]. 'Critical', in this case refers to an operation of undoing or subtracting phenomena from conventional links and relations. In particular, it refers to the unknotting of gestures, sounds, figures, colours and so on, from their

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[98] 'Ultra-Modern', p. 234.
[99] 'Ultra-Modern', p. 238.
[100] 'Fenz', p. 66.
[101] 'Ultra-Modern', p. 235.
[102] ibid.

instrumentalised role in narrative schema, insofar as such a schema restricts the treatment of motifs to a teleological end. Figuration is agnostic toward narrative. It is neither rejected outright nor is it treated as the destiny of all images. Rather than a story-telling art, cinema is, as we have been studying it at length, an experimental laboratory, a method of kinetic investigation, fully immersed in the real taken as the scintillating movement of pure plasticity. Figuration, practised as descriptive experimentation, studies "the divergence of the thing from itself"[103]. This is Brenez's description, and not definition, of real presence. From here we receive a key passage in Brenez's thought. It occurs in the midst of an analysis of a particular filmmaker but opens up to a more general reckoning with the medium and its insights into the nature of the reality it makes manifest:

> Things are there, but only cinema can see them for what they are. In other words, it measures itself to their unstable, disorderly, relative and unintelligible nature. Real presence requires shifting toward the figurative; the phenomenon - a face, a river, a speed - must be recovered from the perspective of its strangeness. And this strangeness does not refer to a mystery, to something dark and shameful...but to *essential alteration*, to the profoundly unidentifiable and impure dimension of things that cinema detects, welcomes and develops.[104]

Essential alteration, as the divergence of the thing from itself, is the crucial insight of figurative cinema. It is one of the avatars of the '*force* of representation' which Martin saw so clearly as a key feature of the figure. Brenez's eccentric idea of 'real presence' is a difficult one to grasp because we are accustomed to thinking of presence as something stable, actually *graspable,*

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[103] 'Ultra-Modern', p. 236.
[104] Ibid.

something that yields a definite datum of perception or empirical fact. What Brenez sees in Epstein's films and critical writing, however, asks us to think differently and to consider *nothing* as stable and definite; that every phenomena is always moving and being moved; that 'things' are themselves constellations of forces, which cinema puts on show.

Chapter Summaries

The first chapter builds on the introductory discussion of the aesthetic concept of the figure by discussing a key ancestor for Brenez, Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard's aesthetic philosophy, including a small handful of key texts devoted to the moving image, have only recently been starting to get attention in film studies. While scholars such as Lisa Trahair and Ashley Woodward have presented Lyotard's reading of Freud contra Lacan as a possible *rapprochement* of cinema and psychoanalysis[105], I engage with his writings in this chapter in the effort to describe the outlines of a figural aesthetics and the implications this has for a critical methodology of film analysis, which I view Brenez as developing in the present. I position Brenez in the wake of Lyotard's interventions into debates regarding the complicated relation between visuality and language, or to use Lyotard's more conceptually precise terms 'discourse' and 'figure'. I detail his deconstruction of discourse as organised and structured signification and the philosophical presentation of the figure as an order of sense that mediates the spatial thickness and contingency of corporeal existence. The figure, for Lyotard, is subversive of discourse, but equally discourse 'invades' the order of the figure; the dynamism of his figural aesthetics flows from this imbricated relation. Nonetheless, Lyotard's position, possibly unique among French poststructuralists, "takes the side of the eye"[106] against the theoretical attitude

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[105] Trahair. "Figural Vision: Freud, Lyotard, and Early Cinematic Comedy", Screen, Vol.46(2), 2005, p.175-193; Woodward. "A SACRIFICIAL ECONOMY OF THE IMAGE", Angelaki, Vol.19(4), 2014, pp.141-154.
[106] Lyotard. *Discourse, Figure*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. 5. [DF].

that sees language as the universal arbiter of all sense and experience. Lyotard outlines three figurative dimensions that determine the plasticity of the visual perception: 'image', which designates the facility of recognising and identifying clear and distinct objects, 'form' is the overall architecture or gestalt in which perception locates objects in a visual field, and 'matrix', is the 'invisible' horizon of visibility, a 'negative' virtuality that necessarily conditions all 'positive' actual experience. Lyotard theorises this difficult idea via a reading of the Freudian unconscious and Merleau-Ponty. Image, form, and matrix are subject to discursive organisation and the *figural,* conceptualised in distinction to the figurative, names the effects of transgression or rupture of discursive codes. This, Lyotard argues, is the proper place of art: in the experimental testing of perceptual habits and their over-determination by discursive principles. Lyotard's theorising of the critical function of art that flows as a consequence of these philosophical manoeuvres and are inscribed in a small body of writings on the cinema beginning with 'Acinema' from 1973. Brenez, usually quite reluctant to explicitly name her theoretical forebears, has celebrated Lyotard's work several times, not least of which for being perhaps the only philosopher in the professional academic sense to approach the cinema from its experimental and avant-garde dimensions. The bulk of the chapter is focused on close readings of 'Acinema' and a slightly later essay 'The Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', where I extend Lyotard's brief analysis of Michael Snow's experimental film *La Région Centrale* (1971). Lyotard argues for a radical autonomy of art from both the institutionalised discourses that construct society's 'reality effect' and from the would-be analyst's attempts to fix the figural operations of art in discursive and legible meaning. Art works in the interstices of organised perception and in the aporia of articulated language, invested, Lyotard writes, by "a radical complicity with desire"[107]. The critical autonomy of art and the irreducibility of the visible to language are fundamental tenets of Brenez's criticism. 'Autonomy', I argue, should not be seen

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[107] DF, p. 268.

as a withdrawal from the social but as the opening of a space where its limits can be exposed and different perspectives can be exhibited. Lyotard's critique of the assumption of the analyst of a position of mastery over the visual is another important dimension of his work that Brenez picks up and extends in her own original way.

Chapter Two develops this point and extends into a discussion of one of the key aspects of Brenez's work identified in the existing reception: her critical methodology. Method is one of the central fields in which Brenez's experimental ethos is expressed. I position her work in relation to a tradition of French critical writing on cinema that views film analysis as an equally critical and creative, writerly practice. Specifically, I examine an enabling moment of crisis in the writing of film analyst Raymond Bellour who, in the mid-1980's, declared film analysis to be 'an art without a future'. Rather than send film analysis to its grave, however, Bellour's aim was to liberate it from some of its inherited tendencies and open it up to what he calls 'free gestures'. An important catalyst for Bellour in this regard was his encounter with the critical writing and subsequent video art of Thierry Kuntzel. I discuss one of Kuntzel's essays from the 1970s, 'The Film-Work', as an important precursor to Brenez's formulation of 'figural analysis'. Figural analysis has been the paradigm through which Brenez's work has been generally received in English-language film studies to date. However, since the publication of *De la figure* in the late 1990s, it has somewhat dropped away from Brenez's own critical vocabulary and been replaced by what she calls 'immanent critique'. I detail the principles by which Brenez understands and deploys this idea and, most importantly, how it is a shared pursuit by both critical writing and a form of critical practice Brenez calls 'the visual study'. The idea of the visual study is one of the most important critical territories Brenez opens up for further research. It is a critical film practice that traverses avant-garde and industrial contexts, documentary essays and genre films, features and installations, and which Brenez celebrates as

an *experimental model for thinking in images.* I detail how, for Brenez, 'to study', is always to produce an effect of critical estrangement of the object from its habitual or 'organic' place with a cultural habitus or system. The visual study is a form of critique of representation by means of the image itself. The history of the visual study, as Brenez notes, remains to be written. My aims in this chapter are to contribute to helping to initiate that line of research by describing the key critical instruments by which visual studies operate, the *cut,* the *frame,* and the *figure,* and offer a reading of two analyses Brenez makes of some paradigm cases: Al Razutis's *Visual Essays: Origin of Film* (1979-1984) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1989-1999).

I follow the detailed analysis of Brenez's method with a chapter dedicated to close readings of key texts where she puts it into play. Chapter Three addresses the dimension of Brenez's figural thought as it concerns the cinematic treatment of the body. Brenez's approach to the cinematic body is always maintained by a strong ethical impulse that sees the body as both the primary site of subjective violence and repression but also the experimental zone of invention and resistance. She thus situates her remarks in relation to what she calls "our anguish over the body"[108]. Such anguish is induced by a 'tragic' tension between individual isolation and ecstatic fusion with the other, the body's 'volatilization' in the wake of the disasters of the 20th century, as well as the bewildering unknowability of the body, the way it always exceeds any attempt to define and fix it in categories of certainty. Brenez describes the figuration of the body in the cinema as a process of 'somatisation', which is defined as a broad methodological field in which to analyse how socio-historical phenomena are translated into events and gestures of the cinematic body and how the cinema opens up the body to an open-ended horizon of figural experimentation. Brenez's essential figural gesture is to demand

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[108] Brenez. 'Incomparable Bodies', np.

that we radically distinguish the cinematic image, what she calls 'the effigy before us', from the real body. Cinema, approached from a figural perspective, is addressed by Brenez in terms of the *difference* it makes and the new perspectives on reality it brings into view. Cinema, Brenez tries to teach us, a matter of the *encounter* "between the ordinary plasticity of appearances and the indescribable evidence of each body"[109]. In tracing the rich and diverse forms of cinematic somatisation, Brenez exhibits a pleasure in taxonomic categorisation in constructing a kind of burlesque natural history of cinematic embodiment. I focus on what I claim to be an essential text of hers, 'Incomparable Bodies', and detail the dynamic and complex movement of her thought as it assembles a cartography of figurative archetypes, prototypes, models, logics, and modalities of somatic uncertainty across scores of different films and filmmakers. Her diverse writings treat the body as a central force of aesthetic invention and as a biopolitical field of contestation.

The final chapter is a dedicated close reading of the most substantial piece of Brenez's writing available in English, her monograph on the American filmmaker Abel Ferrara. By analysing the key features of this book, the chapter also operates as a summary of several of the key elements of Brenez's work that this dissertation aims to bring into view. *A Cinema of Negation* is a demonstration of Brenez's principles of immanent critique, it is strongly focused on Ferrara's treatment of the body, and it highlights the critical function of art in terms of cinema's status as an experimental laboratory for the confrontation with the intolerable aspects of our shared reality and as a critical instrument for the rigorous study and analysis of images. Her experimental ethos of critical writing is expressed by the way the writing does not proceed along a linear structure of proposition followed by argument and evidence nor does it approach singular films as isolated case studies; her analysis, instead, is multiplied in serial

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[109] 'Incomparable Bodies', np.

rather than causal relations, with certain films being returned to in several different places and examined under different analytical lenses. Brenez's immanent critique displaces the temporal continuity, spatial homogeneity, and narrative unity of the films and condenses on the *ethical problems* Ferrara's films raise, "What are the limits of identity? What is an individual? What is a social subject? What are we conscious of? What are we responsible for?"[110]. The different layers of the book are organised by isolating a particular logic by which one or more of these problems are figured in one or more films. Each logic is then pursued following two lines of inquiry: their immanent *anamorphic structures* and regimes of *somatization.* That someone who is ostensibly a specialist in experimental and avant-garde cinema would tackle a filmmaker working within the teeth of the American industrial system also signals the kind of democratic spirit with which Brenez approaches the medium. The central claim of Brenez's study is that Ferrara's films are "devoted to observing the nature, role and workings of images in the individual psyche and collective imaginary"[111]. I unpack this claim with regard to Ferrara's critical treatment of cinematic cliché and how Brenez perceives his films as offering a viable political aesthetic for the age that comes in the wake of the 1960s political movements for emancipation. Ferrara's 'morality of forms' and 'critical intensification' of cinematic genre express, according to Brenez, the logic of *delirium* which, for her, "constitutes neither a flight from the real nor an arbitrary fantasy. It testifies to an intensive relationship with knowledge"[112].

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[110] CN, p. 3.
[111] CN, p. 152.
[112] CN, p. 141.

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The Tribulation of the Figural:
Figural Aesthetics and the Critical Function of Art

Language is not made for telling the truth and film is not made to disguise truth on a fantasmatic stage. Both are inexhaustible means for experimenting with new effects, never seen, never heard before. They create their own reference, therefore their object is not identifiable; they create their own addressee, a disconcerted body, invited to stretch its sensory capacities beyond measure.

– Jean-François Lyotard[113]

Introduction

The current reception of Brenez's critical writings in English has been framed by the concept of the figure. In the Introduction, I summarised the complex definitions and genealogies of the figure with the claim that they all condense on the problem of a *show of force*. The figure is both the *event* of representation, its bringing forth the things of the world, and their continual and dynamic re-shaping. This chapter explores the concept of the figural in more depth via a reading of the aesthetic philosophy of Jean-François Lyotard, including his writings on film, with the goal to expand and deepen the current understanding of the figure and to highlight Lyotard as an important theoretical ancestor for Brenez's experimental ethos. Lyotard's earliest major work, *Discourse, Figure,* is an essential text for figural thought. Due to a significant delay in the availability of a full translation of this text into English and Lyotard's

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[113] Lyotard. "The Unconscious as Mise-en-Scène", *Acinemas: Lyotard's Philosophy of Film*, p. 52.

dominant reputation as a theorist of the postmodern, his reflections on figuration and the moving image have, until very recently, not had the level of commentary and analysis that, for example, his contemporary Gilles Deleuze has received. I engage with his writings in this chapter in the effort to describe the outlines of a figural aesthetics and the implications this has for a critical methodology of film analysis, which I view Brenez as developing in the present.

Brenez does not often preface her writings with a summary and explanation of the critical or theoretical principles that inform her approach. Her thinking takes the shape of a more speculative style of reasoning that engages theoretical concepts, political analysis, and poetic renderings of figurative logics into heady, often vertigo-inducing, writerly whiplash. Her critical strategy is thus more performative and enactive than dialogical and exegetical. However, there are at least two places in Brenez's work where she explicitly cites and gives some detail on Lyotard's philosophical aesthetics even if, arguably, its significance is greater than this somewhat limited indication. One is an introductory essay to an anthology of texts titled *Le Cinéma critique: de l'argentique et numérique, voies et formes de l'objection visuelle* published in 2010[114] and the second is a talk from 2011, given in English, at Goethe University in Frankfurt as part of the 'Kracauer Lectures in Film and Media Theory'[115]. In both of these instances, Brenez highlights the importance of Lyotard's concept of the figural for imagining a critical visual practice in the cinema.

Even though Brenez is not a film theorist, does not write theory strictly speaking, she does hold a complex relation to it. On the one hand, she is theoretically *voracious;* across her

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[114] Brenez. 'L'Objection visuelle' ['Visual Objection'], in *Le Cinéma critique : de l'argentique au numérique, voies et formes de l'objection visuelle,* Eds. Nicole Brenez and Bidhan Jacobs. Publications de la Sorbonne. 2010, p. 6.
[115] 'An Archaeology of the Figure and the Figural in Cinema after Kracauer'.

work there are citations from ancient and modern philosophies, the human sciences, the history and theory of aesthetics, as well as art and film theory[116]. On the other hand, she has quite a practical, almost down to earth stance toward theory, which she reads "in so far as it informs experience, as it matters to me and as I have need of it"[117]. As an historian and critic, she is more apt to describe traditions of filmmaking, often marginal and subversive of the commercial mainstream, that elaborate and extend a theoretical principle in specifically cinematic ways, than to analyse how a given film or body of work is illuminated by a theoretical framework. As such, in trying to understand Brenez's work and the theoretical traditions she creatively assimilates, we must pay close attention to those moments when she directly cites an intellectual forebear. In the essay, 'Visual Objection'[118], Brenez celebrates Lyotard as perhaps "the only philosopher (in the disciplinary and professional sense of this term) to have taken charge of the cinema from the point of view of its experimental dimension", and identifies his essay 'Acinema' as a "radical text"[119]. This chapter further hopes to show how Lyotard's affirmation of the critical autonomy of art and the irreducibility of the visual to language are crucial to Brenez's subsequent development of a critical methodology based around the figure.

The foundations of Lyotard's concept of the figural are established in the wide-ranging series of critiques he stages in *Discourse, Figure,* originally published in 1971 and only recently translated into English in 2011. Lyotard explores the figural in the structures of language, in the plastic space of perception, the operations of desire conceived as force, and in general as a deconstructive agency in discursive systems. Early in the text Lyotard announces that the book

[116] The extensive annotated bibliography that accompanies Brenez's *De la figure* is ample evidence of her very broad intellectual horizons. See, *De la figure,* pp. 435-446.
[117] Brenez. 'Ultimate Journey', np.
[118] All translations of this essay are my own. The original is given in respective footnotes.
[119] Brenez. 'Visual Objection'. "...le seul philosophe (au sens disciplinaire et professionnel de ce terme) à avoir pris en charge le cinéma du point de vue de sa dimension expérimentale"; "texte radical", p. 6.

"takes the side of the eye"[120] in defence against the theoretical attitude that reads all experience and meaning in terms of language and 'the text'. Lyotard explains, "One does not read or understand a picture. Sitting at the table one identifies and recognizes linguistic units; standing in representation one seeks out plastic events. Libidinal events"[121]. Throughout *Discourse, Figure* and his subsequent writings, Lyotard defers to the work of art as a critical space that experiments with new orders of sense and sensibility and which has the capacity to critically inhabit and subvert dominant paradigms of representation and institutionalist forms.

Both Lyotard and Brenez share a deep admiration and affection for the *work* of art as an active and critical function. Lyotard refers to the painter Paul Klee's well known dictum, written in his 'Creative Confession' of 1920, that "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible"[122]. Meaning, works of art are not transparent windows that reproduce reality as a catalogue of perceptual givens, but opaque screens where visibility is *made,* composed in material forces of dynamic relation. For Lyotard, the powers of 'making visible' are opposed to the orders of signification, language and legibility, which he sees as "complicit with the whole of Western *ratio* that kills art at the same time as the dream"[123]. He stages a rigorous defence of the density and complexity of visuality as an autonomous sphere of experience. Against the 'closure' of discourse he pits the spatial mobility of perception and, especially, the anarchic processes of unconscious desire figured as force. In the following section I offer a summative reading of *Discourse, Figure,* before returning to those moments in Brenez's work where she signals Lyotard's importance for her project to think the figurative powers of cinema.

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[120] DF, p. 5.
[121] DF, p. 4.
[122] Paul Klee. *Creative Confession and Other Writings.* Tate Publishing. 2013, p. 5. The formulation is found in slightly altered form and translation DF, p. 9.
[123] Lyotard. DF, p. 9.

In Defence of the Eye

Discourse, Figure is a text of intimidating bulk and intellectual breadth. It spans 1000 years of Western art and engages in deeply probing deconstructions of the disciplines of structural semiotics (at the height of its prestige at the time of the book's original publication in 1971), the phenomenology of perception, and the concept of desire in psychoanalysis. Though it hardly mentions cinema at all, it is one of the indispensable texts on the concept of the figure; indeed, it is one of the main semantic multipliers of the term. Lyotard mutates the sense of the figure as 'plastic outline' or a type of visual organisation into *the figural,* which Graham Jones has described as "a sort of perceptual violence and cognitive vandalism"[124], i.e. an operative *force* that actually 'disfigures' the formalised aspects of language and perception. Curiously, when Lyotard penned 'Acinema', almost contemporaneous with *Discourse, Figure,* he doesn't use the concept of the figural at all. Nonetheless, as I hope to show, there are a host of ideas in the book relevant to the study of cinema and several of its proposals find their way into Brenez's critical arsenal. One of Lyotard's primary gestures, which Brenez takes up in earnest, is to affirm "the specificity of the visual and its irreducibility to discourse"[125]. For Lyotard, however, the relation between language and vision, discourse and figure, is not a matter of strict binary opposition and involves a more complex interweaving and contamination of one and the other.

The book cultivates a certain confusion between the key terms of its demonstration. While 'discourse' and 'figure' can conventionally map onto 'language' and 'the visible', one of Lyotard's key manoeuvres is the implication of opposing terms into one another so that, for

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[124] Graham Jones. *Lyotard Reframed.* I.B. Taurus. 2014, p. 19.
[125] Vlad Ionescu. 'Figural Aesthetics: Lyotard, Valéry, Deleuze', *Cultural Politics*, Vol.9, No.2, 2013, p. 145.

example, there is a discursive side to perception and a figural dimension of language. Perception and visuality are further deconstructed through the lens of a reading of Freudian psychoanalysis to mark out the specific place and function for art, as Lyotard sees it. Art works in the interstices of organised perception and in the aporia of articulated language, invested, Lyotard writes, by "a radical complicity with desire"[126]. I mention these manoeuvres at the outset before getting down to details to signal to the reader not only the complexity of Lyotard's arguments, but also to highlight how the idea of the figural transforms critical discourse, including Lyotard's own. The mobility and dynamism of the writing as it 'dissolves' disciplinary borders, the artful avoidance of conceptual fixity and settled definitions of terms, and the at times opacity of prose that blocks clear signification are all 'performances' of the figural in the space of Lyotard's own text[127]. As Lyotard himself notes, he "does not seek to build "a unitary theory" and instead "signification is fragmentary"[128]. He likens the book to a "dislocated body" whereupon such fragments of meaning are inscribed as so many tattooed "rebuses"[129]. This superimposition of body, discourse, and image in a kind of fragmented noetic montage that is not subordinated to the benefit of the whole is echoed in his later examination of experimental film practices.

The meaning of 'discourse', while not identical with language per se, finds its strongest expression there in the idea of the 'text' as "a closed system of relations that subordinates a signified object to an invariable set of rules"[130]. This is essentially a Saussurean understanding

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[126] Lyotard. DF, p. 268.
[127] As such, I have been guided through the labyrinth of Lyotard's text by certain secondary sources, especially Jones and Mareen Turim's early reading of Lyotard's work 'Desire in Art and Politics: The Theories of Jean-Francois Lyotard', *Camera Obscura*, Vol.4(3), 1984, pp. 91-106.
[128] DF, p. 13.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Ionescu. 'Figural Aesthetics', p. 146.

of language as a combinatorial structure determined by its own internal system of finite oppositions and conventional associations of signifier and signification. Language interpolates subjects as subjects of knowledge, constrained within the parameters of the system. Discourse puts us in the hermeneutic position of the anxious detective or knowing analyst: every event of consciousness must be deciphered and located in its proper meaning. Once alighted on, meaning is accorded the privilege of certainty and fixity; achieved signification clarifies the chaotic scrabble of experience under the authority of the concept. Discourse sacrifices the depth, contingency and variability of perceptual experience for a 'flat' grid of repeatable codes around which communication can build consensus based on the agreed upon conventions of the codes. According to Jones' commentary on the book, Lyotard at least partially accepts this model of language, but rejects its proprietary claim on truth as well as system's tendency toward border-policing exclusion of any 'surplus' that deviates from the rules as mere noise or error[131]. What, in Lyotard's view, the "specialists of language" fail to account for is, precisely, "the figure, that is, a spatial manifestation that linguistic space cannot incorporate without being shaken, an exteriority it cannot interiorize as *signification*"[132].

The figure 'invades' discourse in the form of deictics, the indexical dimension of language; signification is thickened by continual but variable references to 'here', 'there', 'this' and 'that'. This 'spatial manifestation' within language is what Lyotard calls "designation"[133]. The spatial dimension of designation gives language its particular historical colouring, ensuring that language cannot be a totally virtual, transcendental code. As Jones explains, it makes "signification itself possible inasmuch as it draws language outside of itself and grounds it in

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[131] Jones. *Lyotard Reframed,* p. 22-23.
[132] Lyotard. DF, pp. 6, 8.
[133] The first half of the book is in fact titled 'Signification and Designation' and is concerned with their mutual complication. DF, pp. 23-157.

concrete instances of *parole*"[134]. Beyond even this horizon, however, of figurative rhetorics and the idiomatic dimensions of actual speech, there is a more pronounced *figural* disruption of the discursive dimension of language where writing itself is drawn toward the visual. Lyotard's example is Stéphane Mallarmé's experiments in typographic displacement in his poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* first published in 1897[135]. *Un coup de dés,* Lyotard argues, "radically deprives articulated language of its prosaic function of communication"[136]. The alteration of standardised lettering and the discontinuity of their placement on the page introduces contingency and draws the eye to the space of the page itself rather than 'through' the words as transparent vehicles for meaning. An even more extreme example would be the drawings of Henri Michaux which are a type of cursive rather than discursive writing. In the ironically titled *Narration* (1927), for example, the dismantling of semantic structure and the disintegration of typographic form is excessive; the work simply *is* the presentation of a force of excess on the body of language.

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[134] Jones. *Lyotard Reframed,* p. 27.
[135] Lyotard. DF, p. 61-69.
[136] DF, p. 61.
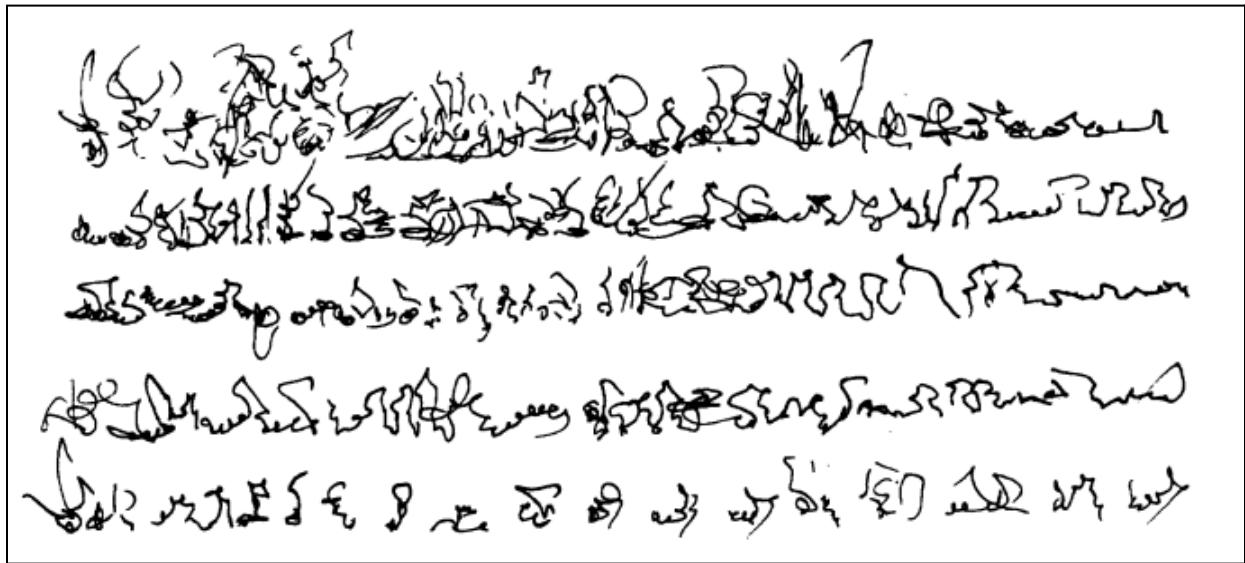
Henri Michaux, *Narration*, 1927.

Such are the travails of the 'the figure in the text'. What is required now is to pivot our orientation away from signification and its figural complications to the space of perception itself. Lyotard contrasts the textual space of articulated language with the "phenomenological space" of visual perception[137]. Where signification is determined by the 'negative' structures of language as a system of coded oppositions between linguistic units, perception operates in a 'negative' field of "spacing", the distance opened up between the body and phenomenal reality[138]. But rather than being fixed and ordered for pragmatic communication, as the structural relations of language are, perception is variable and organised for practical activity. Perception is the "thickness of the sensory" whereas language signifies in a flat code[139]. As Lyotard explains, "There is a negation involved in the visible—the distance, the spacing that determines space itself—a negation experienced in variability. The experience of this mobility, which engenders expanse, thickness, and the figure, is for the phenomenologist a privileged

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[137] DF, p. 15.
[138] DF, p. 23.
[139] DF, p. 5.

object of description"[140]. Moreover, "seeing", Lyotard says, "is a dance"[141]. The mobility of the eye and its mobile relations with objects constructs the space of vision as relational and synthetic, composed of "plastic events" of variable movement, speed and proximity; a choreography, a gestalt. Crucially, each of these plastic events borders on an *in*visibility[142]. Lyotard here draws from the late works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty where 'the invisible of the visible' refers not only to the empirical invisibility of aspects of things obscured from view, but to the 'transcendental' *spacing,* which Lyotard calls "depth itself, constituting things in thickness"[143]. Jones provides a useful summary of this difficult idea:

> This depth – which situates our body, and fleshes out our world as a series of contiguous and overlapping relations that are not exclusive, and determines our 'distance' from the objects that emerge, move and hide within it – is 'invisible' in itself. It subsists as a transcendental difference from which the visible is born and yet which as potential is irreducible to being merely the antithesis of that which is visible. In short, it is the 'otherness' *of* the visible – the invisible that makes the visible possible[144].

The space of perception is internally riven by this 'otherness', this difference. And while the matrix of depth *as such* cannot be seen, this otherness is expressed in the features of perception that operate at the edges of proper vision. If we experience perception as a continuous and homogenous support for our movements it is only at the expense of a heterogeneity and discontinuity that we scarcely notice inhabiting the thresholds of visibility.

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[140] DF, p. 23.
[141] DF, p. 9.
[142] Jones. *Lyotard Reframed,* p. 25.
[143] DF, p. 28.
[144] Jones. *Lyotard Reframed,* p. 25.

This "spatial difference" can be further clarified by naming its two extreme poles: foveal vision, or "focalized attention"[145], and the curvilinear space of "anamorphosis"[146]. Foveal vision is the 'discursive side' of perception and involves the clear and distinct recognition of objects; here, vision is 'pulled' into focus. This modality enacts a strong sense of delineation between the perceiving subject and the 'objective' world of things. The strong sense of '*I* see', rather than just 'vision' is partly a consequence of this disciplining of the eye. Furthermore, there is a co-ordination between a perceptual mastery over the visual field and organised gestures of the body in practical action; less a 'dance' perhaps than labour. Foveal vision, in short, prepares the ground for the instrumentalisation of the environment and the transformation of things in depth to objects of use. Resolution and definition, (my terms, not Lyotard's), which have technical, visual and epistemological resonance, are the ultimate horizon of focused seeing. The identification of objects is here analogous to the authority of the concept in linguistic signification.

On the other hand, "the preeminently *figural space*...the field of vision which focalized attention represses...[is] a vast peripheral fringe of curved space"[147]. The anamorphic periphery 'pushes' vision into irregular forms, it dissolves perspectival relations of space into topological ones. Just as the figure was the force of a spatial difference within the articulated language of the text, here figural space is the 'other' of vision, its constitutive difference that is, generally speaking, subordinated to utilitarian aims of resolution and definition. The anamorphic region of vision, "the curved, twilight, fleeting, lateral space", is the zone of a 'first contact' between the eye and things in their originary depth and thickness[148]. As such, it means more than simply

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[145] Lyotard. DF, p. 154.

[146] DF. p. 179; Lyotard discusses the famous case of Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* p. 378-379.

[147] DF, p. 154. Emphasis added.

[148] Ibid.

that something is 'out of focus'; it is the zone of a more generative potentiality, a matrix for other possible ways for things to become present. The figural augmentation of visuality admits a much greater plasticity to perceptual forms beyond the instrumental function of identification and definition of objects. As with the examples of Mallarmé and Michaux in their taking the figural dimension of language into speculative territory, we can imagine that the anamorphic zone of visuality is rich terrain for visual artists to operate. I discuss the ways Brenez takes up this potentiality of the zone of the figural for imagining cinema from an experimental point of view below. Before that, however, we must first understand the critical status of the concept of desire as theorised by psychoanalysis for Lyotard's work as a whole.

After textual space and the space of perception we move now to the space of desire. And once again we find that this 'space' is internally divided, split into the Freudian paradigms of the primary and secondary processes. The primary processes are the workings of the unconscious and here Lyotard subscribes to the "energetic model" of the psyche where desire is figured as "unbound" energy or force[149]. In Jones' gloss the primary processes of desire "consist of the continual shifts of a freely mobile energy within the psyche that [Freud] calls 'libido', and which can potentially be invested in, bound or attached to various perceptions, ideas, memories, objects and actions"[150]. The libido is 'economically' regulated by the pleasure principle and the reality principle. The former seeks to "discharge" energy and "return the psychical apparatus to a state of least stimulation"[151]. Dreaming, or more specifically the "operations of the dream" or the dream-work, as Freud called it, is one of the key mechanisms of the pleasure principle whereby energy is discharged in the form of an "hallucinatory"

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[149] DF, p. 269.
[150] Jones. *Lyotard Reframed*, p. 41.
[151] DF, p. 269.

intensification of "memories of perception", or mental images[152]. The unconscious space of the dream does not 'designate' an outside world of perception; it *works* memory-traces into the form of images and thoughts into the form of rebuses. Moreover, unconscious space does not take as its frame the effective body of action but the body as a space of erotic and sensuous intensity. Lyotard writes, "One cannot afford to ignore the fact that we sleep while we dream, and thus that the connaturality between body and world is suspended by an immobility whose function is not only to eliminate the world, but whose effect is to take *the body as world*"[153]. The aesthetic space of the dream as the interior of the body, or the body's night, is the body "subverted [*détourné*]" by pleasure or *jouissance*, a dis-organised, impulsive and intensive body[154]. In its diurnal state the sensuous body opens up a "phantasmatic *mise en scène*", a libidinal economy where desire seeks to invest in the 'objects' of sense-perception through an ordeal of the body that is always antagonised by the split between its internal drives and the prohibitions of the external social world. By pulling the workings of desire and the unconscious toward force, the image, and the intensive body, Lyotard radically opposes the well-known Lacanian formulation that the unconscious is 'structured like a language'[155]. For Lyotard, language more properly belongs to the discursive regime of the reality principle.

Under the reality principle, the unbound energy of the unconscious is not discharged but maintained at a "constant level" by "a whole set of bindings, regulating associations and

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[152] DF, p. 268, 270.

[153] DF, p. 273. My emphasis.

[154] DF, p. 270.

[155] There has been some recent attention given to Lyotard's work by film theorists who have seen in this position a way to revisit the relationship between psychoanalysis and the cinema. See, for example, Ashley Woodward's essay 'A Sacrificial Economy of the Image.' and Lisa Trahair's entry on Lyotard in *Film, Theory, Philosophy: The key thinkers,* ed. Felicity Coleman, Routledge, 2009, pp. 222-232.

exclusions"[156]. Such operations of *organisation*, as we have seen in the other cases of signification and vision, are the *discursive* operations of the psyche and are the purview of the secondary processes. They are, in fact, the 'source' of those other functions[157]: articulated language, foveal vision, and organised motor activity are 'progressive' investments of the libido into the productive activities of communication and physical transformation of the environment[158]. The secondary processes, following the regulative principle of the conservation of energy, "enable linear thinking, planning and reasoning"[159]; they are concerned with the "organism as a whole" and its self-preservation[160]. This 'discursive' regime of thought is obviously necessary and vital to experience and human relations. Indeed, Lyotard suggests that the consistency of reality itself is discursively constructed, in the senses of the term that have hopefully now become clearer[161]. His critical point, however, is that this reality never produces the total picture; 'reality' is in fact a secondary "emergent structure that covers over and attempts to regulate" the unbound and more dynamically mobile energies of the primary processes of desire[162].

In the published text of a lecture given at Nanterre University in 1970, Lyotard makes the claim that it is the critical function of art to inhabit the aporia of our discursively constructed realities and to experiment with the more dynamic range of expression afforded by the order of the figure. I analyse this text and Lyotard's other more directly aesthetic reflections on the figural below. In the following section, however, I return to Brenez's own reading of

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[156] Here, I follow the earlier translation of this section of *Discourse, Figure* in *Driftworks,* Semiotext(e), 1984, p. 58. The translation in DF reads as "contact-barriers…bindings through association and exclusion", p. 269.

[157] Jones. *Lyotard Reframed*, p. 40.

[158] Lyotard. *Driftworks,* p. 58.

[159] Jones. *Lyotard Reframed,* p. 41.

[160] Lyotard. DF, p. 270.

[161] Lyotard. 'Notes on the Critical Function of the Work of Art', *Driftworks,* p. 69-83. ['Critical Function'].

[162] Jones. *Lyotard Reframed,* p. 42.

Lyotard's ideas and the use she makes of them to think cinema from a figural point of view. She takes from Lyotard the sense of the figural as a deconstruction of discursive codes and as the 'force of representation', the sense that every element of the image is traversed by the disruptive forces of desire. However, rather than look to the theoretical paradigms Lyotard deploys to conceptualise the figural (for example, psychoanalysis or phenomenology), Brenez makes the claim that the figural is in fact the very *logic* of the cinematic apparatus itself and looks to Siegfried Kracauer's Weimar-era film criticism to bring this claim out. Brenez understands Lyotard's concept of the figural as a critical and generative force of negativity and creatively interprets it as the capacity of the cinema to suspend conventional links and relations between phenomena and produce a distinct and altered reconfiguration of reality.

The Logic of Disintegration

In the essay 'Visual Objection', Brenez briefly recapitulates some of the key premises of *Discourse, Figure* regarding the distinction between the figurative and the figural (noting how in English these two terms are generally seen as synonymous), referring at first to the art of painting. The figurative refers to the traditional understanding of mimesis as the representational copy of a model. The figurative is the discursive dimension of visuality and functions as the disciplining of the image toward the goals of clear and distinct pictorial resolution which facilitates the recognisability of objects and their incorporation into conventionalised discursive regimes of meaning. By contrast, the figural refers to the transgression and rupture of figurative codes. Figurality, therefore, is actually the much more expansive regime of representation as it is not foreclosed by specific sets of rules or visual protocols; figurality is an open-ended horizon of experimentation. The internal division of the image between the regimes of the figurative and the figural is interpreted by Brenez as opening

the space of critique within the image itself. She writes, "As opposed to the figurative, the figural thus means for Lyotard the disposition of the image to reflect on itself, to work on its own components"[163].

Brenez nuances these distinctions between the figurative and the figural by making what is a typical move of hers in the game of conceptual sovereignty between art and philosophy. She suggests that Lyotard's whole conceptual edifice stems from an intentional mis-reading of some reflections of the Swiss-German painter Paul Klee regarding the art of painting. According to Brenez, Lyotard replaces the biological models Klee uses to describe the nature of images, with such terms as *bildanatomisch,* or 'picture-anatomy', with the purely formalist ones of 'figure' and 'form'[164]. In 'Ways of Nature Study' [*Wege des Naturstudiums*], from 1923, Klee describes the artistic image as the expression of an encounter between the close study of exterior optical appearances and a sensitivity to the plasticity of vital rhythms that unfold both within the objects of nature and between them; the image is an articulation of such objects in a space (*Gestalt*) that is similarly determined both by certain logical 'rules', such as those of geometry and perspective, and an animating *élan*. Explaining the step beyond the strictly mimetic understanding of the image as the outward trace of objects, Klee writes:

> [T]here are other ways of looking into the object which go still further, which lead to a humanisation of the object and create, between the 'I' and the object, *a resonance surpassing all optical foundations*. There is the non-optical way of intimate physical contact, earthbound, that reaches the eye of the artist from below, and there is the non-optical contact through the cosmic bond that descends from above...For the sake

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[163]Brenez. 'Visual Objection', "Par opposition au figuratif, le figural signifie donc pour Lyotard la disposition de l'image à se réfléchir elle-même, à travailler sur ses propres composantes", p. 6-7.
[164] 'Visual Objection', p. 7.

of clarification I might add that the lower way leads through the realm of the static and produces static forms, while the upper way leads through the realm of the dynamic. Along the lower way, gravitating towards the centre of the earth, lie the problems of static equilibrium...We are led to the upper ways by yearning to free ourselves from earthly bonds; by swimming and flying, we free ourselves from constraint in pure mobility[165].

This dynamic combination of the optical and non-optical, or what Brenez refers to as Klee's entanglement of "Éros-Logos"[166], is Klee's attempt to account for the radically non-mimetic nature of his painting while at the same time affirming their actuality as expressing a dimension of being beyond a purely positivist understanding of representation. The emphasis on the autonomy and dynamic range of the plasticity of images, the ability to push and pull the recognisable forms of the visible into hitherto unknown and unseen formations, is vital to both Lyotard and subsequently Brenez's understanding of the figural.

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[165] Klee. 'Ways of Nature Study', in *Creative Confessions,* p. 17-18. Emphasis added.
[166] Brenez. 'Visual Objection', p. 8.

Paul Klee, *Comedy.* 1921

Klee's 'resonance surpassing all optical foundations' is transposed by Lyotard into the psychoanalytic of desire and the drives, with the libidinal economies cathecting the free and mobile energies of the primary process substituting for Klee's picture-anatomies constructed in the intervals between 'static equilibrium' and 'pure mobility'. According to Brenez, Lyotard's concept of the figural thus has two "poles of reference"[167]: formal deconstruction of the figurative codes by which reality is rendered in images and the opening of a psychic space traversed by the affective forces of desire. It is important to note that this "erotic dimension" of the figural, as Brenez calls it, is located at the level of these formal operations, perhaps better termed the *dis*-figurations of the discursive dimension of representation, rather than in any particular content[168].

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[167] 'Visual Objection', "deux pôles de référence", p. 8.
[168] Ibid. "la dimension…érotique".

The resonance between Lyotard and Klee, I argue, extends into Lyotard's writings on film as well. When Lyotard turns to a figural analysis of the cinema in his 'radical text' he will identify two polarities of "aberrant movement", precisely paralleling those of Klee's *bilder*, which he sees as systematically excluded by, and therefore subversive of, the conventional operations of cinematic figuration: stasis and excessive movement[169]. Movement, as I will argue in more detail below, is the material 'matrix' (Lyotard's term) of cinematic figuration and it joins two other components of representation that figurality works over: 'image', or what Brenez calls the motif, the outward appearance of objects, and 'form', the architectonic arrangement of figurative space. 'Image', 'form' and 'movement' are the figurative givens of cinematic representation, its plastic specificity. Figural analysis is charged with investigating the specific manner and intensity with which each of these components is altered, worked over, disfigured, in Lyotard's terms, "transgressed"[170]. This nexus of ideas that condenses the figural, cinema and critique as a force that negates the habitual or naturalised conditions of apprehending the world and invents new configurations of sense is further explored in 'The Archaeology of the Figural'.

In her Kracauer talk, Brenez relates Lyotard's concept of the figural to the critical film theory of Siegfried Kracauer. Given the constraints of time during her talk, Brenez forgoes any in-depth explanation of Kracauer's aesthetics, other than to link them to his critical concept of "disintegration"[171]. Citing Kracauer's famous essay on photography from 1927, Brenez points to his claim that cinema has the capacity to manifest "the suspension of every habitual

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[169] Lyotard. 'Acinema', *Acinemas: Lyotard's Philosophy of Film,* p. 36. Lyotard's essay is discussed at length below.

[170] DF, p. 268.

[171] 'Archaeology of the Figural', 0:46.

relationship among the elements of nature" and that "the capacity to stir up the elements of nature is one of the possibilities of film. This possibility is realized whenever film combines parts and segments to create strange constructs"[172]. Brenez celebrates the radical negativity of the cinema in its ability to fragment 'nature', to subtract phenomena from their organic unity in space and time and to separate them from their habitual significance in integrated systems of meaning. She says that the "social function of cinema [is] as a discipline to contemplate the disintegration of the world. For [Kracauer], cinema is a description of negativity at work. And the consequence is the joy brought by the cinema. For it exposes, it gives the void to see"[173]. These are difficult ideas to parse to be sure. But they really get to the core of figurality and, as such, to the heart of Brenez's experimental ethos: *the critical affirmation of radical negativity*. In order to flesh this idea out, so that I can then return to Brenez's assimilation of Kracauer to figural aesthetics, I turn to Miriam Hansen's ground-breaking work on Kracauer anthologised in her essential text *Cinema and Experience*[174]. Hansen links what she calls Kracauer's ontology of "photographic negativity" to an aesthetic materialism that estranges habituated sense-perception, exposes subjectivity to the uncanny force of material things removed from their 'natural' places in space and time, and points to a dimension of Kracauer in sympathy with certain avant-garde tendencies of his period where film, rather than reproduce antiquated aesthetic forms that attempt to secure the subject in a position of visual mastery or act as a consoling buffer against the "negativity of the historical process", in fact attempts to "advance that process"[175].

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[172] 'Archaeology of the Figural', 2:25; Kracauer. 'Photography', in *The Mass Ornament.* Harvard University Press. 1995. p. 62-63.

[173] 'Archaeology of the Figural', 7:30.

[174] Hansen. *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno.* University of California Press. 2012. [CE]

[175] CE, p. 37; 6; 12.

Hansen's work on Kracauer, along with other scholars like Gertrud Koch and Lesley Stern, have taught us to read Kracauer again in ways that decisively depart from his long-standing reputation as a "naïve realist"[176]. According to Hansen, this status was based on a mis-reading of Kracauer's photographic ontology of the cinema as reproducing an authentic visual re-presentation of reality as such. In sharp contrast, Hansen argues that, for Kracauer, photography's iconicity, its existence as a modality of visual presence, is in dialectical relation to its fragmentation of temporal continuity and its exposure to "material contingency"[177]. By 'material contingency' Hansen is referring to the categories of experience revealed by technical media that escape conscious intention. Kracauer names the modern imbrication of nature and technology "camera-reality"[178] and in *Theory of Film,* he outlines what he calls the "inherent affinities" of camera-reality, for example 'The Fortuitous', 'Endlessness', and 'The Indeterminate'[179]. 'The Fortuitous' refers to film's affinity with accident, unplanned events and the "fleeting impressions" that characterise especially the modern urban environment[180]. A simple shot of a bustling crowd reveals the depth of every contingent moment spatialised in a rhythm between total chaos and some secret harmony. For 'Endlessness', Kracauer means that the purvey of camera-reality greatly exceeds the focused attention of our everyday lives immersed as they are in practical activity. Kracauer alludes to a thought experiment by Fernand Léger, anticipating both the surveillance state and elements of reality television, who

dreamed of a monster film, which would have to record painstakingly the life of a man

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[176] CE, p. 5. Hansen reviews some of the "critical demolition" of Kracauer's Post-War book *Theory of Film,* written in exile in the USA, at p. 254-255.

[177] Hansen. 'Introduction', in Kracauer. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality.* Princeton University Press. 1997, p. xxvii.

[178] Kracauer. *Theory of Film,* p. 64.

[179] *Theory of Film,* p. 62-71.

[180] *Theory of Film*, p. 63

and a woman during twenty-four consecutive hours: their work, their silence, their intimacy. Nothing should be omitted; nor should they ever be aware of the presence of the camera. 'I think', he observed, 'this would be so terrible a thing that people would run away horrified, calling for help as if caught in a world catastrophe.' Léger is right. Such a film would not just portray a sample of everyday life but, in portraying it, *dissolve the familiar contours of that life and expose what our conventional notions of it conceal from view*"[181]

Finally, 'The Indeterminate' refers to the effect on signification once phenomena are separated from 'nature' and translated into camera-reality. Description overshoots definition and even the most ordinary of scenes, a face, a landscape, take on an "essentially indefinable" sense once removed from familiar links within a symbolic configuration of meaning. Hansen glosses this characteristic as "a fissure between psyche and physis"; camera-reality appears to resemble the prosaic world but does so unmoored both from spatio-temporal fixity and discursive regimes of understanding[182]. The everyday world is instead translated into a figural mode of 'speech', a kingdom of "light and shadows, a rondo of figures in the snow, a silent scurrying and flitting on stairs and along bridge railings, a rhythmic condensation of all visibilities which begin to speak without words"[183]. Hansen, in fact, very closely echoes the terms and arguments of the Lyotard of *Discourse, Figure,* when she writes of film affecting a "difference that erupts" between "discourse…[that is,] the implied horizon of our 'habits of seeing', structured by language, narrative, identification, and intentionality, and…the realm of material contingency…that which perpetually eludes and confounds such structuring"[184]. The

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[181] *Theory of Film,* p. 64. Emphasis added.
[182] Hansen. 'Introduction', p. xxvii.
[183] Kracauer. Cited in CE, p. 16.
[184] Hansen. 'Introduction', p. xxvii.

'disintegrating' dynamic of Kracauer's film theory, which Brenez so admires, can therefore be underlined as the expression or force of difference at the level of the visual event, a radical extension of perception beyond the focused attention of everyday life, and a rupture between both this new regime of visuality and discursively organised regimes of knowledge. Summarising her revisionary reading of Kracauer, Hansen writes, "[T]he same indexicality that allows photographic film to record and figure the world also inscribes the image with moments of temporality and contingency that *dis*figure the representation"[185].

Returning to Brenez now and her placement of Kracauer within the pantheon of figural thought, we can note that, whereas Lyotard privileges the psychoanalytical models of desire and the drives for his articulation of figural aesthetics, for Brenez, figurality emerges from the internal split marking the very nature of the medium: that it both figures reality and *dis*figures representation, to use Hansen's terms. As Brenez says, "the figural begins, not as the history of the word, the concept, notion, the idea even, but in the *logic* of the cinematic apparatus itself. The figural begins - this is my hypothesis - when the film affects directly the relationships between the image and the referent"[186]. At least two important things need to be said about the status of this logic. Firstly, it escapes the charge of being contained to the photo-chemical modality of the apparatus because other modes of technological capture - video, digital, etc - still *figure* reality, that is, still produce a recognisable semblance. Secondly, while the figural logic of the apparatus might be its default setting, figurality is not the automatic or dominant form of cinematic practice, which, from Kracauer's time to today, tends to tarry with the figural only insofar as its threatening difference can still be incorporated into the figurative regimes of narrative coherence, psychological characterisation, and

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[185] 'Introduction', p. xxv.
[186] Brenez. 'Archaeology of the Figural', 3:05.

space-time economies that serve the elaboration of the scenario; putting 'negativity to work', so to speak, still requires specific aesthetic decisions to make it operative. An experimental ethos is needed. This brings us back to the nexus of figurality, cinema, and critique. In the Kracauer talk, Brenez politicises figurality, interpreting it as "the *activist* operations linked to representation. This is no longer about representing but about *manifesting*"[187]. For Brenez, the figural disfiguration of representation amounts to much more than mere formalist antics. The way of the figural, as the critical reflection on the means of representation, is the investigation into new and alternative ways of understanding and apprehending reality. "The genius of cinema", she says, "is to create other logics and this is the affirmative dimension of cinema, the tribulation of the figural"[188].

A great deal of Brenez's writing is taken up with describing many different logics of figural expression and future chapters engage with that aspect of her oeuvre. In the remainder of this chapter I engage in more detail with Lyotard's proposals themselves. This will involve a fleshing out of the points raised in this first section. Namely, elaborating more concretely the key elements of figurative plasticity that are 'transgressed' by the operations of the figural, examining the role of the figural in terms of Lyotard's conception of the critical function of art, and, finally, an extended reading of Lyotard's writings on film itself and the kinds of figural, or to use Lyotard's term, 'acinematic' logics that he describes. Beyond laying out the fundamental characteristics of figural aesthetics, Lyotard's work also provides a model for its analysis and interpretation. This is borne out in Lyotard's critique of Freudian hermeneutics which, he claims, operates on the 'principle of distrust' and puts the analyst in a position of mastery and authority over the work. Making the shift from the figurative to the figural also requires a shift

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[187] 'Archaeology of the Figural', 5:08. In French, 'manifester' means to participate in activist demonstrations.
[188] 'Archaeology of the Figural', 55:35

from the position of the Master to that of mediator and instead of approaching the work of film by interpreting a concealed discourse one must describe the new perspectives on reality which they open up.

The Critical Function of Art

In March of 1970, while he was composing the constellations of figural disruption within the discourses of structuralism, phenomenology and psychoanalysis that would become *Discourse, Figure*, Lyotard gave a talk at the University of Nanterre in Paris. The talk was part of a larger initiative to remember the still fresh events of May '68, in which the campus at Nanterre had played such a crucial role. The notes from that talk were subsequently translated and published in *Driftworks* as 'Notes on the Critical Function of the Work of Art'[189]. This essay situates Lyotard's idea of the figure as a fundamental feature of a political aesthetic, heralding, according to Maureen Turim, an "experimental and subversive function of art"[190]. I discuss the terms of that claim as a bridge to the other aesthetic discussions of the figural in *Discourse, Figure* as well as to highlight the crucial role of the cinema within a concept of figural aesthetics.

Lyotard opens his talk by referring to the psychoanalytic definition of reality "as a bound set of perceptions that can be verified through activities of [productive] transformation and signified in bound sets of words, i.e. verbalized"[191]. Lyotard then says that this essentially

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[189] Lyotard. 'Critical Function'.
[190] Turim, 'Desire in Art and Politics', p. 93.
[191] Lyotard. 'Critical Function', p. 69.

discursively constructed shared reality is incomplete, full of "gaps"[192]. "There are words that are unpronounceable because they lack 'signification' and perceptions that are impossible, things that cannot be seen: thus, there are screens"[193]. It is the opaque aspect of screens that is important here; they are the rocky shores that the ordinary tides of communicative rationality crash up against. He calls this 'other space' existing in the interstices of reality, "Dada-reality", and it is in these openings in the habitual construction of reality by human discourse "that works of art can take place"[194]. Works of art, in this text, are directly nominated as "Figures" regardless of whether they are visual, sculptural, or acoustic works, regardless of genre in general. What qualifies works of art as Figures is that they exist in "an order of the figure" that is distinct from the order of reality as discursive defined[195]. The 'order of the figure' is "an order of existence - which is neither that of language, nor of practical transformation"[196]. They are distinct too from phenomena like dreams and hallucinations insofar as they, according to Lyotard, are "border-line cases in which I can believe the scene I see is a stage upon which I could modify these object-relations", that is, that they are scenes into which I could project myself and participate on stage. This oscillation between 'scene' and 'screen' figure as the two domains of representation Lyotard puts into conflict in the essay.

Initially, he locates the place of cinema in the 'scene', ostensibly excluding it from the 'screens' of the figural order. Why? The cinema Lyotard has in mind is the cultural mainstream, the industry heavy with capital investment, which he views as one of society's central *dispositifs* of desire. The reality of consumer society is akin to an obsessive compulsive *order;* a repetition

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[192] ibid.
[193] Ibid.
[194] ibid.
[195] 'Critical Function', p. 70.
[196] Ibid.

of the same at the cost of any threatening deviation and difference. This cinema, Lyotard argues, functions "as a scene in which my desire is caught and comes to fulfillment"[197]. The 'scenic' aspects of cinema - pictorial stability, identification with characters, the projection of personal fantasy onto imaginary actions, and the resolution of desire in the organisation of narrative coherence - are opposed to the function of a figural 'screening' of reality. The 'uncritical' function of art that cinema as a cultural *institution* fulfils is in its belonging to "society's system of self-integration"[198]. Lyotard views such an institutionalised practice of art as "religious" in the sense that it performs a collective communion amongst strangers within an 'imagined community'. It is the 'ideological' aspect of art which Lyotard opposes with 'the critical function of art'. "What art does", Lyotard argues, "what it ought to do - is always to unmask all attempts to reconstitute a pseudo-religion"[199]. The polemic of such a statement is perhaps understandable given the proximity to the events of May '68; nonetheless, the *pragmatic* criteria for critique as a function of art still has actuality.

The critical function of art is to "deconstruct" the objects that have been discursively constructed in our collective imagined communities. (Lyotard's example is the then relatively recent phenomena of Pop Art, which he sees as short-circuiting the libidinal pathways between object and subject that consumer society organises itself around by essentially 'deadening' their voluptuous character: the Warhol paradigm)[200]. Or, and for Lyotard it really amounts to the same thing, to deregulate the energies of desire by disinvesting them from the consumer objects in which they are caught up, and make desire "wander", to drift in unpredictable and 'pulsional' ways (here, the example is Abstract Expressionism which Lyotard sees as "working

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[197] Ibid.
[198] 'Critical Function', p. 71.
[199] 'Critical Function', p. 72.
[200] 'Critical Function', p. 72.

at the level of the plastic screen itself")[201]. The order of the figural is like a duty-free zone of unregulated drives; a place 'screened' off from reality in which experimentation can flourish and in which reality is by turns disintegrated and rendered strange; where 'objects' are extracted from their organic place within a cultural continuum and projected onto a screen that calls for a different gaze. The Figure is a space "no longer jammed by phantasy, that is no longer blocked in a repetitive configuration, but on the contrary one that opens upon other possibilities, that *plays*…[a space] in which there is room for the play of forms"[202]. It is at this point in his text that he turns toward a film by Alain Resnais, *Je t'aime, je t'aime* (1968), whose story concerns the effects of a time-travelling experiment gone wrong. For Lyotard, *Je t'aime, je t'aime* is a work of figural deconstruction because it is a "total deconstruction of sequence [*découpage*]"[203]. The film's formal experiments in temporal reversal and confusion, even if they articulate the 'theme' of the fiction, work for Lyotard to interrupt the otherwise conventional organisation, which is to say 'capture', of desire in narrative machinery: "The spectator finds himself in the reversing, critical, function of the work and his desire collides with the screen, because the screen is treated as a screen and not as a window"[204]. The 'integrating' function of the image as a scene for my desire to find itself is thwarted and instead, as Peter Milne has argued in his analysis of the film, "the gaze runs up against the image itself. *Another reality appears* in this collision with the screen; objects, actions, or movements lose their familiarity. The gaze in thus reversed, from the image back on to the viewer"[205]. While Lyotard's exemplification of his argument is no doubt caught up to a degree in the *politiques des auteurs* of his time, the point is not to elevate particularly gifted creatures called artists, but to propose certain possibilities in

[201] 'Critical Function', p. 73.
[202] 'Critical Function', p. 75.
[203] Ibid.
[204] Ibid.
[205] Peter W. Milne, 'Authorisation: Lyotard's Sovereign Image', *Acinemas: Lyotard's Philosophy of Film*. Eds. Graham Jones and Ashley Woodward. Edinburgh University Press. 2017, p. 105. My emphasis.

the *work* of art; critique is a function of the figural deconstruction of reality as it is discursively reproduced and libidinally captured in representational forms. The cinema is, plainly, "where certain things can be done"[206].

Lyotard's notion of critique, here, departs from a more orthodox Marxist political aesthetic that would see in the work of art as an instrumental means of raising revolutionary consciousness and delivering the appropriate messages to arouse revolutionary desire. Lyotard argues that such a stance leaves "representation [itself] uncriticized", and thus open to neutralisation and recuperation by the other discursive instruments of social reality[207]. Additionally, such a stance holds that revolutionary politics can be contained within scenic space, can be assimilated to a single point of view, a single 'meta-narrative' of historical unfolding. The kind of political aesthetic Lyotard has in mind, by contrast, is not doctrinal or based on the communication of political or revolutionary information; it is experimental and open-ended, it is the introduction of screens of rupture into the definitions of what reality *is* as a disciplined and regulated form of life. Lyotard summarises his perspective: "The system, as it exists, absorbs every consistent discourse: the important thing is not to produce a consistent discourse but rather to produce 'figures' within reality"[208].

There are implicit echoes in Lyotard's speech at Nanterre to Situationism, both as a political movement and as a political aesthetic that puts 'figures within reality'. He describes the events of May '68 as "situations of deconstruction, that disconcert discourse and social reality"[209]. Such a practice becomes "an absolutely practical art which consists, precisely in

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[206] Lyotard. 'Critical Function', p. 76.
[207] 'Critical Function', p. 78
[208] 'Critical Function', p. 79.
[209] 'Critical Function', p. 81.

deconstructing not the material, plastic screen of representation - not an automobile as in the case of pop artists - but the ideological screen of representation, a subway station as a social space, for example"[210]. A figural praxis treats social space as a possible space of *play,* which in Lyotard's sense of the term is connected to the disruption of habitual forms of *use,* of utility. Lyotard is here speaking after the publication of Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* in 1967 but before the film version, released in 1974. Although the relationship between politics and art within Situationist discourse is ambivalent at best[211], one of its more influential critical manoeuvres has been its deconstruction of the opposition between the plastic screen of representation and the screen of social integration, in other words the Spectacle, the *scene* writ large. In an unsigned text from the first issue of the *Internationale Situationniste* (1958) titled "With and Against Cinema[212]", members of the Situationists highlight the importance of the cinema for their critique of post-war life in the European metropolis. Cinema, as an institution, is an integral system of "material infrastructure"[213]; it is more than simply cultural objects called 'movies', but a movement of material, technical, and aesthetic integration (very much in the 'religious' sense proposed by Lyotard). The reality effect of the Spectacle, according to the Situationists, is the false coherence of a substitute world, one that separates people, not from some 'authentic' prelapsarian bliss (as it is sometimes dismissed as contriving), but from other possibilities and alternative forms of life, systematically excluded and effaced by Spectacle. If the scene of struggle is the Spectacle and the cinema is one of its

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[210] Ibid.

[211] For a recent revision of Debordian strategies as a viable political aesthetic for the 21st century see Archibald & Lavery. 'From Street to Screen', *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts,* Vol.23(7), 2018, pp. 109-119.

[212] 'Internationale Situationniste'. 'With and Against Cinema'. Trans. Jason E. Smith. *Grey Room*. No. 52. 2013. Pp 19-21.

[213] 'With and Against Cinema', p. 19.

most potent instruments then, they declare, "we therefore have to struggle to take hold of a truly experimental sector in the cinema"[214].

The experimental practices of the Situationists, the *dérive* and *détournement,* are highly conducive to the figural subversion of Spectacle. *Détournement* is not just 'appropriation', but a compositional strategy based on aesthetic rupture and epistemological sabotage. *Détournement,* literally a hijacking, snatches fragments of readymade images from the Spectacle and puts them into play: from a *mise en scène* to a *mise en jeu*. Consider the Situationist driftwork *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Short Period of Time,* from 1959. The film is both a kind of biography of the Situationists and a document of the political agitation of this period of the Algerian War of Independence. But crucially, it performs that agitation as much, if not more, in its auto-critique of film form than in any coherent political platform. The film mixes shots of members of the Situationists out drinking at bars and apartments with appropriated footage of confrontations between students and police; scenes of ordinary pedestrian traffic in Parisian streets are cut with scenes of white-gloved French paratroopers parading in Algeria; generals, pontiffs and presidents appear between television advertisements for soap featuring Anna Karina. The everyday life of the metropolis is seen through the lens of a colonial war and the bohemian pretences of the avant-garde are poor imitations of the seductions offered by the official imagery of the Spectacle, which is explicitly articulated as a means of staging authority. What is otherwise segregated is brought together on an immanent plane of the screen, a screen that speaks through multiple voice-overs, runs backwards and in slow-motion, and most radically, does away with imagery altogether in a series of 'sequences' that exhibit nothing but a blank monochrome white. A voice intones over this figure of the screen with a formula that could read as the synopsis of *Discourse, Figure:* "We

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[214] 'With and Against Cinema', p. 20.

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can never really challenge any form of social organisation without challenging all that organisation's forms of language…This project implies the withering away of all alienated forms of communication…The cinema, too, must be destroyed". To destroy the cinema by an act of film is to be with and against cinema. To mix up our vocabularies a little bit we can say that to construct a situation in the teeth of the Spectacle is to unleash the force of the figure in the space of discourse. To put figures into reality, to construct situations is to problematise the reality effect of Spectacle, to make it drift, to open it up to new pathways of expression and experience.

Elements of Figurative Plasticity

The core elements of the plastic screen of the figural order are described in the chapter from *Discourse, Figure* titled 'Desire's Complicity with the Figure'[215]. Image, form, and matrix are the "machinery" by which the figure puts on its *show of force*[216]. To indicate the very direct articulation between the concept of the figure and these elementary particles of the screen, Lyotard hyphenates each so that we have *figure-image, figure-form, and figure-matrix*[217]. In each instance the prefix *figure* designates a "transgression" of the succeeding term, where 'transgression' means that extent to which the force of desire is either bound and codified or mobilised and disruptive[218]. *Figure-image* refers to the delineation of an object, the *tracé révélateur*[219]; it is the most explicitly visible dimension of the screen, its most scenic element. *Figure-images* are discursively determined for the recognition and identification of discrete objects, their resolution and definition. Their figural disruption occurs via a "transgression of

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[215] DF, p. 268-276.
[216] DF, p. 268.
[217] In other commentaries on the book the order is sometimes reversed so that it is *image-figure*, etc.
[218] DF, p. 268.
[219] Ibid.

the contour"[220], for example, in the superimposition of more than one object into the same space, or, in the dissolution of the boundary between objects and the surrounding field. The following screen-shots from *Six et Demi Onze* (1927) and *Sombre* (1998) can serve as respective illustrations of possible *figure-images.*

Figure-image in *Six et Demi Onze* (Dir. Jean Epstein, 1927).

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[220] DF, p. 274.

Figure-image in *Sombre* (Dir. Philippe Grandrieux, 1998).

Figure-form refers to the overall space of representation and not only the particular elements within it. The 'formal' aspect of the figure, Lyotard explains, "in general remains unseen"; it is, instead, the "architecture", "framing", or "schema" that holds it together.[221] He calls it "the nervure of the visible"[222]. In general, the more 'invisible' the *figure-form* is the more discursive it is; rather than drawing attention to itself as a screen, discursive form presents itself as a transparent window. Discursive form is "good form", meaning it obeys the rules of Euclidean geometry and perspectival relations. Good form is 'well organised'. "Figural form", on the other hand presents "an energetics indifferent to the unity of the whole, one could qualify it as Dionysian"[223]. The figural puts good form into a state of crisis. It is the 'catastrophe' of a Pollock canvas or an Ornette Coleman solo. There is a lack of focal points; attention is dispersed among multiple compositional vectors of variable speed. Such form

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[221] DF, p. 268.
[222] DF, p. 275.
[223] Ibid.

'thickens' the screen, so to speak, brings attention to representation's matter of factness, its *facture.* A powerful example of this figural disturbance of the formal space of representation is in Jacques Perconte's digital films, such as *Après le Feu* (2010). Using a digital camera, Perconte has recorded the movement of a train forwards into the landscape. As the journey unfolds artefacts appear, glitches in the algorithmic computation of the image. In post-production, Perconte uses different software packages to intervene into the image at the level of its code, altering the way movement, line and colour are synthesized during the render. The results are the spectacular disintegration of form; a digital reprise of an older avant-garde gesture of scratching or painting the material surface of film in order to produce unpredictable perceptual events. In *Après le Feu,* the figurative, that is, the recognisable element of the image is retained and the software glitches act as totally unpredictable figural disturbances of its surface.
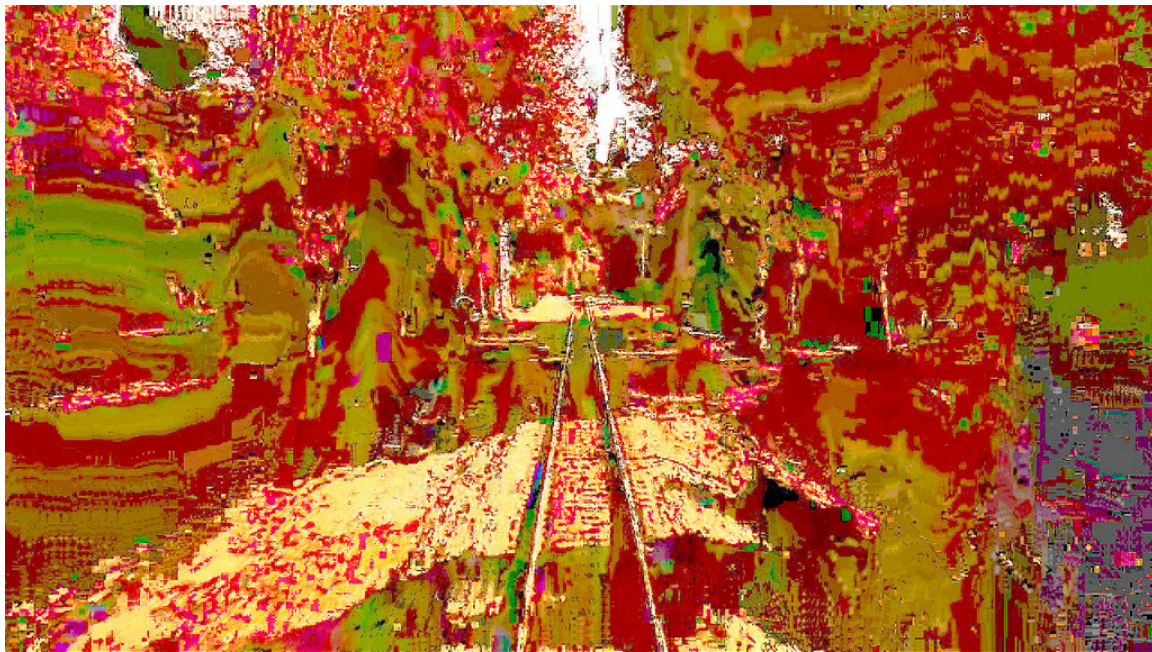

Figure-form in *Après le feu* (Dir. Jacques Perconte, 2010)

Most mysterious of all, the *figure-matrix,* which is not a visible or even invisible part of the screen, but its non-visible condition of possibility. The *figure-matrix* is a purely virtual space; it is "difference itself"[224]. Images and forms are the specific actualisations of the general differential virtualities of matrixial space. In psychoanalytic terms the *figure-matrix* is the unconscious, both the site of an "originary repression" and the "non-site" of every representation[225]. Ionescu explains this perplexing dimension thus:

> The figure-matrix is a *producer* of forms and images, but as such it is outside the sphere of communicability, just like the Kantian "thing-in-itself." The matrix of figures has not a substantial but rather a *virtual* consistency that realizes itself in a variety of figures and images. Its invisibility has nothing mystical about it—it concerns, like the unconscious psychic process, an instant of repression, one that is unknowable in itself and that appears across the figures it engenders[226].

The *figure-matrix* lacks any oppositional structure necessary for discourse, it creates no distance or space for designation, it brooks no negation; it is not really a space but 'spacing'. It is present in every instance of *figure-image* and *figure-form*, but is absent in itself. The aesthetic space of the figural, the screen, cannot be accurately called a type of formalism, as 'form' is only one of its elements. The figure's 'complicity' with desire makes it a pulsional aesthetic, the expression of dynamic forces upon the surfaces of sense, one that, Lyotard argues, is "the polar opposite of the verbal and of motility, that is, of the reality principle with its two functions, language and action. Desire turns its back on these functions"[227].

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[224] Ibid.
[225] DF, p. 268, 269.
[226] Ionescu. 'Figural Aesthetics', p. 151.
[227] DF, p. 271.

What about the cinema, what exactly can be done there? It would be fair to say that, along with the figure, there is a radical complicity between desire and movement. Is the moving image exhausted in the screen dynamics of image, force, and matrix, or is there the need for a *figure-film?* Without saying its name Lyotard makes such a case by working in the passage between an almost silent difference: *Le cinéma, l'acinéma.*

Acinema

Published two years after *Discours, figure* in 1973, Lyotard's essay 'Acinema' is the most substantial document for a figural aesthetic of the cinema before Brenez's interventions starting in the 1990s. He makes *movement* its central feature, describing the cinema as "writing with movement", a literal transcription of 'cinematography'[228]. By doing so, he displaces the optical and iconic aspect of the medium from the centre of theoretical reflection, as well as any reference to a photographic ontology or unique, 'indexical' claim to the real. Instead, cinema becomes a matter of expressing different *economies* of movement. The radical complicity of the figure with desire means that figuration is first of all a field of forces and intensities which are subsequently contained or 'put in order' under different aesthetic regimes, or, *dispositifs.* In 'Acinema' as well as the slightly later essay 'The Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*'[229], Lyotard produces a critique of the scenic or theatrical *dispositif* of the cinematic image, which he claims neutralises the intensity of the figure via "an incessant *organising* of movements", a systematic process of eliminating any 'incongruent' movement or figural intensity that cannot be utilised for the benefit of the narrative coherence of the whole[230]. As discussed above, Lyotard sees *le*

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[228] 'Acinema', *Acinemas: Lyotard's Philosophy of Film,* p. 33.
[229] 'The Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*'
[230] 'Acinema', p. 34. My emphasis, to highlight the continuity of Lyotard's sense of 'organisation' as a discursive containment of figural force.

cinéma as an institutionalised, productive system of power that reproduces the libidinal structures necessary for society to reproduce itself, to produce its own spectacular 'reality effect'. In 'Acinema', he both fleshes out how this works but also presents how this discursive regime can and is undermined from within. The near silent negation of the masculine *e* in *l'acinéma* is figured in two regimes of "aberrant movements"[231] that Lyotard sees as otherwise systematically effaced from *le cinéma*: immobility and excessive movement. As with the 'machinery' worked out in the previous paragraph, movement here is operative at the level of the representational image and form, but also of the material support itself. This expanded framing of cinematic movement is the main reason why Lyotard looks to the avant-garde and an experimental *dispositif* as possible sites of 'acinematic' expression, as it is in these spheres that the demands of discursive intelligibility and figurative recognisability are not so emphatically enforced.

Lyotard theorises the cinema as an ensemble of densely ramified kinetic energies, an animated and intensive body of movement. There is the movement in the frame of the actors and other bodies which are themselves composed in the movements of lighting, colour, and camera movement; there is the work of montage at the level of sequence and in the overall 'scene organisation' and, finally, the movement of sound and speech working "over and through" these other movements[232]. The central question of the practical activity of filmmaking thus becomes "*which* movements?"[233]. Lyotard notes that in the dominant regimes of the cinematic image, in accordance with its industrial standard, movement is subordinated "to protect the order of the whole"[234]. The 'good form' of the whole, its coherence and

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[231] 'Acinema', p. 36.
[232] Lyotard. 'Acinema', p. 33.
[233] Ibid.
[234] 'Acinema', p. 34.

legibility, follows the discursive principles of order and organisation, visual resolution and definition, and narrative structure. This latter aspect has recently been summarised by Rancière in terms of the representational logic of the 'fable' in the sense of "a logic of ordered action", that is, "the arrangement of necessary and verisimilar actions that lead the characters from fortune to misfortune, or vice versa, through the careful construction of the intrigue and denouement"[235]. What is excluded from this obsessive compulsive ordering? The "fortuitous, dirty, confused, unsteady, unclear, poorly framed, [and] overexposed"[236]. That is, the wasteful, detritus of organic form, everything that blurs the edges and disconcerts the body of the image; all the "motion which in going beyond the point of no return spills the libidinal forces outside the whole, at the expense of the whole (at the price of the ruin and disintegration of this whole)"[237].

The name Lyotard gives to the process of incessant ordering for the benefit of the whole at the expense of aberrant movement is "*mise en scène*"[238]. *Mise en scène* is a theatrical term of art that refers to the construction of a diegetic space, the *scene*, which separates the space of reality from that of the fiction in order to produce its own 'reality effect'. Lyotard assumes a particularly classical idea of the *mise en scène* as a *unified* space: "The diegesis locks together the synthesis of movements in the temporal order; perspectivist representation does so in the spatial order"[239]. Adrian Martin has discussed how the freighting of this theatrical form into the cinema and into film criticism burdens it with very strict limitations. He writes, "For with the assumption of the centrality of the scene comes a great baggage, which is precisely the

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[235] Jacques Rancière. *Film Fables.* Bloomsbury Academic. 2006, p.1.
[236] Lyotard. 'Acinema', p. 33.
[237] 'Acinema', p. 35.
[238] 'Acinema', p. 36.
[239] Ibid.

baggage of classicism in the arts: continuity, verisimilitude, the ensemble effect in acting performance, narrative articulation, the necessity for smoothness and fluidity, centring, legibility and formal balance"[240]. Lyotard goes a step further, however, and rather than *mise en scéne* being contained within a particular moment of the arts, is actually "a general process touching all fields of activity, a profoundly unconscious process of separation, exclusion and effacement"[241]. In particular, he traces a synergy between film, body, and society[242]. In this way, Lyotard argues that *mise en scène* is a practice of organising and managing relations across a range of contexts: social relations, libidinal-affective relations, and cinematic relations. Drawing from the psychoanalytic principles of the libido as a disruptive force of the drives working in antagonistic relation to the reality principle of organised speech and action, Lyotard argues that the theatrical *dispositif* of *mise en scène,* in each instance of film, body, society, is driven by the "reasonable goal *par excellence*, the subordination of all partial drives, all sterile and divergent movements to the unity of an organic body"[243]. The cinematic scene is to the social body what the "orthopaedic" Lacanian mirror is to the organic or psychosomatic body: a phantasmatic idealisation of unified totality where all the parts commune as One[244].

What does Lyotard mean exactly by 'sterile' movement and how does it diverge from this ideal of the One? A sterile movement is simply a movement, an intensity, that exists for itself and not as a value to be 'returned' or re-invested for the benefit of the whole. Lyotard evokes the figure of a child burning a match, not to light a fire that will cook a meal, but "*to see what happens - just for the fun of it* - he enjoys the movement itself, the changing colours, the

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[240] Adrian Martin. "Turn the Page: From Mise-En-Scène to Dispositif." Screening the Past, no. July, 2011, http://www.screeningthepast.com/2011/07/turn-the-page-from-mise-en-scene-to-dispositif

[241] Lyotard. 'Acinema', p. 38.

[242] 'Acinema', p. 39.

[243] Ibid.

[244] Ibid.

light flashing at the height of its blaze, the death of the tiny piece of wood, the hissing of the tiny flame"[245]. This child, Lyotard says, follows the "pyrotechnic imperative"[246]. Lyotard's little troublemaker has a psychedelic experience with this tiny inferno of audiovisual events; he enjoys the entropic dissipation of energy in its movement through a series of different sensory forms. The child '*détourns*' the match's utilitarian function for a "simulacrum" of pleasure with no 'return'[247]. This figure provides Lyotard the opening through which he conceives of two directions in which cinema can, likewise, follow the pyrotechnical imperative: immobility and excessive movement. "In letting itself be drawn towards these antipodes the cinema insensibly ceases to be an ordering force; it produces true, that is, vain, simulacrums, blissful intensities, instead of productive/consumable objects"[248]. Both pyrotechnical protocols interrupt the instrumentalisation of imagery in their significance for the drive toward narrative resolution; a sort of 'vertical' stuttering of presence substitutes the 'horizontal' progression of the fiction. Both polarities are, Lyotard says, "displacements in place", either "an immobilising motion, [or] an immobilised mobilisation"[249].

Immobilisation produces a "fascinating paralysis"[250]. This minimalist cinema drifts toward the stillness of the photographic; the gaze is freed from the chains of signification and can delight instead in the audiovisual events on screen. In reading these ideas, I am always

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[245] 'Acinema', p. 34.

[246] 'Acinema', p. 35. In connection to this imperative Lyotard cites a formulation attributed to Adorno, but for which I have been unable to find the original source. Lyotard writes, *"It is thus that Adorno said the only truly great art is the making of fireworks"* (35).

[247] Ibid. "A simulacrum, understood in the sense Klossowski gives it, should not be conceived primarily as belonging to the category of representation, like the representations which imitate pleasure; rather, it is to be conceived as a kinetic problematic, as the paradoxical product of the disorder of the drives, as a composite of decompositions".

[248] Ibid.

[249] 'Acinema', p. 40.

[250] Ibid.

reminded of Yvonne Rainer's 1966 film, *Hand Movie,* in which the famous dancer's hand is filmed in static close-up against a neutral background. Rainer employs the most common of means and the most ordinary of gestures to great expressive effect. The hand never resolves itself into any recognisable symbol and instead the relations between each finger, between the fingers and the hand, and the tiny articulations of each finger themselves are pulsed and swayed into figures, as if the current of her body, flowing in the most unpredictable and rhythmic ways, was concentrated upon this single zone.

Hand Movie (Yvonne Rainer, 1966)

At the other pole, excessive movement. Lyotard here does not mean simply that objects in the frame move rapidly and in all directions, but that, at its most extreme, movement becomes so intense that "it blocks the synthesis of identification and thwarts the mnesic instances", meaning I can no longer recognise any object and 'enjoy' its phantasmatic repetition of a memory-trace[251]. The screen ceases to be a window or a *tableau* (which belongs to the minimalist pole) in which recognisable images and forms are posed and instead the material support "offers itself as the flesh posing itself"[252]. The flesh of the image as *figure-matrix*, perhaps. I don't perceive these two acinematic poles as total absolutes; doing so would place theory in a legislating and authoritative position over practice, something Lyotard strives to avoid. It would be more accurate to view them as two polarities that open up a field of multiple possibilities in the passages between them. As Lyotard writes, "It is only for thought that these two modes are incompatible. In a libidinal economy they are, on the contrary, necessarily associated; stupefaction, terror, anger, hate, pleasure – all the intensities – are always displacements in place"[253].

By way of illustration (but one could just as easily say that it is the theory that illustrates the film) let us take a short two-minute sequence from Philippe Grandrieux's *Sombre* (1998), a narrative film but one of especially nuanced plastic and sonic intensity. The sequence begins with a shot of the back of a woman's head as it dangles out of an open car window, straining to receive the last remains of the day's sunlight . The speed of the car and the displacement of the air transforms the woman's hair into an ecstatic dance illuminated by warm streaks of setting sunlight. Then a cut, the reverse-shot, the face of another woman, Claire, whose gaze is fixed on

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[251] 'Acinema', p. 41.
[252] Ibid.
[253] 'Acinema', p. 39-40.

the woman's head, who we know to be her sister Christine. Claire's face makes a small pan to her left and then another cut. This time the driver of the car, Jean, seen in profile, implacable eyes fixed dead ahead. A moment passes and the streaks of intermittent sunlight disappear. Another cut. A peripheral view outside of the landscape rushing past, we can't attribute this view to any of the figures we've seen so far; the camera's focus has been pushed to infinity and the planes of depth composing the image blur into a plastic mass of lateral zones of moving colour.
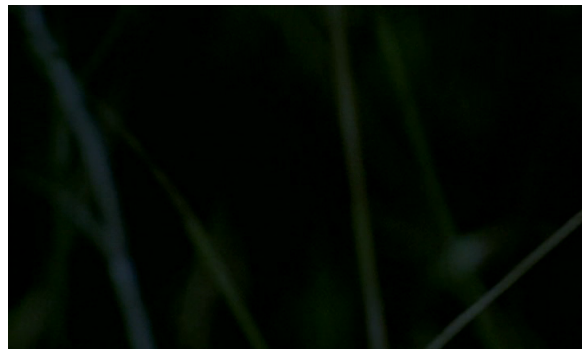
'The flesh of the image'. Shots from *Sombre* (Dir. Grandrieux, 1998)

One can still make out recognisable forms, however, vehicles, buildings in the distance, the foliage of the median strip between lanes of traffic. That is, until a block of dark green fills the whole frame and vision is suddenly plunged into a chaos of excessive movement, as if the camera had passed some threshold of perception and was now coursing with maximum speed into the sinew of material reality itself. The nervure of the visible, indeed. There is grass, maybe flowers? Nothing is certain except the sheer presence of a density and its frenzied agitation. Sometimes it seems like there is sky at the bottom of the frame, but 'sky' is meaningless here, it is only a colour, the sombre, pale blue, like opals, that covers the entire film. Then the sensation of a movement back, a withdrawal and a slow coming into focus: hair again, a person's head. A word is never spoken but the two-minutes of film does more than any words (mine included) to *express* both the flesh of the world in which we each separately and collectively inhabit, and that this flesh is a zone of intense libidinal pleasure and threatening, unknowable fear. The sequence passes between the 'scenic' elements of figurative recognisability and the chaotic 'acinematic' zone of figural excess. Such a practice also puts a certain pressure on would-be

exegesis: interpretation of meaning passes more into description of events and the perspectives on sense that *this* particular set of movements opens up[254].

Grandrieux's work is a powerful example of a filmmaker exploring the anamorphic zone of visuality - that "curved, twilight, fleeting, lateral space"[255] - that Lyotard equates with the space of the figural. Beneath and beyond the space of recognisable forms and distinct beings is a zone of chaotic movement, an immanent plane of indistinction, confusion and force. In scenes like that just described, an acinematic economy of values is suggested whereby such cinematographic forces are presented for their own autonomous value as plastic events of luminosity and velocity. By working in the liminal passage between the immanent forces of differentiation and the recognisable figures of perceptual experience, the film also embodies the logic by which Brenez interprets the figural as that which figures reality while simultaneously disfiguring representation.

Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*

The aesthetic possibilities of an acinematic regime of the image are further explored in Lyotard's essay 'The Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*'. In this text, as well as refining his arguments regarding the aesthetic differences between a theatrical *dispositif* and an experimental one, Lyotard also analyses the interpretative methods that each in effect presupposes and brings into being. This brings Lyotard back to his concerns regarding the relationship between language and visuality as well as, once again, theorising the different

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[254] Martin himself acknowledges this by placing a citation from Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* as an epigraph to his own deconstruction of *mise en scène*: "The representational chamber is an energetic *dispositif*. To describe it and to follow its functioning, that's what needs to be done". 'Turn the Page', np.
[255] Ibid.

modalities of desire manifested by different aesthetic economies. In addition to its organisation and ordering of movement that we saw in 'Acinema', the theatrical *dispositif* of *mise en scène* now refers to the transcription of a legible script onto performing bodies, from 'cinematography' to "somatography"[256]. The 'encoded' performance is subsequently 'decoded' or interpreted as a disguised translation of the original concealed meaning. Such a method, Lyotard claims, operates on "the principle of distrust" and speaks the language of judgement[257]. This 'classical' paradigm is countered by experimental practice which Lyotard discusses in reference to Michael Snow's film *La Région centrale* (1970), where the 'reality effect' of a diegesis is replaced by an open-ended creation of multiple figures of sense. The difference amounts to one where, in the former, desire is acknowledged as a legible text, whereas in the latter, the work of figuration is a *show of force,* the "will to create [new] realities"[258]. In turn, critical language must shift from a model of interpreting a disguised truth to an immanent description of the new 'perspectives' opened up by expression.

'The Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*' sees Lyotard somewhat revising his strict indictment of *mise en scène* as an idealisation of totality without remainder in 'Acinema'. In the later essay, *mise en scène* still refers to a 'unity', but it is a "polyaesthetic" one, premised on "the multi-sensory potentialities" of the body: the "capacity to see, to hear, to touch, to move…"[259]. Lyotard's objection now resides in the subordination of these potentialities to "signifiers" transmitted from another source[260]. He draws a series of analogies between the staging of a script (for example in an opera or in classical Hollywood productions), and the Freudian

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[256] Lyotard. 'Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', p. 44.
[257] 'Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', p. 46.
[258] 'Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', p. 53.
[259] 'Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', p. 44.
[260] 'Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', p. 43.

concept of the 'dream-work' (essentially posed here as the 'staging' of desire), as theorised in *The Interpretation of Dreams*[261]. Lyotard assimilates Freud's text as a theory of representation as well as its interpretation. The script constitutes the "'dreamthoughts", the "primary data" of representation, determined by the constraints of discourse; the "dream-content" is the performance itself, the finished product resolved into a unified whole (whether the manifest dream, the theatrical performance, or the classical film). The 'dream-work' is the direction of the *mise en scène,* the "detailed coordination" of the polyaesthetic heterogeneity that makes up any work (the ensemble of movements discussed earlier). Lyotard emphasises that the translation of signifiers from one phase of representation to the other is an inscription of their meaning *in disguise* onto the bodies of performers. He explains, "The important thing in this context is that *mise-en-scène* consists of a complex group of operations, each of which transcribes a message written in a given sign system (literary writing, musical notation) and turns it into a message capable of being inscribed on human bodies and transmitted by those to other bodies: a kind of somatography"[262]. The strongest feature of *mise en scène* as an expressive modality is therefore not its verisimilitude or believability but its ability to translate "written signifiers into speech, song and movements executed by bodies capable of moving, singing and speaking"[263]. This emphasis on corporeal inscription, animation, and expression is congruent with Lyotard's whole project of rejecting the linguistic interpretation of desire and aesthetics and foregrounding its figural dimension. As such, following his theorising of *mise en scène* as somatography he provides a critique of Freud's 'classical' aesthetic of interpretation, which receives all bodily 'symptoms' and expressive performances as evidence not of a multi-sensory expressive potential, but of a concealed discourse.

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[261] 'Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', p. 46.
[262] 'Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', p. 44.
[263] Ibid.

As noted above, Lyotard reproaches the early Freud for operating under the 'principle of distrust'. Lyotard writes that in "[Freud's] interpretative method there is the presupposition that the data to be interpreted simultaneously display and conceal a primary message which the interpreter should be able to read clearly"[264]. This method is premised on a concept of desire as *wish*, as the 'desire of...' something that is latent, lacking, missing, or repressed. It is the unconscious 'wish' that is, by turns, worked over in the dream and cleverly disguised on stage by the gestures of the *mise en scène.* The concept of desire as *wish* puts the analyst in the position of truth as the subject of knowledge and demystification. The body, whether the empirical body of the psychoanalytic patient, or the ensemble of intensive movements of a film are 'passed over' to get to the real, primary data: the *idea,* the *meaning* behind it all. Martin has articulated how this model of interpretation works in terms of the 'expressive economy' of classical aesthetics in cinema[265].

> Classical aesthetics rests upon a particular proposition (explicit or implicit) about the ideal economy or interrelationship between the various elements of filmic style [i.e. *mise en scène*] – and, even more determiningly, the relation of style to subject or story...In essence, according to classicism, style exists to *serve* the subject or story. This is an expressive economy: style expresses subject.[266]

The 'subject', Martin goes on to say, is the "idea, feeling or situation" an author may have, however latent or ambivalently 'conscious', and the work exists to "convey" this subject. The

[264] 'Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', p. 45.
[265] Martin. 'Aesthetic Economies: The Expressive and the Excessive', in *Mise en Scène and Film Style: From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art.* Palgrave Macmillan. 2014. Pp. 21-42.
[266] 'Aesthetic Economies', p. 23.

film analyst works in reverse order and attempts to travel backwards from the 'clues' of the work to the original source, the latent idea or themes of the story. Martin further notes, in passing reference to a comment by Roland Barthes, that "this makes the artist a god, and the critic a priest deciphering the writing of that god"[267]. This theological ambience hovering over aesthetics and interpretation is anathema to Lyotard. He notes, however, that there is an alternative already in place in the later writings of Freud where "desire is no longer conceived of as a wish, but as a bloc of forces, in the sense of a dynamics"[268]. Drives are changeable vectors of force that can 'invest' or, as Lyotard writes, "lay siege" to any organic unity[269]. The drives, as blocs of force, are analogous to the figural as a *show of force.* Lyotard turns to Snow's experimental film in order to analyse how this different conception of desire as force is put into play in significantly different ways to classical *mise en scène.*

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[267] Ibid.

[268] Lyotard. 'Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', p. 49.

[269] Ibid.

Michael Snow with the machine he and Pierre Abeloos designed to film *La Région Centrale*.

(Photo by Joyce Wieland [1969]. Art Canada Institute, 2014)

La Région Centrale, Lyotard says, tells no story and constructs no diegesis. Rather it is "an accumulation of figures" on an "infinite and bounded voyage that opens up every perspective on sky and ground to the gaze"[270]. At first glance, this is a curious statement to make as, at least conventionally speaking, *La Région Centrale* is distinguished by being completely *devoid* of figures, in the sense of the visual representation of human bodies either posed or in dramatic action. It is a landscape film, it's all *ground* and no figure. However, we begin to get to Lyotard's radical sense of the figure via a description of the film's deconstruction of conventional figure/ground relations. The landscape, in this film, is no longer simply relegated to the background of the action, it is the main event. Rather than the dramatic space

[270] 'Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', p. 52, 51.

of the representational order we have the modulation of the "plastic expanse" of the figure in the sense of dynamic movement that dramatically alters standard 'scenic' coordinates[271]. Figuration, here, radically departs from the typical geometry of situated human vision. Instead, we are immersed in a strange extraterrestrial consciousness that sees the world in a totally new way.

Working alongside the engineer Pierre Abeloos, Snow designed a complex mechanism for controlling the movement of a camera along vertical and horizontal axes as well as the camera's rotation around the lens and its telescoping zoom function. Snow and his small crew were helicoptered to a remote location in the Canadian Rockies and the three-and-a-half hour film, edited from about five hours of rushes, is the choreography of visual movement controlled by a remote panel of four dials, one for each element of motion providing for intervals between 1 for the slowest and 10 for the maximum speed. The film is accompanied by an electronic score of drones and bleeps, composed by Snow himself. In an interview from 1983 for English television, and in accord with Lyotard's analysis, Snow discusses the way camera movements are typically subordinated to the construction of a space of 'illusion' and the narration of dramatic action[272]. Snow then describes the project of *La Région Centrale* in almost quasi-Freudian terms: His aims were, he says, "to bring out the content that's latent in these techniques [zooms, pans, rotational swirls], so they don't disappear in their use…so that they're not lost, they're *seen*"[273]. In other words, to bring the polyaesthetic potentials of acinematic movement out from an 'unconscious' space of possibility and into the perceptual space of

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[271] DF, p. 15.
[272] 'Snow Business'. Interview by Simon Field, *Visions,* Channel 4, originally broadcast 19 January 1983. YouTube. Uploaded by Large Doors, 31st March 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nir7aNK5794&ab_channel=LargeDoor Accessed August 2022
[273] Ibid.

expression. This process, also, necessarily involves a collaboration with contingency. Prior to the shoot, Snow had initially 'scripted' the kinds of descriptive motions he wanted the camera mechanism to perform using a notational form or 'score' for programming the variables of the different dials. "Fortunately", he says in another interview, he learnt more about the instrument as they were filming and improvised on the spot the almost infinite possible permutations of different intensities and vectors of movement. Snow was also forced to play his instrument blind since, this being celluloid film, he couldn't see what the camera saw until the stock was processed in a lab back in Toronto[274]. *La Région Centrale* is another excellent case of the practical hybridity of Lyotard's theoretical poles of acinematic motion: it is a continuous modulation of motion between an apparent immobilisation and excessive movement. The camera is *always* moving, but there are long sections of total blackness, obscurity and opacity where the camera records too close to the earth and, likewise, sections of simply blue sky, pure transparency and distance; in these moments perceived motion is zero even if actual motion is active. Between these extremes, however, the camera swirls and droops and arcs in very disorientating Möbius-strips. There is no more enigma to solve, but a continuous 'accumulation' of sensory events: colour events, movement events, landscape events, i.e. figures.

La Région Centrale, and indeed Snow's work as a whole, sabotages the utility of technical machines and disrupts discursive rationality. This resonates with Jones' evocation of the figural as 'a sort of perceptual violence and cognitive vandalism', but comes off here in a more mischievous way (this is 'Dada-reality', afterall). The films are tricksters in the playground of perception. This is evident in the soundtrack as much as the bewildering

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[274] 'Michael Snow - La Région Centrale'. Interview for Festival Punta del Vista, 2016. YouTube. Uploaded by festivalpundadelvista, February 17th 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWyv7mSaXHM&ab_channel=festivalpuntodevista. Accessed August 2022.

imagery. The synthesiser drone evokes not only the b-movie sci-fi films of the 50s, but also simulates a kind of conversational rhythm. It unfolds across two different frequencies, one of more repetitive, short durations of <eehm eehm> while the other is more fuzzy longer tones of <wahm wahm, waahm, mm, wah-uhm, uhm uhm, wahm wahm wahm>. The sound has grammar, but makes no sense; just as the image has movement, but signifies no meaning; sound and image are expressed in a different poetic register, one wholly of its own design. The film's excessive *ratio,* its seizing of a rational, technical program and pushing it to its logical ends, far beyond the realms of common sense, is also why it is one of experimental film's great *comic* masterpieces. Lisa Trahair, one of contemporary film studies' more acute readers of Lyotard, has also written about the essence of the comic, or what she calls the *laughable* as evoking the experience of "the mechanical encrusted on the living"[275]. If we take Lyotard's point that *mise en scéne* is a kind of somatography, and that, in the films of Snow and other acinematic *auteurs,* it is the flesh of the image itself that is inscribed by the vital force of desire, *La Région Centrale* is a living image gone haywire. Snow's camera mechanism can be seen as a descendent of one of Buster Keaton's crazy contraptions, except now, the gag is on us. If one submits to the duration of *La Région Centrale,* one undergoes the strange experience of seeing and feeling in the eyes, ears and body of a totally alien consciousness. But there is something deeper still, more uncanny, which can provoke a convulsive laughter just as well as a sombre revelation. Something more on the plane of the "salutary estrangement" Walter Benjamin once described as the effect of modern media[276]; one starts to feel the glitching of *the automatism of one's own movements and perceptual habits*. The feeling that, in comparison to this new vision,

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[275] Lisa Trahair. *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick.* State University of New York Press. 2007, p. 108.
[276] Benjamin. 'Little History of Photography', *Walter Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and other writings on media.* Eds. Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin. Belknap Press. 2008, p. 287.

one's own polyaesthetic body is ridiculously disciplined and needlessly programmed; but also that, at any moment, things could go terribly wrong, the machine in me - my libidinal drive mechanism - could take command of my actions and paralyse me or send me into a convulsive delirium. The "nihilism of conventional movements" by which Lyotard describes *le cinéma* is the neurotic, if not paranoiac defence formation against such a derangement of the senses[277].

If the artist-as-god paradigm has been exposed as the mere machinations of demonic devices, where does that leave the would-be priest, the analyst? 'The Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', like all of Lyotard's work that we have discussed, is an essay just as much about the problem of critical discourse as it is about figural aesthetics. Lyotard says of Snow that "he abandons the principle of distrust", and so we must follow suit[278]. This is something that students or anyone unfamiliar with experimental film can often have a hard time with. *What does it mean!?,* they cry. Their habituated positions as subjects of knowledge and visual mastery are thrown into a crisis while the work calmly goes about doing its thing, in all its sound and fury. Such works, Lyotard argues, "must not be taken as symptoms symbolically expressing a concealed discourse, but as attempts to state perspectives of reality"[279]. This is another evolution of Lyotard's own position. The previous emphasis on the 'transgression' of norms is here replaced with a Nietzschean affirmation of difference, with the effect of still freeing representation from the libel of mere disguise but without the somewhat neurotic attachment to power and authority[280]. Films, then, are not the disguised truths of a deeper meaning but

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[277] Lyotard. 'Acinema', p. 33.
[278] 'The Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', p. 52.
[279] 'The Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', p. 53.
[280] This is echoed in an even later essay on film, one that I have not had the space to address here, 'The Idea of a Sovereign Film', where Lyotard, after Bataille, writes of the experience of sovereignty not as "the supreme authority", but "an experience which is not authorised and which does not appeal to any authority; an experience or an existence which appears, happens, without relation to any law by which it could claim or demand to be 'what it is'", *Acinemas,* p. 62.

"apparati for experimentation which permit us to quarter sensibility and draw it out beyond this old body"[281]. The analyst's posture of mastery and position as the subject of truth and knowledge is here displaced for the open-ended gestures of mediation and the more prone position of affective transference.

Conclusion

We arrive, then, at cinema as an experimental laboratory, the essential point of departure for Nicole Brenez. Lyotard's analysis of Snow's experimental *dispositif* culminates in a summary of his figural aesthetic of cinema and an experimental approach to critical methodology:

> Language is not made for telling the truth and film is not made to disguise truth on a fantasmatic stage. Both are inexhaustible means for experimenting with new effects, never seen, never heard before. They create their own reference, therefore their object is not identifiable; they create their own addressee, a disconcerted body, invited to stretch its sensory capacities beyond measure[282].

I take this as a key statement on figural aesthetics that informs Brenez's experimental ethos. Lyotard provides an example of critical language freed from its duty to discursive authority and liberated from the principle of distrust the better for it to explore the image as the site of *possible* experience, as a zone or screen where new realities can be encountered and translated into a writerly practice. This departure from the 'true' should not be seen as 'relativism' pure and simple. Discernment is still essential to this practice of critique. As Lyotard notes in

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[281] 'The Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', p. 54.
[282] 'The Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*', p. 52.

Discourse, Figure, "one must learn not to distinguish truth from falsity—both defined in terms of the internal consistency of a system, or of operativeness upon an object of reference—but to discern between two expressions, the one that exists to thwart the gaze (to capture it) and the one that is there to expand it, to allow it to see the invisible"[283]. 'To see the invisible', means to see, like Michael Snow says, that which is usually disappeared from view, to see the differences that are possible but not yet actual, to see what haunts perception on the threshold of the visible. This is Brenez's project too. In 'Visual Objection', she likewise describes the 'work of critique' as a force that exposes the contingency of the status quo and in doing so opens up a space for difference to emerge. She writes, "One of the characteristics, in fact, of the work of critique consists in not propagating the world as it is, but in creating it: the work brings about a new symbolic configuration that the old one cannot recognize, so that what is inadmissible works in it to indicate both the limits of the antecedent organisation, and the tearing or displacement that it exerts there"[284].

The following chapter and beyond put Brenez's work more directly at the centre of attention. My lingering in the tribulations of the figural have been for the purpose to more expansively unpack the theoretical background to Brenez's experimental ethos and the kinds of positions she takes toward both cinema as a critical activity and film analysis as an engaged, writerly practice. The critical autonomy of art and the irreducibility of the visible to language are fundamental tenets of Brenez's criticism. 'Autonomy' should not be seen as a withdrawal from the social but, as I have argued, as the opening of a space where its limits can be exposed

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[283] DF, p. 12.

[284] Brenez. 'Visual Objection', "L'une des caractéristiques, en effet, de l'œuvre critique consiste à ne pas reconduire le monde tel qu'il est, à ne pas le proroger mais à le créer : l'œuvre occasionne une nouvelle configuration symbolique que l'ancienne ne peut reconnaître, de sorte que ce qui travaille en elle d'irrecevable nous indique à la fois les limites de l'organisation antécédente, et la déchirure ou le déplacement qu'elle y exerce", p. 9.

and different perspectives can be exhibited. Lyotard's theorising of cinematic representation as an ensemble of movements organised by different logics and as a field of forces and intensities that work over the figurative plasticity of form and image is also crucial. In Chapter Two we see these ideas inscribed in a specific philosophy of film analysis Brenez calls "immanent critique". Brenez advances Lyotard's attempts to render a figural as opposed to discursive form of criticism where explanatory mastery is relinquished for an immersion into the fine-grained materiality of figural processes of construction. The work of critique is thus pulled toward the poetic where the figurative powers of the film are expressed in the movement and intensity of the writing. At the same time, however, Brenez gives a twist to Lyotard's logic whereby she grants to the order of the figure a discursive ability to study and critique the image itself, without having to mimic textual exegesis but by articulating certain figural principles. The logic of disintegration, for Brenez cinema's essential nature, is operative both in immanent critique's decomposition of the body of the image into complex constellations of forces and in a specific cinematic practice Brenez calls the 'visual study' which *dis*figures dominant regimes of representation and articulates the relation between cinema and history in experimental ways.

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Analysis in Flames:

Immanent Critique & the Visual Study

The critic's object will not always be to explain the work of art. He may seek rather to deepen its mystery.

– Oscar Wilde[285]

Introduction

The previous chapter explored the theoretical foundations of the key concept of the figural in the work of Jean-François Lyotard. In this chapter, I examine Brenez's vision for the art of criticism. We will see how many of the features of Lyotard's proposals regarding the critical function of art, the cinematic image as an ensemble of densely ramified kinetic energies, and especially the call to alter the status of the analyst from the position of mastery to one of complicit mediator, migrate into the practical work of film analysis. How are the theoretical postulates of the figural mobilised in the close reading of cinematic figuration and what are the writerly forms the analysis of films can take? How does film analysis conceive of the relation between language and image? Is film analysis a 'scientific' method of demystification, a libidinal one that translates the pulsional force of images into writing or a 'poetic' one that induces its own aesthetic articulation as it thinks *with* the film? I address these questions by, firstly,

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[285] Cited in Brenez. "Recycling, Visual Study, Expanded Theory - Ken Jacobs, Theorist, or the Long Song of the Sons" ['Study'], in *Optic Antics: the amazing cinema of Ken Jacobs.* Eds. Paul Arthur, David E. James, and Michele Pierson. Oxford University Press. 2011, p. 172. [Study]

focusing on an enabling moment of crisis in the analytical work of another French critic Raymond Bellour who, in the 1980s, declared film analysis to be 'an art without a future'. Rather than send film analysis to its grave, however, Bellour's aim was to liberate it from some of its inherited tendencies and open it up to what he calls 'free gestures'. An important catalyst for Bellour's speculations about the possible future of film analysis derives from his encounter with the critical writing and subsequent video art of Thierry Kuntzel. In turn, I examine the concept of 'the film-work' proposed by Kuntzel in the 1970s to describe the immanent process of film construction. I argue that Kuntzel's essay is an important precursor to Brenez's formulation of 'figural analysis' and is especially significant as a model for the 'experimental' treatment of commercial narrative film Brenez embarks on in her book on American director Abel Ferrara (the subject of Chapter Four). Other than very brief allusions, Brenez does not herself refer to Bellour or Kuntzel as models for her work. Nonetheless, I argue that their examples of a film criticism practised as a creative, writerly pursuit are intellectual contexts out of which Brenez creatively constructs her own methodology. I situate both Bellour and Kuntzel within what Brenez herself calls a tradition of "immanent critique", a specific critical strategy taken toward the image shared, Brenez argues, by both art and criticism.

Brenez lays out her vision for the art of criticism as a shared pursuit of critical writing and visual art in an essay published in an exhibition catalogue on the occasion of a retrospective of the work of the filmmaker and artist Harun Farocki at the London gallery Ravens Row in 2009. The essay is one of several occasions where Brenez discusses the forms and history of the "visual study", a critical film practice that traverses avant-garde and industrial contexts, documentary essays and genre films, features and installations (the form is associated with so-called 'found-footage' or 'recycled' cinema). In my commentary of this essay I briefly discuss the work of Farocki, as seen through Brenez's critical gaze, and highlight his work as a paradigm

of the visual study. But I am most interested in reading the essay as a lesson in understanding Brenez's own philosophy of criticism and in that vein I appropriate her taxonomy of 'principals' by which she understands Farocki's immanent critique as a personal manifesto on her rights and duties as a critic of visual forms. I connect these principles to what, in *De la Figure,* Brenez called figural analysis. As a textual strategy of exegesis figural analysis builds on the 'free gestures' Bellour called for in his article 'Analysis in Flames'[286]. In the notion of immanent critique, a strategy shared by both criticism and art, we have here as if two strands of the DNA comprising the experimental ethos of Nicole Brenez: a critical writerly practice on the one hand and cinema as critical visionary activity on the other.

Analysis in Flames

In a short text from 1984 titled 'Analysis in Flames', the seminal analyst of films Raymond Bellour wrote that "film analysis has finally become an art without a future"[287]. Announcing, as much to himself as to a whole methodological field, that "the false sense of plenitude" produced by a certain kind of film analysis associated with structuralist semiotics and film as a 'signifying system' had become a victim of its own institutionalised success[288]. However, Bellour's pronouncement of the death of film criticism (a bell often tolled) is a canny

[286] Raymond Bellour. 'Analysis in Flames', trans. Lynn Kirby, in *Between-the-Images.* JPR|Ringier & Les Presses du Réel. 2012.

[287] 'Flames', p. 23.
On Bellour as a foundational figure see, for example, Tom Gunning's review of the belated translation of *L'Analyse du film* (1979)*,* where he writes: "If American (and English language) film studies established itself academically in the seventies as a discipline with a scholarly methodology and complex theoretical base, it was largely due to a sort of cultural invasion from France...of the works [by] Christian Metz, Jean Baudry, and Raymond Bellour". Gunning. 'The work of film analysis: Systems, fragments, alternation', *Semiotica,* Vol.144(1), 2001, p. 343.

[288] Bellour provides his own synoptic account of this moment in 'A Little Bit of History' collected in *The Analysis of Film.* Indiana University Press. 2000. Pp. 1-20. See also, Michael Goddard's entry on Bellour in *Film, Theory, Philosophy: The key thinkers.* Felicity Coleman, ed. Routledge. 2009. Pp. 256-265.

and playful one. It is, first of all, an ironic citation of the famous line by Louis Lumière, who, in 1895, hailed cinema to be "an invention without a future" (signalling, by none other than one of its inventors, the death of cinema as contemporary with its birth). Bellour's fatal proclamation is thus more of the ambivalent sort 'Analysis is dead! Long live analysis!'. Analysis mutates away from a concern with the systematic defining and categorising of rhetorical codes and toward "figuration, the body, and emotion"[289], to an encounter with new media and new possibilities for cinema to analyse itself. To be an art without a future is to exist without an already mapped out horizon, to proceed without a *doxa* and without a destiny. The after-life of analysis, according to Bellour, comes in the form of "free gestures" made possible by "[a]n eye at last freely fascinated"[290].

Analysis is the fatal victim both of its own success - the emergence, out of an informal mixture of trade journalists and enlightened amateurs, of the development of a systematic and institutionalised discourse - but also, in the final count, of the 'unattainability' of its object. Already in the mid 1970s, still in thrall to the promise of cinema as a 'signifying system', Bellour was describing the film as an 'The Unattainable Text'[291]. Unattainable because the tools of the analyst - language, writing - can only be intimate strangers to the fact of cinema's manifold "matters of expression"; meaning its peculiar mixture of sound, duration, speech, and figuration, as well as its deterritorialization of the other arts that predate it: painting, the novel, theatre, music, etc[292]. Unlike literary works, which share the same raw material as literary criticism, the modalities of cinematic presence always exceed the grasp of any discursive attempt to master it. But it is precisely this excess and this distance that, so to speak, inflames

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[289] Constance Penley, 'Preface', *The Analysis of Film,* p. xi.
[290] Bellour. 'Flames', p. 23.
[291] Bellour. 'The Unattainable Text', *Analysis of Film,* pp. 21-27.
[292] 'Unattainable Text', p. 23.

analysis; language *reels* in its attempt to define the visible and sensible realm in which figuration operates. As Brenez writes, in the context of the attempt to translate the films of Stan Brakhage into acts of criticism, "the monumental visuality of this medium… (to borrow a phrase from Raymond Bellour) 'pushes language into check'"[293]. The problematic goal, then, for the analysis of film is to conjure ways of *making the figure appear* in a foreign language.

Such a problematic can be viewed through the "politics of translation" proposed by the artist-theorist Hito Steyerl in a text named 'The Language of Things'[294]. In this essay, Steyerl is analysing some of Walter Benjamin's early writings on language and attempting to adapt them for a theory of documentary filmmaking. My interest, however, is specifically in her opposition of two different modes of translation: the "language of judgement" and the "language of practice". The language of judgement translates its object via a will to "classify, categorise, fix and identify…[it] objectifies the thing in question, fixes its meaning and constructs stable categories of knowledge to understand it"[295]. That is, it attempts to master the object in a totalising way. While the language of judgement enables a certain kind of consensus among those who share its *lingua franca,* according to Steyerl, it is a form of "epistemological dictatorship", in that it represses the dynamic and sensuous aspects of things that do not obtain in more rationalist approaches. Against the dictatorship of judgement she mobilises the "language of practice". The language of practice comes down to the level of its object, to the level of the 'thing', in the terms Steyerl uses. It is more deeply involved and compromised by that which it attempts to translate; it is a more flexible mode of receptivity and is attuned more to the contingency and singularity of things than to incorporating them into overdetermined

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[293] Brenez. 'Serious Mothlight', np.

[294] Hito Steyerl. 'The Language of Things', *Transversal,* Vol.20, 2006. Online.

[295] 'Language of Things', np.

grids of identification. The language of practice, indeed, doesn't even perceive things as stable and fixed but as moving and interactive "constellations of forces"[296]. The language of practice translates "the incongruities, the inegalities, the rapid change of speed, the disarticulation and dizzying rhythms, the dislocation of and the arhythmic pulsations of time" that exist in any material field[297]. The language of practice privileges *relation* and *discrepancy* over 'category' and 'definition'.

How does film analysis speak the language of practice and avoid the pitfalls of the language of judgement? What kind of analytical posture or disposition are we talking about here? In 'Analysis in Flames', Bellour writes about the "mad desire to touch the film" as a necessary, almost instinctual, impulse of the analytical act[298]. The relation between the film analyst and the object of study is one of intensive and affective transference; a confusion of boundaries between 'subject' and 'object'. The analyst dissolves or projects into the figural flux of the film and in turn the film is incorporated and unfolds in the nervous system of the analyst (Bellour writes that films "remodel…the interior of our bodies"[299]). The piece of writing that ensues is something like the document of this complicated exchange, its translation across multiple modes of sensory, cognitive and perceptual experience. Bellour describes film analysis as much as a libidinal process as a cognitive or rational one. Indeed, one of the significant achievements of this genre of writing is to produce a discourse where these two dimensions of life are intimately intertwined.

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[296] Ibid.
[297] Ibid. Steyerl's key example are the dizzying films of Dziga Vertov
[298] Bellour. 'Flames', p. 25.
[299] 'Between-the-Images', p. 17.

For Bellour, the desired contact is with "the bodily core of the text", meaning its immanent processes of construction, its figuration rather than its signification[300]. What inflames film analysis is the question over 'what it is' and 'how it works' rather than 'what it means', even if the work of analysis inevitably means a mixture of these positions. This kind of analysis therefore is drawn, first of all, to the *material* aspects of film expression. It argues that one must first investigate *how* the film is produced at this primary, figural level of composition, before any kind of interpretation at the secondary level of 'theme' or meaning can be conducted. The kind of analysis that Bellour has in mind (and which he himself practices) is different from more mainstream criticism that, as Bill Routt has noted, "tends to treat the screen as a window in which narrative or dramatic action is represented"[301]. And in the course of his own work the sense of what 'the bodily core of the text' meant shifted from an exhaustive cataloguing of the structural relations that organise the drama's *découpage* and toward a more figural sense of the dynamics at work interior to "the body of the image"[302]. This mutation is catalysed by his encounter, beginning in the late '70s and into the 1980s, with the transformations affecting the nature of film by the emergence of video and subsequently other electronic means of recording and displaying images.

Accessing the 'bodily core' of the film proceeds by a quite literal sense of analysis: the breakdown of an apparent whole into its constitutive parts. This is the first 'gesture' that Bellour names as a necessary component of film analysis[303]: interrupting the continuity of the film's unfolding or, to use the technical term in French, the *défilement*. This can move in different directions too. It can involve using editing tools to physically stop the film and

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[300] 'Flames', p. 14.
[301] Routt. 'For Criticism', np.
[302] Bellour. 'Thierry Kuntzel and the Return of Writing', *Between-the-images,* p. 49
[303] 'Flames', p. 24.

disintegrate it into a series of freeze-frames; or it can tend toward a systematic investigation of structure, its overall organisation and its heterogeneous assembly of relations between parts. But analysis may also be a kind of gleaning, a fixation on "the smallest elements of the filmic fabric"[304], and the subsequent tracing of their development across constellations or circuits in the figuration. Each of these tendencies have an oblique relation to narrative, actually subvert the construction of the film as a causal, linear and continuous surface. Take the following example from a slightly later text by Bellour where he evokes the experience of 'stopping' Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) during the climactic scene at the end of the film where the mansion, the film's key setting, is set on fire and engulfs the house mistress Mrs Danvers:

> It can happen that if you stop the image, you will no longer recognize her, the dark silhouette of Mrs. Danvers, licked by long white flames, is nothing more than a universe of pure forms. In short, for an instant which might last a lifetime, you find yourself in front of an invented, defigured image whose force derives from what it escapes from - a drama - in order to now offer nothing more than a forgotten quintessence, a latent energy, of lines and layers, of strokes and points, something like a pathway [*trame*] pulled out from the narrative action but giving it its power[305].

'A universe of pure forms', 'a forgotten quintessence', 'a latent energy', 'force', and 'power', and the diagrammatic relations of visual composition reveal the 'unconscious' matrix or what Bellour calls, after a formulation by Serge Daney, "the unknown flesh of the film", an entity 'invented', created and brought into view for reflection by the analytical gesture itself[306].

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[304] 'A Little Bit of History', p. 4
[305] I have cited the translation of this passage made by Dana Polan in his review essay on *L'entre-images* published in *Discourse,* Vol.16(2), 1993, p.198. A slightly different translation, by Allyn Hardyk appears in *Between-the-Images,* p. 14.
[306] 'Between-the-images', p.15

What are the other 'gestures' Bellour sees as means to 'free' analysis? These are perhaps less gestures as codified 'moves' a film analyst might make than open questions which 'have no future', no obvious answers. After 'stopping' the film and dissolving it into its latent virtuality and figural components, the second free gesture involves the question of writing itself. Analysis displaces the film, sets it adrift and is itself a kind of driftwork (to borrow a phrase from Lyotard). Bellour highlights the work of Daney as exemplary of how "certain stops in his sentences correspond with freeze-frames in the reader's mind"[307]. The open question of how writing translates the 'universe of pure forms' or 'the unknown flesh of the film' ungrounds analysis from the "rabid exactitude" that Roland Barthes once claimed characterised the work of Christian Metz, one of Bellour's important mentors[308]. Instead, "critical gaze and creative desire come together in a shared gesture"[309] where analysis can become something more elliptical and poetic and cinema can become more critical and theoretical. Gone is any pretence to an explanatory mastery *over* the film, instead, analysis thinks *with* the film, and does so in a particular way. Rather than assuming the film as either a transparent window on to a reality of which it would be the second nature, or that the film is a formal exercise in the organisation of a catalogue of rhetorical codes and expressive techniques, the analyst receives the images as *a zone of possible experience*: "That is to say, a reality of the world, as virtual and abstract as it may be, reality of an image-as-possible-world"[310]. Language and image, analysis and poetics, then, become two different modes of translation of a shared preoccupation: the desire, deepened in each gesture, for *another world*. This takes us to the final gesture that liberates analysis: "the

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[307] 'Flames', p.25.
[308] Cited in Penley. 'Introduction to "Metaphor/Metonymy, or the Imaginary Referent"'. *Camera Obscura,* Vol.3(1), 1981, p. 7.
[309] 'Between-the-images', p. 15.
[310] 'Between-the-images', p. 17

encounter, often oblique or indirect, yet so very suggestive, of film analysis *with* cinema. Its transformation, its dissolution in cinema and video"[311]. This opening up of a territory of a shared critical impulse between writing and cinema is especially important to Brenez and her notion of immanent critique.

Before shifting the discussion into the analytical gestures she makes, which extend the points raised here, I want to conclude this section by examining the figure that really sparked the mutation in Bellour's idea of analysis, Thierry Kuntzel. Kuntzel moved from the field of film theory and analysis to become one of the pioneers of video art and installations in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Bellour's close personal contact with Kuntzel and his encounter with the nascent development of video aesthetics had a significant impact on Bellour's understanding of what was possible in terms of a more general category of 'moving images', now an expanded field of experience opened up, precisely, "between the images" of different materialities: photography, cinema, video, and painting[312]. But first, let us examine Kuntzel's key theoretical intervention in the field of film analysis via his concept of the film-work.

The Film-Work

In the early 1970s Kuntzel composed two long essays titled 'Le Travail du film'. The second and more well-known essay was translated into English as 'The Film-Work, 2' and concentrated on the opening sequences of the 1932 Hollywood B-film *The Most Dangerous*

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[311] 'Flames', p. 25. Emphasis added.
[312] In 2018, Sapienta University in Romania held a symposium based on this area of Bellour's work. An interview conducted by Ágnes Pethő and Mihály Lakatos and uploaded to YouTube provides some useful background. 'Raymond Bellour: The Experience of In-Betweenness'. Uploaded by Sapienta Film Conferences, Nov 2018. https://tinyurl.com/Bellourbetween Accessed July 2022.

Game[313] [314]. The essay is of interest here not only as an influential paradigm of film analysis for Bellour and Brenez, but it is also one of the few close readings of a film that directly refers to the Lyotardian interpretation of Freud and his concept of the figural. As such, while it still views itself very much within the genre of a *textual* analysis, taking up, like so many others, the ideas and vocabulary Barthes laid out in his article 'From the Work to the Text'[315], I situate it as a kind of proto-figural analysis. In the essay we see many of the elements Bellour would herald as the key gestures of the analysis of film as I have just attempted to describe above: a displacement of the temporal continuity, spatial homogeneity, and narrative unity of the film in search of its bodily core "essentially involved", Kuntzel writes "with the figural, with unbinding, with primariness…with *force* as Lyotard defines it: 'Force is nothing but the energy which causes the text to crumple and fold'"[316]. Here, Kuntzel is referring to Lyotard's idea of the figural as that which 'thickens' or fleshes out discursive codes of visuality. This was analysed in Chapter One in terms of the 'transgression' of the elements of figurative plasticity, that is, via the blurring of the descriptive contours of objects, the deconstruction of formal gestalts, and the figuring of economies of movement which propagate 'acinematic' forms of excess that subvert the conventional narrative-representation system. Kuntzel also takes up Lyotard's

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[313] Thierry Kuntzel. 'The Film-Work, 2', *Camera Obscura,* Vol.2(5), 1980, pp. 6-70.

[314] The plot of the film, co-directed by *King Kong* creators Ernest B. Shoedsack and Merian C. Cooper, consists of the shipwrecking of a luxury yacht on a remote island in the Pacific Ocean. The wreck's sole survivor, a famous hunter named Bob Rainsford (Joel McCrea), discovers the island is inhabited by an expat European aristocrat named Zaroff (Leslie Banks) and a handful of other survivors from previous wrecks, including a woman named named Eve Trowbridge (Fay Wray). The drama unfolds, in the manner of the adventure story mixed with elements of the fantastic, as it is revealed that Zaroff, bored with conventional hunting of animals, now practices 'the most dangerous game', hunting human beings and displaying their bodies as trophies. A deal is struck where if Rainsford survives the night as the prey in Zarhoff's deadly game he will be allowed off the island. After a number of close calls Rainsford triumphs and the film ends with he and Eve escaping the island together on a motorboat.

[315] Roland Barthes. 'From Work to Text', *Image, Music, Text.* Hill and Wang. 1977, p. 155-164.
For an account of the reception of Barthes' essay in the development of *textual* analysis in film studies see Janet Bergstrom 'Enunciation and Sexual Difference (Part 1)', *Camera Obscura,* Vol.1-2. 1979. Pp. 32-69

[316] 'The Film-Work 2', p. 48.

reading of the Freudian sense of desire as energetics and 'force'. The reference to 'primariness' in the quote above, refers to the primary processes of the psyche according to psychoanalysis. The notion of the 'film-work' is an appropriation of the Freudian concept of the dream-work, or the functioning of the unconscious, first developed in *The Interpretation of Dreams.* Kuntzel speculates that there are possible analogies between the psychic apparatus, as theorised by psychoanalysis, and the cinematic apparatus. In both cases 'work' refers to a complex, generative process where the data of perception (in the case of the mind) or the inscription of visual and aural phenomena (in the case of the cinema) are organised and expressed according to certain principles.

What attracts Kuntzel and his generation of film analysts to Classical Hollywood film form is a highly structured and disciplined form of organising audiovisual material. This 'work' is meant to remain 'invisible', not consciously noticed during film viewing; the work of analysis, then, is the medium where the occulted work of the film is brought into explicit view. As David Rodowick notes in his account of Kuntzel's essays, "If one is to understand the condition of the film's textuality, the film must be broken down and reconstituted. In both of Kuntzel's film-work essays, this process of fragmentation and reordering...is aimed at producing an account of film's figural activity: a particular weaving of visual and aural motifs that, like Freud's notion of the dream-work, is unavailable to conscious consideration save in the form of secondary revision[317]. Kuntzel's 'secondary revision' of the film, in this essay, reaches a delirious level of excess; the smooth functioning of classical film form is scattered into a myriad of fragments, sub-headings and theoretical asides. The trope of delirium is explicitly invoked by Kuntzel when, fifty pages into the analysis, he announces its ultimate goal: the hunt

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[317] D.N. Rodowick. 'The Figure in the Text', in *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media.* Duke University Press. 2001, p. 81.

for "another rhythm of vision". He writes, "*Delirare*: to derail, to wander, thus to rave. Inescapable delirium of any reading effort...We shall deliberately refrain from any attempt to integrate these interrelated fragments into a system, and content ourselves with picking up the evidence of *the work of the text beneath the text*"[318]. Delirium as a reading strategy inflicts a special kind of violence upon the film understood as an obvious and transparent form of communication and becomes, to prefigure a later discussion of Brenez, "an intensive relationship with knowledge"[319]. Kuntzel's desire is to "attempt a reading of the film in a kind of Cézanne-like space, in which different perspectives are at work on the same surface"[320]. Such an effort puts a lot of pressure and difficulty on the exegetical format that demands clear and distinct, causally related propositions, explanations and exemplifications.

First of all, Kuntzel analyses the discursive level of the film, how it is "organized, connected and unified into a whole"[321] and he begins, appropriately enough, right at the beginning with the opening credit sequence. The titles appear over a close-up of an iron door decorated by a doorknocker styled as a centaur, its heart pierced by an arrow and an unconscious woman in its arms. "For the analyst," he says, "what is fascinating about beginnings is the fact that, in the space of a few images - a few seconds - almost the entire film can be condensed[322]. From this hypothesis Kuntzel proceeds to demonstrate how individual part-elements of this opening image are displaced into signifying chains and this interplay between condensation and displacement form what Kuntzel calls "constellations"[323]. It is the generation and movement of these constellations that constitute one level of the *work* of the

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[318] Kuntzel. 'The Film-Work 2', p. 51, 55. Emphasis added.
[319] Brenez. CN, p. 141.
[320] Kuntzel. 'The Film Work 2', p. 56.
[321] 'The Film-Work 2', p. 32.
[322] 'The Film-Work 2', p. 24.
[323] 'The Film-Work 2', p. 13.

film, how the film produces itself. The figure of the doorway is displaced into a series of other thresholds, openings, enclosures, and crossings that produce the film as a kind of "volume" in which the action occurs. There are further constellations associated with the centaur, the virgin, the arrow, the sound of dogs heard over the credits, and the words themselves from the title of the film. In each of these constellations there occurs a 'crossing' or transgression, either by inversion or confusion. For example, the centaur signals the confusion of human and animal, civilization and savagery; the arrow refers to hunting and the reversal in the plot of the film between the hunter and the hunted, and so on. The source of each of these different 'negations' (in the dialectical sense), according to Kuntzel, and which it is the film's very purpose to simultaneously bring to the threshold of consciousness only to displace into a galaxy of relations between stars, is "nothing other than the original *void*"[324], the primal 'background' or Lyotard's matrix-figure, at once the origin and possible collapse of all meaning.

The generative function of negativity, as the virtual force of the figural, is evident in certain of Kuntzel's analytical gestures too. He divides the materiality of the film into the "plane of expression"[325] - the economy of relations of cuts, transitions, point of view, spatial organisation, and temporal duration - and the plane of content - represented objects and figures; the 'dynamic' of the film consists in how each constellation figured in condensed form at the start of the film unfolds or weaves across these two planes. Negativity, insofar as it splits, divides, crosses and confuses, always sets the image in motion, giving the image its particular pulse and rhythm. The 'classical' nature of the film dictates that the potential for rupture and disintegration inherent to the force of the negative be held in harmonious balance in order to assure clear comprehension and the gradual translation of mystery into knowledge. In other

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[324] 'The Film-Work 2', p. 10.
[325] 'The Film-Work 2', p. 50.

words, all these complex processes work not only to signify but to secure the very place of meaning. As Kuntzel writes, "*The Most Dangerous Game* is not just the combination of material elements; this combination itself forms part of the meaning of the narrative. And the meaning is nothing other than the progressive *anchoring* of meaning (the progressive definition of the enigma)"[326].

The work of film, then, is not only to express a theme and articulate a story but to preserve the place of the production of meaning and to secure the subject/spectator as the bearer of that knowledge. According to Kuntzel, this preservation of knowledge comes in defense against what he calls, after Barthes, "the terror of uncertain signs"[327]. Kuntzel refers to Barthes' theory of polysemy and the 'floating chain' of signifiers. That is, the potential for any sign, taken in isolation, to spiral off into a labyrinth of possible meanings which lack any ground for certainty. This "fluttering of meaning", as Kuntzel calls it, is a destabilising force which the various techniques of classical form actively work to repress by 'fixing' specific relations between meaning and signs. Such a repression, however, is never total and indeed becomes for Kuntzel a whole new "point of departure [from which] another film might be imagined: a film in which the initial figure would not find its place in the flow of a narrative, in which the configuration of events contained in the formal matrix would not form a progressive order, in which the spectator/subject would never be reassured. Lyotard's *acinema*: within the dominant system of production and consumption, this would be a film of sustained *terror*"[328].

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[326] 'The Film-Work 2', p. 24.
[327] Ibid.
[328] 'The Film-Work 2', p. 24-25.

This 'other film' is glimpsed, according to Kuntzel, in the early sequence of a shipwreck in which all ordered, perspectival relations are disintegrated and a different logic of figuration, temporarily at least, takes over the film. The film's diegetic space, which its discursive ordering is so careful to maintain, is here "pulverized" by figural forces of "unbinding"[329]. The 'catastrophe' is not limited to the narrative or representational level and extends to a "perturbance of images and iconic definitions"[330]. Kuntzel describes this at the level of spatial effects: horizontal axes are replaced by diagonals, the outside bursts into the inside ("confusion"), the illusion of depth becomes a turbulent agitation of the surface plane. Speech is replaced by "object-language"[331], a reduction of language to sheer physical presence as shards of screams; essentially, language is animalised. Kuntzel, however, tempers his delirious reading somewhat with the obvious observation that such a 'crisis' is discursively justified as the cataclysmic event that gets the story going: "all of these ruptures of code take on meaning - and value - with respect to the global economy of narration and representation"[332]. Nonetheless, Kuntzel sees these relations of reversal, inversion, crossing, disturbance, confusion, etc., as the cinematic expression of figurality and an analogue of the psychoanalytic concept of the primary process. Kuntzel's delirious reading dreams of another film, a film of "sustained rupture" that isn't reclaimed by the dominant order of representation[333]. And this dream of an 'other film' returns us to the gestures sketched out by Bellour and Kuntzel's own transition into the world of video aesthetics. At this point we must open a quite stunning theoretical passage between a shipwreck in a marginal Hollywood b-movie from the 1930s to the cutting edge of video experiments with the image half a century later.

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[329] 'The Film-Work 2', p. 47, 48.
[330] 'The Film-Work 2', p. 51
[331] 'The Film-Work 2', p. 48
[332] Ibid.
[333] 'The Film-Work 2', p. 50.

Bellour's essay from 1981, 'Thierry Kuntzel and the Return of Writing'[334], which summarises Kuntzel's theoretical work as well as his transition to video artist, can be read as a sort of prologue to 'Analysis in Flames' and the two together signal many of the elements of film analysis that Brenez will take up and bring into the new century. Bellour argues that there is a natural progression from Kuntzel's search in his theoretical and analytical writings for "the 'other film'" and his work in video, such as *Nostos* (1979), which conduct a "figuration of figuration"[335]. Rather than writing approaching the film-work from the outside, the video synthesiser becomes a medium to process and *work over* the cinematic image, a means to "decompose" and "denaturalize" that image in an immanent fashion from within the image itself. In *Nostos,* the image is completely displaced from its function within a fiction and given over to an exploration of plastic values of figural modulation; everything is concentrated on "modifications within the fleshy mass" of the "body of the image"[336]. The video is a series of sketches, studies really, where figures emerge from a monochrome field of colour, like a breath forming on a pane of glass, that just as quickly disappears, returning to the void of pure colour. Tonal values are limited to extreme contrasts with the effect that the figures, when they do appear, are expressive silhouettes, like Matisse cut outs. Movement is a choreography between the pulsing presence and absence of the figures, their small, ordinary gestures - walking in tandem, smoking, raising an arm while sitting by a window - and the almost imperceptible colour-shifts of the background field. 'Movement' is not quite the right word however, it is more of an overall *modulation* of degrees of intensity of light that, by turns, surges into view, violently at times, then retreats and fades back into obscurity. The reference to painting is by

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[334] Bellour. "Thierry Kuntzel and the Return of Writing", in *Between-the-Images,* p. 30-59.
[335] 'The Return of Writing', p. 37.
[336] 'The Return of Writing', p. 39, 49.

no means gratuitous. Bellour sees the 'materiality effect' of video as pushing cinema "toward painting"[337] where luminosity and velocity become the primary conditions of form and where colour is a phenomena that transgresses its containment within figurative outline. Perhaps most importantly for Bellour, *Nostos* "opens up a mental space"[338]. The trace's "conversion into memory"[339] becomes, instead of the scripting of a *mise en scène*, the transcription of a continuous psychic effort of remembrance caught, as it is, between the images of oblivion and the fluttering of meaning. Bellour claims that the principal concern of Kuntzel's theoretical work was neither the possible relations between the texture of film and the institution of cinema nor the attempt to map the structural relations of narrative fiction; it was driven by the desire to uncover a "psychic scene"[340]. The essay ends with Bellour affirming that the impossible dream of representation - to present the process of dreaming itself - is realised in Kuntzel's videos[341].

The examples of Bellour and Kuntzel provide crucial models for the emergence of Brenez's own methodology of immanent critique and an expanded conception of theory as practice. Brenez has herself described Bellour's book *L'Analyse du Film* from 1979, simply, as "le livre fondateur"[342], the founding book, the book that makes possible the analysis of film as an immanent, poetic and critical practice. The methodological shift I described above from a language of judgement and posture of mastery that aims to fix and classify to the language of practice and position of affectively animated mediator, is crucial to understand Brenez's philosophy of criticism. The approach to cinematic matters of expression as a kinetic

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[337] 'The Return of Writing', p. 52.
[338] 'The Return of Writing', p. 41.
[339] 'The Return of Writing', p. 49.
[340] 'The Return of Writing', p. 33
[341] 'The Return of Writing', p. 59.
[342] Brenez. *De la Figure,* p. 443.

constellation of forces is a core feature, as I discuss below, of Brenez's notion of a figural analysis. Finally, the question raised by Bellour and answered by Kuntzel *vis-à-vis* the possibility of film analysis conducted *by* and *in* the image, an immanent analysis, is taken up and extended by Brenez's engagement with 'the visual study', the "face-to-face encounter between a 'readymade' image and a figurative project that comments upon it"[343].

Principles of Immanent Critique

In an essay ostensibly about the work of artist and filmmaker Harun Farocki, Brenez produces a veritable manifesto for a highly elevated role for visual criticism within cultural life. The essay does not go into any rigorous depth in terms of an analysis of specific works of Farocki's. Instead it provides a wide overview of his methods and, especially, the ethical stakes of his practice. Farocki's practice can be situated in the intersections of several aesthetic genealogies: an articulation of the readymade with the cinematic avant-garde; ethnography and the essay film; and a pop sensibility (with a German twist!) fascinated by the routines of consumer society. Brenez highlights the diversity of his output which, over a period of some 40-years, includes critical writing, screenplays, essay films, militant pamphlets and installations, all operating on a documentary impulse and deep problematization of technologies of reproduction and visual representation. Common across these various pursuits, Brenez argues, is the critical investigation into what she calls "the logic of control"[344]. Farocki's work analyses, in her words, "the way in which bodies are assaulted, trained, subdued, and worn down by the ensemble of technologies of control"[345]. The key element in this ensemble, Farocki's main area

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[343] Brenez. 'Study', p. 161.
[344] 'Genesis', p. 130.
[345] 'Genesis', p. 135.

of research, is what he himself calls "operational images"[346]. Images, that is, produced not with the intention to entertain, inform or seduce but as "sources of information to be scanned, classified and acted upon", as Thomas Elsaesser has noted[347]. Elsaesser continues, "Farocki has shown time and again that images are not only something to be contemplated, to immerse oneself into, to be looked at either with admiration or disinterestedness, but now more often than not function as instructions for action (by machines), or as sets of data for processing and translating into actions (by machines)"[348]. A rather dystopian *mise en scène* emerges from such a thought, one heavily exploited by a large sector of popular culture as well as radical publishing houses, where human life exists merely in the interstices of a vast apparatus of technical functions.

The central form of the operational image is the quantitative schema, a rationalisation of phenomena objectified in a huge range of types of visual rendering. Farocki studies the multiplication of screens and operations of 'screening' in modern life. Take, for example, Farocki's 1991 film *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* which reveals a widespread visual episteme via a montage of association between different means of abstracting reality for instrumental purposes. The film weaves together the analysis of wave motion in a Hannover port, architectural plans based on the science of optics and perspective, the cosmetic make-up of models for advertising imagery, life drawing classes, the photographic documentation of Algerian women during the Algerian War of Independence for identification by colonial authorities, and American air reconnaissance photographs from World War Two that, while surveying an IG Farben plant for possible shelling, produced the first known documentation of

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[346] Harun Farocki. 'Soft Montage / Cross Influence', in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom.* Antje Ehmann & Kodwo Eshun, eds. Koenig Books. 2009, p. 74.
[347] Thomas Elsaesser. 'Simulation and the Labour of Invisibility: Harun Farocki's Life Manuals', *Animation: An interdisciplinary journal,* Vol.12(3), 219.
[348] ibid.

the Auschwitz concentration camp (a fact unnoticed until 33 years later when former CIA office clerks, moved by the sentimental portrayal of the Holocaust in a television mini-series returned to the archives to re-evaluate the data). *Images of the World* is a speculative investigation of the *Inscription of War,* meaning, how the logistics of perception, to use Paul Virilio's term, developed in modern warfare become echoes in other seemingly quite distant contexts of human relations[349]. These images become kinds of visual thought experiments on the multiple meanings of *Aufklärung*, the German word for the Enlightenment, but also referring to sex education and military reconnaissance. The film's critique of disinterested rational mastery of nature via techno-scientific means chimes with Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which opens with the words "In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant"[350]. The accumulative impact of such a series comes to a paradoxical conclusion: images create a distance between us and the world, a certain blindness toward it even, but images also produce a collapse of distance, until, in fact, they are taken for the world as such. Sovereignty is ceded to the intelligence of machines. Or, as Brenez puts it, Farocki's work can be seen as a "a synthesis of an anthropological regime of the current state of administrated life"[351]. Operational images have reached an order of magnitude across such a diverse range of contexts that they are more like, in Hito Steyerl's words, the "operating system" of planet Earth[352]. Several commentators have struggled with this paradox in Farocki's work for it also raises the status of the cinema as

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[349] See Paul Virilio's book, published in English two years before Farocki's film, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception.* Verso. 1989.

[350] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Cited in Thomas Keenan. 'Light Weapons', in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight-Lines.* Ed. Thomas Elsaesser. Amsterdam University Press. 2004, p. 207.

[351] Brenez. 'Genesis', p. 131.

[352] See an interview with Steyerl posted online that accompanied an exhibition of her and Farocki's work at the Thaddaeus Ropac gallery in London. YouTube, uploaded by Thaddaeus Ropac, Nov 14 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AL8x2d5iww0&ab_channel=ThaddaeusRopac. Accessed August 2022.

itself a major *dispositif* of the technological image and thus fully implicated in the 'ensemble' of technologies of control that Brenez sees as Farocki's target of critique. Thomas Keenan, for example, has argued that "the collapse of distance and our exposure to the image"[353] has significant implications for our ability to understand and critically address the history of violence. He further writes, "Farocki seeks to understand what it means for the camera to be part of the equipment of destruction, indeed for the destruction to be in a certain sense impossible without the camera...No destruction without images, yes, but also no response to the destruction, no critique and no intervention"[354].

The possibility of critique taking place, as it were, without the benefit of the proper distance, brings us to Brenez's notion of the visual study, which she defines in her essay on Farocki as "an intensive and mediated form of encounter...between an existing image and a figurative project dedicated to observing it - in other words, a study of the image by means of the image itself"[355]. The visual study, *vis-à-vis* cinema's status as a technology of control, surveillance, and ideological incorporation, is the site, she says, of "cinema's auto-critique"[356]. Destruction, art, and criticism are now all enfolded onto an immanent plane. But as Brenez notes, "all technology, all objects, all institutions, all logic can be reappropriated, subverted and turned against its own determinations"[357]. This impulse toward an emancipatory potential within seemingly foreclosed ideological conditions distinguishes her as a writer from many other critical theorists who are apt to view the cinema with high degrees of hermeneutic suspicion. Cinema as an ideological tool can also be *détourned* as an instrument of awareness.

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[353] Keenan. 'Light Weapons', p. 208.
[354] 'Light Weapons', p. 206.
[355] Brenez. 'Genesis', p. 129.
[356] Ibid.
[357] 'Genesis', p. 131.

In all three of the major statements on the visual study in her writing Brenez reproduces a famous passage from the philosophy of Hegel and claims "the analysis of representation…consists no more nor less than in 'tarrying with the negative'"[358]. This can be interpreted in several ways. Dialectically, analysis requires the 'negation' of the given or immediate so that a new mediation may emerge. The object of study must in some way be rendered strange and unfamiliar, removing it from its 'organic' place within a culturally determined habitus. This dimension of negativity was explored in the previous chapter in relation to the critical film theory of Kracauer, which Brenez celebrated for its focus on forces of 'disintegration'. In can also mean, perhaps in a more straightforward sense, confronting the intolerable aspects of our lived actuality. This is the essential ethical motif of her book on Abel Ferrara, which I analyse in Chapter Four. Finally, tarrying with the negative consists in the negotiation with problematic phenomena that resist clear and distinct understanding, where there are no easy answers and no readymade solutions. As such, tarrying with the negative pushes analysis into poetic and figurative territory where it must invent forms in which to manifest that which only exists at the limits of knowledge. The concept of the operational image and its demonstration across the great variety of Farocki's work is one example of this in action.

But Brenez's essay on the German filmmaker is of interest beyond her inscription of his work within the parameters of the visual study. It also provides an object lesson in the style and principles informing Brenez's own writing itself. The bulk of the essay in fact deals with elaborating on the notion of "immanent critique" within a much broader history of ideas concerning the relation between art and criticism, exegesis and poetics in 18th century Romanticism and German Idealism. This seeming detour from her ostensible subject can be a

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[358] Ibid. See also, 'Study', p. 172 and 'L'Étude Visuelle' in *De la figure*, p. 335.

feature of Brenez's writing at times. She will occasionally introduce a film or a body of work, analyse the key formal protocols and their ethical stakes, and then spin upwards and outwards into larger 'logics', either conceptual schema or historical regimes of representation (or both), which the films are seen as developing and making certain moves in. This relation between an analysis of a work's immanent processes of construction and a network of associated ideas and interpretations is discussed in detail later in this chapter in terms of Brenez's notions of 'figural economy' and 'figural logic' respectively.

Another important trope in the *oeuvre*: the construction of logical typologies, often in the form of a numbered classificatory system, inside of which an ensemble of critical and/or artistic phenomena are situated. It is actually one of Brenez's favoured genres, a riff on the critical dictionary or 'user's guide'[359]. Brenez's typologies of models, logics, principles, forms, etc., can have the delirious quality of a kind of 'burlesque natural history', (such as recently analysed by James Leo Cahill in relation to Georges Bataille's work in the avant-garde journal *Documents* in the 1930s[360]), in the sense that they deploy a potentially totalising and systematic logic of reasoning toward unsystematic and open-ended purposes. They are also ingenious cognitive maps of complexity and effective resources for future experimentation. In the essay on Farocki, Brenez lays out "the five dimensions of immanent analysis"[361] and rather than follow Brenez into the trappings of early-modern philosophy I reserve my task here to summarising these principles as I take them as a (disguised) manifesto for Brenez's own

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[359] Indeed, one of Brenez's important books, though still unavailable in English, is titled *Cinéma l'avant-garde: mode d'emploi.* Gendaishicho-shinsha Publishes. 2012.

[360] James Leo Cahill. 'Absolute Dismemberment: The Burlesque Natural History of Georges Bataille', in *Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure and Violence.* Eds., Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond. Duke University Press. 2019. Pp. 185-207.

[361] 'Genesis', p. 133. There is a slippage in Brenez's essay between 'criticism' and 'analysis' which are taken as synonymous. I understand certain discourses may wish to distinguish the two, but here I follow Brenez's example.

position as a critic. If I paraphrase Brenez's own commentary on Farocki's films to support claims I make about Brenez herself, it is because her writing is always both descriptive (and dedicatedly so) and performative, in the sense that it enacts the principles it discerns as the models of thought present in the films[362]. Brenez is always learning how to do criticism from the kinds of work films do with images. In like manner, I appropriate Brenez's form of the 'user guide' here to organise and synthesise her 'five dimensions of immanent analysis'.

"The Five Dimensions of Immanent Analysis"[363] (A User's Guide)

1. "The Aim of Criticism is to Relate the Singular Work to a Historical Whole of Art"[364] This concerns the relationship between the general and the particular, or in the terms Brenez uses here, between the "singular" and the "system". A 'classical' view of criticism would see every concrete particular incorporated into a normative system of genres, aesthetic doctrines, and symbolic codes. Immanent criticism, by contrast cultivates the singularity of each work and "the model of the system will dissolve to make of each work a 'whole' in itself that is capable of constructing its own legitimacy"[365]. It becomes one of the tasks of criticism to organise different singularities into an "ensemble"[366] that is nothing but the composition of singular, autonomous works. This allows critique to operate with open horizons and not simply reproduce the terms of a master discourse. At the level of a visual study we can see this logic operating in terms of how a film constitutes a "speculative ensemble" out of composing an economy of singular

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[362] This requires, on the part of the Brenezian exegete, several degrees of ventriloquism, but with the result, hopefully, being both to illuminate Brenez's method and to send the reader back to the texts themselves.
[363] 'Genesis', p. 133
[364] 'Genesis', p. 134.
[365] Ibid.
[366] Ibid.

differences, whether individual frames or larger figural blocs of audiovisual material. Rather than a paradigm of norms and exceptions, immanent criticism operates in a movement between the singular and the common.

2. "Criticism is a Method and is Dedicated to Structure"[367]

Brenez cites Schlegel's concept of "characterisation" as the effort to "'reconstruct, perceive, and characterise the thought of another in finest property of its whole...one only understands a work, a spirit, when one can reconstruct its movement and structure"[368]. To characterise the singularity of a work means to elucidate its structure. We saw how in the film analyses of Bellour and Kuntzel this immersion into the molecular structure of films can reach delirious levels of critical intensity. Criticism inhabits its object of study; one intelligence is dissolved into another and 'the study' is the result of this unpredictable encounter.

3. "Criticism is a Text and Becomes a Work of Art"[369]

A characteristic of immanent analysis is "the fusion of poetic and exegetic activity"[370]. In its activity of "making explicit and unfolding the reflective and structural dimension through which the work *is* the work,"[371] exegesis necessarily takes on the formal and expressive aspects of its object. The task of immanent analysis is not simply to "deconstruct" the work, but to seek to make it "germinate"[372] (let a thousand studies bloom!). Thus, it will need to invent forms specific to each contingent encounter. This

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[367] Ibid.
[368] 'Genesis', p. 135.
[369] Ibid.
[370] 'Genesis', p. 136.
[371] Ibid. Emphasis added.
[372] Ibid.

may even entail inflicting the object with a certain violence and process of displacement, exposing characteristics of the work that are not apparent without the intervention of analysis.

4. "Criticism Liberates the Concept of Art"[373]

Apropos principle 1. The focus on singularity frees the concept of art from normative categories and historically circumscribed determinations in favour of the open horizon of contingent gestures. Immanent analysis is less concerned with 'art history' than with "the general becoming of art"[374]. The sole criteria for evaluating the *work* of art is its own immanent process of construction. Which leads directly to the final principle:

5. "Criticism Liberates Forms"[375]

In its anti-systematic impulse, immanent analysis favours "formal diversity, variety without end, without totalisation and without finitude"[376]. Criticism is therefore both a drive towards the open horizon of becoming and an inward journey into the constitutive differences of every integral being. This character of immanent analysis, its "feeling for chaos"[377] is especially on view in Brenez's treatment of the cinematic body. Chapter Three explores some of her key texts on the vertiginous terrain of the body opened up as a methodological field of somatisation. The privileging of singular structures by immanent analysis condenses onto a definition of the poetic (now fused with critical intensity). "The poetic is defined thus: no longer as something that obeys

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[373] Ibid.
[374] 'Genesis', p. 137.
[375] 'Genesis', p. 138.
[376] Ibid.
[377] Schlegel cited on p. 138.

the rules of organisation…but as something that develops its own particular modes of organisation"[378].

There is a clear sense in all this of a political impulse animating Brenez's principles of immanent critique. But, as with criticism and poetics, the concept of the political at work here is not doctrinal or programmatic. It aims, first, in opening up a space of possibility in a context where distance *from* the image has given way to a question of *thinking with* the image. Let us attempt a brief summary of the principles and gestures of immanent critique that I have tried to bring into view. Brenez insists that the analysis of representation involves 'tarrying with the negative', that is, a kind of shock of defamiliarisation in the negation of the immediate for a different kind of mediation. Her key principles express an ethos of singularity over system, self-determination, and an open horizon of contingent experimentation. Critique as a writerly practice and form of visual study is the fusion of the poetic and exegetic based on a definition of the poetic as a self-legitimating gesture of singular construction. The poetic is the movement of thought that manifests in figures fluctuating between the void and the unknown flesh of the film.

The question I wish to address at this juncture is, how have the principles and gestures of immanent criticism been articulated and developed in Brenez's own body of work? The following chapters provide a much more comprehensive response to this question, but within my specific focus on method here, I want to explore what in *De la figure* in 1998 she called 'figural analysis'. While it has somewhat fallen out of use in her own writing, this term has been the vehicle by which she has been received in some English-language film studies where it is interpreted as a 'renewal' of the lost art of close reading and incorporated into the widespread turn toward affect and matters of the body in film studies and beyond. Brenez herself, however,

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[378] Brenez. 'Genesis', p. 138.

never intended it to become a doctrinal methodology and it was always meant as a flexible and 'principled' approach that remained open to the manoeuvres of the films themselves. In what follows I concentrate on the untranslated 'Methodological Introduction'[379] of *De la figure* where, true to form, Brenez outlines four principles of figural analysis. In maintaining her experimental ethos she cites right at the start, as an "irrevocable formula", Gilles Deleuze's warning: "always experiment, never interpret!"[380]. I provide here, as with the principles of immanent critique, a user's guide to figural analysis.

What is Figural analysis?

"Consider, at least provisionally, that the film takes precedence over its context"[381].

This is Brenez's 'figural wager' and it is and remains something of a heretical position. A widespread habit of thought has it that any cultural artefact is always a symptomatic expression of wider discursive processes and historical pressures. According to Brenez, affirming the poetic and critical autonomy of films runs counter to a "powerful methodological doxa"[382]. Operating across a range of critical and interpretive discourses, we can characterise this dominant epistemological framework by two distinct but interrelated movements. On the one hand, it *undermines* the work of art by making it the effect, or 'construction', of contextual

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[379] Brenez. *De la figure,* pp. 9-28. All translations are my own, I give the original in footnotes. In addressing this text I have benefited greatly from Bill Routt's essay-length review of the book in *Screening the Past,* 'For Criticism'.

[380] *De la figure,* "la seule formule irrévocable serait la mise en garde de Gilles Deleuze : «Expérimentez, n'interprètez jamais» ", p. 10.

[381] Ibid. "Considérer; au moins provisoirement; que le film prime sur son contexte".

[382] Ibid. "Une puissante *doxa* méthodologique".

determinations external to it. The film or work of art is often relegated to a pretext or illustrative function for the social, economic, political or cultural forces deemed, explicitly or not, more significant and intellectually pertinent. On the other hand, it *overmines* the work of art by making it the mirror of interpretations developed and deployed by other critical discourses. Brenez does not deny that both movements can make important insights and propagate a critical historical consciousness. However, they are united in abandoning and forgetting what Brenez calls the work of art's own "speculative resources"[383]. Rather than explain the singularity of the work as the necessary result of contextual and/or historical determinations, the task of analysis is to think *with* the film, to analyse them "*from the point of view of the questions they pose and the questions they create*"[384].

This can be understood in terms of how analysis reveals how films *problematise* the larger fields in which they are a part, especially in terms of the global economy of images themselves. Brenez, as we have seen with the example of Harun Farocki, values those films that take the image as a problem to be confronted and not as a readymade effect to be produced. She is particularly drawn to films and filmmakers that reflexively take the image as theme, material and research question. She is keen to point out, however, that such an approach does not constitute "an abandonment of reality and life"[385] in favour of a carnival of simulacra. To problematise the image is to construct a "critical enterprise" that aims to articulate "the logical ways one can crack [images] open, compare, complete, transform, exhaust, convert them"[386].

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[383] Ibid. "ressources spéculatives".
[384] *De la figure.* "…du point de vue des questions qu'elles posent, du point de vue des questions qu'elles créent", p. 11. Original emphasis
[385] 'Letter', p. 49
[386] Ibid.

"Consider that the components of a film do not form entities but elements (figurative economy)"[387].

This principle concerns the internal structure of a film and can be thought of as a development of the kinds of 'film-work' Kuntzel analysed in his writing. As the term 'economy' suggests, this is a question of the set of interactions, links, and relations by which the material elements of cinema are put in motion, into 'constellations'; how, in other words, every film is a *grand ensemble*. "In the cinema", Brenez writes, "the image is not an object but an architecture"[388].

But the architecture of a film under the lens of figural analysis is a 'soft' or synaptic architecture, pure circulation, cut and connection. *Break/flow.* Taking the image as an ensemble-being is another translation of Brenez's motto of tarrying with the negative: the image is not identical with itself, has no fixed 'positive' identity; it is a mobile constellation of forces, a composite of relations. If we look at an image from a so-called proper distance we at first might recognise some visible forms in a more or less obvious gestalt. A closer look might pull the gaze toward particular details, gestures or tropisms; these details will start to lose their definition in the greater whole and begin to take on a relative autonomy. A closer look still and we plunge into nothing but pure relativity itself; the very security of the I/eye dissolves into the differential array of vibration and turbulent spacing. What we might call cinema's material plane of immanence is this fracas of the link, the relation, the interval itself.

The materiality of cinema is not composed of objects or subjects but of the generative

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[387] *De la figure.* "Considérer que les composants d'un film ne forment pas des entités mais des éléments (Économie figurative)", p. 12.
[388] *De la figure.* "Au cinéma, l'image n'est pas un objet mais une architecture", p. 12.

differential relations interior to and between the images. Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) is perhaps the canonical expression of this dimension of cinema as the genius of the cut. The matrix of cinema is the 'immaterial' gap between concrete photograms which makes animation, montage, and cinema's projection into the world possible. For Brenez, the materiality of cinema lies in what she calls "*la lumière du discontinu*" ["the light of discontinuity"][389]. This gap or 'negative' materiality is never presented in itself but *gives form* to the image. Vertov perhaps comes very close to this immanent chaos and at one point toward the end of the film we get a veritable icon made in its honour. Back in the film theatre we are shown at the beginning of the film the screen now becomes filled with nothing but a strange banded, oscillating presence signifying nothing: "a pulsing beat, if I dare say, in its raw state, vacillating, trembling, palpitating, flickering, dazzling, blinding"[390].

What are the other elements assembled in the matrix of the cut and arranged in a figurative economy according to Brenez? They are "the morphology of the image", "formal qualities of the shot", and the "treatment of motifs"[391]. Brenez explodes 'the' image into a larger *dispositif* that forms "a circuit between the concrete plasticity of the photogram, the work of projection and the general translation of different types of *défilement* (that of the material support, of the motifs, film sequences and reception)"[392]. A *dispositif,* in Foucault's

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[389] *De a figure*, p. 317.
[390] Jean-Louis Comolli. *Cinema Against Spectacle.* Trans. Daniel Fairfax. Amsterdam University Press. 2009. P. 126.
[391] *De la figure*. Respectively: "la morphologie de l'image", "les qualités formelles du plan" and "le traitement des motifs", p. 12.
[392] *De la figure*. "…un circuit entre plastique concrète du photogramme, travail de la projection et translation générale des différents types de défilement (celui de la pellicule, celui des motifs, celui des séquences, celui de la réception)", p. 12. The term 'reception' is enigmatic. I interpret it to mean the noetic movement or 'stream of consciousness' of the spectator (individual and collective). The suggestion being that the movement of thought is a constitutive element in the mobile plasticity of the cinematic image.

classic definition, is "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble"[393], and here includes the plasticity of the image, the mode of its display, and its reception by the spectator.

The 'formal qualities of the shot' concerns the degrees of precision and obscurity the image erects between it and the total field of phenomena; *how* the image brings the things of the world into view. This feature of Brenez's typology is not developed at length in this section of *De la figure*, but in a later chapter she analyses one of the great pedagogical sequences in the history of cinema, the shower scene from Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). She describes the formal qualities of the shot in plastic terms as a movement between "blurry, interior dreamlike imagery" and "an absolutely clear object-image"[394]. The former is linked with "the unknowable shadow" of the murderer and the latter the "known body" of its victim, Marion Crane (Janet Leigh)[395]. Between these two polarities the figurative economy of the scene "organises a repertoire of plastic and figurative problems"[396]. The montage 'anatomises' or analyses the visible, female body, transforming it into a "dispersive creature", while "infra-visible" shots of dark shadow, white voids, blurs, and graphic lines synthesise an "accumulative creature"[397]. Brenez summarises the experimental formal qualities of the shower scene thus: "The plastic principle of the sequence thus consists in injecting formlessness into the distinct and precision into vagueness"[398]. We can see here that the image under figural analysis is a densely stratified and kinetic process.

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[393] Michel Foucault. Cited in Martin, 'Turn the Page: From *Mise en scène* to *Dispositif*', np.

[394] Brenez. *De la figure*. "image floue, intérieure, dimension onirique"…"une image-objet absolument nette"., p. 323.

[395] Ibid. "ombre inconnaissable" … "corps connu".

[396] Ibid. "organise un répertoire de problèmes plastiques et figuratifs".

[397] Ibid. "une créature dispersive"…"une créature accumulative.

[398] Ibid. " Le principe plastique de la séquence consiste ainsi à injecter de l'informe dans le net et de la précision dans le flou".

The question of the 'motif' is the question of the trace of things as they make an appearance in the matrix of the cut and mobile plasticity of the screen. Yet the motif has a stronger, more active presence in figural analysis, and in figuration. Things have a density, and a presence around which the dynamic processes of the cut and the screen are formed. Things are themselves material compositions of forces, and produce a resistance, a hesitation, and a deferral of the pulsing catastrophic light of 'cutting'. The motif, especially the body, is exposed in figural analysis as so many different durations, velocities, and morphologies of material composition. Brenez is often teaching us to become more concerned and more aware of this material level of the weight and force of things which cinema brings to our attention.

Placing these material elements of a figurative economy at the centre of our critical practice, she argues, "overturns the hierarchical relation between figure and fable"[399], the latter constituting only one possibility and not an end in itself. Even when addressing ostensibly narrative films made in commercial film industries, Brenez will uncover other layers of expression and alternative forms of sense-making. Which is to say that "the method considers figurativity from a figural point of view"[400].

As Adrian Martin writes, "Figural analysis…is less concerned with lenses and depth-of-field than with the mobile arrangement, displacement and pulsation of screen particles. Shot divisions, even scenes or sequences are less pertinent for this work than analytic 'ensembles', slices of text and texture that demonstrate the economy of a film's ceaseless transformation of its elements"[401]. The relative autonomy of the relation to the terms related is

[399] *De la figure.* "Une telle démarche déhiérarchise les rapports entre figure et fable", p. 13.
[400] *De la figure*. "la méthode considère la figurativité d'un point de vue figural", p. 12.
[401] Martin. 'The Body Has No Head: Corporeal Figuration in Aldrich', np.

one of the ways figural analysis is distinguished from other modes of close reading or *mise-en-scène* analysis. Conspicuously absent from Brenez's criticism are the familiar tools of *découpage* or the analysis of shot and sequence which, as Martin puts it, "depends upon the theatrical and dramatic unity of the filmic scene"[402]. The basic unit for figural analysis isn't shots but the "ensembles" or "circuits" that traverse the borders of individual scenes and dissolve the integral unity of the individual shot. Thus the analyst does not presume the 'point of view' of the perspectivally situated spectator, but attempts to plunge into the immanent 'molecular' level of the filmic process.

"Consider the elements of a film as so many questions (figurative logic)"[403].

Figurative logics are historical constructs or conceptual schema with specific kinds of consistency. Brenez sometimes refers to them as "image regimes". What characterises figurative logics are the kinds of questions they ask and the phenomena they problematise. They are "the stakes that motivate the representation"[404]. She provides an example via the work of the American director John Carpenter. Brenez observes a particular "logic of disappearance"[405] at play in the elaboration of the figure of the antagonist in a series of Carpenter's films starting from the "ultra-figurative"[406]: the nebulous fog of *The Fog* (1980)*,* the anonymous shadows of *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), and the pure plasticity of *The Thing* (1982). This uncanny double or hostile entity is then extended to a general structure of feeling in films like *They Live* (1988) and *In the Mouth of Madness* (1994): social invisibility, capitalist alienation, and madness. Finally, the logic culminates, Brenez argues, in the erasure of difference and

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[402] Ibid.

[403] Brenez. *De la figure*. "Considérer les éléments d'un film comme autant de questions. (Logique figurative)", p. 13.

[404] *De la figure.* "les enjeux qui motivent la représentation", p. 15.

[405] *De la figure,* p. 14

[406] Ibid.

antagonism altogether in the proliferation of sameness: *Village of the Damned* (1995). It is typical of Brenez to focus on the antagonistic elements. Within a figurative economy they are the problematic phenomena that resist clear and distinct understanding; the figures of rupture, critique, and difference that make meaning flutter.

This brief example of Carpenter exhibits some other of Brenez's inclinations as a critic. She is particularly fond of analysing what she calls *"population filmique",* or "film populations". While these populations can commonly be formed from the body of work of a single director, her real passion is for a much more radical heterogeneity. "You can make comparisons", Brenez says, "between films of the same time, by the same author, but what is more significant for me is when you make a comparison *between the values or the treatment of the motifs – the figuration* – invented by a film, and they could be from very different times, nations, cultural contexts...You can try to make experiments to compare films that at first look have absolutely no relationship"[407]. Taking figurative logics as the point of departure for research can become ways to reconstruct the critical taxonomies by which the medium is typically studied. Following figurative logics across national borders, linguistic barriers, genre type, and historical periods opens up film history to a more experimental ethos.

A perfect example of this, this time in a completely different context to the slyly subversive commercial cinema of John Carpenter, is her article '*À propos de Nice* and the Extremely Necessary, Permanent Invention of the Cinematic Pamphlet[408]. This text shows Brenez's genius for revealing how images spool out of and respond to other images. The

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[407] 'A Conversation'

[408] Brenez. "*À propos de Nice* and the Extremely Necessary, Permanent Invention of the Cinematic Pamphlet." *Rouge*, Vol.7, 2005. http://www.rouge.com.au/7/propos_de_nice.html

cinematic pamphlet is a militant form of audiovisual agitation where social injustice is shown to be "inscribed within the flesh itself, on walls, within the very fabric of urban organisation, in the concrete occupation of space"[409]. Brenez presents Jean Vigo's *À propos de Nice* (1930) as its paradigm example but then provides a kind of critical dictionary of 20 films that render a city under the same logic provided by Vigo's film: "polemical essay, urban analysis, stylistic innovation, biopolitical axiom"[410].

The entries into her 'dictionary' are all demonstrations of Brenez's genius for the short, critical sketch, sometimes only a single sentence: "Here, only misery is at work" (*On the Bowery,* Lionel Rogosin, 1956). Some of the entries, such as *Manipulations* (Mounir Fatmi, 2004) forgo the urban imaginary altogether; instead concentrating on a single symbolic form: the cube of the Kaaba substituted by a Rubik's cube. Linking together films that reproduce similar representational content is seen as less important than assembling ones that share the same figurative logic, in the case here a poignant subversion of the symbols of power and authority. She writes of Fatmi's video[411]: "*Manipulations* is an anti-clerical pamphlet, at once economical and madly audacious. Fatmi's essay works on visual relationships, building the form from pointed insertions which can be as fleeting as a shot (its appearance and duration) or as monumental as a motif (its symbolic charge). In close-up, male hands work a Rubik's Cube; instead of falling into the usual patterns of green, blue, red and yellow, it becomes entirely black: suddenly, an image of the Kaaba around which a huge crowd of pilgrims gathers, slipped in-between the shots. The hands spread a dark substance which seems to liquify the cube...they cover themselves with this opaque blackness, which soils even the wall, like the oil which traps

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[409] 'The Cinematic Pamphlet', np.
[410] Ibid.
[411] Available online at <u>Manipulations MOUNIR FATMI 2004</u>. Uploaded by Herminia Veteri, February 20 2011. Accessed August 2022.

birds on beaches, or the Gulf in its politics"[412]. The critical dictionary format here affords a literary economy of the sketch: crystalline description and figurative evocation.

The text produces a virtual cine-geography of struggles and social movements in Japan, Lebanon, the US, France, Northern Africa, and Indonesia with a strong emphasis on films from the twenty-first century. Nothing suggests that this is an exhaustive list or that Brenez's comments are anything like the 'final' words on the individual films. Everything suggests an ethos of "formal diversity, variety without end, without totalisation and without finitude"[413]. These kinds of texts demonstrate Brenez's 'passion for classification', something she perhaps inherits from Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze opens his two-volume work on the cinema by famously claiming that his study "is not a history of the cinema. It is a taxonomy, an attempt at the classification of images and signs"[414] and compares this endeavour with the great systems of modern natural history[415]. However, as noted above regarding immanent critique's privileging of the singular over the total system, Brenez's classifications always emerge from the distinctive characteristics of the films themselves. In 'The Ultimate Journey', Brenez expressed her admiration of this very aspect of Deleuze's critical enterprise: "it constructs a system at the same time that in maintains always an effect of being an enquiry: it imports strong conceptual models at the same time that it seems to be taking its concepts from the films themselves"[416].

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[412] Ibid.

[413] 'Genesis', p. 136.

[414] Deleuze. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image.* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2005, p. xiv.

[415] "Yes, there is nothing more enjoyable than classifications, tables", he explained in an interview in 1989. "There's nothing more beautiful than the classifications of natural history...In a classification it is always a matter of bringing things together which are apparently very different, and of separating the very close". 'The Brain is the Screen: Interview with Gilles Deleuze on *The Time-Image*'. *Discourse.* Vol. 20, No. 3. 1998. P. 50.

[416] Brenez. 'The Ultimate Journey', np.

One final demonstration of Brenez's mastery of the genre of the critical sketch, a snapshot of her commentary on Boris Barnet's 1936 film *By the Bluest Seas.* She writes, "Each director through their career develops an ethology: Renoir, *brotherhood*; Antonioni, *the necessary loss of the self in relation to the other*; Cassavetes, *the mise en scène of one's desire to exist;* for Boris Barnet, in the context of Soviet cinema, totally ruled by the Administration and that nevertheless produced this outsider film, *the euphoria of the body*. The joy of the body exuberantly plunged into sensations; sensual editing that displays his love of motifs - the sea, the seagulls, the faces - in place of treating a story"[417]. Each sentence stimulates interest in what it is *in the films* that has led Brenez to these conclusions. We see the emphasis on the treatment of the motif as the sensible signs of sensation and the construction of specific 'logical' enterprises. We see, too, a glimpse at the kind of ethic informing her writing which freely mixes eroticism and political subversion. Here, a scientific discourse - social anthropology - has been appropriated not as explanatory mastery, but as a means to illuminate what filmmaking is capable of (producing images of community, refusing totalitarian regimes, figuring the force of bodily existence) and doing so in its own terms (staging, editing, performance, the treatment of motifs, etc). As readers we are invited to participate in one of Brenez's key methodological principles, which is to *think with the film.* This close adherence to the object of study is a critical inhabiting of the communicating elements of cinematic figuration. Such a method achieves something of a 'philosophical reversal' whereby rather than categories such as subjectivity, corporeality, community, existence, and so on, being ontologically primary, they are *constituted* by a specific arrangement of elements determined by a figurative logic.

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[417] Film scholar and video essayist Kevin B. Lee has transposed these remarks into a video essay with imagery from the film and voice-over by Alice Moscoso. It is available online on YouTube. Nicole Brenez on By the Bluest of Seas uploaded November 19, 2008.

These examples also show how Brenez's principle of critical and poetic autonomy do not represent a retreat from the social, but are in fact a critical intensification of possible relations to it. In this regard her ethos echoes that of Jean-Francois Lyotard's, who wrote in an essay titled 'Plastic Space and Political Space', that the work of art is a site where "situations given elsewhere in lived social space become manifest"[418]. Of course, this isn't meant in any straightforward 'representational' sense, but in a figurative one, having to do with the poetic ways lived experience can manifest in figurative economies and logics.

"See how the cinema problematises what it treats (why the body)"[419].

The dominant motif of Brenez's figural analysis is the body. As this is the major concern of the following chapter I will restrict my gloss of this final 'principal' of her method to broad, introductory comments. The body, Brenez writes, "is a motif that the cinema will never finish elaborating"[420]. Figural analysis translates the organic nature of the body into a 'methodological field' Brenez calls "somatization"[421]. This field is also a zone of biopolitical contestation; Brenez positions cinematic figures as critical agencies in the struggle against figurative archives of conformity and cliché. The body, insofar as it is the medium of lived experience, is the essential cinematic element in Brenez's concept of figurativity, which she defines thus: "Figurativity consists of the movement of translation interior to the film between the plasticity of its elements and the categories of common experience"[422]. Beyond the singular film, as I discuss at length in Chapter Three, cinematic figurativity is a speculative proposition with anthropological significance as "an anatomical theatre, an ethnography of bodily

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[418] Lyotard. 'Plastic Space and Political Space', *boundary,* Vol.14(1/2), 1985, p. 212.

[419] Brenez. *De la figure.* "Voir comment le cinéma problématise ce dont il traite (pourquoi le corps)", p. 17.

[420] Ibid, "c'est un motif que le cinéma ne finira jamais de travailler".

[421] *De la figure,* p. 28.

[422] *De la figure.* "La figurativité consiste en ce mouvement de translation intérieur au film entre des éléments plastiques et des catégories de l'expérience commune", p. 13.

phantasms [and] an archive of somatic uncertainty"[423]. Cinema is seen as an experimental laboratory for recreating the image of the human body in totally new ways.

The term 'figural analysis' has dropped away somewhat from her writing since the publication of *De la Figure* in 1998. Or rather, she has become more and more freely fascinated by the history and possibilities of the visual study as an *experimental model for thinking in images.* As she says in her *Cinética* interview, "since *De la figure* has been published, in 1998, I think there is a magnificent part of cinema itself that was more and more devoted to film analysis...It's a very long history, but today the studies in film, by film, for films, is absolutely flourishing"[424]. The practical principles of figural analysis - affirming the critical and poetic autonomy of film, discerning the densely kinetic assemblage of a figurative economy, and speculating about a film or group of films as elaborating a figurative logic - have certainly not disappeared from Brenez's critical arsenal. It would be more correct, perhaps, to say that they have been folded into the larger framework of immanent critique. The final section of this chapter returns to the visual study and Brenez's vision for cinema as an expanded practice of theory that desires the greatest material intimacy and conceptual precision.

Expanded theory, or, the Visual Study (reprise)

To study...

Before continuing into Brenez's exploration of 'expanded theory' and speculating as to the essential principles of 'thinking in images' articulated by the paradigm of the visual study, I

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[423] *De la Figure.* "Le cinéma aussi fait office de théâtre anatomique, ethnographique des fantasmes corporels ou archive de l'incertitude somatique", p. 20.
[424] 'A Conversation', np.

would like first to meditate on the word 'study' itself. The word is not only a verb, *to study,* but also a noun, in particular, as Brenez herself notes, a genre common to the other arts such as painting, music, and sculpture. In these domains a study is traditionally an apprenticeship or preparatory exercise for a larger or mature work; it poses a question of what expression may become. The study is an hypothesis, an "as if", inscribed in material form. Rather than overall resolution, the study concerns often very local problems of construction and rendering, of what painters call 'facture'. The study privileges the fragmentary detail over the integrated whole. Beyond this still important pedagogical function the study has achieved its own 'modernity' across the arts and taken on a life of its own. Manet's paintings, for example, shocked the salon crowds because they appeared 'unfinished'. In collage, fragments of existing everyday things started invading the harmonious integrity of the picture surface. The readymade expanded the field of sculptural production to social production in general, rendering the artistic 'gesture' of corporeal making as now a provisional hypothesis regarding the disappearance of the body into mass produced commodities. The fragment, seceded from a whole, takes on an energy or force of its own that would otherwise be smoothed over or channelled into the wider concerns of the overall.

The fragmentary study is the dynamic seed of possible expressions. It is open in exposing the fact of its own construction. The study sketches, without completion, the outlines of its figures. The sketch and the study are part of an artist's daily activity, a habitual working and thinking through materials. In sculpture, in the domain of things and objects, the world of bodies of memory and the memory of bodies, the study becomes an important facilitator of 'unmonumental' things-in-process. The sculptural study opens things up, exposes their diagrammatic lines of force. In the work of a sculptor like Gabriel Orozco, who works on images as much as things, the study is the translation of a readymade via certain principles of

constructivist intervention that returns the corporeal trace back into the signs of its material occlusion. This is very much in parallel with how Brenez herself describes the visual study as a "direct, face-to-face encounter between a 'readymade' image and a figurative project that comments upon it"[425]. Orozco calls them "instruments of awareness"[426]. The study is always raw, open and provisional. It critically inhabits a given, 'readymade', situation and works out possible reconfigurations that are latent or obscured therein.

To study is always to express the movement of thought through the experimentation and collaboration with materials. The sketch, too, has connotations of thought: sketching an idea, working it out; figuring it out; always this seeking of elementary features and relations that can then be elaborated and put into play. In such ways, studies become speculative diagrams and theoretical objects. Studies generate new matters of fact and experiment their way through the opening up of things. To study is therefore a general capacity of thought that has specific properties conditioned by the materials in which thought moves. The goal for the remainder of this chapter is to explore the potential movements of thought afforded by the moving image and exploited by the visual study, as described by Nicole Brenez.

For the sake of a kind of mythic symmetry, but also to emphasise the way the visual study immanently articulates itself on the body of film history, I have selected as my examples, from the vast corpus of works Brenez identifies with this practice, works that address both the origins of cinema and its possible demise: *Visual Essays: Origins of Film* by Al Razutis and *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* by Jean-Luc Godard. Brenez describes the visual study as "[a]s a form in

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[425] 'Study', p. 161.
[426] See Margaret Iverson. 'Desire and the Diagrammatic'. *Oxford Art Journal*. Vol. 39. 2016. Orozco is quoted on p. 15.

perpetual expansion since 1951, that is, since the great Lettrist initiatives in the field of cinema, [and is] currently the dominant practice on the cinematography of the avant-garde[427]. But Brenez traces it all the way back to the motion studies of Marey in the 1890s; the visual study precedes and haunts the entire history of the medium[428]. The visual study can be seen as existing as an underground or 'minor' genre of experimental practice in Akira Lippit's appropriation of Deleuze & Guattari's sense of the term. In *Ex-Cinema: From a theory of experimental film and video,* Lippit names what Brenez calls the visual study, "revisionary cinema"[429]. Revisionary cinema is doubly minoritised as it is the hybrid cross of "two minor genres of film—experimental film and documentary"[430]. 'Minor' forms are not defined by

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[427] Brenez. 'Genesis', p. 129.

[428] Brenez completes her 'Study' with a breathless compendium of other possible moments in the minor history of the visual study. One senses in these kinds of catalogues, not uncommon in her writing, not only Brenez's incredible breadth of knowledge but also the driving force and impetus with which she desires to privilege these 'marginal' works as, really, what should be at the centre the discipline's theoretical and exegetical reflections. Behold, Brenez's chaotic ensemble of visual studies: "Guy Debord, Harun Farocki, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, and Craig Baldwin; the critical poems of Bruce Conner (*Crossroads*, 1976), Travis Wilkerson (*National Archive V.1*, 2001), and Keith Sanborn (*Operation Double Trouble*, 2003)…A more experimental level of such work is devoted to the plastic or semantic study of disinformation in public spaces, such as Tony Cokes' films on African American imagery within Hollywood or popular culture (*Fade to Black*, 1990; *Black Celebration*, 1998); Mounir Fatmi transforming the TV images that a city's inhabitants have given her (*Dieu me pardonne*, 2004); Jayce Salloum working over the images of the Sabra and Chatila massacres (*[As if] Beauty Never Ends,* 2003); or, at the other end of the spectrum, Peter Emanuel Goldman critiquing, piece by piece, the treatment of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict by the American media (*NBC Lebanon: A Study of Media Misrepresentation*, 1983)…Another vast level of research confronts cinema in an endogenous way, whether analytically (Jacobs), historically (*Los Angeles Plays Itself* [Thom Andersen, 2003], *The Fall of Communism As Seen in Gay Pornography* [William E. Jones, 1998], *Wild Song: Preamble to Any Possible History of Cinema* [Chaab Mahmoud, 2007]); polemically (Kirk Tougas, *Kali-Film* [Wilhelm and Birgit Hein, 1988], works by Yves-Marie Mahé, Richard Kerr, Johan Grimonprez, Sanborn); materiologically (Peter Delpeut's *Lyrical Nitrate* [1991], Hervé Pichard); elegiacally (Anthony Stern's *Ain't Misbehavin'*, 1974) . . . or all of the above (Peter Tscherkassky's *Cinemascope Trilogy*, 1996–2001)…All these artists, plus many others (to cite further, very diverse examples: René Viénet, Péter Forgács, Bill Morrison, Brahim Bachiri, Hartmut Bitomsky, Douglas Gordon, Johanna Vaude, etc.)…", p. 171-172.

[429] Lippit. 'Revisionary Cinema', in *Ex-Cinema: From a theory of experimental film and video.* University of California Press. 2012. P. 150.

[430] 'Revisionary Cinema', p. 155-146.

quantitative measure or in the sense of being qualitatively inferior or insignificant. Rather, according to Deleuze & Guattari's deployment of the term, it refers to the way dominant "languages are deterritorialized, the individual is connected to a political immediacy, and each enunciation is always part of a collective assemblage"[431]. These three characteristics of minor forms very neatly describe key elements of the visual study. Across the huge range and diversity of their expression, visual studies very often critique, re-work, *dis*figure, and re-vision images from film history's dominant commercial cinema. Visual studies commonly re-inscribe these images into political contexts that are either obscured or latent in the original or practise a politics of form by opening up the plastic and expressive possibilities of the medium otherwise foreclosed by dominant images. Finally, visual studies are species of ensemble-beings, Frankenstein-ish studies of collective audiovisual collage, polyvocal and polyaesthetic bodies of collective enunciation.

Cut, Frame, Figure

In the essay 'Recycling, Visual Study, Expanded Theory, 'Brenez derives the principles of the visual study by submitting *Cinema,* by Gilles Deleuze, to a figural analysis[432]. Her critique uncovers within the body of one of the discipline's now canonical texts, an essential, if underground, agency. She conducts an immanent analysis of *Cinema* that reveals how certain elementary particles of the experimental film play a "primordial role" in its system dynamic[433]. *Cinema*, in Brenez's analysis, is a parasite of experimental film*,* drawing from it some vital functions but remaining, ultimately, exterior to it. I offer a commentary on Brenez's analysis of

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[431] 'Revisionary Cinema', p. 156. Lippit is citing Deleuze & Guattari's work on the writings of Kafka.
[432] 'Study', p. 158.
[433] 'Study', p. 159

Cinema in order to acquire the effective principles with which the visual study makes its interventions into the world of images.

She does this by pointing to Deleuze's own reference to the aptly titled *Film,* an experimental film from 1965 by Samuel Beckett & Alan Schneider that stars Buster Keaton. According to Brenez, *Film* provides a whole "visible demonstration" of the constituent parts of Deleuze's *Cinema*: the perception-image, the action-image, and the affect-image are all figured there. Deleuze himself posits *Film* as a "proof" for how we might "retrace the lines of differentiation of these three types of images, and try to rediscover the matrix or the movement-image as it is in itself, in its acentred purity, in its primary regime of variation, in its heat and its light, while it is still untroubled by any centre of indetermination"[434]. Furthermore, as Brenez notes in her own analysis, Deleuze declares that, "[a]n important tendency of the so-called experimental cinema [in general] consists in re-creating this acentred plane of pure movement-images"[435]. What does this mean? There is no need to recapitulate the whole Bergsonian edifice that informs Deleuze's notion of the movement-image as universal variation. Brenez suffices to point out that it is the experimental film wherefrom a model of thought that liberates vision from 'natural perception' is derived. Brenez's reading isolates two specific kinds of signs that obtain from the experimental image: they are the 'gramme' and the 'potisign' or any-space-whatever.

The *gramme.* Brenez calls it cinema's "originary molecule"; its essential atomic element[436]. It is the 'genetic' element of the Deleuzian "perception-image". The gramme is not

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[434] Deleuze. MT, p. 66.
[435] Brenez. 'Study', p. 159.
[436] Ibid.

reducible to an image with a particular content, nor identical with the 'photogramme' or single frame of celluloid. It is, rather, *a grammatical relation* between and interior to images which determines their vectoral force. It is, she writes, "inseparable as such from certain dynamisms (immobilization, vibration, flicker, loop, repetition, acceleration, deceleration, etc)"[437]. The gramme is responsible for all the kinetics of cinema; what makes it, beyond any specific technical support, an art of the *moving* image. In theory and in practice, the *cut* is the figure of the gramme. To the atomic swerve of the gramme Brenez opposes the "any-space-whatever", the "space without any reference points" which Deleuze derives from his analysis of Michael Snow's experimental film *La Région Centrale*[438]. It is not any particular place, but a general 'spacing' which delimits a border between a relatively closed ensemble of elements and the infinite out-of-field of which it is a part. The any-space-whatever is essentially the void, but the void charged with positive possibility. It is the 'open whole' in which the rain of atoms falls and in which the grammatical relation articulates images, *sets them in place*. In theory and in practice, the *frame* is the figure of the any-space-whatever. The *frame* mediates between making-visible and disappearance; it is the very threshold of sense. The open whole is an endless process of framing articulated by the dynamism of the *cut*. This sense of reality as an ongoing process rather than static totality is one of the key 'philosophical' propositions affirmed by experimental film and *Cinema*.

The theoretical drama of the *cut* and the *frame* is the dynamic articulation of images in an always-becoming open whole. The gramme and the any-space-whatever are theoretical elements that are the generative conditions for cinema in general and *Cinema* in particular. The *cut* and the *frame* are the practical, experimental elements that are put into play in *any*

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[437] ibid.
[438] 'Study', p. 160.

formation of moving images. Another crucial importance of these elementary particles, to Deleuze and beyond, is that they allow for a conception of "modes of manifestation that owe nothing to language, or, completely redefine the nature and function of language within expression"[439]. The *cut* and the *frame* are non-linguistic figures of expression. As such they are the genetic elements of the visual study. The *cut* and the *frame* are logical determinants. They are the structuring differentials of the screen. But *how do things appear* in the grammatical relation between the *cut* and the *frame*? What principle is there that can express the problem of visual and acoustic descriptive translation whereby cinema "reformulates the world by means of light and rhythmic effects"[440]? This is, of course, the dynamic trace, the *figure*. It is the *figure* that gives the grammatical articulation between *cut* and *frame* volume, shape, body, and a shimmering presence.

Sur un seuil du visible

The *figure* as dynamic trace, as *a modality of presence that borders on absence,* is analysed in the chapter on the visual study from *De la Figure*[441]. There, Brenez examines a suite of experimental films made by Al Razutis between 1979 and 1984 collectively titled *Visual Essays: Origins of Film.* She gives particular focus to the first of these titled *Lumière's Train,* which is itself divided into several short episodes with a total running time of just over seven minutes. Razutis works over material taken from three sources: the Lumière brothers' *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1895), Abel Gance's *La Roue* (1922), famous for its experimental editing of a train crash, and a Warner Bros. special produced in 1940 in homage to the industry's stuntmen and women titled *Spills for Thrills* featuring a serial of accidents and disasters aboard trains, cars and other moving bodies. The importance of Razutis' film, for

[439] Ibid.
[440] 'The Ultimate Journey', np.
[441] 'L'Étude', *De la figure,* p. 313-335.

Brenez, is in its doubled treatment of its eponymous twin-subject: the arrival of a train and the origin of cinema. By studying Razutis' essay, Brenez is able to uncover some further general principles about the nature of cinema and affirm film itself as a participant in an expanded theoretical enterprise.

Razutis' film realises Kuntzel's dream of a film of "sustained rupture" as he submits his material to a barrage of cuts, tonal inversions, optical ellipses, and spatial discrepancies, intensifying the discontinuity that is at the heart of the cinematograph's illusion of continuous movement[442]. The motif of the train and the medium of cinema arrive out of a chaos of dispersive *cuts*, what Brenez calls "pure plasticity"[443]. Reflecting on Razutis' use of the famed Lumière *actualité* Brenez asks, "Why is 'Arrival of a train' not the first film but the origin of cinema? Because first there is an image but the motif is not there, or not quite, there at the edge of the frame, still confused with the blackness of the background, *on the threshold of the visible*"[444]. The *figure* is propelled by a force of dense confusion in an imaginary depth to an arrival at the surface of the screen as a catastrophe, an overturning of the state of things. This mutation of the motif affected by cinema is, according to Brenez, an event in the history of images. In the cinema, definitively, the motif becomes a *figure* that oscillates between presence and absence. The figural work of cinema, the way it thinks in images and transforms the objects of perception, always occurs "*à la lumière du discontinu*"...in the light of the discontinuous[445].

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[442] Kuntzel. 'The Film-Work 2', p. 50.

[443] Brenez. 'L'Étude', "pure plasticité", p. 317

[444] 'L'Étude', "Pourquoi *l'Arrivée du train* est-il, non pas le premier film, mais l'origine du cinéma? Parce que d'abord il y a une image mais que le motif n'est pas la, ou pas tout-a-fait la, au bord du cadre et encore confondu avec le noir du fond, *sur un seuil du visible*", p. 317. My emphasis.

[445] ibid.

Such an arrival, for Brenez, is the advent of something unique: the splitting of phenomena from itself, "*la non-concomitance des phénomènes*"[446]. Cinema is the external projection of a radical alteration internal to things. Recall the little conceptual device Brenex derives from Kracauer: cinema both figures the world and disfigures representation. As a poetic form of tarrying with the negative, cinema works the primary link between image and world as well as a gap internal to phenomena as such, the pulse between the thing and nothing; the visible is now in constant tension with its own shadow, with the invisible that grounds it. It is as if, in the midst of the most powerful doubling of the world, a catastrophe has overcome the screen.

This twin scene of arrival - of train and cinema - is, of course, the site of a well-known legend regarding the first public projection of moving images in a Parisian café in 1895. The audience, it is said, was observed to have fled in terror at the sight of the oncoming locomotive. Incredulity aside, the legend persists as a tale of the affective disturbance cinema brought about as it arrived in collective consciousness. Razutis, in *Lumière's Train,* piles up the disasters. There is screaming and yelling; figures oscillating into the void; the image derails (*delirare*) from its material support and, finally, the frame is extinguished in a total conflagration of saturated white, then fades to black. Looking back across the abyss of the 20th century, 100 years after its arrival it would seem that the disaster was cinema's origin and its destiny. Cinema never stops presenting the genesis of things caught between an annihilating whiteness and originary blackness. Brenez offers her final word on *Visual Essays: Origins of Film:* Razutis studies the image as "the arrival of...an invention of a singular form of plasticity which fundamentally borders on absence; as the arrival of the motif, as the advent of a visibility with

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[446] ibid.

particular optical properties, caught in the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity; and, finally, as the arrival of an affective irruption in the collective imagination"[447][448].

Both the train and cinema are often seen as iconic expressions of modernity in its rationalist, technological and perception-altering dimensions. As modes of transport - one for cargo the other for images - they are both emblems of circulation, displacement and dislocation. With the train and the cinema there is a collective experience of perception speeding up, of bringing the world closer together and of throwing people into far flung locations. And as the sources of Razutis's essay suggests, the train and cinema are the simultaneous signs of epochal arrival and disaster. The cinema delights in the chaotic movements, speed and scale of modern catastrophes, of which railroad derailments were a particular fascination. Joy and terror, it would appear, are often confused in the cinema. Train and cinema are both, finally, figures of libidinal automatism, of the drives - that relentless, pulsing machinery that diverts us from our 'proper' destinations in life. The sense of the *figure* exposed in figural analysis participates in all these dimensions too. Figures transport the traces of phenomena and displace them into altered formations (figurative economies); movement and change are, as such, their very mode of being and consequently carry a distinct affective

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[447] 'L'Étude', "l'arrivée de l'image cinématographique comme invention d'une plastique singulière qui fondamentalement s'adosse à l'absence; l'arrivée du motif comme avènement d'un visible aux propriétés optiques particulières, pris dans une dialectique du continu et du discontinu, adossée cette fois à l'invisible; et l'arrivée du film comme irruption affective dans l'imaginaire collectif", p. 317.

[448] An excellent companion visual study to *Lumière's Train* would be *Phoenix Tape #3: Derailed* (1999) in which Matthias Müller and Christoph Giradet study the films of Alfred Hitchcock (who himself often made a study of human sexuality on trains). They create a fever dream of looping refrains and flickering tension composed from excerpts of anxious confinement, frames of panicked crowds, and the apparently numerous gestures of falling figures scattered throughout the director's work. Here, the visual study is presented as a heterogenous body of citational intensity that holds differences together without diminishing their singular strangeness. The numerous visual studies by experimental filmmakers and contemporary artists that this director's work has occasioned since his death calls out for its own concentrated analysis.

charge or intensity, a *presence* that oscillates between the terror of disappearance and the joy of being.

Histoire(s) du Cinéma

Lumière's Train embodies the logic of disintegration described in the previous chapter. The syntactical dimension of the film, its cuts, ellipses, speed and splendour, form a matrix of plastic differentiation inside of which the iconic or figurative elements of the imagery are caught up and tossed about. In studying the origins of film, Razutis makes the avant-garde, but not uncommon claim that it is the ecstatic montage of presence and absence that defines the expressive essence of the cinema. If we turn to our other visual case study, we witness a mutation. In Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1988-1998), rather than a dialectic of presence and absence via an intensification of the *cut*, there is a proliferation of *frames* superimposing on each other which follows a logic of confusion. In the essay 'Comme vous êtes', Brenez identifies this mutation in the contemporary condition of the cinematic image via the increasing use of "layer-sequences" [*nappes-séquence*][449]. She describes the layer-sequence as a technical synthesis of the otherwise polar extremes of Soviet montage and the sequence shot of such post-war *auteurs* as Orson Welles and Max Ophüls. In the layer-sequence "images flow on top of each other, pour into each other in the manner of folds and pleats, creating feathering effects, stratifications, transparencies, porosities and new opacities"[450]. This condition of con-fusion between several images at once is familiar to anyone who uses a computer desktop where images, web browsers, text processors, and other software

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[449] Brenez. 'Comme vous êtes', *De la figure,* p. 373.
[450] Ibid. "…les images coulent les unes sur les autres, se versent les unes dans les autres, à la manière de fronces, de plis et de surplis créant des effets de feuilletage, de stratifications, de transparences, de porosités et d'opacités nouvelles".

applications share the same space. Today, several streams of contemporary media production are exploring the creative potential of this space from so-called 'screen life' horror films like *Unfriended* (2014), to 'desktop documentaries' like Kevin B. Lee's magnificent visual study in institutional critique *Transformers: The Premake* (also 2014)[451], to contemporary video art such as Camille Henrot's *Grosse Fatigue* (2013) which 'confuses' layers of imagery recorded in a variety of archives cut to a minimalist break beat and voiced by a spoken-word collage that *détourns* elements from the creation myths from different cultural contexts[452]. Godard is the cranky grandfather of these 21st century explorers of the image. In 'The Ultimate Journey' Brenez analyses *Histoire(s)* as a paradigm case of the visual study, in particular in its exploration of the possible relations between cinema and history. The layer-sequence offers an image of time saturated in the past, but its spatial heterogeneity opens up possibilities of new, future links and relations between hitherto dislocated presents.

For Brenez, investigations into the dynamic between cinema and history are a central avenue of figural research[453]. She identifies three lines of inquiry, each derived from a characteristic she observes in Godard's visual study. These are: A) cinema's ability to confront the opacities of the events of history itself, B) its own history as a medium, industry, and mode of thought, and C) how history can condense into a figure that is able to open up 'virtual' possibilities in political contexts seemingly stifled by repetitions of the same. *Histoire(s)* is composed of a complex re-editing of dozens of films from the twentieth century in a style that both 'vertically' superimposes images, text and sound over each other like semi-transparent

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[451] Lee's film is available online. <u>TRANSFORMERS: THE PREMAKE (a desktop documentary) on Vimeo</u>. Uploaded by Kevin B. Lee, May 5, 2014. Accessed August 2022.

[452] Extracts from Henrot's work can be viewed online. <u>Camille Henrot "Grosse Fatigue" on Vimeo</u>. Uploaded by Collectif Combo, February 8, 2014. Accessed August 2022.

[453] Brenez. 'Ultimate Journey'.

sheets of memory, and in a 'horizontal' montage that scatters absences and gaps in a chronicle

of the age. Godard is of special significance for Brenez. She has written often about his work,

participated in exhibitions dedicated to his films, and worked with him as an archivist and

image researcher for his film *Le Livre d'image* (2018), and she writes here that Godard "carries

the image to its conceptual plenitude"[454]. She identifies "three principal lines, three conditions

of the theoretical possibility" for articulating 'history' and 'cinema'[455].

Firstly, concerning history itself. Brenez argues the *Histoire(s)* gives an "experimental

character" to history[456]. Rather than seeing history as that which is made in major or minor acts

of willed intention or even as a discourse or narrative which organises events under a *telos,*

history "unreels between"[457]: between people, between images, between memories. History, as

it were, is what happens in the *cut*; "in that interval which exceeds the human and which only

the work of montage is able to put into question"[458]. History denotes a kind of exteriority to

both the subject and the image; it is the plane of immanence or matrix for aesthetic experience.

History is a field shared by the image and the subject, not as a substance, but as possibility, as

"the very idea of the possible"[459]. By placing the field of historicity *in between* it gives it a

significant plastic value insofar as history becomes a tool for reconfiguring the *relations between*

phenomena. Because history exists, or rather insists, in this 'virtual' dimension "the image is

what puts the possible back into the world"[460]. Forcing an opening in the complex historical

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[454] Ibid.
[455] Ibid.
[456] Ibid.
[457] Ibid.
[458] Ibid.
[459] Ibid.
[460] Ibid.

interconnections between people, images, memory and time is an essential quality of the 'experimental' for Brenez.

Secondly, concerning cinema and its own history. Brenez claims that cinema "is the only art which is able to conceive of its history in its own distinctive material, with images and sounds"[461]. Cinema has the ability to study itself, reflect and theorise itself, through the very work of images and sounds in which its history is composed. In an interview featured in Fergus Daley's documentary *Experimental Conversations* (2006) Brenez elaborates on the idea of the visual study as a flourishing aspect of experimental film. "Experimental cinema", she says "stands against the history of dominant images; we can cite Jonas Mekas' sublime formula: 'Hollywood cinema is merely a reservoir of material for artists to use later.' Therefore experimental cinema is a major speculative initiative since its task is also to criticise, change, parody and destroy the dominant images, or to complete them, to reveal what they hide and falsify"[462]. The visual study hollows out the conventional and canonical history of cinema, treats it to an internal problematisation and reworking of its hidden latencies. One could say that the visual study dreams the history of cinema differently, or as Brenez herself puts it, it "recount[s] a potential history for the cinema...restore[s] to the cinema the history of its potentialities"[463].

And thirdly, how history as a "general model of feeling" condenses into and is inhabited by a figure[464]. The question being asked here is about the nature of cinema's ability - its films, figures and its authors - to bear witness, to assume a figural responsibility in a confrontation

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[461] Ibid.
[462] *Experimental Conversation.* Dir. Fergus Daley, 2006.
[463] Brenez. 'The Ultimate Journey', np.
[464] Ibid.

with actuality. To bear witness does not just mean a report of the facts but a transmission of the affective 'structure of feeling' in which history is reproduced or refused. In 'The Ultimate Journey', Godard is figured as if he were the (ordinary) experimental spectator of the whole of the cinema, which means the whole of the twentieth century; as if he were in attendance in Paris at Le Grand Café that December in 1895 and never left. All the light of the century has carved out a zone in the night and become *Histoire(s) du Cinéma.*

These three principles regarding the possible relations between history and cinema - history as virtual matrix, an immanent auto-critique of film history, and the figurative powers of bearing witness - argues Brenez, "inscribe themselves in the stylistic structure" of Godard's film[465]. The film disintegrates the conventional assumption of the shot as an integral unity linked together in a chain determined by a logic of continuities of time and space. Instead, it is the 'interval' or *cut* as organising principle. Brenez calls it a "temporal atom"[466] and it forces a multiplicity in place of a unity. Relations between images, between image and sound, between audiovision and language, between even these phenomena themselves there are numerous gaps, displacements and blurrings. "Short alternating superimpositions become Godard's principal videographic figure", writes Brenez[467]. The intensification of the cut produces a "living beat that makes the images palpitate"[468]; it foregrounds the singular sensory and perceptual presence of each visual, textual and acoustic fragment. But it also allows for the different form of arrangement of images, different relations between phenomena and a wholly other kind of

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[465] As I focus on the peculiar *logic* of the film as a theoretical model of the relation between history and cinema, I regrettably leave to the side the film's complex re-visioning of specific historical/cinematic events, especially the Holocaust and cinema's inability to either heed its own warnings as to totalitarian desire's vengeful presence in Europe before the war or indeed cinema's failure to stop it.

[466] Brenez. 'The Ultimate Journey', np.

[467] Ibid.

[468] Ibid.

figural volume: the image works in depth like a palimpsest simultaneous to the image's constant modulation of appearance and disappearance in time. It makes less and less sense to speak of 'the' image and more what Brenez calls an "ensemble being" (*être-ensemble*). In *The Future of the Image*, Jacques Rancière described the logic of Godard's film as a "disjunctive conjunction" and argues for it as a figurative strategy that bears witness to a double resistance: a resistance to "schizophrenia" or a catastrophe of images that levels all differences and distinctions and a resistance to "consensual stupor", a zombie-like repetition of the dominant norm that leaves no space for difference at all[469].

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate a central field in which Brenez's experimental ethos is expressed. I detailed the principles, histories and techniques of immanent critique, a broad framework for the analysis of representation that, according to Brenez, is essentially linked with 'tarrying with the negative'. 'Negativity' was figured in several different ways: as the displacement of the apparent integral nature of the moving image into a delirious anti-system of fragments and speculative logics, as the matrix of the cut, the pure plasticity of discontinuity, and as the ethical drive to confront symbols of power and ideological closure. The practice of analysis was described as the passionate desire for material intimacy with the object of study and the process of inventing forms for its figurative translation. In such ways, immanent critique subverts 'the language of judgement'. One of the key points, reiterated throughout, was immanent critique's fusion of poetic and exegetic activity. In the case of the visual study this involved revelling in the logic of disintegration within and between phenomena and the layering of speculative forms of confused association able to link otherwise

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[469] Jacques Rancière. 'Sentence, Image, History', in *The Future of the Image.* Verso. 2009, pp. 33-67.

disparate contexts of human relations. This is mirrored in one of the favoured exegetical strategies of Brenez that I have labelled the 'user's guide'; a logistical mapping of the complexity of a delineated field of practice under the principle of 'formal diversity, variety without end, without totalisation and without finitude'. I highlighted Brenez's affirmation of the autonomy of film in terms of its singular processes of immanent construction and its critical intensification of possible relations to lived actuality. I have attempted, too, to convey something of the diversity and intensity of Brenez's writing and her enthusiasm for the ability of cinema to study the image, to essay its essential features and comment on its historical expressions. The variety and non-hierarchical nature of Brenez's engagement with film history was also on show as examples were drawn from essay films, Hollywood B-movies, militant pamphlets, canonical auteur films, and visual studies. Brenez celebrates the role of the artist as critic, but, as we have seen, these two terms are highly unstable: the criticism of Nicole Brenez reads with the utmost artistry and the artistic enterprises she brings into view are incendiary forms of critique.

[3]

Somatization
The body as methodological field

"In the world there exists, and there has only ever existed, *one man*. He is in each of us in entirety; thus he is ourselves. Each is the other and all others. Except that a phenomenon, for which I do not even know the name, seems to infinitely divide this single man, splits him into the accidents of appearance, and renders each of the fragments foreign to ourselves"
- Jean Genet[470]

The human is that which cannot find its limits
- Nicole Brenez[471]

Introduction

The body is a central paradigm through which Brenez understands the cinema and through which she makes her critical interventions. The motif of the body is a subject that cinema ceaselessly problematizes and questions. Her diverse writings treat the body as a central force of aesthetic invention and as a biopolitical field of contestation. In the texts that I discuss in this chapter, Brenez takes the bodily figuration of a large range of films and film forms as occasions to exercise the twin strategies of immanent critique: a thick description of the immanent processes of film construction and the elaboration of associative networks of meanings and interpretations. This latter aspect of her method is particularly concerned with

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[470] Brenez cites Genet in her letter to the online journal LOLA on the occasion of a special dossier on Leos Carax's 2012 film *Holy Motors*. See 'Hail *Holy Motors:* A spontaneous LOLA collective', 2013. Online.
[471] CN, p. 26.

the ethical exigencies of figurality, as that which touches on the conditions and possibilities of experience and a view of the body/figure nexus as an experimental laboratory for contesting conformity and refusing injustice. Brenez's approach deploys the notion of the figure less as a defined and stable concept than as an instrument to experiment and think with the films. What emerges in this corpus of texts, and that I hope to present to the reader, is a critical output of incredible intensity, insight and invention.

Brenez describes the figuration of the body in the cinema as a process of "somatization" (after *sōma,* the Greek term for 'body' as distinct from the soul and psyche). The movement from 'body' to 'somatization' at the figural level parallels a movement at the textual level from 'the work to text', in the sense given by Roland Barthes in the 1970s[472]. Rather than the body remaining an empirical object enclosed within itself it is opened up as a "methodological field", or as Brenez puts it, "the organic nature of the body [is] completely reworked as a field of somatization"[473]. The body, so somatized, is never a stable entity, always a figural process of *embodiment* that expresses the conditions of experience. Somatization is given a range of definitions. In *De la figure,* Brenez defines it (and all Brenezian definitions are contingent, pragmatic and open to revision), as the "work of the imagination upon the body...the indistinction of the real and the dream"[474]. Elsewhere it is the "translation of psychic, political, and economic phenomena into corporeal terms"[475]. From one direction, history condenses into bodily gestures, comportments, and sentiments, and from another, the inner world, what

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[472] Roland Barthes. 'From Work to Text', *Image, Music, Text.* Hill and Wang. 1977, p. 155-164.
For an account of the reception of Barthes' essay in the development of *textual* analysis in film studies see Janet Bergrstrom. 'Enunciation and Sexual Difference (Part 1)', *Camera Obscura,* Vol.1-2. 1979. Pp. 32-69.
[473] CN, p. 46.
[474] *De la figure*. "...du travail de l'imaginaire sur le corps...l'indistinction du réel et du rêve (la somatisation)", p. 28.
[475] CN. p. 22.

Brenez calls "mental images", opens up and unfolds the body. Somatization is the process of rendering visible the secret intimacy of the subject and of making palpable the obscure 'distant' determinations of the historical process. In every case it is a matter of, in a formula that I will elaborate on in detail below, the encounter "between the ordinary plasticity of appearances and the indescribable evidence of each body"[476]. Opening up the body as a field of somatization is how Brenez understands the figural *work* of cinema, what it *does*. At the same time, I claim, by discerning and translating this activity, by making it immediately intelligible for reflection, it is also a way of understanding what is achieved in Brenez's own immanent critique.

Cinema, taken in its broadest sense and encompassing its various production, critical, reception and archival contexts, has a significant anthropological function for Brenez. It "serves as an anatomical theatre, an ethnography of bodily phantasms [and] an archive of somatic uncertainty"[477]. A central aim of Brenez's criticism, as well as her dream for the wider critical culture of film studies, is to install itself as a custodian of such a somatic archive, as a critical practice that cares for, maintains, and develops questions from it. Somatization concerns the practices by which the question of the human itself can become an horizon of cinematic thought.

The body of the chapter opens with a prefatory sketch of Brenez's revisioning of cinema's 'primal scene', its origins in the experimental laboratory of the Station Physiologique in Paris in the late 1880s. She proposes a bifurcation of the medium along two distinct but often interweaving lines of figural development respectively aligned with Étienne-Jules Marey

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[476] 'Incomparable Bodies', np.
[477] *De la Figure.* "Le cinéma aussi fait office de théâtre anatomique, ethnographique des fantasmes corporels ou archive de l'incertitude somatique", p. 20.

and his assistant Georges Demenÿ. From there I proceed by way of a series of close readings of three specific texts written by Brenez that directly concern the figuration of the body. They have been selected for their density of ideas and as rich demonstrations of Brenez's writerly practice. As such, each section is dedicated to the peculiarities of argument, style and exemplification contained in each text and less concerned with how the insights contained therein can be unified into a 'Brenezian' system. I am more concerned with the concrete specificities of the strategies she employs in each essay and the critical territories they open up. This may appear to the reader as unnecessarily impressionistic or fragmented, but there is a logic to it. It is a way for commentary to mimic the emphasis Brenez places on the contingent encounter with the object of study - for Brenez, with the films; for me, with Brenez's essays. As Brenez herself says, "For me you have to invent an *ad hoc* analysis for each film...each film or each body of work requires a singular analysis...each film is a laboratory"[478]. It is the encounter with the singular work and what it opens up that nourishes and expands the overall concept, rather than deducing from a concept all actual, contingent encounters. The chapter aims to construct a (necessarily incomplete and open-ended) database of ideas and insights concerning Brenez's figurative approach to cinematic bodies. This database then becomes available for further research and future researchers to challenge their own analytical habits and models as well as provide nodal points for cross-fertilization with their own concerns.

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[478] 'A Conversation', np.

The Primal Scene
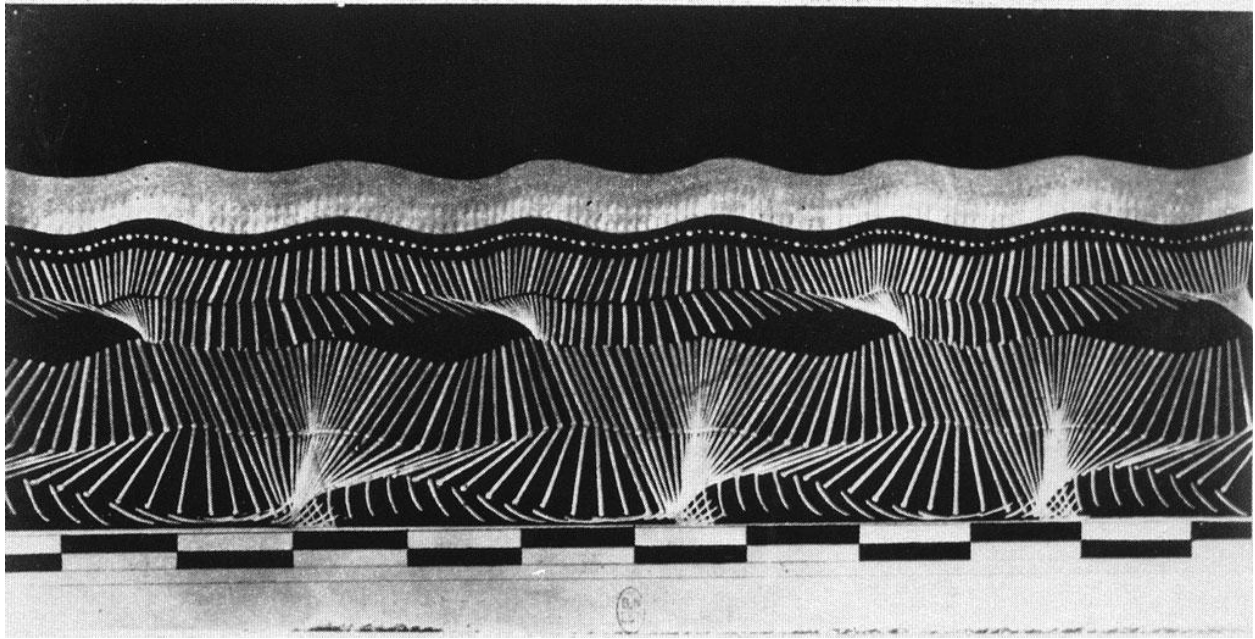
Joinville Soldier Walking (Etienne-Jules Marey, 1883).

It is something of a critical cliché in film studies to observe an originary bifurcation in the history of the medium in the two ancestral figures of the Lumière Brothers and Georges Méliès. The former standing in for realism and the latter for illusion. Whole kinship diagrams of the great *auteurs,* not to mention battlelines of different critical sensibilities and the economic strategies of film executives, could be plotted from these two alternative lines of descent. In this context, Brenez makes a significant gesture. She displaces Lumière/Méliès and situates Marey/Demenÿ as the rival couple of cinema's original *scène primitive*[479]. This gesture achieves a number of things for Brenez. Firstly, it inaugurates an alternative canon by which to understand and communicate the history of the medium, from which flows the second point, that it is the *experimental values* of research, invention, and direct involvement with

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[479] *De la figure,* p. 17.

phenomena that are at the medium's very core and not, as the dominant histories tend to tell it, a marginal side-show[480].

Étienne-Jules Marey is relatively well known as the inventor of chronophotography, one of the many precursors to the establishment of the cinematographic apparatus[481]. His assistant, Georges Demenÿ, is less so. As Brenez tells it, Demenÿ was as instrumental as Marey in setting up the Station Physiologique in Paris in the late 1880s. It is here, at cinema's original experimental laboratory, using the then latest photographic technology for the rapid recording of visual phenomena, that they conducted the systematic study of motion, specifically the analysis of moving bodies. According to Brenez, the problem of movement is "the problem that structures cinema itself"[482]. The project at the Station, under the authority of Marey, is the triumph of scientific positivism. Perceptual data relating to the mechanics of movement - human and non-human - that had hitherto been invisible to the naked eye could now, through its decomposition into a series of instants, be rendered visible and measurable. The laboratory set-up, the isolation of specific anatomical features and highly rarefied gestures (the opening and closing of the hand, for example, or the turning of cat's body dropped from a small height), the breakdown of the perceptual continuum into a discontinuous abstract grid produced a "spectralization" of the body, a new kind of figure. The integral body is dispersed into a seriation of sliced cuts. This is the first program of figurative possibilities that cinema affords: a figural plasticity whereby the organic body becomes a phantom displaced into circuits of technical display.

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[480] Brenez freely admits the 'mythic' nature of positing such primordial origins (*De la figure,* 17). They nonetheless have a productive heuristic value as gestures that forever need translating and revisioning in the present.

[481] See, for example, the studies by Marta Braun (1992) and Mary Anne Doane (2002).

[482] 'Secrets of Movement', p. 164.

This project is by no means innocent, as Brenez makes clear. The Station Physiologique was funded by a significant subsidy from the French military and indeed its investigations into the minutiae of physical effort were complemented by a study of ballistics. Brenez writes, "In France, the cinema emerged as a massive and collective training for death. The scientific program of the Station Physiologique was to investigate highly practical matters: to find out the maximum weight a man could support, the maximum length a man could walk, and the "best", i.e., the most economical, way to put a foot on the ground to move forward. Here "man" precisely means "soldier", and indeed all of Marey's actors were on loan from the French army…[The Station's research agenda] was designed with a precise purpose: dressage, a training of bodies to gymnastic functionality"[483]. While it is certainly *not* the case that Brenez will perceive all figural abstraction from a perceived organic integrity as the practice of warfare by other means, there is for her an essential *negativity* at the core of the cinematic apparatus. The radical dimension of this negativity that Brenez will frequently and passionately affirm is the ability of the cinematic apparatus to dispute and question what passes for common sense and natural perception. And while she freely admits that "the cinematographic dispositif belongs fully to the history of technologies of control", her interest primarily lies in tracing the very many lines of dissent from the medium's official use[484].

This is where "la dispute inaugurale" between Marey and his assistant Demenÿ comes in[485]. Due to a battery of disagreements regarding the formal acknowledgement of Demenÿ's role in experiments as well as his alternative vision for the future of the techniques he had

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[483] Ibid., p.165.
[484] 'Genesis'
[485] *De la Figure.,* p. 17.

helped develop, Demenÿ took a primitive film camera into the streets and recorded moments of everyday life. According to Brenez, "he transforms the ordinary and insignificant into a visual event"[486]. Demenÿ discovers the contingency and particularity of the encounter. Where Marey's approach sends the body into a spectral realm of part objects and idealised motion, Demenÿ "works on presence"[487], framing the body's situated temporality, how it reveals time in its gesture, posture, later in its speech. Marey was indifferent to the use of the cinematograph outside of any scientific purpose, while Demenÿ recognised it as a tool for communication, seduction, and what Brenez calls "invocation", that is, the appearance of a figure in the absence of a 'real' body (the very category of the real now problematised by such life-like appearances). Brenez writes, "[Demenÿ's] desire was to record daily life in its fleeting and uncoordinated appearances, not to understand, rationalise and train the body within the framework of scientific endeavours...This initial gesture of a diversion [*détournement*] of the apparatus, whose intention was not directly political, spontaneously achieved one of the most political ideals ascribed to cinema and art in general: expanding life itself"[488].

Demenÿ's unexpected hijacking of the nascent apparatus, one of cinema's crucial clinamen-events, induces a variation that opens a new line of possibility. The device moves out of the laboratory, but doesn't stop experimenting. Description of real presence massively enhances democratic visibility and generates new visual forms. The ability of cinematic figuration to involve itself in the ordinary and insignificant allows it to slip in the gaps of understanding, into the manifold 'background' of everyday life. This is what I take Brenez to mean by the construction of 'visual events': the dense texture of life, its scintillating and

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[486] *De la figure,* "Il transforme l'ordinaire et l'insignifiant de la vie en événement visuel", p. 18.
[487] Ibid., "Il travaille sur la présence".
[488] "Improvised Notes on French Expanded Cinema", Millennium Film Journal, Vol.43-44, 2005. http://mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ43/Brenez.html

continuous movement. Regarding somatization at this scale sensitises us to a mode of attention that does not feverishly hunt for meaning or certainty but retains an open passivity to events as *events*, as movements and expressions of an indeterminate materiality. As Jean-Francois Lyotard once wrote, concerning the pedagogy of the event, "To become sensitive to their quality as actual events, to become competent in listening to their sound underneath silence or noise, to become open to 'It happens that' rather than to 'What happens', requires at the very least a high degree of refinement in the perception of small differences…Thus to encounter the event is like bordering on nothingness"[489]. "A man feels hot and wipes his face, a child bursts out laughing, the swirls of a pipe", such are the descriptive tropisms Brenez alights on in Demenÿ's films[490]. Otherworldly figural plasticity and descriptive events of real presence are two 'primal' modes of the body encountering the cinematographic apparatus, of the body-as-figure, that Brenez reveals throughout her writing.

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[489] Lyotard. *Peregrinations,* p. 18.

[490] *De la figure,* "un homme a chaud et s'éponge, un enfant éclate de rire, les volutes d'une pipe", p. 18

Organicity, or, "the trial involved in having a body"

An "intermediary body" from *Body Snatchers* (Dir. Ferrara, 1993)

The more bizarre things get, the greater the illumination produced

 - Nicole Brenez[491]

      Brenez studies somatization in a text titled 'Come Into My Sleep', which focuses on a

seven minute sequence in the 1993 film *Body Snatchers* directed by Abel Ferrara[492]. The film

offers itself as a commercial genre film that thinks in images, specifically via an intense working

over of the image of the body[493]. The film is one of at least half a dozen official adaptations of

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[491] Brenez, Nicole. "Come Into My Sleep Abel Ferrara's Body Snatchers." *Rouge*, Vol.13, 2008.
http://www.rouge.com.au/rougerouge/sleep.html ['Sleep']

[492] 'Sleep', np.

[493] Chapter Four is dedicated to a close reading of Brenez's monograph on Abel Ferrara. The essay I address here, which is a translation of part of a chapter from *De la Figure,* functions as a prologue to the larger concerns of that book which focuses especially on the ethical stakes of Ferrara's cinema.

Jack Finney's novel *The Body Snatchers* published in 1955. The science-fiction theme of an invading alien species replacing human beings with physically exact but emotionally vacant copies presents itself as rich territory for ruminations on some central figurative questions: the interweaving relations between model and copy, referent and figure, image and body, alien-other and the self-same. 'Snatcher' films become genre allegories for the generic possibilities of cinema as such, focused on the problem of the body, and inscribed within the particular historical anxieties of each adaption. In 'Sleep' we see Brenez deploy some of her key concepts, an exemplary detailing of a figurative economy, and a brief but typically provocative examination of two figurative logics that articulate the images at the historico-political and psychotropic levels simultaneously: on the one hand, the logic of the body's "volatilization" in post-Hiroshima civilization, and on the other, "the logic of fantasy"[494].

The sequence occurs roughly at the half-way point in the film. The action of the story centres around a family moving to a military base to facilitate the Father-character's investigation into some strange biological phenomena. In narrative terms, the sequence takes place in something of a pause; major and minor characters have been introduced and their relations established, the central enigma of some kind of organic disturbance, possibly alien in nature has been introduced but its full horrors have yet to be revealed; the day's twilight has tipped into night, action has been suspended, natural and artificial light blends together and the interior spaces fill with shadow, expressing the thick opacity of the bodies on screen. The scene is saturated with the kind of libidinal dread typical of the horror film, the mood is coloured by a mix of authoritarian power and eroticism.

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[494] 'Sleep', np.

The presence of a step-mother character amplifies the already complex system of forgeries, substitutes, and copies at play. In figural terms, the scene is the result of an economy of dynamics between fusion and separation, each containing a force of violence and aggression. This schema is recognisable in certain structural relations that are established by an alternating montage between the main 'private' locations of the domestic interior: bathroom and bedroom. Father is laying in bed getting a back massage by Step-Mother (already turned alien and seeking unto others), Daughter is in the bathtub falling asleep listening to music via headphones. Father and Daughter are the two main polarities and Step-Mother is a free radical in between, an obstruction blocking the flow of desire between Father and Daughter. Daughter, naked, is turned inward, escaping into an interior space suspended in water and made rhythmic by the music playing only for her. Father, topless, is exposed to the outside and rendered passive and somnolent by soothing oils and the "lullabies" of the Step-Mother. In the film, the snatching occurs during the victims' sleep. It is this treatment of sleep and the plunge into an oneiric interior that justifies Brenez's claim that the sequence follows a "fantasy logic".

So far so Oedipal...but in between this simulacrum of Mommy, Daddy, Me, literally emerging from an obscene exterior, enter three "paradoxical bodies"[495]. These three bodies are the excessive and nightmarish entities that 'disfigure' the conventional familial relations, and become the staging grounds for Brenez's more experimental treatment of the sequence. Downward from the ceiling above the Daughter and upward from beneath the bed of the Father come thin, translucent tendrils attached to respective cocoon-like masses obscured in their hidden crawl-spaces. These sticky dendrites are the medium in which Self becomes Alien. Two of the three paradoxical bodies - an "unfinished corpse" and a "man yet to be born" - are

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[495] Ibid.

Daughter and Father's obscene others, and exist in determined, if liminal, spaces[496]. But there is a third yet undetermined and "*intermediary body*" that exists nowhere in the home; an uncanny embryonic foetus that floats in the suspended syntax of an exclusively cinematic caesura[497]. This undecidable thing, is it Daughter, Father or somehow both? This bizarre homunculus, a "body-too-much", Brenez writes, is evidence of a central capacity of cinematic figuration: to create bodies that exist nowhere other than in the plastic circuitry of the film itself. All three paradoxical bodies are situated 'in between', in the zone of indistinction of the neither/nor. Granted, the science-fiction fable does generate the expectation of a little monstrosity, but Brenez's point would be that 'genre', here, provides the screen for an investigation into the more troubling existence of the generic. The paradoxical bodies of cinema are in this way the experimental presentation of its particularly special, figurative effects.

These paradoxical bodies form one of several constellations of figuration by which Brenez constructs the sequence's figural economy. She calls them "pathways of defiguration". Studying somatization rather than *the* body requires traversing these lines of activity that open the body up[498]. Her approach toward them in the writing takes the form of a descent, beginning at the surface level of recognisable figures and then taking the plunge into the more paradoxical realms of figurality. Each 'layer' of the figurative film body, however, is less a substance than a dynamic system of relations, internally complex, and externally interconnected with the outside.

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[496] Ibid.
[497] Ibid.
[498] Ibid.

Brenez isolates a "circuit of the eye" and a "circuit of the hand". These "anatomical circulations" construct the flow of their respective motifs. What is significant about these circuits, methodologically speaking, is that they, on the one hand, deconstruct the conventional splitting of film expression along subjective (character) and objective (camera) lines, and on the other hand, they traverse, like nerve fibres, otherwise self-contained scenes. Working like a collage artist that cuts into an integral image and rearranges the pieces, Brenez exposes a dimension of film that is in between explicit and latent; these circuits are undeniably there in the films but not obviously manifest without the work analysis performs. In the case of the 'circuit of the eye', images are linked on the basis of a "subject-less look", a pure affectivity, that transmits, across the faces of several characters, the empty eyes of indifference, the open eyes of horror, and the closed eyes of dreaming[499]. The 'circuit of the hand' variously expresses the force of life as the animation of a simple gesture, an intimate caress that conceals a deadly intention, the terrifying contact with an unknown other, and finally - the iconic sign of the Snatchers series - the pointing finger of the outstretched hand. This last sign is saturated with figurative significance, as if the very act of referring and indicating was governed by the body language of judgement, condemnation, in fact, "damnation". The elementary features of the body are submitted to a 'hallucinatory' analysis where the 'part' assumes an autonomy from the 'whole' and is then assembled into vertigo-inducing constellations.

The next dimension of the sequence's figurative economy analysed by Brenez takes the strange, intermediary body as its staging ground for a speculative investigation into the soma itself, or "organicity"[500]. The problem of the organism is the problem of where it ends and the world begins, the problem of limits. Insofar as every organism is permeable to its outside, every

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[499] Ibid.
[500] Ibid.

organism is the result of a paradoxical tendency toward both self-definition *against* the outside and the necessary transgression of its own limits putting it at risk of self-annihilation. The problem of the body in cinema, as Brenez confronts it, concerns precisely this question of limits. The crux of the problem, Brenez writes, is "What is a body, what is there *between* bodies?"[501]

The figure of the 'intermediary' foetus becomes a concentrated instance of a whole complex of placental imagery. The placenta is a 'con-fused' figure, as Brenez notes, "it belongs to two bodies simultaneously", an inside that is also an outside. A figure that is both particularly sexed but also generically universal. Brenez's analysis follows the film and dives "into the most secret parts of the body, exposing its folds, strata, and substance". We now depart the macro-level of figuration and descend into the cellular systems proper to the figural. The flesh and bone of the body is dissolved into its constitutive, dedifferentiated tissues. This palpates the real core of the issue, what Brenez studies and what Ferrara figures: "the trial involved in having a body, including the experience of encountering the body of an Other". Throughout Brenez's writing there is this intense pathos for the difficulty in being embodied, of *having* a body - *whatever it is!* - and *being* a body for others. And if cinema is the *promise* of a body, it too must be riven with this same irrevocable difficulty.

The first trait in which Brenez explores the difficulty of being organically embodied is "the primal agony associated with orifices"[502]. The *orifice,* the small apertures around which a body forms, those zones of passage where the inside is exposed to the outside. In *Body Snatchers,* it is the ears, nose, and mouth that are the visible orifices which the alien tendrils

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[501] Ibid.
[502] Ibid.

attempt to infiltrate. But the eroticism of the limit and the limits of eroticism are multiplied in Ferrara's work. There is the micro-porosity of the skin that soaks in water and takes in the massage oils. And there is the patterned array of small holes in the ceiling through which pours the invading other, an organic schema now projected onto inert matter. And it is this permeable ceiling itself, a barrier that splits open, sending the Daughter's obscene double crashing down onto her bathing body. This moment of hideous contact with the other releases the cumulative build-up of affective dread, unleashing the paradigmatic sonic expression of the body's interiority, the scream. This is the terrible truth of the 'home', the enclosure that is meant to secure the self against intrusion and threat is in reality a veil that protects the threat itself, immunises it against 'prying eyes'. As revealed through the anamorphic lens of fantasy, according to Brenez, "the imaginary of *penetration as rape* fills the entire space"[503].

Second organic trait, "three primeval substances: *plasma, placenta and plankton*"[504]. The plasma of the sequence's gestating foetus provides the "plastic virtues of opalescent and viscous liquid" while also being a figure of, precisely, the generic substance of life itself. This plasmatic substance is illuminated by an "ultra-modern chromatism". *Ultra* because it incorporates the archaic within the modern itself. The 'poisoned light' that induces this monstrous creature, for Brenez, evokes both a natural phosphorescence and atomic radiation. The dense obscurity of the viscera is fantastically illuminated in silty red-yellows. By including chroma as a constituent element of the soma, Brenez highlights how a bodily figure need not remain bounded by the physical contour of distinct beings. Plasma, and thus by extension chroma, is a figure of flow, of spill. 'Placenta' we have already mentioned as key to the whole complex being studied. But *plankton*? Brenez suggests the sequence's confusion of inside,

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[503] ibid.
[504] ibid.

outside; man, woman; father, daughter; orifice, intrusion; determined and indeterminate, prove that "images exhibit the capacity to displace themselves"[505], and that plankton, as a creature of ambiguous organic status between animal and vegetable, stands as a figure of this ability. Figures of the body, in Brenez's writing, often display this amphibious ability to slide from one mode of being into another.

The final element by which Brenez analyses the sequence's investigation of the body's organicity is the treatment of *skin*. Or, rather, it is *membrane,* as 'skin' is perhaps already too determined and individuated. Brenez's whole analysis, her 'anatomy lesson', is the disarticulation of the film's body into a flattened and spread out membrane on which occur the sensible events of organic life. *Film,* of course, names not only the medium of moving images but a thin residue of semi-stable matter. Closer to her point here, however, is the ambiguous status of the membrane as both shield from corrupting forces and, if we recall that the three paradoxical bodies appear to be almost *nothing but skin,* the corruption itself.

These atavistic horizons of the soma are inscribed, nonetheless, within a specific historical mesh: the military-industrial complex of post-Hiroshima civilization. The terrible emblem of that event being the shadowy traces of the disappeared bodies burnt into the urban substrate by the heat and annihilating light of atomic energy. Coming in the wake of that event requires a revisioning of the status of the body. According to Brenez, the "catastrophe obliges us to treat the body from the viewpoint of its volatization"[506] and that "we must henceforth re-view humanity in the poisoned light of Hiroshima, Minamata and Chernobyl"[507]. The

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[505] Ibid.
[506] CN, p. 46.
[507] 'Sleep', np.

proliferation and play of bodily figures in 'Sleep' is presented as forcing questions over several logics of corporeality: the formation and corruption of kinship, the ordeal of being embodied, the oneiric fascination with bodily flows, originary worlds of matter and decay, the industrial toxicity of modern society, and the spectre of mass death via scientific means. It is in laying bare the workings of these conditions of experience that Brenez can claim fantasy as a visionary critical activity. And it is in making this process apparent, one could say *readable* in the image via the work of analysis that, I claim, includes Brenez's writing in the same activity.

The proliferation of somatic figures corresponds to a proliferation of Brenez's text, as if it were driven by its own fantastic, cancerous logic of incessant self-differentiation and multiplication. At its core though is the dread of the generic body, the any-body-whatever, the *figure*. Immanent critique uncovers 'the unknown flesh of the film'; but deeper still into the organicity of the flesh itself. This requires another way of looking and a different mode of attention. One that studies the visionary critical activity of the image. The deeper the analysis, the further away it gets from the recognisable figurative body and closer to the fluctuating intensities and differentiating forces of the figural matrix. The more complex and speculative the reading, the less attached it is to the 'apparent' and strictly optical level of the film. Criticism approaches science-fiction when it too reaches for the limit-experience of the imagination. Yet, insofar as a great theme of the Snatchers series is, as Brenez notes, "Should we trust the evidence of our senses?"[508] and, also, insofar as the Ferrara episode probes the (hysterical?) historical and figurative genesis of modern (mutant) embodiment, Brenez is exact in her descriptions. The figures of *Body Snatchers,* as they slide into the 'sleep' of Brenez's dream-reading, oscillate between the "irremediable", "tragically isolated" singularity of the individual and a nightmare of fusion "where the individual is plugged (even despite itself) into

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[508] Ibid.

anything and anybody, to the point of delirium and exhaustion"[509]. Perhaps all horror derives from this: the ordeal of the body, in its tragic isolation, is that it both desires and is terrorised by the promise of interconnectivity.

Somatization names the process of both being opened up and gathering the multitude in. It is the principle that animates both the figurative body of films and the body of work produced by figural analysis. Such geminal bodies are, despite the terminology, not really composed in a topology of 'surface' and 'depth', but of a multilinear whole, a skein, composed, as Brenez notes, of "rhizomatic" lines of figurative circulation. The name she gives this multilinear whole is figurative economy. The logic of such the circulation studied here is that of 'fantasy'. Brenez attempts to return fantasy to what she calls in 'Sleep' "*the work of images*"[510]. Fantasy is not *only* a concept in a critical discourse, but a whole labour of the imagination and building site for images. Brenez's immanent criticism attempts to work in solidarity with this constructive facility in its expression in cinematic figuration. We should not make the mistake, however, of viewing fantasy as therefore identical with the cinematic itself. Cinema, at least when practised as a critical visionary activity, "lays bare the workings of fantasy"[511]: each film is a demonstration, a laboratory, a study. Brenez places at the centre of her figurative conception of cinema a view of the body turned inside-out which, among other things, takes the imagination as a constitutive, even organic process. Cinema, Brenez claims, imagines "the body [as] no longer given as an objective thing but as the primary material of dreaming"[512].

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[509] Ibid.
[510] ibid.
[511] ibid.
[512] Ibid.

Flaming Creatures, or Identity in Flames

The cinema's figurative possibilities of rendering the body are further raised in the essay 'Are We the Actors of Our Own Life? Notes on the experimental actor'[513]. This text appears in the multilingual journal *L'Atalante, Revista de estudios cinematográficos* based in Spain. It is one of the explicit deployments of Brenez's phrase 'experimental laboratory' and here centres on the body of the actor as a key zone of figural activity and critical attention. The "experimental laboratory" of the actor, more precisely, "puts representation to the test"[514]. The actor is an experimental device for testing certain philosophical theses regarding identity, especially those concerning the relation between essence and appearance and, in an ethical dimension, the actor's performance marks a crucial site where a dispute between conformity and contestation can be staged.

Somatization is in this text given a theatrical twist and acts of figuration are here explicitly described as spectacles before a real or imagined audience. However, as consistent across her writings, it is not the dramatic aspect of spectacle (or theatre for that matter) that is of interest to Brenez, and more so its 'ritual' and broadly speaking its performative dimensions. Somatization as acts of bodily metamorphosis and performative display is in this essay given its full anthropological significance: "Man is the singular animal who watches himself live", Brenez writes citing Valéry[515]. The 'imaginary', prior to any resolution of an image, Brenez explains, is a path to knowledge, a form of dreaming, and a communal experience. 'Performance' thus takes on a ritual function as the horizon of an embodied form of thinking

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[513] Nicole Brenez. 'Are We the Actors of Our Own Life? Notes on the experimental actor', trans. Paula Saiz Hontangas, in *L'Atalante, Revista de estudios cinematográficos,* Vol.19, January-June. 2015. ['Actors'].
[514] 'Actors', p. 59.
[515] 'Actors', p. 60.

in images, at once a culture's reflecting mirror and its figural transformation. Brenez often prefers the term 'creature' when dealing with figurations of the human. Creatures are singular creations on the continuous line of cinematic variation; they are living forms part-soma part-imago, *figures*. "The actor's work…exposes and lays bare the way in which the links between a creature of flesh and its *imago* (the ideal self, psychic projections in general) are tied and untied"[516]. Here Brenez uses her favoured technique of the taxonomic constellation. We are introduced, in particular, to 'actors-rebels', 'the poets of unstructured appearance', and 'constructivists'. In general, however, the actor is an experimental testing ground for the *theoretical*, *practical* and *poetic* potentials of art[517].

Who is an actor and what counts as acting? Where does acting take place? Brenez's taxonomies never assume total or systematic closure, but work firstly to problematise dominant or hegemonic typologies and secondly to propose alternative arrangements, phenomena and expressivity that had otherwise been excluded, forgotten or repressed. One of the major conceptual oppositions her analysis questions is that between the fictional and the real, the imaginary and the actual. *Acting* as a process of somatization, as events of figurative invention cuts across the borders of institutionalised regimes of the image, spontaneous outbursts on the street, organised resistance against oppression, and the playful revisioning of archetypes. As always, it is less about determining and defining a figure's proper place than by describing what it does and how it works. *Acting* is itself a movement, an ensemble of gestures that takes in the world and projects into it a new figure, a new matter of fact. The sometime brevity of the 'entries' in Brenez's taxonomy are not a sign of underdeveloped thinking, but invitations to the reader for further use and future experimentation.

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[516] 'Actors', p. 62.
[517] 'Actors', p. 59.

Part of the architecture of Brenez's writing is the unexpected comparison. She is particularly fond of invoking obscure classical texts in the midst of discussing the most ordinary of contemporary concerns. 'Actors' begins in such a vein with a reference to a first-century Roman lawyer, Quintilian, and his *De institutione oratoria* in which he "distinguishes three types of arts": the *theoretical,* the *practical,* and the *poetic.* According to Brenez, "it is clear that the film actor achieves a synthesis of these three dimensions of art"[518]. 'Theory' refers to speculation and acquiring the knowledge of things; 'practice' involves action, particularly any activity undertaken for its own sake, a means and not an end; and 'poetry', here, is "'the completion of a visible task'", that is, the formation of an image. Not only is this typology a canny way to think about 'performance', it also highlights Brenez's knack for extracting creative and effective operations from her sources without necessarily subscribing to or needing to recapitulate their entire discursive system. She is something of a conceptual *bricoleur* in that she will playfully use some fragment of knowledge, picked up in the course of one's research, if it suggestively illuminates the object of study. It is also, finally, a good example of how Brenez makes something seemingly simply like 'the body' into something really complex, multi-faceted, and unexpected. She calls this "the ordinary experience of the undefined"[519]. By granting to the actor their theoretical, practical, and poetic powers, Brenez is resisting the urge to *define* what a body is and what it can do, but nevertheless takes great joy in setting to work in *describing*, in "figuring out", what is possible.

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[518] Ibid.
[519] Ibid.

According to Brenez, "the actor's social function"[520] is to engage in hand-to-hand combat against what could be called 'the archive of conformity'. This archive comprises the "prevailing codes of symbolisation" and is content to confirm the already known, to serve at the leisure of the powerful, to reduce complex relations between things to reified and simplistic stereotypes, and in general to reproduce the dominant ideology[521]. She writes in another text, "when a figure fits hand-in-glove with contemporary body-ideology, it consents to obscenity"[522]. Against such an archive, Brenez pits "the actor rebels", those actors who make of their bodies images that firstly, defect from participation in conformity and, secondly, experiment beyond the "archetypes" to which particular identities are subjected. Her example of the former is Marlon Brando, especially his 'performance' as, strictly speaking, himself in the documentary *Meet Marlon Brando,* in which, Brenez claims, he "sabotages with irresistible irony every industry norm"[523]. Her case for the latter is Delphine Seyrig who takes to her role as actor with "aristocratic grace and radical subversion"[524]. Brenez cites the film Seyrig made with Carole Roussopoulos in the mid-1970s *Sais belle et tais-toi* (idiomatic French for 'be beautiful and shut-up') where a host of female actors are interviewed regarding their treatment as 'product' in the film industry. From these examples we can see how the actor's experimental laboratory extends beyond the characters actors play in films and is expanded to the problem of 'play', identity and performance in the more general, anthropological sense alluded to above.

Another unexpected comparison: Eighteenth century philosopher David Hume meets 1960s underground filmmaker Jack Smith. Brenez suggests that the poetic activities of

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[520] 'Actors', p. 60.
[521] Ibid.
[522] 'Incomparable Bodies', np.
[523] 'Actors', p. 60.
[524] 'Actors', p. 61

filmmakers like Smith provide the complementary image to the theoretical speculations of "modern empiricism", as embodied in the thought of Hume. In particular, the philosophical thesis that all 'identity', in the sense of a unified, persistent subject is "pure illusion, the imaginary synthesis of sensory impressions"[525]. Brenez cites Hume's thought experiment whereby he imagines the mind as a "theatre without a scene": "The mind is a kind of theatre", writes Hume, "where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass; repass; glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations"[526]. Brenez elaborates: "This leaves nothing but a specific dissociation, as the person dissolves into a flow of heterogeneous sensations conductive to illusions of continuity"[527]. The only essence is the event of successive - heterogenous, discontinuous - appearances. Identity is a fiction, more or less useful, and has the value of providing experience a sense - even if 'illusory' - of continuity. Identities are, in this way, learnt behaviours, highly scripted performances. They are conceptual structures circulating in any given milieu, inside of which we smooth over the raw edges and shadowy depths of 'personality', what Pierre Klossowski called "the vicissitudes of the body"[528]. The archive of conformity, which manufactures identities on an industrial scale, takes care to flatter our fragile, anxious desire for a unified perception of things, world, and self, and deploys an entire *mise en scène* of guarantees and reassurances. Rather than this *mise en scène*, however,

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[525] 'Actors', p. 62.

[526] Hume. *A Treatise on Human Nature,* cited p. 62.

[527] Ibid.

[528] The following statement by Klossowski, an important source for the likes of Brenez, Grandrieux, Schefer, and a major influence on the generation of Deleuze, Foucault et al, may act as a summation of this position vis a vie the relation of body, appearance, and the 'me' of identity: "The body is only the *same* body to the extent that a same me can and will confuse itself with that body, with its vicissitudes: the cohesion of the body is that of the me: it produces this me and consequently its own cohesion. But as for itself, this body *dies and is reborn* many times according to the deaths and rebirths through which the me claims to survive in its illusory cohesion. The ages of the body are, in reality, only the *impulsional movements* which form it and deform it, and which tend afterward to abandon it." (cited and trans. by Jenny Chamarette. *Phenomenology and the Future of Film.* 2012, p. 204. Original emphasis).

Brenez directs us to the "poets of unstructured appearance" who risk a *mise en jeu* of fluctuating shadows and *flaming creatures*[529] "whose purpose is not so much to exist but merely to appear...[to] do nothing but dance, droop and fall away"[530]. Creatures as pure events bordering on nothingness. Such poets explode the paper tigers of identity and work to give figural form to the multi-differentiated possibilities of appearance. Note how, in something of a philosophical reversal, 'essence' is linked to appearance, change, chance and movement, while 'identity', the ostensibly stable and permanent state of being (therefore more desirable on the marketplace) is presented as a forgery.

The reference to Hume, I think, should be read not as an anxious attempt to 'legitimise' art in the name of philosophy, but precisely in defence of art being itself *theoretical, practical* and *poetic.* Furthermore, nowhere does Brenez suggest that such 'acting out', the affirmation of appearance over identity, is a flight from the real into escapist fantasies. It is, in fact, apropos Hume's *theatricum mundi*, a more precise description of the real sense of things as they pass, repass, glide away and mingle. This is, after all, the "symbolic game" of figuration which, we should recall here, Brenez and her colleagues described as "aiming to establish a fixed, evolving or unstable correlation between the plastic, aural and narrative parameters able to elicit fundamental categories of representation...and other parameters...relating to fundamental categories of ontology"[531]. The symbolic games of figuration and the theoretical powers of the experimental actor work to problematise what Hume named "habit", those generalisations and false concretions of what are only relations among heterogenous differences. Habits are the cliches that are absorbed by the body and reproduced by the mind, they are the stock and trade

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[529] The title of Smith's most famous film from 1963.
[530] Brenez. 'Actors', p. 62.
[531] Brenez et al. Cited in Martin *Last Day,* p. 8.

of the archive of conformity. In art historian Kamini Vellodi's gloss on Deleuze's revisioning of Humean empiricism, "habit is pernicious in its inscriptions of difference under what has already been. The task of transcendental empiricism involves the breaking of habits constituted and the integration of difference into the realm of experience"[532]. While the concept of habit introduces an important constructive dimension into empirical experience - as the faculty organising the chaos of sensation and appearances - it can, especially when scaled up to the level of a culture industry, become a deadening force. What Vellodi's reading of Deleuze argues, very much in sympathy with Brenez's ideas, is that the *work* of art is to destroy habits and introduce real difference into experience. Identity in flames.

In an analysis of a film she greatly admires, John Cassavetes' *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976), Brenez offers a verbal panorama that well describes her performative ethos and the exigencies of art as an experimental re-visioning of identity[533]. The film largely takes place in a Los Angeles revue bar named Crazy Horse West, a more or less seedy joint, but for Brenez it figures "an aesthetic and sentimental Utopia within the world of business"[534]. This separation from the totality of ordinary and habitual human relations for the exhibition of bodily postures and situations is a hallmark, according to Samuel Weber, of theatricality as a medium[535]. 'Theatre', which for Weber is more than simply 'drama' and takes on more of an anthropological significance as a 'social fact', is the delineating of a distinct field of action with

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[532] Vellodi. 'Two Regimes of Fact'. Special Issue 'Matters of Fact', Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft, 60(1), 2015, p. 114.

[533] Brenez. "Shops of Horror: Notes for a Visual History of the Reification of Emotion in a Capitalist Regime, or (to Put It More Bluntly) 'Fuck the Money.'" *Rouge*, Vol.11, 2007. http://www.rouge.com.au/11/shops_horror.html

[534] 'Reification', np.

[535] Samuel Weber. *Theatricality as Medium.* Fordham University Press. 2004. One of the great features of Weber's collected essays in this book is the promiscuous descriptions of theatricality beyond the stage including film and other technical media.

a permeable relation to its outside. The creation and care for such a space, a hollow void or *no-place,* is for Brenez, an occasion for "claustrophilia"[536]. In the 'theatre' one can stage a great *No!* to what determines things elsewhere, thus introducing a little difference, a little chaos into the system. Brenez recites a liturgy to the performer's incendiary mission: "to seduce, to give pleasure, to enchant", to bask in "the ephemeral, the provisional, the risky", and to retain "independence, mystery and singularity"[537]. It is a place, finally, where "human relations can become beautiful"[538].

The final official type of experimental actor in Brenez's taxonomic sketch traverses the reflexive acting and playful antics of Jean-Luc Godard's films. Godard's actors, in a sense, theorise their practice in their own performance. Godard's 1960's *mise en jeu* is well known: the explicit re-citation of genre 'types', the recurring suspension of the fictional contract with the audience, and, during the driftwork of the era of his 'blackboard films', actors becoming "responsible not only for reflecting the world but also for analysing and changing it"[539]. The body of the 'constructivist actor' becomes a medium for problematizing reality. The stakes of the problem are raised further still when Brenez shifts from the constructivist to the activist properly speaking. In these cases, theatricality goes underground and the joys of the ephemeral, the provisional, and the risky become matters of life and death. Brenez highlights the activities of Raymundo Gleyzer who made revolutionary and interventionist films in the face of the military dictatorship in Argentina during the 1970s. These films, almost impossible to see until recent years, dissolved the distinctions between director, actor, crew, and extra; were shown in

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[536] Brenez. 'Reification', np.
[537] Ibid.
[538] Ibid.
[539] 'Actors', p. 64.

the streets and in factories; and, ultimately, cost Gleyzer his life. He was kidnapped, tortured and murdered by the junta; he became *disappeared.*

Beyond these different types of the experimental actor, supported as they are by institutional arrangements, there are, Brenez says, the "expressive impulses" of the non-actor. These are the spontaneous irruptions of acting-out by figures who gather up into themselves, their bodies, their knowledge, the realities of their forlorn circumstances and transform them into poetry. Brenez cites the figure of a small boy who appeared in *A Luta Continua* ('the struggle continues') a 1977 film by Bruno Muel, Marcel Trillat and Asdrubal Rebeleo that reported on the Mozambican movement for independence. "In an effort to deal with the grief of losing his brother during the war, [he] composes a song for him and, standing in the dust, sings through his tears, screaming out his beautiful song"[540]. Then there is the anonymous man who yells *Napalm! Napalm! Napalm!* on a street corner in New York just to start a conversation with other strangers about the war in Vietnam (recorded by William Klein for *Far From Vietnam* [1967]). The experimental laboratory of the actor belongs to no one in particular and is available to anyone in general. 'Performers' like these, Brenez writes, who "have nothing but their bodies, their energy and their knowledge of a situation, embody the need for acting"[541].

What does it mean 'to put representation to the test'? It means shifting the terms of the debate on the relation between image and the body away from representation and toward manifesting. From this text we can discern some principles informing the activity of the Brenezian laboratory:

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[540] 'Actors', p. 65.
[541] Ibid.

- The model for beauty and splendour is that which refuses all determinations

- Negating the archive of conformity is the pathway to the utmost physical joy

- Activism and the struggle for freedom is the greatest poetic act

- Acting and performing is gambling with one's life

- Living is creating

All the 'types' of actor which Brenez describes are actually better called *prototypes.* Cinema's capacity to invent prototypical bodies, bodies without models, or 'Incomparable Bodies', is the central Brenezian feature of cinematic somatization. "The actor, an experimental laboratory of identity, redefines the accepted configurations or develops before our eyes specific prototypes of beings that can be inscribed, not only in the history of images, but in our social reality"[542].

Figures Without Bodies & Bodies Without Models

The essay 'Incomparable Bodies' is, I claim, one of Brenez's major texts available in English[543]. First published in French in 1997 in the journal *Trafic* and collected in sections of *De la Figure,* a translation by Adrian Martin was published in *Screening the Past* in 2011. 'Incomparable Bodies', or in its original French *Les corps sans modèle* ('bodies without models'), is an intensive demonstration of the variety in which cinema can manifest the manifold implications of the relation 'body/image' that is the figural matrix of somatization. It revisits aspects of many of the tropes and themes of Brenez's writing that have been previously discussed: the experimental actor, the tension between plasticity and presence, a conception of the figure that exceeds the organic body, an especially vivid demonstration of Brenez's wild empiricism. Seeing is granted its full speculative powers of invention in this text.

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[542] 'Actors', p. 62.
[543] 'Incomparable Bodies', np.

The text provides us, too, with one of the key formulas, alluded to above, for an understanding of cinema as a figural practice. That is, cinema is determined by the encounter "between the ordinary plasticity of appearances and the indescribable evidence of each body"[544]. The encounter and sliding between the *ordinary* and the *indescribable* and between *imaginary appearance* and *material effectivity* is the subject of 'Incomparable Bodies'. She describes the cinematic figure as a "corporeal *aperçu*", a term that carries with it the economy of the sketch, a glimpse or pre-view, but also the spark of insight. Brenez's tactic in 'Incomparable Bodies' is to hone in on such figures, highlight them in their distinction and set them into possible comparison with each other in order to describe categories of formal, figural invention.

Brenez's taxonomic pleasures are on full display here; she unfolds her analysis across a series of categories and circuits encompassing scores of different films and filmmakers. Her taxonomy of cinematic bodies takes in a variety of types, models, modes and manifestations. Such genera, as the title suggests, have no ultimate reference; cinematic figures cannot here be contained in the old shibboleths of degraded copies and ideal models. As such she makes the provocative claim that "cinema is fundamentally an abstract art"[545] and Brenez is the contemporary natural historian of its creaturely phantasmagoria. She makes a more general gesture, however, by dividing her objects of study into roughly two categories: what she calls 'archetypes', which are inherited from the larger figurative tradition, and 'prototypes', the eponymous incomparable bodies cinema invents for itself. But *what kind of creature is this* that is both a "terrifying, unworkable strangeness" and an "extreme familiarity" bearing the promise

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[544] 'Incomparable Bodies', np.
[545] Ibid.

of "species-belonging"[546]? Brenez positions her remarks in relation to what she calls "our human anguish over the body", the 'tragic' aspect of which was remarked upon in the discussion of Brenez's reading of Abel Ferrara's 'altered bodies'. Whereas in that text the anguish derived from the tension between individual isolation and ecstatic fusion, here it is coded in the bewildering unknowability of the body superimposed on its sheer facticity; the way it always exceeds any attempt to define and fix it and the violence with which any 'norm' or standard is secured. In the hands of Brenez such anguish, however, is precisely the experimental zone of critical activity. The distance a figure takes from standard analogies is a gesture of art; the distance from ideology or the archive of conformity is a research proposal. Together, cinema nourishes, in inventing new regimes of images, our collective imaginaries of embodiment.

Brenez prefaces her essay with a citation from Husserl: "Necessarily coexisting human beings are not thinkable as mere bodies and, like even the cultural objects which belong with them structurally, are not exhausted in corporeal being"[547]. Such a thesis situations her analysis of the cinematic body in a transindividual dimension. The figure is precisely this border troubling entity, a medium of somatization that exceeds 'corporeal being' and the distinction between subject and object. Adrian Martin has described this aspect of Brenez's project as informed by "the philosophical and anthropological problems of 'classification' or categorisation, that is, how films navigate the treacherous ground of deciding or demarcating what is 'human' from what is variously animal, alien, monstrous or non-human"[548]. On her part, Brenez marks this by jumping from Edmund Husserl to *Kung Fu Zombie* (1981).

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[546] Ibid.
[547] Ibid.
[548] Martin. 'Ultimatum: an introduction to the work of Nicole Brenez', np.

Throughout 'Incomparable Bodies' there are scattered citations, all in a first-person address, from slasher horror films, cheap video nasties, creature features and ghost stories. I am fascinated by this ghoulish chorus of the undead. Never properly integrated into the flow of analysis, lexically othered in the original French (in English), typographically marginalised as citations/headings, exiled from the proper body of the text and cinema's proper bodies, as if they were in the background during the essay's composition and have somehow crossed a threshold and seeped into this other space. Their monstrosity nonetheless underlines the general problem under consideration, the eccentric figuration of the body and the interplay between the singular and the species[549]. What Brenez might be suggesting is that what we are dealing with here is not a 'collective' or even a 'community', but the somatization of an entirely different kind of assemblage. A nocturnal kinship akin to what Jason Mohaghegh has called, in his reading of the Iranian New Wave, the "experimental pack"[550]. He posits the experimental pack as "an anthropological alternative to the pseudo-universalism of social collectivity…[T]he pack can be invoked here as an unstable aggregate, never a community, never a frustrated body but a paroxysmal alloy, not a unity but an incessant procession of particularized tonalities"[551]. A becoming of forms, then.

A bold proclamation is made at the outset: "we need to radically distinguish", Brenez writes, "the effigy before us, this dancing silhouette in images, from any real body. Of course, everything has led us to believe – because of analogy, because the image retains the trace of the individual who is anchor or extra – that the body subsists. Because it *was* there, it's *still* there.

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[549] The general ambience of violence and pathology emanating from this host of folkloric beings also has a mocking laughter, even silliness. Ghost Vixen as figural apostle.

[550] Mohaghegh. *Insurgent, Poet, Mystic, Sectarian: The Four Masks of an Eastern Postmodernism.* SUNY Press. 2015. P. 219.

[551] *Four Masks,* p. 222

And right away we have the essential figurative work accomplished by cinema: this infinite, more or less panicked research into *resemblance* via *semblance*, this enterprise authorised, quite precisely, by the very absence of a real body"[552]. Brenez's analysis critically inhabits "the kingdom of the effigy"[553] and in one fell swoop, opens the way out the deadlocked debates about 'representation' and the demise of cinema's photographic, indexical relation to the real. Similar to the earliest generation of film critics and filmmakers, Brenez will affirm the *difference* cinema makes in its reconfiguration of the sensible and logical world. The figure of the cinematic creature unfolds not as a representation but as an open question, a proposition, with no ultimate reference other than the originary *cut,* this generative absence of the real body. However, and this is a vital aspect of Brenez's film thought, this 'negativity', this *après coup* of the cinematic *aperçus* does not prohibit the possibility of what she calls "real presence", which was defined you'll recall as "the divergence of the thing from itself"[554]. What counts as real for a critic like Brenez is not anything 'pure', untouched by mediation, nor is it something defined by being ontologically distinct from image and appearance**.** Real presence in the cinema is any concrete phenomena that prolongs and intensifies this originary cut; that, in her words, affirms film's "capacity for abstraction, its propensity for allegory, its figurative invention, its various aberrations and its prophetic force"[555].

Even so, Brenez's wild empiricism is still an empiricism. For her, cinema is still linked, like some figurative umbilical cord, to what she calls **"**the effective body"[556]. Cinema goes to work on the kinetic, affective and situated aspect of real bodies, its "movement, trace, passage",

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[552] Brenez. 'Incomparable Bodies', np.

[553] Said, surely, with a nod to the famous response of Ashile Gorky to the earliest projected moving images, who described the world of cinema as the "kingdom of shadows".

[554] 'Ultramodern', p. 236.

[555] 'Incomparable Bodies', np.

[556] Ibid.

she writes. She celebrates the title of one of Guy Debord's early films, *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Short Period of Time,* as "the unbeatable title, the title to end all film titles", because it condenses, in descriptive rather than psychological terms, this figurative work that cinema does. But the real body is not exhausted in corporeal being. It also includes a "symbolic elaboration"[557], the whole unevenly socialised archive of sedimented figurative types, the cliches and stereotypes, the norms and exceptions, the fantasies and impulses, all the virtualities of every actual body. Experience, cinematic or otherwise, is given its shape and intensity by the varieties and occurrences of the relation between the effective body and its *symbolique.*

Let's plunge into Brenez's classifications, this "vertigo of resemblances"[558]. As always in her writing, there is the appropriation of a systematic logic of thought but without its totalising or universal pretences. Her taxonomy overlaps, subdivides, multiplies, and repeats itself; relations of inversion and doubling are frequent. Some entries of the system are almost totally opaque and confusing, others are more detailed and exemplified. The dynamic of the text is the possible passages between these two points. The sketchy nature of the types opens space for future experimentation and nuancing. At times it reads as if she is thinking out loud on the page, improvising at the moment of encounter for the generation of concept or classification. But there is always a sense, to this reader at least, of a deep and profound experience and understanding of the world of images - their history, forms and powers - of a life shared with images and of an intellect responding to the strangeness and singularity of cinema's world-historical transformation of that world.

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[557] Ibid.
[558] Ibid.

"Four classical figurative models", Brenez writes, "inform our apprehension of the body, and load the cinematic effigy up with their artistic and cultural weight: *organic, logical, mechanical* and *fetishistic*"[559]. These are the 'archetypes' cinema inherits and at turns reproduces and reconfigures. There is a risk in considering these archetypes as predominantly obstacles to the full and 'proper' autonomy of the cinematic figure. But Brenez quickly notes that, in relation to the organic model but applicable to the rest, they can serve as "infinite laborator[ies]"[560]. The cinema is simultaneously a heuristic and artistic dispositif; it can be appropriated to study the histories and varieties of bodily figurations.

The *organic* model, for Brenez, is focused on the body's effectivity and she singles out "figurative research into movement, anatomy, flesh, the corpse, the scorched and the skeletal"[561] as "permanent" features of the medium. The model then divides into *animal* and *vegetal* modes, each with different branching manifestations. The *animal* mode, for example, is articulated where human behaviour is "naturalised" in terms of animal tropes, such as the famous superimpositions of animal and human faces in Eisenstein's *Strike* (1924) to denote the different character qualities and dispositions. Or, alternatively, when it is deployed, beyond any totemic significance, to render the 'inhuman' or monstrous dimension of human being: the human as a wolf among wolves.

The *logical* model is the inverse. It abstracts away from 'nature' into either allegorical or ideal modes. Allegorical modes are cases where figures embody specific virtues or conceptual types: courage, avarice, etc. Or it invents ideal types, or "cases", that condense several virtues

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[559] Ibid.
[560] Ibid.
[561] Ibid.

into figurative and especially physiognomic form. Brenez claims that the logical model, cinema's most abstract tendency, is in fact its most common. Hollywood cinema, for example, is described as a "cinema of Individualism without individuals", populated instead by "emblems, examples, [and] types"[562]. The logical model, nonetheless, allows for a great deal of artistic scope for experimentation and play insofar as these 'emblems' are in each case possible images of thought.

The third classical figurative archetype is the *mechanical* model. The mechanical or machinic can refer either to "the imaginary of the robot", of all the many versions of the cyborg whether the 'hardware' version like *The Terminator* movies or the 'software' version a la Cronenberg, where the human flesh is contaminated with silicon logics. Or to exceptional cases like Vertov, where the whole figurative economy strives for the dynamism and perfectibility of the machine. The 'classically' modernist discourses of the New Man - futurism, constructivism, etc - fall under this model and reinvent it as the spirit of the age. For Brenez, though, these are quite clear and distinct examples. Her analytical desire is sparked more so by the eccentric comparison, where figures embody these different models without the legitimising safety of genre or ideology. For example, she writes,

> The 'perfect electric man' is, rather, Katherine Hepburn, whose diction forbids us
> from imagining that she has actually thought what she speaks, a diction so rapid that it
> autonomises speech and transforms the body into an extremely spiritual automaton.
> Or it is Jet Lee, whose lateral airdrills and magical leaps sweep away the limits of human
> movement. Or, indeed, all those figures who once again put the body in play in relation
> to itself, striving for a perfection which sometimes testifies to the utmost humility, such

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[562] Ibid.

as Keanu Reeves in *Speed* (1994), who feels no need to either reflect or prove himself, who is pure action – even a pure operationality of the act – and who, because of that, resembles nothing so much as an electric cable[563].

In all these cases, rendered in characteristic brilliance and originality, the body is put on show by forces that make it exceed its limits. Brenez's rhapsody of the figure produces a contemporary image of magnificence.

Finally, there is the *fetishistic* model. This model has three different modes: the *Eidolon,* the Figurine and the Reference Point [*le repère*]. It is defined as "everything which incorporates alterity into the body". The *Eidolon,* as the name suggests, refers to the figurative schemas of the ancient Greek world. These are, in one sense or another, supernatural figures. Figures that evoke some "beyond within the human form"[564]. Religious deities as well as folkloric figures like the vampire are included in this mode of fetish. The Figurine, inversely, empties the body out and leaves behind a homunculus with an uncanny human-like form but deprived of cognitive facilities and self-determining agency: the doll, the marionette, the automaton. In the cinema, figurines make of the body a pure "plastic contour" such as the "geometrization of bodies" in the films of Busby Berkely[565]. Most mysteriously is the mode of Reference Point. *Le repére* may be alternatively translated as 'benchmark', even 'landmark'. A node within a system by which all the other co-ordinates are measured. 'Man as the measure of all things', as that which absorbs and nullifies all other differences. But Brenez, evoking a totally contingent moment in Godard's *Nouvelle Vague* (1990) where Alain Delon's silhouette is "assimilated" to an ordinary tree trunk, reverses the polarity. Now, instead of being the figure of universality

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[563] Ibid.
[564] Ibid.
[565] Ibid.

embodied in 'perfect' Pythogorean form, "the human figure falls into the *informe* or formless, now nothing more than an accident, some little thing lost within Nature"[566]. Which is to say, a world without any reference point at all.

This experience of alterity as it somatizes into cinematic figures is taken to new intensities and eccentricity as Brenez moves from the inherited archetypes that cinema "recalls" and into the "hypothetical gestures" of figurative prototypes. According to Brenez, there are four "original logics" that cinema invents for itself, in other words, that do not build on existing figurative schema inherited from the great world traditions of corporeal figuration. They are: *plastic circuits, critical bodies, pathological counter-model* and *Phantom*. I intend to focus here only on the first two of these as they are given the most detailed analysis in Brenez's essay and are models that recur throughout her writing.

The logic of plastic circuits is divided into two modes: *dispersive synthesis* and *intensive anamorphosis.* "In a plastic circuit", Brenez writes, "the body is not already given and can never be given; it results from a visual and aural syntax or parataxis which never hesitates to leave itself in the state of a perpetual sketch, and to construct the body as an impossible contradiction"[567]. In plastic circuits, the figure takes leave of the effective body most completely. Indeed, one could summarise it succinctly as producing *figures without bodies.* What Brenez means by 'circuit' is not reducible to montage, though montage is its condition of possibility. Circuits are the chains of resemblances in which the motif of a figurative economy are assembled. They are also not the same as the sequence of discrete scenes or shots; circuits

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[566] Ibid.
[567] Ibid.

may be composed of part-elements *within* scenes that are linked in circuits *across* scenes that are alternatively contiguous or distant from each other.

Here, Brenez's key example of a *dispersive synthesis* is that favoured treasure of French cinephilia *Cat People* (1942), a B-movie horror film directed by Jacques Tourneur. What Brenez is attempting to describe is the ability of cinema to 'suggest' a body or merely some presence purely in formal or 'syntactical' terms, and not through explicit representation. The monster in *Cat People,* according to Brenez, is an "unassignable creature…an unlocatable synthesis of phenomena of resemblance, whose most definite local manifestation is in the fades-to-black"[568]. Brenez does not expand on this idea, but consider, for example, the two sequences where the character of Alice (Jane Randolph) is stalked by this strange presence. First sequence, exterior night, the figure of the monster is pure ambient threat, produced through a circuit of linkages between looks out of frame, centred framing of Alice, dissolves of the frame into blackness, and rapid scanning of the frame by an opaque presence (provided by street lamps). The rhythm, which alternates between a dilated pause as Jane attempts to locate the threat visually in the scene and a staccato pacing of cuts with heeled-shoe strikes that superimposes the suggestion of a tense flight and beating pulse, is crucial to the overall synthesis. Second sequence, interior basement indoor swimming pool, the concept of a plastic circuit is given figural form in the lateral image of a darkened staircase rendered in graphic chiaroscuro of alternating vertical bars. This image appears three times, twice with the stairs framed on each side by thick bars of opaque blackness. This graphic emphasis of illumination regularly spaced within total darkness evokes the structural base of film itself, the exposed frames and invisible intervals of the celluloid strip. Transgressing this regular structure,

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[568] Ibid.

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however, is a tenebrous, plastic mass, a shadowy movement that borders on presence but never takes any recognisable form.

An *intensive anamorphosis,* on the other hand, is "a deepening of a single image, bringing out its variations, exhuming its scandal and thus its truth"[569]. Anamorphosis, here, does not only mean the distortion of proper perspectival relations, but a *process* of constant modulation. If the previous circuit operates by dispersing the body into links and relations, this second mode operates by "deepening" an image by altering it in the course of gradual stages of translation. The key example Brenez uses for this mode is *Lost Highway* (1997) directed by David Lynch. The originary image unfolded or *défiled* is of a criminal executed in an electric chair. In Brenez's analysis the film's progression *is* this moment translated into three distinct regimes. First, "*memory-images*". These, paradoxically, approach the real (the "inaugural image", the crime itself) with the most intensity but are presented with the greatest plasticity: "excess images, filmed on video, fragmentary, blurry, at the limits of identifiability"[570], such excess signalling its dangerous, irruptive force within the circuit. Second, "*fantasy-images*". This regime attempts to screen the real, make it more psychically tolerable. Brenez divides it in two: 1) a scenographic regime that translates the morbid *mise en scène* of capital punishment into the empty and formal, "hieratic" description of the couple's life; 2) narrative cliché, the popular iconography of *film noir,* with all its desperate dreams of pleasure and enjoyment marked by death. Finally, "*electric-sensation*", a plastic circuit of stroboscopic flickering, aural hazing, and scenes of libidinally saturated bodily panic. Such a logic does not follow a

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[569] ibid.
[570] Ibid.

representational/narrative logic of cause-and-effect but instead objectivizes "a psychic process: *the reproduction of a trauma in its multiple aftershocks*"[571][572].

The two models of circuits of plasticity are two powerful logics of somatization. The dispersive synthesis is a model for the *ext*ensive investigation into the plastic capacities of figural monstrosity, altered bodies of purely cinematic construction. The model of anamorphosis is an *int*ensive plunge into the multiplicity and multiple strangeness of every image.

The other figurative prototype I will discuss here is what Brenez calls the *"the critical body"*. If the twin logics of plastic circuits produce *figures without bodies,* then the logic of critical bodies is that of *bodies without models.* Here we return to the effective body, the locus of figurative work with which Brenez begins her taxonomic adventure and from which, till now, cinema's powers would seem to be measured in the distance taken from it. How does cinema, then, operating under the figural protocols by which Brenez engages it, address the kinetic, affective and situated aspect of real bodies, their movement, trace, and passage? "These are the *critical* bodies", she writes, "in the face of which speech [*parole*] gives up, those revelatory bodies proper to documentary cinema and the documentary dimension of cinema as a whole"[573]. Brenez quickly qualifies this 'revelatory' aspect of critical bodies by complicating what strictly denotes the documentary mode of cinema 'as a whole'. On the one hand, critical

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[571] CN, p. 17.
[572] Various aspects of psychoanalytic discourse are clearly at play here. But it is Brenez's affirmed position that film analysis is best conducted by staying with the film and building up its logic piece by piece, re-engineering its figurative economy. My aim in these sections is both to present Brenez's taxonomy of figurative expressions as material for future study and testing, but also to indicate to the reader her immersive reading strategies of individual films, which rarely refer to any authority other than the films themselves.
[573] Translation slightly modified. Original reads: "les corps révélateurs propres au cinéma documentaire et à la dimension documentaire de l'ensemble du cinéma" , *De la figure,* p. 37.

bodies are not reducible to ethnographic data ("ceremonies, masks, dance, play"[574], for example), which, while being eminent descriptive practices are more concerned, Brenez's argument here goes, with generating "material for knowledge", that is, information and discourse[575]. And on the other hand, critical bodies refuse the reduction of individuals and groups merely to 'victims of history', where real bodies are made to appear in the course of economic, social or political arguments which they themselves are *de facto* ineligible to influence or participate in. And implicitly, for it is not directly addressed in this essay, the revelatory dimension of critical bodies does not mean producing a psychological subject such as what a liberal humanism might recognise.

Critical bodies emerge, rather, from "bodies doing nothing"[576]. We return here to the Demenÿ-prototype of the visual event ('bordering on nothingness') with which we began: the framing of corporeal time in its everyday gestures and habits, its situated modes of relationality, and as 'mute witness' to time. Outside the various discursive models in which it is so often incorporated, the critical body resides in its ordinary insignificance[577]. Such insignificance, however, incarnates a figural power of great importance for Brenez. She writes, "[t]he principle of the incomparable body asserts itself nowhere better than here"[578]. The hypothetical gestures of somatization do not necessarily concern feverishly hunting down the meaning of everything and everybody. What the cinematic transformation of the ordinary body into visual event produces is singularity, "indescribable evidence" of the sheer improbable matter of fact of *this figure making an appearance*. The constructive valence is essential. 'Evidence', in this usage,

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[574] 'Incomparable Bodies', np.
[575] Ibid.
[576] Ibid.
[577] On 'the indeterminacy of the everyday', see Sheringham's reading of French theory and critical art practices in *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present.* Oxford University Press. 2006.
[578] 'Incomparable Bodies', np.

does not mean an epistemology of proof nor does it refer to an 'ultimate reference', outside the image. The only evidence is the facility of infinite displacement of every figure to appear, to change, to inhabit its gesture; the only real presence is 'the divergence of the thing from itself'.

What becomes of classification and kinship under the pressure of such singularity? Or, as Brenez herself writes, "Once we have confirmed the strangeness of everyone to everyone else, and of each person to him/herself, we arrive again at the question of human community, of belonging to a species"[579]. 'Community' becomes, in Brenez's terms, "a dynamic question"[580]. Shared belonging in the experimental pack is a collective striving to affirm difference - difference between and difference within each member. Belonging appears as an open-ended experiment in immanence rather than a collective incorporation under an imaginary unity (Nation, God, People, etc). There is certainly a utopian dimension to all this. One wonders if the abolishment of all models is possible in practice, where there is necessarily a tension between 'recalled' archetypes and 'hypothetical' prototypes. But the critical body remains something of a figurative ideal, a limit-experience against which the rest of "species-belonging" is measured.

Brenez is light on exemplification for this model. She refers, cryptically but provocatively, to the collaborative poetics of Jean Rouch and the film *Moi, un noir* (1958) in particular. This suggests an alignment between the figure of the critical body and the expressive impulses of the non-actor. *Moi, un noir* is famous not only for its immersion into the everyday *habitus* of its subject-collaborators, but also it serving as a screen and medium for their acting out, their dreams and desires, even their 'fictional' personas. The critical body is also the

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[579] Ibid.
[580] Ibid.

creative body. And insofar as the film emerges in the cross-cultural encounter between 'the pale fox' (Rouch) and 'Edward G. Robinson' (Oumarou Ganda), *critique* and *symbolique* are modes of somatization that permanently exchange masks.

The kingdom of the effigy is a domain of great turbulence, energy and variety. A world where the "accidents of appearance", alluded to in the citation from Genet above, are the constitutive material phenomena. Brenez describing the becoming of forms could, one imagines, go on into yet unnamed and infinite series. Not only do figures present 'catastrophic' versions of real bodies - in the sense of structure, logic and measure losing its integral definition and dispersing - Brenez's own categories themselves always seem to include, even privilege, their own catastrophic inversion. Every form borders on the *informe.* We see here as well a recapitulation of the typical Brenezian schema that privileges contingent accidents and discontinuity but which populates a depth, an opacity, a continuity; a figural space of great possibility. Such a vertigo of resemblances and nocturnal kinship suggests Blanchot's concept of 'the other night'[581]. It is the proper domain of the fascinating image, "where pure resemblance reigns. Everything there is similar; each figure is another one, is similar to another and to yet another, and this last to still another. One seeks the original model, wanting to be referred to a point of departure, an initial revelation, but there is none. The dream is the likeness that refers eternally to likeness" (268). These chains of resemblances do not constitute an identity, but its unworking.

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[581] Maurice Blanchot. *The Space of Literature.* Trans Ann Smock. University of Nebraska Press. 1982, p.162

Conclusion

Brenez's writing on somatization is a panorama of figurative possibility. It challenges us to conceive of cinema as an experimental zone that throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century has reconfigured the archive of bodily forms and ventured more than a few of its own 'hypothetical gestures'. Somatization as a methodological field has ontological, plastic, historical and political dimensions. As an ontology of history, Brenez posits figurativity as a virtual field of figurative possibility, a field that can be actualised in a multiplicity of plastic circuits and descriptive forms. The bifurcation at cinema's 'primal scene' between Marey's line of figural plasticity and Demenÿ's line of descriptive experimentation could be thought of as the two strands of DNA comprising a figurative conception of cinema. The bonds between them are the many, many different protocols of somatization explored above such as the figurative unfolding of the body beyond its corporeal limits, the condensation of history into ordinary gesture and comportment, a passage between essence and appearance, the critical refusal of restricted discourses, or dispersive and intensive circuitry of aural and visual plasticity. One of the goals of this chapter has been to provide a database of ideas and analytical sections into the cellular tissue of figural thought that can initiate further study and experimentation in the territories that Nicole Brenez helps open up.

In the following chapter I examine the most substantial piece of Brenez's writing currently available in English, her monograph on the American filmmaker Abel Ferrara. The dynamism of 'anamorphosis', which was analysed above as one of the 'prototypical' dimensions of figuration, is again deployed by Brenez to describe the immanent processes of construction in Ferrara's films. The book deepens the ethical implications of cinematic somatization by situating it in relation to the way characters in the films acknowledge and

somatically translate intolerable and traumatic events. My reading of 'A Cinema of Negation'
also returns to the principles and features of the visual study discussed in the previous chapter.
Ferrara's films, Brenez writes, are "devoted to observing the nature, role and workings of images
in the individual psyche and collective imaginary"[582]

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[582] CN, p. 152.

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The Logic of Delirium:

Reading Brenez's 'A Cinema of Negation'

"...the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative as when we say of something that it is nothing or is false, and then having done with it, turn away and pass on to something else; on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being."

– G.W.F. Hegel, Preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*

Introduction

At the end of the last millennium, a PhD student named Kathy (Lili Taylor) is in a dark room faced with images. She also *is* an image, a figure in the film directed by Abel Ferrara, *The Addiction* (1995). The full darkness of this room, of this image, is only obscured by twinned illuminated surfaces, two projection surfaces, a face and a screen. A face and a screen stretched over an originary darkness. The screen hosts still images that slide into and away from each other - a slide projection - an atrocity exhibition of photographs snatched from conflict zones of the twentieth century. 'Atrocity', from the Latin root *astrox* meaning fierce, cruel, unrelenting. Damaged images. The face is suspended in its movements, in a stunned fascination. There is a cross-hair focused right between her eyes, a part of the face that with the smallest of micro-movements can shift its bearer between a state of contemplation and a state of grief. The face, turned toward catastrophe, is crossed by the shadows of atrocity and

enlightened by their gaze. *But what kind of knowledge is this?* There is another light too, a second light, as if shining from the back of Kathy's head out toward the screen, modelling her as both a classical movie star and some kind of angel. An angel of history? *Atrocious.* Projected in such a way, it is as if the unseen source of her psyche, the most intimate yet most unknown part of her, is now beaming on the screen, as if the opaque images of the horrors from the twentieth century are already deposited in her and are now being given a full figural expression. What responses are there to such images? How do we take responsibility for images that are simultaneously 'out there', evidence of a world (even if it is the loss of a world), but also 'in here', as the enigmatic part of ourselves, as the shadows of our unknown body? These are the kinds of problems posed by the cinema of Abel Ferrara and the point of departure for their analysis in Brenez's critical study 'The Cinema of Negation'[583]. As Brenez writes, "Faced with the obligation to stare at the intolerable, how does consciousness function?"[584].

Previous chapters have established the theoretical basis of Brenez's critical strategies and highlighted her centering of film practice as 'expanded theory'. They have described the principles and instruments of immanent critique and outlined the cinematic form Brenez names the visual study which she hails as a form of image analysis by means of the image itself. I catalogued the variety of ways Brenez opens up the body as a vertiginous field of cinematic somatization. What remains is to give an account of the ethical force at the heart of her critical project. This has been hinted at throughout but has not been given any direct treatment. Brenez is a specialist in avant-garde cinema and has championed figures such as René Vautier,

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[583] Brenez, Nicole. *Abel Ferrara.* University of Illinois Press, 2007. Print. [CN]
The book is published as part of a Contemporary Film Directors series then edited by James Naremore and as such all carry the respective director's name as formal title. The text itself, however, is titled in the contents as 'A Cinema of Negation'. The book was subsequently published in French in 2008 by Cahiers du Cinéma bearing the title *Abel Ferrara: Le Mal Mais Sans Fleurs,* a pun on Baudelaire
[584] CN, p. 114

director of the anti-colonial film *Afrique 50* (1950), Jocelyn Saab, who spent decades documenting the scars of war on the flesh and psyche of Lebanon's people, and Lionel Soukaz, whose films, such as *IXE* (1980), radically mix hardcore gay pornography and political militancy, so it may come as somewhat of a surprise for her to herald a filmmaker operating within the American commercial film system and producing ostensibly genre pictures as a moral contemporary of Bataille and Hegel[585]. Such a gesture, however, is wholly in keeping with the way reading Brenez forces us to confront our ready-made critical habits and prejudices about what a political aesthetic is and could be. What Brenez admires most of all in Ferrara's work is the same activity and ethos she affirms again and again across her various activities as a writer, curator, film producer, and teacher. That is, cinema deployed as a confrontation with the intolerable aspects of our shared reality and as a critical instrument for the rigorous study and analysis of images. As the most substantial example of Brenez's writing available in English, I take it as a working template of the possibilities for her method as such, as a practical model for facing the image and translating that encounter into a dynamic, writerly practice. I offer a reading of 'A Cinema of Negation' not as a contribution to debates on a particular director per se, but to bring to the fore the thesis that cinema is a visionary critical activity, which Brenez's intervention so brilliantly demonstrates.

The book participates in a history of European critics, often with strong avant-garde sympathies, tackling an American director of commercial films otherwise dismissed, ignored or actively reviled by its domestic critical establishment. A "reputedly monstrous, addicted, muddled filmmaker", Brenez writes[586]. Her critical gaze, however, is motivated not in uncovering the ideological underpinnings of a dominant cultural form, but to critically inhabit

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[585] CN, p. 35.
[586] CN, p. 150.

the film-work, to discern the figural economies and figural logics at play, and to think with film as an expanded practice of theory, a thinking in images. The writing does not proceed along a linear structure of proposition followed by argument and evidence; analysis is multiplied in serial rather than causal relations. It is possible, I would argue, for the reader to enter into the text at almost any point and be able to extract some valuable insight, just as one might consult a dictionary or networked database[587]. Single films are approached from multiple perspectives, and appear at multiple points in the book. A Cinema of Negation' sees Brenez reprising Thierry Kuntzel's efforts to produce a 'delirious' reading of cinema "in a kind of Cézanne-like space, in which different perspectives are at work on the same surface"[588]. Discussions of narrative development and the conventional tools of formal analysis such as framing, camera movement, dialogue, montage, etc, are almost completely absent. Instead, Brenez's immanent critique displaces the temporal continuity, spatial homogeneity, and narrative unity of the films and condenses on the problems Ferrara's films raise, "What are the limits of identity? What is an individual? What is a social subject? What are we conscious of? What are we responsible for?"[589]. The different layers of the book are organised by isolating a particular logic by which one or more of these problems are figured in one or more films. Each logic is then pursued following two lines of inquiry: their immanent *anamorphic structures* and regimes of *somatization.* Anamorphosis, which was briefly discussed in the previous chapter in terms of its usage in Brenez's essay 'Incomparable Bodies', is defined here as the process by which "a key image is translated and metamorphosed in the course of a film"[590]. Somatization, or the

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[587] This is, perhaps not incidentally, the Lyotard's definition of a 'good book', that is, one that approaches the order of the figure from a figural rather than discursive point of view. Lyotard explains, "A good book, in order to give free rein to truth in its aberration, would be a book where linguistic time (the time in which signification evolves, the time of reading) would itself be deconstructed—a book the reader could dip into anywhere, in any order: a book to be grazed", DF, p. 13.

[588] Kuntzel. 'The Film Work 2', p. 56.

[589] CN, p. 3.

[590] CN, p. 13.

translation of psychic processes and historical phenomena into bodily states, is focused, in this case, into a critical investigation into the question of subjectivity and the status of the individual in late capitalist societies. The analysis is an often-bewildering mixture of extensive breadth and concentrated depth. It goes broad to an almost baroque level of complexity in the number of questions Brenez asks of the films and the variety of responses she observes. But it also goes deep in the way singular themes are translated in multiple repetitions, variations, and critical reprisals.

The book is also often overlooked in the piecemeal reception of Brenez's work to date perhaps because it appears to be so closely tied to one particular director's work. There is therefore a risk that its insights are not properly assimilated by the discipline at large. The text emerges out of a seminar Brenez taught for several years on the problem of evil for figurative cinema at the University of Paris 1. 'Cinema of Negation' is therefore a teaching text, one that offers a veritable pedagogy of the image.

Study the Image

The central claim of Brenez's study is that Ferrara's films are "devoted to observing the nature, role and workings of images in the individual psyche and collective imaginary"[591]. Imagery, in Ferrara, is a medium for exploring "violent psychic experiences" via a "contestatory political engagement"[592]. To explore what she calls Ferrara's "systematic research into the

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[591] CN, p. 152.
[592] Brenez. 'A Critical Panoply: Abel Ferrara's Catholic Imagery Trilogy', trans. Adrian Martin. *Film Trilogies: New Critical Approaches.* Eds. Claire Perkins & Constantine Verevis. Palgrave Macmillan. 2012. P. 127, 129. This later essay revises many of the arguments Brenez makes in her monograph with additional analysis of *Mary* (2005) which had received only very limited attention. I refer to this essay at times as part of my reading of her treatment of Ferrara's oeuvre.

visionary dimensions of psychic life"[593], Brenez ranges across all of Ferrara's many films from the 1970s to early 2000s, including abandoned projects, music videos, and work for television. In this chapter I have chosen to limit my focus on her analysis of what she calls Ferrara's 'Consciousness Trilogy' which comprises *The Addiction* (1995), *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), and *The Blackout* (1997). 'Consciousness', so-called because the figurative economies of these films are strongly determined by the different figurative logics of the subject embodied in the figures of the films' three protagonists. Specifically, their different modes of acknowledging a traumatic and intolerable reality: denial (L.T., played by Harvey Keitel in *Bad Lieutenant*), introjection (Kathy in *The Addiction*), and delirium (Matty, played by Matthew Modine in *The Blackout*)[594]. The Consciousness Trilogy provides a particularly acute body of work in which to trace the films' analysis of images and can thus provide the chapter with a cohesive structure with which to parse Brenez's study. In Ferrara's films, consciousness is given a strong visual and 'visionary' emphasis. 'Visionary', in the sense Brenez deploys it here is, precisely, the intensive study of imagery. Brenez refers to Ferrara's "enterprise of translation [which] never ceases reinventing the relation between mental image and concrete image"[595]. Mental images refer to the subjective experience of the image, such as in memories, reveries, hallucinations, and in the imagination, especially as a medium for the forces of desire. Concrete images refer to the appearance in the films of images 'objectified' in tangible forms for example, in the documentary images in the scene from *The Addiction* described above, or in religious iconography in *Bad Lieutenant,* or in the working of the 'film within a film' trope in *The Blackout*. Ferrara's 'system', then, refers to the system of relations that can be articulated between mental and concrete images at the level of the individual film, and, at the level of the

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[593] 'Critical Panoply', p. 127.
[594] CN, p. 113.
[595] CN, p. 23

œuvre, how this key concern is reprised, complicated, and extended in each iteration of the system. In such a way, Ferrara's 'enterprise of translation' becomes Brenez's analytical device with which to study the films from a figural perspective at the level of the image.

'Cinema of Negation' sees Brenez following through on the exigencies of film theory as she came to articulate them in her essay 'The Ultimate Journey'. There, she nominates three "axes of theorisation" that have motivated the field of figural thought: *the powers of the image, the figurability of the subject, and the thinkable relations between the cinematograph and history*[596]. The powers of the image are discussed in the terms just described above. That is, on the one hand, the image as a mode of perception and experience of traumatic memory figured by Ferrara's protagonists, and on the other, their interaction with a variety of different regimes of the image. The structure of the films themselves follow from the different figures of consciousness incarnated by each protagonist and unfold according to processes of 'anamorphosis'. The question of subjectivity, more specifically, is analysed in terms of the ways the different figures of consciousness *somatize* the experience of mental and concrete images. Somatization is here defined as "translation of psychic, political, and economic phenomena into corporeal terms"[597].

Finally, the question of history, which concerns, as has been mentioned several times now, the confrontation with what Brenez calls 'the intolerable'. The guiding principle of Ferrara's cinema, according to Brenez, is that "*the only story is the story of evil*"[598]. This intolerable evil operates at a number of levels. It can refer to the generalised nature of crime,

[596] 'Ultimate Journey', np. .
[597] CN, p. 22.
[598] CN, p. 6. Original emphasis. The motto is repeated on pages 14 and 23.

violence and enmity that saturates Ferrara's fictional worlds, but also to larger political impasses concerning the legacies of the catastrophes of the twentieth century[599]. It refers to the spiritual malaise of Ferrara's protagonists and the ordeals which they undergo to first of all acknowledge the truth and cause of evil in the world and, finally, their efforts in, as Brenez writes, "finding forms of faith at the heart of human negativity"[600]. Borrowing a term from Bataille, Brenez characterises the Ferraran hero as figures of "hypermorality"[601]. That is, a figure that rather than simply tolerate, ignore or psychically shield oneself from an intolerable world via normative categories of the good, they transgress the boundaries separating the self and "the disaster"[602]. The hypermoral figure searches for more intense modes of communication *with* the intolerable by immersing themselves in, Brenez says citing Hegel once more, "ethical totality"[603]. The visionary aspect of Ferrara's films, their various anamorphic and somatic *dispositifs* of translation between mental and concrete imagery, is intimately tied to this "work of negativity"[604].

The Ferraran aesthetic of studying the image is closely connected, as the title of the Brenez's essay explicitly marks, to her Hegelian principle of 'tarrying with the negative' which, as I discussed in Chapter Two, is the essential principle by which Brenez imagines the common cause of critical art and the art of critique. Just as the hypermoral figures of the Consciousness Trilogy immerse themselves in 'ethical substance', Brenez, following her experimental ethos of

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[599] CN, p. 110.

[600] CN, p. 26.

[601] Ibid.

[602] CN, p. 14. Though uncited, the reference is certainly to Maurice Blanchot's theme of 'writing the disaster'. In 'The Ultimate Journey', Brenez also gestures to Blanchot claiming the work of post-WWII film theory and practice operate in the wake of disaster. The strongest theoretical articulation of this is, of course, Deleuze's *The Time-Image*.

[603] CN, p. 33.

[604] CN, p. 34.

the critical affirmation of radical negativity, abolishes all distance between her and her object of study. Eschewing moral judgement for rigorous description of the workings of the films necessarily means they are, as well, infected with their certain delirious quality; a work of critique filled with rage, melancholy, and fragile hope. The book reaches its intellectual climax in pursuing the thesis that, in such a context, *delirium* constitutes a viable and visionary political aesthetic. She writes, "The image only has meaning in ceaselessly measuring itself against what is unbearable and inadmissible: cruelty, inner opacity, and all that defies understanding"[605].

Ferrara's Combat with Clichés

One of the first things Brenez has to say about Ferrara is that he is "a poet who justifies the existence of popular forms"[606]. Across this body of work there are examples of many of the popular genre that have dominated the culture industry since moving images began to be mass produced. Aspects of pornography, science-fiction, detective thrillers, fantasy horror films, are all put to the test. This is a key facet of Brenez's central cinematic form, the visual study: putting representation to the test. However, in contrast to the disintegrating logics deployed by Razutis or the "spirit of contradiction and contestatory energy"[607] that animates Godard's aesthetics of confusion, Ferrara's work, for Brenez, "strives to be clear, accessible, [and] comprehensible to all"[608]. As such, Brenez reinforces the claim that the visual study is not limited to works conventionally associated with the avant-garde or even within the narrowly

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[605] CN, p. 38.
[606] CN, p. 1.
[607] 'Work of the Document', np.
[608] 'Critical Panoply', p. 131.

defined parameters of the 'found footage' film[609]. Rather than extant images per se, what Ferrara goes to work on is the currency of certain standardised cinematic forms and figurative tropes, familiar to large numbers of people across geographically and socially diverse contexts; a kind of cinematic 'common sense', indeed seemingly everything that Lyotard condemned as endemic to the quasi-religion of *le cinéma*: "characters, narrative, mise en scène, and genre"[610]. For Brenez, however, such 'common sense' is precisely the field of Ferrara's figurative intervention: *mise en scène* is the staging ground for the work of negativity to begin. Having said that, Ferrara's form of studying the image is not via any kind of 'postmodern' irony or self-conscious parody; like the early Warhol, but with totally different means, Ferrara's treatment of convention and cliché is deadly serious. What Brenez praises, with Ken Jacobs and Paul Sharits' films flickering away in the back of her head, is the *"figurative directness"*[611] of his films where the 'directness' of the cliché qua engrammatic excitation meets the directness of experimental film's use of the image as concrete presence or perceptual event of luminous plastic velocity.

Thus, the crucible through which Ferrara's 'enterprise of translation' between mental and concrete imagery must pass is the culture of the cliché. The specific principle under which Brenez situates this aspect of Ferrara's *détournement* of cinematic common sense is "critical intensification"[612]. This occurs through a three-way articulation of the iconography of visual 'low culture' - sleaze, gore, celebrity, as well as formal elements of advertising, television, and

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[609] Although there are elements of quotation in Ferrara's films, the documentary images in *The Addiction,* for example, or the use of elements of Jean Renoir's 1926 film *Nana* in *The Blackout.*
[610] CN, p. 4.
[611] 'Critical Panoply', p. 129.
[612] CN, p. 25.

music videos[613] - with a "sumptuous" and "flamboyant" plastic sensibility, and a subversive engagement with the politics of exploitation, warfare, and cruelty[614]. At its core, this critical intensification of the cliché is borne of a rage at the foreclosure of the promises of the movements for radical change in the 1960s. In the collective imaginary, clichés reign in conditions of failed or collapsed transcendence, when there is no more 'outside' of the current political and existential condition. In this way, we can situate 'A Cinema of Negation' within a larger project of Brenez's which is to locate, describe, and amplify forms of visual protest in the wake of collective projects of emancipation. I return to this point in the final section of this chapter.

But what exactly is a cliché? Certainly it is something that facilitates easy recognition via its sheer quantitative repetition and circulation. As a 'commercial image', an image of commerce, the cliché travels in a purpose-built industrial apparatus premised on extensive circulation and presents a face that invites rapid exchange and easy trade across otherwise heterogeneous domains. Clichés and cinematic common sense more generally do have a connection to local cultures, folklore, storytelling, and common experience (even if it is only the common experience of clichés). But the cliché is not the popular; it may be, however, the true appearance of the false relation to the popular that the culture industry exploits. The cliché would be something like the pleasure principle of the society of the spectacle, which was analysed in relation to Lyotard in Chapter One. As long as its currency circulates a stable equilibrium of tolerances is maintained within the system and its reality-effect is maintained.

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[613] Brenez locates the origins of Ferrara's work in the No Wave punk music and film scene in New York of the late 1970s and '80s, alongside filmmakers such as Vivienne Dick and Scott and Beth B (38).
[614] Ibid.

But the cliché is not only about the abstractions of exchange or a social relation mediated by images, it is also a figure, a pictorial entity and perceptual-sensory formation.

This is the manner in which Gilles Deleuze analyses the cliché in his book on the painter Francis Bacon, *The Logic of Sensation,* another key text on the concept of the figure in modern aesthetics. There he writes that clichés are "ready-made perceptions", they are all the prefigurative 'givens' that exist on the canvas (or any screen) before any artistic gesture[615]. They are, also, all the *a priori* presuppositions that exist in the mind and in the body before any thought or gesture; they are an image of thought. Clichés are images that determine, in hegemonic fashion, what can be thought, said and felt. Clichés are the "imperialist" form of the image in that they "impose themselves" on the senses to such an extent that they become what reality itself is taken to be[616]. Clichés are second nature. As either the real abstraction of the culture industry or as the perceptual readymades colonising our senses, the cliché would seem to be the very anathema of a visionary critical activity that Brenez claims cinema is capable of. But Deleuze says something fascinating about the possible artistic responses to the culture of the cliché. Hostility, transformation, integration, direct or indirect, all have their generative potential, but also their limits. "It would be better", he writes, "*to abandon oneself to clichés*, to collect them, accumulate them, multiply them, as so many prepictorial givens"[617]. Ferrara is a filmmaker who has completely abandoned himself to clichés. Putting representation to the test then requires a two-step process: an initial immersion in the culture of the cliché, an openness to their flow and function, and then, secondly, the work of their dis-figuration. It is this

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[615] Gilles Deleuze. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. London: Continuum, 2003, p. 87. [FB]
[616] FB p. 91
[617] FB p. 92, my emphasis.

'secondary figuration', emerging from the contest with the culture of the cliché that, for Deleuze, constitutes the real 'pictorial act', which he gives the proper name "Figure".

The figure, working within the machinations of 'A Cinema of Negation', is the critical and plastic mediator between clichés, concrete and mental images, and as such becomes the locus for staging the question of the subject. With regards to this figuration of regimes of imagery, let us move through each of the films in the Consciousness Trilogy the better to see how Brenez analyses these figurative enterprises of translation.

The narrative fable of *The Addiction* concerns the transformation of an urban philosophy student into a vampire. But her 'infection' operates at the allegorical level whereby it is her exposure to documentary images of 20th century atrocity that initiates and by turns accelerates her organic decomposition into the living-dead. I go into more detail below in terms of how Brenez analyses how the film translates the problem of historical evil in terms of an 'epidemic' transmitted through brutal vampiric acts below. My point here is that Ferrara hijacks the forms and imagery of genre cinema to stage an open question about how to acknowledge, even admit, the accumulative atrocities of history. As Brenez explains, the somewhat clichéd image of the movie vampire "offers a simple, universal, popular iconography for the treatment of a complex and universal political question: how to live with the knowledge of historic evil?"[618]. The figure of Kathy is a figurative condensation of the problem of bearing witness, a subversive repetition of cinematic conventions, and, according to Brenez, the "liquidation of Western philosophy" insofar as its pretences to the devotion to knowledge can neither prevent evil nor adequately register the somatic scars and corporeal torment (if not

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[618] Brenez. CN, p. 18.

outright annihilation) it leaves in its wake[619]. The film can also be read as a figurative

elaboration of the notion of 'consumption', in terms its status as a deadly disease affecting the

organism, the bloodthirst of the vampire (its need to feed), the 'ingestion' of imagery produced

on an industrial scale, the primary economic activity of contemporary Western societies (in

Ferrara, more often than not included as just another potent form of narcotic), and, in this

case, the voracious consumption of wisdom embodied in the official materials of philosophy

(as well as in a few bodies of official philosophers).

By contrast, L.T. the drug-addled detective in *Bad Lieutenant,* "wishes to see nothing,

know nothing, and encounter nothing"[620]. The world of the fiction is the familiar *noir* universe

of generalised corruption, shadow economies of rough trade, and everyday crime. L.T.'s vision

is one of fetishistic reification and psychic denial; everything that he perceives is transformed

into a hallucinatory phantasm of morbid enjoyment that serves to plunge him deeper into a

state of what Brenez calls "narcotic autism" which both traps him his private anaesthetised

existence and "allows him to keep moving, despite everything, at the heart of an intolerable

world"[621]. L.T.'s "psychic odyssey"[622] is interpreted by Brenez as the journey *deeper* into the

material roots of suffering and iniquity that other more conventional crime capers might

otherwise only produce a more tolerable or superficial (i.e. censored) image of. He is thus the

emblem of her idea of 'hypermorality', which she qualifies, again borrowing from Bataille, as

"going to the end of being"[623]. L.T., and the Ferraran hero in general, exceeds not only

conventional morality, but also the normative limits of the subject itself. Brenez argues that

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[619] Ibid.
[620] CN, p. 131.
[621] 'Critical Panopoly', p. 136.
[622] CN, p. 70.
[623] CN, p. 68.

"profound solitude characterizes most of Ferrara's heroes", however, she reads L.T.'s "accumulation of extreme, transgressive experiences" as, ultimately, "the transgression of the experience of solitude, of this despair of never being other than a self"[624]. Thus, the cinematic figure once more expresses "our human anguish over the body"[625].

Finally, *The Blackout,* which is one of the most intensive and formally experimental treatments of the relation between concrete and mental images in Ferrara's œuvre but which is staged within a scenario of Hollywood celebrity and cliché. The film is a vertiginous unfolding of doubles, models and copies, remakes and remembrances, bodies and their figures; a fresco of indistinction between the imaginary and real, the mental and the concrete. At the film's core is the real death of an actress (Sarah Lassez), staged for a fiction by a filmmaker, Mikey (Dennis Hopper), madly driven to find the final murder scene he needs to complete his film (a sleazy remake of Renoir's *Nana* titled *Nana Miami*). But it is also just as equally staged by the morbid and desperate desire of the lead actor, Matty, intoxicated to the point of insanity who perceives the actress to be his real lover who he strangles on camera for having abandoned him. The film thus becomes a figural staging of desire-as-lack at the level of its two lead characters: Matty, yearning for lost love, now haunted by mental images of the repressed trauma "[which are] fragile, treacherous, indecisive, and ambiguous at the level of their psychic status"[626]; and Mickey, the video artist, producer of concrete images in the form of overblown erotic clichés, is a visual sadist and "vidiot", an image-addict who maintains a parade of interchangeable bodies to feed some impossible cinematic *jouissance.* At the level of the film itself, however, desire is much more directly figured, à la Lyotard, as a *show of force* as the typical expectations of continuity, causality and psychological characterisation of cinematic common sense are

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[624] Ibid.; p. 70.
[625] 'Incomparable Bodies', np. See discussion in Chapter Three.
[626] CN, p. 50.

dispersed into a confused and fragmented delirium. Both subjects somatize the desperate and violent dimension of desire as "an ideal of fusion and love", while the film exposes "the pathological, morbid nature of this ideal"[627]. The traumatic death of the actress, which occurs chronologically half-way through the film but only explicitly appears toward the end of it, is triply repressed: the memory is 'blacked out' by Matty and returns via agonising and intrusive "scraps of recollection"[628]; evidence of the death, the actress's corpse, is secretly disposed of by Mickey; and the death is the traumatic force affecting all the images of the film itself returning, finally, in another ambiguous figural double: the concrete evidence of the crime in the form of video images witnessed by Matty on a television set and a hallucinatory mental image, a "hyperdulia"[629], that hovers over the black ocean in which Matty has drowned himself.

Ferrara's cinema of negation, Brenez argues, is a tragic vision of life and all his characters conclude their journeys in death. Kathy is devoured in a bestial carnival of cannibalism and bloodlust at a party she hosts to celebrate the completion of her thesis; L.T. is killed by his bookie, but the incident occurs as a minor event, unseen, unspectacular. He is merely 'dissolved' into the ambient throng of the urban crowd[630]. And Matty, upon confronting the truth in the form of a concrete image, disappears into his oceanic death; "self-revelation is annihilation of the self", Brenez repeats several times in her study[631]. She maintains, however, that the films go beyond a simple wallowing in the death-drive of the private individual. They are for her, ultimately, "figures that overflow finitude"[632] and their ethical force consists in, whether at the collective or personal level, "a reactivation of the suffering that is ingested,

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[627] CN, p. 28.
[628] CN, p. 145.
[629] CN, p. 25.
[630] CN, p. 70.
[631] CN, p. 20, 30, 75.
[632] CN, p. 40.

retained, and normalized by our imaginary"[633]. Brenez shows us that Ferrara's strategy vis-à-vis the cliché is to invest them with a tragic significance and a figural dynamism, moving between the mental and the concrete, the trivial and the world-historical, and an ethical force that always aims to bring to the surface what would otherwise be habitually repressed or plainly forgotten.

Anamorphosis

In this section I analyse more deeply the figurative processes by which Brenez details Ferrara's hypermoral description of negativity at work. With an understanding of Ferrrara's critical strategies of intensification and transgression of the cliché we are now ready to explore the two key *dramatis personae* of Brenez's study, the means by which the powers of the image, the question of the subject, and the relation between cinema and history are brought together on an immanent plane of expression. Firstly, anamorphosis. Anamorphosis may be most familiar to people as a kind of optical illusion or visual puzzle; a distorted image that requires a specific point of view or instrument in order to 'correct' it. The most famous case is undoubtedly the anamorphic skull in Hans Holbein's 1533 painting *The Ambassadors.* A common, even clichéd, interpretation of the painting is that the anamorphic skull reveals the hidden 'truth' of the painting. That all the trappings of youth, wealth, and position, the wisdom of knowledge and the enchantment of worldly things represented in the archetypal figures of the ambassadors and the objects that surround them, are all a flight from necessary and inevitable death.

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[633] CN, p. 111.

There needs to be a small mutation in our thought, however, if we are to follow

Brenez's deployment of the term as a "strong conceptual structure" underpinning the films she

analyses[634]. The conceptual twist we need to make is to abandon the perspectival

presuppositions of the interpretation commonly made of the anamorphic skull. Turn away,

that is, from the representational logic whereby images are always and only derived from the

presumed identity of the things they depict, and, the norm of an orthogonal, clear and distinct

perception. We need to focus, instead, on the anamorphic relation itself as a *force of movement

and differentiation*, that translates the film from one figure to the next. Anamorphosis does

not terminate in the correct and grounded all-knowing subject; the subject, in fact, is but a

local instance in the anamorphic process.

Anamorphosis is described variously, but always as a *process,* an ordeal that the images

undergo, and by which representation is put to the test. It is a process of "sliding, variation, and

mutation between one figure and another, by means of copies, analogies, and inversions"[635]. It

creates "circuits of propagation, contamination, and invasion"[636]. Tracing the anamorphic

process can mean tracing the "intensification or deepening of a single entity" or, as a mode of

metamorphosis, the "complete alteration or transformation in form, structure, or

substance"[637]. The anamorphic process is the architecture in which the traffic of figuration

flows. Implicated in this term are thus multiple figures of communication: transmission,

contamination, transference, translation, propagation, and so on. All figures that put

movement into thought. It is the close reading of the anamorphic system dynamic that gives

Brenez's writing its own pulsional drive and energy. Brenez observes in Ferrara's films a

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[634] CN, p. 12.
[635] CN, p. 132.
[636] CN, p. 8.
[637] CN, p. 15.

particular dynamic in this mutual process of mutation and translation. The "films are organised upon a single major fold, where the beginning finally meets or 'touches' the ending to offer a striking comparison, or a more gradual pleat, where the major fold is progressively translated throughout a series of small folds (akin to a pleated skirt) over the entire structure of a film"[638]. She presents *Bad Lieutenant* (1992) as a model for the former and *The Addiction* for the latter.

The major anamorphic fold of *Bad Lieutenant* is the tormented "conversion" of its protagonist L.T. (Harvey Keitel). The film unfolds between a private scene in a family home, followed by a father taking his two sons to school in the car. This is then anamorphically 'matched', at the end, with its "devastated version": L.T. in a car with two young criminal rapists followed by L.T.'s death in a New York traffic jam[639]. This major fold is pleated by a series of minor folds that complicate and multiply this logic of couple+1. There are three minor folds of boy-figures, girl-figures, and transvestite-figures. The three folds, according to Brenez, bear an anamorphic relation to the Holy Trinity: passion, sacrifice, torment, affliction are rendered as the movement between and amongst the figures as a kind of "spiritual exercise" in the twin senses of the conversion of its protagonist immersed in the lower depths and in the plastic conversion of the film itself in its dynamic, transformative, and anamorphic passages between images[640]. In this reading, the meaning of 'spirit' resonates with the specifically cinematic way that term is deployed in Deleuze's *Movement-Image* where he describes it as "the power of the whole which is constantly becoming"[641].

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[638] Ibid.
[639] CN, p. 17.
[640] CN, p. 134.
[641] Deleuze. MI, p. 82.

To address the anamorphic sliding of *The Addiction*, let us return to the scene with which we opened this chapter, which is also the first scene of the film. The scene repeats in the form of an illustrated lecture in a university theatre, the originary *mise en scène* of the arrival of cinematographic images. As we saw in Chapter Two, Brenez has described this arrival as occurring "*sur un seuil du visible*" - on the threshold of the visible - and "as an emotional irruption in the collective imagination, backed by an anthropological fear"[642]. Staging this threshold, this liminal zone, requires the screen-encounter become a vector of affective transference, even 'contamination'. Remember also, that *The Addiction* is a contemporary vampire movie.

We are once more in the kingdom of shadows. A dark enclosed space, a seated audience, images projected onto a screen are reflected back on the faces of the assembly. But the images are not yet moving. We are, in fact, in a pre-cinematic situation. A voice, off-frame, out of sight, presumes to explain what is seen. The photographic slides, those little fragments of facts, fill *our* screen, and are matched to the gaze of the audience, Kathy's gaze, by a series of cuts. The documentary images are inscribed into the body of a fiction and onto the faces of the audience assembled on screen and before it. Being *still* images spliced into moving ones makes them more uncanny still. Moving, still; document, fiction; the work of the film condenses and confuses distinctions. More still: the first image in fact exhibits a helicopter, grounded and unmoving; a midden of corpses, the human figure rendered unto indistinction; a General, glorified and armoured in uniform; a building on fire, *explosante-fixe*[643], is a weeping woman, her frozen body wracked in grief. Such images are not, horrifyingly, without their clichéd

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[642] Brenez. *De la figure,* p. 317.
[643] "Fixed-explosive". See André Breton, *L'amour Fou,* 1937. See also, Foster, Hal. *Compulsive Beauty*. MIT Press, 2008, p. 23.

aspect. The archive of atrocity so often fails to move us, their rupturing force now an accepted, even banal, possibility, dispersed into a global concentrationary imaginary.

What to make of the face that interrupts this sliding of still images? The question, again, of *what kind of knowledge this is*. How does it affect and infect the witness? Kathy, we, are captivated by images. To be affected, infected requires the loss of psychic boundaries and the assumption of the image. To be captivated by images…*is this what knowledge is?* Immobilisation, opacity, exposure, image and counter-image; a kind of noir ontology and geometry of force[644] where the abstract line confronts an intolerable reality. "Faced with the obligation to stare at the intolerable, how does consciousness function?", writes Brenez[645]. "Kathy not only withstands the vision, she somatizes and propagates it"[646]. The opening of *The Addiction* re-stages the arrival of the cinematic image, in negative, as an event that consciousness must confront. Brenez will remind us that this maintaining of the confrontation constitutes the possibility of a cinematic ethics.

The anamorphic process of *The Addiction* "invents a critical circulation of images"[647]. And the ethical force of the film, in its keeping faith with its status as a psychic event, as, in fact, a kind of wounding and lacerating of the subject, is not to heal any wounds, but to multiply and intensify them in a metaphysical fury:

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[644] Gallagher, Tag. "The Geometry of Force: Abel Ferrara and Simone Weil", *Screening the Past*, Issue 10, 2000. https://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-10-first-release/geometry-of-force-abel-ferrara-and-simone-weil/ .
[645] Brenez. CN, p. 114.
[646] CN, p. 130.
[647] CN, p. 136.

On the level of its protagonist, [*The Addiction*] offers the metamorphosis of a philosophy student into a vampire, and thus of a moral problem (collective historical guilt) into corporeal destruction (somatization). From the viewpoint of the film itself, the metamorphosis is the permanent conversion of historical information (images of the Vietnam War, Nazi death camps, and so on) into physical events (vampiric attacks). *The film is an essay on the psychic effects of images* that are so powerful that, once shown, they take over the fictional bodies...first as documentary then as allegory...how to live with the knowledge of historic evil...how not to die from all this pain, anguish and guilt? Kathy incarnates and overexposes the torment that western civilization strives daily to repress[648].

Anamorphosis in *The Addiction* is one of the strongest examples of Brenez's idea that Ferrara's films are driven by the variations, transferences and translations between mental and concrete images. Kathy's captivation by the documents of political terror is propagated in a serial logic of exposure-contamination-objectification-transmission. "Kathy, absorbed by these images, in turn absorbs them and retransmits them via her vampiric acts...[She] introjects and mentally internalizes the image-information. Then she objectivizes the psychic torment caused by these images of disaster"[649]. After leaving an exhibition of concentrationary images at a Holocaust museum, Kathy extracts the blood from a homeless man by syringe and re-injects it in herself. The defence of her philosophy thesis becomes consummated in a blood bath, her own private My Lai massacre[650] . "Evil is literally an epidemic", writes Brenez, who argues that the anamorphic logic of rampant and contagious transmission without end figured in *The Addiction* in turn figures a thesis formulated by Primo Levi concerning the epidemiology of

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[648] CN, p. 18.
[649] CN, p. 47.
[650] See Gallagher. 'The Geometry of Force'.

catastrophe: : "[T]his is the awful privilege of our generation and of my people, no one better than us has ever been able to grasp the incurable nature of the offence, that spreads like a contagion…It is an inexhaustible fount of evil; it breaks the body and the spirit of the submerged, it stifles them and renders them abject; it returns as ignominy upon the oppressors, it perpetuates itself as hatred among the survivors, and swarms around in thousand ways, against the very will of all, as a thirst for revenge, as a moral capitulation, as denial, as weariness, as renunciation"[651].

Tracing the anamorphic process is a method to examine how films essay the image, not, first of all, in terms of its representational content, but in the logical protocols of movement and interaction, mutation and translation, its *sliding*. We have seen how the anamorphic relation is practised in Ferrara in terms of the interplay of numbers and sets - relations of couple and trinities; in the exchanges between inversion and doubling; in the way traces of images rupture, echo and resonate. The anamorphic relation is a waveform in the field of the image. Tag Gallagher, in a text surely composed in response to Brenez's provocations, has written of the "geometry of force" in Ferrara's films. "Lines of motion are force", he writes, and force turns humans into things, which are both moments of passage on the anamorphic relation. "Ferrara's shots are composed with conscious geometry, inventively balanced in internal lines, planes and angles, always to expressive effect, always with delight at *photographic* effects of limited depth, sfumato, foregrounded objects, patches of brilliant light, shadows passing"[652]. Anamorphosis as the variegated writing of light.

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[651] Levi. *If This is a Man,* cited in CN, p. 136.
[652] See Gallagher. 'The Geometry of Force'. The introductory chapter of Brenez's *De la Figure* is addressed directly in response to a letter from Gallagher demanding a clarification of the method of figural analysis. See 'Introduction', p. 9-28

Emphasising the anamorphic relation commits the analyst to a close, granular reading of the image and its powers of affective transmission and conceptual construction. It is more about figuring out how images work than interpreting what they mean; to be intimately involved in the labyrinth of displacements, dispersions and echoes. Tracing the circuitry of the anamorphic process is one way of giving an account of the temporal axis of cinematic figuration that side-steps narrative machinery. As Brenez notes, Ferrara employs a wayward approach to narrative that "favors description over action and liberates the possibility of working with mental images"[653]. Ferrara's agnosticism toward narrative coherence, which attracts the avant-garde instincts of Brenez, makes his films apt studies of the anamorphic process.

Somatization

The second *dramatis persona* of the book is the concept of somatization. If the anamorphic process is a means of uncovering the spiritual architectonics of the films, somatization is a process that condenses and slows and renders sensible all the dizzying protocols on the anamorphic relation. As we transition from spirit to body we can formulate an hypothesis and say that the Figure is the subject of anamorphosis. It is an intensive zone of actualization of the virtual potentials of the anamorphic field. Somatic figures are pulsing and palpable knots on the abstract line.

If the anamorphic process testifies to a "psychic process: the *reproduction of a trauma in multiple aftershocks*"[654], according to Brenez, it is "the body that carries this testament"[655]. As

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[653] CN, p. 24.
[654] CN, p. 17.
[655] CN, p. 142.

with everything operating in a figurative universe, somatization is a *process,* the ordeal of the body; the soma endures and the soma expresses. As was discussed at length in the previous chapter, somatization is the figural treatment of the cinematic body opened up as a 'methodological field'. Somatization, in 'A Cinema of Negation', is the anamorphic performativity of the body. Brenez is fascinated by performance, by acting and actors. Acting is in itself a process of somatization, and as such, figures as a site of what Martin calls an "auto-reflection on the problems of figuration"[656]. And it is *ritual* rather than *theatre* that, for Brenez provides the models of actorly somatization. The actor is a figure of ritual possession. The actor's body becomes a "vehicle for the transmission of images"; somatization transforms the body into a "medium, a building site for images"[657]. We should look to, argues Brenez, music, dance and trance states for the characteristics of ritual and the models of somatization. The body induced as a field of somatization manifests a possessing entity. An avenging angel? *Atrocious.* There is a kinship in this formulation with the one made by Adorno about his friend Kracauer, a major inspiration for Brenez. In his openness to the contingencies and actualities of his contemporary milieu, Kracauer is described as a subject "without skin"[658]. This flayed subject composed in knots of body, meat, and spirit and dangerously exposed to the not-I of the world, for Brenez, is something like a *sōma*-ideal of cinematic Figures in general (if not of figural analysis in particular).

What kind of knowledge is this? The particularity of Ferrara's rogue gallery in the Consciousness Trilogy is determined in the way each character lives the distinction between knowledge and acknowledgement. "Knowledge involves a vital, immediate relation to the real

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[656] Adrian Martin, 'Ultimatum: an introduction to the work of Nicole Brenez', np.
[657] CN, p. 143.
[658] See Hansen's discussion of Kracauer in *Cinema and Experience,* p. 18.

(and thus to evil); acknowledgment involves the way in which consciousness admits this relation or not"[659]. We should pause here to note this eccentric definition of knowledge. In this conception, knowledge is not presented as a cognitive process of accumulated learning (this, perhaps, is what we could call wisdom). Knowledge brooks no mediation, it is immediate and immersive, a given. *The body knows*. It is consciousness that produces the gap, it is the mediating agency, and therefore a privileged agent of the image. Indeed, another name for consciousness is a "living image"[660]. Living images screen, that is filter or block, the turbulent passage of other moving images. It is consciousness which affects a delay in the body's knowledge. This capacity for *screening* is, of course, shared by consciousness *and* the cinema, wherefore the thesis that cinema arrives as a rupturing effect in consciousness. Immersing cinema in the immediate data of the real (and thus evil) is, therefore, its supreme ethical act. Similarly, it is worth recalling, that it is this screening capacity that Lyotard highlighted as the condition for the critical function of art[661]. Brenez composes an analysis of Ferrara's "Consciousness Trilogy" on the basis of this conflict between knowledge and acknowledgement. *Bad Lieutenant*, *The Addiction* and *The Blackout* each offer intensive figures of somatization. L.T. is a figure of *denial*; Kathy a figure of *introjection*; and Matty (Matthew Modine), from *The Blackout,* is a figure of *loss*[662].

The essaying activity of the films is articulated in relation to somatization via the connections they create between a figure's relation to the real and these living images inhabited by the body. The subject is opened up by its predicate. The body is not exhausted in its corporeal being but is at all times passed through by images, is passed over in them. The Figure

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[659] CN, p. 112.
[660] See MT, p. 62
[661] See Chapter One.
[662] CN, p. 113.

becomes in its somatic investment by images. In all three protagonists of the Consciousness Trilogy, "the foreclosed real returns in the form of an image"[663]. At this point in my reading I would like to quote at some length from the body of Brenez's text. I do this to provide the reader with a better sense of the texture, better the sinew, of her writing as it observes and traverses these connections; how her thought slides into one figure and out of the other.

> L. T. in *Bad Lieutenant* is the figure of denial: the world does not exist, nothing can touch him. When the news is bad he shoots the radio; there is nothing to see or comprehend. He denies exteriority, otherness, and death, de-realizing everything he encounters (even a corpse is an erotic object to him). Kathy in *The Addiction* is the exact opposite, a figure of introjection: not only does she encounter the exterior, she invites it, absorbs it, and lets herself be devoured by it. She is completely permeated and destroyed by the real, somatizing torment to the point of death. Matty in *The Blackout* represents the figure of loss: he does not know what he has experienced, yet he lives in a state of continual trauma that prolongs itself in multiple replays...[Matty] constitutes the psychic synthesis of the two preceding modes. Like L. T., Matty is blind (blacked out); like Kathy, he relives the agony in a sharp, repetitive way.[664].

The passage demonstrates how "the films offer a rigorous survey on the diverse natures and forms of the image", living images, mental images, cinematographic images[665]. It is also further evidence of Brenez's practice of immanent critique: a deep immersion into the structural manoeuvres of the films and the figurative logics they express, here styled as different regimes of relating to the world and coping with the image.

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[663] CN, p. 114.
[664] CN, p. 113-114.
[665] Ibid.

A Cinema of Cruelty

The sentence I am constantly returning to, where my reading inevitably terminates no matter where it starts is this: "The image only has meaning in ceaselessly measuring itself against what is unbearable and inadmissible: cruelty, inner opacity, and all that defies understanding"[666]. *What kind of knowledge is this* that ceaselessly measures itself against all that defies understanding? The critical abandonment to cliché, the somatic acrobatics on the anamorphic fold, all the theoretical and figural capacities of cinema are claimed to be literally meaningless without the establishment of this impossible relation. The final treatment of Ferrara that Brenez makes which now demands to be more fully fleshed out is thinking this impasse between image and history read in the key of catastrophe. And, as has been argued from the start, if the implications of the text are significant for Ferrara studies in particular, but also for the discipline of film studies in general, I propose to end my reading in a mutation and translation of 'The Cinema of Negation' into a speculation on the question of a cinema of cruelty[667]

There is an Artaudian line of radical critical thinking that draws a configuration between violence, truth, and knowledge. I briefly address only three here, Jean-Luc Nancy, Laura Marks, and Gilles Deleuze. The anomalous Truffaut/Bazin book notwithstanding, Brenez's book on Ferrara offers perhaps the most synoptic and persuasive exemplification of the Artaudian idea for film studies.

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[666] CN, p. 38.

[667] See Andre Bazin. *The Cinema of Cruelty.* Ed. Francois Truffaut. Arcade Publishing. 2013. The scholarship on Artaud is extensive across a variety of media. For a useful discussion of the potential of his ideas for film studies see Angelos Koutsorakis. 'The Dialectics of Cruelty: Rethinking Artaudian Cinema', *Cinema Journal,* Vol. 55, No. 3, Spring 2016, pp. 65-89.

In the text titled 'Image and Violence', first published in French in 2000 and collected in the translated volume *The Ground of the Image,* Jean-Luc Nancy analyses "the terrible ambiguity" of violence[668]. Nancy's writing is a dense wordplay in the relations between violence, truth, and the image. His thought is a difficult sliding into and away from them. Clarity, in any definitive sense, is impossible (and yet so terribly necessary) when it comes to thinking these three words together. This ambiguity marks and makes the distinction between what he calls 'the violence of truth' and 'the truth of violence' a terribly fraught one.

'The truth of violence' is its application of a singular force that is distinct to the "dynamic or energetic system" of relations in which it intervenes[669]. Violence "denatures, wrecks, and massacres that which it assaults"[670]. The truth of violence 'makes' things that are nothing other than their violation. For Nancy, any thing, person or image, that violence may intervene into is itself a 'unity' or play of forces. But violence "does not play the game of forces. It does not play at all. Violence hates games, all games"[671]. Violence is "stupid…the calculated absence of thought willed by a rigid intelligence"[672].

Before the passage to 'the violence of truth', Nancy declares that there is an "essential link that violence maintains with the image"[673]. This is not in the perhaps common-sense idea, expressed in the commonly made lament regarding the representation of violence in images as occasions of psychic abuse. The link between violence and the image, instead, comes in their

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[668] Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Ground of the Image.* Fordham University Press, p. 18. [GI]
[669] GI, p. 16.
[670] Ibid.
[671] GI, p. 17.
[672] Ibid.
[673] GI, p. 20

mutual "self-affirmation"[674]. The self-affirmation of the image, as for violence, is in its essential distinction from the thing it claims as its own. The image, insofar as it is an image at all, marks a gap between it and the thing it is 'an image of...', as the saying goes. This distinction between image and thing is another manifestation of the anamorphic relation discussed above. "The image", writes Nancy, "disputes the presence of the thing"; but, moreover, it is only in the image that "the thing *presents itself*", and it is this presentation, a style of disputation between thing and image, that is the violent truth of the image[675]. It is in this precise sense that, Nancy writes, "every image borders on cruelty"[676]. Cruel in its self-affirmation at the violent expense of the thing and in its potentially irresponsible presentation of it. "The image is of the order of the monster", writes Nancy, playing on the Latin root words *monstrare*, meaning 'to show', and *monstrum*, as in 'demonstration'[677]. What Nancy is trying to show us in his demonstration is the terrible ambiguity between truth, violence, and the image. "What is monstrously shown is not the aspect [or face], of the thing...[but] its unity and force"[678]. Force is what distinguishes the image from the thing and what unifies the elements of the image in dynamic relation ("the image is always a dynamic or energetic metamorphosis"[679]). The general distinction of images is to make known the particular game of forces that compose things.

"Now truth", writes Nancy in the final step of his demonstration, "is also, essentially, self-manifestation...Truth shows or demonstrates itself (and, as in any *demonstration*, even in the logical sense, there must be the display and the '*show of force*')...Violence and truth have in common a self-showing act"; which is to say that they have in common the image as a *show of*

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[674] Ibid.

[675] GI, p. 21.

[676] GI, p. 25.

[677] GI, p. 22.

[678] Ibid.

[679] Ibid.

force[680]. The violence of truth is in its self-affirming distinction from the habits of knowledge, and not in its adequation with the thing. The violence of truth, bordering on cruelty, is demonstrated in its combat with clichés, in its commitment to all that power blinds us from seeing.

The essential act, the moment of truth, what Nancy calls "the responsibility of art in general", is in caring for this gap or distinction between the thing and image that the truth of violence would desire to annihilate[681]. The image that *does* play the game of forces in its presentation of things would be, for Nancy, the just image. But the just image, as we know from Godard, may just as easily be just an image. And so all the difficulty begins again. The cruelty of art is in revealing (and revelling in?) this excess of the real that is the force of distinction between images and things. As the *show of force,* the truth of the image is discerned in its fidelity to this gap, to the *cut,* to the vertigo of spacing of the anamorphic field and to essaying the border between knowledge and acknowledgment that the cinema of cruelty never ceases to trouble.

Laura Marks, most well known as the author of *The Skin of the Film* that catalysed an interest in phenomenology and the body in film studies in the 1990s, has analysed contemporary video art from the Arab world, particularly Lebanon and Egypt, under the category of a "cinema of cruelty"[682]. According to Marks' interpretation of Artaud, through the lens of Deleuze, 'cruelty' is, like in Nancy, a violence upon the conventional habits of

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[680] GI, p. 21.
[681] GI, p. 25.
[682] Laura U. Marks. *Hanan al-cinema: Affections for the moving image.* MIT Press, 2015a, p. 299. See also U. Marks. 'What Can a Body Do? Answers from Trablus, Cairo, Beirut and Algiers', *Paragraph,* Vol. 38, No.1, 2015b, pp. 118-135.

thought that sustain knowledge. Such a destruction is both terrible and liberating. In its dispute with knowledge, cruelty is therefore a method of acknowledging the real, in Brenez's sense of the term. Cruelty-as-method attends first to the affective dimension of a vulnerable, somatic existence in order to liberate "a mass of unmanageable affects in the same gesture with which they unbind restraints"[683]. A cinema of cruelty "stresses the brain with the potentials emerging in the body. It destroys the conventions on which we relied and forces the brain to think without them, a deeply painful process that is understandably rare"[684].

For Marks, a cinema of cruelty operates in the gaps between "molar and molecular forces; in a dynamic of becoming-visible; and in a struggle to attain adequate ideas"[685]. Marks qualifies Deleuze & Guattari's well known concepts of the molar and molecular as different regimes of embodiment. The molar level of embodiment presents the body as an *integral whole* that demands recognition. The struggle for recognition supports the discourse of rights and access to resources in an unequal and asymmetrical field of their distribution. Marks describes this relation as "agonistic" and notes that "the cinema represents the agonistic molar level of bodily forces at the scale of narrative and representation"[686]. The molecular level, on the other hand, is characterised as an *erotic assemblage* of "forces and flows, intensities and passions"[687]. This affective body is, according to Marks, "a source of energy for molar-scale struggles"[688]. The qualities of the films Marks studies exhibit an agnosticism toward the Orientalising narrative apparatus that articulates bodies as recognisable identities as often as victims of standardised plots as real political restraints. They instead introduce what she terms a "latency" or a delay,

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[683] *Hanan,* p. 299.
[684] Ibid.
[685] 'What Can a Body Do?', p. 119.
[686] 'What Can a Body Do?', p. 120.
[687] Ibid.
[688] Ibid.

something held in reserve regarding the status of the passions; a latency that cannot be so easily translated into the molar regimes of expressivity. They induce an "enfolded body" that protects, cherishes, and cares for the molecular play of forces that exist below and beyond the level of explicit visibilities ("Cliches menace them at every turn"[689]). Such a practice constitutes for Marks "a kind of erotic knowledge that survives by not being recorded"[690]. These erotic and enfolded bodies dispute the cruel images that otherwise circulate about the region, claiming to offer the truth of violence. But they themselves are also cruel, in theory, in so far as they force a confrontation with an unbearable lived actuality without the usual stereotypes of recognition. Such an acknowledgement is the cause a cinema of cruelty strives for. Marks cites Kuniichi Uno (Deleuze & Guattari's Japanese translator), who writes, "Thinking is cruel because if we manage to think, this thought overwhelms us, penetrates into being, tears through the whole thickness of our vitality, the endless intertwining of our sensations and memories, everything that is recorded in the body"[691].

The struggle for acknowledgement, in distinction to the struggle for recognition, is "a method of embodied and affective analysis" that experiences the cinema of cruelty as an essaying from body to thought in the search for adequate ideas and just images[692]. The cinema of cruelty dissolves the clichés of violent commerce into enfolded and erotic assemblages, living images that keep open the capacities of the body.

Before returning to Nicole Brenez and 'A Cinema of Negation' I offer a brief reading of an aspect of Deleuze's *Cinema* books that often goes unremarked. Namely, that he makes the

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[689] 'What Can a Body Do?', p. 131.
[690] 'What Can a Body Do?', p. 128.
[691] *Hanan al-cinema,* p. 299.
[692] 'What Can a Body Do?', p. 119

confrontation with what he calls 'the intolerable' the very project of a 'modern political cinema'. The theme that passes between *The Movement-Image* and *The Time-Image,* that both is the gap and an attempt to acknowledge it, is "the crisis of the action-image". Briefly, according to Deleuze cinema is initially composed in movement-images that are particular arrangements of the general movement of virtual images. He produces detailed descriptions of, as Paola Marrati notes, "*forms of action and agency* and their transformation", in the distinct figurations of material aspects of cinematic images which he discerns in the major national cinemas of the early years of film[693]. The cinematic consciousness that comes to dominate in the first half of the twentieth century is the action-image. The action-image is characterised by an organic unity amongst the elements of the image whereby perceptions and affects arising from the horizon of the world are interpolated by a rational subject and, in turn, extended in action that introduces a new state of affairs into the world. This dynamic system not only describes the kinds of narratives and material arrangement of images common to the period but also, Marrati again claims, "both liberal and Marxist-inspired political theories"[694]. A whole movement-politics is founded on the play of forces integrated in the action-image (liberal integration of immigrants in the US; dialectical integration of the proletariat in Soviet Russia). What constitutes the crisis of the action-image is both a loss in faith in movement-politics and a lack of belief in the efficacy of the action-image to sustain a cinematic gesture that links humanity to the world. Deleuze himself writes, "We hardly believe any longer that a global situation can give rise to an action which is capable of modifying it - no more than we believe that action can force a situation to disclose itself, even partially"[695]. What the causes of this crisis are has been a subject of some controversy in the reception of the *Cinema* books, but it is

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[693] Marrati, Paola. *Gilles Deleuze: Cinema and Philosophy.* Trans. Alisa Hartz. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, p. x.
[694] *Cinema and Philosophy,* p. xi.
[695] Delezue, MI, p. 206.

significant in this context to note that Deleuze himself includes 'an awareness of clichés' as one of them: "we ask ourselves what maintains a set [ensemble] in this world without totality or linkage. The answer is simple: what forms the set are clichés, and nothing else. Nothing but clichés, clichés everywhere"[696].

If action in the above sense of novel integration of the different and the excluded is now impossible if not totally meaningless, the entire possibility of a 'political cinema' (let alone politics *tout court*) must be re-thought. Some of the most fascinating parts of *The Time-Image* are concerned with this very activity. He writes, "[If] there were a modern political cinema, it would be on this basis: the people no longer exist, or not yet...*the people are missing*"[697]. Further, "It is as if modern political cinema were no longer constituted on the basis of a possibility of evolution and revolution, like the classical cinema, but on impossibilities, in the style of Kafka: *the intolerable*"[698]. Deleuze's remarks on the question of the intolerable would seem, then, to be one of the points of departure for Brenez's speculative provocation that "the image only has meaning in ceaselessly measuring itself against what is unbearable and inadmissible: cruelty, inner opacity, and all that defies understanding". One of the strangest proposals Deleuze makes for a modern political cinema that can live up to the conditions of what he calls a "lived actuality" of the intolerable, he says, "consists of *putting everything into a trance,* the people and its masters, and the camera itself, pushing everything into a state of aberration, in order to communicate violences"[699]. Instead of raising the consciousness of a people that already exists, modern political cinema puts everything into a trance: immersion in

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[696] MI p. 208.
[697] TI, p. 216
[698] TI, p. 219.
[699] TI, p. 219. Translation modified.

the truth of violence, isolation of an intolerable actuality, delirious agitation of political and cinematic constituents as "the prefiguration of the people who are missing"[700].

The Logic of Delirium

Such a delirium brings us back, finally, to Brenez and Ferrara. The intolerable is a figure of evil, the very *raison d'être* of the analysis. The intolerable constitutes the world of Abel Ferrara, the fictional world of the films, the impetus determining somatization, and the ethical exigency of the images themselves which, as I elaborate below, are becoming-delirious. The politics of the relation between the cinematic image and history in general and in 'A Cinema of Negation' in particular is to be found in how the confrontation with the intolerable is figured.

Brenez situates Ferrara's filmmaking in the political and aesthetic aftermath of the upheavals of the 1960s and '70s. She places his work in relation to the figure of Edouard de Laurot (via another comrade Zoë Lund, actress and co-screenwriter on two key Ferrara projects), a now almost forgotten participant in the militant film activities happening across the Europe, U.S., Latin American, de-colonizing Africa, and Japan of the period. Discussing the principles of Cinema Engagé espoused by de Laurot, Brenez writes, "the artist's task is proleptic in the sense that he possesses 'the power to *perceive futurity within the present,*" opening onto a moral creation of the world. 'The artist then transforms the world in the most profound sense, for he actus upon consciousness: in creating art he at the same time morally creates reality': this is the principle of dynamic realism. No trace of such positivity can be detected in Ferrara's work; it is entirely devoted to a description of the negative without the

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[700] TI, p. 224.

slightest utopian or messianic appeal"[701]. This is a strikingly similar formulation to the one just described made by Deleuze regarding the impossibility of political action and the necessity to base activity on such an intolerable situation. Brenez writes, here on the cusp of the 21st century, that "our current historical horizon no longer offers any possibility of collective hope"[702]. This is a frequent theme in her other writings also, and sensitises her to artists and works that, for her, display an acute awareness of this historical situation in "the ebb of the great emancipation movements"[703]. Furthermore, against the waves of memorialization and general gentrification of the imaginary relating to this period, the very question of keeping the *actuality* of a political aesthetic alive becomes an urgent and fraught enterprise.

We have already seen some of the ways Brenez analyses "the obligation to stare at the intolerable" as manifesting in the dynamic system of Ferrara's films[704]. Taking Kathy, our PhD student in *The Addiction* as our ersatz Angel of History, it is clear that realising cinema as the 'description of negativity at work' means for Brenez preventing the wounds of history from being closed, resolved, memorialised, ignored or forgotten. As one of Ferrara's "hypermoral" heroes she "not only withstands the vision, she somatizes and propagates it"[705]. The cinema of cruelty somatises, in anamorphic relations and the molecular bodies of its human creatures, the unbridgeable gap, the caesura opened up by the truth of violence and the violence of truth. Such creatures "incarnate the logical, politically radical response to an intolerable situation"[706].

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[701] CN, p. 60.
[702] CN, p. 110.
[703] 'Fenz', p. 67.
[704] CN, p. 114.
[705] CN, p. 135.
[706] CN, p. 89.

The critical activity of images puts everything into a trance. As Brenez writes, in the culminating movement of her demonstration, "delirium constitutes neither a flight from the real nor an arbitrary fantasy. It testifies to an intensive relationship with knowledge"[707]. Knowledge, you will recall, is the immediate immersion in the real (and thus evil). Delirium is thus not only an entirely justifiable response but the *just* response to political and psychic impasse. In the "delirium films, there is a logical, unqualified use of image-pathologies, leading to the limits of understanding". L.T,'s psychic denial and reifying vision turns everything into an object for his delirious *jouissance* (diagnosis of clichée). Everything is marked by a violent vision. The event in consciousness arrives in the form of the 'hyperreal' apparition of Jesus Christ, here composed in the frame so that all lines of force lead to its centre: "the event is characterized by a presence towards which [L.T.] must crawl, that he must kiss, whose incontestable tactile nature he must verify"[708]. Transcendence has collapsed into the geometry of force. The banality of everyday crimes, raised to a delirious level of a shared collective hallucination, is disputed by a haptic, silent, and still image. It is striking to observe, in fact, how this apparition is presented in ways similar to the documentary slides snatched from conflict zones that enlighten and horrify the PhD student in *The Addiction:* suspension of diegetic space, centring of the gaze, Figures filling the frame, an uncanny stillness. The event in consciousness is the advent of an image of indisputable evidence of an intolerable reality. Kathy's lacerated psyche, devoured by the real, circulates the affective, molecular impact of violence and thus acknowledges historical memory as an actual force in the present.

The Blackout, which does away altogether with the 'universality' of religious morality and historical catastrophe, and concerns only a 'local' event in the life of a trivial actor, is a

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[707] CN, p. 141.
[708] CN, p. 132.

veritable clinic, according to Brenez, on the status and manifestations of delirium. Drawing directly from the medical literature, Brenez assigns to delirium three modalities: the gap, fragmentation, and confusion[709]. The gap stands in for the trauma itself, the blank nothing where there should be something; this aporia is spread all over the fiction whose nonsensical and dispersive construction entirely had critics at a loss; fragmentation is "the impossibility of assembling and synthesising the various aspects of experience" (145). *The Blackout* is filled with images of cut up bodies, shards of poorly and mis-remembered memories, and an anamorphic structure that constantly throws reality into feedback loops with no discernible beginning or end. Traumatic memories become crystals that project images of both actual and imagined deaths that haunt the protagonist - who is indeed a murderer, but not of whom he thinks. Finally, confusion. The film splits identities into several characters, doubles the frame by an especially intensive treatment of the film-within-a-film motif, and makes of confusion the dominant medium of character interaction in general. In such a way, the film induces a therapeutic trajectory from negative hallucination mired in the stupidities of Hollywood stardom and its democratisation in the figures of the 'vidiots' ("freaks of the light, freaks that record our own images") to a delirious acknowledgment of the violence of truth, once more embodied in an image bearing evidence of a violated body.

There is a striking symmetry, not touched on in the text, between the three modes of delirium Brenez observes in *The Blackout* and the three components of the figural analysed by Lyotard in *Discourse, Figure*[710]. The 'gap', or originary trauma, the invisible force that inscribes itself on the visible is Lyotard's matrix-figure; 'fragmentation' of continuity and causality rhymes with form-figure, and 'confusion', the dissolution of boundaries between otherwise

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[709] CN, p. 144.
[710] See discussion in Chapter One

distinct objects and images, is the expression of the image-figure. The elision of Lyotard from the text is not a sign of Brenez simply obscuring her theoretical roots, but evidence of the way her approach is, first of all, dedicated to detecting the immanent structure of the films, and secondly, that film and theory are conceptual twins, both their own 'enterprises of translation' which mediate psychic processes and the dynamism of figurative plasticity. As Brenez writes, responding to Martin's essay on figural thought *Last Day Every Day,* "each time I'm trying to be very clear: the analysis is about the process elaborated by the film to construct its own type of 'figure'...it's the films themselves, in their singularity, that are enriching the method—so the more they are singular and unique, the more they will offer to the knowledge of figurality. So, never reduce the richness of a film to a word, but enrich the notion with all the properly analysed concrete inventions"[711].

Conclusion

I have crossed the seeds from 'The Cinema of Negation' with a few cuttings from a larger discourse on the cinema of cruelty. To summarise, Brenez's book offers a demonstration of the powers of the image, the figurability of the subject, and the thinkable relations between the cinematic image and history. The image is an event in consciousness that demands a confrontation and induces a universe of possible responses. The Figure is the subject of the anamorphic process. And the relation between history and the cinema is translated into a psychoaffective force that must be cared for in living images. In such a way, the cinema of negativity becomes, ultimately, a "cinema of symbolic reparation"[712]. The faith and commitment to the work of negativity is, in itself, a positive affirmation (a negation of

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[711] Brenez. Cited in Martin. *Last Day,* p. 32.
[712] CN, p. 150.

negation). The cinema of cruelty bears witness to all the disappeared bodies, bodies denied images, damaged bodies, and bodies cruelly attached to clichés; it testifies to all the cruelty, inner opacity and things that defy understanding. Fury reigns without consolation. The sovereignty of the image returns/repairs (from *reparare,* to make ready again) all that power blinds us from seeing. "This compassion looks evil in the face and resolves nothing; it cultivates and propagates its rage in the way rage infects an organism - or as a deathly dream still haunts the mind upon waking"[713].

'A Cinema of Negation' is a rare example in Brenez's translated writings of a sustained and elaborated analysis of a single *auteur*[714]. Her writing more generally takes the form of shorter critical sketches or the kind of comparative analyses deployed in 'Incomparable Bodies'. Her taxonomic pleasures are still on view in the Ferrara book, however, in the way the writing isolates smaller ensembles of films within a larger *œuvre,* such as the 'Consciousness Trilogy' that I have focused on here. There is a strong curatorial impulse in this kind of writing, which gathers together constellations of films, recognises patterns and describes commonalities. Brenez's writing frequently reproduces the figure of the dynamic ensemble (indeed, the figure *as* dynamic ensemble), an image of thought that works in the passage between the singular and the common.

Abel Ferrara is in Brenez's pantheon of filmmakers, along with the likes of Jocelyn Saab, Peter Whitehead, Philippe Grandrieux, Jean-Luc Godard and Koji Wakamatsu, who she views as taking up the medium as an experimental laboratory for putting representation to the test. While highly diverse in terms of style and context such an ensemble of filmmakers are

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[713] CN, p. 157.

[714] Brenez's monograph on another American director John Cassavetes, titled *Shadows,* remains untranslated.

connected in their pursuit of non-dogmatic expressions of a political aesthetic of cinematic figuration premised on a pedagogy of the image, the critical intensification of the body, and the ethical demand to formulate an image that confronts the opaque and intolerable dimensions of historical experience.

Conclusion:
Tarrying With the Negative

"My conviction and endeavour are dedicated to the hope that film studies in universities do not become a 'registration office' administering the corpus imposed by the industry. This means that we have a duty (urgent to the point of becoming an emergency) to seek out and to comment on what I would call "free-films", that is to say, films made outside the industry for ethical, political, economic or purely aesthetic reasons".

- Nicole Brenez[715]

Brenez's challenge to film studies

Brenez's experimental ethos and practice of immanent critique provide contemporary film studies with a set of aesthetic, critical and ethical principles with which to navigate the contemporary field of the image in all its heterogeneity, complexity and sheer over-abundance. In December 2021, the online film journal *Sabzian* invited Brenez to deliver an up to the minute review of the 'state of the cinema'[716]. Her analysis is striking as much for what is *not* present as what is. No mention of any festival awards, no high points or disappointments from well-known auteurs, and no mention of ticket sales. The essential feature of the contemporary image, according to Brenez, is that whereas "previously, images were in the world...today, it is the world that is swimming in an ocean of images"[717]. The vast majority of such images, she says, compose the surveillance machinery and anthropotechnical systems of control which were the target of Harun Farocki's visual critique. Brenez charges this dominant regime of

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[715] 'The Secrets of Movement', p. 163.
[716] "'State of Cinema, 2021", *Sabazian*, December 2021, https://www.sabzian.be/text/state-of-cinema-2021-1
[717] Ibid.

visuality not only with unimaginable quantitative bloat[718], but as a corrosive presence in the psychical and political health of the species: "Whether to supervise real gestures or tame the imagination, film apparatuses prove to be the best allies of a totalitarian world, more powerful than any lethal weapon"[719]. However, and as this dissertation has tried to describe and discuss, Brenez's critical gaze is never turned for very long toward the dominant paradigms of governmentality.

Her 'state of the cinema', instead, is devoted to recording the "counterhistories" available within the contemporary frenzy of the visible. She notes how digitization makes available otherwise inaccessible and obscure works of politically engaged and formally experimental cinema. Such accessibility, she hopes, will guide film studies away from attending to the prescribed corpus of works produced by the industrial system and lead to "more accurate and better-informed histories" that can now take into account the genuine pluralism of the moving image[720]. Her prognosis for the cinema of the future touches on other features of her writing that this thesis has attempted to bring into view. She affirms again the capacity, as was discussed in Chapter Four, of the cinema to be "one of the places that allows us to reflect on the relationship between technical images...and mental images: how the former provide the means of representation for the latter, how the latter serve as potential for the former"[721]. She makes a call for a "new constructivism" that "consists in baring the functioning of contemporary images: in order to explain, deploy, relativise, historicise, twist them"[722]. These

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[718] Ibid. "Every nanosecond, more images are spread across networks than in the entire history leading up to Nicéphore Niépce [the man credited with the first fixing of a photographic image by chemical and technical means]".
[719] Ibid.
[720] Ibid.
[721] Ibid.
[722] Ibid.

are the characteristics of the visual study, analysed in Chapter 3, perhaps the richest area of possible future research that Brenez opens up for film scholars. Whether in the sphere of criticism and historiography or in the affirmation of experimental practices that are in themselves critical acts and historical reflections, Brenez provides the tools with which to intelligently navigate the contemporary ocean of images. Her *critical affirmation of radical negativity,* that is, the aesthetic decision to act on the ability of the cinematic image to subtract phenomena from any apparent unity in space and time and to separate them from their reified significance in integrated systems of meaning, works to forever keep open the horizon of experimental possibility. The challenge is laid down: "As far as cinema is concerned, everything remains to be done"[723].

This thesis has been an attempt to lay out some of the co-ordinates by which this challenge may be taken up. I have attempted to extend the to-date limited reception of Brenez in English-speaking film studies by consolidating a body of work that has circulated for some years at the margins of official academia. Rather than presenting a Brenezian theory of the cinema I have attempted to describe her strategies as a model for a critical agency that attends to the radical potential of the medium; an agency I have characterised as embodying an experimental ethos. Brenez recognises the cinema's experimental roots in scientific endeavours of observation and description, particularly of the phenomenon of the moving body. But just as equally she acknowledges the medium's ability to intervene and plunge into the everyday lifeworlds of societies. While she is a specialist and great champion of the avant-garde, Brenez's experimental ethos is not restricted to a particular genre or context of production; it is a critical perspective upon the field in general. She approaches films less as things to know than as ways of knowing, cinema as a lived experience even. Her experimental ethos values those works that

[723] Ibid.

transgress or simply ignore the conventional boundaries of documentary, fiction and experimental cinema; that, like Farocki and Godard, take the image as a problem to pose rather than a readymade effect; that provide, like Abel Ferrara, a meditation on the traffic between mental and concrete images; and works that generate new figurative archetypes of bodily expression. Like the Situationists, we can say that Brenez is both 'with and against cinema'. Against it in its inscription within systems of discipline and control that reproduce the status quo and which affect a "mutilation of the imaginary"[724]. But with it in solidarity with all the many gestures of the *détournement* of the apparatus toward the creation of new perspectives on reality, or which bear witness to injustice, or which nurture 'the very idea of the possible'[725]. As such, Brenez's experimental ethos sustains a fundamentally moral idea of the cinema as a visionary critical activity.

Synopsis: Tarrying with the Negative

Over the course of researching and writing this dissertation, I have come to recognise Brenez's citation of Hegel's phrase regarding 'tarrying with the negative', discussed especially in Chapter Two, as a key framework in which to understand the philosophical underpinnings of her approach to cinema, the ethical exigencies that animate it, and the practical techniques of analysis and critique that are its forte. The intense joy and enthusiasm in which Brenez's writing is composed would seem to contradict any claim that 'negativity' is at the centre of her work. But here again, she is teaching us to see things, concepts and words differently. Negation or negativity should not be seen simply as a matter of loss, absence or lack, but as the condition

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[724] Ibid. Translation modified.
[725] 'The Ultimate Journey', np.

of difference, differentiation, and dynamism, i.e. the core principles that underpin her experimental ethos.

The Brenezian concept of negativity is present in her understanding and deployment of the resolutely unstable term 'figure', which, as discussed in the Introduction, was defined at its most basic level as "the *force* of a representation"[726]. The figure announces the *event* of representation as such, its bringing forth the things of the world into the experience of appearances. As plastic form and dynamic trace, the force of the figure is also the continual *transformation* of appearances; the figure gives form to the logical determinations of the *cut* and the *frame,* the genetic and generative elements of cinema. This protean facility of the figure was discussed in Chapter Five in terms of Brenez's notion of anamorphosis, conceptualised as *a force of movement and differentiation* which translates the film from one figure to the next. In her analysis of Epstein, detailed in the Introduction, Brenez hones in on a concept of "essential alteration", which is a state of being where everything and phenomena is always divided from itself and always part of larger constellations of movement. Seen in terms of Brenez's experimental ethos, the cinema is a great machine with a refined capacity for propagating figures as modalities of presence that are always oscillating between their own concrete autonomy and their inscription in forces and movements that take them beyond themselves.

'Presence', a notoriously difficult and illusive phenomena and theoretical concept, would seem to be the authentic opposite of anything 'negative'. But Brenez provides the dialectical twist: as we saw in the analysis of Razutis' *Lumière's Train,* the cinematic figure is a

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[726] Brenez. Cited in *Last Day*, p. 7

"singular form of plasticity which fundamentally borders on absence"[727]. We can thus conclude that presence in the cinema operates across two separate but deeply interconnected levels. Firstly, presence can refer to the concrete material presence of the image as luminous matter, a dynamic movement of condensation and displacement of energy regardless of its particular representational content. Here presence refers to intensive events of *luminosity* in values shading between darkness and brightness as well as a *velocity,* in other words a magnitude of movement in a specific direction. Presence also requires some type of 'distinction', a presence must be distinguished from something it is not; it requires a frame. Presence is the unstable framing of luminous events. Secondly, presence also concerns the figurative relationship between image and thing, what Brenez calls the referent's "transposition into a motif"[728]. Each level refers to a different kind of movement: the movement *of* the image taken as a distinct thing *in* the world and the movement *in* the image of figures of presence we recognise as *of* this world, but have now taken on a different, altered modality. In both cases there is a passage and a transformation: framing brings into visibility a presence that had hitherto been contained in an indistinct background and 'transposition' introduces heterogeneity into the heart of things assumed identical with themselves. "Real presence", Brenez writes, "is the divergence of the thing from itself"[729]. Figuration, therefore, is the radicalisation, the *uprooting,* of reality.

Brenez's Kracauerian notion that cinema is "the description of negativity at work"[730] is amply demonstrated in the distinction she makes between the body and the figure, as well as the vertiginous heterogeneity in which she constructs the field of cinematic somatization. Chapter Three analysed the radicality of the figure as the condition for the body's complex

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[727] *De la figure,* p. 317.
[728] 'Ultra-modern', p. 235
[729] 'Ultra-Modern', p. 236.
[730] 'Archaeology of the Figural', 7:30.

travails in cinematic circuits of plasticity. Critical negativity underpins the "claustrophilia"[731] of theatrical troupes and militant guerrillas that allow them, differently but in solidarity with each other, to stage a great *No!* to the archive of conformity and to political oppression. The figure's force of differentiation is detailed in Brenez's burlesque natural history of figurative archetypes and prototypes. And it is embodied in the "expressive impulses" of non-actors, of the ordinary, generic and absolutely singular critical bodies that cinema detects, welcomes, and develops.

As I discussed in Chapter One, Brenez's affirmation of negativity comes in the wake of Lyotard's philosophical deconstruction of discourse and figure where 'negativity' is the operative agency in several domains. It names the negative relation between signifying terms in the systems of language, the 'spacing' of perception that opens up the 'negative' field between object and subject, and the unsettling *force* of desire which Lyotard argues is the generative motor of both communicative rationality and phenomenological sense. Important for Brenez is Lyortard's 'negative' understanding of the critical function of art as a 'screening off' of conventional reality-effects for the expression of alternative and open-ended experiments with figurative effects. Perhaps the most generative aspects of Lyotard's critical practice of the negative for Brenez is the displacement of the analyst's position of explanatory mastery and the opening of another model of critical exegesis that refuses any unified or essentialised model of 'truth' and works instead to translate the image as a space of possibility and potential.

Tarrying with the negative, then, is most simply defined as *the work of critique.* This idea was most substantially demonstrated in Chapter Two's discussion of the principles, histories and techniques linked to Brenez's notion of "immanent critique". The work of critique as tarrying with the negative is embodied as a mode of film analysis that displaces the apparent

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[731] 'Reification', np.

integral nature of the moving image into constellations of forces and heterogeneous ensembles of relations. In her film analyses, Brenez names such ensembles figurative economies, which I characterised as the immanent processes of a film's construction. These economies are organised by different figurative logics, either networks of symbolic associations or historically inscribed figurative practices. The plasticity and dynamism of cinematic figuration was examined in terms of the premise of a 'negative' ontology of the image based on the materiality of the cut, whether in the form of the interval between frames, the space of projection, the work of montage, or (most fundamentally) in the articulation of the *gramme*. Brenez called this essential dimension of cinema the flickering "light of discontinuity"[732].

Finally, one of Brenez's most original and important critical gestures is in proposing for future research the raw, open and provisional form of the visual study. The visual study is Brenez's paradigm of an experimental mode of thinking in images and is immanent critique's audiovisual recto in parallel to the verso of textual exegesis. The ability of cinema to study the image, to essay its essential features and comment on its historical expressions, is a feature of the medium which Brenez celebrates regardless whether it is in the subversion of cinematic common sense and critical intensification of the anamorphic relation by filmmakers like Ferrara (Chapter Four), the ecstatic abstractions of Razutis or the aesthetics of confusion in Godard's late essays (Chapter Two). What Brenez says about Ferrara in particular goes for the visual study in general: they are "devoted to observing the nature, role and workings of images in the individual psyche and collective imaginary"[733]. It is Brenez's experimental ethos writ large on the plane of practice. To the extent that today images saturate the entire social field, the scope of possibility for the visual study is incredibly large. The actuality of the visual study

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[732] *De la figure,* p. 317.
[733] CN, p. 152.

thus also begs the question of the critical role of cinema in the post-cinematic era of the 21st century.

Areas of further research

The future could be a golden age for the experimental and speculative initiatives which Brenez's field work labours to bring into view. One of the consequences of the contemporary dispersal of cinema - its modes of display, figurative histories, technical devices, and forms of experience - into the larger dispositif of 'screen media' analysed, among others, by Francesco Casetti[734] and Thomas Elsaesser[735], is that it becomes harder and harder to justify the definition of our object of study to the industrially produced feature narrative film. The familiarity and popularity of new media art, the enormous scale of so-called 'user-generated content' on digital platforms, and a contemporary structure of feeling modulated by constant immersive experience in the vital affectivity of technical images, suggests that there is a collective sensibility now sensitised to a heterogeneity of audiovisual experiences which can swing between the deeply abstract, the strangely uncanny, and direct involvement with lived reality. Following Brenez's example by reconfiguring our critical and historiographic priorities toward works and traditions, such as the visual study, that labour on the materiality of images, their function and political economy, and which essay the interfaces between *psyche* and *technē,* can help sustain the actuality of film studies as a critical enterprise in the 21st century. Similarly, and as noted by Brenez in her 'State of the Cinema' address, the accessibility today of no budget, artisanal,

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[734] Casetti. 'What is a Screen Nowadays?', in *Public Space, Media Space.* Eds. Chris Berry, Janet Harbord, Rachel Moore. Palgrave Macmillan. 2013, p. 16-40. See also the collected anthology *Screen Genealogies: From Optical Device to Environmental Medium.* Eds. Craig Buckley, Rudiger Campe, Francesco Casetti. Amsterdam University Press. 2019.

[735] Elsaesser. *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema.* Amsterdam University Press. 2016. See also *Mind the Screen: Media Concepts According to Thomas Elsaesser.* Eds. Jaap Kooijman, Patricia Pisters and Wanda Strauven. Amsterdam University Press. 2008.

previously censored or frankly unobtainable works is leading to the formation of new 'micro canons' on cinephile platforms like *Letterboxd.com* where users can generate and comment on 'playlists' of titles which can vary from the pleasure of poster design[736] to the experimental queer underground[737] to contested 'best ofs' of every genre and decade of the medium's existence[738]. Under the pressure of the insights of media archaeology and the new forms of global cinephilic intelligence, film studies needs new ideas and new methodologies. Brenez's experimental ethos can provide some possible responses to that need.

I would like in the future to address some of these anxieties and possibilities around the contemporary nature of the object of study by investigating a speculative question, to paraphrase Lyotard one more time: *What is the desire named cinema?*[739] Can the cinema be productively thought of as 'the passion for the figure', in the multifaceted sense of that term that Brenez tries to teach us? What ensembles of practice and new lines of enquiry emerge if we approach the cinema as the desire for material intimacy with phenomena and as a plastic medium for the expression of the movement of thought? Is there a 'will to cinema' in a way similar to how Kojin Karatani analysed a "will to architecture" in *Architecture as Metaphor*? And would such a 'will' be the desire for formalisation, to give order and consistency to the chaos of our lives, or would it be the desire for the undoing of form, an ecstatic dissolution of perspectival relations of subject and world? Approaching such questions would be one possible response to one of Elsaesser's provocations, made right at the end of his life, when he suggested

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[736] For example, 'Personal Selection of Textless Poster Art', by Granit Hysiqi
https://letterboxd.com/grougy/list/personal-selection-of-textless-poster-art/
[737] For example, 'Queer Experimental Cinema' by Nicholas Swanton
https://letterboxd.com/njohnswanton/list/queer-experimental-cinema/
[738] The user NEWARCHIVE has produced over 500 playlists of micro genres, an historical undertaking worthy of its own close study. https://letterboxd.com/newarchive/lists/
[739] Lyotard raises the question of "the desire named Marx" in *Libidinal Economy*.

that we shift our theoretical reflection from the paradigm question of 'what is cinema?' to that of "what is cinema good for?"[740]

One specifically Brenezian trajectory with which to navigate these areas would be to nuance them into a set of questions about history, rebellion, and the use of cinema as a matrix for radical and revolutionary acts. How has cinema figured in realising the utopian dreams of alternative realities and how is this desire expressed today in a "world swimming in an ocean of images"? Some initial visual studies that might form an ensemble with which to analyse this could be Johan Grimonprez's delirious *détournement* of official images reporting on the hijacking of airplanes and television airspace by international militant organisations of the late 20th century in *DIAL History* (1997); *Black Celebration* (1988) by Tony Cokes which appropriates newsreel footage of riots and confrontations with police in urban black neighbourhoods of the US cut to the sounds of Skinny Puppy; Jean-Gabriel Périot's collage of films by and about the German Red Army Faction titled *A German Youth* (2015); and *Videogrammes of a Revolution* (1992), Farocki and Andrei Ujica's cine-pamphlet on the events that took place in Romania in December 1989, the first revolution to be broadcast, seen and perhaps made for t.v. Can we still occupy *The Hour of the Furnaces* (Solanos & Getino, 1968)? And what are the radical functions of the image in the age, as Hito Steyerl has described it, of *November* (2004), the time *after* revolutionary October?

Some other Brenezian affinities can also be discerned in the recent generation of Brenez's former students. Go Hirasawa, for example, who completed his dissertation with Brenez in Paris in 2021, has been researching into the histories and forms of Japanese *fûkeiron*

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[740] Elsaesser. 'Film as Thought', in *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment.* Bloomsbury Academic. 2019, p. 31.

or 'landscape theory', a militant political aesthetic conceived in the 1960s and '70s in response to the long echo of Japanese fascism, the accelerated post-war economic boom, and the perceived limitations of radical leftist documentary filmmaking of the time. Hirawsawa, along with scholars like Julian Ross, Miryam Sas and Yuriko Furuhata, have opened up the study of Japanese cinema beyond the lines of auteur theory and anime and have shown how intensely politics and cinema were implicated in each other. Brenez has since collaborated with Hirasawa on edited collections of critical writings by Japanese filmmakers such as Koji Wakamatsu and Masao Adachi.

Bidhan Jacobs, who completed his thesis with Brenez in 2014 and who co-edited the anthology *Le Cinéma Critique* which was discussed in Chapter One, has conducted research that brings together the figurative conception of cinema of Jean Epstein, the investigations of the materiality of the *dispositif* by structuralist filmmakers of the 1960s and a contemporary generation of filmmakers and artists, such as Jacques Perconte, Peter Tscherkassky, Marylène Negro and HC Gilje, who attempt a critical appropriation of analog, video and digital technologies simultaneously. His central concept is the 'signal', that is, the inscription, storage, transmission and translation of energy across material systems, which he views as a continuous phenomenon across all forms of cinematic infrastructure. Jacobs views his cohort of contemporary artists and filmmakers as offering a 'signal intelligence' that hacks into the programming and routines of audiovisual technologies to convulse the apparatus into generating new forms of movement, image-relations and new palettes of colour, blur and figure[741].

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[741] Jacobs. *Esthétique du signal: Hacker le filmique.* Éditions Mimésis. 2022.

Lastly, Sylvain George, who studied with Brenez in the early 2000s, and who comes from a philosophy and social work background has been producing independent films, cinematic pamphlets in Brenez's nomenclature, that investigate the impact and lived realities of France's immigration policies through the close study of refugees trapped in the state of exception in border-zones like Calais. In a sequence of films such as *Qu'ils reposent en révolte (Des Figures de Guerres I)* (2010), *Les éclats (Ma gueule, ma révolte, mon nom)* (2012), and *Paris est un fête* (2017) George freely mixes documentary reportage, experimental handling of form, rhythm, and montage, and a collaborative ethic that records the testimonies of long journeys toward hope and freedom met with exploitation and persecution.

Whether it is attending to the contemporary state of cinema, mired in an ocean of images, with the form of cinematic intelligence she calls the visual study, or by bringing back into the present age histories of struggle and formal invention otherwise obscured by view, or the innovative investigation into contemporary artistic practices that challenge technical and aesthetic norms, or, indeed, as filmmakers confronting the intolerable realities of the 21st century, the lines of research opened up by Nicole Brenez will prove to be fruitful and daring. They will all pose once again "the fundamental cinematographic questions": "Why make an image, which one, and how? With whom and for whom? With which other images does it conflict? Why? Or, to put it differently, which history do we want?"[742].

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[742] Brenez. "Political Cinema Today—The New Exigencies: For a Republic of Images." *Screening the Past,* 2013. https://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-37-aesthetic-issues-in-world-cinema/political-cinema-today-%e2%80%93-the-new-exigencies-for-a-republic-of-images

The Tissue of Humanity

To end with, I would like to approach a final film analysis of hers; a work, she says, that "attains the very principle of figurativity"[743]. Once more we see Brenez demonstrating the practice of immanent critique where the exegetical drive of analysis is fused with poetic evocation and speculative reasoning, all of which saturated in the characteristic Brenezian exigency to stare in the face of the intolerable. In a text titled 'A Picture of Us' dedicated to the French artist and filmmaker Marylène Negro, Brenez discusses the 2010 work *X+,* a single-screen projection that 'vertically' edits together, that is superimposes, ten films from the period between 1961 and 1976 all originating in the United States[744]. To be more precise, they are "ten activist films from a body relegated to the margins of the official history of images"[745]. This corpus of films is an ensemble of neorealist fiction, militant pamphlet, and documentary report, all in one way or another a record of that turbulent period in American history: the civil rights movement, the urbanisation of indigenous peoples, and especially the traumas of the Vietnam War. However, the superimposition technique all but totally obscures any 'message' or discursive transmission of agitprop and any empathetic identification with figures is fleeting. Instead, Brenez writes, the citational density of the work produces "[m]oments of interlocking that border on magma that suggest an image, *an emblem for the perpetual agitation of living creatures coexisting either in time or in space or in people's memories*, never meeting, but partaking of the same energy, a coexistence that no discourse or concept can account for"[746].

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[743] Brenez. "A Picture of Us: X+ by Marylène Negro", *Sabzian*, Special Dossier Nicole Brenez: Sur la Terre / Au Fond du Cœur, December 2021, https://www.sabzian.be/text/a-picture-of-us .
Sections of this analysis also appear in 'Political Cinema Today'.

[744] The work can be viewed on the artist's website at https://www.tousdesindiens.com/marylene_negro

[745] Brenez provides a list the original sources: *Here at the Water's Edge* (1961); *The Exiles* (1961); *The Bus* (1963); *Losing Just the Same* (1966); *One Step Away* (1967); *Black Liberation* (1967); *In the Year of the Pig* (1968); *Winter Soldier* (1972); *Wattstax* (1973); *Underground* (1976).

[746] 'A Picture of Us', np.

Here, Brenez provides us with a perfect, if coded, definition of the figure: a protean agency on the threshold of visibility, existing in liminal states between creaturely materiality and plastic appearance, in passage between the concrete and the mental, which troubles the desire of discourse to fix sense in classified certainty. A force of discontinuity emerging from a common energy, the figure, as a modality of presence, is a sign of unstable closure, exposed to force, manifesting in sensible form, that is apt to form and deform relations with other figures.

The work aims to manifest something of the radical energy of the period but scrupulously refrains from restricting that energy to a discursively defined political subject. It is more about *the movement* itself, a nuancing of differences, a movement between moments in time, space and memory; the movement between the singular and the common. That this movement is manifested in and by the materiality of the image is of crucial importance to Brenez. The anarchival use of found-footage registers an anarchic form of *coexistence* composed of a fluid tension between the continuity of a medium and the heterogeneity of its mediations. The shifting layers of the work create formal collisions of images of different colouring, scale, grain, and movement. There is a similar confusion of voices, sometimes several speech-tracks layered on top of each other, sometimes the noise dropping out leaving only a singular voice, sometimes the noise of crowds. The work overall manifests the variable tonalities of democratic noise. These collisions and confusions at the formal level bear witness at the social and political level of the antagonism between a society's killing machines - the grotesque instruments of war, class conflict, racial hatred, and gendered violence - and a society's machines of collective resistance, joy, and freedom. The imagery slides depictions of death at an intimate and massive scale over gestures of intimacy on a collective and personal level. Dancing bodies, caressing bodies, bodies speaking out, singing and testifying, corpses, smiling murderers on the killing fields, bodies emptied by all the horror, beaten bodies and those that weep. The work is

particularly focused on the face. Faces fill the frame, they crowd over each other, they face each other across time and space, they face us. The opacity of the work's layering produces a plastic physiognomy that both seduces and thwarts the gaze. The face and speech meet in close, humid density and in close hand-to-hand combat over the fate of history. Figures at the edge of discourse haunting the threshold of visibility.

What then, finally, is figurativity? The answer is by no means straightforward, but the response Brenez wishes to highlight is that it involves "the effervescent confusion of...presence"[747]:

> Endlessly, the cinema records silhouettes, groups, crowds, masses - fleeting passers-by of a period they are going through, tiny extras [*figurants*] of a zeitgeist that carries them along. *X+* explores the visual and aural forms of presence thanks to which persist, insist or dissolve the argentic [*argentique*] traces of these innumerable figures whose existence forms the tissue of humanity and whose mingled gestures - noticed or unnoticed make up the supposed 'collective' substratum of collective history[748].

Figurativity constitutes 'the tissue of humanity'. 'Tissue' is both a living material and a network of gossamer interconnection. How does something so fragile come to stand for the species as such? The figure of the species, that which is asked to appear as its basic ontological condition, is the *figurant,* the term the French use for the film 'extra', the nobody, the anybody, the generic. The 'highest' principle of figurativity is an embodiment of the utmost neutrality and anonymity. As a mere 'accident of appearance', the *figurant* lacks a clear and distinct definition

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[747] Ibid.
[748] Ibid.

272

of its own and is instead a form of potential and possibility; a figurative force that could lead in many different directions and link up with untold other figures. Cinema is the matrix for figurative possibility. Not a catalogue of types, but an anarchival dissolution of borders, an anti-structure of fluctuating continuities and discontinuities. Brenez puns on the French term for 'film', *argentique,* that refers literally to the silver emulsion of celluloid, its fundamental or molecular element[749]. The agitation of living creatures appears to draw an analogy with the photogenic dispersion of 'argentic traces' of the medium support. 'Tissue', as it slides in and out of film, is both a living material and a network of interconnection. Everything emerges from the mesh of relation.

However, figurativity, as Brenez always tries to teach us, is not just a recondite realm of micro movement and abstract tropism. It is deeply connected to history and what Brenez calls "the political dimension of everyday life"[750]. The work studies activist films "vibrating with the popular energy born of anti-colonial battles of liberation harbored in photograms like pollen in the trunks of dead trees"[751]. Figurativity thus involves a Benjaminian-esque dialectic whereby the traces of a marginalised past that did not develop its full potential are re-membered and recomposed in the present - not as a program for action but as the experimental embodiment of, citing Gramsci, "political passion"[752]. And, as with Benjamin, a linear or progressive notion of history is replaced by an image of history "that occur[s] through latencies, resonances, deflagrations, involutions, short circuits, lags and synchronies"[753]. Figurativity *disfigures* teleology, and exposes the substratum of collective gestures from which future sensible and

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[749] It is sometimes contrasted with *numérique* as a term to denote 'digital' images.
[750] 'A Picture of Us', np.
[751] Ibid.
[752] Ibid.
[753] Ibid.

visual events can be derived. Finally, these critical bodies of yesterday, in 'the effervescent confusion of their presence', constitute a kind of "republic of images"[754]: "What is a people?", Brenez asks, "*X+* provides the intuition of the irrepressible power of people fighting, a people identified not from its nation, its generation or its community, but from the types of its commitment in the world"[755].

'The tissue of humanity'. *X+* (Dir. Marylène Negro, 2010)

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[754] 'Political Cinema Today', np.
[755] 'A Picture of Us', np.

Brenez's experimental ethos and immanent critique reveals how the political and figurative exigencies of film can provide us the co-ordinates for other collective efforts to construct a critical culture. Tarrying with the negative leads to new ensembles. Brenez's example invites us to consider the formal and ethical modes by which cinema has and can acknowledge the real, "ceaselessly measuring itself against what is unbearable and inadmissible: cruelty, inner opacity, and all that defies understanding"[756]. She asks us to reflect on the cinema as a practice of the interface between intimacy and historical actuality, as an instrument of critical awareness, and a visionary machine of new figurative archetypes. Her experimental ethos offers scholars a rigorous and poetic methodology of film analysis capable of traversing the heterogeneity and complexity of the contemporary field of the image. Let the image become a visual shout in favour of the disinherited; let no one escape the consciousness of suffering and injustice; let humanity become a synonym for goodness and understanding: these are the tasks Brenez sets for herself and for cinema.

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[756] CN, p. 38.

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