

The Wayward Spectator

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Abstract

Through a heterogeneous set of contributions from film studies, psychoanalysis and critical theory, including Leo Bersani and Laura Marks, Jacques Rancière and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, the dissertation confronts spectatorship, film theory, and their relation, on the issue of emancipation and of its discursive regulation. Against the pedagogical forms of film theory and the authoritarian framing of the spectator's position that can be seen to be integral to the functioning of the cinematographic apparatus, this work suggests that we consider theory as an internal aspect of film experience, rather than as its external explanation. Arguing for the fundamental emancipation of the spectator together with the heteronomy of the subject and the discursivity of film experience, the dissertation addresses what, in film experience, resists being reduced within intellectual mastery, metapsychological structures, and the logic of interpretation, and rather remains radically incommensurable with the principles of its intelligibility. Indeterminacy and a lack in mastery are thus taken to be the constitutional ground of spectatorship as a praxis and of the spectator as a site of tensions and dissensus. More specifically, three basic dimensions and categories of this "wayward" ground of film experience will be examined in their correspondences and connections: contingency, free association, and embodiment.

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Introduction. A divided passion?

The film analyst by his very activity places himself [...] outside of the institution.

Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Film*.

[Lady Ottoline Morrell to Bertrand Russell] Listen, just get through the seminar and let's go to the cinema.

Derek Jarman, *Wittgenstein*.

“How can you tell a psychoanalyst in a party crowd? When a beautiful woman enters the room and everyone turns to look at her, he is the one who turns away to look at everyone else.” There are versions of this joke about sociologists and psychologists as well, but it is really the film theorist that should figure in it: he, or she, would be that spectator who, as soon as the film begins, turns away from the screen to stare at the other members of the audience.

It is sometimes the case with film theorists, indeed, especially when they deal with spectatorship, that they shift their attention from the contingencies of their own involvement with film and from the personal significance that it holds for them, to the visible signs of the involvement of everyone else and to the intelligible meaning of the text. So that the desire animating the study of film would seem to come less from the theorist's own enjoyment of film as a spectator, than from its fascination with the other's visual pleasure, made into the object of its look. Like the psychoanalyst in the joke, the film theorist

would seem to be somewhat removed - or to wish to remove itself - from the power of attraction exerted by the spectacle: more than being directly engaged in its own visual pleasure, and with the lures that fantasy and ideology have prepared for it, the theorist would rather look at the ways others perform the one, and bite the others. Understood in this way, the position of the theorist would imply a movement away both from the source of pleasure and from the theorist as the site of it. Driven by this fundamentally perverse pleasure in looking at the other's looking, but necessarily aiming at the sublimation of this pleasure and bringing about the objectification of both the spectacle and the gaze, film theory - and a theory of spectatorship in particular - would thus be essentially, as Christian Metz put it, a divided passion.¹ On the contrary, the intention of this work is to explore the ways in which film theory, not merely as an academic practice, but as an aspect of film experience itself, can act not as a distribution of the space of film and an articulation of its pleasures and significance, but rather as yet another form of their sharing.

The joke we have begun with is sexist, of course - because it wants you to assume that the theorist is heterosexual, and because it frames both the woman as a spectacle and the spectacle as an objectified beauty.² In this, it fittingly represents the sometimes no less crude objectification of spectatorship and film, and the same normative "transparency" of the ideal spectator, that can be recognised in academic film theory. Keeping with the sexist inflection, we can picture the film theorist as a kind of voyeur, looking at a male heterosexual spectator who is staring, in turn, at a beautiful woman on the screen. He would look at the film only as an object of the other's desire, at the same time separating himself from the spectacle, and objectifying spectatorship and film as the spectator objectifies the woman. In many ways, indeed, the straight male conformist subject of early apparatus theory functioned as proxy of the apparatus theorist's own desire and of its authoritarian relation to cinema and film. This overstatement of masculinity and visibility, as well as this apparently inevitable "buddy relation" between the theorist and the ideal (male) spectator that it entails, suggests in turn a disavowal of homoerotic desire and, together

¹ Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Film: The Imaginary Signifier* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 79.

² See Michele Aaron, *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On* (London: Wallflower, 2007), 25.

with it, the refusal of a different regime of knowledge and pleasure. One that would blur, at least, or bring about the collapse, of the stiff separation between subject and object, observer and observed, savant and ignorant, passive spectator and critical subject, that is typical of pedagogical knowledge and of a normative gaze. By shutting itself off from its own visual pleasure, indeed, and by putting a distance between itself and what arouses it, the theorist also removes itself from many - if not all - of the political questions that define spectatorship.

Reified and commodified, but still unscrutable, visual pleasure is the centre around which all actions and fantasies of cinema as a psychic and social institution gravitate. As the use of explicitly sexist vocabulary (or formally neutral, but still implicitly sexist ideas) both in our joke and in a number of film theory texts only makes more evident, within authoritarian regimes of knowledge, power and sexuality, visual pleasure becomes itself a spectacle. Looking at the other looking comes then to be a dominant metaphor for the economic and discursive regulation of spectatorship and for authoritarian forms of film theory as well. We can say, then, that visual pleasure is *made* visible, studied, named and controlled in many ways, through many technologies and discourses - not least, through film theory itself, and by those films that put spectatorship “en abyme”. If we take visual pleasure to be yet another object of a *scientia sexualis*, as that fundamental dimension of film experience that institutions seek to signify, direct, and produce from without, then spectatorship theory must be addressed first of all as a Foucauldian incitation to discourse:³ an attempt to construe, rationalise, name and control the experience of watching, and the modes of subjectivity that come with it, in order to allow its discipline and reproduction. Therefore, film theory would often appear to be intrinsically allied, in the forms of its enunciation and in the kinds of relations it establishes, to the modes of film production and consumption that it often constructs, simultaneously, as the object of its criticism.

Within authoritarian regimes of knowledge, the spectator’s visual pleasure, in itself escaping visibility, is forcibly reduced within the frenzy of the visible, in itself erratic and proteiform, it is put under surveillance and normalised. Film experience and the very embodied presence and subjective implication of

³ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la Sexualité: La Volonté de Savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 25.

spectators in the scene of film is thus constructed as an object of the theorist's gaze. From the point of view of the apparatus, visual pleasure has to be disciplined through the same gesture by which it is aroused. From the point of a "rational" theory of the spectator, in turn, spectatorship and its agency have to be acknowledged and articulated through the same gesture that makes them intelligible. In both cases this gesture entails an authoritarian articulation of the space of film and a negation of the spectator's fundamental emancipation. The failure to account for the variety of existing modes of spectatorship, of its specific agency and discursive power, that can be seen to be characteristic of apparatus theory, can indeed be traced back to an authoritarian regime of knowledge: to a neat split, that is, between the theorist and the spectator and to the affirmation of an inequality in their respective ways of understanding film experience. In this sense, apparatus theory appears to be an integral element of the cinematic apparatus itself, as it constitutes a fundamental part of the discursive regime by which spectatorship is articulated. At the same time, and for the same reason, film theory can be occupied as a potential site of resistance. We can see, then, how a queer feminist critique of the hetero/sexism and paternalism of apparatus theory, and of the transparency and normativity of the subject positions it assumes and contributes to construct, can be taken as a first step in the critique of a more universal pedagogical and authoritarian regime of knowledge about film and about the spectator's experience.

If we try to move beyond its sexist frame, then, what the joke exposes is a visual pleasure that is not made visible directly as an object of observation, but rather mediated through the look of another. In the end, the theorist looks away from the spectacle only to find it again through the spectator's pleasure. In fact, can the moving image even be apprehended as such without a *détour* through the look and the body of another? Is our relation to the moving image not first of all a form of interpersonal and contingent contact and, as it were, the introjection of a scene of dialogue, with its passions and misunderstandings? As the theorist turns to the spectator, she is in fact returned to herself: only, no longer in the sense of an autonomous and unitary subject. Does the subject really exist, indeed, beyond its involvement with other subjects and its contingent encounters with the world? Beyond the objectual regime of thought that is characteristic of intellectual mastery and its hierarchies, subjectivity may indeed appear to be *intentional*, in its radical phenomenological sense: the sub-

ject would only be found *in* the world, as an aspect of it, and, on the reverse, the world would always bear with it a trace of subjective experience. As it relates to spectatorship, this understanding would make of each contingent act of film watching already an expression of the whole history of the spectator's embodied encounters with film, and with other spectators. It would make of the very discursivity of the spectator's position a site of pleasure and tensions, and of subjectivity an eventually ungraspable *history* of interpellations, rather than merely an intelligible *instance* of turning around.

The specific fascination with visual pleasure that the film theorist embodies needs not be curbed, then, nor it necessarily has to take the form of an intellectual mastery. Indeed, as the theorist renounces to the position of the external observer, acknowledging its implication in the scene of watching, and as spectatorship is recognised in turn its own intellectual emancipation, this fundamental fascination with the other's look is returned to a shared ground of fantasy and experience - which is what keeps both spectatorship and film theory alive. The work of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière suggests envisaging the agency of the emancipated spectator and the activity of the film theorist on the same plane - that is, that we consider all forms of spectatorship and filmmaking and theories of spectatorship as "equal intelligences"⁴ of film and film experience. As a matter of fact, one cannot exist without the other: every form of spectatorship implies the performance of an aesthetic act, as well as a more or less conscious or complex theoretical and discursive articulation, and every theory of spectatorship is, in itself, a form of spectatorship grounded in aesthetic and embodied experience. Not only spectatorship and theory are inseparable, though, they are also largely indistinguishable. On one hand, without the desiring involvement of the theorist - which is at the same time a form of discursive power, and, thus, of political involvement - and without the loss of mastery that this implies, which makes the theorist more like a spectator, academic theory itself would be reduced to a mere profession of mastery. On the other hand, without some kind of theory in the form of a reflexive, though not necessarily conscious, theoretical understanding and extension of the significance of film experience on the part of the spectator, the psychic experience and the social performance of spectatorship would really be limited to the sce-

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur Émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008), 16.

nario of total passivity and intellectual stultification that apparatus theory can be accused of endorsing.

Now, the point is not to find a position for the film theorist which would truly be external to ideological apparatuses, completely detached from the gaze, or completely separated from her desires. It is not by taking away the gaze, nor the ideological dimension of cinema and film, nor the fundamental perversity of theory, then, that film theory can open itself up to more egalitarian forms of knowledge. The point is precisely the opposite: it is to face the involvement of the theorist and let it be played out - both in terms of the theorist's spectatorial pleasure, and of that particular form of pleasure which is looking at it. The point is not to place the shared ground of spectatorship and theory outside of the discursive dimension of film experience but rather to address, and disturb, the knot of power, knowledge, and desire that articulates it. A move beyond the authoritarian articulation of the space of film, then, entails not refusing to deal with the film theorist first of all as a contingent, embodied and desiring spectator and, conversely, with spectatorship as a discursive, theoretical and "agent" form of film theory. From the same Greek root stem both the term "spectator", and "theory": *theoria* would then be nothing more and nothing less than the activity of the *theoros*, the spectator. In this sense, the practice of spectatorship would in fact appear to be a *praxis* - a synthesis of theory and practice that is at the same time the essential expression of the fundamental emancipation of all spectators.

Spectatorship names not only that dimension in which aesthetic and discursive visual experience and theory converge, but also that in which the subject's lack of mastery over itself and a form of political agency coincide, and the space in which looking on and disciplinary observation are inextricably linked, hard if not impossible to be distinguished. And so the question of the spectator's emancipation ultimately becomes how to imagine this agency and passivity together, and together with the lack of mastery and contingent embodiment of the subject - that is, both beyond the fantasy of mastery that is fostered by the apparatus and by authoritarian theory, and beyond the forms of mastery, self-confession, and identitarian discipline that the subject can exert upon itself. Spectatorship, in fact, individuates a form of otherness to oneself, which bears its potential for emancipation and subversion not only as it troubles the existing articulations of the space of film, but because it disturbs the very identification

of subjectivity with self-mastery, which is what grounds all normative regulations of the subject. In this respect, in order to become subversive, the gaze and the embodied experience of the emancipated spectator and of the film theorist do not have to be entirely rational, nor aimed exclusively at mastery and meaning. On the contrary, if spectatorship and theory become dissensual, it is because their gaze wanders off its predetermined or previsible course, as their experience avoids the meaning and rather extends the significance of film experience through its sharing and encounters and through its radical involvement with fantasy.

In this sense, the space of spectatorship as a *praxis* is indicative of a lack, and a disturbance, in its very articulation. The position of the spectator that would refer to this, in turn, appears to be denoted by a certain “waywardness”. Wayward is, first of all, a subject who turns around, that is, one who responds to ideological interpellation - in doing this, however, it is also expressing a radical, if always ambiguous, subjective agency. It is a subject that, by looking on, also looks back upon its own contingent being and its relations with other people. Wayward is, in turn, a subject that turns *against*, and, thus, by extension, an intractable subject, wilfully and perversely deviating from the norm, but also unwittingly erratic and unpredictable. On the opposite end of the pensive spectator, then, who is subversive in the measure of its understanding and its control over the moving image, this restive spectator would rather find its emancipation and express its radical dissent through uncontrolled acts of wandering. The wayward spectator is not entirely regulated by discourse, then, despite existing in it, it is not entirely autonomous, despite being agent and responsible, and it is at the same time fundamentally emancipated and radically other to itself. The wayward is not the ungraspable subject: not what *cannot* be grasped or mapped, but that which nevertheless disturbs the very principles of its intelligibility. The fundamental aim of normative discourse is indeed not to repress, but rather to give form to this waywardness: the wayward spectator, then, is not automatically the enemy of normative discourse - it is, first of all, its tentative object.

In this sense, the waywardness of the embodied subject and of the contingent experience of film is never a guarantee of the subversiveness of spectatorship nor of its status as a political practice. Is it only when the erraticness of spectatorship troubles the existing articulation of the space of film, and only when

the subject's turning around is also a turning against its very self-sameness and self-possession, that spectatorship and subjectivity become political. In this sense, the wayward spectator is not a pre-discursive individual, nor simply a bodily and cultural viewer, but rather an impalpable site of struggle. Indeed, this quality of experience that we might call "wayward", cannot really be addressed, and certainly not reified, without losing its dissensual charge. As Rancière puts it, the political is not a form of articulation or re-articulation of the parts in a given social space (or of the space that is individuated by a given artistic medium) but rather the expression of a dissensus that comes from a part radically beyond the parts.⁵

Coherently, and inevitably, this work does not seek to explain or put the wayward spectator into discourse, and even less to reduce it to a portable category. Indeed, apart from the title, little points directly to this waywardness, and the dissertation, in keeping a rather associative and fragmentary nature tries to respect, through its heterogeneity, the very heteronomy of the subject it is arguing for. Still, some structure has been given. The first chapter will address spectatorship as a site of tensions and conflicts - between police and emancipation, discursive discipline and contingency, agency and passivity, autonomy and heteronomy, film theory and the experience of film - at the same time foregrounding the centrality of spectatorship in defining the epistemology and the political scope of film theory as a practice. Assuming the fundamental equality of the intelligence and the experience of film that is performed by all subjects involved with the medium, the second chapter will suggest that we rethink film theory as an internal aspect of film experience rather than as its external explanation. More specifically, it will highlight the disciplinary role of a pedagogical theory of spectatorship in the functioning of the cinematographic apparatus from the standpoint of the writings of Jacques Rancière. The next chapter will then address the concept of contingency, which underscores the discursive power of both spectatorship and theory, at the same time grounding them in the materiality of film and film experience and setting their limits. The fourth chapter is dedicated to psychoanalysis: it will address the role of psychoanalytic metapsychology and the logic of interpretation in the construction of the normative subject of the apparatus in psychoanalytic film theory,

⁵ Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente: Philosophie et Politique* (Paris: Galilée, 1995), 31.

and discuss free association and free floating attention as part of an alternative, non-authoritarian, understanding of the relation between psychoanalysis, film experience, and film theory. The fifth chapter will deal with phenomenological film theory, seen both as an attempt to break free from the normativity and the disembodiment of authoritarian film theories, and as a more bodily and non-objectual form of film epistemology. The particular relation of embodiment, contingency and the heteronomy of subjectivity will be addressed through a reading of David Cronenberg's film *The Fly*. Finally, the last chapter will discuss spectatorship as a form of being in the world and will argue, using Paul Auster's novel *Man in the Dark* as an example, for taking the dimension of embodied and forgetful memory as the fundamental ground of the spectator's emancipation and of its contingent encounters with film, beyond their inscription within the regime of representation and their authoritarian regulation.

Spectatorship as a site of conflict

The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.

Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*.

Spectatorship is a wide-ranging concept. In its broadness, it encompasses heterogeneous media, various kinds of relations that spectators entertain with them in dissimilar contexts, and different methodological approaches to their study. Its theoretical function is less to map this heterogeneity - to articulate a description of all possible scenarios of spectatorship - than to provide a synthesis, to tie together different aspects of film experience, and of the discourses that define it, at a specific point: the spectator. In this way, spectatorship abstracts, systematises, and provides a name to the dynamic of forces that shapes the ways we experience film and informs its social significance - forces that, however, in their materiality and complexity, and because of their involvement with fantasy, tend to defy rational grasp. Spectatorship, in fact, is also something else than a word and a theoretical construct, for it points back to the psychic state we are in when we are watching a spectacle - a spectacle which exists not only as it is projected, or displayed, on a screen, but within a scene made of our desires and pleasures. As such, spectatorship is always a personal experience, hard to translate into language and, thus, it is largely incommunicable: it encompasses the emotions, the fantasies, and the associations that come from our encounter with particular films, as well as the accrual of feelings that marks our involvement with cinema and with the very act of watching. And yet,

spectatorship is always also an interpersonal experience: one that only exists insofar as it is shared with other people and as it extends beyond the moment of the film's projection; one that, in turn, is necessarily affected by the way it is put into words, that is structured by the discourses and institutions in which it is embedded, and that acquires meaning through the kinds of relations that it fosters.

Spectatorship as an ideological institution and as a discursive practice.

In its most restricted sense, film spectatorship can be defined as the relation between viewer and film: the experience that a viewer has of a film and her understanding of this experience. A theory of spectatorship would then be a systematic study of the relations between viewers and films, of the possible modes of film experiencing, as well as of the discourses that are employed to make sense of film experience itself.

If the relation between viewer and film is at times reduced to the physiological, cognitive, and psychological mechanisms of audio-visual perception, it is nevertheless characteristic of the concept of spectatorship that it be addressed as something stretching beyond what is proper of those mechanisms, and framed instead as a discursive practice and a form of ideological institution. As Judith Mayne argued, spectatorship “denotes a preoccupation with the various ways in which responses to film are constructed by the institutions of cinema and with the contexts - psychic as well as cultural - that give those responses particular meanings.”⁶ As such, she concludes, “spectatorship is not just the relationship that occurs (3) between the viewer and the screen, but also and especially how that relationship lives on once the spectator leaves the theatre.”⁷ In other words, the scope of spectatorship relates to the significance of the experience of film as it is lived by viewers during and after the moment of the film's projection, as well as to the context of discursive practices and institutions that situate this experience. Spectatorship would then be the site in which these two dimensions of film experiencing - its embodiment and its discursivity - come together and become inseparable.

⁶ Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 32.

⁷ Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, 2-3.

We can say, then, that at the origin of contemporary theories of spectatorship is an extension of its scope, from the description of the physiological and psychic mechanisms of perception, to the study of the social dynamics that are seen to inform them. From this perspective, no such thing as mere film perception - prior to its discursive, political and ideological, construction - can be imagined. Perception itself, in fact, much like the cinematic subject, is taken to be a function of the broader dynamics that regulate spectatorship as a social phenomenon and, more specifically, film as a signifying practice.⁸ As a consequence, film perception becomes not simply a physiological and cognitive process, but a material and discursive activity, understood as a convergence of semiotic meaning, social value, and personal significance.

What in many ways was the first and most influential, and what has now become the paradigmatic theory of spectatorship - conceived in the early 1970s at the crossroads of critical theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis and semiology - addressed spectatorship in terms of subject positioning: it made sense of spectatorship, that is, through a particular metapsychological and ideological characterisation of the position of the spectator. A position that was inscribed within, and informed by what Jean-Louis Baudry famously called, adapting Louis Althusser's concept of *appareil idéologique*,⁹ the basic cinematographic apparatus. Spectatorship emerged as a concept and as a specific area of study, then, in the context of a rethinking of cinema as an ideological institution, attending to the reproduction of social relations of production, and of film as an ideological object, whose textuality and meaning were to be analysed through the instruments of textual analysis, the critique of ideology, and psychoanalytic interpretation. From the ontology of the image and the quest for cinema's formal and aesthetic specificity in relation to the other arts, then, film theory's main task became in this perspective the theorisation of the ideological power of film as a medium. The spectator was individuated in turn as the ideological object of film, interpellated and positioned by the technological and narrative structures of the film text. As Baudry put it, the ideological function of the basic cinematic apparatus was, like artificial perspective, expressed primarily

⁸ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 37.

⁹ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 144.

in the construction of the subject as the illusory centre and unitary instance of perception.¹⁰ The imaginary unity of the subject, further linked to the Lacanian account of the mirror stage, provided in this way a model for the fundamental misrecognition through which the ideological effects of cinema were explained. By this, apparatus theory gave (and can still be used to give) a powerful interpretation of film as a consumerist product and of spectatorship as a conformist practice: it is, though, as it is often noted, less equipped to account for the diversity of spectators and for their agency and emancipation.

The very interest of film studies in ideological state apparatuses was, in some respects, a consequence of the Frankfurt School's main claim and cornerstone of critical theory: that the relationships of domination in capitalist society could not be explained as a function of coercion alone. Critical theory attempted to give reasons for the subject's active implication in the functioning and in the re-creation of the institutions that oppressed it. Cinema, in this regard, provided the perfect model of a cultural apparatus, one that operated almost exclusively by means of ideology: it was indeed an institution that did not help to reproduce the existing social conditions through intimidation and repression, but rather enforced its ideological potential by capitalizing on the audience fantasies. When Slavoj Žižek, discussing the Marxist notion of commodity fetishism, addresses the fantasmatic character of the commodity, film appears again to be the perfect example.¹¹ As Žižek reminds us, Karl Marx had a complex and almost paradoxical understanding of the commodity: hardly the no-nonsense category that it may appear to be, a commodity would rather be "a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."¹² In this sense, commodities would not be defined entirely, nor essentially, by their use value. On the contrary, Žižek comments, their value ultimately rests on the ideological fantasy that not only dictates our relation to them, but that informs their very material reality.¹³ In other words, there

¹⁰ Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1974-1975): 46.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 27-28. Also see Cornel West and Slavoj Žižek, Talk at Princeton University, 5 May (2005): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBvASueefk4>.

¹² Karl Marx (1995-1996 / 1867) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. I. Moscow: Progress Publishers, p. 46.

¹³ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 30.

would be no reality to the commodity beyond the ideological fantasy illuminating it as such. In this sense, we can see how film functions at the same time as a commodity and as an instrument of ideology and, in turn, we could say that every commodity is fundamentally like a film, acquiring value in function of its fantasmatic power. The dimension in which the spectator's emancipation and its subjection to ideological institutions is fought, in the end, is at the same time a material one - having to do with social realities and actual relations of production - and an ideological, fantasmatic one - having to do, as Althusser wrote, with the subject's representation of imaginary relationships.¹⁴ In Žižek's view, however, the confluence of these two dimensions is a radical and insurmountable one: there would be no real social conditions, we could say, beyond the ideological fantasies that frame them in terms of their reality, of their situatedness, and of their politics. On the contrary, it is precisely by affirming the possibility of a discrimination between real and imaginary conditions that Althusser, as we will see, attempted to impose the autonomy and the authority of theory, that 1970s film theory eventually took as its own model.

As opposed to sociological approaches to the study of spectatorship, whose aim is to systematise viewer responses, Althusserian film theory was more concerned with the spectator as that *imaginary* position implied by the text and informed by the basic cinematic apparatus, than with the viewers materially present at the film's projection. In this sense, Judith Mayne can write that the distinction of the cinematic subject from the viewer has been the fundamental insight of 1970s film theory.¹⁵ To put it differently, we can say that the main accomplishment of this period of film theory has been precisely that of making cinematographic experiencing conceivable in terms of spectatorship: to understand *the* viewer as a spectator, at the same time foregrounding the political and ideological dimensions of film watching and film theory. Now, this key idea of a split between the spectator as a film goer and the spectator as the subject of film can be taken in two directions. On one side, it constitutes a (strategic) negation of the more situated and embodied agency that viewers always have in their relation to film. This negation spurred what is probably the most consistent and widely shared line of criticism against apparatus theory: that

¹⁴ Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 162.

¹⁵ Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, 33.

it cannot account for the “real” spectator - that is, for the degrees of freedom and for the contingency of spectatorship in all its possible manifestations. On the other, it must be taken as the recognition of a struggle that is internal to the very agency of the spectator, inseparable from its discursive understanding and from a psychoanalytic view of subjectivity and desire. This is, conversely, the main reason why, despite the essentially valid criticism, apparatus theory proved to be somewhat inescapable and has never been completely discarded - unless, that is, at the same time one is ready to abandon, or at least drastically downplay, the psychic and ideological dimensions of cinema as such, and, with them, the cultural and political relevance of spectatorship both as a category and as a cultural practice.

The cinematic subject of apparatus theory was constructed according to practices and discourses - on spectatorship itself, and, more generally, on perception and subjectivity - that clearly had a longer history, and a broader scope, than those of cinema, psychoanalysis, and film theory on their own. Baudry's reference to Renaissance perspective in his description of the normative mechanisms that regulate cinematic perception and attend to the formation of the cinematic subject, in a way, was an attempt to place film studies within this tradition, at the same time that it constituted an implicit attack on the rationalist subject of Enlightenment and against the deceptive neutrality of optical technologies.¹⁶ And yet, if the history of film spectatorship, as a practice, can be retroactively made to coincide with the birth of cinema - and if the historical development of the discourses and institutions that frame spectatorship dates back to ancient theatre and to the first philosophical discussions on subjectivity and political action - as a theoretical concept, spectatorship has a shorter history and a tighter focus.

One could say that spectatorship, in its current conception, was born at the moment in which cinema, from being a social technology among others, was also becoming a technology of the social. Meaning that cinema was seen not only to advance particular ideological positions within a given society, but, precisely through the dimension of spectatorship, also to inform the ways in which the social space itself was conceived. Simplifying, one could locate in Guy Debord's *La Société du Spectacle* the moment in which this shift became apparent to a

¹⁶ Baudry, “Ideological Effects,” 40.

sector of French intellectuals and film theorists.¹⁷ From then on, spectatorship was foregrounded both as a necessarily political dimension and as a key element in the network of power, knowledge and sexuality that structured the idea of society in the West. It is in this sense that the French philosopher Jacques Rancière explores the spectator at the same time as the subject of theatre and film and as the subject of democratic politics.

If, in more traditional film criticism, film was taken as reflection of a given social reality,¹⁸ from the more dynamic, dialectical, perspective offered by critical theory, cinema was studied instead as an active part of the historical, and psychic, forces that concurred to shape the social reality in which it existed. As such, apparatus theory configured itself more (at least, more than other academic theories of film) as an active intervention in the contemporary aesthetics of cinema, in the politics of spectatorship, and, ultimately, in politics as such, than as a reconstruction of the medium's historical, aesthetic, or technical specificities. An ahistorical gesture which, since then, has often been criticised, but that should not be seen *per se* as the cause of the theory's authoritarian framing of spectatorship: if the spectator's emancipation was foreclosed from the scope of apparatus theory, in the end, it was not because of the discursive nature that the theory recognised in film experience, but rather due to the pedagogical regime of understanding of the relation between discourse and experience that was characteristic of both cinematic institutions and academic practice.

In any case, the concept of spectatorship calls for an essentially political definition. Political both at the more abstract level of our understanding of power relations, of the account that can be given of them, in which spectatorship is articulated as an ideological institution; and at the more material level of dialogue, subjective encounters and contingent social struggles, that gives theories of spectatorship their flesh. The relation between these two aspects of the political dimension of spectatorship is an important question in film studies. More concretely, their connection has been one of the objectives of those spectatorship theorists who accompanied their academic activity with more direct forms of political engagement. The realities of the struggles they were involved in, or at least, that they supported - from class struggle and the opposition to

¹⁷ Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

authority, to feminist and queer movements, from the fight for racial equality to the resistance against colonialism - were, and still are, an essential part of spectatorship theories, without which a significant dimension of their meaning would be lost.

The ideological unconscious. The understanding of film as a social and political phenomenon, on one hand, and, on the other, a practice of theory that was at the same time meant to bring about political emancipation, were the premises for the elaboration (for the necessity) of a comprehensive theory of spectatorship. One that, as we have seen, linked cinematic modes of production and a semiological understanding of film signification to the dimensions of ideology and fantasy. Or, one should rather say dimension, in the singular, for it was indeed characteristic of 1970s film theory to conflate these two domains: apparatus theory found a precise correspondence - in Metz's wording, a "dual kinship" - between the libidinal economy of the spectator's metapsychology and the political economy of cinematographic production.¹⁹ This was not just a way of addressing cinema's evident affinity with imagination and of providing a sophisticated account of the psychology of film experience, but also, we will argue, a way of establishing the authority of film theory and, more generally, to further the alliance of Althusserianism and semiology. By folding Freud's psychic apparatus over Althusser's ideological apparatus, in fact, by reading the former largely as an internalisation of the latter's structures, film theorists took hold of the psyche in socio-political, semiological, terms (a bold move, whose mishaps and implications are far from being dead). This idea of internalisation was another trait that film studies had inherited from critical theory. As Horkheimer had written in 1937,

"the whole psychic apparatus of members of a class society, insofar as they do not belong to the nucleus of privileged people, serves in large measure only to interiorize or at least to rationalize and supplement physical coercion."²⁰

¹⁹ Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Film*, 8.

²⁰ Max Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," in *Critical theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 56.

Note, by the way, the exemption of the psyche of the “privileged” from social determination, as it is a first index of apparatus theory’s tendentially paternalistic positions: psyche and ideology, at least insofar as they were made into objects of critical analysis, were definitely posited as features of the passive masses. The Althusserian notion of interpellation, and thus the notion of cinematic identification, originated precisely from the theoretical move that combined social and psychic repression - that joined what subjects did not know about the mechanisms of oppression and what, on the ground of psychic repression, they could not know about their own history and desire. Film theory in this way addressed the lack of mastery of spectators coming from their binding, but not directly repressive, fascination with mainstream cinema, as it reflected their relation to the manufacture of consent and normative discourse in the context of capitalist society, and of Western liberal democracies in a more specific way. At the same time, this lack of mastery was not represented in terms of mere deception (ideology as a lie), but rather as a deception which satisfied and, more importantly, articulated, the spectator’s own desires (ideology, precisely, as a construction of a subject position).

Characteristic of this passage through psychoanalysis, then, was to put the ideological dimension of film spectatorship beyond the grasp of the *spectator*’s conscious agency,²¹ at the same time that it granted the theorist authority over it. The general assumption was, of course, that the ideological impact of cinematic institutions was greater, when its effects were not consciously acknowledged by viewers.²² This appears now to be a matter-of-fact postulate, but it actually relies on a specific - paternalistic, pedagogical or more generically authoritarian - understanding of the relation between knowledge and the unconscious and between the subject of theory and the spectator. The lack of awareness of the spectator implied the film theorist’s critical attention and to the former’s lack of mastery, necessarily corresponded the pretence of mastery of the latter. The fantasy of mastery is not synonym with knowledge or agency, then, but it rather names an authoritarian regime of understanding of knowledge and agency.

²¹ Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, 28.

²² Baudry, “Ideological Effects,” 40-41.

By superimposing film's ideological effect with the lack of conscious awareness of the spectator, apparatus theory not only made the dimension of the unconscious more intelligible, as we will see, it also negated its specific agency. Beyond the realisation that apparatus theory was never able to account for the many possible forms of the spectator's agency and emancipation lies, I think, not the employment of psychoanalytic theory as such, but rather its reduction to a mere metapsychology, together with apparatus theory's reliance on the logic and the mastery of interpretation. Not the universality of the subject of film that film theory individuated, but rather the transparency of its universal spectator to issues of contingency (gender, race, class, but also the diversions of the unconscious and the radical heteronomy of the subject). Not the discursivity film experience, finally, but rather the exclusion of the spectator's agency and fundamental emancipation from its scope. All of which can be seen as functions of the theory's authoritarian stance.

The future of disillusion: emancipation as a knowledge effect. Both spectatorial agency and the authority of the critical theorist were generally imagined as an act of disentanglement from the apparatus, involving a demystification of the discourses that informed it and a shattering of the positions it defined. Yet, quite paradoxically, this act could only be performed from a position that was in fact *already* external to the apparatus itself. While the theory's emancipatory goals presupposed that political subjects could assume this position, the spectator, by definition, could not: its emancipation was either bound to come from an external agency, or to be realized in self-effacement. In any case, either through an increased activity or through critical distance, the position of the spectator had to be attacked, removed, or relinquished. More specifically, the possibility of the spectator's emancipation from the apparatus was predicated on a "knowledge effect,"²³ external and opposed to that of ideology. A knowledge that, in the end, could not but be symbolised and possessed, if only in fantasy, by the apparatus theorist. The knowledge effect, indeed, no less than the ideological one, presupposes and supports an authoritarian regime of knowledge that was equally necessary to affirm the independence of theory and the insistence of ideology, and a specific set of relations of power

²³ Baudry, "Ideological Effects," 41.

between the passive spectator and the critical subject that ultimately rests on their inequality.

In his work, Rancière puts forward a stark critique of this kind of logic, which, for him, takes the form of an intellectual imposture (in fact, we could say, it is *the* quintessential imposture of the intellectual, both as a persona and as a regime of knowledge). In the following passage of *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière presents his views of the meta-political regime,²⁴ that we can take at the same time as a negative comment on the so called post-theoretical turn (in all of its forms) and as a critique of the standard Althusserian theory of ideology:

“Forty years ago critical science made us laugh at the imbeciles who took images for realities and let themselves be seduced by their hidden messages. In the interim, the imbeciles’ have been educated in the art of recognizing the reality behind appearances and the messages concealed in images. And now, naturally enough, recycled critical science makes us smile at the imbeciles who still think such things as concealed messages in images and a reality distinct from appearances exist. The machine can work in this way until the end of time, capitalizing on the impotence of the critique that unveils the impotence of the imbecile. [...] To escape the circle is to start from different presuppositions, assumptions that are certainly unreasonable from the perspective of our oligarchic societies and the the so-called critical logic that is its double. Thus, it would be assumed that the incapable are capable; that there is no hidden secret of the machine that keeps them trapped in their place.”²⁵

From this point of view, both the ideological regime that enforces (or, which is to say the same, assumes) the spectator’s passivity, and the regime that announces (or, which is to say the same, appropriates) the spectator’s activity equally constitute a form of *abrutissement*, of stultification, because they equally subtract to the subject its fundamental agency and emancipation. What both facets of this meta-political regime affirm, in fact, is the spectator’s inequality: its

²⁴ The regime of ideology and of its interminable demystification, see Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 123.

²⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London, New York: Verso, 2009), 48.

incapacity when confronted with cinematic discourses and institutions (“film language” and film production, film theory and the academia), and its inferiority toward their representatives (emblematically, the film director and the intellectual). If there is any possibility of emancipation, on the contrary, it is only in the possibility that the subject has to affirm it by itself. Not only spectators already have their own forms of agency and understanding, and do not need to receive them from the outside, Rancière argues, but, more fundamentally, one should regard the very dualistic oppositions of knowing and seeing, reality and appearance, activity and passivity, that underscore this authoritarian understanding of spectatorship as “incarnated allegories of inequality.”²⁶

Let me try to make this point *less* clear, by addressing the problem of ideology and knowledge from another angle. When Žižek, in order to explain the work of ideology, returns to Marx’s dictum - “they don’t know it, but they’re doing it” - he asks himself where is ideology expressed: at the level of knowledge, or at that of action?²⁷ In other words, is ideology neutralised as its effects become conscious and is emancipation then really an effect of knowledge? Or is ideology active at the level of practice and reality, embedded, as it were, in things themselves? The point, Žižek writes arguing for the second option, is not that people have a false representation of their social reality, as Althusser presumed, but that, even as they *know* that their relation to reality is imaginary, they still *act as if* what they imagine were real.²⁸ Our knowledge of things “as they really are,” is much less effective than the ideological fantasy that animates them. One could say that capital “K” knowledge itself - the knowledge that is supposed to be the knowledge of things as they actually are - only becomes effective insofar as it fulfils the obscene ideological fantasy that sustains it: that is, a fantasy of intellectual mastery. The irony is, then, that the Althusserian knowledge effect becomes effective *only insofar as it works as an ideology*. In the end, from Žižek’s perspective, the formula to describe the workings of ideology becomes one that necessarily traverses (cynicism), or simply bypasses (disavowal), the dimension of knowledge: *je sais bien, mais*

²⁶ Rancière, *Le Spectateur Émancipé*, 18. Translation mine. Gregory Elliott translates this expression as “embodied allegories of inequality.” See Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), 12.

²⁷ Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

quand même, as Octave Mannoni put it,²⁹ or, in other words, “they know that they’re doing it, but they are doing it all the same.”³⁰ Telling “them” what they are really doing, as the Althusserian theorist would try to do, does not sabotage the ideological machine. On the contrary - as Rancière confirms from a completely different standpoint - it drives it on.

Agency and heteronomy. All in all, rational knowledge can be seen to have little impact on the domain of ideology, as little as it has rein on the work of the drives. Like in Freud’s metaphor of the horse and the rider, through which he sought to explain the relation of the ego to the id, often the rational subject (the theorist, as much as the spectator) has to boldly go where the irrational sends it:

“The ego’s relation to the id might be compared with that of a rider to his horse. The horse supplies the locomotive energy, while the rider has the privilege of deciding on the goal and of guiding the powerful animal’s movement. But only too often there arises between the ego and the id the not precisely ideal situation of the rider being obliged to guide the horse along the path by which it itself wants to go.”³¹

The ego “guides” the id where the id wants to go: the id needs to use the experiential and psychic structures of the ego in order to relate to reality, and at the same time the ego, “only too often,” has to pretend, precisely in order to perform its function, that it has a power of choice. There is no easy separation between the ego and the id, in this sense, and no direct equation between the rider and the rational subject, for the ego is not the self. Nevertheless, the metaphor implies the existence of two separate agents and suggests two different kinds of agency beyond the agency of the rational subject. On one hand, we see a kind of agency that consists in acknowledging and giving in to its very lack. The rider says: “since I am going where the horse wants, I might as well go that way.” It is not, as it might seem, a cynical, or a desperate, choice of

²⁹ Octave Mannoni, *Clefs pour l’Imaginaire: Ou, l’Autre Scène* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), 12.

³⁰ See Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 30.

³¹ Sigmund Freud, “New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis,” in *Freud: Complete Works*, ed. Ivan Smith (2000 [1933]), 4685.

not choosing (“the horse is going where it wants, there is nothing I can do”) nor a disavowal of the horse’s agency (“it’s me, not the horse, who wants to go that way”), but rather a choice that at the same time recognises not being entirely the product of free will. While the first two “choices” still entail the idea that there is a subject distinct from the horse, and an agency distinct from a position of passivity, the last does not make these distinctions. “Since I am going where the horse wants,” the psychoanalytic subject says, “I might as well be the horse.” On the other hand, we see how the horse, from being a mere repository of energy, suddenly manifests an independent agency. Or, better, we see how an agency makes itself manifest where none was supposed to exist. Despite psychoanalysis’ constant effort to reduce it to intelligibility and thus to make it more tractable, the agency of the horse remains incommensurable to that of the rider: not because the rider is more intelligent than the horse, but because intelligence is a human category. What Freud is describing, then, is the emergence of an incommensurable agency that troubles the scene of its rational articulation.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, then, the agency of the subject is not entirely a matter of rationality and free will, and it is not a matter of autonomy. The idea of autonomous agency, in fact, implies that agency is active and whole (that it expresses itself through action and that it completely encompasses the scope of an action), and that the subject is capable of making an *informed* and *uncoerced* decision. What the psychoanalytic dimension of the unconscious and of the id suggest, instead, is that no action is completely unconditioned, and that our knowledge of our own motives is fundamentally and irremediably compromised. In this sense the psychoanalytic subject is a *heteronomous* subject: its agency comes from where the subject is not.

Indeed, the place of this agency cannot be clearly located “inside” or “outside” the subject, for it actually traverses the subject and makes it other to itself. Heteronomy is as much intra-psychic as it is interpersonal, then, and it is as much a psychic category as it is a discursive one: in fact, it brings these very domains together and prevents them from being clearly distinguished and articulated. As the metaphor of the horse and the rider makes clear, heteronomy does not mean here the subjection to an external power or to a recognisable law. Heteronomy does not individuate a scenario of mastery, either, and as much as it troubles the articulation of the subject’s mastery over itself, it troubles the

idea of its subjection to the agency of an identifiable other or of self-willed and intelligible institutions. Heteronomy does not mean the existence of an external and rational agency, more powerful than the subject and thus able to control it, nor does it mean that the horse is this agency, in the sense that unconscious agency would be a double of the will of the subject and thus individuate the fundamental dimension of the subject's freedom from social constraints. To put it in Lacanian terms, heteronomy is not a lack of mastery, but a lack *in* mastery: as much as there is no autonomous subject, there is no big Other pulling the strings of the horse, and no big Horse as well.

So, as much as the idea of heteronomy suggests that we are never entirely "free" from discursive and ideological power, it suggests that we are not free only in the measure that we are not influenced by external causes. To equate freedom with autonomy and subjectivity with free will is characteristic, on the contrary, of the position of a subject who identifies its subjectivity with a mastery over the self. Both the idea of an unconditioned subject and that of a completely determined one, in fact, would correspond to an essentially authoritarian fantasy of mastery. The idea of free will, in particular, fundamentally entails the idea of intellectual mastery: the idea that causes are intelligible, that causation is essentially, or at least largely, controllable, and thus that the subject can come to master itself and the world through the exercise of its reason. At the same time, however, precisely by assuming that there is no heteronomy to the subject - that there is no lack in the mastery of the self - the idea of autonomy also assumes that the subject can be entirely mastered by someone else. In other words, at the same time that it makes the subject the master of an objectified world, the fantasy of mastery necessarily entails the possibility of making other subjects into objects, and thus, of making an object of the subject itself. Rather than assuming a radical lack *in* subjectivity, then, the subject of free will is eventually identified within a regime that is defined by a lack *of* mastery - one that can be inflicted and repaired.

Faced with the anxiety that the heteronomy of subjectivity can provoke, then, both the performance of authority and that of self-discipline become somewhat pleasurable, and both positions of domination and positions of utter passivity become eventually self-absolutive. The autonomous subject, indeed, is one that is judged in terms of what it does, and its responsibility begins and ends with its *full* responsibility over its actions. An ethics that rests on

the idea of free will is thus tendentially unable to account for a vaster domain of responsibility, one that cannot be reduced to the accountability of human actions. On the contrary, the heteronomous subject is never entirely active nor passive, never entirely responsible for its actions, nor completely irresponsible from the unwilled consequences of its being in the world. In other words, the psychoanalytic subject is not autonomous, unitary, rational and self-sufficient, but at the same time it is still agent and responsible - agent of an agency that is radically incommensurable to its rational articulation, and thus responsible for something more than its actions.

The idea of ethics that depends on free will in fact reduces the much vaster domain of responsibility of the subject to a particular regime of its visibility - that of the accountability of its deeds. In this regime, what escapes accountability - not just in the sense of a crime that is recognised as such but not pursued, but more importantly in the sense of a wrong whose nature is such that it is not, or cannot be, accounted for by the law - also escapes responsibility. To put it simply: stealing an apple is an accountable deed, while being part of a social system in which people die of starvation is not. The particular configuration of power that defines the autonomous subject, then, also corresponds to a particular regime of the regulation of social injustice: not just the regime that punishes the apple thief but not the exploiter, but also and above all the regime that has the power to *interpret* social categories - the regime that only sees theft in shoplifting, and exploitation in starving masses, the regime which defines that the “proper” response to starvation is stealing apples and not, say, apple computers. This regime, in the end, is the one that defends property over equality and emancipation, and that values equality and emancipation only insofar as they are construed as something that can be owned.

One could say, in fact, that autonomy and the idea of free will are radically anti-egalitarian. Free will is indeed only the freedom and the will of those who have the means to enjoy the former and the power to define the latter. In this sense, the agency of the horse, whose emergence we have recognised in Freud’s metaphor, appears to take the shape of political dissensus. It is an agency of “something” that was not supposed to have an agency. An agency that is incommensurable to the intelligible rationality of the masterful subject and that disturbs the subjective and the political space that was articulated in terms of this rationality. By manifesting itself as an agency, what appeared

to be the mere “locomotive energy” of the horse disrupts the autonomy of the subject and the understanding of agency and responsibility that was defined in terms of it. In other words, by manifesting itself as a *logos*, what appeared to be the pure passivity of the subject disrupts the existing regime of agency and responsibility, together with its particular distribution of the parts.³² The heteronomy of the subject could thus be seen in some respects to correspond to the Rancièrian conception of political subjectivation.

Heteronomy of the subject and masochistic spectatorship. The spectator is the epitome of the subject who is not accountable for what happens in front of her, while still being responsible toward what she sees. If an authoritarian regime of understanding identifies the passivity of the spectator with its want of awareness and emancipation - assuming, as Rancière put it, that the more the spectator contemplates, the less she is³³ - one should instead reverse the logic and assume that the spectator’s “passive” looking on in fact constitutes a particular form of agency and individuates a specific dimension of political responsibility. In her *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On*, Michele Aaron suggests that we recognize an agency in the passivity of the apparatic spectator, and that we link this specific form of spectatorial agency with spectatorship’s ethical dimension. While, we could say, sadism entails the questionable ability to relate to reality (and in particular to the reality of the other’s pain) as we relate to a spectacle, film spectatorship, Aaron argues, presents instead a masochistic character.³⁴ Defining masochism as a pleasure in unpleasure, as an agent desire played out through passivity,³⁵ and as a state of expectation of impending pain, real or imaginary,³⁶ Aaron reinterprets the whole economy of pleasure that sustains the cinematographic apparatus, at the same time moving beyond apparatus theory’s disingenuous binarism of activity and passivity, sexuality and gender, and confronting the spectator with the responsibility that comes with its desiring agency and fundamental emancipation. Spectatorship

³² Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 33-34.

³³ Rancière, *Le Spectateur Émancipé*, 12.

³⁴ Aaron, *Spectatorship*, 52.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 60.

can then be seen to be arranged through a masochistic contract³⁷ in which the spectator agrees to relinquish its activity in exchange for the film's proficient domination of its fantasy and its embodied experience. Spectatorship's lack of agency is thus exposed as some kind of performance: the position of the spectator only *signifies* a lack of agency, it only shows the visible traits of physical and mental passivity - silence, stillness, diminished "watchfulness" - but, in fact, its act of looking on loses nothing of its discursive power and ethical responsibility. In this way, spectatorship's ideological dimension becomes not merely a matter of the institutional manufacture of consent, but, jointly, of its spectatorial disavowal.³⁸

"Consent," Aaron argues, "is the disavowed but crucial element" in the fulfilment of the fantasy of being mastered that defines a masochist model of spectatorship, as well as that of becoming the master that can be seen to characterise the classic apparatus model.³⁹ In both cases we are dealing with a fantasy of *mastery* - with an articulation of the space of film in terms of positions of activity and passivity that implies a contract, a *mise en scène* and, potentially, a conservative narrative resolution. As much as the idea of mastery that structures the apparatus entails a narrative in which this mastery is acquired, indeed, the imaginary *scene* of masochistic domination can be transformed in a *scenario* of mastery, and thus be coopted for conservative ends. As apparatus theory saw it, to the film spectator is offered the illusion of autonomy, and what it gets instead is an absolute passivity to cinema's ideological effect. But, as Aaron notes, the mechanism can also be seen to work the other way around: to the spectator are offered moments of pleasurable passivity - "conservative masochistic episodes"⁴⁰ - that arouse the mobility of the subject's desire but never really disturb the subject's sense of unity, in fact revamping its fantasy of mastery. Masochistic spectatorship, like the Freudian fort/da game that Aaron discusses,⁴¹ could then be seen to frame a fundamental anxiety in terms of a game of absence and presence, dispossession and mastery, that eventually reinforces and re-establishes the subject's impression of power over itself and the

³⁷ Ibid., 90.

³⁸ Ibid., 89.

³⁹ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁴¹ Ibid., 54-56.

world. In the end, the controlled collapse of activity and passivity that individuates the masochistic regime of apparatusic spectatorship, precisely as it involves a superficial relinquishing of the subject's activity, and a brief and temporary surrendering of the subject's autonomy, can be seen as a way to cope with and make sense of the more shattering, profound, and persistent lack of cohesion and independence that is the subject's heteronomy.

The idea of an autonomous subject is intimately connected with the construction of imaginary positions of activity/passivity. In this sense, autonomy seems to be an intrinsically oppositional concept, for it presupposes a distinction and a conflict between the subject and the law, while, in fact, it is a hegemonic concept, for it articulates subjectivity in terms of the subject's subjection to the law. This is precisely how the position of the subject within the apparatus is established. Similarly, in the measure that masochism is taken as an articulation of positions of activity and passivity, rather than the collapse of this articulation *within* the very idea of agency, it remains conservative. A theory of spectatorship that sees the spectator masses as conservative masochists, in particular, would represent the ultimate form of their *abrutissement*, of their stultification: "not only are they being done," the theorist would say, "they must surely like it." On the contrary, it is by recognising an agency in the passivity of the spectator (not merely a form of "activity" in the spectator's relinquishing of it), that is, by exposing the constitutive ambivalence of agency and desire themselves and foregrounding the responsibility and fundamental emancipation of spectatorship, that the masochistic pleasure of the spectator can lead us beyond its conservative framing. As Aaron argues, it is only by going beyond a substantially hegemonic and redemptive understanding of the passivity of masochism, and rather taking it as a pleasure in its own right,⁴² that it can escape the dimension of mastery and thus afford a more ethical relation with the moving image.

Other than separating agency from activity and mastery, as Aaron suggests, we should perhaps also separate agency from the idea of autonomy. The masochist spectator might sign a contract relinquishing its autonomous agency, but it does not really *possess* that agency - not entirely, that is - to begin with. In this sense, the gesture of relinquishing activity already constitutes a strategy

⁴² Ibid., 56-57.

of disavowal - at the same time of the subject's lack of mastery and of its responsibility. In the measure that they address the construction of the subject, then, the cinematographic apparatus and its theory become a means to frame heteronomy and discursivity through an imaginary scenario of (sexual) subjection and (intellectual) mastery. Thereby not only relieving the subject from the anxiety that its heteronomy may cause, but also making the spectator's lack of mastery into an object of discipline. - Other than framing spectatorship in terms of the subject's lack of mastery, one can, on the reverse, also *interpret* the heteronomy and lack of agency of the subject in terms of spectatorship. In other words, whenever a dissensual form emerges in the space of our subjectivity, or in the social space that we inhabit, we are offered the imaginary choice of assuming the relatively safe position of the spectator and, by that, of avoiding facing our full responsibility.

In this way, through its contractual, and thus intrinsically consensual, nature, the masochistic regime of spectatorship regulates the subject's lack of control and accountability, thus keeping both the sadism of the subject and the destructiveness of the world somewhat at bay. The ethical problem of film spectatorship becomes indeed in this perspective the role played by spectatorship in framing sadistic relations and the other's real physical pain.⁴³ In other words, the articulation of domination and passivity that underlies both the fantasy of intellectual mastery and the more embodied scenario of conservative masochism *represents* the ambivalence of desire and the heteronomy of subjectivity, it gives it a shape and allows us to address and overcome, to frame and tame, the fact that we are affected and made by others, that we are mortal bodies, that we are inevitably and violently occupying the place of an other, and that we are always necessarily bound in culture and language.⁴⁴ In this sense, the emancipation of the spectator corresponds to the heteronomy of the subject and, as such, it exists significantly beyond the spectator's autonomous agency. What I call heteronomy of the subject names the fact that, as much as agency cannot be reduced to activity, emancipation cannot be reduced to an autonomous and

⁴³ Ibid., 111-112, 121.

⁴⁴ And it does so also by putting a further, Platonic, distance between theory as an aspect of spectatorship and theory as an academic discourse, between the idea of masochism and the lived experience of masochism as a form of sexual relationship (a distance that the recent glamourisation of BDSM in mainstream culture can only accentuate).

intelligible agency as well.

The fact that one cannot distinguish between the dimension of agency and that of ideology and discursive power can be addressed more clearly, perhaps, in Foucauldian terms. Foucault's ideas on power, indeed, can be used to place the dynamics of ideology and emancipation beyond its reduction to a knowledge effect, at the same time addressing the pervasiveness and decentralization of discursive power⁴⁵ and the hegemonic appropriation of spectatorial agency on the part of cinematic institutions. Power not being primarily an instance of repression, but a living expression of social technologies and discursive practices, in a more Foucauldian perspective we are not allowed, eventually, to distinguish clearly where ideology ends and free will begins, so to speak, nor to tell reality and fantasy unambiguously apart. This would mean, first of all, that the agency of spectatorship is not external to ideological institutions, but is rather itself discursive. A Foucauldian notion of power can then make more evident also that the issue of film ideology is not just one of conscious, and rational, demystification, but, more fundamentally, one of the politics of pleasure and desire. The whole issue of ideological determination is, in fact, largely a *mise en discours* of the discursivity and heteronomy of subjectivity - its reduction to the principles of its intelligibility within an authoritarian regime of knowledge. In other words, it already implies and performs an ideological rendition of the dimension of ideological fantasy, by framing the heteronomy of the subject through a scenario of mastery.

What can an agency beyond the fantasy of mastery be, then? It would be, on one hand, the recognition of the extent of one's responsibility, of the discursivity and heteronomy of our subjectivity, and of a radical lack in the autonomy of our choices - which is not really an absence of choice, but something in-between free will and discursive determination, something that the categories of activity and passivity, freedom and unfreedom, already frame in an authoritarian way. On the other, it would be the dissensual emergence of agency from where it was not supposed to exist. In this sense, political agency can never be "owned", nor appropriated by an external subject or institution, for it is rather a dimension that traverses embodied subjects and the social space, disturbing their identity and its articulation. In this sense, it is only *within* the dimension of ideology (of

⁴⁵ De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, 85-86.

discourse and desire, pleasure and signification, as they are inseparably linked together) - and only *due to* its discursivity and heteronomy that the agency of the emancipated spectator can exist. So that, eventually, the problem of film ideology (that is the discursivity and the ethical nature of film spectatorship) should not be seen to end with the spectator's agency, but rather to begin with it.

The spectator as a site of tensions.

Film theory - as a specific part of film studies - foregrounds the spectator as the dynamic point of convergence of seemingly opposed dimensions: the personal and the political, the signifier and the signified, passivity and agency, fantasy and reality. Many a theory of film capitalises on one of the terms of these dichotomies that characterise spectatorship, trying to rescue one from the hegemony of the other, or attempting to reach some kind of simplistic "integration",⁴⁶ thereby unwittingly confirming the dualistic split that keeps them separated and opposed. It is rather more interesting to address these various couples in that they produce hybrid categories, concepts or situations in which the two terms become not only inseparable, but radically indistinguishable, at the same time maintaining their conflictual relation. Film spectatorship is, in this sense, a liminal and conflictual space. One that articulates social struggles that are larger than its proper field, one that is traversed by psychic conflicts that are more radical than that of the cinematic subject, one that is always reflexive and bent upon itself. Hailing and identification, ideology, fantasy, meaning-making itself and signification, in the end, all the categories that define spectatorship address, through the filmic experience, the subject's problematic relation to itself.

Judith Mayne, with reference to Linda Gordon, defines spectatorship precisely as a conflict, and the spectator as the site of a "tension."⁴⁷ She opposes, more precisely, "the cinematic *subject* and the film *viewer* so as better to situate the *spectator* as a viewer who is and is not the cinematic subject, and a subject who is and is not a film viewer."⁴⁸ We could then define spectatorship as the

⁴⁶ Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, 38.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

relation between physically present viewers, on the one hand, and the subject of film as an ideological position and as an abstract construction of film theory, on the other. And yet, we cannot forget that the individual *viewer* is itself a *subject* - subjected in turn not only to the cinematic apparatus, but to a plurality of ideological institutions and to a more encompassing discursive regulation (in this respect, the cinematic subject could appear to be even *more* “free” than the viewer). “While I think it crucial to acknowledge that real people do exist outside of the categories of theory,” Mayne writes, “it is equally crucial to acknowledge that those real people are always the function of my or my culture’s notion of what a real person is.”⁴⁹ The viewer is not thinkable in itself, but can only be addressed, in the end, from the standpoint of a theory of spectatorship and, more broadly, of a certain understanding of human subjectivity.

Still, one should keep in mind that the very relation between the person and the subject is not something that falls outside of the domain of ideology: on the contrary, it is its fundamental field of operation. As such, the agency of the viewer cannot be regarded as a simple and evident solution to the problem of film ideology, as we have said: the constitution and the ideological mapping of this agency corresponds indeed to the scope of the mechanism of ideological interpellation. To put it simply, ideological institutions should not be regarded as repressive institutions that operate in the field of discourse: for their specificity rests instead in the way in which they *appear to enforce* the spectator’s agency at the same time that they are in fact policing it and normalizing it. It is proper of ideological institutions not only to want to lock the subject within their power, but to make it believe that its subjection nevertheless coincides with an expression of autonomous agency:

Taking spectatorship as a site of conflict allows to understand the subject of the apparatus in a more meaningful way - that is, first of all, to understand how the account of film experience that apparatus theory provides can relate to different subjects in contingent historical and cultural contexts. If one can talk of a female gaze, or of black spectatorship, for instance, it is because a certain situatedness and specificity are seen to characterise the viewer, while at the same time its position is seen to be individuated by the same unchang-

⁴⁹ Ibid.

ing and quasi-transcendental characteristics of the apparatus.⁵⁰ The subject of apparatus theory, on one hand, functions as an abstract theoretical concept and as a potentially universal position implied by cinematic institutions and by the film text. On the other hand, it refers each time to a specific, situated, experience lived by a real subject. These two dimensions cannot, and should not, be unproblematically separated. “Despite the insistence on real viewers’ as distinct from the subject’,” Mayne argues, “the place of the spectator’ in film studies is not easily or readily defined as either’ a real person or’ a position, a construction.”⁵¹ Rather than confirming this split between a discursive subject and a real person, thus disregarding both the spectator’s embodied experience and the ideological and fantasmatic discursivity of its encounter with film, it is much more productive to address spectatorship itself as the site of struggle between these two dimensions. In this way, Mayne’s systematisation of spectatorship allows to go beyond the authoritarian split that defines both the apparatus and its theory, at the same time avoiding relinquishing the political tensions that make spectatorship meaningful as a concept and significant as a practice.

“The bureaucratic/symbolic Institution not only reduces the subject to its mouthpiece, but also wants the subject to disavow the fact that he is merely its mouthpiece and to (pretend) to act as an autonomous agent [...]”⁵²

The agency of the spectator is, in fact, still of a discursive and ideological nature (or at least it is the main object of ideological and discursive hegemony). At the same time that it constructs the spectator’s position as passive, for instance,

⁵⁰ One of the main lines of development and criticism of the paradigmatic definition of spectatorship has been that of rescuing the position of the spectator from its monologic definition in terms of the Althusserian subject of ideology, and rather address it as a site of multiple theoretical approaches, and a broader set of epistemological perspectives. In this way we can imagine both several apparatuses - aural (Kaja Silverman), tactile (Laura U. Marks) - working at once, as well as alternative conceptions of the basic cinematic apparatus, without necessarily relinquishing its status as a universal structure. Insofar as this multiplication reduces the authority of theory, leaving the political and discursive scope of spectatorship intact, this proliferation of theories can be seen to be a form of theoretical emancipation.

⁵¹ Ibid., 36.

⁵² Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2008), 306.

the apparatus encourages the spectator to assume this position as if it were the expression of a masochist choice. The spectator knows, unconsciously, that she is signing a masochist contract, even if she is not necessarily aware of it: telling the spectator - or the institution, that knows as much and as little as the spectator - would not necessarily alter the situation. For, as we have seen, they know very well what they are doing, and they are still doing it.

This is, I believe, the potential pitfall of reception studies and, in a different way, but with similar consequences, of some strands of phenomenological and feminist film theory as well: that they may still endorse a split between agency and discursive determination, between the subject of ideology and the “real” subject. While, on the contrary, it is only because there is no individual beyond the discursivity and heteronomy of the subject that resistance to normative discourses is possible in the first place. In this sense, as we have claimed, the problem of film ideology does not end with the spectator’s agency, but rather begins with it. The solution to the problem of the spectator’s agency is not even to be found, as Žižek can be taken to suggest, in a multiplication of historically and culturally contingent *spectatorships*: for, with that, we risk losing track of spectatorship as the expression of a central and irresolvable conflict, which is in turn also the ground of the struggle for universality and equality. In fact, it is always in a struggle to affirm a universality beyond a regime that compromises it (sexism, racism, colonialism, capitalism, and so on), and, more generally, in the struggle for the realisation of the equality of all subjects, that the politics of spectatorship can be seen to take place. From the point of view of the practice of film theory, then, the problem becomes how to elaborate a theory of the discursive spectator that is nevertheless closer to the embodied viewer, without negating the subject’s heteronomy.

Much like, as we said, the scope of spectatorship cannot be limited to the relation between viewer and film, but it addresses this relation as it is informed and played out in a broader social and discursive field, the tension that animates spectatorship cannot refer exclusively to the constitutive elements of the cinematic apparatus but also, more fundamentally, to the very definition of human subjectivity that underlies them. In other words, quite obviously, what Mayne calls the cinematic subject cannot be discussed exclusively in cinematic terms, but its analysis must include those discourses that effect subject formation before and beyond it. It cannot be explained just in relation to cin-

ematic technology, but must refer to social and psychic subject formation as such. Feminist film theory is an example of a theoretical practice in which a more wide-ranging configuration of power - gender construction - is deployed as a specific instance within the cinematic apparatus, and can therefore be mobilized as a potential site of resistance, not only in relation to cinematic practices, but, through them, back to social life as such. If it is true that spectatorship names a fundamental conflict, then, it is also true that it constitutes a specific instance of another, more universal one: that which is determined by the discursive construction and normative definition of human subjects in general.

If, as Étienne Balibar argues, it is the citizen that makes the man⁵³ (the political subject that makes the human as such), and not the reverse, as it is usually taken for granted, then spectatorship must be foregrounded as one of the crucial dimensions in which the symbolic and political space that we inhabit takes shape. Spectatorship would be one of the significant moments in which we face normative injunctions about what is meant to be human, a site in which we perform our relation to inhumanity and its representations, a position from which we engage with existing relations and potentially imagine new ones, a scene in which, finally, we are, or we are not, moved by fantasy and desire beyond the familiarity of our “self”. What makes spectatorship effective both as a conservative and a subversive force is indeed its constitutional reflexivity and its evocation of heteronomy, the fact that it addresses a form of power and agency that is marked by the subject’s otherness to itself.

Interpellation and reflexivity. Describing spectatorship as a tension is, indeed, also a way to expose how it is essentially structured by a reflexive dynamic. If it is clearly true that spectatorship “represents an understanding reached between the spectator and culture,”⁵⁴ it is also true that it represents the troubling coming to terms of the subject with itself.

There are many ways in which this reflexivity is made apparent in film theory, and many directions in which it can lead: interpellation, fantasy, visual pleasure, all imply a reflexive relation of the spectator to itself - one that does not necessarily derive from, or imply, an act of conscious and rational reflection.

⁵³ Étienne Balibar, “Is a Philosophy of Human Civic Rights Possible? New Reflections on Equaliberty,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2-3 (2004): 320-321.

⁵⁴ Aaron, *Spectatorship*, 88.

First of all, as it is well known, reflexivity is discussed in the classic account of cinematic identification in terms of the Lacanian mirror misrecognition, in connection with the Althusserian notion of interpellation. For Baudry, the function of this element of reflexivity is that of (re-)creating an imaginary unity of the subject toward the division and lack which are instead part of the symbolic order.⁵⁵ Far from naming an essential similarity, a rationality, or a form of mimesis, then, this idea of reflexivity entails in fact a particular relation between two incommensurable domains: on one hand, the imaginary unity of the monologic subject (*sujet unaire*), and, on the other, what Julia Kristeva calls the subject in process.⁵⁶ As Christian Metz put it, there would be a certain degree of similarity in between the most basic form of psychic identification (the primary identification of the child with the mother),⁵⁷ and the primary form of cinematic identification, that of the spectator identifying with itself as a pure act of perception, as wakefulness and alertness, and thus, as a transcendental subject.⁵⁸ Every film then, not just those that offer visible representations of film spectatorship, would entail a fundamental *mise en abyme* of the spectator (it could be argued that this *mise en abyme* is nothing but the gaze). At the same time, the subject would be confronted with its status as a construct. There would be something intrinsically uncanny to spectatorship, individuated by the uncertainty that characterizes it as to whether one is subject or object, agent or acted, seeing or seen, and animated by a radical indeterminacy between the living and the lifeless that might be inherent to the cinematic medium.⁵⁹

While not exactly a relation to oneself (for there is no subject prior to interpellation), ideological interpellation is still a reflexive operation in that it involves an element - a ghost - of autonomous agency. Judith Butler writes, commenting the classic Althusserian scenario of interpellation (in which someone walking in the street responds to the call of a policeman by turning around, thereby identifying itself as the addressee of the law):

“The one who turns around in response to the call does not

⁵⁵ Baudry, “Ideological Effects”, 45.

⁵⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 55, 62.

⁵⁷ Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Film*, 45.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁹ See Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *Freud: Complete Works*, ed. Ivan Smith (2000 [1919]), 3680.

respond to a demand to turn around. The turning around is an act that is, as it were, conditioned both by the voice' of the law and by the responsiveness of the one hailed by the law. [...] The turn toward the law is thus a turn against oneself, a turning back on oneself that constitutes the movement of conscience."⁶⁰

Reflexivity is thus an inseparable moment and aspect of interpellation.⁶¹ In turn, it sets the ground for ideological misrecognition: "therein lies the ideological act of recognition in which I recognize myself as always-already' that as which I am interpellated," Žižek develops following Butler's argument, "in recognizing myself as X, I freely assume/choose the fact that I always-already was X."⁶² Thus we see how "submission and mastery take place simultaneously," and how, in turn, "this paradoxical simultaneity constitutes the ambivalence of subjection."⁶³ Understood in this way, the reflexivity of spectatorship would name at once the spectator's independence and its subjection - it would be a turning back and a turning toward,⁶⁴ a wayward gaze. One could say, with Jacques Rancière, that spectatorship potentially locates an act of political subjectivation⁶⁵ at the same time that it constitutes the response to an ideological address. The spectator would then be the site of tension between ideological misrecognition (*méconnaissance*, unawareness) and political dissensus (*mésentente*, disagreement) - the two forces that inform cinematic experience and the sharing of the sensible that is individuated by it, as well as the political regime of film theory.

Spectatorship is reflexive, however, also in another, more tangible, sense: because, in its extended scope, it implies a performative understanding of the experience of film watching, and a reflexive appropriation of its mechanisms: remembering the film, talking about it, reenacting some of its scenes, dreaming it, and so on, they all involve a relation of the spectator with its history of encounters with other people and other films. Subversive reading of a main-

⁶⁰ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 107.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶² Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 15.

⁶³ Butler, *Psychic Life*, 116.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 59.

stream film, for instance, presupposes a truly theoretical look at the way a text is constructed, and constitutes an operative understanding of the forces and techniques that inform the psychology of spectatorship and the ideological dynamics of the medium. Through reading, and, in a more prominent way, through the *use* of a text beyond the range of interpretations that the text itself foresaw and coded, spectators engage not only with the text, but, through it, with themselves as spectators and with social discourses on spectatorship and subjectivity. Thus, they transform their position by transforming the object of their look, or by shifting their viewpoint in relation to it. All these practices entail a form of mastery, for sure, but they do not necessarily entail a *fantasy* of mastery, in the sense that they at the same time acknowledge its limits and its radical lack: they potentially correspond to a different regime of mastery than that which is sustained by ideological interpellation. In a sense, the primary political action of spectatorship is precisely to shift from one regime to the other. A shift that involves, among other things, a change in our understanding of the relation between spectatorship and theory. In the end, a practice like reading against the grain should be taken not only as a typical expression of spectatorial agency and political resistance, but as the founding act of spectatorship as a *praxis* - that is, as a practice that is at the same time inseparable from theoretical understanding.

Theory and implicational spectatorship. On the reverse as well, then, we could say that film theory cannot be separated from its ground in the practice of spectatorship. This requires, first of all, a confrontation of theory with its own political and discursive implications. Mayne, indeed, understands the involvement of the theorist in terms of accounting for her desire and for her position within ideology. More specifically, she writes:

“Theories of everything involve projection and desire as all discourses do, and the failure to examine those mechanisms leads to a notion of subjectivity with no possibility of contradiction or significant variation from the norm.”⁶⁶

An authoritarian theory, then, no differently than a normative apparatus, produces a captive, submissive, subject: ideology, Mayne claims, enters the very

⁶⁶ Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, 45.

ways in which researchers construct the audiences they write about.⁶⁷ Not just “totalitarian” theories of everything, however, but the everyday practice of theory as such must be seen to have discursive effects - effects that, while never being neutral, are also never *a priori* aligned with domination or subversion.

The discursivity of theory, in turn, would be one of the reasons why theorists often avoid acknowledging their own “investment in the process of spectatorship analysis”⁶⁸ - and, by the same token, the main reason why this acknowledgement becomes necessary. One of the most structural and hopefully long lasting contribution of feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic film studies has been precisely their constant awareness of film theory as a political and discursive practice. This has led to foreground the reflexivity of theory itself, to an attention to its vocabulary and phrasing, and, above all, to acknowledge the political ramifications of its principles and the status of theory as an institution among other institutions. Film theory becomes in this sense a reflection on the very process of theorising, on theory’s falterings and its pretence of mastery, as well as on the material conditions of production of theoretical texts and the kinds of relations that they entail and promote.

As it names the reflexivity of spectatorship, the dimension of theory can then be seen to be integral to film experience, and thus to constitute both a strategy of reading and a way to increase and extend, or curb, the pleasures and unpleasures of cinema. Yuka Kanno briefly discusses a kind of spectatorship which she calls “implicational” precisely in the sense that it refers to an agency and a desiring involvement which are located at the level of the historical and subjective contingency of the film spectator - which, in her case, also happens to correspond to the film theorist and to her personal self. “By implication,” she writes, “I want to address the historicity of the present viewer, whose specificity is no less important than that of the [...] text.”⁶⁹ By losing its pretence of political and subjective neutrality, theory is foregrounded at the same time as a form of power relation, and as the site of an embodied and contingent encounter with film. In the end, the point is to subtract the practice of theory from its pedagogical understanding, to take theory as an interaction and a conflict which

⁶⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 102.

⁶⁹ Yuka Kanno, “Implicational Spectatorship: Hara Setsuko and the Queer Joke,” *Mechademia* 6 (2011): 288.

is not available exclusively to the rational subject or the professional academic, to recognise the essentially theoretical components of everyday film experiencing and the potential for pleasure and transformation that comes with them. With the same gesture, then, the definition of spectatorship as a space of conflict maps both the reality of social performances of spectatorship and the landscape of its theoretical elaboration - in many ways bringing these two aspects together.

Spectatorship as a ground of disagreement.

Different ways in which the relationship between viewers and films is imagined and analysed, of course, result in different theories of spectatorship, but also in altogether different theories of film. As Aaron writes, “spectatorship represents a site of conflict between methodologies.”⁷⁰ The issues that spectatorship raises within film theory, however, are not only methodological: they are, fundamentally, epistemological and, ultimately, political. They are epistemological because different models of spectatorship construct in different ways the very objects of film theory and what can be known about them. The object of a theory - Julia Kristeva wrote about linguistics - logically precedes the theory and is defined by a specific and implicit representation of the speaking subject:⁷¹ Kristeva called the relationship of the subject of theory to its object *dispositif épistémologique* (epistemological apparatus).⁷² In this sense we can say that the cinematographic apparatus is also, and above all, an epistemological apparatus - a regime of understanding of spectatorship - and that, as such, it includes film theory itself. Spectatorship presents issues of a political nature, then, for theory partakes in the ideological dimension of film spectatorship and in its significance as a social phenomenon by confirming or contesting given assumptions on human subjects and by supporting one or another form of social relations. We find issues of a specifically methodological nature, finally, as alternative conceptions of spectatorship individuate in a various ways the position and the practices of the theoretical writer, both in relation to her objects of study and to spectators as her fellow human beings. In all these senses, theories of film are less explanations of the realities of spectatorship and filmmaking than they

⁷⁰ Aaron, *Spectatorship*, 1.

⁷¹ Kristeva, *Polylogue*, 287.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 287-288.

are regimes of their representation.

Theories, essentially, disagree on the kinds of subjects that they assume, on the understanding of the processes that they describe them by, and on the roles that they assign to them. That is to say, I believe, that they ultimately disagree on their own political scope as discursive practices addressing subjectivity and human relations. One could argue that it is the political dimension of a theory, its ethical ground, that acts or should act as a pragmatic criterion for the justification, or the comparison, of different theories: other than theories of what, theorists should then ask themselves *whose* theories they are articulating. In the case of film studies, spectatorship is obviously the sphere in which the conceptions of subjectivity and human relations that underlie not just cinematic experience but also any given theory of film appear more clearly. This is how spectatorship becomes a fundamental element in the definition of the scope of film theory as such.

Spectatorship can therefore be taken to provide that “ground of disagreement” that Warren Buckland sought for in the effort of establishing a dialogue among the multiplicity of schools and methodologies in film studies.⁷³ But while this space can be imagined to be a rational one, a neutral field of articulation of academic discussion, I would argue on the contrary that it is one that, not unlike spectatorship itself, is always already traversed by conflict and charged of political significance. On one hand, as we have seen, theories of spectatorship necessarily take part in the politics of subjectivities, of bodies, and of their representation - so that the operations of theory, beginning from the very coordinates by which they define their objects, can never be neutral. On the other hand, the very process of establishing a common theoretical ground is not a neutral one as well. One could say that, if spectatorship constitutes the space of difference to which existing theories of film can be related, no theory of film will conceive this difference in the same way. Difference in itself, as Žižek often reminds us, is indeed a controversial concept, always already framed in antagonistic ways.⁷⁴ So that, in the end, the ground of disagreement comes already sown with its seeds.

⁷³ Warren Buckland, *Cognitive Semiotics of Film* (West Nyack, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4.

⁷⁴ Ben Wright and Slavoj Žižek, *Manufacturing Reality: Slavoj Žižek and the Reality of the Virtual* (Ben Wright Film Productions, 2004). DVD.

Different epistemologies of film constitute different regimes of representation: alternative ways, that is, in which their very object is posited. In the case of spectatorship, then, disagreement is not limited to the particular ideas through which the concept is discussed, but to those that *inform* it in the first place. A phenomenological perspective, for instance, will posit film experience in terms of the intentionality of perception, foregrounding the spectator as an embodied subject and a bodily presence. A Marxist, Althusserian, perspective will define spectators in terms of their relation to film as a commodity and to cinema as an ideological institution. A feminist and queer perspective will highlight the way the representations of gender and sexuality and the modalities of film experiencing reflect and enforce normative discourses on human subjects. A psychoanalytic perspective will address the dynamics of desire and the unconscious as they interact with the experience of film, and question the rational mastery and unity of the subject. Linguistic and semiological perspectives will tend to isolate the subject's rational capacities of encoding and decoding as they are involved in the understanding of the film's meaning, and so on and so forth. These are not simply different ways of talking about the same thing, but regimes of representation that result in altogether different and incommensurable objects of enquiry. In the combination of elements from these disparate perspectives, indeed, a certain blurriness cannot be avoided. To make matters even more complicated, perceived differences between a perspective and another, and perceived differences between their variously informed objects, are not symmetrical: what distinguishes the psychoanalytic spectator from the cognitive one, for example, will be different from the point of view of psychoanalytic film theory and from the point of view of cognitive theory.

Now, one might wish to reduce all these differences to a single epistemology of film or, at least, to a common measure. And, while I believe that theory's political scope in some ways may constitute this common measure, at the same time I think that a drastic reduction of this heterogeneity can only serve authoritarian regimes of knowledge. In the end, dialogue between theories can take place only because no theory is ever a pure and unitary expression of any given principle, and because it is always already trying to map its relation to other, distant or even incommensurable, conceptions of its objects. Most of theoretical work is made in this (meta-theoretical and inter-disciplinary) field - a field where disagreement is grown, so to speak, and at the same time hegemony

inevitably attempted. We could then say that a multiplicity of methodological approaches and the very heterogeneity of the objects of theory, rather than being an obstacle to theoretical exchange, are actually what makes it possible (though, of course, never easy).

Jacques Rancière refers to the heterogeneity that, in many forms, can be seen to characterise film experience and the discourses that are made about it, with what he calls the *écarts* (the gaps, or the intervals) of cinema.⁷⁵ A gap between image and word, first of all, as well as an internal inconsistency that can be found in both language and the moving image. One that, in turn, can be seen to translate the irreducible heterogeneity of human relations and the uncertainties of non-authoritarian forms of knowledge. For Rancière, then, this incommensurability becomes the defining element of the space of film.⁷⁶ As a consequence, we are encouraged to see in the heterogeneity and multiplicity of academic theory - in its “indisciplinarity,”⁷⁷ as Rancière calls it, rather than inter-disciplinarity - a ward against the pedagogical regime. All separation of disciplines essentially entails, indeed, a division between those who are qualified to make certain statements and those who are not, a separation of disciplines which is yet another form of the authoritarian split between “those who do the science and those who are regarded as its objects.”⁷⁸

Through a kind of theoretical anarchism,⁷⁹ one should instead strive to respect the diversity and the fluidity of the relations that take place in the everyday practice of spectatorship, filmmaking, and film writing. Politics, Rancière writes, takes first of all the form of a conflict over the existence of a common scene, and over the existence and the attributes of those who are deemed to be present in it.⁸⁰ The heterogeneity of the space of film is thus meant to be the equal ground (but still a ground of conflict) which is shared by all subjects involved with film - filmmakers, spectators, critics and academics - beyond a hierarchic articulation of their relations. An articulation that, most of the time,

⁷⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Les Écarts du Cinéma* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2011), 12.

⁷⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Le Destin des Images* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2003), 14.

⁷⁷ Jacques Rancière, “Jacques Rancière and Indisciplinarity: An Interview”, *Art & Research*, unpagged (2007): <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/jrinterview.html>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ See Paul K. Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 2010), 1-5.

⁸⁰ Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 49.

serves the goals of those institutions that attempt to regulate film experience, and knowledge in general, as objects of production and consumption.

Hard science, soft humans. Spectatorship can thus be seen to determine the scope of film theory and inform its political dimension. That is to say, first of all, that a theory of spectatorship constitutes an unavoidable aspect of film theory: that there can be no film theory without an explicit, or implicit, theory of the spectator. In turn, a theory of spectatorship cannot be considered independently from the conception of the subject that underlies it - which, of course, includes, again explicitly or implicitly, a model of the intersubjective and social relations that define the subject. So that there can be no theory of spectatorship, and no theory of film, that is not actually grounded in a theory of the subject and of the ways subjects live together. There is no film theory, then, that is not an expression of a particular set of social relationships and that does not give support, willingly or unwittingly, to a specific set of discursive practices. In other words, a theory of film assumes its position as an historically and socially contingent discourse first and foremost through the understanding of subjectivity it employs and fosters and through the model of spectatorship that it implies and constructs.

Film theories that study film as an objective reality independent from the human beings that experience it, then, or that address it from the standpoint of a neutral and transcendental subject, are not really devoid of a theory of spectatorship: they are actually implying an understanding of spectatorship that allows them to dismiss spectatorship itself as neutral or irrelevant to the practice of film theory and to the definition of its object. In a similar way, then, theories of film that consider a discussion of the subject inessential to the study of film or to the practice of film theory, must actually be seen to adopt and foster a particular view of the subject and of society at large. Film theory can claim little neutrality toward the contingent politics and aesthetics of filmmaking and spectatorship, then, and also toward the dynamics of its very practice. Indeed, it is not neutral in respect to the ways film is made and understood; it is not neutral in respect to the dimension of ideology; it is not neutral in respect to the understanding of knowledge and subjectivity that it implies and to the kind of social relations that it configures in academic practice; it is not neutral, finally, in respect to the individual film theorist, her contingent thoughts and desires.

This is one of the main lines of criticism that Robert B. Ray moves against a certain tendency in film studies, and which we could easily understand as an expression of a pedagogical regime of knowledge:

“[...] while Grand Theory is criticized for its obsession with an irrational and unconscious subject that cannot account for its actions, Bordwell promotes a rational agent’ theory of mental functioning, which is in fact the subject of good theory recognizing itself in the object it wants to examine. The concept of the rational agent functions tautologically here as a projection where the ideal scientific subject seeks the contours of its own image in the model of mind it wishes to construct or to discover. In a perspective that strives to be free of ideological positioning and to assert an epistemology that is value-neutral, the introductions to Post-Theory nonetheless express the longing for a different world modelled on an idealized vision of scientific research: a community of researchers united by common epistemological standards who are striving for a universalizable and truthful picture of their object.”⁸¹

What Robert Ray is describing is a scenario in which the political, institutional and, arguably, also the sexual innervations of film theory are being subtracted from reflection, in favour of a methodology inspired by the hard sciences (seen through the lenses of analytic philosophy) and responding *grosso modo* to the label of a post-theoretical or empirical turn. Doing away with psychoanalysis, more specifically, “may lead”, as Mayne writes, “to more attractive and less pessimistic models of how the cinema works, but such models may well elide questions of sexuality and the unconscious in the name of deceptively neutral (and neutered) and rational notions of representation.”⁸² D. N. Rodowick writes, confirming Ray’s positions, that:

“Confusing theory’ with Theory, often lost in these debates is the acknowledgement that judgements advanced - in history, criticism, or philosophy - in the absence of qualitative assessments of our

⁸¹ Robert B. Ray, *How a Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 97.

⁸² Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, 76.

epistemological commitments are ill-advised. To want to relinquish theory is more than a debate over epistemological standards; it is a retreat from reflection on the ethical stances behind our styles of knowing.”⁸³

A post-theoretical turn, then, is also a movement away from the tensions of spectatorship, from the deadlocks of ideology, pleasure and desire, in the attempt to produce an apparatus of theoretical writing as seamless as the cinematic one.⁸⁴ To counter this, Ray proposes to follow the flight of the signifier and revel in its unpredictability:⁸⁵ a Feyerabendian “stake”, that this work attempts to follow with its focus on contingency and free association as sites and instruments of the subject’s heteronomy and of its emancipation.

⁸³ D. N. Rodowick, “An Elegy for Theory,” *October* 122 (2007): 92.

⁸⁴ Ray, *How a Film Theory Got Lost*, 41.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

The film theorist and the emancipated spectator

if you can believe the actions and speech of the
characters
you might even believe that the popcorn you chew also
has a meaning of
sorts.

Charles Bukowski, *The Last Night of the Earth Poems*.

We don't take anyone seriously, not even ourselves. Because whoever takes themselves seriously has stopped with the thought that their truth should be the truth for everyone and forever. And, sooner or later, they dedicate their force not so that their truth will be born, grow, be fruitful and die (because no earthly truth is absolute and eternal) rather they use it to kill everything that doesn't agree with this truth.

Subcomandante Marcos, *I Shit on All the Revolutionary Vanguards of this Planet*.

Film theory as an integral element of the experience of film.

Academic film theory is generally treated as a necessary condition for the existence of a theoretical dimension of film as such. As if viewers could not, or did not, reflect independently on their experience as spectators. As if they did not perform concretely, in every act of film experiencing and in all the activities

that originate from it, more or less systematic views on their being spectators, on their experience of specific films and, more generally, of their understanding of film as a medium and as a signifying practice. As if, in other words, a theoretical component was not intrinsic to film viewing, and, on the other hand, as if the contingent and material aspects and of spectatorship and the embodied dimension of film experience did not influence the very activity of the film theorist. On the contrary, a living, operative, ground of film theory must be taken to exist, one which is performed in the act of viewing and concretely informs it, and that reaches out beyond the moment of the film's projection, toward both the configuration of the social space that the experience of film constitutes (film as a shared space and as a particular distribution of the sensible) and the one that it addresses (cinema as an instance of, and a reflection on, social discourses and institutions at large).

In a way, the very field of discourses and practices which is individuated by the concept of spectatorship implicitly assigns to spectators a theoretical agency. "The study of spectatorship involves an engagement with modes of seeing and telling, hearing and listening," Judith Mayne writes, "not only in terms of how films are structured, but in terms of how audiences imagine themselves."⁸⁶ More radically, if the field of spectatorship is the gap between flesh and bone viewers and the spectator as the abstract and fantasmatic subject of a discursive apparatus, and if the function of a study of spectatorship is to bridge that gap,⁸⁷ then viewers themselves must be seen, in their concrete everyday experience of film, as the first agents of a theory of film. In other words, film theory should not be seen as an external explanation of the social and textual dynamics of film, but as something integral to them.

Watching a film - no less than writing or talking about it, and no less than directing one or taking part in its realization - one necessarily performs a specific understanding of film experience, that is at the same time unique to the particular viewer and to the contingent conditions of viewing, and refers to their universal subject (the spectator). In other words, spectatorship is shaped by the tension between the absolutely subjective and contingent conditions of viewing and their experiential and discursive systematisation. If, throughout

⁸⁶ Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, 32.

⁸⁷ Aaron, *Spectatorship*, 2.

the dissertation, I will argue for the significance of contingency and for the necessity to include it in our lived-experience and understanding of the medium (or, rather, not to exclude it from them), a certain degree of systematic articulation is nevertheless inevitable and necessary. In order to watch a film as a film, in fact, spectators need to put into action some kind of abstract, and more or less systematic, understanding of what a film is, and of what kind of relation they have to it. As we have seen, this action is *reflexive* - in the sense that it is an action that, in some respects, takes itself as an object - even if it is not necessarily *reflective* - in the sense of consciously elaborating a reflection on itself and on its own reflexivity. So, while this reflexivity can be made to correspond to spectatorship's theoretical aspect, this aspect is not entirely a function of rational reflection or a matter of the possession or the acquisition of knowledge: the spectator's theoretical agency begins with its very involvement and its implication with the film.

More broadly, the everyday activity of spectatorship implies a performance and a reconfiguration of what is pleasurable in the scene of film, and of what is intelligible of the spectator's relation to it as an aesthetic object and to cinema as a means of sharing and organising social space. Spectatorship, as a concept and as a field of enquiry, names then what Jacques Rancière calls a *partage du sensible* (distribution of the sensible)⁸⁸ - that is, it individuates at the same time a shared space and a particular distribution and regulation of this space. As a practice and a performance, in turn, spectatorship necessarily occupies this shared space and potentially reconfigures its distribution. In this sense, film watching would be an aesthetic act,⁸⁹ capable of bringing about new modes of feeling and understanding and new forms of political subjectivity.⁹⁰

Precisely as it constitutes an act of redistribution and reimagination of the kinds of relations that define a specific film or that characterise the medium in general, then, spectatorship must also be seen as a theoretical act, bearing its

⁸⁸ Rancière defines *partage du sensible* as a system of perceptible features that manifest at once the existence of a common space, the partitions into which it is articulated, and how bodies and subjects are assigned to them; this distribution determines in turn the ways in which what is common can be shared and who actually takes part in the sharing. See Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du Sensible: Esthétique et Politique* (Paris: Fabrique, 2000), 12.

⁸⁹ See *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹⁰ See *Ibid.*, 7.

own modes of experiencing, its own forms of articulation and enunciation, its own epistemologies and its own methods. The reproduction or redistribution of the power relations that inform the space of film is something that spectators and filmmakers materially do, and that academic theorists only in a second instance, and yet not less materially, address. Film theory proper (a film theory text or a theoretical discussion) would then exist in continuity with a more pervasive theoretical dimension of spectatorship, which is in fact inseparable from film experiencing as such. The formulation of a theory of spectatorship would then appear as a particular form of spectatorship, different in its methods and scopes from that which is performed in everyday filmgoing, but fundamentally equal in terms of its embodiment and of its contingent immersion in discourse. In this perspective, the elaboration of a theory of spectatorship should not be taken as an interpretation or an explanation of film experience, but rather as a particular field in which the agency of the spectator can extend itself.

So, on one hand, there can be no spectatorship without the performance of some kind of theoretical, reflexive and symbolic agency from the part of the spectator, the mastery of which the spectator must not necessarily receive from an external source. And, on the other hand, there can be no theory separated from the experience of film: both in the sense that the spectator and the film theorist share the same space - that they are parts of the same articulation of the sensible and subjected to the same institutions and discourses - and in the sense that, in that space, they are *equal* - that they have an equal intelligence of the filmic experience and that, even as their activities respond to two different regimes of knowledge, the agency of one is not predicated on the authority of the other. There is no separation between the spectator's performance of its understanding of film, and the theorist's reflection on it, and no hierarchy should be inscribed in the relation between these two forms of experience. In other words, there is a material, contingent, side to professional film theory and a theoretical side to the experience of film which are inextricably bound together: this mixed ground would be the basis for a more egalitarian conception of film theory, it would suggest taking spectatorship as the common measure of the filmic space, and thus to ground our understanding of film on the spectator's fundamental emancipation. In this sense, theory should not be seen as an act that can bring about the emancipation of spectators, but rather as an act of emancipation which is brought about by spectators themselves, never entirely

separable from film experiencing.

Academic theory, from this perspective, cannot be addressed as a restricted practice. It should not be seen merely as the expression of the epistemic authority, or of the creative fantasy, of the professional theorist. It should not be taken as a prerogative - and, even less, a property - of the learned. In fact, if theory is to be taken as a reconfiguration of relations of power, knowledge and desire, in the context of a broader net of relations - if it is, in other words, a regime of representation internal to the field that it describes - it must not be individuated as the practice of a specific subject, for it actually names a form of relation between all subjects. It cannot take power and ideology as objects distinct from itself, for they are its constitutive dimension. Finally, it cannot limit its scope to the reduction of the world to the principles of its intelligibility, for, as we will see, that would mean a negation of its politics.

Refusing the distinction between observation and theory that informed Popperian scientific epistemology, Paul Feyerabend wrote:

Learning does not go from observation to theory but always involves both elements. Experience arises *together* with theoretical assumptions not before them, and an experience without theory is just as incomprehensible as is (allegedly) a theory without experience [...].⁹¹

Here we can see what is, more generally, characteristic of pedagogical and authoritarian regimes of knowledge: a clear-cut line of separation between knowledge and experience and, in particular, between the sharing of experience and the possession of knowledge. On the contrary, a non-authoritarian regime of knowledge admits no clear line of demarcation between academic theory and the kind of theory that is integral to everyday experience, between the object that theory attempts to define and theory itself as an object, between the scientist and its subject. From this point of view, the spectator would name precisely that subject for which experience and theory are not separated, that agent for which looking on, the reflexivity of looking (looking as simultaneously looking and being-looked-at), and the understanding of this experience are found together: *theoria*, as its etymology suggests, would be the activity of spectators and, in turn, the defining feature of the space of film.

⁹¹ Feyerabend, *Against Method*, 151.

Academic film theory as an *incitation au discours*. The living, truly empirical, ground of film theory which is expressed by the spectator's experience, and its political significance, should not be subordinated to the academic discourse that addresses it. Compared with the broader dimension of film theory that we are discussing, then, the systematic articulations of academic film theory must be seen to perform, first and foremost, a *mise en discours*⁹² - that is, a more comprehensive mapping of the discursive dimension of film experience. As it necessarily extends the discursive power of spectatorship and filmmaking, indeed, academic film theory at the same time almost inevitably constitutes a policing of the spectator's fundamental emancipation. In other words, a first and often primary consequence of the practice of academic film theory is that we reach a further, more exhaustive, distribution of that space of sharing that spectatorship and film experience open up.

The essential form that this *mise en discours* of spectatorship assumes is that of a discursive hegemony.⁹³ In a radical sense, the function of theory is to reduce to intelligibility precisely what, about spectatorship, cannot be reduced to it - its contingency, its embodiment, and the heteronomy of the subject that it expresses. More concretely, we can see that the idea a theory has of the knowledge of the theorist is used to frame the representation that it makes of the spectator's lack of knowledge - in this sense, as well, performing a discursive hegemony. Similarly, the lack of agency of the spectator is understood in terms of the kind of agency that the theorist presumes to possess. Every work on film theory constructs as its object not just the visible, intelligible, or measurable phenomena of spectatorship (more precisely, the experience of film in terms of its visibility, intelligibility, and measurability), but, implicitly, also the theoretical agency that is proper of the spectator. Theory sets out not only to chart all possible ideological subject positions, not only those specific ideologies that inform the basic mechanisms of consensual film signification, but, more fundamentally, exerts its control over the spectator through a *mise*

⁹² Foucault, *Histoire de la Sexualité*, 20.

⁹³ I take discursive hegemony to be the inscription into the order of discourse of the very opposition between discourse and what lies beyond it. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 32.

en discours of the spectator's emancipation from them.⁹⁴

In this respect, apparatus theory provides a perfect example. At the same time that it described interpellation and misrecognition as a function of bourgeois ideology, it was entertaining and imposing a specific idea of how spectators were meant to break free from those mechanisms: as a matter of fact, it took the study and the supervision of the dynamics of emancipation to be its defining function. Consider, by way of example, what Jean-Paul Fargier called the “decisive rule” concerning the relation between knowledge and film signification, in an article that first appeared in *Cinéthique* in 1969 and that was then reprinted on *Screen* two years later: “in the cinema,” he wrote, “the communication of knowledge is attendant upon the production of knowledge about the cinema.”⁹⁵ What he meant, more precisely, was that the possibility that cinema could act as a vector for the communication of positive knowledge (that is, scientific and historical-materialist notions) was predicated on cinema's production of knowledge about itself, its capacity “to show the material facts of its physical and social existence.”⁹⁶ It was a given, though, that the capacity to recognise the *factuality* of both social phenomena and their knowledge was a prerogative of theory. Since ideology and the knowledge produced by the scientific application of theory were for Fargier, as for Althusser, polarly opposite, he must be seen here to deny any possibility of a politically significant exchange between ordinary spectators: no sharing of knowledge through cinema, and no knowledge of film experience, was possible beyond its theory. Apparatus theory was at the same time and in equal measure the theory of cinema as an ideological apparatus, and the theory of theory as the only means of emancipation: the nature of cinema is ideological, Fargier argued, and the only way in which it can “break out is via theoretical practice.”⁹⁷

Spectators must then claim their emancipation from two concurrent pow-

⁹⁴ This *mise en discours* takes as its first object the theorist itself, its own experience as a spectator and the experience of its own emancipation. In its authoritarian forms, from being an aspect of experiencing, theory becomes instead a kind of self-disciplinary observation.

⁹⁵ The original text is all in block capitals. Jean-Paul Fargier, “Parenthesis or Indirect Route: An Attempt at Theoretical Definition of the Relationship Between Cinema and Politics,” *Screen* 12, no. 2 (1971): 141.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

ers, that of consensual ideology and that of a pedagogical critique of ideology, and from both the cinematic apparatus with its institutions from and the institutions of a pedagogical regime of knowledge. From this point of view, then, little changes if the discursive control that academic theory exercises over the spectator is meant to confirm or subvert existing subject positions: for it is in the measure that it capitalizes on the spectator's incapacity for independent emancipation that it becomes authoritarian.

In fact, the kind of emancipation that can be reached through the recourse to an external authority cannot but reproduce the need for emancipation, in a cycle that is based on the affirmation of intellectual inequality and of a hierarchy of intelligences - what Rancière called, in *Le Maître Ignorant*, a logic of explication.⁹⁸ To accept that we need to be *explained* what we need to learn in order to emancipate ourselves is already a way of relinquishing our emancipation. Academic film theory, then, with its pretence to explain spectatorship for what it really is and with its hegemony over its dynamics, could in this sense not only seem pointless,⁹⁹ but outrightly malicious. Together with the discursive framing of spectatorship that is done by the apparatus, and its more or less normative representation that can be given by specific films, then, a pedagogical film theory would function as a police of the spectator's agency. As long as it construes itself as an objectified and proprietary form of knowledge and as something external to the dimension of spectatorship, film theory becomes the first and fundamental form of the spectator's *abrutissement* - of its objectification and stultification. The proliferation of academic discourse becomes thus in many ways complementary to the ideological power of the apparatus.¹⁰⁰

The logic of explication prompts a proliferation of discourses on emancipation which have precisely the function of preventing the fundamental emancipation of the subject to express itself more independently. This is not a prerogative of academic film theory, of course: it also corresponds to a strategy of the apparatus (reaching out to fulfil the expectations of its target groups and

⁹⁸ Jacques Rancière, *Le Maître Ignorant* (Paris: Frayard, 1987), 12.

⁹⁹ Jacques Rancière, "Jacques Rancière and Indisciplinarity: An Interview," *Art & Research* (2007): <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/jrinterview.html>.

¹⁰⁰ We can see this, perhaps, in what is now one of the defining discourses of the academic institution: despite the fact that the expression suggests a repressive threat, the "publish or perish" imperative is indeed connatural to a Foucauldian *incitation au discours*. See Foucault, *Histoire de la Sexualité*, 26-27.

involve them in its dynamics and evolution), as well as to a form and an understanding of “engaged” filmmaking. For instance, the politics and aesthetics of enunciation that came with apparatus theory - the idea that a film should expose its ideological nature and shatter the cinematic *dispositif* in order to produce a critical spectator - may appear to be, in this perspective, a kind of meta-political filmmaking as well as, in some respects at least, an instance of a pedagogical framing of the spectator’s emancipation. More markedly, the recent emphasis on media interactivity can be seen to effect an even broader mapping and a tighter discipline of the spectator’s agency.

To put it bluntly, in order to have emancipated spectators we do not need a “better” cinema, new “technologies” of agency, nor more of a theory of film that, in fact, requires the spectator’s passivity and presupposes its lack of awareness. The fact that spectators might not possess much quantifiable knowledge about film, or that their awareness of, or interest in, cinema’s political dimension might be lacking, is still not a warrant for an authoritarian theory of film. On one hand, quite clearly, the assumption of the spectator’s intellectual emancipation does not automatically make of spectatorship a political practice - let alone one that would be essentially progressive or subversive - nor does it dispense spectatorship from political struggle. On the other, it is not through a *mise en discours* of the spectators’ emancipation that we can expect this struggle to be created and maintained.

In the effort to rethink the concept beyond this ideological deadlock, Rancière argues that emancipation is less a matter of a conflict between established parts,¹⁰¹ less the articulation of what was previously under- or mis-represented, than the constitutional effect of a radical and irresolvable conflict. The political dimension comes into being, Rancière writes, not when the distribution of the parts that characterizes a given society is rearticulated, but as it is troubled by a part of those that have no part (a *part de sans-part*), by the manifestation of something that is *incommensurable* with the very principles that regulate that distribution.¹⁰² This dimension ceases to exist, on the contrary, when this gap (*écart*) is brought back within the intelligible articulations of the social space. As it reduces incommensurability to an articulation of parts, the *mise en dis-*

¹⁰¹ Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 64.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 40.

cours that characterises disciplinary institutions, especially if what is reduced into discourse is the subject's agency, must then be seen as a primary form of oppression, a negation of the very political dimension of equality and emancipation. The action of authoritarian theory (abstracting from the empirical contingent ground of the phenomenal world the principles of its functioning and thus reducing the world to the principles of its intelligibility) would then mimic the fundamental action of police: by articulating our understanding of the world in terms of objectified knowledge, theory would inevitably end up serving social control.

Breaking the spell of theory. The specific problem of the film theorist becomes then how to envision its academic practice beyond an authoritarian regime of knowledge that would cut her off from her own experience as spectator, from the fundamental ground of equality that she shares with other human beings, and from the paradoxes that animate the political dimension. So, rather than establishing the authority of the film theorist on its being external to the mechanisms of spectatorship that it describes, one should ground the effectiveness of its activity in its very involvement as a spectator, in its capacity to let go of the mastery of concepts and rather make use of the self-shattering potentials that the space of film affords. More generally, rather than establishing the function of film theory as its ability to make cinema and spectatorship intelligible, one should rather take it as a hospitable space - not unlike the space of spectatorship - for something radically incommensurable to the existing distribution of knowledge to appear.

We should therefore assume that no break exists between the practice of spectatorship and the practice of academic theory, and that the forms of the latter necessarily come as the extension of the ungraspable forces of the former. Even before they are framed as sociological or critical objects of enquiry, indeed, the film theorist necessarily partakes in those communal forms of film experience that spectatorship names - and that is because she is herself, first and foremost, a viewer and a spectator. It is, then, in the material contingencies of the academic practice of theory, in the equality of its form of knowledge, in the theorist's involvement with film experience, and, finally, through her proximity to the emotive, sensual sources of spectatorship's theoretical dimension, that the potential for a non-authoritarian film theory can be found. Writing

on film, then, would be just one more way of engaging with it, a strategy of viewing among others, one in which something unexpected and unintelligible can potentially appear. Academic film theory would be yet another discourse on film and another form of visual pleasure with no privileged relation to its object, no intrinsically superior access to truth, or to subversiveness, than that of everyday filmgoing. In turn, any form of spectatorship would bear with it not only the power to confirm or reconfigure the space of film, but also what can be understood and said about it - it would not only have discursive power, but a theoretical power as well. Beyond their authoritarian articulation, spectatorship and theory become then one practice and a single dimension, one that is open to the emergence of the incommensurable.

One of the forces that, equally in everyday spectatorship and in everyday academic practice, are able, so to speak, to break the spell of theory - to mock its pretence of mastery and retribute it to the unexpected and the contingent play of encounters that characterises lived-experience - is pleasure. As much as it cannot establish a clear separation between ideology and the forms of knowledge that are characteristic of it, indeed, theory can claim no distance from its pleasures. In pleasure, I am not saying anything particularly new here, we can find an agency that goes beyond the illusion of mastery of the subject: rather than taking it as a sign of a lack of awareness, as apparatus theory tendentially did, or as something that necessarily corresponds to conformism and consensus, the spectator's pleasure should be seen to constitute a specific form of critique and to be the drive sustaining its successive articulations. If theory can reinforce visual pleasure, visual pleasure surely drives theory on (together, quite clearly, with a pleasure in reading, and sometimes a perverse preference for philosophical texts). The reading of film theory can indeed make certain films more palatable (or can help to make the films we already like more respectable) by extending the context of their understanding, and thus opening them up for more, and potentially more pleasurable, meanings. Almost anything does the trick. There is something of cinephilia, then, in the joys and pains of theory, of bibliophilia, claustrophilia: any "philia", any pleasure and any perversion (including that for "neutral" empiricism), actually reinforces, or at least extends, the domain of theory, to the point that we may begin to doubt where one ends and the other begins. We might say that all theories partake in the eclecticism of the amateurs and in the polymorphism of infantile

sexual theories. From this perspective, even the driest classifications of film codes may be seen to acquire an uncanny obscene character. Is the disembodied space of authoritarian theory, and of an authoritarian theory of spectatorship in particular, not something like an anatomical theatre, then, a panoptical device surrounding a human body reduced, in death, to what can be made intelligible about it? As soon as we take theory as a practice, instead, we begin to see in it the same living and ungraspable tensions that animate the politics and the aesthetics of spectatorship and film.

On the side of the viewer, as well, the possibility of extending meaning, of prolonging one's immersion in the film, and, most characteristically, of reading against the grain, must be taken as a kind of theoretical activity which is driven by pleasure. What is considered oppositional reading - and which is probably better described as an aesthetic *use* - is indeed meant to contrast the naturalness of consensus and the transparency of subjectivity. It is an expression of dissent, an arguing for one's own voice and one's own meaning that does not necessarily need to be self-consciously theoretical, nor to muster a high degree of discursive mastery, in order to achieve significant subversive or critical effects. Its force, in fact, lies primarily in desire, not in awareness and technique: the spectator does not need to have a theory behind it, nor in its hands, to unsettle the established distribution of the sensible. It is, if ever, by her contingent presence as a looking, speaking and desiring being, that this disturbance will take place. Indeed, if most of the focus has been put onto "rational" oppositional reading, of the kind that pitches the spectator's critical awareness against the normative and hidden structures of the apparatus, there is also another set of normative structures that the experience of spectatorship potentially transcends and transgresses, by other means than reason: those that inform the viewer itself as a person with an identity, those that make up the imaginary continuity of the subject before it identifies with the cinematic one, the desires and pleasures by which he or she is looking for a unitary point of identification in the first place. Film experience would then offer not just moments of imaginary union, but of *self-shattering* as well,¹⁰³ it would be one of the myriad of encounters that make up subjectivity as a dynamic without centre. A self-shattering that, I believe, relates to the subject's heteronomy - that is, to its fundamental emancipation *from itself*.

¹⁰³ Leo Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 46.

As Rancière confirms from a different perspective, it is only from the position that normative discourses inform or hegemonise that it is possible to advance a politics of identity, and, furthermore, it is only from that position that we are able to distinguish unambiguously between, so to speak, movements of the subject toward or away from itself, between passive and active forms of agency, between, political subjectivation and ideological misrecognition (though they can clearly be separated in principle, the two are not always unambiguously recognisable in their concrete, contingent, instances). Against the knowledge of the rational and conscious subject, we should rather listen to the wisdom of the id: we really exist only in the measure that we are not entirely “ourselves”. In other words, the possibility of subjectivation would rest ultimately on an unresolved tension between an “it” and an “I”. In relation to the experience of film, the spectator would be the name of that tension.

If the spectator’s intellectual emancipation takes shape through the statement and the recognition of its equal intelligence of film, then the theorist’s emancipation must be sought for in a return to, or rather a constant connection with, this emerging dimension of the spectator’s desire and the subject’s heteronomy. A dimension which would not be the *origin* of theory - the idea of origin, as Jean-Bertrand Pontalis argued, is essentially nostalgic, and eventually presupposes a teleology, of which theory all too easily can come to occupy the vertex - but its ever present *beginning*.¹⁰⁴ In writing, and in theoretical writing in particular, one is never finished and one must constantly begin again: the theoretical *parole* is the contrary of the authority of theory - that absolute voice that objectifies every experience and identifies every object infallibly and once and for all, that masterful gesture that links the essence to the name. An intelligence that never falters is indeed one that lives in fear of its stupidity, and one that would therefore need to stultify others. A speech that never wavers would ignore, as Pontalis wrote, that which actually nourishes it and brings it into being: the unconscious, which is a time not reduced to measure, and a voice of that which was not supposed to speak.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Avant* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), 18.

¹⁰⁵ Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Fenêtres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 29.

The beginnings of film theory.

Film theory is born in the curious, but never innocent, look that children cast upon the medium as they are discovering it, it is in the everyday performance of viewing, in its pleasures, as spectators and the people working with the medium continuously engage with film and with each other. As children, we are told and shown in many ways, by many people on and off screen, what the medium and our relation to it are supposed to be. The first form that film theory takes, in this sense, is again that of the police: a mapping of the sensible that assigns each subject to a part, each aspect of the experience of film to a position defined by regimes of discursive power. We come to understand film through a layout of the seeable, the sayable, the imaginable, which is at once repressive and somewhat necessary, or at least inescapable. And yet, learning what the medium is, is first of all learning what it is and what it means to other people: at the same time that we encounter the discourses that code cinema in the cultural symbolic, we find those discourses and codes as the people around them relate to them and embody them. If the subject is born into language, this language is only accessible to the subject in the form of a *parole*. The *discursivity* of the subject - that is, the coexistence of the discursive construction of the subject and the subjective contingency of this construction - marks from the outset the dimension of our embodied experience of film.

We are educated to film, and our relation to it is explained to us as we learn to assume those positions that identify the medium in the social space, and ourselves within it. At the same time, however, we discover the experience of film more independently. We never perfectly cope with the emotions we, and other people we know, attach to film, we never entirely adapt to the consensual language games that define its place in the places we inhabit. These contingent, but still discursive, forms of experiencing that set the foundations of our continuously evolving engagement with film are not apprehended as a datum, but are rather formed gradually as we share them with the people that we meet through the medium. So that even as we are explained what film *is*, we are still able to discover it, as it were, for what it is not, or not yet, and by other means than those which we are given. In this sense, the contingency of our history as spectators corresponds to the heteronomy of our subjectivity. By interacting with others and by mastering a certain set of notions, discourses, and modes

of experiencing film we are already changing them as well as confirming them in some of their respects (the discursivity of spectatorship in this sense corresponds to a dimension of discursive *power*). As we understand the regimes of filmic representation, as well as the regime that represents film as a social and imaginary activity, we are inevitably subjected to them: we are identified as spectators. At the same time, however, we put ourselves beyond this identity: both through the contingencies and idiosyncrasies of the subjective encounters that make up our personal history as spectators, and through our own use of the film as a scene of pleasure and signification. So that our relation to film is, from the very beginning, both an embodied and a theoretical one, at the same time embedded in discourse and emerging through contingent dialogue and encounters.

However, when we enter the distribution of the sensible that defines film, it is not enough that we arrive to possess an independent and personal understanding of it: we are asked proof of an understanding and of an experience which must be valid for others. A child in front of the screen seems to be engaged with the film, but does she know what it *means*? Is she *watching*? Does she really *see*? Our apprenticeship of moving images takes first of all the form of a discipline and is subjected to the logic of explication: we are not supposed to know what film is until we are able to *explain* what it is, or, more generally, to display the proper reactions.¹⁰⁶ And, since we are supposed to need an explanation in the first place, by responding to it, we are bound to accept implicitly that we will need other explanations in the future (to make sense of any new situation, as well as to make sense of the very explanations that we receive).¹⁰⁷ The origin of authoritarian film theory can be found precisely in the gesture that establishes the child as an incapable: not as someone who merely lacks the experience that it needs to understand the world the way it is collectively and contingently constructed, but as someone who is yet to acquire the potential to understand it the way it is. Without a recognition of the equality of intelligences - and first of all of the equality of intelligences of the child and the adult, and of the equal

¹⁰⁶ Sometimes, one has the impression that, as a social phenomenon, spectatorship is nothing but the ensemble of these coded and proper reactions, a masquerade - and it surely is one, as an object of authoritarian film theory. If it really were, however, nothing new would ever come from it. Even as the codes are constantly and accurately reproduced, in the very contingency of their performance something is bound to escape them.

¹⁰⁷ See Rancière, *Le Maître Ignorant*, 12.

value of their different perspectives on the world - the cycles of the pedagogical regime will find no end. Within this regime, spontaneous and independent knowledge - what Rancière calls learning, rather than comprehension¹⁰⁸ - is almost entirely discounted. In this way, the universal subject of film experience is turned in the transcendental subject of film theory: the former, an expression of the equality of all intelligences in relation to film; the other, that position of ignorance that the film theorist needs to sustain its authority. Indeed, as we have written, the passivity of the spectator is doubly coded: first by the structure of the cinematographic apparatus and then by the pedagogical assumptions of its theory.

It is never just in the autonomous and rational judgement of the subject, however (an avatar of the unitary subject and a representative of the mastery of theory), but in the recognition of the contingency and heteronomy of our experience and subjectivity, that something beyond the logic of explication can be found. In other words, the fundamental emancipation of the subject does not correspond to its acquisition of a form of mastery (this is precisely the lure by which both the cinematographic apparatus and the pedagogical regime function in the first place), but rather to a radical lack in all forms of mastery.

The child, the *fatum* and the *infans*. Taken as that empty dimension in which the equality of intelligences of all subjects having to do with film is expressed, spectatorship can be seen as the *part de sans-part* that constantly traverses the existing distribution of the social and aesthetic space of film. This part of those that do not have one, we have begun to address it by imagining a child in front of a screen: and yet it does not correspond to childhood, literally, but rather finds a similarity with what the French psychoanalyst Jean-Bertrand Pontalis called the *infans*. If childhood is, indeed, clearly a part of the social space - a category, an ideal and even a commodity - the *infans* names that experience of radical alterity that comes from our everyday encounters with language and the unconscious, one that begins with but in no way ends with our childhood. Every language and every experience is, at first and at its core, a foreign one,¹⁰⁹ and no *logos* can exist without the struggle by which we make

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰⁹ Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *l'Amour des Commencements* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 30.

it, day by day and always precariously, our own.

Film theory, in the general sense we are discussing, addresses that knot of discourses, actions and emotions that make it so that the lights on the screen become recognisable to the subject as moving images, and, more fundamentally, the moment in which the sounds that the child produces at some point are recognised to be a voice saying something about those images. We become spectators by acquiring and by being recognised this voice: on one hand, we are mastering the medium, and thus we are being mastered by it; on the other, we are assuming our equality to the other people that relate to it, arguing our position in a performance of a spectatorial *logos*¹¹⁰ which is never clearly our own, in the sense that it always informed discursively, but that, by the very fact of our subjective contingency and heteronomy, already constitutes a potential for dissent.

In-fans - the child, the one who does not speak - would then name not really a space outside of language, but that silence which supports the emergence of the voice.¹¹¹ That which is no *part* of language and which, during the course of our life, at the same time *wants* no part in it and drives it on. Language exists, Pontalis wrote, only when it is inhabited by what it is not.¹¹² More generally, he believed, the power of an art lies in the fact that it can face what negates it,¹¹³ what remains incommensurable to it. In a similar way, theory becomes effective only as it can engage with what escapes it and, more specifically, what escapes its fantasy of mastery. So, the child speaks from a space that cannot be measured and says “I, too, am a speaking being” - by this giving a positive expression of the fundamental equality of all speaking beings. And yet, this equality is not a given, and is never the simple realisation of a human essence: the most banal of utterances, in this perspective, already has the full magnitude of a political act.

As the child becomes into language, a part beyond the parts of the subject, as it were, shuts up in dissent, resisting against the saturation of the sensible that is brought about by discourse, trying to escape from the mastery that concepts allow for, and that they cannot fail to impose. The state of the *infans*

¹¹⁰ Rancière, *Mésentente*, 44.

¹¹¹ Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *En Marge des Nuits* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 74.

¹¹² Pontalis, *l'Amour des Commencements*, 29-30.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 53.

is not that of aphasia,¹¹⁴ but precisely the site of the appearance of silence. It is not opposed to language as such, but only to its authoritarian power. Much like the voice must become able to argue for itself in order to be distinguished from sound, silence must tell itself apart from the incapacity to speak. The *infans* is, in this sense, a creature of dissensus: it would be that thing in us which would rather not speak. For both Rancière and Pontalis a fundamental dissent animates language, without which language would be very little, and say nothing at all. A language without possible misunderstanding, Pontalis wrote, would not be able to sustain a single signification¹¹⁵ - without dissensus, no possibility of political subjectivation.

We can say that a political dimension exists when, in the sharing that language allows, we learn not to oust its radical otherness and the struggles that inform it. Language can never be a direct access to the thing, Pontalis wrote, but it would be nothing more than a code were it not driven by and moving toward what it is not.¹¹⁶ Similarly, the subject would be nothing more than a spokesperson (not a speaking being) were it not driven by and moving towards what the subject is not: here we find, perhaps, the politics and the aesthetics of the unconscious - *part de sans-part* of our psychic being. The unconscious, for Pontalis, corresponds in fact to the silence of the *infans*, part of that which has no part in language nor consciousness. The characteristic domain of experience individuated by the unconscious, in fact, would not be one before or beyond meaning - one that would thus be comfortably intelligible in articulation with it - but a rupture, the continuous emergence of an incommensurable *within* language and the speaking being themselves. In this sense psychoanalysis is, or should be, for Pontalis, hospitable to everything that migrates, to everything that does not have a proper place.¹¹⁷

If the *infans's* telling silence is first of all meant as a sign of dissensus and emancipation, Pontalis appropriately called *fatum* the subject of a speech which is never its own:¹¹⁸ I don't speak, but rather I am spoken (*fatum sum*). In a

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Après Freud* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 121.

¹¹⁶ Le langage "ne serait rien de plus qu'un code s'il n'était porté par et emporté vers ce qu'il n'est pas." Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *La Force d'Attraction* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 99. Translation mine.

¹¹⁷ Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Ce Temps Qui ne Passe Pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 72.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 30.

similar sense, Rancière referred to the Platonic use of the term *aisthesis* to address the language of the subaltern, the language of a subject who is able to speak, but to whom is nevertheless negated the ability to make its own meaning.¹¹⁹ To return to the cinema, then, the spectator of Althusserian film theory was assigned the position of the spoken, of the subject who is merely able to read what the flow of images manifests to it. Redefined with Judith Mayne, on the other hand, the spectator would be the tension between these two figures: one hand, the spokesperson, the *fatum*, the subject of ideology; on the other, the speaking being, who is also an *infans* and, thus, the Rancièrian subject of dissensus and political subjectivation. In psychoanalysis, one should perhaps remind it, the speaking subject is not the conscious subject:¹²⁰ precisely because of this lack in its agency, however, it is also a subject who can never be entirely spoken by an external and intelligible agency.

And yet, the *infans* is continuously talked about, interpreted, and tentatively put into discourse:¹²¹ its cries and motions are constantly heeded, investigated, and made significant by others, quelled and thus deprived of some of their dissensual charge. The *infans*, after all, is treated like a child. And so successful and pervasive this pedagogy of subjectivity is, that one might finally lose the ability to hear the *infans* and to let it speak. One might indeed lose touch with the incommensurable and with its own subjective heteronomy, and it would be precisely the function of psychoanalysis to reawake ourselves to it. Analysis, for Pontalis, aims to make *fatum* silent, and let the *infans* speak:¹²² *fatum* here corresponds not really to the repressed, nor to the traumatic, but, on the contrary, to identity and the self, it is that which has been put into discourse and which is subjected to the mastery of language and to the subject's own fantasy of mastery over itself. The silence of the *infans* and the diversions of the unconscious would provide, on the contrary, those migrant elements, that disturbance within the sphere of language and the senses that prevents the self-sameness of the unitary subject and thus allows the expression of its voice. For the struggle into language of the *infans* that accompanies us all is fundamentally an act (an art) of emancipation: in this way, as we will see, psychoanalysis can be seen

¹¹⁹ Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 38.

¹²⁰ Pontalis, *Après Freud*, 49.

¹²¹ Pontalis, *Ce Temps Qui ne Passe Pas*, 31.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 32.

to address the domain of the political that Rancière defines, rather than acting merely as a technology of subjectivity, a metapsychology of the irrational, a teleology of the sexual, and a police of the irrepresentable.

In Derek Jarman's film *Caravaggio*¹²³ there is a scene in which Jerusalem, Caravaggio's foundling and mute, lifelong companion, cries out at his friend's deathbed with all the strength of his passion. He cannot cry with his voice, however, for he has none. So instead he blows into a whistle. In the film we can see him do that, desperately and with all his breath, but we cannot hear any sound. The film has doubled his silence, and by this it has made that silence, like the silence of the *infans*, so much louder. This scene evokes the strange, synaesthetic, impressions of hearing a phantasmal sound - a visual and narrative cue evokes a sound that is not actually there - and of seeing silence - we see the signs of blowing on the whistle, and through them we *see a lack of sound*. So that we actually have a sound, deprived of its aural dimension, and we perceive this lack through the image. This scene can be taken as a representation of the silence of the *infans*: not the trauma of a silenced subject, but the passion of a speaking silence. In a similar way, the subject's speaks through the spectator's aesthetic illumination of the film as the viewer remains silent. We can take this incommensurable and significant sound, perhaps, as the first sign of the spectator's fundamental emancipation.

The spectator as an *infans*. After this digression, through which we tied together Pontalis' approach to unconscious experience and some of Rancière's ideas on political subjectivation, we can say that the cinematographic situation, rather than infantilizing the spectator as apparatus theory assumed, first of all puts it in the position of the *infans*. To be sure, this possibility to go beyond ourselves and to spectate, as it were, our own otherness to ourselves in its contingent emergence, is not exclusive to film spectatorship. On the contrary, as Christopher Bollas argues, it is a general characteristic of unconscious experience and of our ordinary, everyday, encounters with the world.¹²⁴

In the scene of spectatorship and theory that authoritarian film theories construct, on the contrary, the spectator is imagined not just to be silent, but

¹²³ Derek Jarman, *Caravaggio* (British Film Institute, 1986). 35mm.

¹²⁴ Christopher Bollas, *Free Association* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2002), 5.

to be lacking a proper voice. This authoritarian logic is predicated on an identification of passivity with a lack of agency: since the spectator lets the film speak, then it cannot have a voice and, thus, it must be spoken. Limited to the moment of projection, then, engaged by the dominance of the agency of technology over the receptivity of subjectivity, the relationship between the viewer and the screen may very well represent a dimension of radical conflict (of alienation and self-dispossession), but hardly one of dissensus. If the ideological apparatus clearly *influences* spectatorship's discursive power, an authoritarian theory of film can be seen to *negate* its independent political dimension. From this perspective, the silence of the metapsychological spectator does not correspond to an empty universal position that can be occupied by any contingent being whatsoever and re-signified, but rather becomes a sign of emptiness which inevitably erases everything that escapes the mastery of concepts: contingency, fundamental emancipation, and the diversions of the unconscious.

At what point, and on what conditions, the sounds of the spectator's voice are recognised as a discourse on the image? When, and how, wavering patterns of light become a moving image? What makes us and unmakes us as spectators and as human subjects? These are the questions to which the film theorist, the child, and the emancipated spectator continually return to. Perhaps, they return to them precisely to prevent them from being answered. One could say that the film theorist, inasmuch as it is a spectator and an emancipated subject, is the one who keeps cherishing film as an unknown object, as a manifestation of an incommensurable, as a site of otherness. The one who cannot let go the fascination with the very process of weaving and unweaving of the texture of film experience and of the process of its signification and re-signification. The one who constantly returns - a *détour*, actually - to the trouble of beginnings. In the end, the film theorist would be the one who, before the moving images, can never stop being lost. In its essence, a non-authoritarian film theory would not aim to an ontology of the moving image or the filmic experience, then, but rather to preserve its paradoxes.

Knowledge always comes from desiring the unknown: which is either a desire to erase it, or a desiring relationship with our own ignorance. The theorist is, in this sense, not only an emancipated spectator but an *ignorant* viewer - not in the sense of one that lacks someone else's knowledge, but, precisely, of one that is engaged with the necessarily faltering beginnings of one's own.

Knowledge should be seen less as a form of mastery, than as a pleasurable form of sharing of our experiences. Interpretation (psychoanalytic interpretation in an enhanced way) and objectified knowledge would then be something like the end-pleasure of film theory - they would enjoy their object only in the measure that they are able to kill that pleasure and dominate it. So, on one hand we will have the end of film theory, the climax of its progression to annex every possible experience to the symbolised, to the sayable, to the seen, all of which is inevitably predicated on a depoliticization of spectatorship (as we have suggested, politics only exists in the continuous emergence of an incommensurable within the consensual distribution of the sensible, which is a movement opposite to its *mise en discours*). On the other, we will have a film theory that mocks its own mastery and “flirts” with its own ignorance.¹²⁵

This will bring us to discuss theory and spectatorship in relation to what Rancière calls aesthetic regime of art and, in turn, with contingency and free association. But, first, it is perhaps the case to dwell on an aspect of Rancière’s work that, while being clearly one of the cornerstones of the concept of the emancipated spectator (together with *Les Nuits de Proletaires*¹²⁶ and his work on Jacotot), is not immediately linked with film: his early critique of Althusser’s theory of knowledge in *La Leçon d’Althusser*. This will allow us in turn to address more specifically the relationship between, on one hand, film theory and normative discourses on film, and, on the other, the spectator as an aesthetic subject.

Rancière’s critique of Althusser.

By presenting Althusserianism as a practice¹²⁷ - that is, by foregrounding the politics of Althusser’s thought in relation to their historical and institutional context, rather than addressing his ideas about politics from a purely theoretical standpoint - Rancière was actually touching a central argument in Althusser’s theory of ideas: the separate and privileged status that he assigned to theory. When Althusser affirmed the independence of theory from contingent political

¹²⁵ See Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994).

¹²⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labour* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

¹²⁷ Jacques Rancière, *La Leçon d’Althusser* (Paris: Fabrique, 2011 [1974]), 8.

practice, Rancière conceded,¹²⁸ he was doing it first of all to separate the laws of theoretical truth from the entrenched logic of party politics that characterised the French Communist Party.¹²⁹ At the same time, however, Althusser's positions entailed a split between theory, as a specialised field and an elitist practice, and any emanation of political rationality coming from the actions of the base: for him, there was no possibility of finding solutions to political problems by systematising what was emerging from concrete struggles.¹³⁰ What had to be done, instead, was to return to the sources of Marxist thought and to the implicit dialectic of the great revolutionary moments.¹³¹ Althusser's was a double return to theory, then: first as a focus on theoretical texts, and then as a theoretical reassessment of their founding principles. A task that he made to coincide in essence with the essence of political action: "politics would be philosophy in act."¹³² Theory was thus made to be the sole possible guarantee of the "scientificity" - the rationality, and thus the effectiveness - of politics as such.¹³³ This idea of the necessity and independence of theory, tendentially expressed as a critique of false knowledge, by May 1968 evolved into a stark affirmation of the separateness and superiority of theory over the forms of knowledge that could have been elaborated at one with political practice. "False ideas come from social practice," Rancière thus summarized Althusser's position, and so, "science can only be established from a point outside of the illusion of practice:"¹³⁴ a mutual exclusion of theory and experience that we have already encountered as a feature of authoritarian regimes of knowledge.

Althusser's conception of ideology as a system of representations that automatically subjected individuals to the dominant order, Rancière continued, sustained the idea of a radical cultural revolution at the same time that it was used to condemn the student revolts - depicted as a movement of petty bour-

¹²⁸ Ibid., 67.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 68.

¹³⁰ Rancière names the miners strike in 1948, the student strikes in 1963 and the revolts of May 1968, the Algerian War of Independence, and, of course, the Chinese cultural revolution in the "near" background. Ibid., 71.

¹³¹ Ibid., 64.

¹³² Ibid., 67.

¹³³ Jacques Rancière, "Sur la Théorie de l'Idéologie: Politique d'Althusser," in *La Leçon d'Althusser* (Paris: Fabrique, 2011 [1969]), 240.

¹³⁴ Rancière, *Leçon*, 96.

geois, unwitting victims of an ideology of which they had to be made aware.¹³⁵ The irony is, of course, that the function of ideology - to reproduce the existing conditions of production - was precisely the function that the students of May were accusing the university of performing. These two faces of theory - one as an instrument of emancipation, the other, as a support of the authority of academics and intellectuals against the danger of overthrowing the institutions to which they belonged - can be recognised in Althusserian film theory as well.¹³⁶ On one side, we have the presupposition of the passivity of spectators and of their incapacity for autonomous emancipation. On the other, the project of an avant-garde cinema that, by exposing the secrets of the machine that imprisoned them, was imagined to liberate spectators from the particular ideology that informed the cinematographic apparatus. Both these ideas in fact presupposed the incapacity of spectators to grasp the dynamics of film ideology and film signification independently, and postulated that emancipatory knowledge - either in the form of a critical discourse on film or in that of engaged experimental filmmaking - was something from which the spectator was constitutionally cut off. According to apparatus theory, the less the spectator knows - the less the experience of spectatorship is intelligible to it - the stronger is the apparatus's ideological effect. And yet, in relation to the authority of theory, the stronger is the ideological determination, the more intelligible the experience of the spectator becomes for the theorist. In fact, the incapacity of the spectator is a requisite not just for the ideological effect, but, first of all, for the mastery and the authority of theory. In this sense, as we have seen, we should consider apparatus theory to be an essential part of the apparatus it described.

Other than appropriating the Althusserian idea of cinema as an ideological state apparatus, then, 1970s film theory had first of all assimilated his point on the necessity of a critical and scientific discourse about film. At the same time, film theory set out to establish the principles of film ideology and to construct

¹³⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹³⁶ In addressing the authoritarian aspects of "Althusserian" film theory, or apparatus theory, I am making a wide, if quite consensual, generalisation. Still, I think that three combined assumptions can be taken to define, in this generic sense, an Althusserian theory of film, especially in relation to issues of theoretical authority: the negation of the spectator's emancipation; the idea that film signification rests essentially in the creation of an *illusory* impression of reality which corresponds in turn to a specific ideological worldview; and a particular connection between ideology and psychoanalytic metapsychology.

itself as a critique of the ideological nature of the medium - the underlying assumption was, of course, that the ideological dynamics of cinema were determined by the very psychological and technological features of the medium.¹³⁷

If cinema was “ideology talking to itself,”¹³⁸ the political action of the critical theorist was then to disturb this monologue with its own voice: its purpose was to show and explain film signification in its relation to the ideological regime from a position of knowledge external to the apparatus. Film theory’s regime of understanding cinema as a medium had to assume its ideological nature as much as it capitalised on the theorist’s critical distance from it.

On the contrary, Rancière argued, the relationship between objective knowledge and ideology can never be one of rupture or separation, for it is rather always one of articulation.¹³⁹ There is no separating scientific knowledge from discourse: it is only in an ideological - and, specifically, bourgeois - conception of scientific knowledge, in fact, as Rancière claimed, that knowledge becomes thinkable as distinct object.¹⁴⁰ Film theory became then essentially a critique of false knowledge: not really in the sense of a demystification of the false *contents* of bourgeois films, but rather as an elucidation of the ideological *form* of cinematic representation itself (through this, film criticism was in fact becoming film theory). The terrain of film ideology, indeed, was not seen to rest primarily in the content of the film, but rather in the process of its enunciation, and less in the narrative and storytelling than in the very ontology of moving images. “Narrative,” Stephen Heath wrote, “gives the meaning that the photographic image shows real.”¹⁴¹ In this way, Althusserian film theory tendentially identified the ideological nature of film with the longstanding issue of the impression of reality, materialised in the tropes of classical continuity and in the metapsychology of the apparatus, and imagined a different form of filmmaking in the subversion of both. “The impression of reality,” Christopher Williams wrote in

¹³⁷ Abraham Geil, “The Spectator Without Qualities,” in *Rancière and Film*, Paul Bowman, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 68.

¹³⁸ Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” *Screen* 12, no. 1 (1971): 30.

¹³⁹ Rancière, “Sur la Théorie de l’Idéologie,” 236.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Stephen Heath, “Film and System: Terms of Analysis,” *Screen* 16, no. 2 (1975): 108. Note the verb “to show” that is also used to convey the idea of the function of theory. Also see: Comolli and Narboni, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” 34.

the same year, “spawns two processes in the spectator: recognition, and then mystification. The task of political cinema, and of cinema criticism, is to destroy those processes.”¹⁴² At the same time, however, this kind of film theory came to be based on the fundamental incapacity of spectators to address, and eventually “destroy”, these processes independently and in their own ways. In this sense, Althusserian film theory is less to be criticised for its “formalism”¹⁴³ - that is, for describing spectatorship as an abstract subject position rather than as the practice of a culturally and historically situated real viewer - than for its intellectual paternalism.

In a 1969 text that preceded his *La Leçon d'Althusser*, Rancière characterised Althusser's theory of ideology, on one side, in terms of its assumption that ideology is a pervasive structure, a general principle of social cohesion which binds individuals to their role; on the other, and it is here I believe that we find the strongest expression of the theory's authoritarian regime, of its clear-cut separation of ideology from objective knowledge.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, if the first definition of ideology can be explained in terms of more or less contingent configurations of discursive power, enveloping the subject but also always open to transformation, its second understanding frames this dimension of power in terms of a transcendental binary logic that in fact forecloses the subject's emancipation. The study of film was particularly receptive to this logic: “Truths” Paul Narboni and Jean-Luc Comolli wrote, arguing against the no less authoritarian positions of Fargier on *Cinéthique* from the pages of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, “never came to be known theoretically' through a film: known, yes; theoretically, no. *Cinéthique*,” they added, “misuses language in many ways. An over-hasty marriage between theory' and cinema' goes side by side with an equally unwise divorce between cinema' and ideology.”¹⁴⁵

Such emphasis on truth and demystification, such as that we find in Althusser and Althusserian film theory, could not but have resolved in a police of words,¹⁴⁶ both in the form of internecine struggles over the correct understand-

¹⁴² Christopher Williams, “Politics and Production: Some Pointers Through the Work of Jean-Luc Godard,” *Screen* 12, no. 4 (1971): 21-22.

¹⁴³ Geil, “The Spectator Without Qualities,” 73.

¹⁴⁴ Rancière, “Sur la Théorie de l'Idéologie,” 216.

¹⁴⁵ It is less important here to give the details of the discussion than to acknowledge its vocabulary and grasp its tones. Comolli and Narboni, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” 33-34.

¹⁴⁶ Rancière, *Leçon d'Althusser*, 127.

ing and practice of theory, and in the constitution of a technical vocabulary - at times rigorous, at times, as it was noted, merely confusing. The polemic between the *Cahiers* and *Cinéthique* to which we have hinted above, assumed indeed the form of a quarrel between true versus false science, between mere exhibition of militantism and actual revolutionary action. The allegations were, coherently, those of not having understood correctly, of making a mystifying rather than an actually theoretical use of theoretical concepts: “pseudo-scientific rigour quickly takes the place (and masks the absence) of genuine theoretical rigour,” Narboni and Comolli criticize their colleagues, noting incidentally that “(the word theory itself has a high frequency ratio in the text but is still never formulated theoretically).”¹⁴⁷ They are in fact, accusing the other of having the same kind of inability they imputed to spectators, only translated from the domain of film experience to that of professional criticism. In both cases, they were doubting the other’s ability to *comprehend*: “the *Cinéthique* team may have read their Althusser, but they have not digested him, and their use of his terminology is sometimes unscientific to the point of fantasy.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, the Althusserian split between ideology and science reinscribes itself within the science which is needed to separate science from ideology: Althusserian film critics are haunted by the very logic of knowledge and false appearances that they set themselves out to combat within the cinema. This logic returns over and over, every time a final ontological, epistemological, or methodological arbitration is invoked, whenever theoretical concepts become the “unobservable” explanation of observable phenomena. In his recent rational reconstruction of film theory, Warren Buckland quotes Mario Bunge, providing a very apt formulation of this kind of standpoint: “if we want to explain experience we must *rise above it* by analysing it in nonexperiential terms.”¹⁴⁹ Terms that, as they are subtracted from merging with the ordinary of aesthetic experience, put themselves, and the people who use them, to the task of an endless and arid scrutiny. In the end, Althusserian critique did not offer a weapon to change the world, but only a recipe for its

¹⁴⁷ Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism (2),” *Screen* 12, no. 2 (1971): 147.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁴⁹ Mario Bunge, *Philosophy of Science: From Problem to Theory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 453. Quoted in Warren Buckland, *Film Theory: Rational Reconstructions*. (London: Routledge, 2008), 17.

interpretation - and for the necessity of its *perpetual* interpretation.¹⁵⁰ The pedagogical regime indeed aims at keeping alive that power that it attempts to dethrone,¹⁵¹ for, as we have seen, it is in that power that its authority ultimately resides.

So, we can say that the mechanisms of ideology to which Althusser's theory provided a critique and the mechanisms that informed the kind of critical practice that he sustained, have largely the same nature. They both presuppose, as Rancière also argued, that domination is a mechanism of dissimulation that prevents those that are subject to it from knowing its functioning, they both exert their power through the claim that the dominated are dominated because they ignore the laws of domination.¹⁵² This reductive understanding, Rancière continues, has as its first effect to endow the subjects who are supposed to understand these laws with the exalting task of supplying the dominated with their knowledge: theorists can thus present themselves as the heroic agents of the emancipation of those subjects whose independent agency they at the same time negate. Here Theory's discourse of emancipation ends up supporting the authoritarian relations of the pedagogical regime. As Rancière will later argue, it is the master who needs the incapable in order to sustain its authority, not the reverse: by distinguishing between mere apprehension and comprehension, by establishing an inequality and a hierarchy of intelligences, it is the explanatory master who constructs the incapable as one.¹⁵³ Framed in this way, the dominated are subjected to a double regime: that of the forces of domination, and that of the authoritarian appropriation of their autonomous means of emancipation by the agents of institutional critique.

This double regime would in the end be characteristic of a form of bourgeois materialism. If both pre-Marxist and Marxist, dialectical, materialism hold that subjects are products of their social circumstances, and that new subjectivities are products of mutated social circumstances, Rancière wrote, only Marxism maintains that are those who are subjected to given social conditions, and not those who organise them, who actually have the means to change them.¹⁵⁴ This

¹⁵⁰ Rancière, *La Leçon d'Althusser*, 72.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵³ Rancière, *Le Maître Ignorant*, 15.

¹⁵⁴ Rancière, *Leçon*, 30.

prompted a distinction, in more practical terms, between the forms of power that are determined in the organisation of the forces of production from the part of the ideologues, and those that come from the appropriation of the means of production by the workers.¹⁵⁵ And, in the case of cinema: between the demystification of the mechanisms of film ideology from the part of film theorists and filmmakers, versus the forms of agency of emancipated spectators. In this sense, Rancière claimed, Althusserian theory specifically fails to be Marxist:¹⁵⁶ in the measure that it configures itself as an institution whose reason to exist is the *supervision* and the *promotion* of those forces and conditions that theory itself establishes to be necessary for revolutionary change, theory becomes instead authoritarian.¹⁵⁷ As long as social relations and the historical process are held to be knowable only through the mediation of the scholars, Rancière continued, the power of the masses is just the power of those masses that the scholars have instructed.¹⁵⁸ In a similar way we can say that, as long as the power and agency of spectators is reduced to that which is framed and mobilized by external agents - the critic, the ideologue, the engaged filmmaker, a specific social group or an interactive technology - this power comes to negate the spectator's fundamental emancipation.

By means of Althusser's theory of knowledge, a technical division of labour is introduced in the organisation of class struggle, one that ends up justifying a regime of knowledge which is characteristic, Rancière said, of bourgeois philanthropy: on one hand, those who produce ideas, on the other, those who consume them.¹⁵⁹ On one hand, the Althusserian idea according to which masses need the *science* of the intellectuals, on the other, that which was emerging from the events of May '68: that what masses needed was rather their *revolt*.¹⁶⁰ Unsurprisingly, both the 1963 student strikes and the upheavals of May five years later, were negatively interpreted by Althusser, who saw them as an attack against the independence of scientific knowledge.¹⁶¹ Althusser's celebrated ar-

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 161.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 39-40.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 30-31.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 40.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 85.

title on ideological state apparatuses, that acquired such a central importance in 1970s film theory, had been in fact a way of putting into theory (and thus somewhat control) what the student revolts had already spontaneously manifested and contested.¹⁶² In the measure that it maintained that the oppressed needed to be *assisted* in order to achieve their emancipation, Althusserianism configured itself as a philosophy of order,¹⁶³ and, more specifically, as a reversal in the service of order of the discourses of emancipation and subversion: a form of education, in the most detrimental sense, and of Foucauldian discipline. Althusser's understanding of political power, articulated as it was on the coupling of an anonymous subject of theory and its abstract object, eventually failed to take power effects into consideration.¹⁶⁴

All in all, Rancière contends, Althusser remained within a metaphysical conception of ideology (which went, as we will see, hand in hand with his reduction of psychoanalysis to a metapsychology), according to which ideological power is a matter of distorted vision and, on the other side, that scientific truth and political practice are a matter of its rectification and of a demystification of the image. For him, words - and, by extension, concepts, images and texts - were not elements of discursive practices articulated onto other social practices, as in a Foucauldian perspective, but *representations* of existing conditions.¹⁶⁵ On the contrary, Rancière declared, "class struggle in the domain of ideology remains unthinkable as long as we keep with a theory of ideology as a theory of illusion, imprisoned in the three terms of subject, illusion and truth."¹⁶⁶ With Althusserian film theory, in particular, we move into a field in which these three elements can be hypostasized in the very nature of the medium, appearing to be "ingrown" in the contingent reality of spectators, rather than embodied by them: if it is always possible to argue for the capacity of emancipation of the workers and the vocal masses, the very category of spectators was all too easily conceivable, and treated, as the tangible form of the passivity of the masses as such.

¹⁶² Ibid., 136.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 17.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 105.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 103.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 140.

Film experience and the aesthetic regime. From the perspective of Rancière's critique of Althusser, then, the question of the spectator's emancipation becomes not how to go beyond the illusion embedded in the images, but how to go beyond the illusion of the passivity and incapacity by which the position of the spectator is defined. The way to counter this illusion is, for Rancière, to begin from an apparently unreasonable assumption: that all forms of the experience and understanding of film are an equal expression of the same intelligence and fundamental emancipation.¹⁶⁷ Spectatorship becomes in this perspective something more than a position, and something more than a set of practices: it can be taken as that dimension through which the space of film becomes a space of sharing, rather than merely as a part in a distribution of roles within this space. In this sense, spectatorship would be less the politics of a part of spectators, less the articulation of different positions and modalities of film experiencing, than the empty dimension that makes the distribution of the parts possible in the first place. If we take Rancière's definition of politics - that is, not a form of distribution of power, but the struggle to bring a common scene into existence - spectatorship would then name both the ground and the aim of a politics of film. This, of course, does not erase the import of specific struggles for the redistribution of power within the space of film, it rather defines the dimension of spectatorship as the specific scope of a non-authoritarian struggle for equality. Spectatorship would be more than a practice, then, but rather an aesthetic regime of understanding cinema as an art and as a social phenomenon, one that exists precisely in the faltering of its hierarchical and intelligible articulations.

For Rancière, the aesthetic defines a third form of the effectiveness of art: neither the one that rests in the communication of a message, nor the one that consists of a purely pre-discursive mimesis, but one that exists first of all as a contingent and embodied encounter with the film and in the extension of its potential for signification.

“Cinema is an art in that it is a world, in that its shots and

¹⁶⁷ I chose to address in this work the spectator's emancipation mostly in relation to the practice of professional theory, rather than in relation to the classic counterpart of the spectatorial agency - “dominant” cinema - precisely to foreground how it does not correspond just to the spectator's potential for subversive reading, but, more fundamentally, to its capacity to define what *counts* as a subversive reading.

effects, disappearing in the instant of projection, have to be carried on, transformed by the memories and the words that make cinema exist as a shared world well beyond the material reality of its projections.”¹⁶⁸

In other words, cinema can be thought of as an art primarily in relation to the ungraspable and embodied dimension of film spectatorship. From this perspective, film experience becomes something radically different than an intelligible relation between a viewer and the images on the screen, it cannot be reduced to an object of discursive mapping, and rather exists as expression of an aesthetic space and of a political tension.

For Rancière, the aesthetic regime is at the same time a specific historical configuration of practices and ideas about art, emerging in the late Nineteenth Century,¹⁶⁹ and the regime of understanding of art and artistic experience that made it possible.¹⁷⁰ In the aesthetic regime, the distinction between thought and aesthetic experience, between the work and its experience, between the ordinary of life and the extraordinary of art, is reduced, bridged, if not outrightly abolished.

“First, the autonomy staged by the aesthetic regime of art is not that of the work of art but of a mode of experience. Second the aesthetic experience’ is one of heterogeneity, such that, for the subject of that experience, it is also the dismissal of a certain autonomy. Third, the object of that experience is aesthetic’, insofar as it is not, or at least not only, art.”¹⁷¹

The aesthetic is not a property of the film, we can say, but rather a form of spectatorship: one that involves the subject’s heteronomy and foregrounds - in the reflexivity of its performance - the very problematicity of the distinction between art and non-art, the essentially political tension between aesthetic

¹⁶⁸ “Le cinéma est un art pour autant qu’il est un monde, que ces plans et effets qui s’évanouissent dans l’instant de la projection ont besoin d’être prolongés, transformés par le souvenir et la parole qui font consister le cinéma comme un monde partagé bien au-delà de la réalité matérielle de ses projections.” Rancière, *Écarts du Cinéma*, 13. Translation mine.

¹⁶⁹ Jacques Rancière, *L’Inconscient Ésthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), 12-14.

¹⁷⁰ Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis* (Paris: Galilée, 2011), 11.

¹⁷¹ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 116-117.

experience and its representation. Aesthetic experience also corresponds to a tendency and a potential that everyone has for moments of contemplative drifting,¹⁷² of a Schillerian *play drive*,¹⁷³ which, as we will see, can be connected with the psychoanalytic idea of free association.

In this way, the aesthetic can be seen to become an expression of the underlying equality of all beings and also of the dissensus that is at the source of language and signification. An equality and a dissensus that, specifically in relation to cinema, assume the form of a work of de-figuration, of a reading which is always already a reading against the material grain of the image and, as it were, always already the composition of a film with the elements of another.¹⁷⁴

According to Rancière, cinema has a peculiar relation with the aesthetic regime: apparently its embodiment, with its utterly passive, impassible, and indifferent recording instrument and its boundless potential for hearing and expressing the mute speech of things, cinema was however quickly transformed in the most faithful guardian of the old art of stories and representations.¹⁷⁵ We will return on the relationship of cinema with the aesthetic regime in the next chapter. Here, to conclude, I would like to contrast the freedom of interpretation which is granted to the spectator in a semiological description of film experience, with the aesthetic and dissensual dimension of spectatorship.

For, indeed, it is not that authoritarian theories of film entirely negate the ability of spectators to read a film in an autonomous way: it is, mainly, that they frame this capacity as a reflection of the apparatus or the text and, more generally, as a function of the intelligibility of the spectator's experience. Umberto Eco formulated this principle in a clear way in relation to the reader of the literary text: there should be a distinction, he claimed, between the "free use" of a text and its "reading", which is essential to the epistemology and the method of semiology.¹⁷⁶ While interpretation rests in the mapping that the text makes of the possible meanings that an ideal reader can find in it, free use names instead a reinvention of the text that transports it beyond its

¹⁷² Rancière, *Le Spectateur Émancipé*, 68.

¹⁷³ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 116.

¹⁷⁴ Jacques Rancière, *La Fable Cinématographique* (Paris: Galilée, 2001), 9.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Umberto Eco (2010/1979) *Lector in Fabula: La Cooperazione Interpretativa nei Testi Narrativi*. Milano: Bompiani, p. 59.

foreseeable meaning - in fact producing a novel text, and thus transforming the experience of the reader into something radically incommensurable to reading. In his very choice of the term “use”, Eco is putting this kind of activity beyond the “proper” use of a book - which is reading it, and nothing more. Use is not necessarily ignored by semiology - it can even be valued by semioticians like Eco that are also writers - but is never articulated together with the epistemology of language codes and with the logic of textual interpretation. If the reader that makes *use* of a text can clearly be mapped (mapped out, in fact), it is clear that the text that is produced by this use, remains unintelligible through the hermeneutic instruments of semiology, until it is given other form than that of the reader’s embodied experience. For example, we can understand use through fan fiction, but the embodied and creative involvement of the reader or of the spectator with a book or a film that naturally preceded it, is not *per se* observable. Use is not an “object” that semiology can study, then, but rather a dimension of this “object” that remains incommensurable to objectification.

By the distinction that Eco proposes, a certain order is brought in the empire of signs: the reader and, in our case, the spectator, is granted a certain, intelligible, intelligence, and a graspable agency, over the text. But to the open text still does not correspond an emancipated reader - precisely because its agency as a reader is made into a recognisable part and a manageable principle of *textuality*. Through the *mise en discours* of free use that semiology necessarily attempts, through the very articulation between reading and use that it effects, the meaning of the text becomes available to the semiotician as a more complete object, but the experience of reading and signification remains always a step beyond its grasp.

Also from a political point of view, spectatorship points to something else than the tangible representations of the spectator’s emancipation. Both in respect to semiology and in respect to ideology - to put it bluntly - the exclusion of *use* is the exclusion of dissensus. The agency of the spectator should not be seen exclusively as a strategy of “reading”, in other words, but rather as the emergence within film experience of something ungraspable for both the spectators and the technologies of its normative regulation, something radically incommensurable to the principles of its understanding. As we will see, it is in this sense that “personal”, idiosyncratic, readings of films can be seen to acquire, precisely through their utter contingency, a certain universal theoretical

value. Consensus, on the contrary, corresponds to the harmony and intelligibility of a worldview which is entirely constructed on the mastery of interpretation and explication, and that proceeds from the the principles of intelligibility defined within dominant discourses to embodied experience and the contingent phenomenal world, rather than the other way around.

Without taking into account something incommensurable to the instruments and the mind-frames of linguistic theory and ideological articulation, the tension animating spectatorship is, in fact, lost, and either resolves in the falsely reassuring affirmation of the always already resistant presence of viewers as “real spectators”, or in the totalitarian image of complete and seamless ideological determination. On the contrary, we would find a different way of the understanding and the experiencing of art, as Rancière suggest, in the blurring of use and interpretation, proper and improper meaning, open and closed texts, which would be characteristic of the aesthetic regime. In this sense, dissensual is not what is *recognisable* as a subversive reading, but rather that reading which is not recognisable, or acceptable, as such: an improper use, then, an act of signification that refuses the very distribution of meaning into subversive and consensual, and troubles the principles of this distribution. Dissensus is not the expression of the under-represented, misrepresented, or the irrepresentable, but rather what is incommensurable to a given regime of understanding of film experience.

Aesthetics, indeed, is a matter of a conflict at the source of *logos*. We find the concept of *aisthesis* in Rancière’s *La Méésentente*, opposed to *hexis* in the context of Plato’s definition of *politeia* - of the politics of citizenship.¹⁷⁷ In this context, it is the quality of those who can only understand language, and not exercise the agency of speaking beings. In this sense, precisely, the spectator of apparatus theory is a slave: in that it does not speak independently, but it is rather spoken, and in that it constitutes a textual subjectivity, instead of being the agent of the subjective dimension of the text. The term *aisthesis* is rediscovered then by Rancière as the radical aspect of the regime of art that takes its name, as a form of active contemplation, or passive agency, that in fact dissolves the principle of their distinction. Emancipation, Rancière wrote

¹⁷⁷ Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 38.

in *The Nights of Labour*, is the “thinking of whose not destined to think.”¹⁷⁸ Not those who cannot think, but those who do not possess - or, rather, to whom is not recognised - the agency and the autonomy of thinking. If domination is expressed in the subdivision and distribution of the social space in parts, in a policing of subjects and practices, political emancipation takes place, then, in the struggle for the recognition of a voice as meaningful - of an image as significant and a look as signifying. The struggle for emancipation is a struggle for the emergence of *logos* from a place which is incommensurable to it. *Logos* is not simply the spoken word, but the recognition that is given to it - it is already dialogue, misunderstanding, and dissent.

If we like, we can picture the history of spectatorship as a long road, not toward emancipation, but toward a more comprehensive *discursive mapping* of the spectator’s fundamental emancipation: from the original scene which constructed the spectators as visual ignorants, reacting to the image as to a thing - the audience fleeing from the Lumières’ locomotive - to the recognition (and the policing) not only of the spectator’s ability to comprehend, but of its potential for an aesthetic use of film experience. It is fundamentally in the way the very emancipation, contingency, and “waywardness” of film spectatorship is interpreted and regulated, in fact - not in its outright repression - that its normative regulation eventually takes place.

As final remark, one must not confuse the means of expressing the spectators’ emancipation, with the fundamental emancipation that characterises spectatorship and aesthetic experience. The availability of new technologies, for instance, the extended accessibility of visual and social media, and their increased integration in our everyday lives, has, of course, extended the spectator’s means of representing its experience, and expanded the modes and forms of this experiencing, but it is not in itself the origin of the possibility for such representation. The expansion of the visible, in other words, does not necessarily correspond to a more egalitarian experience of the visual, and the proliferation of technologies of interactivity does not necessarily bring about greater agency of the spectator. On the contrary, both must be seen primarily as forms of police in relation to the forms of emancipation that spectators always already have, and that basically correspond to their embodied experience of film. In

¹⁷⁸ Rancière, *The Nights of Labour*, xii.

this sense, the user of interactive technologies is precisely the opposite of the subject making a free use of them - in other words, the very idea of interactivity already entails a form of discursive hegemony.

Contingency

He reads a part, or a piece of it, then stops, only to resume reading another piece later, and, as so often happens, he starts from the middle or from the end, then backtracks to the beginning. Quite often he'll read a couple of segments then toss the book aside, not because he has lost interest in it, but because something else came to his mind. [...] Might not just a phone call, or a fly, interrupt his reading precisely at the point where all the individual parts unite in a dramatic resolution?

Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*.

The world of film is a flow of random events involving both human and inanimate objects.

Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*.

Contingency and film theory.

In different ways, all major critiques and revisions of the 1970s paradigm of psychoanalytic film theory are concerned with reclaiming the contingency of film experience and cinematic subjectivity, against the transcendental position assigned to the spectator by the theory of the cinematographic apparatus. A revaluing of the historicity, of the situatedness of the spectator's experience, and of its embodied implication with the film is characteristic of a broad range of studies and perspectives, from David Bordwell's "case" for cognitivism and

its “contingent universals,”¹⁷⁹ to Vivian Sobchack’s situated encounter between the intentionality of the spectator and that of the film, from Laura Mark’s haptic and synaesthetic forms of film experience, to Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit’s idea of spectatorship as an act of phenomenological illumination - just to name a few. Even Žižek, one of the most “Theoretical” critical theorists and film writers, addresses the ideological subject, as we will see, in terms of its (of course, “radical”) contingency. Indeed, no one can comfortably negate that the conditions of cinematic signification and of film production, marketing, and reception, are, to some degree, situated and discursive, and no one can safely affirm that they correspond instead to fixed features of cinematic technology and the human psyche, entirely independent from their specific historical and cultural coordinates. Taken in this broad sense, the idea of contingency offers little or no controversy, and little or no interest. It would be relatively easy, in this perspective, to define contingency simply as that which the apparatus theory of spectatorship lacked, and thus proceed to map this field of contingencies at the same time using any finding obtained through this approach for revising, or subverting, the more and normative claims of Theory.

Not unlike the notion of spectatorship, however, contingency is more useful for the kind of synthesis that it allows and for the heterogeneous objects and perspectives that it is able to bring together. It is then primarily in the understanding and the use that is made of this fundamental ground of contingency that disagreement can be found,¹⁸⁰ together with the possibility of a significant discussion. In this chapter, I will try to present contingency as a paradoxical concept - one that tests the limits of the rational reconstruction of spectatorship - without relinquishing its fundamental link with the materiality of film experience and with the emancipation and heteronomy of the subject.

The field of experiences and ideas that contingency brings together is vast, complex, and heterogeneous. First of all, contingency can be seen to address the various levels of historical, cultural and subjective specificity of spectatorship as a social phenomenon and as an aesthetic practice. At the same time, it refers to the embodied and bodily nature of film experience and to the subjectivity of the subject’s experience - to put it simply, to the fact that no spectator can have

¹⁷⁹ David Bordwell, “A Case for Cognitivism,” *Iris* 9 (1989), 22.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

exactly the same experience of the same film. By this, contingency also points to the potential for openness of film signification (or, rather, to the impossibility of its closure). In this sense, the contingency of film experience would be defined by the capacity of the spectator to make use of the film, and to understand and make use of its very position as a spectator. Contingency also evokes the particular kind of reality that the cinematic medium is apparently capable of capturing, the minute texture of visual, aural, and kinetic details that the cinematic medium can record, and the very materiality of the medium's images. The concept of contingency relates to aesthetic practice and to scientific practice, in some ways bringing them together: both can indeed be seen to explore and give shape to a world of empirical and phenomenal contingencies in order to establish their meaning or further their significance in relation to the human subject. As it refers to what cannot be foreseen or controlled - to what, most radically, cannot be *observed* - contingency also presents a particular connection with the unconscious, with the sudden manifestation of ideas and feelings and to the lack of unity of the psychoanalytic subject. Finally, contingent is also the status of spectatorship and theory themselves, as embodied and discursive practices. By troubling the distinction that authoritarian regimes of knowing and looking establish between the subjective and the objective, between the masterful subject and the intelligible object themselves, contingency would name, then, the tension that animates *praxis* - that is, a non-authoritarian dimension of spectatorship and theory.

Contingency should be seen more as a tension that inhabits knowing and experiencing, than as a quality of an object or a circumstance, then.¹⁸¹ The idea of contingent "objects", indeed, or of a delimited "field" of contingency, is already part of a reductive framing of contingency. Generally speaking, this framing - typical of the discourse of empiricism and, arguably, of structuralism as well - entails the idea that phenomena are tendentially contingent, while processes, structures, and their understanding are tendentially more transcendental. In this sense, the contingent phenomenon would exist as the counterpart - as a *product* - of its (quasi-)transcendental systematisation in terms of more or less universal or fundamental structures and laws. Seen from the lenses of its systematisation, then, contingency becomes a quality of the phenomenal world,

¹⁸¹ If, in the following pages, I will write about "contingent" events, what I mean are actually events in which this tension becomes manifest in some of its respects.

rather than a tension traversing our relation to it. On the contrary, the challenge is to see how contingency insists in this very relation and systematisation, and thus to address this further level of contingency in our understanding and in our relation with the world.

Žižek writes, referring to Jean Claude Milner, that universal contingency is “not opposed to causal necessity, but functions as its inherent obverse: causal necessity works in the guise of rules which regulate the endless contingent’ - meaningless - interaction of elements)”¹⁸² - or, to the very least, our understanding of this interaction. There is a slight, but crucial, difference, Žižek argues, between taking the problem of contingency as being simply the relation between contingent phenomena and essential explanations (like in the case of a universality conflated with metaphysics or, arguably, in certain versions of the empirical, mid-level, “problem-solving” approach)¹⁸³ and as being the historicity of the very principles that structure the relation between contingency and its systematisation. A difference, in Žižek words, between historicism and historicity.¹⁸⁴

Contingent, in the end, is that which does not derive from logical or metaphysical necessity: that which happens causally, but not what happens inevitably as a result of an immanent and inalterable structure or law. A certain degree of contingency is, then, inescapable: the very idea of knowledge, one could say, implies contingency as its raw material. If contingency, then, already names the productive gap between phenomenal reality and its understanding, it is in how this gap is conceptualised and in how this conceptualisation invests the spectator’s agency and experience that contingency finds a significant scope in film theory.

In the case of film experience, then, contingency should be seen less as a space in which different modes of spectatorship are articulated, than as an aspect of the tension that, in Mayne’s understanding, informs spectatorship itself. The scope of contingency corresponds then to the tension between the radical subjectiveness and materiality of film experience and its experiential and dis-

¹⁸² Žižek, *The Frigate of Real Tears*, 100.

¹⁸³ Bordwell, “A Case for Cognitivism,” 12.

¹⁸⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!,” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2000), 112.

cursive, theoretical, systematisation. On one hand, we have the fact that both spectatorship and theory always take place in a specific context and that they involve subjects and objects that have unique features and a complexity that is never entirely graspable. On the other, we have spectatorship and theory's driving desire and somewhat inescapable function of trying to make sense of this contingency through concepts and experience. To put it in a paradoxical way, we can say that contingency is essentially our contingent relation to contingency - that is, to the very contingency of this relation. The recursivity of the concept is indeed what makes it palatable to non-authoritarian theories of knowledge, because the concept eludes its own grasp (more difficult, however, is to make a non-authoritarian use of this kind of meta-theoretical arguments). More concretely, contingency refers to the singularity of the conditions of experiencing - not merely to embodiment, but to the fact that embodied experience is not entirely reducible to intelligibility. In this sense, contingency can be taken as that tension that authoritarian forms of knowing and looking downplay - or, rather, that they address in order to better reduce it within their grasp - and that less authoritarian forms of experience instead attempt to address in its own terms.

If we say that contingency is an aspect of the tension that animates spectatorship, theories of film will differ in that they give different accounts of how this contingency is made sense of, or not, and for what purpose. Cognitivist, as well as metapsychological, approaches to film spectatorship take the passage from the contingency of the spectator's encounter with film to its systematisation at the level of meaning and discourse to be governed by quasi-transcendental and objectifiable processes: cognition and imaginary misrecognition, for instance. Now, whether it is clearly possible to give very different accounts of what these basic acts of cognition and misrecognition are, and of what is their significance for an ideological and aesthetic understanding of film, limiting our description of film experience to these processes alone would amount precisely to disregarding the issue of contingency: it would mean reducing the tension between these structures and processes and their radical ground of specificity and situatedness. Our focus on free association and embodied experience will instead attempt to show how the very process of systematisation of contingent experience is in itself sensuous, conflictual, and somewhat erratic. In fact, the tension to which contingency refers is what makes it possible to think and experience film in the first

place. In order to experience a film as a film, indeed, the subject must have a more or less systematic understanding of a what a film is, experientially as well as discursively, both in relation to the discourses that distribute the space of film in terms of positions and codes but also, as we have seen, in relation to the contingent encounters that make up the subject's unique history of spectatorial acts.

Contingency and universality. Generally speaking - only apparently in a contradictory or paradoxical way - a reduction of the contingency of film experience, film theory and subjectivity, also determines a reduction of the scope of their universality. By refusing to address contingency, or by choosing to address it only at a certain level or, so to speak, only up to a certain point, the claims that a theory of spectatorship makes on the universality of the spectator's subject position become increasingly problematic. These claims can take three main forms. First of all that of an identification of universality with metaphysics:¹⁸⁵ which is actually, in the case of apparatus theory, a reduction of the scope of universality to the formulation of an ahistorical, metapsychological, and ideological model of spectatorship. Quite clearly, this conflation is intrinsically normative, in a literal sense, as it is expressed through the articulation of laws, and also in the sense that it reinforces an authoritarian regime of knowledge and discursive regulation. In this way, the universality of spectatorship would be subsumed not by its transcendentalism, but, instead, by its normative discursive definition.

Since no normative description can be complete and absolute, however, and exist beyond its own historical context and discursive coordinates, in turn, we find a second form of reduction of contingency and universality: the issue of hegemony, or of the conflict between competing, particularised, notions of universality.¹⁸⁶ For instance, if the universality of spectatorship can be thought, in relation to the spectrum of existing forms of spectatorship, as a project aiming at their progressive inclusion in a more and more encompassing articulation of

¹⁸⁵ See Judith Butler, "Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 11. For a discussion of the "lure" of metaphysics in film theory, see Richard Allen, *Projecting Illusion: Film Spectatorship and the Impression of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 47-80.

¹⁸⁶ Ernesto Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 50-51.

the universality of spectatorship itself (a liberal, multi-culturalist project), it is also true that this idea of universality is always already an expression of a contingent socio-political scenario and that it can thus be seen to represent the interests of a specific group. We only have particular versions of universality, then, that nevertheless (it cannot be otherwise) still claim to be universally valid: hegemony is in fact inextricable from the issue of universality as such. Indeed, hegemony expresses itself first and foremost by stating that the dynamic between particular and universal is not subject to contingency.¹⁸⁷

In other words, not accounting for the contingency of the relationship between contingent conditions and universality themselves is a way of objectifying the former and reducing the latter within the discursive universe, or the *ethos*, of a particular class or category of subjects that, by this, becomes “transparent”. On the contrary, there is no possible “transparent” way of affirming universality beyond its particular historical and cultural situation. In a classic example, by investigating the specificity of female or homosexual spectatorship, feminist and queer theories of film foreground the contingency of cinematic subjectivity in such a way as to rescue it from its male heterosexual, particularised, universality - by this not only allowing new forms of film experience to be addressed, but also questioning the very principles by which subject positioning is lived and theorised in the first place. Feminist, queer, and post-colonial criticisms of apparatus theory can all be seen to attack hegemony at this level, as they attempt to make more evident the particularisation inherent to the pretended universality of the subject of the apparatus, as well as of the subject of apparatus theory. At the same time - and this problem is endemic to cultural studies - a further contingency and particularisation of this very criticism and of the position from which it is performed is always at hand, and constantly open for further analysis. This fact becomes especially evident through an interdisciplinary approach: post-colonial criticism of capitalist dynamics, for instance, or a queer critique of post-colonial studies, just to make two examples, are more likely to expose those transparent categories and normative assumptions that structure their reciprocal fields.

Finally, at a third level, one could imagine that the universality of spectatorship consists in its potential to function as an empty position, that can be

¹⁸⁷ Judith Butler, “Competing Universalities,” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 163.

occupied by all sorts of subjects and that, in this way, would stand as the condition of possibility of historical, cultural and subjective contingency themselves. This does not entail a transcendence of contingency, but rather a foregrounding of a certain tension within the process of universalisation and within the very position of the universal. A conception of universality that can be seen to combine Rancière's *part de sans-part* and Ernesto Laclau's understanding of universality. "*The universal is an empty place,*" Laclau writes, "*a void which can be filled only by the particular, but which, through its very emptiness, produces a series of effects of structuration/destructuration of social relations.*"¹⁸⁸ In a similar way, we can take the spectator's position to be a radically contingent one, opaque rather than transparent to its systematisation, and at the same time, as a position that would be hospitable to the emergence of dissensus.

Radical contingency. In this perspective, Žižek proposes that we see contingency as a relation between, on one side, contingent phenomena and the existing variety of historical and cultural objects and conditions, and, on the other side, as a radical contingency which would be in turn the foundation of the very idea of universality. In his view, radical contingency would be the paradoxical, minimal ahistorical kernel of historicism.

"Every version of historicism," Žižek argues, "relies on a minimal ahistorical' formal framework defining the terrain within which the open and endless game of contingent inclusions/exclusions, substitutions, renegotiations, displacements, and so on, takes place."¹⁸⁹

"Historicity," Žižek had written two years earlier, elucidating the relation between contingency and discourse,

"Is not the zero-level state of things secondarily obfuscated by ideological fixations and naturalising misrecognitions; historicity itself, the space of contingent discursive constructions, must be sustained through an effort, assumed, regained again and again."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Ernesto Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony," 51.

¹⁸⁹ Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism?," 112.

¹⁹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London, New York: Verso, 2008), 67.

The same is also true, in a Lacanian perspective, of ideology and subject positioning in relation to the Real: “when Lacan emphatically asserts that there is no big other [...],” Žižek writes, “his point is precisely that there is no a priori formal structural schema exempt from historical contingencies - there are only contingent, fragile, inconsistent configurations.”¹⁹¹

We can then understand the paradox of radical contingency precisely as a tension between the historical and the transcendental - or, rather, as something internal to what is historically posited as transcendental. Something that, however, can never be resolved by leaning on either side, so to speak: neither by reaching some “truly essential” coordinate of description or interpretation, nor by dismissing the radical contingency that traverses every articulation of cultural and historical contingencies. In this sense, the contingency of spectatorship would not be intrinsically opposed to the ideological or discursive dimension of which apparatus theory provides one possible description, but rather be a constitutional aspect of this discursive dimension, one of the elements of the tension by which the position of spectator is established. Since one could say that our very perception of contingency, and the way particular spectator positions are articulated in discourse is itself contingent, radical contingency would then name the fact that there is no solution to the problems of spectatorship that is not also a reproduction and propagation of a fundamental conflict. “It is the very focus,” Žižek writes from a Lacanian perspective, “on the notion of Real as impossible [internal limit of symbolisation] that reveals the ultimate contingency, fragility (and thus changeability) of every symbolic constellation that pretends to serve as the a priori horizon of the process of symbolization.”¹⁹²

Adapting one of Žižek’s claims, we can thus say that spectatorship names a deadlock to which each contingent performance of spectatorship already constitutes a tentative, partial, solution.¹⁹³ With this definition, on one side, we do not lose the theoretical frame, the radical contingency, nor the universal ideal that a Marxist and psychoanalytic film theory can sustain; on the other, we are able to address the spectator as a situated agent of ideological, and cinematic, power.

¹⁹¹ Slavoj Žižek, “Holding the Place,” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 310.

¹⁹² Slavoj Žižek, “Da Capo Senza Fine,” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 221.

¹⁹³ Wright and Žižek, *Manufacturing Reality*.

The idea of a spectator who is thoroughly determined and informed by ideology, a purely consensual subject, is, I think (other than a recurrent misconstruction of which it is often made instrumental use in the debate between antagonistic theories of film), fundamentally an authoritarian *dispositif* of intelligibility: it makes the spectator's position legible beyond its contingency, and beyond the implication of the subject of theory in its construction. On the other hand, a theory of radical contingency has nothing beyond this very contingency to *assert* - the rest of its significance belongs to a different regime of knowledge.

Radical contingency would correspond to the founding lack of the Lacanian subject, or, in other terms, to that otherness to oneself, to the heteronomy that comes from the intersubjectivity and the discursivity of subject formation and from the unconscious dimension of experience. It is then this radical form of contingency - a constantly renewed encounter with the contingent, and not its metapsychological systematisation in psychoanalytic theory - that would constitute the specificity of psychic experience and provide a connection between analysis and aesthetics. In the same way, indeed, radical contingency would be a way to address the heterogeneity that characterises language and signification, and that we have discussed in the previous chapter as the site of the emergence of the *logos* from the point of view of Rancière and Pontalis. Dissensus and political subjectivation would be, in this sense, first of all radically contingent events, and it would be precisely through this contingency that a discourse on universality would become possible.

Contingency and the psychoanalytic subject. Psychoanalysis, Žižek argues, finds its specificity against other forms of empiricism precisely in its relation to the singularity of contingent events and to the radical contingency of subjectivity that it envisages. Psychoanalytic epistemology, indeed, involves looking for the exception to understand the norm, for symptoms in order to understand the structures and basic functioning of the psyche, for embodied *use*, in order to understand meaning-making, and so on. Psychoanalysis presupposes that singular contingency, as it emerges within the fabric of our language and experience, holds a particular significance. And it also involves a jump from the

singular to the universal, bypassing the mid-level of the particular.¹⁹⁴ If this can work, it is because there is no universal that is not itself contingent. So if, on one hand, the singular contingency of the case study elevated to the essential expression of a quasi-transcendental form of experience would never satisfy the criteria for empirical validation, on the other hand, the kind of universality which can be obtained through research in mid-level contingency would never satisfy the more radical level of universality that radical contingency suggests.¹⁹⁵ Two ways of dealing with contingency correspond then to two mutually incommensurable epistemologies and, more importantly perhaps, two kinds of relation to conceptual mastery. In other words, while instrumental reason is concerned with our ability to foresee and control contingent events, psychoanalysis would rather be concerned with our ability to encounter the unexpected.¹⁹⁶

The fact that the side of cognition is generally aligned with the formation of consensual meaning and the coding of consensual modes of signification does not put, however, singular contingency and the play of the signifier outside of the dimension of discursive power: the contingent, I think, should not be taken as the external supplement of the discursive, but rather as a particular level of discursivity. In the end, radical contingency constitutes a precondition for the establishment of the field of discourse, much like the action of turning back in the Althusserian scene of interpellation was at the same time made in implicit observance of the law and as an expression of independent subjective agency. Why is that the subject as the ground of agency does not become automatically an effect of regulatory power, if not because of the polysemy and contingency of discursive power itself, and of the radical inconsistency of subjectivity - both of which are an expression of Žižekian radical contingency? On the side of the subject, it is precisely in the eccentricity, in the compositeness and heteronomy of its subjectivity, in the fact that subjectivation has no centre and no stable point of cohesion, that the autonomy of the subject from discursive determination resides.

“Even more radically,” Žižek writes, “the very basic constituents of the subject’s identity - the signifiers around which his/her sym-

¹⁹⁴ Žižek, “Da Capo Senza Fine,” 241.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 240.

¹⁹⁶ Pontalis, *Après Freud*, 114.

bolic universe has crystallized itself, the fundamental fantasy which provides the co-ordinates of his/her desire - result from a series of contingent traumatic encounters.”¹⁹⁷

The psychoanalytic subject would then exist, as in Mladen Dolar’s understanding, where ideological interpellation fails.¹⁹⁸ A failure of interpellation that, again, does not mean an absence of discourse - the psychoanalytic subject is not unrelated to ideology but, precisely, it is related to it in terms of ideology’s failure to determine the subject entirely. Subjectivity would thus be the internal limit of interpellation. And ideology would be in turn a way of coping with the impossibility of becoming a subject - in the classical sense of a rational, self-centred, and self-sufficient being. If it is true that ideology finds more power in its alliance with the classical notion of the subject, then, it is not by claiming the agency or the emancipation of a *rational* and unitary subject that the order and the effects of ideology can be countered, but, on the contrary, only by imagining an agency that originates from a failure of mastery, and resides in the subject’s contingent alterity.

That the subject is never entirely determined by ideological institutions, within the scene of interpellation, and that it is never *proper* and master of itself are, I think, one and the same thing: a recognition of radical contingency and the Rancièrian assumption of fundamental equality, together, have the effect of making the distinction between passivity and activity collapse. So that, as Rancière argued against Foucault, the dimension of discursive agency does not exhaust that of politics, and, on the reverse, the dimension of politics is always found as the intrinsic conflict between itself and the forces of police. Neither one essentially overpowers the other: subjectivity remains discursive and the subject, on the other hand, is never dispossessed of its emancipation and of its political potential and responsibility. From within film theory, Krauer’s thought appears to have a certain affinity with this understanding of contingency: for him, Bratu Hansen writes, “film experience *undercuts* the still returning illusion of the sovereign, self-identical, subject. For the materiality film engages is not least that of the spectator,” which is involved with film as a

¹⁹⁷ Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears*, 100.

¹⁹⁸ Mladen Dolar, “Beyond Interpellation,” *Qui Parle* 6, no. 2 (1993): 77-78.

corporeal, and contingent, being.¹⁹⁹

The flesh blanket: levels of contingency.

Having outlined the scope of contingency in its general relation to historicism and historicity, universality and the psychoanalytic subject, I think it would be useful now to start over, as it were, attempting a more “positive” articulation of contingency, to see how it can be used to describe more concretely some aspects of spectatorship and film experience. So, beginning with a formal definition: “contingent” would be that which is “neither impossible nor necessary; i.e., both possible and non-necessary. The modal property of being contingent is attributable to a proposition, state of affairs, event, or – more debatably – an object.”²⁰⁰ In this sense, as we have already suggested, contingency individuates the criticism that underlies most of the reactions against apparatus theory: that the structures and dynamics of film experience are certainly materialistic, but should not be normative, mechanistic, nor behaviouristic. That the experience of the spectator is clearly *discursive*, but not discursively *determined* (at least, not entirely and not in a way that can be entirely known). That there is always, in other words, a space of freedom from necessity, of possibility, of variety, particularity, unforeseeability and uncertainty to spectatorship that ideological institutions and discursive norms cannot repress nor regulate completely. Finally, that apparatus theory failed to take the effects of this contingency into account.

From the point of view of authority and knowledge, then, contingent is basically what escapes normative theoretical formulation. Contingency can be taken indeed as the internal and the external limit of the authority of theory. Internal, since, as we have repeatedly affirmed, theory is itself a contingent discursive practice. External, since theories confront themselves with a world that is incommensurable to the principles of its intelligibility.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 262. Emphasis added.

²⁰⁰ Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 181.

²⁰¹ By this I do not mean that the phenomenal world, or our experience of it, are unintelligible, only that they cannot be reduced entirely to what can be made intelligible about them.

Contingency is, so to speak, akin to a certain nominalist vertigo, an unarrestable, never ending (some would say inconclusive), game of ramification and recursivity: each context presupposes another context, and there is positively no limit to the degree of situatedness that can be that can be found in any given situation or to the connections that stem from, and inform, any given experience. At the same time, over this microcosm of contingent experiences, looms the shadow of a panoptical, “hyper-theoretical” and panoptical, fantasy - the fantasy, that is, of registering and preserving each and every contingent nuance and detail of our experience and accounting for every minimal movement of the world and for every shift and faltering of our perception. Jorge Luis Borges gave us a great fictional example of this aspect of contingency - a universe of details that, once perfectly registered and remembered, would also correspond to the collapse of the symbolic - in his short story *Funes the Memorious*.²⁰² In the story, the peasant Funes, after a fall from horseback, finds himself paralysed and endowed with a limitless power of memory and perception. He becomes, if we like, an all-seeing and all-remembering, but completely inactive, spectator of the world in its normally ungraspable full material contingency. The power he acquires makes any systematisation of experiencing entirely futile: not only is he able to recall every object that he has ever seen, but he has a distinct memory of every different perception that, in time, he had of it. He does not need numbers any more: for all he cares, every number might as well have a different *name*. Trying to talk with Funes, the narrator of the short story is confronted with a radically incommensurable logic and form of experience:

“In place of seven thousand thirteen, [Funes] would say (for example) *Maximo Perez*; in place of seven thousand fourteen, *The Train* [...] In lieu of five hundred, he would say *nine*. Each word had a particular sign, a species of mark; the last were very complicated... I attempted to explain that this rhapsody of unconnected terms was precisely the contrary of a system of enumeration. I said that to say three hundred and sixty-five was to say three hundreds, six tens, five units: an analysis which does not exist in such numbers as *The Negro Timoteo* or *The Flesh Blanket*. Funes did not

²⁰² Jorge Luis Borges “Funes the Memorious,” in *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1962).

understand me, or did not wish to understand me.”²⁰³

In a way, Funes does not even need to remember - that is, if we intend by memory a process of association, disassociation, condensation and displacement of memory traces and of their representations - because his whole experience is always already present to him as an all-comprehensive archive. At the same time, however, acting becomes for him not only pointless, but impossible.²⁰⁴

At its most paradoxical level, a thorough account of contingency approaches this kind of boundless nominalism, and by the same token, evokes its shadow - one of a disembodied and disembodying reification of memory and experience. Indeed, such “memoriousness”, such hypertrophy of memory and perception, could be seen as one of the founding fantasies of the photographic and cinematic image and to correspond in particular to their most direct uses (literally and metaphorically) as instruments of authoritarian discursive police: disciplinary observation and the archive. But, in this, they would arguably be the opposite of theory - if we take theory to constitute an aspect of experience and a form of sharing, that is. The story of Funes suggests in the end that an integral inscription of contingency in fact corresponds to a fantasy of mastery: when we imagine a more embodied memory or film experience, and less authoritarian uses of cinematic technologies, we do not refer to the kind of incorruptible memory and boundless perception with which Funes was cursed, but rather, on the reverse, to the everyday forgetfulness of human embodied memory, to the discursivity and contingency of our lived-experience.

This discursive contingency can be subdivided in three levels, of which the first two have a diffused and widely shared use, and the third is perhaps more relevant to the perspective of this work: historical contingency, cultural contingency and singular, or subjective, contingency. Cultural contingency, albeit under different names, is clearly a central focus of contemporary film theory, especially that which finds in sociology and, indeed, cultural studies, its companion disciplinary field. I would reserve the term cultural contingency for referring to all those discourses that assume a variation of meaning and or sig-

²⁰³ Ibid., 113.

²⁰⁴ For a discussion of this story in relation to memory, see Pontalis, *Avant*, 37-41. For a further analysis of the story in relation to media and embodied memory, see Carlo Comanducci, “Forgetting to be Human: Embodied Memory and Memorious Media.” (Gdansk: University of Gdansk Press, forthcoming).

nification that depend on the characteristics of specifically identifiable social groups within a given historical frame. Culturally contingent would be that which depends on variations that have to do with the cultural and discursive context of reception - issues of nationality, race, class, gender and sexuality are all aspects of cultural contingency. All theories that argue for the meaningfulness of connections between and distinctions within these categories in the study of film signification and in the reception of specific films are making a cause for the contingency of spectatorship at the cultural level. Of course, cultural contingency makes little sense beyond historical contingency and beyond the historicity that makes every transcendental claim on a given medium or form of experience contingent in the first place. Still, one might want to distinguish, in a very basic way, those contingencies that depend on the place and context of reception from those, potentially more “universal”, that relate to historical periods. Taking historical contingency into account, “early spectatorship”, for instance, would not be reduced to a simple expression of a different state of cinematic technology, but addressed in its historical and discursive context. All this is rather obvious and generally goes unquestioned.

As we come to the third level of contingency, however, contingency becomes harder to map, and, from the point of view of the epistemology and the methodology of film studies, more conflictual. In the first instance, this level of singular contingency would correspond to a variance in meaning and signification, which takes place at the level of individual spectators and specific films, to the ideas and the memories, the unique context, the accidents, and the histories that make the watching of every single film a unique experience and the experience of each spectator different from that of everyone else. Now, this difference can be great or small, but, I would say, it is always significant. It is clearly significant for spectators - after all, it is at this level, each time we watch a film, that we first encounter it, and that our embodied and emotive engagement with it takes shape.

This dimension of utterly contingent, situated and idiosyncratic meaning, I believe, is also fundamentally significant for the understanding of spectatorship as a field of shared practices, and of the position of the spectator in terms of a tension: it is in fact through the tension between contingent signification and “objective”, consensual meaning, that film signification becomes something more than the mere decoding and communication of a message, and that the film

subject acquires an agency beyond the agency of the text. The communality of film experience - the extended, discursive and interpersonal, dimension of spectatorship - takes place first of all within the universe of circumstances and fleeting details that arise from our encounter with a film and from our sharing of it: its contingency is not limited to its cultural and historical condition, but extends to the story-like ordinary coincidences and interactions that make up our lived-experience, our memory and our re-telling of film. Circumstances that, in fact, are so intricate and interdependent that they can never be consciously grasped in their entirety, nor followed in all of their ramifications - also because the very act of bringing them to mind already alters them significantly.

On this point, I like to refer as an example to Werner Heisenberg's "observer effect": at the atomic level, the very interaction between subject and object, the very act of observation and measurement of a phenomenon alters it so dramatically, that it cannot in fact be known or registered as such.²⁰⁵ The same goes for film experience at the level of its singular contingency.

Telling a story about watching a film. Take, for example, the ordinary scene of someone telling someone else about a film that she has seen. This apparently self-explanatory scene actually involves two scenes that are equally fundamental to spectatorship, the scene of watching and that of telling. At the same time, I would say, the scene of spectatorship never entails just one film, but many, and never just one spectator or an individual subject, but rather more than one person and an heteronomous subject and, thus already the introjection of a scene of dialogue.

When does film experience begin? When do we cut into our lived-experience and identify the first significant moment of our experience of a film? When the lights are turned off? When we pay for the ticket? As we enter the cinema theatre? When we decide what film we are going to see? And how do we even decide? How far does what shapes our decision reach back? To some extent, at least, the context of watching precedes and influences our experience of the projection. This is usually accounted for in terms of intertextuality and, precisely, the theory of spectatorship. But this is just the extent of extra-textual contingency that can be addressed through the text, and only the contingency of

²⁰⁵ Werner Heisenberg, *The Physical Principles of The Quantum Theory* (Toronto: Dover, 1999 [1930]), 3.

spectatorship that can be addressed through a model of the typical spectator - that is, through a significant reduction of singular contingency. In fact, however, everything that might happen - say, as we walk to the cinema - has the potential to influence our experience of the film: not only and maybe even not essentially what we can rationally connect with the film or reduce within a typical scenario. On the way to the cinema, I might meet a friend who tells me about another film she has seen: unexpectedly, and unaccountably, that film will become part of the intertextual dimension of the film I am going to watch. In this perspective, our walk to the cinema would become a part the experience potentially as essential as the actual witnessing of the projection. In order to try to describe the singular contingency of every act of spectatorship, we could imagine the experience of each film to be a happening. The wayward, embodied and erratic, spectator we are dealing with is then one who might not even reach the cinema, who might change her mind on the way or arrive too late: paradoxically, we can say that the experiences she might have *instead* of that of the film's projection would still constitute her singular experience of the film or, at least, that they would still be part of her history as a spectator.

But let's say that we do enter the cinema hall - which, of course, bears its own set of more or less meaningful, but always significant, contingencies and potential encounters - and that we actually watch a film. Of course, in this phenomenological tracking shot of the contingency of film experience, we do not get to see the film *as such*. From our point of view, we do not see images as they are projected, and we see clearly something more, and something that comes before what will be the objective "text" of the film: what we experience is actually a series of shifting stains of light that we *interpret* as images.

In this sense, we always proceed from the contingent and material ground of film experience to the text and to the abstract idea of "the" film, and not the other way around. So that before we image film experience in terms of the decoding of a message, we should first of all imagine it as an aesthetic and theoretical activity by which a crowd of contingent sensations, thoughts and feelings concurs to give shape to the moving image. The material images on the screen are, of course, an important part of this crowd, but they are not necessarily the defining one. In fact, many of the associations and feelings that make up the moving image may have little to do with the film's recognisable content or with its material form: on the contrary, most of them are often free

associative and, in respect to the film's *meaning*, inessential. If the *meaning* of the moving image must be, at least to some degree, conventional and consensual, what makes it *significant* to the single spectator is possibly what is most contingent about it. Film experiencing is characterised by a tension, Miriam Bratu Hansen writes in her study of Siegfried Kracauer's theory of film, between the focussing of our attention and our being constantly "sidetracked by details," potentially wandering at the margins and corners of the screen, or committing to our memory other transient and contingent images.²⁰⁶ For Kracauer, this kind of "spectatorial mobility," Hansen continues, induced a "centrifugal movement [...] away from the film, into the labyrinths of the viewer's imagination, memories and dreams"²⁰⁷ - an aesthetic form of engagement with film that also has the character of free association.

After the projection, our experience of the film loses something of its presence and detail, and at the same time acquires another, as contingent and even more embodied, dimension: that of memory. In our memory, all those personal associations that shaped the film as we experienced it during the projection are already settling down, as it were, without us necessarily being aware of it: some will acquire more importance with time and some will become something else, some we will remember exactly, some we will remember not quite as they actually were, and some we will forget. Film, as it exists in the spectator's memory, is necessarily incomplete, non-objectual and bound up with subjective imagination: it inhabits a dimension of embodied memory which is in fact defined by its forgetfulness, blurriness and free associative mobility. By remembering a film, indeed, we are always already forgetting something about it: we are reshaping it in an associative way and extending its significance in new, unforeseeable, directions.

When we finally narrate our experience of a film to someone, every aspect of the encounter and of the dialogue will concur to evoke yet another, different, film in the person who is listening to us. On one hand, then, we can say that the discursive meaning of film never exhausts the film's contingent significance (works of film theory, for example, are often a way to re-signify, to extend or subvert, the significance of a film beyond its established meaning). On the

²⁰⁶ Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 276.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

other, we see that the efficacy and the pleasure of the sharing of film experience, such as we can find talking about film, rests not only, and not primarily, in the proficiency with which we command cinematic codes and the codes of conversation, but essentially in our ability to engage with the singular contingency of the dialogues and the encounters in which that experience is evoked. In this sense spectatorship is primarily a form of aesthetic and interpersonal involvement, and only after a matter of rational understanding and comprehension. The significance of spectatorship as an aesthetic and dissensual practice, I believe, rests in fact in the incommensurability of the spectator's contingent and embodied memory, experience, and re-telling of film to the discourses and the techniques that would reduce them to intelligible objects.

In the end, no theory of cinematic signification can aspire to reach the level of complexity that is processed in the everyday, ordinary, scene of a person telling another about a film she has seen. This simple gesture of telling a story about watching a film is, I think, that living and fundamentally ungraspable ground in which both spectatorship and theory have their source: a level in which they are found together and in which it is in fact impossible to tell them apart. What is peculiar to academic theory, then, and to authoritarian theories in a much more pronounced way, is to abstract some elements from this ground of contingent experience and argue for their more or less universal significance or, even more significantly, to address and define the principles by which this universal significance is supposed to be constructed. From the perspective that a full account of singular contingency opens up, then, a film cannot be, strictly speaking, "understood": we should say on the contrary that its signification is extended from the experience we have of it during the projection, to our memory of it, and beyond, in a series of encounters with other people, other contexts, and other films. Or, we can say that, at its most basic level, the experience of film is always already the telling of a story about watching a film.

The position of the spectator is always characterised by a tension between more conventional meaning and free association, the random thoughts and erratic events that might change - and, from the perspective of communication, compromise - our understanding of and our relation to film. The emergence of spectatorial agency, in turn, cannot be disjoined from this dimension of singular contingency. A dimension that, again through the primary process and free association, marks the heteronomy by which the position of the spectator

is traversed. Dissensus and the agency of spectators should not be seen to come only from their acquisition and autonomous performance of cinematic codes, or their masterful perversion of the norms that regulate them, then, but, more fundamentally, from the relative lack of control that they have over themselves as they bring the moving image into existence. Indeed, the spectator can be surprised by its own associations as much as she can be surprised by the images of the film. Both the encounter with the flux of the film's images and the encounter with one's own flux of free associative thoughts and feelings highlight the contingency of film experience and the otherness of the spectator to itself. Film experience arises precisely as these two fluxes become connected, from the interplay between the contingent materiality of the medium and the contingent and embodied experience that the spectator has of it. Also in this case, Kracauer's theory of cinema seems to be close to this understanding of contingency. His concept of camera reality, in particular, can be seen to refer precisely to this interaction: in Hansen's description it would correspond indeed to a "complex intertwining of the material reality of the viewer - as embodied subject of perception, memory, experience - with the life world."²⁰⁸

The singular contingency of film experience is an indispensable part of the conflict that sets up the position of the spectator: spectatorship remains in all cases a discursive practice, but if we reduce the spectator to just an expression of a set of historical and cultural, intelligible, contingencies, then the tension between the particular and the universal and between dissensus and consensus that informs spectatorship as an aesthetic practice would be lost. The meaning and the relations that can be expressed as a function of cultural and historical contingency alone can still be subversive, of course, but, arguably, the position of the spectator in itself would not be dissensual.

In this sense contingency is a radical concept and is bound to remain opaque to systematic research. It calls instead, in order to become productive, not only for an aesthetic regime of the understanding of art, but, more generally, for an aesthetic regime of knowledge: one in which the pretence of mastery that defines more authoritarian conceptions of theory gives the stage to the contingent and to the play of signification, taking them as something *integral* to the sharing of knowledge, rather than as mere, and distinct, objects of research. One could

²⁰⁸ Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 278.

say that dissent, in Rancière's conception, is a paradoxical category: it does not consist of the movement into meaning of the under-represented, nor does it correspond to a dialectic between representation and the irrepresentable, but should rather be seen as a confrontation between two incommensurable spheres of existence and signification that finds its significance precisely by keeping their incommensurability alive. I believe that we have shown how the domain of singular contingencies and that of meaning are linked, precisely, as two equally necessary and inevitable, but still mutually incommensurable, dimensions of film experience.

Dissonance and the music of chance. A final issue to be discussed is the relation between contingency, chance and fate, for it is all too easy to confuse contingency with randomness and then, in a typical reversal, turn contingent events into an expression of an underlying, fateful, meaning. Through this gesture, in fact, contingency is transformed from an expression of incommensurability to yet another measure of transcendental and discursive intelligibility. Contingency, in fact, describes deterministic processes whose outcome is not foreseeable, not random events whose meaning was in some ways ordained, nor erratic phenomena whose sole import would rest in the possibility of their interpretation. Contingency names then a contiguity and a coincidence - a music of chance, to borrow Paul Auster's words - that is bound to surprise us. One that, while still inviting significance, is inherently meaningless.

The "insignificance" of the contingent, though, is never far from the imaginary fullness of meaning that is typical of faith and belief - from the idea of inevitable connections, universal correspondences and uncanny, cyclic, returns. Auster, I believe, provides us with good examples of the ambiguity of this relation between chance and fate. In his first novel, *The Invention of Solitude*, for instance, we find the first in the series of incredible anecdotes that punctuate his work, and that are thoroughly contingent at the same time suggesting the inevitability of fate: without knowing it, a young man comes to live years later in the same small Parisian room that his father had occupied in his flight from Germany at the end of the Second World War. The chance is evident, the circumstances are ominous, but their actual significance is forever elusive, if there is any at all.

In a similar way, the idea of destiny can become a way of making sense of

radical contingency - in a sense, it can even be seen to constitute the fantasmatic root of “meaningfulness” itself. This is the way Žižek addresses the relation between contingency, fate and meaning in his book on Krzysztof Kieslowski. Žižek resumes the problem at the core of the idea of fate with this question: “is there a deeper meaning beneath contingencies, or is the meaning itself the outcome of a contingent turn of events?”²⁰⁹ A question that, we might note, echoes the question of the ontology of the image in relation to its embodied experience: is there a deeper meaning beneath the contingency of the experience of film, or is the objective and discursive meaning of the text merely the contingent outcome of an ungraspable series of events? Žižek’s answer to the first question is that fate is, in all probability, just a desperate way of making sense of the meaninglessness of contingent experience.²¹⁰

By being contrasted with the fullness of meaning that the idea, as well as the “feeling”, of fate allows to entertain, contingency constitutes instead the horizon - the limit as well as the scope of possibilities - of the emancipated subject. Fate, indeed, relates to *fatum* - to the subject which is spoken by a masterful discourse, and which is therefore deemed incapable of autonomous speech. To put it schematically, fate appears to be the quintessential symbolisation of consensus, and a fundamental principle of the regime of representation, while contingency, on the other hand, can be taken as the fundamental condition for dissensus and as a characteristic of the aesthetic regime. The very nature of the image in the aesthetic regime can then be understood as the incommensurability - a dissonance - between discursive articulation and that of the material contingency of the encounter between the spectator and the film. Or, as Bratu Hansen writes about Kracauer again, between “the implied horizon of our ‘habits of seeing’ [...] and that which momentarily eludes and confounds such structures”²¹¹

In this way, the role of contingency, and its account in our understanding of spectatorship and film experience, would also be a critical one in the passage from the regime of representation to the aesthetic regime. To further discuss this topic, I would like to use a short story by the Italian writer and playwright Luigi Pirandello: *The Bat*. Through this story, we will address how the regime

²⁰⁹ Žižek, *The Frigate of Real Tears*, 101.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

²¹¹ Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 268.

of representation is able to capture contingency, precisely by representing the irruption of a contingent event that troubles the surface of its articulation. By this, we will address in turn the ambivalent relation that the cinematic medium and our understanding of it have not only with the contingency of film experience, but with the material contingency of film and the world.

If only a bat hadn't come into the story.

A few days before the *première* of his new play, playwright Faustino Perres is precipitated into an unforeseen and intractable predicament. Things, so far, had gone exactly as he expected. About the play - a rather conventional one, and poorly written - there was “nothing so new and startling [...] that the audience was likely to take offence,”²¹² and the actors, as well, were just about adequate and satisfied with their parts. Everything was, then, as harmonious and plain as a stale performance can be - that is, “if only a bat hadn't come into the story.”²¹³

Each night, indeed, a bat that had presumably made its nest among the beams of the theatre's dome, or that came in from a hole in the roof, was lured in by the stage lights during rehearsals and kept flying over the performers' heads. All actors were disturbed, of course. But the young actress Gastina was so terrified by the animal that she could barely hold herself together and perform, disgusted as she was by the animal and being in a mad fear that it could get stuck into her hair.

The night before the dress rehearsal, Gastina asks Perres to revise the script to introduce more scenes in which the lights are dimmed, in order to reduce the risk of attracting the bat. At the playwright initial refusal, she insists, setting off a formidable, typically Pirandellian, dialogue on contingency, reality, and its illusion. “No, I mean it!” she says, arguing for her solution with the playwright:

“After all, don't you want your play to give a perfect illusion of reality?”

“An illusion? No, that's not it at all. Art creates reality itself, not an illusion!”

²¹² Luigi Pirandello, “The Bat,” in *Modern Italian Short Stories*, Marc Slonim, ed., translated by Frances Frenaye (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954 [1920]), 22.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

“Very well. But if art creates reality, the bat destroys it.”

“What do you mean? Why?”

“Just because. Just imagine that in real life you have a family quarrel, a scene between husband and wife, mother and daughter, a question of money or anything you like. And in the middle of it, a bat flies into the room. Well, what happens? I can tell you. The quarrel is held up; either the lights are turned off, or the opponents go into another room, or else somebody fetches a broom, gets up on a stool and tries to knock the bat unconscious. And then they forget what they were quarrelling about and gather around, half smiling, half disgusted, to look at the creature and see how it is made.”

“All right, that’s everyday life, if you like [...] but I didn’t put any bat into my play.”

“Maybe you didn’t, but the bat got into it, willy-nilly.”²¹⁴

Since the bat imposes itself not only as a presence on the stage, but also, as it were, as a presence in the fiction of the drama, Gastina continues, not only she, the actress, cannot ignore it but Livia as well, her character, should not act as if the bat were not there. The most natural thing to do, she says, would be to have the characters take a broom, get up on a stool, and chase the beast away or kill it. Without even letting her finish her sentence, Faustino protests, exasperated, that that was surely impossible. To that, the actress rebukes:

“[But] your play is sure to benefit. After all, the bat is part of the scene: whether you like it or not he’s forced his way into it... A *real bat*, too. If you don’t take him into account, he’s bound to seem artificial. [...] Can’t you see?”²¹⁵

Throughout the exchange, Faustino is made to defend the regime of representation, with the clear-cut separation, and respective self-sufficiency, that it must assume between real reality and the reality of fiction. A regime which admits no contingency whatsoever and thus finds itself irremediably shattered by the coming of the bat: for him, a thing - a bat or a character, an event or an experience - only exists inside or outside the world of fiction, never in-between, and

²¹⁴ Ibid., 24.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 25.

certainly cannot fly from one to the other. The two spaces, and the two ideas, are not permeable. Faustino is made to sustain the kind of notion of reality that Pirandello usually compares to madness, and that, in his plays and short stories, is often brought to a point of rupture. Faustino is now saying:

“If I were to take the bat into account and make my characters pay attention to him, then he would have to be part of the reality which I have created. And in that case he’d be an artificial bat, not a real one. And, incidentally, an element of perfectly casual reality can’t be allowed to introduce itself into the essential and created reality of a work of art.”

“But what if it does introduce itself?”

“But it doesn’t! It can’t! That bat doesn’t get into my play; it simply gets onto the stage where you are reciting it.”

“Very good! Where I am reciting your play. Then one of two things (26) must be true. Either your play is alive, or the bat is alive. And the bat *is* alive, very much so, I can tell you. I’ve proved that to you because he’s so alive Livia and the other characters can’t seem natural if they go on with the scene as if he weren’t there. So the conclusion is this: either throw out the bat, or throw out the play.”²¹⁶

The dialogue touches here the relation between the reality of the scene and the reality of the play and asks where this reality must be seen to exist: in the diegetic reality of the play as it is written, in the material reality of its performance, or somewhere in-between? Does one dimension exclude the other, and can the two even be distinguished? Isn’t the bat, as Gastina compellingly argues, the only real thing, if not in Pirandello’s short story, at least in poor Faustino’s play?

The opening night comes and the bat has not been chased away, also because of the dismissiveness of the director who cannot allow himself to take the whole matter seriously. The play begins without incidents and Faustino is ridiculously absorbed in his own creation, gesturing along as the lines are spoken and silently mimicking the actors’ expressions. The bat flies in, but no one in the audience

²¹⁶ Ibid., 25-26.

notices it. Even Faustino, at first, fails to acknowledge its presence: he only realises that the animal is there, Pirandello notes, when the mediocrity of the play becomes painfully manifest and the performance is met with “little and feeble applause.”²¹⁷ He is only able to see it, that is, as an excuse for the failure of his play. A moment later, Gastina enters the scene and the whole theatre falls silent in expectation. Still, no one in the audience has noticed the bat flying over the stage. The actress walks in, straining to keep her composure. And then, of course, for the first time after days of rehearsals, the bat hits her. With a cry, Gastina immediately faints into the arms of the actor who was playing the scene with her. While he drags her away, to the surprise of everyone in the crew, the spectators let out a thunderous applause: unaware of the bat, they had taken Gastina’s reaction as a part of the play - and as the most brilliant one at that. “The fainting scene,” Pirandello writes, “had been played so realistically as to convince them that it was an integral part of the whole, and this was the reason for their ovation.”²¹⁸ The applause does not die out and the playwright, the director, and Gastina are loudly called to appear on stage. Unfortunately, the director has to explain, the actress had been so proven by the intensity of her performance, that she could not go on with the play: “the performance had to be interrupted.”²¹⁹

Minutes later, when the theatre is finally empty, the troupe gather to consider the situation. Not only, Faustino laments, it was way worse to acknowledge that he owed the success of the play to the bat, than to admit the play’s failure, this unexpected success causes the company a terrible problem. Indeed, how could they remain true to the only successful scene of the representation the following night, and then the next? How could they *stage*, this time, and repeat that which had been a complete coincidence? If they wanted to go on with the representations at all, they had to include, somehow, anyhow, the fainting scene into the play. Surely, the director says, it won’t be a problem for the actors to perform it. But that is not the point, Perres rebuts: if the scene came out so well it has been precisely because the performance broke down. So, for him, there is no possible solution: the play has to be cancelled. At that point Gastina comes in, recovered and visibly pleased, for her point had been so thoroughly

²¹⁷ Ibid., 26.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 27.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 28.

proved. With a smile, she rubs some salt on the two men's wounds:

"I *could* have an artificial fainting spell in the second act, if Signor Perres were to follow your advice and write it in for me. But you'd have to have the bat under control, so that it wouldn't make me do the real thing, say in the first or third act, or right after tonight's scene."²²⁰

Ignoring her, the director is thinking of forcing Gastina to play anyway, but Faustino knows better and he is already resigned. In the end, indeed, the play will be cancelled. As the narrator relates, concluding the story:

"[Faustino] was convinced that the success of his play was due entirely to the violent intrusion of a purely casual, extraneous element, which instead of upsetting his artifice completely had miraculously fitted into it and given the audience the illusion of truth. He withdrew it from the boards, and it was never given again."²²¹

The bat and the cinema. Now, imagine that someone has filmed the play. Through the film recording we could, if not recreate, at least reproduce the fortunate coincidences that led to Gastina's successful performance and watch it over and over again. At a first glance, then, film appears to be the ideal medium for capturing the irruption of contingent events: indeed, as Mary Ann Doane argues, "the emergence of photographic and phonographic technologies in the nineteenth century seemed to make possible what had been previously been beyond the grasp of representation - the inscription of contingency."²²² Contingency became indeed an aesthetic category in the first place, precisely through the modern fascination with its legibility, through modernity's fascination with chance and the ephemeral that were often the object of camera reality.²²³

And yet, what a recording of Gastina's unwarranted exploit would have touched, is, arguably, not a true expression of contingency but, precisely as Doane wrote, merely its inscription. As such, the recording would suture the

²²⁰ Ibid., 29.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Mary Ann Doane, in Linda Connor et. al., "Notes from the Field: Contingency," *The Art Bulletin* 94, no. 3 (2012): 348.

²²³ Ibid.

contingent event to the regime of representation: “the paradox of photographic (or electronic) contingency [...] is that once registered, once fixed in representation, the contingent loses its contingency.”²²⁴ Cinematic technology surely enjoys a great deal of mastery over the contingent: it can rule it out, by discarding unwanted shots, and stage it in - waiting for it, as it were, in the unfolding of staged as well as unstaged events. Cinema can evoke and provoke contingency and, not least, it can fake it. But its capacity to record contingent events acts, in fact, as a taming of contingency. In this, cinema is closer to literature, than to the theatre (a real bat can fly on a stage, but can’t fly in or out of a page or a screen).

We must not forget that the interplay between contingency and staged reality that Gastina and Faustino discuss in the story is also active at the level of the literary narration itself: the “real” bat that Pirandello wrote about is fictional and, precisely, *not contingent*. The bat’s calculated dramatic effect disrupting the play is indeed, in relation to the *written* story and the *diegetic* play, the exact opposite of the intrusion of an unforeseeable and uncontrollable event.

If it is true that contingency lies beyond the regime of representation, beyond, in Bratu Hansen’s words, the illusory depth of the diegesis and beyond the protocols that regulate our understanding of narrative,²²⁵ then cinema suddenly becomes much less hospitable to it. If, on one hand, film appears to be the medium of contingency *par excellence*, on the other, it is the one that has the highest potential for leading it back within the logic of representation. For what film affords are, in fact, *representations* of contingency, and a particular regime of its visibility. As in the case of Pirandello’s play, in which the reality effect is produced by the spectators failing to notice the bat, film would then aim at the creation of a perfect illusion of reality through a complete inscription of contingency, which in fact would correspond to its complete foreclosure. As Doane put it, “the act of filming transforms the contingent into an event characterised by its very filmability.”²²⁶

If cinema appears to have a greater power to represent and control contingency it is in the end on the account of the imaginary claim that its inscrip-

²²⁴ Ibid., 349.

²²⁵ Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 277.

²²⁶ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 23.

tion of contingency is made in the same material of contingent reality itself, and without human intervention. Contingency apparently corresponds to an agency without volition (which is precisely the opposite of fate, in the sense of a *will* beyond human agency). But this agency is rather the dissensual agency of the heteronomous subject and of the unconscious, than the lack of agency of automatic mechanical recording. In fact, cinema confirmed a regime of understanding of contingency based precisely in the statistical and archival reduction of material reality and unforeseeable events,²²⁷ as well as in the reduction of the heteronomous agency of the embodied subject to the lack of agency of the automaton. With photography, Doane indeed argues, contingency was moved to the realm of “the non-anthropological, the autonomous, that which registers without consciousness of registration.”²²⁸ If there is a contingency to film that has relevance in the aesthetic regime, in the end, it is not to be found in the technological *dispositif*, but rather in the full range of contingency of embodied film *experience* from the part of spectators, its historical, cultural and singular situatedness. In a sense, also the materiality of the medium and of the conditions of recording and projection can be the site of a disruptive manifestation of a contingent event, not reduced to an inscription. The cinematic equivalent of the irruption of the bat would be, in this perspective, something like a film burn or the sudden detaching of the reel from the projector.

We can individuate four kinds of contingency in relation to cinema. The first is the level of the contingent event, of the bat’s *flight*: the objectified presence of the contingent which breaks down the performance of the play - the “latent”, unseen, object that in fact produces the impression of reality. This level is still internal to the regime of representation: in fact, it represents its cinematic reinstatement, it codes the superior power of suture that film can achieve between the raw materiality of the visual and its *visible* capture. A second level would be that of camera reality: the level of singular contingency of the pro-filmic that the camera can capture, the precise rendering of visible features and the apparently seamless tracking of movement of which the medium is capable. Film could register what makes of the bat not just any bat, or a bat in general, but that unique animal; of its flight, that particular unrepeatable trajectory; of

²²⁷ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 18-19.

²²⁸ Doane, “Notes from the Field,” 348.

Gastina's scream, a scream with a definite constellation of overtones, a specific length and pitch, and so on. In fact, film cannot avoid this contingency. ICinematic contingency, in this sense, is that quality of the photographic image that makes cinema appear to be essentially outside of the concerns of representation, and rather aligned with the pure presence of the thing itself. A third level of contingency would be the very materiality of the cinematic medium, beyond its function and its transparency in the regime of representation: glitches and film burns, and all the cases in which the machines of recording and projection fail, in which the material support of the images ages or becomes corrupt, and thus the medium itself becomes, in this failure, evident as something that is present beyond the phenomenal reality of the moving image. At this level, the concept of contingency brings together the idea of freedom from necessity with the idea of physical presence, and the idea of getting in touch with the real, so to speak, with a failure of representation.

“Despite the reputed realism and mimesis of photographic, electronic, and digital imaging systems,” Doane writes, “it is the defectiveness of the image (or sound) its deficiencies, that constitute the confirmation of its contact with (touching of) the real, its collaboration of contingency.”²²⁹

Finally, a fourth level would be that of the contingency of film experience itself: not just in that film experiencing is a situated and embodied practice, happening in a particular place and involving flesh and bone subjects, but in that film experience is discursively contingent and subjectively contingent, at the same time at the intelligible level of the historical and cultural specificity of its meaning, and at the less manageable level of an associative flight of signification.

Contingency lies in the traumatic hit of an animal thing that shatters a play of appearances, in fact making the illusion more real. In the relation of indexicality between profilmic reality and its “memorious” visible and audible recording - a connectedness that seems to promise an unmediated relation with the thing as such. It lies in the fleetingness of existence that the photographic image, both in its relation with time and in its own materiality inevitably addresses - the withering touch of the fading image, the scarred reel and the

²²⁹ Ibid., 349.

broken down lenses. Finally, contingency lies in the principle of contiguity that drives free associations, in the passage from one image to another that is what creates the moving image in the first place, in the resonance of a word on another which is what allows for their significance and meaning. In all these cases, contingency refers to a kind of contact and contiguity, of “close contacts and resonant connections”²³⁰ that can be linked, as we will see, to free association and synaesthetic sense experience.

²³⁰ Maria Brennan, in Mary Ann Doane, in Linda Connor et. al., “Notes from the Field: Contingency,” *The Art Bulletin* 94, no. 3 (2012): 347.

Free association

Psychoanalytic theory should only ever be given free-floating attention.

Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation*.

The equality of all subjects is the negation of all relation of necessity between a given form and a determined content.

Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du Sensible*.

A failure to account for the contingency of the spectator's experience of film, as we have seen, can be taken as one of the central features of those critical reactions to apparatus theory that do not downplay or disregard the ideological and political tensions that are proper of the dimension of spectatorship. This contingency can be addressed in terms of the plurality of existing subject positions and modes of film experiencing, and in terms of a radical contingency that would correspond to the fundamental emancipation of the spectator as a heteronomous subject, against its normative interpretation in terms of an utterly passive subject position. Many of the critiques against apparatus theory, recognised this normativity to be a core attribute of the psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity, and thus identified its overcoming with the rejection of psychoanalysis as a whole - or at least with a drastic reformulation of its basic principles. Contrary to this position, I would argue that the normativity of the description of the cinematic subject in psychoanalytic film theory lies not, or at least not exclusively, in specific shortfalls or limitations within the

psychoanalytic account of subjectivity, but rather first of all in the reduction of the scope of psychoanalysis itself to that of its metapsychology. Much like discursivity does not automatically mean discursive determination, in fact, so the psychoanalytic subject is something inevitably more contingent and less intelligible than any of its possible metapsychological definitions. Psychic experience and psychoanalysis as a therapy, respectively constitute and address a kind of self-experience and relationality that cannot be reduced to a form of knowledge about the self.²³¹ Moreover, in this, they can be seen to be essentially opposed to the mastery that defines the function of metapsychological concepts. If there is a fundamental rule to the epistemology and the phenomenology of psychoanalysis, beyond its reduction to a psychology of the deep or to a sociology of repression, in fact, it is precisely that there is a dimension in which these concepts share the same materiality and indeterminacy of the phenomena they pretend to describe. The longstanding argument against the scientificity of psychoanalysis can indeed be seen to be an effect of the limited power of objectification of its forms of knowledge and practice.

All too easily film studies have been drawn to the positive knowledge of psychoanalytic metapsychology, disregarding the dimension of rupture that makes this knowledge possible in the first place. Aside from its reduction to metapsychology, however, the dimension of experience with which psychoanalysis constantly renews its encounter essentially sides with a non-authoritarian understanding of knowledge and subjectivity and suggests a conception of subjectivity which is neither unitary nor normative, sustaining a regime of knowledge which is at the same time embodied and incommensurable to discursive grasp.

Metapsychology and film theory.

Metapsychology constitutes at the same time the most systematic, the most normative, and, potentially, also the most authoritarian dimension of psychoanalytic theory. Metapsychology is, so to speak, the theoretical division of psychoanalysis: its function is, indeed, that of constructing an articulated complex of conceptual models that are “more or less far-removed from empirical

²³¹ Pontalis, *Après Freud*, 13.

reality”²³² - to systematise, that is, the contingency of analytic experience, and the specific results of its method of enquiry in therapeutic practice, into a series of claims and notions, perspectives and scenarios.

It should not come as a surprise, then, that metapsychology has been for Louis Althusser the key field for establishing a dialogue between psychoanalysis and the analysis of ideology.²³³ Lacan’s return to Freud, in particular, clearly fulfilled the Althusserian necessity for an eminently theoretical reassessment of the fundamental concepts behind the founding acts, and the founding fathers, of psychoanalysis’ “revolutionary” action. Founding fathers - Marx, Freud, Nietzsche - that were for Althusser at the same time “unexpected” children: Freud, in particular, was imagined by the French critical theorist to be a father to himself, a theoretical self-made man, and the epitome of the autonomy, and the solitude, of theory.²³⁴ A metaphor that, by the way, we can take as an expression of the particular regime of power, knowledge, and subjectivity that Althusser imagined.

Althusser was particularly interested in rescuing psychoanalysis from the accusation of being a practice without theory.²³⁵ For him, metapsychological concepts had to be more than an extension of psychoanalytic practice, they had to be absolutely primary:

“Neither do the technique and method contain the secrets of psycho-analysis, except as every method does, by delegation, not from the practice but from the theory. Only the theory contains them, as in every scientific discipline,”²³⁶ he wrote.

Althusser’s defence of psychoanalysis as a science, then, even as he struggled to maintain its specificity against behaviourist and psychologist revisions, nevertheless coincided with the establishment of the supremacy of its metapsychological dimension. If the scientificity of psychoanalysis had to proceed from its metapsychological concepts to contingent practice, and not the other way

²³² Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), 249.

²³³ Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, 20.

²³⁴ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy: And Other Essays* (London: Unwin Brothers, 1971), 181.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 184.

around, then it was perfectly acceptable, in the context of the application of psychoanalysis to the study of ideology and the arts, to disregard not only the therapeutic *aims* of psychoanalysis, but also any of the specificities that could be found at the level of therapeutic *practice* and of psychic lived-experience as well. On the contrary, I would say that the very specificity of the psychoanalytic method tends to undermine the normativity that its metapsychology can acquire, that the radical contingency of psychic experience essentially resists its normative description, and that the forms of psychoanalytic knowledge that exist in contiguity with the dimension of the Id and the primary process tendentially escape any pedagogical appropriation. What is characteristic of the psyche rather sides with the aesthetic regime than with a logic, so typical of metapsychological reductionism, of positions of authority and an endless process of interpretation.

The insistence, so to speak, of theory in psychic experience and therapeutic practice, in turn, is what allows the transformation of psychoanalytic theory into an ideologically salient *discourse* on subjectivity: that is, from an element of the therapeutic method, to a particular distribution of psychic experience and of the knowledge we can have about it. A discourse upon which, as Althusser argued, the method itself had in turn to come to depend. However, I believe, by submitting the psychoanalytic method to the structures of its metapsychology, Althusser was hardly making a case for the scientificity of psychoanalysis, and rather positing the conditions *only* for its discursive articulation. In other words, he was sanctioning, from the standpoint of radical Marxism and the theory of ideology, the use of psychoanalysis as a disciplinary discourse. It is this discourse on subjectivity that responds to apparatus theory in film studies actually criticise psychoanalysis for. The perceived teleology of the stages of psychic development, indeed, the ubiquity and hegemony of the Oedipal narrative, the heterosexist bias of the psychoanalytic notions of pleasure and desire, and so on, all take their full normative character only in the measure that psychoanalysis is seen as little more than a normative discourse and a metapsychological system. In its normative aspects this discourse is less a product of the limits of psychoanalysis as a discipline, than it is a consequence of its reductive framing.

Especially in film and cultural studies, psychoanalysis is so often discussed exclusively in terms of its metapsychology that most objections against its nor-

maturity in the study of film signification and spectatorship in fact become correct. Only, I would say, they are fundamentally misdirected: they are not really pertinent to psychoanalysis as a practice or as a field of enquiry, nor of the psyche as a dimension of embodied experience, but rather to the authoritarian and pedagogical reduction of their scope. A reduction, to be fair, from which psychoanalytic writers are not always immune, but that is probably more distinctive of the application of psychoanalytic metapsychology to the problems of ideology and to the interpretation of the arts.

Metapsychology and analytic experience. At one level, metapsychology names that regime of understanding of the psyche which gives the psychoanalytic method its shape: clearly, Freud's ideas about the psyche, its topography, economy and dynamics, have been consubstantial with the development of psychoanalytic therapy, and different conceptions of psychic dynamics will inevitably orient the therapeutic process and its instruments in different directions. At the same level, metapsychology also constitutes the ground on which different psychoanalytic approaches and new theories confront themselves. It is the space of the interaction between orthodoxy and currents, so central to the history of the psychoanalytic movement. It is the dialogic, and the institutional, space of the analysts' training, of the formulation of the procedural standards that should regulate the therapy and the relation between analyst and analysand. At the same time, metapsychological notions, coordinates, and narratives provide, *de facto*, the most immediate mapping of the potential connections between psychoanalysis and philosophy, other sciences, and the arts: as we have noted, metapsychology is usually the object of choice both when psychoanalysts venture to write on art and as soon as a psychoanalytic approach is adopted by scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

With the exception of the sometimes seductive but generally disdained writing of "psychoanalytic" biographies, this privilege of metapsychology as the main connection between psychoanalysis and other fields mainly takes the direction of interpretation. As we will see, in the measure that psychoanalysis is reduced to its metapsychology, its interaction with the arts is also reduced to the scope of a hermeneutics of the text or of the work of art, and of a fundamentally pedagogical explanation of social relations and aesthetic experience. It is, from the very outset, the prestige that Freud assigned to, and sought for, psy-

choanalytic metapsychology - and, within it, for its most ahistorical elements - that allowed not just for the translation of psychoanalysis into other disciplinary fields, but for its reduction to a structuralist “masterplot”²³⁷ as well: the ambassador of psychoanalysis would, in this sense, also be its witch.²³⁸

At the level of therapy, instead, metapsychology has a more pragmatic role: primarily, it sustains and informs the analyst’s acts of interpretation. Such acts - of which the classic model would be, of course, the interpretation of a dream - are focussed interventions on the part of the analyst within the session and constitute its most apparent contribution to the analytic process. Quite clearly, interpretations can only be made in relation to a metapsychological frame, but, it is important to note, they are not made exclusively in relation to it. The interpretation of a dream, for instance, can never be reduced to a purely intellectual decoding of its manifest content - detached from the dimension of transference and countertransference - or to a symbolic reading - separated from the contingent play of free associations in which both the analysand and the analyst are engaged during the session. Before being active at the level of the latent meaning it uncovers, then, interpretation in therapy confronts its effectiveness as an utterance, as a performative expression of the analyst’s own emotive presence in the analytic field.²³⁹ This shift from the intellectual content of interpretation to interpretation as an act that is internal to the relation of transference is a fundamental one in psychoanalytic therapy and theory. It is a change that took place gradually, beginning with Freud’s move away from the classical, symbolic, reading of dreams to their interpretation in the context of the analysand’s free associations, and with the foregrounding of transference and recognition of the limited power of interpretation when confronted with the

²³⁷ Peter Brooks, “Freud’s Masterplot,” *Yale French Studies* 55-56 (1977): 285.

²³⁸ Indeed, Freud figured metapsychology as a Faustian witch that the analyst can, or rather must, call to its aid. Sigmund Freud, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” in *Freud: Complete Works*, Ivan Smith, ed. (2000 [1937]), 5022.

²³⁹ The concept of analytic field (*campo analitico*) is characteristic of the work of the Italian psychoanalyst Antonino Ferro, who drew from Kurt Levin, Madeleine Baranger and Wilfred Bion for its elaboration. With this concept, Ferro refers to the conscious and unconscious, emotive and semantic space that the analyst and the analysand evoke and inhabit during the session, and, more generally, to what “happens” in the transferal relation that is established between the two. Through this, Ferro proposes an approach to analytic technique and, in particular, to interpretation, that is based more on the collaboration of analysand and analyst than in the latter’s authority or ability. See Antonino Ferro, *The Bipersonal Field: Experiences in Child Analysis* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999).

compulsion to repeat.²⁴⁰

In particular, it is the recognition of the centrality of transference that can be seen to require, more than simply suggest, a rethinking of the analyst's interpretations and a reconfiguration of the authority of psychoanalytic metapsychology as a whole. Transference, Pontalis suggestively wrote, is like a fifth season,²⁴¹ a mark of the atemporality (*ucronie*) of the unconscious,²⁴² and, quite clearly, a part beyond the parts of time. A season which is not other to language, but rather to what Pontalis calls the *tout-langage*²⁴³ - the all-language and the everything-language - stranger, precisely, to the comprehensive articulation of the sensible that language can appear to determine,²⁴⁴ and to the fantasy of mastery that comes with it.

Moving away from the interpretation of symptoms to the interpretation of transference is also, at least in part, a move away from a logic of demystification and uncovering of psychic "truth" and toward a more embodied and collaborative working-through of the emotive relation between the analysand and the analyst. Something which is prompted by the recognition of the contingency and embodiment of psychic signification itself, and of the acknowledgement of a fundamental equality of intelligence of the psyche in the analytic encounter. Adam Phillips is building on the same foundations when he states that psychoanalytic theory is made with sentences, not ideas.²⁴⁵ By which he means that psychoanalytic practice rests more in the dimension of dialogue, of the contingent encounter between two subjectivities, than in the masterful knowledge of one of the two, or in the only apparently more neutral idea of a shared *rationality* uncovering in psychic phenomena some deeper meaning.

On the contrary, in the reading of the unconscious that is characteristic of Althusserian psychoanalytic film theory, there would no place for contingency: nothing in it would be - nor indeed could be - accidental.²⁴⁶ I think, and in this I am taking an approach opposite to Althusser's, that what are surely the

²⁴⁰ Pontalis, *Avant*, 51.

²⁴¹ Pontalis, *Ce Temps Qui ne Passe Pas*, 35.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 16-17.

²⁴³ Pontalis, *Avant*, 114.

²⁴⁴ Pontalis, *Ce Temps Qui ne Passe Pas*, 35.

²⁴⁵ Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 105.

²⁴⁶ Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, 22.

most specific, and possibly the most radical, insights of psychoanalytic theory, lay the closest to its therapeutic practice and to the dimension of the analytic encounter and not, or not exclusively, in its grand metapsychological constructions. The epistemological and theoretical significance of psychoanalysis would lay beyond its reduction to the scope of a metapsychology and rather come from its proximity to the unconscious and the primary process, and with its connection with the flow of free associations and free floating attention that characterises the analytic field.

The mastery of concepts. The unconscious, as a form of experience, is irreducibly singular and contingent - it is accessible by psychoanalytic theory only as a system, not in its individual contents.²⁴⁷ Or, if it ever becomes accessible in its singular subjectivity, it is so only already within the interpersonal field of transference - not as object, then, but rather as a shared form of signification. In the end, metapsychology cannot claim an objective knowledge of the unconscious: it can merely attempt to give a systematic description of some of its mechanisms.²⁴⁸ Instead of being a form of technical knowledge, then, or a method for probing and collecting data from the unconscious, psychoanalysis should rather be seen to touch upon a kind of non-knowledge, one which is less a refusal of knowledge than the enjoyment of its partiality and incompleteness:

“Psychoanalysis bores me when it enters in every place without being invited,” Pontalis wrote, “when it affirms itself as the interpretation of all possible interpretations. I claim for everyone not a refuge in the uninterpretable, but a land of the uninterpreted whose borders will never be firmly set.”²⁴⁹

If there is something that psychic experience violently opposes in language it is not signification, then, but rather the *tout-langage*, the fullness of meaning and the pretence of mastery of rational discourse, as well as the comprehensive,

²⁴⁷ Pontalis, *La Force d'Attraction*, 18.

²⁴⁸ Pontalis, *Après Freud*, 117.

²⁴⁹ “La psychanalyse m’assomme quand elle entre, sans y être invité, en tout lieu, s’affirme comme l’interprétation de toutes interprétations possibles. Je revendique pour tout un chacun non le refuge dans l’ininterprétable mais un territoire, aux frontières mouvantes, de l’ininterprété.” Pontalis, *l’Amour des Commencements*, 27. Translation mine.

normative, mapping by which discursive power is exerted. Psychoanalysis, on the reverse, invites us to entertain a relation to knowledge that values the potential inherent in its suspension, a wisdom that lies in not assuming that everything can, or indeed should, be known. This relation can be grasped, from another perspective, in terms of the difference between a lack of knowledge, which would be the foundation of the pedagogical regime, and a Lacanian lack *in* knowledge, an irreducible gap in our understanding and within our very “self”, that is at the same time the sole space in which a sharing of knowledge and experience can take place and, thus, the sole place that we can inhabit as speaking subjects.

Pontalis’ idea that psychic experience is radically incommensurable with conceptual mastery proceeds very rigorously from a fact of analytic therapy: that conscious apprehension of repressed material, or of the reasons for its repression, is not enough in itself to suppress the effects of repression.²⁵⁰ Rational knowledge finds itself powerless when confronted with the compulsion to repeat: we can obtain, through therapy and reflection, a reasonable understanding, image, or explanation of previously repressed affects or complexes of ideas, without this leading to a significant change in their psychic economy, nor in our behaviour, symptoms and desires. It is often easy enough to accommodate repressed ideas and feelings in the conscious mind: what is difficult is to work through them at their more intractable, thing-like, level. It is easy enough, Slavoj Žižek would say, to educate the man: the point is to convince the chicken.²⁵¹ It is not through a process of disclosure, then, nor as an effect of the mastery of concepts, but through something within transference and thus beyond their power, that one is able to engage with repression in such a way that its economy can be altered, together with its symptomatic effects.

²⁵⁰ Pontalis, *Après Freud*, 118.

²⁵¹ The Slovenian philosopher likes to tell the following story. A man is convinced to be a seed of grain and so he is afraid that chickens will eat him. Unable to lead a normal life, he decides to admit himself to a mental institution. After many years and numerous treatments, the doctors manage to cure him. The man is no longer convinced of being a seed of grain, so they are ready to release him from the clinic. As soon as he leaves the institution, however, the man sees a chicken and runs back to the doctors, utterly terrified. When they ask him how come he is still afraid of chickens, since he now knows that he is not a seed of grain, the man replies: “I know, alright, but does the chicken know?” For one of Žižek’s versions, see: Cornel West and Slavoj Žižek, Talk at Princeton University, 5 May (2005): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBvASueefk4>.

Analytic therapy in fact involves a continuous, if partial, collapse of its own metapsychological schemas, not only as an effect of the contingency of the analytic encounter itself, but because the nature of the unconscious is to escape the mastery of concepts,²⁵² to provoke continuous diversions not merely in the objects of knowledge, but in the very processes and positions of the act of knowing - subtracting, in fact, consciousness from itself. Analytic experience, and the psychoanalytic insights that can be translated to the humanities, then, exist in counterpoint and defiance to the grasp of rationality and intelligible discourse.

In this sense, the unconscious should not be understood merely in terms of its accessibility or foreclosure to consciousness, but also, and more significantly, in terms of the interaction between two incommensurable logics: that of the primary process and that of the secondary process. The dimension, the scope and the effectiveness of psychoanalysis lies, then, in the acknowledgement of and the engagement with this incommensurability, and at the same time in refraining from giving any definitive solution to it: psychoanalysis addresses paradoxes, not problems, and in this sense it can be taken to involve, from both the analyst and the analysand, a form of aesthetic and theoretical practice.²⁵³ Psychoanalysis is not a discourse that enables us to articulate and solve questions, then, but rather a language that allows us to speak about paradoxes in their own terms. If psychoanalytic experience is the tension between a drive to know and its constant (sometimes pleasurable and sometimes traumatic) faltering, psychoanalysis becomes a practice that attempts, but never quite manages, to bridge not between language and the irrepresentable (which would be the enterprise of a psychology of the deep), but between the intelligible and the merely significant, between the known and the contingent.

Pontalis' writings indeed suggest that we can see in the unconscious not just the psychic topography of latent meaning, but the dynamic agency of our emancipation from the habits of reason, from the ethos of identity, and from the consensual mapping of experience that the mastery of concepts affords. The

²⁵² Pontalis, *Après Freud*, 13.

²⁵³ In particular, Antonino Ferro described this aesthetic collaboration in terms of a storytelling that takes the place of the interpretative cut. Antonino Ferro, *La Psicoanalisi come Letteratura e Terapia* [Psychoanalysis as Literature and Therapy] (Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 1999), 1-2.

unconscious would be a source of a dissensus - internal to subjectivities and language, but at the same time always interpersonal and thus - in the sense that it does not address the subject as a unitary and self-sufficient individual - also *impersonal*. Still, the dimension of psychic experience would never be essentially nor entirely free from discourse: what it is constitutionally “free” from, is rather our understanding of, and mastery over, experience and discourse themselves. If, on one hand, psychoanalysis can potentially be used to extend the mastery of concepts to the realm of the id and of the unconscious, downplaying and even erasing the specificity and their “eversive” potentials, we still need it to name and address the existence of an inalienable dimension of conflict at the core of the human subject, something which makes experience intrinsically paradoxical, and rational mastery always problematic. Without this psychoanalytic insight (what we might call a radical psychoanalytic discourse), we could lose sight of the very necessity of a critique of ideology as such - as it indeed seems to be happening in film studies with the post-theoretical turn.

Nothing would be a clearer instance of collective repression, Pontalis jokingly concluded, than a conference of the psychoanalytic association:²⁵⁴ the pursuit of scholarly coherence in psychoanalytic theory was indeed for him often just a way of eluding a real confrontation with the unconscious. If his first interest in psychoanalysis came as a reaction against the conceptual mastery that he had disliked in philosophy,²⁵⁵ he quickly turned his critique to the pretence of mastery that psychoanalytic discourse itself could perform. Pontalis’ writings, which he meant to occupy a place in-between the theoretical language of psychoanalysis and the aesthetic language of literature and the psyche, could be addressed in terms of a phenomenological shift from the dimension of psychoanalytic knowledge to that of the significance of analytic and psychic experience themselves - from the interpretation of the latent contents of dream to the significance of the experience of dreaming.²⁵⁶ If the essence of psychoanalysis and of its language lies in its attentiveness to “everything that remains at the margins of the prose of life,” as he wrote,

“It must then refrain from substituting to the singularity of this

²⁵⁴ Pontalis, *Fenêtres*, 23.

²⁵⁵ Pontalis, *En Marge des Nuits*, 20.

²⁵⁶ See Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Entre le Rêve et la Douleur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 19.

experience a pre-established order of relations, even if this order has been constituted through the discoveries of psychoanalytic practice itself. The order that suits psychoanalysis is exactly the opposite.”²⁵⁷

It is not the order of metapsychology, then, that should define the epistemological and theoretical significance of psychoanalysis, but rather that of the contingency and erraticness of its embodied practice, and that of the constant disruption of its very grasp - in everyday life, as well as in therapy and criticism. As Pontalis brilliantly put it, psychoanalysis is like *Citizen Kane, without Rosebud*.²⁵⁸

Psychic experience could therefore be seen to be marked by a kind of indifference to power and objectification, and a waywardness in relation to the lures of identity and the calls of interpellation:

“This region of being that Freud has pulled out from the night, and to which it is so difficult to assign an ontological status, acquires its structuring effectiveness precisely from the fact of its latency: psychoanalytic reality is trans-individual and pre-subjective, trans-temporal or outside of the temporal sequence of events, and it leaves consciousness, if not entirely without knowledge, at least without grasp.”²⁵⁹

Grasp (*prise*) and mastery (*emprise*), not knowledge, are what Pontalis opposed to what is essential to psychoanalytic experience. Beyond the mastery of concepts we find what he called a dreaming speech,²⁶⁰ or dreamful thought²⁶¹, a form of embodied, mental and emotional, process of association that attempts to free itself from the constraints of organised discourse. A dimension which is

²⁵⁷ “À tout ce qui reste dans les marges de la prose de la vie [...] elle doit donc se garder de substituer à cette singularité un ordre préétabli de relations, fut-il constitué par le savoir qui s’est organisé à partir de ses découvertes. L’ordre qui lui convient est exactement l’inverse.” Pontalis, *Après Freud*, 39. Translation mine.

²⁵⁸ Pontalis. *L’Amour des Commencements*, 24.

²⁵⁹ “[...] cette région de l’être que Freud a tirée de la nuit, et à laquelle il est si difficile d’assigner un statut ontologique, doit son efficacité structurante précisément au fait de sa latence: elle est transindividuelle et présubjective, transtemporelle, ou hors de la série temporelle des événements, et laisse la conscience, sinon sans savoir, du moins sans prise.” Pontalis, *Après Freud*, 19. Translation mine.

²⁶⁰ Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *La Traversée des Ombres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 179.

²⁶¹ Pontalis, *Fenêtres*, 37.

still internal to signification, but in many ways one that lies beyond the mastery of meaning and language: free floating, like the attention of the analyst during a session, and free associative, like the dream-work and imagination, like the free speech of the analysand and of each and every speaking subject who is passionately lost in aesthetic contemplation.

Analytic experience, and psychic experience in general, would then consist in a double movement: one, constantly departing from the equilibrium and transparency of “normal”, consensual, life and language; the other, at each moment raising from the utterly contingent dimension of lived-experience toward form. On one hand, the symptom, on the other, what the English psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas calls *formtrieb*, or the drive to represent.²⁶² In the end, the relevance of psychoanalysis to literature and the arts must be sought for not in the technique of interpretation, but rather, as Leo Bersani wrote, in “a certain relation between meaning and movement in discourse,”²⁶³ a “coming into form” which is also a “subversion of forms” and a resistance “to the formal seductions of all coercive discourses.”²⁶⁴ Psychoanalysis would thus be the discipline that, at the same time and by the same token, sanctions the existence of an unruly, unintelligible, dimension of experience, and attempts to reduce it into something meaningful, ordered, or at least significant. “Like dream,” Pontalis wrote, “analysis at the same time discloses what is boundless and tames it.”²⁶⁵ We can then say that the space that psychic experience makes accessible is one in-between the symptomatic disruption of a transparent subjectivity and the aesthetic signification of our contingent being in the world.

Hysteria and “the great complex of associations”.

The idea of free associations was initially developed by Freud in the context of his studies on hysteria: despite the more mechanistic character of this early work, we find in Freud and Breuer’s *Studies on Hysteria* the first formulation of what will become a basic principle in the psychoanalytic method. In the *Studies*, hysteric symptoms were conceived to be the result of an idea getting

²⁶² Christopher Bollas, *Cracking Up* (London: Routledge, 1995), 41.

²⁶³ Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud*, 11.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

²⁶⁵ “Comme le rêve, l’analyse tout à la fois ouvre à l’illimité et l’apprivoise.” Pontalis, *La Force d’Attraction*, 54. Translation mine.

shut off from a process of associations constantly going on in the mind.

In order to develop an hysteria, Freud wrote, “*one* essential condition must be fulfilled: an idea must be intentionally repressed from consciousness and excluded from associative modification.”²⁶⁶ Here we note how repression from consciousness and exclusion from associative activity are not simply two conjoined processes, but almost two ways of describing the same thing. The severing of its associative link with the rest of the mind was seen to isolate a traumatic experience, thus preserving its quota of psychic energy, which in turn was used to generate hysterical symptoms. Conversely, the physiological associative activity of the psyche constituted a functional response to trauma, which prevented it from becoming pathogenic by reworking and discharging the initial quota of affect.²⁶⁷ “The barriers of repression,” as Pontalis will later put it,

“Are located in-between representations. Their function is to prevent the establishment of connections in between them. The aim of the rule of free association is [instead] to establish new connections and to multiply the associative networks.”²⁶⁸

So, as hysteria was conceived as an impossibility, or a refusal, to connect a particular traumatic experience to other experiences and ideas in the “great complex of associations”²⁶⁹ that constitutes conscious mental activity, therapy was defined as the restoration of this connection - what Freud called an “associative correction” of the trauma.²⁷⁰ Association was therapeutic, then, since through it the patient could bring herself to experience a memory of the trauma, find a place for it among her other experiences, and finally put up an adequate response.

According to what we said so far, associative activity could seem to be a prerogative of the conscious mind, but it is not so: unconscious ideas can be associated among themselves, forming unconscious *complexes* of ideas.²⁷¹ In fact, the unconscious is characterised by a markedly free associative activity

²⁶⁶ Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, “Studies on Hysteria”, in *Freud: Complete Works*, Ivan Smith, ed. (2000 [1895]), 102. Emphasis added.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁶⁸ Pontalis, *Fenêtres*, 109. Translation mine.

²⁶⁹ Breuer and Freud, “Studies on Hysteria,” 12.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

- what Freud will later describe in terms of the primary process - and it is precisely the associations between unconscious ideas that the method of free associations was devised to bring to the surface.

The idea of a missing connection between representations gradually gave way to the idea of a displaced connection, as can be evinced by Freud's description of the mechanisms of hysteric conversion and defence. Conversion, he wrote, was "the transformation of psychological excitation into chronic somatic symptoms,"²⁷² which came as a consequence of the impossibility to process the quota of traumatic affect through association.²⁷³ Rather than being simply a blockage of an associative process, conversion was seen to take place when a quota of affect could not take its intended path and rather attached itself to a different, but still associatively connected, representation.²⁷⁴

In particular, conversion entailed what Freud called a symbolic transposition: the physical symptom symbolised the whole complex of ideas that constituted the memory of the trauma, in the sense that it was a means of representing them in the psyche (a tentative abreaction), and in the sense that it evoked the affects that were connected with it.²⁷⁵ Through the physiological function of association, then (that of providing an adequate abreaction to trauma), the task of representation and that of elaboration of traumatic experiences would seem to coincide, but not in the simple sense of connecting an idea to a symbol. Freud's view of conversion involved the concept of symbol, but always in connection with associations and polysemy. That "the symbolic relation linking symptom and meaning is" characterised by polysemy, so that "a single symptom may express several meanings,"²⁷⁶ as Laplanche and Pontalis note, can indeed be explained by the fact that this relation is one between a symptom and a complex of associations, not a single idea. In this sense, Freud's use of the word "symbol" in this context should be understood more as in its radical sense (from the Greek verb *symballo*, to put together), than as in the sense of a sign that conveys one specifically coded meaning. At least in Freud's early

²⁷² Ibid., 79.

²⁷³ Ibid., 102.

²⁷⁴ Indeed, associative connections between the physical symptom and the traumatic experience were still required in order for conversion to take place. Ibid., 158.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 66, 86, 130.

²⁷⁶ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, 90.

account of hysteria, then, symbolic representation in the psyche appears to be more a form of associative signification than a linguistic, Saussurean, relation between signifier and signified.

Displacement and screen memories. While the mechanism of conversion shed some light on the process through which ideas are connected in the psyche, the mechanism of defence addressed, to put it simply, the reason for repression, and the role played in it by discourse and social norms. Defence was conceived as “the refusal on the part of the patient’s whole ego to come to terms” with a traumatic group of ideas,²⁷⁷ and it will acquire in psychoanalytic theory an increasing scope, from being characteristic of hysteria to being a fundamental mechanism in the functioning of neuroses and of the psyche in general. In particular, we are interested in Freud’s conception of displacement, as one of the forms of defence, in that it can be seen to ground the logic of manifest and latent content that will become central to his understanding of dream.

In his essay on screen memories, which shortly preceded *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud addressed the relevance of childhood amnesia, and the apparent triviality of the few memories that one retained from that period of one’s life. He conceived this phenomenon as a result of a displacement along associative lines, intended to preserve, and disguise, emotively significant experiences subjected to repression:

“We shall then form a notion that two psychical forces are concerned in bringing about memories of this sort. *One of these forces takes the importance of the experience as a motive for seeking to remember it, while the other - a resistance - tries to prevent any such preference from being shown. These two opposing forces do not cancel each other out, nor does one of them (whether with or without loss to itself) overpower the other. Instead, a compromise is brought about, somewhat on the analogy of the resultant in a parallelogram of forces.* And the compromise is this. What is recorded as a mnemonic image is not the relevant experience itself - in this respect the resistance gets its way; what is recorded is another psychical element closely associated with the objectionable one [...]. *The result*

²⁷⁷ Breuer and Freud, “Studies on Hysteria,” 151.

of the conflict is therefore that, instead of the mnemic image which would have been justified by the original event, another is produced which has been to some degree associatively displaced from the former one."²⁷⁸

So, the value of a screen memory resides not in its own content, "but in the relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed."²⁷⁹ The connection between the two is one of associative displacement: emotive significance is diverted along an associative path within a network of associations. And it will be by evoking other parts of this network, that the original, or at any rate the contingently significant, displaced experience can be brought to consciousness.

Freud affirmed that displacement was a form of substitution,²⁸⁰ but, I would say, only in the sense that, *in the conscious mind*, we have the screen memory and not the memory of the actual experience. Quite obviously, in fact, the screen memory is present and significant in the first place only because the repressed memory still exists in the unconscious, and since the associative link between the two is unconscious, but still in place: the two memories do not cancel one another, but rather interact in order to give rise to the compromise formation that is the screen memory. Latent does not mean something that is lost, then, and thus something that can be "found" again or "brought to the surface", like a missing object. It refers less to an exclusion, than to a quality of experience, and less to a substitution than to a superimposition and a metaphorical relation.

Screen memories in turn provided the model for realising that apparently erratic and senseless ideas and associations in everyday life can never be considered random or unmeaningful, and even less irrelevant (or, at least, that they can always be made significant). On the contrary, analytic experience brought Freud to think that, actually, the more an association seemed trivial

²⁷⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories", in *Freud: Complete Works*, Ivan Smith, ed. (2000 [1899]), 490. Emphasis added.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 501.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 491.

and unreasonable, the more it was likely to be significant.²⁸¹

In the case of dreams, describing their formation and their content as a result of associative activity was necessary, according to Freud, to go beyond an interpretative technique that “translates any given piece of a dream’s content by a fixed key.”²⁸² As Pontalis remarked, psychoanalysis is less concerned with the distorted memory itself, than with the work that this distortion effects²⁸³ - a work that can only be addressed beyond a static, symbolic, reading of the manifest content, through the method of free association. As any analytic session shows, interpretation of a dream is only possible through (and in fact consists first of all in) the evocation of an ample network of associations - memories, dreams, phrases, events, emotions, and so on - in which, and only through which, the elements of the dream acquire a contingent meaning and assume their psychic significance. The method of free association is then a method for the evocation of this associative field, and it is the whole of this field of associations that is the object of interpretation, not the sole manifest content - which, in fact, hardly exists as such. The “text” of dream interpretation can never be the manifest content of the dream as it is experienced by the dreamer, and is never just its verbalisation in the analytic setting, but rather the experience of the dream as it is expressed and extended during the session through free associations, in connection with everything else that the analysand says and does during the session, as well as in relation to the analyst’s own free associations, and free floating attention, and her memory of the rest of the treatment. It is only in this embodied and contingent context that the psychic significance of what is brought to the session can be felt, and, thus, eventually addressed also as an object of an act of interpretation.

²⁸¹ An idea that was coopted by the surrealists, and that they arguably pushed a little too far. For André Breton, in particular, free associativity lost its contingent character to become instead an expression of an inevitable fate. His love for the *trouvaille* could be seen as a flirt with utter contingency and at the same time as a form of mastery over it. Surrealism, in a way, could have been moved by the idea and the desire that the chance encounter between a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table, in which the Conte de Lautréamont saw the essence of beauty, was not a chance after all. See Jean-Bertran Pontalis (1988) “Les Vases non-Communicants,” *Perdre de Vue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 133-150.

²⁸² Sigmund Freud, “The Interpretation of Dreams,” in *Freud: Complete Works*, Ivan Smith, ed. (2000), 606.

²⁸³ Pontalis, *Ce Temps Qui ne Passe Pas*, 114.

Method and process of free associations. With “free associations” we first of all intend a method in psychoanalytic therapy.²⁸⁴ Through the method of free associations - that is, by saying aloud to the analyst whatever it comes to her mind, regardless of logic or any other conscious concern - the analysand shapes for the analytic couple her inner train of thoughts and emotions. In this sense, free associations are the technique by which the analysand complies with the fundamental rule - to speak her mind by relinquishing her conscious watch over it. In more technical terms, the method of free associations is intended to make the primary censorship - the one that represses ideas into the unconscious - more evident by suspending the secondary censorship - the conscious control over one’s utterances and flow of feelings and thoughts. While the secondary process seeks to circumscribe and define meaning and works by making rational, symbolically and linguistically viable connections in relation to the reality principle, the primary process instead disregards the principles by which representations are supposed to be connected, and rather aims to extend and divert signification by working on the intensity and by trying to satisfy the aim of the affect that drives them. The kind of regime of experience which characterises the primary process is therefore characterised by paradox and, irreverence, and by a constant “sliding” of meaning, by displacement, condensation, overdetermination and the coincidence of opposites.

Free association, Pontalis argued, is fundamentally a language beyond the mastery of concepts: a language that cannot be reduced to the functions that describe it.²⁸⁵ In the analytic setting, he wrote, free associations are the way through which the *infans* speaks.²⁸⁶ And the analyst’s free floating attention, we might add, is the psychoanalytic name for the capacity all subjects have to listen to it. Other than for the troubling indifference to its hierarchies that free association brings to the order of language, then, free association (especially when compared with the paradigm of interpretation) can be regarded as an egalitarian principle in psychoanalytic therapy and theory, for its significance lies in the establishment of a shared ground between the analyst and the analysand, which is in turn based on their equal emotional “intelligence” of their relation. In this sense, as the pupil and the ignorant schoolmaster had in-between them

²⁸⁴ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, 169.

²⁸⁵ Pontalis, *L’Amour des Commencements*, 33.

²⁸⁶ Pontalis, *Ce Temps Qui ne Passe Pas*, 32.

the book as the material support of their equality,²⁸⁷ the analytic couple would have the space of transference. In that space, language is something different than a means for a symbolic distribution of experience and human relations, and rather becomes more evident, in itself, as a space of sharing:

“Through analysis, language is released from all function. It is returned, as it were, to its fundamental power and infirmity. It moves us and carries us away toward what continuously escapes it. It is transported outside of itself, it is *transferred*.”²⁸⁸

The lack of mastery that defines free associations, indeed, does not entail, like hypnosis, a complete loss of consciousness or awareness from the part of the analysand - it can rather be seen as a different regime of consciousness and awareness, as a form of dispassionate self-observation,²⁸⁹ that would be characteristic of both the analyst and the analysand, both the spectator and the critical subject. With the method of association the analysand relinquishes her conscious control over the flow of her thoughts and utterances, and by this it allows another agency to speak, which at the same time is and is not herself. In a way, free association is a self-shattering and self-dissemination that is more done *in* language than through it, by which the self is returned to a contact with its own heteronomy and language is returned to its semiotic and unruly dimension.

The removal of the secondary censorship, of the conscious control on the activity of our mind, brings to the surface a flux of thoughts, feelings and experiences that are continuously subjected to association. This stream of associations, which is constantly taking place in the mind and continuously intertwining conscious and unconscious thoughts and affects, could then be called a *process* of free associations which the *method* of free association would be designed to bring to the surface. In this sense, free association would not be merely an analytic technique, but also relate to everything that goes on in the mind independently from the scope and control of our conscious awareness: free

²⁸⁷ Rancière, *Le Maître Ignorant*, 37.

²⁸⁸ “Par l’analyse, le langage est délié de toute fonction. Il est comme rendu à sa puissance et à son infirmité foncières. Il porte et déporte vers ce que lui échappe. Il est transporté hors de lui, il est transfert.” Pontalis, *Ce Temps Qui ne Passe Pas*, 33. Translation mine.

²⁸⁹ Bollas, *Free Association*, 7.

association constitutes, indeed, as Bollas argues, a creative component of ordinary language and thinking.²⁹⁰ Still, the process of free association would be something different than free talking or free speech:²⁹¹ beyond the flux of verbal associations and thoughts that the subject can willingly articulate, free association is significant for the emergence, within this flux, of something radically incommensurable with the order of language and with the subject's established sense of self.

Pontalis refers to the Freudian term *Einfall* - a term which means idea, but that also means invasion, and that which comes unexpectedly into the mind - to speak about the moment of the emergence of an association, before it is given a further and more defined form (linguistic, emotive, visual or otherwise).²⁹² *Einfall*, he wrote, is the unexpected thought, the strange thought and thought as a stranger, the contingent event that contradicts the most assured theories, a dissonance.²⁹³ *Einfall*, we can say, would name what in the process of free association is radically contingent and dissensual: the analyst can prescribe to free associate, Pontalis wrote, but he cannot "demand that the unexpected come and meet his patients, or himself."²⁹⁴

In the analytic setting, free association is complemented by the analyst's evenly suspended, free floating, or evenly hovering, attention: free associations made by the patient, that is, are met by the analyst's own openness to association, which is devised to produce a similarly unrestrained flow of thoughts in the analyst, devoid of "personal inclinations, prejudices, and theoretical assumptions however well grounded they might be,"²⁹⁵ as a necessary step to relate to and understand the analysand's associations, and prior to interpretation. These two processes - or, rather, these two states of associative contemplation - are, as Pontalis attested, in many ways homologous.²⁹⁶ In order for her attention to be floating indifferently from one of the analysand's association to the other,

²⁹⁰ Bollas, *Free Association*, 67.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁹² Pontalis, *En Marge des Nuits*, 112.

²⁹³ Pontalis, *l'Amour des Commencements*, 148.

²⁹⁴ "L'analyste peut prescrire: associez'. Il ne peut pas exiger que l'inattendu vienne à la rencontre de ses patients, ou de lui-même [...]" Pontalis, *En Marge des Nuits*, 112. Translation mine.

²⁹⁵ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, 43.

²⁹⁶ Pontalis, *Après Freud*, 39.

and from one to the other of the analyst's own thoughts and feelings, indeed, the psychoanalyst has to be engaged in a process of free association, even if she does not voice it in the same way that is required from the analysand by the fundamental rule. On the reverse as well, the analysand's abandonment to the free flow of her thoughts and emotions is not far from an instance of self-listening or free floating attention. To both the analyst and the analysand, the method of free association is a way of evoking a network of associations and letting radically contingent events emerge within this network and in the context of their encounter.

It is important to remember that free associations - although they constitute, together with free floating attention, the defining mode of signification and language in the analytic encounter - are not a direct expression of the primary process: they rather lay in-between, and thus connect, lived-experience and signification. They occupy a place and institute a tension between a form of aesthetic play and the destructuring effects of the unconscious and the id on signification itself. Free associative speech, in other words, finds itself actually in between the primary and the secondary process, and can be seen to constitute, as we have written, a form of compromise and a connection between their incommensurable logics. Free associations are "free" precisely in that they are not controlled by the logic of the secondary process, of rationality and consensual language: it is in this sense that they appear to be meaningless, and the major breakthrough that psychoanalysis brought about was indeed to hold them significant despite their lack of organised meaning. At the same time, however, the irrational which was thus established as the object of psychoanalysis was also submitted to the logic of its interpretation. In this perspective, the act of interpretation does not incorporate and exhaust the significance of free associations and free floating attention: what makes them valuable to therapy in the first place (and, arguably, to a conception of psychic and aesthetic experience as well) is not the meaning that can be found in them, but rather the kind of interpersonal space that they allow to establish. Especially in relation to our focus on aesthetic experience, then, it is not to free association as the prelude to an interpretation, but rather as a particular modality of experience that we will refer to them.

As we have seen, while free associations as a technique is, strictly speaking, exclusive to the analytic setting, the process of free associations would be instead

an ordinary form of experience. At the same time, it would not be limited to a series of connections and disconnections between words or concepts, but involve all kinds of representations: images, sounds, the sensations of touch and smell, actions, moods, and so on and so forth. In truth, even within the scope of psychoanalytic treatment, the scope of free association is not limited to a verbal play of the signifier, but rather potentially includes all other forms of representation and expression: playing, for instance, is commonly used to provide analytic material in the analysis of children in an analogous way to the method of free associations in the treatment of adults. In the same way, Donald Winnicott's squiggle game, in which the analyst and the analysand take turns extending and transforming a drawing, could be taken to be an example of a visual form of free association and of its use in psychoanalytic therapy. All in all, I would argue that the kind of experience that the free associative process engages is, at its roots, synaesthetic - that is, characterised by an interplay and a fusion between all kinds of sense-experience. Distinguishing one sense from the other, would then be one of the first, associative and interpersonal, articulations of embodied experience.

The metapsychological spectator and the paradigm of interpretation.

Where the application of psychoanalysis to the study of film should have led to cultivate an attention to what is contingent, and even idiosyncratic, in film experience, it regularly prompted, instead, an overvaluation and an abuse of metapsychology. Further reduced in its scope and themes by its connection with semiology, sociology and the theory of ideology, and then by a certain routine, psychoanalytic metapsychology has often become in film studies something of a standardised *canovaccio* for textual interpretation. This paradigm of interpretation, together with the logic of demystification, tends to survive the criticism against psychoanalysis as a discourse and as a method: symbolic readings tend to come up even from oppositional standpoints, and metapsychological counter-narratives are more often explored than non-metapsychological approaches, at the expense of the epistemological, theoretical and aesthetic significance that a different understanding of psychoanalytic theory could support.

This overvaluation of psychoanalytic metapsychology against both the phenomenology of psychic experience and its radical contingency has, of course,

conspicuous effects when it comes to the study of spectatorship and film. Much like the spectator of ideological interpellation is not imagined in its contingent encounter with language and ideology, but rather held to be possessed and shaped by them, the psychic experience of the spectator is not taken as a situated and substantially erratic phenomenon, but rather reduced to the ahistorical order of the metapsychological structures and narratives that is supposed to make sense of it. It is in fact by downplaying the unintelligibility of the spectator's encounter with film that the discursivity of her experience is turned into discursive determination, and, in a similar way, it is through a reduction of the erraticness of psychic experience that the more embodied and contingent aspects of subjectivity are reduced within the Oedipal structures and narratives that correspond to their explanation. The failure of psychoanalytic film theory to account for the spectator's emancipation can then be seen to rest, first of all, in its endorsement of this kind of conceptual and Oedipal mastery.²⁹⁷

In this way, the scope of psychoanalysis and of the psyche in film and cultural studies risks to be reduced to that of redoubling, and merely reinscribing at a more intimate level, what has already been decided at the level of ideology and discursive power. A level that is similarly made more "readable" by its conflation with the intelligible discourses of the dominant "symbolic" and their more or less clear metapsychological articulation. That is to say, on one hand, that a recognition of the discursivity of the psyche and of the fantasmatic character of ideology does not automatically allow to bridge the incommensurability between recognisable social forms and the contingent subjectivity of the symbolic order.²⁹⁸ And, on the other hand, that ideology and discursive power are, like embodied psychic experience, themselves largely beyond our rational grasp.

In apparatus theory, in particular, one has frequently the impression that the ideological is used as a model to understand the psychic, and not the other way around. On the contrary, one should rather be led to expect, within the very domain of discourse, the same diversions and paradoxes, the same bizarre

²⁹⁷ Jan Campbell, *Arguing with the Phallus: Feminist, Queer, and Post-Colonial Theory, a Psychoanalytic Contribution* (London: Zed, 2000), 82.

²⁹⁸ In this respect, see Julia Kristeva's crucial distinction between "social symbolic system" and "subjective symbolic order." Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 67.

logic and radical alterity that characterises the unconscious and the primary process. The same lack in knowledge that troubles the identity of the subject makes ideology itself less intelligible. Less intelligible but not, by this, less effective. Discursive power is one thing, indeed, and another is its authoritarian framing: the first is an inevitable dimension of experience and subjectivity that individuates the discursivity and heteronomy of the subject, but also the level of its agency; the second is a measure of pedagogical abrutissement that impairs the subject's emancipation and agency in a more direct and less ambivalent way.

With its particular appropriation of psychoanalytic metapsychology, apparatus theory presupposes the overdetermination of the psychic dimension of subjectivity, at the same time significantly downplaying the specific dissensual agency that can be attributed to the unconscious. The irrationality of the id, then, instead of providing the ground for the radical contingency and unforeseeability of the subject's experience, and thus for her potential for emancipation and subversiveness, is turned into a further sanction of its incapacity to understand - to relate, that is, to the dynamics of its own agency, to the extent of its responsibility, and to the significance of its own lack of mastery. At the same time, the unconscious is understood as the internalised form of an external mastery over the self, and is thus made, again, into an incarnation of the logic of inequality.

As a consequence, the apparatic spectator ends up being less a psychéd being, than a metapsychological subject. In fact, psychoanalytic film theory almost exclusively considers a spectator whose psyche is reduced to the metapsychological concepts and narratives that are used to describe it, and whose unconscious, rather than constituting a radically incommensurable dimension of subjective and embodied experience, is either taken to be a container of culturally and ideologically coded meaning or - in a complete reversal which still fulfils the same authoritarian function - a completely inaccessible site of traumatic refuse. Either by being taken as an essentially meaningful and intelligible but hidden object - and thus as a prompt for the logic of interpretation - or as a dimension absolutely external to meaning and signification - and thus as the pre-discursive support of discursive power itself - the unconscious would thus serve to cement the authority of theory. In the end, we can say that the spectator of apparatus theory is a *metapsychological subject* not just in the sense that it holds an abstract position, constructed according to a specific set of

metapsychological concepts, but, above all, in the sense that it is a form of subjectivity that results from a specific regime of understanding of psychoanalysis and psychic experience - more specifically, as we have argued, from a normative and authoritarian reduction of their scope to that of their metapsychology. The limits of the apparatusic spectator are first of all the limits of this reduction, not (or not just) the limits of psychoanalytic metapsychology itself - and, clearly, not the limits of a psychoanalytic approach to the arts as such.

The intelligent unconscious, Pontalis wrote, is also the intelligible unconscious²⁹⁹ - intelligent, that is, reasonable: one we could reason with and, in the end, that we can bring to reason and thus imagine to control (or, at the very least, one by which we are controlled in the same ways we can imagine to control it, other people, animals and things). To this idea of the unconscious, Pontalis contrasts its *bêtise*,³⁰⁰ its animality and its stupidity: in the sense, that is, of its deafness to reason and of its intractability to meaning and authoritative knowledge, and, eventually, in the sense of the incommensurability of its forms of experience with conscious human “intelligence”.

Similarly, we could say that the intelligent and intelligible spectator is also the one that can be most easily targeted and disciplined by cinematic institutions. The institutional power of normative framing of spectatorship and subjectivity rests indeed in two concomitant assumptions: that the experience of the spectator is fundamentally intelligible (even more, that it is essentially a matter of meaning), and that the spectator is not capable, on its own, to understand it for what it really is. By this, the incommensurability of the unconscious is first reduced to a latency of meaning, and, then, this latency is equated with the subject’s presumed intellectual incapacity. Through this double normative reduction, the unconscious ends up certifying the helplessness of the spectator in the domain of ideology and to its own heteronomy and desire, at the same time that it grants a boundless (although not absolute) authority to theoretical interpretation. In the pedagogical regime, the theorist is not infallibly right - being “right”, after all, is mainly a matter of desire - but it can always say something: its presence in the space of film is already justified by the authoritarian structure of the apparatus. More precisely, the theorist can always argue for the

²⁹⁹ Pontalis, *L’Amour des Commencements*, 120.

³⁰⁰ Pontalis, *Ce Temps Qui ne Passe Pas*, 118.

necessity of an *explanation* of the spectator's embodied experience. From without this authoritarian reduction, instead, the unconscious would rather signify a limit of the very power of interpretation, and a lack in the intellectual mastery of (and on) the discursive institutions that regulate subjectivity. In particular, psychoanalytic interpretations of film texts, of the kind that read unconscious complexes as the hidden structures of the narrative, or as the latent content of the film's discourse, in fact suppress the dissensual and aesthetic potentials of free association, in that they concentrate on those theoretical assumptions and conscious judgements that the method of free associations has precisely the function to bypass.

The apparatic spectator would thus lose something of its emancipation, not really because its position is discursive and ideological, but first of all because of the pedagogical regime of understanding of the dynamics of ideology and fantasy within which its position is further inscribed. Similarly, it would lose something of its heteronomy and embodiment, not because psychoanalysis foregrounds the subject's lack of mastery, but rather because of a normative understanding of psychoanalytic theory. What stands against normative institutions, then, is never just the subject who is consciously and integrally aware of them, the one who *fully understands* the mechanisms of ideology and film signification, and thus the one who *chooses* to be subversive, but rather the one whose resistance is first of all an expression of the indeterminacy of lived-experience and the primary process.

If the subversive spectator *must* be one and awake - if she must believe in and affirm its own autonomy, and, in turn, she must be told how to realize and signify the very fact that she is aware - the wayward spectator finds a further emancipation from its own identitarian, confessional, self-representation precisely in the dreaminess of its experience and in the forgetfulness of its memory of film. By this, I am not merely revaluing the imaginative dimension of spectatorship by putting it against the dimension of ideology, but I am arguing that the discursivity of film experience *as well as its ideological effect* lay significantly beyond the possibility of their mastery and of their rational reconstruction. Intellectual emancipation, as a consequence, would lay not beyond the dimension of ideological fantasy as such - in the sense of the power of discourse and the heteronomy of subjectivity - but first of all beyond an authoritarian *theory* of ideology, beyond an authoritarian regime of understanding the interdependence

of language and the subject.

Emancipation, indeed, expresses itself not only against the authority that institutions perform, but also against the mastery that the subject can enjoy, and exert on herself. If there is a ground of equality, then, it is never just the speaking subject in the sense of the rational and self-sufficient self, the one who possesses meaning, but the subject who is traversed by signification while never grasping it (and herself, in it) entirely. to the extent that the subject is a psychoanalytic one, in the end, it should also be seen as one whose indenture to identity, and whose dependency from the mastery of concepts, are at the same time inevitable and fundamentally in question.

Free association and film experience. It would be possible to recognise in free associations a basic principle of film form (arguably, Sergei Eisenstein's montage theory was not very far from doing that) or to trace the import of this concept in the history of cinema (its centrality in the aesthetics of surrealism, for instance), or, finally, in the history of film theory. Here I would rather examine the concept and the practice of free associations as the fundamental ground of film experiencing. One that would correspond to the full range of contingency of the spectator's encounter with film, affirm its equal intelligence of the medium, and relinquish neither the significance of the discursive dimension of spectatorship, nor the kind of agent heteronomy that characterises the psychoanalytic subject.

If one takes the primariness of the primary process seriously, experiencing in general would indeed appear to be an associative phenomenon: signification would proceed from the evocation of a complex of heterogeneous associations - sensations, feelings, ideas, words, memories and concepts - to their linking in associative chains, from family resemblances of sensations, memories and signifiers, to conceptual and linguistic meaning. It is actually the presence of particularly dense "knots" in the network of associations that suggests the existence of a specific object in perception, or of a defined meaning in signification. The same we can say about film experience. If the moving image emerges in the spectator's experience from a mass of vibrant visual substance, addressing film signification would not be a matter of following polysemous connotations arising from a definite representation, but, on the reverse, a matter of retracing how the associative plurality of meaning engenders the moving image in the

first place. This shift from an objectual to a phenomenological and associative understanding of the moving image, despite its immediate counter-intuitivity, corresponds in fact to a very basic assumption: none other than the discursivity of the image and of subjectivity, which are both central to the notion of spectatorship. There is no such thing as a thing as such, one could say: a thing would always already be the centre in the contingent and embodied, associative network of its discursive articulation.

If an image can take shape within contingent discursive signification at all, then, it is because the image is not the product of a fixed symbolic code, nor of mimetic resemblance, but rather a composite, mobile and potentially contradictory associative formation. One that, as we will argue in the next chapter, returns signification to its more embodied and contingent dimension, making of it first of all a function of contact and situatedness, and not exclusively a matter of symbolic codes. At the same time that it confirms the discursive nature of film experience, indeed, what is free in free association defines the fundamental level of its situatedness and singular contingency, against and beyond its reduction within specific principles of meaning and cognition, and within the bound dynamics of the secondary process.

The ideas of discursivity and subjective contingency eventually suggest that we shift, in our understanding of the film image, from a logic of indexicality or mimetic resemblance to a logic of associative construction. With this, they also imply a move away from the regime of representation toward the aesthetic regime, from the ontology toward the phenomenology of the image and from a metapsychological toward a more embodied account of film experiencing. Free associations are not beyond discursivity, then, but they should rather be taken as a particular, “wayward”, way of engaging with the very discursivity and materiality of film and film experience. As such, they constitute less a model of linguistic signification than a mode of embodied film experience - or, rather, what they provide is actually a connection between these two dimensions. As we have seen, in fact, free associations mediate between the more material, bodily and unbound logic of the primary process and the symbolic articulation of the secondary process.

What matters most to us, is that the process of free association is not intrinsically regulated by the principles of its intelligibility. Unlike the secondary process, its aim is not to be understood, but rather to create significance: in the

early Freudian terms of the *Studies on Hysteria*, its function was to allow an affect to be abreacted; in relation to screen memories and dream, its function was to signify a latent thought through a displaced representation; in relation to transference, finally, free association can be seen to evoke the very space in which the embodied and contingent encounter between the analysand and the analyst can take place. Translated to film spectatorship, then, free association would describe, at least in some of its respect, the aesthetic ground of film experience, and a space in which the subject is exposed to its heteronomy and to the dissensual contingency of the *Einfall*.

What free association plays against, then, is not really the dimension of meaning and significance - whose existence, in fact, they enable - but rather the regime of interpretation and, more specifically, the principles that individuate “proper” meaning and consensual connections. While still being a source of contingent and singular significance, the process of free association is not reducible to a definite articulation of meaning: each new association in fact prevents us from understanding the whole, because it moves signification further and displaces the meaning of the whole complex by a slight, but always significant, degree. In order to reduce it to meaning, this process must be, at some point, interrupted - not unlike, as they say, the life of a person can be judged only after its death, meaning would arise at each faltering and interruption of the flow of associations. In concrete reality, signification is never a pure and continuous current of associations: it can be better described, in fact, as a tension between free associativity and the laws of language, between the structures of meaning and concepts and their situatedness and singular appropriation, between the primary and the secondary process.

Still, the experience of free association and free floating attention shows to the subject a place beyond the logic of interpretation, beyond the reduction of experience to the principles that make it intellectually intelligible, a realm of what is left uninterpreted and that can be extended, instead, in directions that exceed our habits of being. Free association can thus be taken as a means, but even more as a *site*, of self-shattering and dissensus. In this sense, free association stands against both the idea of communication, and that of identity as an intelligible form of the “self”, predicated on a necessarily normative articulation of the personal and the social. In the free associativity of its embodied experience, the spectator finds indeed its heteronomy, together with a lack of

foresight, a lack of mastery over its look, and over its capacity to understand, that are in fact the aesthetic guarantee of its contingent freedom and fundamental emancipation. In order to be an emancipated spectator, in the end, one should not attempt to “read” the film: for it is in fact first of all in the attempt to reduce its encounter with film into meaning that the spectator, as a subject, is reduced into meaning as well.

Coherently, the difference between a passive and an emancipated spectator would not be a function of knowledge and mastery, but, as Rancière put it, of a shift to a different kind of sensible world: one which entails the rupture of the links between meaning and meaning, as well as the rupture of the sensual coordinates that allow one to be at its place within a given order of things.³⁰¹ “The spectator,” Rancière wrote, elaborating on this point, “who experiences the free play of the aesthetic [...] enjoys an autonomy of a very special kind. It is not the autonomy of free Reason, subduing the anarchy of sensation. It is the suspension of that kind of autonomy. It is an autonomy strictly related to a withdrawal of power”³⁰² In this sense, free association is not intrinsically beyond the dimension of discourse and power, as we have said, but it rather constitutes a different modality of their performance, corresponding to a non-authoritarian regime of of knowledge and subjectivity. If put under a certain mastery, instead, the method of free associations loses its hospitality to the *Einfall*, to the disruptive irruption of the id, and, with it, also its therapeutic, aesthetic, and political function. This mastery is usually that of the interpreting analyst, too eagerly performing her function as the subject supposed to know, but it can also come in the form of an extreme associative proficiency on the part of the analysand. In this case, the analysand becomes so comfortable in the flow of her associations that they end up circumventing the unexpected. “Free” in free association is indeed the *opposite* of “volitional”. As we have argued, in free association, a dispossession of meaning and a shattering of identity takes place, and it is arguably only in the space that the collapse of the secondary process opens up, in the as-if relation that can be seen to characterise film experience,

³⁰¹ “Ce qui opère [dans le passage d’un monde sensible à un autre], ce (75) sont des dissassociations: la rupture d’un rapport entre le sens et le sens, entre un monde visible, un mode d’affection, un régime d’interprétation et un espace de possibilités; c’est la rupture des repères sensibles qui permettaient d’être à sa place dans un ordre des choses.” Rancière, *Le Spectateur Emancipé*, 74-75.

³⁰² Rancière, *Dissensus*, 117.

that the spectator's acts of identification and its aesthetic encounter with film become possible in the first place.

In this respect, it could be misleading to think about free associations just as a series of connections, and of the process of free associations as a simple accumulation and superimposition of distinct "unities". While it is surely true that the *Einfall* is always perceived a synaesthetic tangle of heterogeneous impressions, and that free associative speech or imagining tendentially proceed by addition, linearly in time and contiguously in space and enunciation, it is also true that the very precondition of the process of free associations is a cut: a disassociation. To associate, Pontalis writes, is first of all to dissociate from consensual meaning.³⁰³ As Freud wrote, free associations "upset" the innocence of the manifest dream,³⁰⁴ or, we could say, borrowing a concept from Bollas, they ironically "crack up" the self we are accustomed to.³⁰⁵ The freedom that free association enjoy from the bounds of the secondary process takes indeed first of all the form of negative link, a disconnection from conventional codes, from our habits of feeling, thinking, talking and seeing, and of a disrespect toward all that, in signification and dialogue, is proper, rational and correct. To free associate is first of all to dissociate from the consensual and the transparently meaningful, from, as Pontalis put it, "the *established* associations, those that are firmly in place, in order to make other associations appear, often dangerous ones..."³⁰⁶

Free association is necessarily more troubling and dissensual, but also less "material" and clearly identifiable, than any act of free speech: if free speech can very well be the expression of a self-possessed rational and unitary individual, free association is bound to expose its heteronomy, to disturb the subject and the articulation of the social space it inhabits. On one hand, then, the contingency and "freeness" of association make it so that even a conformist or escapist spectator is always liable - threatened, if you like - of defying its own intention to conform: the *Einfall* is always an opening for dissensual meaning, not only directed against institutions and discursive hegemony, but also against

³⁰³ Pontalis, *L'Amour des Commencements*, 115.

³⁰⁴ Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," in *Freud: Complete Works*, ed. Ivan Smith (2000 [1900]), 673.

³⁰⁵ See Bollas, *Cracking Up*, 168-169.

³⁰⁶ Pontalis, *Ce Temps Qui ne Passe Pas*, 115. Emphasis added.

the pretence of mastery that is performed by the self. On the other hand, the agency that are characteristic of psychic experience and the subversiveness that can be recognised in the subject other to itself, is never truly volitional, never fully intelligible and controllable. To lose the productive potential of this otherness, to downplay the spectator's "waywardness", is at the same time a way to reduce it to intelligibility and to reinstate a pre-Freudian conception of desire and a pre-Marxist notion of ideology as a false consciousness. Free associations, on the contrary, force the subject in an extreme and intrinsically distressing proximity not only to what she encounters, but to herself and her peculiar ways of encountering the world. The dimension of contiguity and contingency to which free associations give a shape is at the same time a form of escape from identity, and a way of not overlooking our own finiteness and specificity as embodied subjects.

The scope of spectatorship shifts our focus from an understanding of film experience centred on a unitary and self-sufficient individual, to one that is at the same time interpersonal - that is, dialogic and made of encounters with other people - and impersonal or heteronomous - made of encounters with what (in us and outside of us) is not us. Free association evokes a dimension that lies in-between people, but also one that is the shifting shape of subjectivity itself. Even in the solitude and withdrawal that characterise the moment of projection, at least in its dominant form, our experience of film involves us as a subject with a history of encounters, it evokes in us the people and the the circumstances that, as they say, made of us what we are and that, in their ungraspability, are still making us be something different than what we think we are. Free associations would be relevant to our understanding of film experience, then, less as a formalist model of film signification (which will eventually return within the logic of the text and the regime of interpretation), than for the kind of interpersonal space and heteronomous subjectivity that they call into being.

Embodiment and film experience

If there is an essential characteristic of embodiment, it is indeterminacy.

Thomas J. Csordas. *Embodiment and Experience*.

But how is one supposed to run from something one is, where is the reference point, the foothold from which to oppose it? Our form permeates us, imprisons us from within as well as from without.

Witold Gombrowicz. *Ferdydurke*.

Ontology and the phenomenological turn.

In recent years, we have come to speak of a phenomenological turn in film studies, which is taking place in the context of the decline of the paradigm of apparatus theory, and of an overall renewal of interest in embodied and bodily experience on the part of cultural studies and the arts. To set a landmark for the use of the expression, it is becoming customary to refer to the 2013 Queen Mary University of London symposium that was dedicated to the subject.³⁰⁷ The foundations of the turn itself, however, were established gradually in the mid and late Nineties through a range of references - from transcendental to existential phenomenology, from radical feminism to cognitive theory, from

³⁰⁷ "The Phenomenological Turn in Film Studies." Queen Mary University of London, 23 May 2013.

deconstructionism to the neurosciences. There is hardly one simple common measure to these works: the “phenomenological” denomination in film studies is in fact heterogeneous in its methods, in its very conceptions of phenomenology, in its foci, and in its aims. If any common features are to be found they are, first of all, in the general intention of placing film phenomenology beyond apparatus theory and psychoanalytic film theory through a reevaluation of the embodied agency of spectators, of the situatedness of their encounter with film, and of the bodiliness and the material sensuousness of their experience. Other recognisable features of the turn are less specific objects and perspectives than a series of tensions - between pre-discursive forms of knowledge and their normative regulation, between presence and meaning, vision and the flesh, cognition and sensation, pleasure and desire - that phenomenology allows to reshape and connect in a more coherent way, despite the fact that these tensions are often resolved by different authors in antithetic directions.

In a most basic way, we can say that film phenomenology entails a turn away from the logic of ontology - from an idea of reality as something independent from, or preceding, its apprehension by a human subject. So, a phenomenological approach to film would, or should, place itself first of all beyond an ontology of the moving image. That is, on one hand, beyond the idea that the moving image can be studied “as such”, independently from it being a more or less contingent object of embodied experience. And, on the other, beyond an objectification of the spectator’s relation to the image, and of the image to the phenomenal world (beyond the idea that to the indexicality of the moving image would correspond an unmediated representation of reality). In any case, a phenomenological approach would shift the focus from an eminently textual conception of film signification to one that is centred in embodied and situated experience. It should be clear that, in this broad sense, a phenomenological perspective is not a recent fact in film theory, but rather represents a longstanding concern in understanding film experience, reaching beyond the adoption and the articulation of a specific philosophical paradigm, and back to the fundamental problems of perception, realism, the imaginary and, indeed, the concept of spectatorship.

With the idea of cinema as an ideological institution, of film as a discursive object and of spectatorship as a signifying practice, psychoanalytic film theory already entailed a fundamental shift from the ontology of the moving image

toward its phenomenology - if not in terms of embodied experiencing, at least in terms of the discursivity of film experience. In many respects, then (the situatedness of spectatorship, the relation of the “real” subject and of more bodily forms of experience with the dimension of language and discourse, the role of the body in the conceptualisation of subjectivity, and the politics of the body’s representation), the phenomenological turn comes as a critique but also as an extension of some of the fundamental issues that were first addressed by apparatus theory.³⁰⁸ What is characteristic of a phenomenological approach, then, is less the disclosure of a previously uncharted territory, than a different account of the phenomenological dimension of film experience and spectatorship, an alternative regime of understanding of the body of the spectator in its encounter with the film.

It goes without saying that a phenomenological approach is bound to foreground embodied film experience film as the main object of film theory, and of the spectator’s body as the main site of its significance. A phenomenological turn, then, inaugurates a revival of the study of spectatorship, at the same time recognising more power and responsibility to audiences in relation to aesthetic experience, and shifting the centre of the theoretical account of experiencing itself closer to the individual viewer. Closer to its singular contingency, that is, and thus away from the intelligibility of the text (if not necessarily away from the situatedness of its cultural context) and away from the structures of metapsychology and the institutions of ideology (if not entirely away from film’s discursivity). From a phenomenological perspective, in fact, the spectator’s experience is still culturally and historically located, but is less unavoidably and never entirely determined by film textuality and by the ideological institutions of the medium.

In some of its forms (Laura Marks, Laura McMahon, Jennifer Barker), phenomenological film theory pursues an epistemology of touch, contiguity and connectedness, as opposed to the distance-based, objectual, forms of knowledge and experience that are characterised by an alliance of vision and intellectual mastery.³⁰⁹ While embodied experience - in the work of Vivian Sobchack, for instance - is centred in the body but can still be a form of conscious cognition,

³⁰⁸ Richard Rushton, “Deleuzian Spectatorship,” *Screen* 50, no. 1 (2009): 46.

³⁰⁹ See Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 162-163.

the description of bodily experience and the revaluation of its scope against that of vision that we find in the work of Marks points instead to a different epistemology and a different equilibrium of power relations between bodies and their representations. What this approach suggests, I would say, is to look for the significance of embodied film experience not in the contraposition of the visible and the invisible - of the body and its screen (mis-)representations - but rather in a tension between the visible and the visual.

This particular form of film phenomenology displays an attention to the discursivity of bodies beyond their discursive objectification - beyond, more generally, what we could call an “objectual” regime of knowledge and experiencing. At the same time, it reaches out to touch forms of experiencing that are closer to the contingency of the subject and the materiality of the medium, forms that a cognitive philosophical approach, on its own, is not equipped to address. Indeed, a “tactile” approach to the materiality of the world and to its fleeting forms of being entails first of all a change in our forms of knowing. Other than being a philosophy of embodiment, then, phenomenological film theory would also aspire to be a more embodied philosophy of film.

For Marks, a tactile epistemology “conceive[s] of knowledge as something gained not on the model of vision but through physical contact.”³¹⁰ She claims that the modality of this form of knowledge is not representation but mimesis, which she understands in Auerbach’s sense of a “lively and responsive relationship” between the listener of a story, a reader, or a spectator, “such that each time a story is retold it is sensuously remade in the body of the listener.”³¹¹ Since mimesis in this sense corresponds to the embodied nature of experience and to our sensuous and psychic implication with the world, I would not oppose it to representation and signification, but rather take it as an expression of their semiotic dimension. The way I understand it, mimesis can be taken as a form of symbolic relation that is not subordinated to an act of interpretation, while it still implies a form of theoretical (spectatorial) understanding: if it is a way of knowing, then it is a way of knowing that replicates the form of its object, rather than reducing it to the principles of its intelligibility. Mimesis is, for Jan Campbell as well, a fundamental form of embodied relation that comes

³¹⁰ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 138.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

before, and cannot be reduced within, an Oedipal and authoritarian regime of knowledge.³¹² In the perspective that Marks and Campbell open up, then, it is not vision as such that should be criticised for objectifying the body, but only one particular modality of its experience and one particular regime of its understanding: that sort of “instrumental vision”, as Marks puts it, “that uses the thing seen as an object for knowledge and control.”³¹³

Even in its most “cognitive” formulations, like Vivian Sobchack’s early work *The Address of the Eye*, what phenomenology brings to our understanding of film is the sense of a more material (if not always necessarily more contingent) and more egalitarian (if sometimes no less transcendental) relation between viewer and film. In its more distinctive, and perhaps more radical, expressions, the phenomenological turn attempts to refuse the reduction of vision to visibility and puts a more bodily and subjectively contingent subject in place of apparatus theory’s metapsychological spectator, and images that are more visually material as projections on a screen in place of the film *text*. At the level of spectatorship as a social practice, as well, phenomenological film theory can be seen to foreground the presence - and, by that, the agency and responsibility - of subjects as they interact with film and with other spectators. Yet, at the same time that film phenomenology looks for the relevance of the contingent, and attempts to universalize it, it sometimes tends to look for non-phenomenal elements as well: not only to what might be invisible or irrepresentable in embodied experience, but to a pure, pre-discursive presence of the body and of things in the world, and thus to pre- or post-psychoanalytic, pre- or post-ideological, conceptions of subjectivity as well.

In some respects, film phenomenology competes as a paradigm of film experiencing against the metapsychological account of the position of the spectator in psychoanalytic film theory, against semiological accounts of textuality and signification, and against cognitive explanations of the processes of perception. As such, phenomenology finds, or at any rate should find, in the contingency and situatedness of the spectator’s encounter with film an ally against the abstractness and potential normativity of these approaches. Still, even as film phenomenology generally refuses to take film as a non-intentional object, as

³¹² Jan Campbell, *Film and Cinema Spectatorship: Melodrama and Mimesis* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 53.

³¹³ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 131.

a text or a physical item “absolutely external to any mind,”³¹⁴ of the kind a cognitivists like Dominique Chateau posit as the counterpart of subjectivity in film experience,³¹⁵ it does not necessarily address the contingency of experiencing and embodiment and the heteronomy of the subject. What I mean is that phenomenological film theory may still seek to systematise and objectify sense-experience and the body on the ground of basic psychological and cognitive processes or transcendental categories, by this eventually failing its intended critique of the body’s normalisation.³¹⁶ A focus on the body, indeed, does not automatically come with a recognition of the radical *indeterminacy* of embodiment. In this sense we can understand the distinction that James Penney proposes between a film phenomenology of Deleuzian ascent, like Shapiro and Marks’, and one based on the work of Merleau-Ponty (as well as Husserl’s) like it is the case for Allan Casebier and Vivian Sobchack:³¹⁷ in relation to the classification of contingency that we have proposed in the third chapter, then, the latter approach would, so to speak, fall shy of radical contingency. Another possible categorisation of the phenomenological approach could be established on the difference and the articulation of *embodied* and *bodily* experience - between an interest in the situatedness of perception on one hand, and the particular qualities of sense-experience on the other, as it constitutes a kind of pre-objectual or non-objectual component of perception itself. This distinction in some aspects runs parallel to the philological one advanced by Penney - we might associate a focus on the body as a centre of cognition to the former, and an interest in a sensual and desiring bodiliness to the latter - but it also cuts through it and crosses over, with different results, to the fields of feminist and queer studies, medical humanities and the arts.

Embodied experience becomes significant, in my view, inasmuch as we take the body as a site of conflict, as a discursive category and as a radically contingent and material ground of experiencing and agency. From this perspective,

³¹⁴ Dominique Chateau, “A Philosophical Approach to Film Form,” in *Subjectivity: Filmic Representation and the Spectator’s Experience*, ed. Dominique Chateau (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 165.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

³¹⁶ Jenny Chamarette, “Embodied Worlds and Situated Bodies: Feminism, Phenomenology, Film Theory,” *Signs* 40, no.2 (2015): 289.

³¹⁷ James Penney, “The Failure of Spectatorship,” *Communication Theory* 17 (2007): 6n57-58.

the body becomes a *site* of significance, rather than a field for collecting data, a repertoire of basic conceptual structures or a unitary agent of meaning and action. In that it is driven by and drives towards what it is not - toward other people, toward its own uncanniness - the body is never a mere object of signification. What we have first described as a move away from ontology, also implies a move away from objectification and a critique of the mastery of vision together with the authority of the institutions that regulate it - including, especially in the case of spectatorship, film theory itself. As Judith Butler wrote, not only “bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies are.”³¹⁸ Embodiment is then a matter of shifting boundaries, an horizon more than a border, and, thus, something marked by a radical indeterminacy. The contingency of the body and the heteronomy of embodiment are always something more than their situatedness, and the former dimension actually undermines the latter (in the sense that the body is never fully present, or that, at least, it is not entirely intelligible as a *presence*). There can be no simple, unbiased or non-normative, representation or understanding of the body, then: in this way, issues of normative authority and self-mastery become central to the life of the body and to the discussion of embodied experience. Contemporary critical theory, in fact, can be seen to extend the material contingency and the discursivity that is characteristic of the psychoanalytic subject to the domain of the body, precisely to counter its conception as the naturalised ground of identity. If film phenomenology, then, at times attempts to return to the idea of the body as a unitary centre of selfhood and experience, as a non-contingent but still situated presence, as an essential measure of universality, or as an always already pre-discursive or subversive dimension of experiencing, the kind of body that Butler describes, instead, is never a pure presence. Despite, or rather precisely because of its indeterminacy and radical heteronomy, the body is never simply an object, even when it is effectively passive or perceived to be utterly other to the self.

Non-objectual embodiment. There are, of course, precedents of this position in phenomenological philosophy that radically oppose the reduction of the

³¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), ix.

scope of phenomenology to that of a cognitive mapping and objectification of both lived-experience and things in the world, and that make an alliance of film phenomenology with a radical feminist, queer and psychoanalytic conception of the body and the subject not only coherent, but, in more than a way, necessary. To quote from an author who is mostly evoked in film theory on the issue of ethics, but who is also interesting for his critical evaluation of the foundations and the development of phenomenology, Emmanuel Lévinas: “phenomenological reduction has been a radical way to suspend the natural approach of a world posited in terms of the object - a radical struggle against the abstraction that the object epitomizes.”³¹⁹ In relation to film, then, to reduce perception to a relation between an object and a subject, independently whole and distinct from each other, and to disregard the mutual implication, and even the fusion, of the two that the concept of intentionality instead entails, is indeed already a way to concede to abstraction and normativity, and to subsume the contingency of our lived-experience of the moving image to a kind of naive, pre-discursive, realism. Phenomenology, on the contrary, can be said to denounce any direct vision of the object (and any unmediated form of self-representation) as naive,³²⁰ and to hold instead that our perception of the object is an integral part of the object itself.³²¹ Subjectivity, then, would not exist prior to our acts of experiencing and separated from our contingent experience of the world - a claim that supports, at the same time, the discursivity of lived-experience and the fact that it can never be made completely intelligible by rational and discursive categories.

In this sense, phenomenology would not address the relation between subjects and objects, but rather, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it, a “thing-subject” (*chose-sujet*)³²² - a subject which is also an object, and an object that always already bears a subjective mark. This idea of subjectivity entails indeed what Merleau-Ponty called a *chiasm*, a confusion and a circularity of perceiving and being perceived, of speaking and listening, of seeing and being seen, suggesting that perception is made *within* things themselves and that passivity and activ-

³¹⁹ “La réduction phénoménologique a été une façon radicale de suspendre l’approche naturel du monde posé comme objet - la lutte radicale contre l’abstraction que l’objet résume.” Emmanuel Lévinas, *En Découvrant l’Existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1994), 122. Translation mine.

³²⁰ Ibid., 114.

³²¹ Ibid., 122.

³²² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’Invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 305.

ity can therefore hardly be distinguished.³²³ In this particular understanding of embodied perception, the phenomenological concept of intentionality (the idea that consciousness is always consciousness of something) should not be confused neither with the general idea of conscious intention, nor with the one-way directionality of our conscious apprehension of objects, for it actually constitutes a sign of the indistinctness of subject and object and an expression of the radical contingency of embodied perception.

There are no objects beyond consciousness, then, but there is not consciousness beyond the objects it beholds, either. Embodiment would then become something different than the centring of conscious experience in the body as an hospitable and intelligible site of agency and signification, and rather a form of utterly contingent decentering and scattering of the subject in the world. As Thomas Csordas aptly puts it embodiment is “the existential condition of cultural life”, not reducible “to representations of the body, to the body as an objectification of power, to the body as a physical entity or biological organism, nor to the body as an inalienable centre of individual consciousness.”³²⁴

It is then through a dissolution of the body as a concept and as a thing with boundaries that film phenomenology can transcend the logic of discursive determination, intelligibility and misrepresentation that informs the cinematic apparatus - not by making embodiment more comprehensible, nor the body more familiar. In this way, phenomenological film theory reaffirms the discursivity of spectatorship and film experience, and at the same time subtracts it from the authority and the Oedipal mastery that characterised apparatus theory. From this perspective, one of the characteristic claims of Althusserian film theory - that the spectator’s subjectivity is a product of film textuality - could be reformulated in a less authoritarian and deterministic way. There would not be any spectator beyond its *encounter* with the film, but also, conversely, no film beyond its contingent and subjective experience: at the same time this would not mean, however, that either film or spectator would be determined) or made essentially intelligible by the other. Neither the “textual” spectator nor the “real” viewer is, or should, be addressed beyond the contingency of its encounter with film. Embodiment is not a structure of *intelligibility*, eventually, it

³²³ Ibid., 312.

³²⁴ Thomas J. Csordas, ed., *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), back cover page.

is, rather, a material and aesthetic, but still discursive, ground of signification.

The encounter of the spectator and the film can be described as embodied, then, precisely inasmuch as the dimension of the subject and that of the object, that of the living body and of its discursive articulation, that of significance and meaning, of spectatorship and theory, of light and image, are not kept apart, and their relation is not reduced to the expression of some principle of intelligibility. In other words, we can say that film experience finds its significance not merely in relation to the dimension of reading and meaning, but more fundamentally to the dimension of an embodied aesthetic use - not just in relation to more or less fixed and consensual semiological and sociological (never merely “cultural”) codes, and not just in the *interaction* between the position of the spectator and the film’s ideological forms. Losing this embodied tension, which is proper of the spectator’s fantasy, is, arguably, also to lose the specificity and the significance of the experience of spectatorship. As a matter of fact, apparatus theory already understood that the boundary between the spectator’s embodied fantasy, on one hand, and ideology and cinematic discourse, on the other, is always a permeable one. In fact, it was precisely by assuming the spectator’s desiring involvement with film and the essentially fantasmatic dimension of meaning and signification, that the idea of the spectator’s passivity and ideological determination was elaborated in the first place. The heteronomy and contingency of the subject in its encounter with film, however, were then *subjected to interpretation*, thereby reducing the theoretical dimension of film experience to a meta-language and a meta-politics of spectatorship, and thus arguably framing film experience, and the very ground of film theory, in an authoritarian way.

Withdrawing oneself from the discursivity of the body discursivity is not, in the end, a way around its normative determination - quite the contrary. It is in fact in relation to the issue of intelligibility of film experience and spectatorship, not in their discursive nature, that rests their reduction within a pedagogical regime, and that their submission to the power of normative institutions takes place. A move away from the ontology of the moving image, then, entails both the recognition of the discursivity of the body and the acknowledgement of the contingency of embodiment itself: not only a transformation of the body from visible object to visual agent, but a radical foregrounding of the subject’s lack of mastery over its own body as well. All the tensions that film phenomenology allows to think together coalesce, indeed, as Csordas suggested, in an indeter-

minate and non-objectual notion of embodiment: never *just* the mere material presence of the body, nor just its *mise en discours* (its normative classification, say, from a medical, sociological or metapsychological perspective), never just its *mise en images* (its cinematic representation and its inscription within the regime of its visibility), never just the dynamics of the body as a passive object of power and ideology, as an active instrument of volition, nor as the always hospitable and inalienable site of subjectivity. When we address embodiment in these general terms, then, we are addressing the implication of experience with bodily sensation, of embodiment with subjectivity, and of the role of the body as an agent of social power and as the ground of political subjectivation. Abandoning from the start any pretence to be comprehensive on such wide-ranging issues, I will concentrate on the points in which these issues intersect the ideas of authority, theory, contingency and heteronomy that we have already encountered.

Discursivity of the body and incitation to discourse. The relation of embodiment to spectatorship is first of all addressed in terms of the relation between the lived-body of spectators and the representations of bodies that are given on-screen. The connection of these two domains - the space that this connection entails in-between them - defines at the same time a particular dimension of the politics of spectatorship and filmmaking, and constitutes itself as a specific epistemological and methodological field. In different forms, this relation and this space have been a constant concern of film theory.³²⁵ Still, it would be impossible to say a final word about the body and the screen, for their interplay is constitutional of the tension by which spectatorship is defined, a tension which is never simply resolved by a shift of paradigm or through a different modality of experiencing. In particular, a phenomenological turn is not, or should not be, a move away from the discursivity of this relation: for the viewer is itself a discursive construct, and its body is, in fact, the quintessential “object” of regulatory power.

The reduction of the body to visibility can be taken as the model of its normative regulation. A *mise en discours* of the body begins indeed with its disciplinary observation: its surveillance, its classification, its examination and

³²⁵ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 131.

self-inspection, its autopsy, and so on, but also, in a different way its promotion as a commodity and as an aesthetic “form”. The surveillance of bodies, however, does not stop with the limits of optical technologies, nor at the frontiers of the logic of visibility or of the regime of representation: for it corresponds more essentially to a reduction of the body to intelligibility. As such, not only the articulation between the body and its image, taken in its broader sense, is inevitable: it is inevitably a tension. On one hand, a minimum of distance and mastery over the body is inevitable for our existence and, on the other, this self-mastery is consubstantial with and contiguous to the existing institutions of domination and regulatory power. Embodiment and the body, then, far from being the material and conceptual sites of an intrinsic subversiveness, actually name a fundamental level in which authority and discursive power at the same insist and become somewhat ungraspable.

It is not by chance then that the disembodied language of apparatus theory addressed the relation of embodied film experience to ideology through the Lacanian metaphor of the mirror. The inexhaustible mirror metaphor of cinematic identification relates in fact to this aspect of embodiment, to this inevitable tension, suggesting on one hand the very contingency and heteronomy of the “real” subject, and, on the other, the imaginary mastery that corresponds to its visible representation. And yet, as the illusory self-mastery that is attributed to the spectator is made intelligible through theory and interpretation, another mirror and another illusion of mastery - that which defines the action of theory - manifest themselves. Faced with a psychoanalytic subject and a discursive body, the fantasy of mastery is not just the fantasy of a unitary subject and a pre-discursive body, but first of all that of controlling the instruments that make our lack of mastery intelligible. Both mirrors pretend to give to the subject a unity and mastery that amount in fact to its institutional regulation and normalisation. A sense of the body’s dis-unity and of the subject’s heteronomy, then, would be consubstantial to the subject’s emancipation. Before its representation, before the interpretation that makes it intelligible, embodiment takes place as a contingent encounter and a sharing, which cannot be reduced to the expression of a pre-determined message, to the volition of an independent, self-possessed, individual, nor to the unmediated presence of things in the world. Marks, in this regard, envisages haptic visibility as “a respect of difference, and

concomitant loss of self, in the presence of (193) the other.”³²⁶

The transformation of this heteronomy into the utter passivity of identification would then be the most evident aspect of apparatus theory’s authoritarian reduction of spectatorship: in fact, while heteronomy is not intelligible and manageable passivity is. The passivity that the critics of apparatus theory address, in fact, can be seen as the principles of an authoritarian, heterosexist, fear of heteronomy: a transcendental authority is imagined where no one can actually be found, in a desperate attempt to account not for our servitude, but for our lack of freedom, and not really for the power that others have on us, but rather for the one we cannot have over ourselves. It is precisely through an intellectual fantasy of mastery that the imaginary subject attempts to control the pleasurable contingency of the *Einfall* and the traumatic eruption of the symptom, thereby attempting to nullify their shattering effects. We could say that the normative subject is the one for whom every *Einfall* is *nothing but* a symptom, for whom every instance of self-dissemination becomes a moment of traumatic *loss*. In turn, one could say that repressive subject positions are first of all tentative authoritarian solutions to the deadlock of the psyche, of its heteronomy, discursivity and situatedness. The masterful distance of the apparatus theorist is, in the end, what allows for the discursive regulation of the spectator’s polymorphic and perverse pleasure. In a Foucauldian fashion, we can say that perverse spectators, and wayward ones as well, were “invented” not by cinema as such, but when *film theory* established itself as a technology of spectatorship.

We have seen in the second chapter how spectatorship theory entails a *mise en discours* of the spectator and of its subjectivity. The same can be said, even more appropriately given the Foucauldian descent of the concept, on one side, of the longstanding interest of film, feminist and cultural studies in the body and its representation, and, on the other, of the focus on embodiment which is characteristic of the more recent phenomenological turn. Like sexuality, the field of our knowledge of the body is subordinated to the relations of power that inform it in the first place: so that, in turn, as Foucault wrote, “between techniques of knowledge and strategies of power there is no externality.”³²⁷ In this sense, the

³²⁶ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 192-193.

³²⁷ Foucault, *Histoire de la Sexualité*, 129-130.

practice of theory - and of a theory of the body in an exemplary way - can never claim a comfortable distance from its object, nor from its function of policing and control. It is always hard to distinguish a more positive articulation of embodied experience and of a discourse *of* the body, from the body's disciplinary reduction into discourse. The normative definition and the governance of the body, indeed, is not just performed through its material coercion and through its repression, but it is also positively affirmed in the articulation of our modes of living and ways of understanding embodied experience itself. Normativity, Foucault argued, affirms itself first of all in an *intensification* of the scope of the body, of its *valorisation* as an object of knowledge and as an element of power relations.³²⁸ In this sense we could read the relation between the body and theory as an intrinsically normative one: through a *mise en discours* of the body, what is said about it appears to be bound to betray that indeterminacy that grounds the embodied subject's emancipation. All those theories of film that aim to make embodiment and forms of bodily experience more tangible and comprehensible, in fact, run the risk overstepping their subversive intentions - subversive, that is, of the disembodied subjectivity of the apparatusic spectator, and of the power over the spectators' bodies that is exerted by cinematic institutions - precisely by determining an extension of the field that those powers can reach. In this proliferation, the body becomes again an inert object. An inert object of a more dynamic discourse, that is true, but still an object that is made more visible, and that is thus subjected, in the greater freedom that is recognised to it, to an intensified surveillance; and that is made more knowledgeable and intelligible, and, by this, subjected to an increased mastery and control.

If institutional power aims at the reproduction of the conditions in which its own power is established - that is, in the case of film, at the reproduction of the spectator as a passive subject position *and* as an active consumer of film - the kind of power which is characteristic of an incitation to discourse works instead on a principle of comprehensive mapping, through a permanent extension of the domains and of the forms of control. Ideology attends not only to the definition of spectatorship as a specific subject position, but also to the articulation of a plurality of forms of spectatorship. Power, Foucault suggests, is not confined to

³²⁸ Ibid., 141.

repressive authority, but rather insists in the very articulation of forms of life, including practices of subversion and rearticulation of the social space.

Slavoj Žižek is referring to this Foucauldian understanding of discursive power when he links Lacan's discourse of the university to what he holds to be one of the defining features of capitalism - its capacity to absorb everything that exceeds it.³²⁹ At the same time, Žižek criticises this understanding of discourse and subjectivity, on the grounds that Foucault identifies the subject with that which is *created* by the *mise en discours*, not with what this *mise en discours* fails to address or that is otherwise left unaddressed:

“The university discourse is enunciated from the position of neutral' Knowledge; it addresses the remainder of the real [...] turning it into the subject (\$). The truth' of the university discourse, hidden beneath the bar, of course, is power, i.e. the Master-Signifier: the constitutive lie of the university discourse is that it disavows its performative dimension, presenting what effectively amounts to a political decision based on power as a simple insight into the factual state of things. What one should avoid here is the Foucauldian misreading: the produced subject is not simply the subjectivity which arises as the result of the disciplinary application of knowledge-power, but its remainder, that which eludes the grasp of knowledge-power.”³³⁰

The discursivity of the body is, then, fundamentally, a matter of the limits of normative discourse and of its very contingency - it relates to discursive lack and opposes discursive hegemony, not (or not essentially) the *contents* of a given dominant discourse. While hegemony, as we have seen, refers to the operation of appropriating the principles that regulate the very conflict between opposing discourses, a discourse becomes powerful in the measure that it can convince us that it has in fact added something to our understanding, that it has extended its domain to a previously uncharted territory. The body, and especially the body as the ultimate remainder of ideological interpellation (that is, as a pre-discursive entity), becomes then the ideal object of the discourse

³²⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “Jacques Lacan's Four Discourses,” *Lacan.com* (2006): <http://www.lacan.com/zizfour.html>.

³³⁰ Slavoj Žižek, “*Homo Sacer* as the Object of the Discourse of the University,” *Lacan.com* (2003): <http://www.lacan.com/hsacer.html>.

of the university. This discourse is, in a sense, the prototype of pedagogical authoritarian power, but of course it should not be seen to be limited to the university as a literal institution. In fact, a pretence of mastery over the body is an integral part of spectatorship as well - it defines, precisely, the scope of the spectator's *power* and of its capacity for rational understanding. Its subjectivity, however and, with it, its fundamental emancipation as well, remain incommensurable to the principles of its mastery and can thus be seen to lay fundamentally in what cannot be entirely grasped, defined, and controlled of the spectator's contingent and embodied experience.

The discursivity of the body is not tantamount to its *mise en discours*, then: on the contrary, the idea of a comprehensive discursive articulation runs counter the very discursivity of the body and the contingency of embodied experiencing, which in fact escape autonomous agency and full intelligibility. In relation to this, the academic incitation to a discourse on the body - the renewed interest in bodily and embodied experience - can be seen in part to be a function of power, in that it extends a field of intelligibility and not only one of signification, and in that it determines a re-distribution of the sensible and it is not merely an instance of its sharing. What resists discursive determination is not the dimension of the body as such, then, but its contingency, of which its discursivity is a fundamental part and, in a sense, the ultimate guarantee.

That the body and subjectivity are discursive does not mean, in turn, that their performativity is volitional ("I can create what I am"), nor that they are entirely determined by discourse, dominant or not ("what I am is created for me"). As we have seen in the first chapter, these two assumptions actually require and reinforce each other: both presuppose the same mastery, they only assign it to a different subject position, to a different side of a normative split. In this sense, the idea of a masterful apparatus and of a masterful theory underscores and supports the fantasy of mastery of the cinematic subject, and the reverse. Film theory can then be seen to be an integral part of the authoritarian apparatus it describes, precisely as the institution that sanctions this fantasy of intellectual mastery. What apparatus theory did not address, indeed, was the crucial role that its own pretence of mastery played in locking up the spectator in a passive position. Much like the intelligible unconscious, the idea of a body that can apprehend the world and act autonomously entails the idea that it can be controlled by an external agency. What a radical phenomenolog-

ical and psychoanalytic approach suggests considering, on the contrary, is not just the spectator's agent passivity, heteronomy and embodiment, but, more fundamentally, an agency that lies in the lack of their intelligibility.

If the body is, in relation to normative discourse, the excessive dimension *par excellence*, then the proliferation of discourses on it - from its framing as an organism by medical discourse to its framing as a commodity in consumerism, to the academic/artistic discourse of the body as the domain of the irrepresentable and the pre-discursive - becomes in the end a function of regulatory police. On the contrary, it is precisely because the body is discursive that it can resist its normative determination, without having to entertain a fantasy of mastering itself or to reduce the scope of its agency to that of conscious choice. At the same time non-phenomenal remainder and centre of embodied experience and knowledge, the body must be defined, again, in terms of an irresolvable tension.

Visibility and the visual.

It is characteristic of the *mise en discours* of the body that it be at the same time overtly and widely discussed, *and* presented as something intrinsically unfathomable: as Foucault wrote of sex, the body is at the same time exposed and prized as a secret.³³¹ The real body is hidden from sight, and yet it is defined and desired in terms of its visibility. Embodiment, in a similar way, is beheld in the mind as an impenetrable, shapeless *form* of experience: something invisible and irrepresentable that nevertheless invites to explore the aesthetics and the categories of its visibility and representation. The incitation to discourse that we have discussed *requires* indeed first of all to establish a territory absolutely external to discourse, in relation to which the articulation of discursive power can then be effected. Seeing it from a different angle, we can say that what is considered external to discourse is actually defined by discourse in the first place, and in turn motivates the performance of its regulatory function. The distinctive operation of discourse would be not simply to dictate what the body is, but rather to appropriate what it is not, to articulate what is proper and improper to the scope of the body in a social and symbolic space, and what is subversive as well as consensual in the relations between these two dimensions.

³³¹ "Ce qui est propre aux sociétés modernes, ce n'est pas qu'elles aient voué le sexe à rester dans l'ombre, c'est qu'elles se soient vouées à en parler toujours, en le faisant valoir comme le secret." Foucault, *Histoire de la Sexualité*, 42.

Even more, it would be to dominate and impose the *principles* of this articulation, and, of course, the principles of the principles: in this way, the authority of theoretical and meta-theoretical discourse comes to support social normativity and becomes in some ways consubstantial with the power of discourse - with its very *dominance*.³³² In this context, Rancière's concept of the *partage du sensible* is particularly appropriate, for it does not address discursive power as some kind of entity defined by its symbolic content, but rather as the very act of social distribution and discursive articulation, thus suggesting that the landscape of governance cannot be separated from the underlying dimension of sharing and equality, and from the contingent dynamics of their interaction. In the end, the distinctive scope of the *mise en discours* would be precisely the inclusion in a given distribution of the sensible of what specific discursive "entities" appear to exclude.

If, on one hand, these discursive entities are necessarily normative, and the *mise en discours* clearly aims at an hegemonic mapping, the dimension of discursive power as such, on the other hand - what we could call *discursivity* - is neither essentially authoritarian, nor intrinsically subversive. More specifically, discursivity is not positional, it does not allow for a clear identification of the parts: in this, it should not be seen as a domain framing the body from the outside, but rather as an integral aspect of the unintelligibility of embodiment itself. If the body is never simply an object, then it is never just visible or invisible, representable or irrepresentable. Embodiment would not name either the discursive determination of the body, or the fullness of a pre-discursive dimension, but rather the partiality and situatedness of both lived experience and its representation - a partiality that makes subjectivity and signification possible in the first place.

In this perspective, the invisibility of bodies would appear to be already a category of authoritarian vision, and an expression of the discursive hegemony of the visible over the embodied experience of the visual. The normativity of discourse, in this sense, would correspond not only to a recognisable *mise en discours* of the body, but also to the absolute presence of the invisible that

³³² The authority of meta-theoretical discourse is not necessarily judged in meta-theoretical terms: for instance, a prolific author is often more powerful than a good argument. At the same time, however, a "pure" and effective meta-theoretical approach brings about an even stricter normative control.

this *mise en discours* presupposes: an absolute presence of the invisible that is precisely the opposite of the contingent and ungraspable presence of the visual. Visibility entails, then, a *reduction* of the scope of vision, as well as an authoritarian and objectual regime of understanding of visual experience and the image. Visibility is in fact the first form not only of a regulation of the body, but of a normalisation of synaesthetic experience and a regulation of visibility itself: once it is made intelligible, a body becomes not just less than what it is, but also less than what can be seen of it.

Spectatorship is never quite a problem of the impossibility of representation, then, nor of its being always already determined by dominant discourse, but rather entails, as Rancière argues, a problem of relational distribution and of representational distance.³³³ As we have seen, Rancière suggests a shift from the idea of the *irrepresentable* to that of a fundamental, and fundamentally political, *incommensurability* at the core of the distribution of the sensible. From the point of view of the fantasy and the lack of mastery that we are pursuing, then, this incommensurability is first of all one in-between the embodied experience of the the spectator and the categories of its intelligibility. While the idea of irrepresentability puts the body not only beyond consensual meaning but altogether beyond signification, incommensurability implies a instead a dissensual relation between signification and discourse, which can be taken to be the foundation of subjective speech and political subjectivity. The hegemony of vision, then, is always already the hegemony of a particular regime of understanding of vision, over other possible ways of understanding and experiencing the visual. Technologies of visibility (which are never *just* optical technologies) not only frame the body in terms of what can be made visible and intelligible about it, they subordinate visual experience to its visible forms.

What we normally call vision, then, already names a particular regime of distribution of the visual: a masterful vision that implies intelligibility and objectification and that, in fact, constitutes a form of visibility *without* visibility. The fantasy of mastery leads indeed to a disembodied vision, which would be in turn the defining feature of both the cinematic apparatus (as a principle of intelligibility of spectatorship and its pleasures) and, more generally, of the ocularcentric apparatus (as an authoritarian and disciplinary regime of the visual).

³³³ Rancière, *Le Destin des Images*, 128.

Metapsychology and the regime of interpretation, the reduction of the radical contingency of subjectivity and the reduction of the body to the principles of its visibility, as well as the pedagogical assumption of the lack of knowledge and agency of spectators, would all be, then, functional elements to the establishment of surveillance, of the authority of theory, and of the mastery of instrumental reason. The alliance of vision with reason and cognition that takes place through optical technologies appears to grant us the wish of seeing the *invisible*. However, not only this wish is bound to remain unfulfilled, but such an alliance is bound to diminish the richness of our *visual* experience. The results of this pretence of mastery over experience is, indeed, a mastery over the self that is also a form of sensory deprivation, one that entails and further reinforces the nostalgia for unity and wholeness which is typical of normative subject positions - or better, of a normative distribution of subjectivities.

The visual, on the contrary, would be informed by what is contingent, embodied, discursive, and thus constantly elusive, about the subject's experience of vision. Rather than being identified as invisible, it would correspond, as Marks argues, to the *diminished visibility* of the haptic image.³³⁴ not a lack of vision, really, but a lack in our mastery over the visual. A blurring of the image that is as much "filmic" - that is, taking place at the level of the camera, of the surface of the recorded reel and of the light projected on the screen - as it is experiential and conceptual. In the end, this alternative regime of the visible would still constitute a form of sensuous *knowledge*, one that, as Marks argues, can be organised and "cultivated" not unlike rational and conceptual knowledge.³³⁵ In this sense we can speak of a tactile or haptic *epistemology*. Therefore, as we have been arguing, a more sensuous experience of the visual would not bring about a complete freedom from mastery and discourse, but rather bring with it alternative forms of understanding that involve a diminished mastery over embodied experience.

But what does it mean that an experience can be visual, while not being either visible or invisible? A classic example would be the dream. To dreams, indeed, is generally attributed a visual nature, even though a dream is not, strictly speaking, visible. Nor is it invisible, in the sense that it cannot be

³³⁴ Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, (Minneapolis, London University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 91.

³³⁵ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 144.

experienced visually: on the contrary, dream is in itself already a form of signification. The dream-work already provides a signifying connection between incommensurable forms of experiencing and incommensurable “parts” of the subject. In the process, one should note, this incommensurability is not *removed*, nor reduced into the expression of an immanent meaning (which is the task of interpretation and its regime), but rather maintained and allowed to be significant as it is. It is actually the *experience of dreaming*, not the latent *meaning* that can be found through interpretation, that opens up our conscious thought and our waking life to the dimension of the unconscious. Meaning and interpretation, at least in their authoritarian forms, are on the contrary what attempts to return the symptom and the *Einfall* to meaning. While the logic of representation and interpretation presuppose a translation into meaning, the kind of significance that is proper of dream and of an embodied visuality works instead by preserving its indeterminacy. From the point of view of its *mise en discours* and of the fantasy of its mastery, then, the body is taken to be like a *reified unconscious*: a domain of experience which is by definition irrepresentable, but that can nevertheless be objectified and, by this, reduced to intelligibility through masterful interpretation. In other words, as it becomes a reification of the irrepresentable, the unconscious is in fact articulated as a recognisable part in the regime of representation.

Precisely as a discourse assigns to the body the position of the irrepresentable, then, it makes possible to say about it no matter what: coherently, we are faced with a proliferation of representations of the irrepresentable, of shapes of invisibility and figurations of the abject - which come of course with their unspoken disciplinary assumptions. Rather than having the body stand for a reified domain of the irrepresentable, then, we should understand it to be more like a *radical psyche* (or, as Pontalis put it, as something akin to the insurrectional, explosive and anarchic body of the dream³³⁶): not as the incarnation of an identifiable domain of experience or a specific form of experiencing, but rather as a site that is traversed, like the psyche, by a radical contingency - always already interpersonal, and thus, heteronomous.

If we describe dreams in terms of vision it is, in the end, because vision encompasses more than what is visible. We can find another example of this

³³⁶ Pontalis, *Traversée des Ombres*, 65.

kind of visibility in the moving image itself - that is, in the film image as it is experienced by the spectator. On one hand, the frames of the material reel are clearly visible, and the images of the “objective”, optical, film are an abstraction that further affirms their visibility - in this respect, photographic technology depends upon and supports the very regime of objectual, objectifying, vision.³³⁷ On the other hand, however, as soon as they enter embodied experience, these visible images lose at least some of their visibility: no two people experience the same film in the exact same way, and one can never “see” the film that someone else perceives in the same way that one looks at the images on the screen. Both these examples relate to the *radical* contingency of experiencing. Laura Marks, instead, focusses on forms of visibility that have to do with the *material* contingencies and passing situatedness of spectatorship (memory and migration), with the indexical aura of filmed objects and the physicality of the cinematic medium itself - as such, even if they cannot be addressed in terms of the object, they still have a material referent, with which the critic can enter in contact and engage in a haptic way.³³⁸ As we have said, then, embodiment would not be a *function* of discourse nor something entirely detached from it, but rather a further instance of discursive and subjective contingency. Like the psyche, the body could not be probed nor signified without being at the same time transformed, and not without involving the “observer” in this transformation.

Embodiment and contingency. The problem with the logic of visibility is, indeed, that it circumvents the contingency of embodiment and reduces what can be represented of, said about, or experienced through, the body to the extent of what can be understood about it, and thus subjected to surveillance. Embodiment would in fact name what escapes the *mise en discours* of the body (and, of course, of the idea of embodiment itself). In this sense, the problem is again one of mastery: what makes embodiment more graspable and controllable, in fact, is also what diminishes the discursive, existential and, eventually, political scope of the body. We could say, then, that the discursive mapping of the body and the kind of mastery that attends to it, are in a way disembodied or, rather, disembodimenting. Disembodied would be what is regulated about the

³³⁷ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 36.

³³⁸ Marks, *Touch*, p. xiii.

body, masterful about subjectivity and objectual about vision. Disembodiment, in turn, would not mark a loss of materiality, nor of presence, but rather a loss of contingency and an increase of mastery and intelligibility. It would not name the heteronomy of the body nor the indistinctness of synaesthetic experience, but, on the contrary, the embodied experience of a disembodying mastery. It would essentially correspond to those normalised, non-existential, spaces Marc Augé defined as non-places, and to the disciplined modes of relations that they produce.³³⁹

If embodiment surely points beyond the individual and rather leads to see the subject as a “site of correspondences with the world,”³⁴⁰ it also names the fact that there are certain limits to our sharing of experience. As much as the subject can be permeable and not correspond exactly to the boundaries of the organism, the body still individuates a border: the idea of a heteronomous body does not entail automatically a perfect correspondence of the world with our embodied experiencing. Despite its heterogeneity and radical dissemination, the body is still forcibly “individual” - it names a limit of our capacity for sharing, as well as a limit in our ability to reach out to the world and be imbued by it. The body is never self-sufficient, but at the same time it is never perfectly hosted in the otherness of the world. The contingency of the body has a weight, so to speak, that on one hand conditions its extensibility in time and space and the transparency of our “being-there-ness” (of our partaking in contingent encounters) and, on the other hand, renders the body opaque to the authoritarian gaze.

The body further points to this other limit to the mastery of concepts: our situatedness and contingency not only as subjects, not only as mortal bodies facing a fleeting world and disappearing images, but as sensual beings. As the ocularcentric regime articulates the visual under the aegis of visibility, it also distributes the other senses, and their interaction, in relation to itself, thus establishing a hierarchy and a regime of separation among the senses. The very distance that defines sight as a distance sense, then, is forced upon our understanding of other forms of sense experience. The ocularcentric regime sustains

³³⁹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 80.

³⁴⁰ Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 70.

an epistemology, and a whole mode of being, that are based on distance and objectification: it establishes the separation of the senses not only as the principle of their intelligibility, but of their subjective experience. On the contrary, Marks argues, the human sensorium is primarily characterised by synaesthesia: a connectedness and permeability of all sense impressions, such that a sensation can evoke sense impressions that pertain to different sensory domains (sight can evoke smell, for instance, or touch, and the reverse).³⁴¹ Synaesthesia, at the same time, names specific instances in which sense impressions and experiences traverse their assigned boundaries, and a particular regime of understanding of sense experience in general: a “syn-aesthetics”, if we like, in the sense of an aesthetics of connectedness, which would be inseparable from the indeterminacy of embodiment that we have discussed.

Furthermore, to understand sight and spectatorship in terms of a more tactile epistemology entails the idea that seeing already constitutes a form of touch, that one could not see, in fact, without both entering the image and being othered by it. As one cannot bring about power effects (subversive or otherwise) without being involved in them, one cannot indeed touch without being touched.³⁴² Contingency, then, would essentially be a form of co-presence and touch, as the origin of the word indeed also suggests: from the Latin *contingo*, to enter into contact, reach, meet, touch.³⁴³ In turn, free association would bring the *condensation* of synaesthetic experience and the *contiguity* of contingency together. Free association can thus be seen as a principle of signification, of experiencing and of its sharing, which proceeds by contact and contiguity: unfolding, as it were, the synchronicity of our thoughts and feelings through time and into form, and articulating synaesthetic experience through our memory and intuition. Free floating attention and the process of free association would then embody a mimetic, semiotic and dissensual aspect of language and speech that is fundamentally like a form of psychic and aesthetic touch.

While Marks’ concentrates on the mastery *of* vision on the other senses, however, I am focussing here on a discursive mastery *over* vision, effected not through the look, but rather through the discursive account that is given of our embodied visual experience. Vision does not necessarily master the object

³⁴¹ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 213.

³⁴² Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’Invisible*, 304.

³⁴³ See Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, xii.

that it beholds, as Marks suggests, but this haptic gaze can still be subjected to normative surveillance. As we have argued in the case of the spectator's emancipation, of the embodiment of its experience, and of the subject's heteronomy, it is precisely by recognising, mapping and regulating the hapticity of the visual that a control over vision can be exerted in the first place. The point is less, then, to have more haptic films or more haptic media, but rather to recognise the fundamental hapticity of each and every spectator's experience of any film whatsoever. Locating the hapticity of the image, that is, not only in the materiality of the medium or in some of its specific forms, but rather in the contingent dimension of aesthetic *use* that characterises spectatorship as a *praxis*. As such, like embodiment, hapticity exists fundamentally as a tension.

According to Marks, meaning is "encoded in objects not metaphorically but by physical contact"³⁴⁴ - not by substitution, but through physical contiguity. She analyses in particular how meaning is encoded in objects which are "witnesses" of a change of culture or "bear" the loss of its original culture by an individual. She calls these objects "transnational objects", by comparison with Winnicott's transitional objects: in a sense, for her, both mediate between two incommensurable forms of experience and subjectivity - between two cultures and between the infant and the mother.³⁴⁵ Transnational objects are fetishes produced by intercultural contact since, Marks claims, "they insist in the materiality of the original presence to which they refer [...]." In this sense, "they do not symbolically represent power, they physically embody it."³⁴⁶ She then continues:

"To think of the moving image as a fetish [...] implies understanding it not as a representation, which is volatile only because of the projections brought to it, but as an emissary, which is volatile to the degree that the viewer/receiver has access to the materiality of its original scene."³⁴⁷

What is material and immanent to the object, however, is already in part a representation - not in the sense of an intelligible meaning, though, but rather

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 50.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 78.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 91.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 92.

as a sensuous, mnemonic and semiotic association. The subject's encounters with things in the world would then have the character of an *Einfall*. In this perspective, it does not matter whether the *Einfall* is seen to come from within or from without the subject since, in the radical contingency of lived-experience, the two dimensions cannot really be told apart.

On the contrary, in the measure that we downplay radical contingency or turn it into an expression of an external (invisible) agency, we can entertain the fantasy of a world clearly partitioned into an exterior and an interior, into subjects and objects, and further imagine that something might be (or should be) in control of this distribution. It is then by relinquishing this fantasy of mastery, through a doubt and a questioning which provokes a constant shift in our ways of being and categories of understanding, that authority can be opposed, both intra-psychically and socially. Which is not to say, of course, that all social action or the whole scope of politics can, or should, be reduced to this anti-authoritarian principle: as much as intellectual emancipation must be matched with a struggle for the equality of material conditions, a critique of authority turns into a self-indulgent (and yet still imaginary) impotence, if not accompanied with the recognition of our inevitable involvement, with the particular form of presence which is responsibility. Rancière often evokes the political dimension at the same time in impersonal terms and as a being-there (*il y a de la politique*). Political subjectivation is indeed first of all described, though of course not entirely defined, as a form of dissensual and indeterminate presence - if not as an individual with an established identity, which would already be a part of the consensual distribution of the sensible and of a disciplinary fantasy, then, as an embodied, floating, subject.

This presence, however, is never unmediated, never entirely intelligible, never pure. As we are in the world, not only we take part in its connectedness, but we share in its injustice, not only we experience the contingency and equality of all things, but we are active part of existing inequalities. Empathy should name not just the potentially self-absolving capacity to feel (for) the other's suffering, it should also entail the acknowledgement our involvement with its causes, and the working-through of our implication with the historical process. Much like one can reject the idea of the spectator's passivity, and recognise it as the expression of a masochistic agency and of a paternalist theory of film, we, as world spectators, cannot claim any form of detachment either, nor deny

the responsibility that comes with our very existence - a responsibility that, in the end, is nothing but the interdependence of everyone's existence. Reducing this heteronomy of the subject within a regime of activity and passivity, as Aaron suggested, authorizes instead a strategy of disavowal that grants to the "active" subjects the means they need for oppression, and to the "passive" ones the imaginary distance they desire from it. In this sense both the passivity and the impassivity of spectators are integral to the logic of the apparatus.³⁴⁸ From Rancière's perspective, in fact, the spectator's agency and its share of discursive power would not be enough to make of looking on a political act: there is a politics of spectatorship only when spectatorship becomes, like we have seen, an expression of dissensus, rather than a re-articulation of existing positions of power or the establishment of a new particular "part".

The fantasy of pure presence. If we attempt to translate these considerations more specifically to the domain of the body of the spectator, then, we will see that they tendentially thwart any attempt to assume it as a comfortable ethical ground, and that they prevent us from making of it the essentialized, *a priori*, figure of equality: for, indeed, as there can be no equality beyond dissensus, there can be no embodiment without a tension between its discursivity and its *mise en discours*. The idea of pure presence of the spectator's body - that is, of the body as a given ground of signification or as the site of a perfect correspondence of the subject with the world - appears then to be a way to avoid this tension, an attempt to negate the indeterminacy of embodiment, to master the discursivity and contingency of the body, and thus to negate its politics.

This depoliticization is not only championed by the most manifest discourses of hierarchical observation, normalising judgement, examination, and exploitation (the medical supervision of the body, its genetic, neurological and psychological mapping, its discrimination in terms of race and gender, its religious re-vestment and ritual mutilation, its commodification, and so on), it can arguably be brought about even through the body's idealisation. As Judith Butler has suggested, ideas of the body that construe it as an essentially pre-discursive

³⁴⁸ Their passion and pleasure, instead, are clearly sought for by the apparatus, but at the same time they are somewhat feared, and thus they are tentatively put under surveillance as both desirable and dangerous objects.

and intrinsically subversive domain are in fact likely to support its further reification and regulation.³⁴⁹ What we are looking for is then a form of dissensus *within* the very physical presence, the psychic significance, and the ideological significance of the body.

As we have argued, not the invisible, but the *blurred*, is what escapes and subverts the regime of visibility: the power of normative distributions of the sensible is performed in the establishment of a clear split between embodied experience and disembodied mastery, between normal and abnormal bodies or subject positions. Hegemony, in turn, implies the production of such a split and its incisiveness depends on the neatness of the cut between the abnormal and the normal. Authoritarian discourses *split* when there is in fact a tension, and *discriminate* where there is in fact a continuity, thereby attempting to regulate the fundamental indeterminacy of embodiment, the heteronomy of subjectivity and the discursivity of human relations. The fantasy of a pure presence of the body, and its reduction to an observable and intelligible object, then, meet at opposite ends as two equivalent positions defined within a normative regime of representation of the body and of the embodied subject. The two are positions within the same regime and, together, they articulate the split that allows for a normative framing of the body in the distribution of the social space. In other words, the hypostasis of the pre-discursive body corresponds essentially to the logic of discursive interpretation.

If only a fly hadn't come into the body.

I would like now to discuss an apparently odd topic: teleportation. The science fiction trope of teleportation, in fact, especially as it is dealt with in David Cronenberg's famous remake of *The Fly*,³⁵⁰ allows us to address how the representation of a split between the raw, traumatic, presence of the body and its "pure" normative regulation, eventually becomes a means to make the radical contingency of real bodies more manageable and submit the embodied subject to disciplinary regulation.

What is teleported, indeed, if not the pure, non-situated, autonomous and

³⁴⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 123.

³⁵⁰ David Cronenberg, *The Fly* (20th Century Fox, 1987). 35mm. I am referring in particular to the pre-2005 theatrical release.

self-sufficient presence of the normalised body? And what is the monstrous fly of the film, then, if not a figuration and a reification of the radical contingency and impurity of the body? What are the heteronomy and contingency of our embodied encounters, finally, if not what *cannot* be teleported, what cannot be replicated about subjectivity or de-contextualised about the flesh? Teleportation makes visible a fantasy of mastery of the body: it stands to the flesh like the cinematographic apparatus stands to the spectator's embodied vision. It literalises a regime of understanding by which the body is reduced to the principles of its intelligibility and that implies and performs a reduction of matter to information, of the body to a mappable organism, and of the subject to an expression of the ahistorical self-sameness of identity.

More computing than commuting. To begin with - in case the reader did not catch up with recent issues of *Scientific American* - I have to break some news: quantum teleportation appears to be perfectly feasible. And yet it surely is, compared with the heights of cinematic imagination, quite a disappointment. In fact, nothing about quantum teleportation points to the effortless and instantaneous transportation of matter, let alone objects, animals or people. "Teleportation," writes Doctor Jeff Kimble of the California Institute of Technology, "is a protocol about how to send a quantum state - a wave function - from one place to another."³⁵¹ What is teleported is not matter, then, but rather certain properties of quantum particles: a pattern of information encoded in quantum states.³⁵² Even in the future, we will not be able to teleport objects, but rather a blueprint for their replication - not bodies, but merely the instructions for their reproduction. In the end, as J. R. Minkel put it, teleportation is "more a matter of computing than commuting,"³⁵³ and its only imaginable applications lay indeed in the field of information technology.

The essential imaginary feature underlying quantum teleportation would be then its potential (a prerequisite, really) for an absolutely comprehensive

³⁵¹ J. R. Minkel, "Beam Me Up Scotty?: Q&A about Quantum Teleportation with H. Jeff Kimble," *Scientificamerican.com* (2004): <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-teleporting-is-nothing-like-star-trek/>.

³⁵² Joel N. Shurkin, "Quantum Teleportation in Space Explored as Message Encryption Solution," *Scientificamerican.com*. (2013): <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/quantum-teleportation-in-space-explored-as-message-encryption-solution/>

³⁵³ Minkel, "Beam Me Up Scotty?"

“knowledge” and mapping of the object to be teleported. Human teleportation, in particular, would require and perform an extremely precise mapping of the body, like an all-encompassing quantum “picture” of it. After the mapping, the body would not be, strictly speaking “moved,” but rather destroyed and recreated according to the blueprint that has been obtained. This is, at least, the understanding behind the transporter that we find in an influential mainstream science fiction like *Star Trek*, as well as in the telepod device of David Cronenberg’s film. If we hold that the body at the other end of the teleporter is exactly the same body, and exactly the same subject, that came in, this coding of the body must be seen to constitute a normative mapping as well. Indeed, as long as we hold the two subjects to be the same, teleportation would imply not just a *translation* of the body into a digital code, but its *reduction* to it: the subject would be proved to be nothing more and nothing less than its mapping. Teleportation would be, in the end, still a question of dematerialisation: but only in the sense of the body’s loss of contingency and indeterminacy.

Here we see how the fantasy of teleportation is yet another form of the fantasy of mastery, one by which the embodied subject is not only entirely reduced within knowledge (nothing would escape the mapping), but reduced to the principles of its intelligibility (reduced to an “imprint” of its quantum states in *Star Trek*, as well as in George Langelaan’s original short story *The Fly*³⁵⁴ and, in Cronenberg’s film, to its molecular and genetic composition). The mapping would entail in fact a reduction of embodied experience to measurable matter, and of the body, the mind, and the psyche to what can be predicated about them. Especially in Cronenberg’s rendition of the teleportation device, it is on this preliminary operation, more than on the jump through space, that the fantasmatic and fictional potential is concentrated. In this sense, the teleporter is above all a disciplinary device. The molecular mapping that takes place in the film acts in turn as the fantasmatic ground for all other sorts of normative distributions of the human body: it fulfils the wish of a complete knowledge of the subject and, thus, of its total reduction under masterful control.

Normative mapping of the body. The body that is teleported - in a Foucauldian sense, the body that the imaginary technology of teleportation *pro-*

³⁵⁴ George Langelaan, “The Fly,” *Playboy* (1957): 17–18, 22, 36, 38, 46, 64–68.

duces - is one with impermeable boundaries, perfectly self-contained, and fully reduced to intelligibility. The subject that corresponds to this body, in turn, is a classical one: unitary, male, and proper. Teleportation would grant the subject in a normative position that validation of its own self-sameness and absolute autonomy, which the embodied subject can never find in its contingent presence in the world. Nothing less and nothing more than what can be mapped about it, the subject of teleportation is clearly an imaginary subject: like the child in the Lacanian mirror scene, the subject who passes through the teleporter can identify with a mastered “image” of itself - only the image, in an ultimate wish-fulfilment, is now its very body, flesh of its flesh. In this sense, teleportation entails an extension of the imaginary wholeness of the normative subject from the ocularcentric apparatus to the very idea of embodiment, intensifying the discursive regulation of embodied experience and the flesh. What is lost in exchange for this imaginary mastery are the contingency, the heteronomy and the historicity of the embodied subject, as well as, eventually, its fundamental emancipation. The loss of situatedness and contingency that characterises teleportation confirms, more specifically, the subject’s mastery over its heteronomy: the fantastic capacity for displacement that the body acquires corresponds in the end to the certification of its fixed identity. Once a human subject has run through the teleporter, indeed, we know for sure that he is identical to himself (a dead ringer?) - a human body that is made to fulfil the law of logical identity, which is also the ground of the subject’s ideological identity.

It is as a reaction to this untenable ideological wish of self-sameness that teleportation is bound to go awry, at least in some of the stories that figure it. In this sense, the unforeseen intrusion of the fly in *The Fly* - not unlike the irruption of the bat in Pirandello’s *The Bat* - is not a contingent event, but precisely the opposite, a coincidence and a normalisation of the contingency of embodiment. The fly, indeed - the measly insect, not the monstrous creature - intervenes to unsettle the normative scenario of teleportation and, apparently, to reinstate the troubling presence of an embodied, heteronomous, subject, against the rather unbearable fantasy of perfect self-knowledge and self-replication.

Inaccurate self-replications. Even before the fly incident, though, the telepods were far from being functional. Questionable things had been happening to a series of animals: Doctor Delambre in Langelaan’s short story phased

out the house cat, and, in Cronenberg's adaptation, Doctor Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) managed to turn a baboon inside out and into a homage to John Carpenter's Thing.

In the film, the problem with the teleporter seems to be the incapacity of the computer to process the erraticness of the flesh. Running a steak from a pod to the other merely gives you a computer's interpretation of a steak - synthesised and disgusting. Flavour functions here a sign of a harmonious, more-than-objectual, embodiment. What Brundle seeks, then, is a better mapping of the body, but not simply in the sense that this mapping has to be more *precise*. What is left to be mapped is, in fact, the *unmappable*. What the technological and ideological machine has to achieve in order to master the contingency and heteronomy of the body is, precisely, a *mise en discours* of its pre-discursive deviance (an abnormality which is also what makes it desirable). What the computer has to perform is not just a reduction of the body to molecular or genetic information, then, but a reduction that reduces to information what escapes this very reduction. Without the "molecular" mastering of what is more than molecular, in fact, the computer's mastery of the body would not amount to much - from an ideological standpoint, at least. As Brundle puts it, the computer has to learn how to "get crazy on the flesh." And of course, in order to teach the computer, Brundle has to teach himself first, with the gracious compliance of the film's heroine Veronica Quaith (Geena Davis) - the scientific reporter to whom Brundle had confided the results of his research and who ended up living with him in his laboratory. In fact, what Brundle needs to teach his computer about is hegemony: more specifically, male heterosexual hegemony.

After he has sex with Veronica, indeed, Brundle is finally able to teleport a baboon (the brother of the other unfortunate animal, but probably the same baboon actor) successfully. The computer's mastering of the flesh is made to coincide with the main male character's getting of the girl. We are not surprised. Indeed, beginning with Langelan's story - which had been published on *Playboy* and thus necessarily interacted with the magazine's own version of the objectification of the body - the story of the fly is inseparable from

its sexist underpinnings.³⁵⁵ Cronenberg's film picks up and arguably makes an interesting use of the sexist para-text, or ecosystem, of *The Fly*. Much of the film indeed addresses the relation between Veronica, a rather typical figuration of the "independent" woman journalist, and her ex Stathis Borans (John Getz), a blatantly unsympathetic male chauvinist character, who also happens to be her boss - in one of her most earnest moments, she describes him as a "petty schmuck." I will not go into details, but we can safely claim that the coordinates of sexist hegemony are all in place. If Stathis's vulgarity strives to look funny, with little success, Veronica's acquiescence is outrightly despairing: seeing her coming back to the man for counsel and comfort at every difficulty is as painful to watch as the final agony of the creature. Apparently thanks to a panning from a preview audience in Los Angeles,³⁵⁶ we have at least been spared a "happy" ending in which Veronica and Seth got married. An ending which would have completely changed the tone of the film and, for me at least, completely compromised its significance.

Metamorphosis and anamorphosis. Once the double discursive mapping of the frenzy of the flesh - of the taste of the steak and of the sex of the woman - is completed and implemented in the computer, teleportation as a technology of body and subjectivity is finally perfected. However, when Brundle himself decides to test his device in a drunken fit of jealousy, a fly happens to get locked with him inside the telepod. Fatefully, the computer maps its body together with Brundle's and, acting like a gene splicer, fuses them into a single being. After that, Brundle will gradually transform into a monstrous fly, as the genes of the insect take over his body and his personality. In this respect, Langelaan's story was more simplistic: the human and the fly swapped body parts - the doctor ended up with the fly's head and arm, and the reverse - but each displaced part maintained its recognisable physiology. In the *Playboy* story, then, the

³⁵⁵ At the same time the story is markedly, if crudely, intertextual: spanning, a few pages at a time, for almost the whole length of the volume, the text of *The Fly* is intercut with pictures of the Winter's playmate winner of 1956 on pages 20 and 21, a cartoon about spectatorship, historical films, and gender performance on page 31, a piece on shorts and other elegant men's attire on pages 35 and 36 - just to mention a few. The bottom right corner of page 67, at very climax of the tale, features a cartoon about a "die-hard" seductress inviting a man to join her from inside her coffin.

³⁵⁶ David Prior, *Fear of The Flesh: The Making of The Fly* (20th Century Fox, 2005). Video.

ideological function addressed the body more as a visible form, while in Cronenberg's rendition (despite the fact that what we see on the computer screen is actually the body's chemical composition) the body is addressed more at the level of its organic composition and genetic coding. This allows to map more directly the blurriness and the indeterminacy of embodiment, at the same time determining an intensification of their normative regulation. While in Lange-laan's story the monstrous embodiment was a matter of an immediately visible redistribution of body parts, in the film, instead, the horror is made visible only gradually and represented as a matter of hybridization and contamination - coherently, we can say, with the fantasies and anxieties, and with the intensified knowledge of the body, that came with human genetics and digital technologies. Compared with 1957, indeed, teleportation technology, and the narrative framing of contingency that it allows, seem to imply and require a further *mise en discours* of the body: not just a representation of the body's troubling heterogeneity, but a representation and a reduction into discourse of the very unintelligibility of its heteronomy.

Cronenberg's *The Fly* presents, albeit in another context, the same *representation* of contingency, and the same *representation* of the breakdown of the regime of representation, that we have found in Pirandello's short story. Like the bat's, the contingency of the fly is a staged one, precisely the opposite of the irruption of a contingent event. Within the universe of the diegesis, indeed, the fly enters the pod by pure chance. But if we consider the level of the narration, instead, this intrusion is not a chance at all. Moreover, and more importantly, this intrusion is not even truly disruptive. Through the fly, in fact, the story and the film provide a figuration and a manageable understanding of contingency, by this not only leaving the logic of representation intact, but arguably contributing to reinforce the normative framing of the body. Similarly, the heteronomy of the subject is eventually reified, represented as the creature into which Brundle gradually transforms himself, and finally "disciplined" with a shotgun shell.

In other words, the "chance" irruption of the fly ultimately serves to *code* a split between the purely human and the purely monstrous: on one side, the (male) body of Brundle (and Stathis), on the other, the alien body of the creature. The story of *The Fly* seems to *produce* this split through its narrative of hybridization, while in fact the split is tacitly assumed from the

very beginning. The contingency and the troubling heteronomy of the body are shown in the story to be a product of the disruptive effects of change on a masterful technology, while they are in fact constitutional features of the embodied human subject. In fact, the ideological effect lies in the initial, biased, assumption that the human subject and the contingent fly are not one to begin with. In other words, the body “without the fly” that Brundle has at the start of the film is already the result of a normative framing, it already corresponds to the fantasy of an autonomous body: one “without its heteronomy” and, in fact, without the *thing*.

In this sense, the coming of the fly in the diegesis is fateful. And in this sense as well, the computer does not really splice two different creatures together, as much as it tries to make Brundle whole again. From this perspective, the teleporter’s program appears to give the right, properly tragic, solution to the problem of the flesh that it was asked to solve: by recognising a single being inside the telepod and by fusing them together, it apparently attempts to redeem the primal split onto which the normative male subject was constructed. As the further developments of the plot make clear, however, what the computer is actually doing is putting to use its newly acquired proficiency in male heterosexist hegemony.

I say this, because the rediscovered heteronomy of the subject is presented by the film as an irredeemably traumatic event (while in fact it is a matter of ordinary life, and it is not necessarily unpleasant). By setting up the heteronomy of the subject as a trauma, the film eventually allows its narrative regulation. What appears to redeem the split between a normative and a heteronomous subject, then, in fact reinstates it: as Brundle metamorphoses into the final stage of the fly-creature, the subject he represents loses its heteronomy again to become a reification of the abject, a figure of the body’s irrepresentability which is indeed functional to the *mise en discours* of real human subjects. The split between the transparent normativity of the human and the immediate contingency of the fly that we have at the beginning, is reinstated at the end as the split between the visible humanity of Stathis, with his stereotyped masculinity, and the overstated, spectacular, and reified monstrosity of the creature.

While contingency and embodiment are not per se intelligible, their reified *representation*, indeed, can be mastered much more easily: this is precisely

the scope of the ideological mechanism that Žižek calls anamorphosis.³⁵⁷ The whole narrative can then be read as a symptomatic attempt to frame and tame the anxiety which the founding indeterminacy of the body and heteronomy of subjectivity provokes to subjects in normative positions. As a matter of fact, instead, we are all “Brundleflies” (as the film calls the intermediate stage of the metamorphosis): human subjects already bear with them the contingency that the story first projects into the fly, and then removes entirely through the killing of the creature. Brundle is the closest to a human subject, then, when he is neither the monstrous insect nor the pristine human, but rather something in-between.

Not only Brundlefly seems, momentarily, to be more human than Brundle, then: while he is precariously balanced in-between the two identities that, so to speak, lay claims onto his body, he feels positively liberated. What he is liberated from, I would say, is a stable identity - little matters if it is that of a heterosexual male or that of a giant insect, for both are equally bad, both equally internal to the sexist and authoritarian regime of representation that sustains the narrative. In one scene, Brundlefly describes the disintegration and the reintegration that he has experienced as a purifying process, comparing the teleporter to a coffee filter. In the view of the hybrid, the impurity being filtered would be nothing but the *purity* of the heteronormative subject. Coherently with the normative split that regulates the film, however, Brundle’s liberation from “society’s thick and grey fear of the flesh” - as he and the fly put it - finally amounts to little more than a paroxysm of masculinity, involving random feats of gymnastics and arm-wrestling, and picking up a blonde in a bar. Brundle’s potentially liberating “dive into the plasma pool” eventually “evolves” in a totalitarian position (“insect politics,” as the film refers to it). Both the human and the monster are *pure*: that is, artificially made distinct and autonomous and, thus, intelligible and manageable in their opposition. Purity and impurity, in fact, defilement and redemption, are all terms of a totalitarian fantasy of mastery. In the end, the fantasy of purity and separateness that sustains the normative subject reverts into the fantasy of the “pure presence” of the impure (that is, the monstrous creature). Confronted with the normative alternative between pure monstrosity and pure humanity, then, actual humanity would be,

³⁵⁷ Slavoj Žižek, “Melancholy and the Act,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000): 659.

instead, on the side of the (impurely) impure. The idea of the body as a pure “thing,” a mere mass of protean horror, no less than the idea of a purely human body, is indeed a production of the same disciplinary apparatus.

On choice and the benefit of doubt. If we limit ourselves to Brundle’s perspective, we might see the deadlock and the tragicness of this normative framing of his body, but we would miss what is most essential to its hegemonic dimension. The narrative of *The Fly* is indeed linked from the beginning with the hegemony over another body: that of Veronica. The technology of teleportation - the technology that was supposed to produce the transcendental male subject - indirectly frames the body of women, and, by this, is used to negate the fundamental emancipation of all human subjects.

This framing of Veronica’s body takes above all the form of a forced choice. While in the short story, Delambre’s wife plays the role (at the same time and by the same token) of the female killer and the faithful wife, Cronenberg introduces a whole new element in the plot: Veronica is pregnant. The baby is surely Brundle’s, but of *which* Brundle (before or after his splicing with the fly) she, and the spectators, cannot be sure. Veronica, then, is confronted with, and eventually defined through, two equally unfair alternatives (to give birth to a potentially monstrous child or to have an abortion) and two equally impossible choices (to be devoured by a monstrous bug or to live the rest of her days with a pretentious schmuck). In metapsychological fashion, we could say that she is caught between the visible presence of a prick and the monstrous reification of its lack. It is not really that she is confronted with a situation in which all choices are equally horrible and unjust, she has actually no choice at all: for both the obnoxious Stathis and the fusional creature are equal expressions of the same normative and sexist regime that attempts to control her - choosing one or the other, she would still be opting for the same heterosexist thing. Even if we direct our sympathy to the shapeless thing more than to the male one, that is not enough to avoid the heterosexist normative regime. Veronica’s sole possibility for independence - and, with her, the sole possibility we have to imagine some kind of emancipation for human subjects in general - would be to refuse the terms of the alternatives she is presented with. In this sense, her agency must become more than the expression of her freedom of choice (brutally reified as if it were just a matter of marriage and abortion): her agency must

transform the very terms in which the question and the situation are posited. Even as she blasts the creature with a shotgun, indeed, she is not really the one pulling the trigger.

Unfortunately, the film does not give her the opportunity to negate her choice, nor to express it. Fortunately, however, as the film ends we still do not know if the child will be born or not, if it will be monstrous (a larva) or post-human (a human baby with butterfly wings), nor can we be sure that Veronica, like in the “happy” ending we have mentioned, will rather opt for abortion and have a “normal” child with Stathis. The openness of the plot is what finally allows to imagine the heteronomy of the embodied subject: it does not matter whether the child will be born as a she or a he or a it, for this indeterminacy is the actual condition of all human beings. The whole story, in Cronenberg’s version, can then be taken as a narrative, a kind of infantile sexual theory, about the “birth”, or the imaginary “nature”, of the heteronomous and embodied subject. A birth that we do not - and indeed must not - witness: the film acquires its interest, I believe, precisely in that this indeterminacy is not resolved nor made visible. By the same token, to be fair, the spectators are somewhat protected from it, in the sense that they do not have to confront it directly: but indeterminacy, like emancipation, is not something that can be given. It is only in the dimension of spectatorship, beyond the text of the film, that the prospect of a actual human subject can be maintained - “whole” only in that it is heteronomous, “individual” only in the sense of its contingent embodiment, and independent only inasmuch as it does not indulge in a fantasy of mastery, as it does not curb the mobility and the ambivalence of its desire and as it does not downplay the responsibilities that come with its social and discursive presence.

The wayward spectator

Isn't life a series of images that change as they repeat themselves?
Andy Warhol.

Unburdened from the weight of memory, one is nothing more
than a pure gaze.

Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Traversée des Ombres*.

Oh, one can go out to a movie, lookin' for a special treat
Two can make that single movie somethin' really kinda sweet
Marvin Gaye, *It Takes Two*.

Partages de l'ombre.

I am borrowing the title of this paragraph from a collection of poems by the French writer and film theorist Raymond Bellour. When I read it, I inevitably give the word “partages” a Rancièrian ring, suggesting at once a more egalitarian dimension of practices of sharing, and more normative attempts at its distribution. At the same time, in this context, “l'ombre” - the shadow, the darkness - is necessarily a cinematic one, and thus bring with it a series of metaphorical connotations.

First among these metaphorical references is a Platonic absence of true light: the obscurity of the cave, the flicker of the candle projecting the illusory play

of shadows, that in turn inevitably suggests a certain regime of understanding of cinema. There seems indeed to be an essential likeness, as Jean-Louis Baudry noted, between the Platonic apparatus and the cinematographic one.³⁵⁸ In both cases, Baudry claimed, the illusory impression of reality and the ideological effect do not come from the images' fidelity to the real, nor from the content of the play, but from the structure of the apparatus itself - from its production of a subject position.³⁵⁹ It is through the bonds of the prisoners, then, through the immobility and lack of wakefulness of the spectators, that the images acquire their more-than-real, hallucinatory, reality. It is, in other words, from the coercive disembodiment of their conditions of experiencing - and, more precisely, from the devaluation of their forms of experience - that the prisoner's perceptions are given their illusory character. The images do not even have to try being persuasive, because persuasion is already secured by the *dispositif*. As a result, their impoverished materiality (in the Platonic cave, they are shadows not of real objects but of cardboard figures, and in the case of the cinema, they are mostly "shadows" of a *set*) becomes a means of a further stultification: the shadows of the cave are intended to put a further distance between the subjects' experience and the real world - that is, ultimately, between the world of the prisoners and the world of the people that keep them captive.

No one can be more in the dark, then, than the spectators who choose to lock themselves in the cave. And yet, who is in the position to say that their world of shadows is intrinsically inferior to the real one, if not those who have already escaped it? Who is in the position to say that the prisoners' impoverished environment has impaired their intellect to the point that not only their world, but their experience and their understanding of it, are of no value, if not those who believe their own world and understanding to be intrinsically superior? We can comprehend the intended meaning of the allegory, in fact, only because we are not living in a cave and because we understand what we would lose if we did. Though, we are told, even if we did live in the darkness we would still believe that we did not. The allegory, on the one hand, asks us to occupy the position and share the mastery of the philosopher (the subject

³⁵⁸ Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus," *Camera Obscura* 1, no. 11 (1976): 104-114.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

who really knows). But by the same token, on the other hand, we are made to occupy the position of the prisoner (the subject who merely believes that he knows). Why? Because, in Rancièrian terms, by giving our assent to a logic of explication and we therefore subscribe to a regime of inequality of intelligence. Since we believe that somebody's experience and understanding of reality can really be superior, we tacitly confirm the superiority of the philosopher that presented us with the example in the first place. In other words, by accepting the very split between true and false knowledge that the allegory presents, we are already sanctioning the external authority that distinguishes them, and by accepting that emancipation requires an agency external to phenomenal experience, we are already relinquishing our own. The dialectic philosopher performs his act of *abrutissement* precisely through his *demonstration* of the necessity of emancipation, for which the allegory of the apparatus was indeed devised.

In this sense, the allegory of the cave and the theory of the apparatus constitute an argument for the subject's passivity, and hold it into a double, hegemonic, grip: that of its arbitrary oppressive material conditions, and that of their authoritarian understanding. What is established by this, on top of the discursivity and the heteronomy of the subject, is an authoritarian split within the scene of knowledge and experience.³⁶⁰ At that point little matters what positions we know or we believe we are occupying, because in any case we will be performing and reinforcing this authoritarian split. Until the whole scenario changes, the philosopher will always need his imbeciles, and the imbeciles their philosophers. Until our understanding of spectatorship changes, apparatus theory will always need an intelligible and passive spectator, and passive spectators will always need the masterful agency of the apparatus and of its theorists. Here, cinematic darkness corresponds to an authoritarian distributions of its lights and shadows.

As a matter of fact, Baudry did affirm that the dualism of the apparatus - its forced dynamic of "two scenes, or two places, opposing or confronting one

³⁶⁰ Of course, this authoritarian distribution of spectatorship and film experience does not concern only apparatus theory and psychoanalytic film theory, but also, and to a greater degree, those theories that grant a rational, autonomous, agency to the spectator while still holding it as a passive and intelligible object of their knowledge.

another, one dominating the other” - was one of its structural characteristics.³⁶¹ But still, he omitted to see the role played by the position of the film theorist in sanctioning this dynamic and establishing the spectator’s position. Eventually, a binary articulation of light and shadow, of knowledge and embodied experience, of activity and passivity, conscious and unconscious, discursivity and ideological determination, and so on, is less characteristic of spectatorship as such than of its authoritarian explanation. The spectator, in fact, always occupies *both* scenes or, rather, it occupies an undefinable *in-between* - a place that is actually *untenable*, meaning that it can be traversed, but not held in possession. If the spectator is there at all as an aesthetic, embodied subject, then, it is precisely because each scene fails to dominate the other - in this sense, as we have seen, the spectator is better described as a “site” traversed by tensions. On the other hand, if the film is there at all as an aesthetic object - or, rather, as a contingent aesthetic experience - it is because it has been brought into being in that quality by the spectator.

Spectatorship as an act of illumination. In *Beauty’s Light*, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit suggest that we take spectatorship - and, more generally, an aesthetic modality of looking at the world - as an act of illumination.³⁶² What they allow us to imagine is that the visuality of the film spectacle would not be merely an effect of the projector, but would take place through a further, embodied and aesthetic act of illumination performed by the spectator, who would “light up” the scene of film, in fact making it exist as a scene, through its reflexive implication in it and by the virtue (or the perversity) of its passionate look.

At the same time that they “perform” the moving image, the spectator’s acts of illumination would bring into being its beauty: not in the sense that spectatorship would disclose a pre-existing beauty, inherent to the object, but rather in the sense that the appearance of beauty would coincide with the subject’s non-sadistic relation to the seen. Illumination must be understood, then, in counterpoint to conceptual explication or to a gesture of making-visible:

³⁶¹ Ibid., 104.

³⁶² Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, “Beauty’s Light,” *October* 82 (1997): 17. See also Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio’s Secrets* (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 1998). And, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

far from resting on an act that draws apart light from the shadows, spectatorial illumination would bring them inseparably together. The beauty that the spectator evokes is essentially a form of its relation to the object, and a manifestation of the subject's vaster implication in the world:³⁶³ understood in this way, spectatorship would correspond to a form of non-objectual embodied passion, a relation that eroticises the object's specificity, and even its distance from the subject, at the same time that it does not produce a split in-between them.

A relation that, in turn, individuates the space of spectatorship as a radical form of sharing.

“Now the world of the film can no longer be seen as an object; the film-maker, his representation, and the spectator are all working together, and in so doing, they are discovering and constructing their being *as* that working together, as an incessant compositional and associative activity of which, finally, the film itself is only an episode.”³⁶⁴

The look that arouses the beauty of the spectacle is understood by Bersani and Dutoit also to be the presence of a witness within the scene³⁶⁵ - the spectator's reflexive implication would be a *mise en abyme* of the act of illumination itself. In their work on Caravaggio, Bersani and Dutoit discuss this idea mainly from the point of view of the artist painting a figure of himself as an observer inside his works: the spectator would then be present in the aesthetic scene as a re-doubling of the gesture by which the artist re-discovers itself in the work of art. I do not think, however, that the aesthetic presence of the spectator has to take human form, nor that it has to be necessarily signified, and thus coded, by the spectacle or, more specifically, mediated by the work of the artist or, even more specifically, through its figure. On the contrary, the spectator's implication necessarily precedes its representation: it coincides with the embodied experience of film as such, and it is thus one with the phenomenological coming into being of the moving image itself.

³⁶³ Ibid., 27.

³⁶⁴ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 57.

³⁶⁵ Bersani and Dutoit, *Beauty's Light*, 27.

The spectator's implication in the moving image would begin with its grain, so to speak, and it would be precisely in the soundtrack's timbre, in the microcosm of fleeting correspondences and erratic associations, in the marginal details, and in the unfathomable vibrations and tinges of the light of film - in a word, at the confluence of the material contingency of the image and the embodied contingency of the spectator's experience of it - that film and spectatorship would find their aesthetics. What defines spectatorship, in the end, is not the relationship of the moving image to reality - here we agree with Baudry - and not even to the images' own material reality, or to the physical presence of spectators, but rather the contingency of film experience and the communal forms of its sharing. In fact, if the artist might find in its work a space ample enough to accommodate the expanse of its agency and passion, the spectator can only do so in a dimension that extends from the moment of projection and transcends the film scene as it is conventionally described. In this sense, what is peculiar to the spectator's aesthetic involvement lies perhaps first of all in the dimension of the film's memory and retelling, in its transformations and dissemination.

In a way, the spectatorial illumination can be said to be an "apparatic" characteristic of film experience. As it constitutes an integral part of the cinematographic *dispositif*, rather independently from the contents of specific films, it presents a certain degree of universality. At the same time, it suggests revising the fundamental normativity and the authoritarian assumptions of the classic understanding of the cinematographic apparatus. Other than being a site of imaginary unity - a unity which in fact covers up and entails a separation of the subject from the world - we can imagine the scene of film as a site in which, precisely by the greater permeability between subject and the world that aesthetic contemplation allows for, the subject embraces its heteronomy and is thus moved beyond itself.

Through its implication with the film (not only with the projection but with the whole "scene" of filmmaking and spectatorship) the spectator illuminates it as an aesthetic and political object. On the reverse as well, in its encounter with film, the spectator is illuminated by it as an aesthetic and political subject. Part of the tension that defines spectatorship is indeed the fact that the position of the spectator is created in its contingent encounter with the film. As much as the spectator's relation to the film is not essentially one of objectification,

though, the film's discursive effects are not necessarily confined to a normative framing of the subject. In this sense, as we have argued, the discursivity, the contingency and the embodiment of the cinematic subject does not entail either its perfect correspondence with the phenomenal world, or its complete discursive determination - which are both a measure of its reduction into intelligible discourse: we are made and unmade in our encounters in the world, but the moment and the effects of these encounters are never entirely foreseeable and controllable.

Against the shadows of its *abrutissement*, then, spectatorship would oppose the light of beauty, but a light that is accompanied by the shadows of the subject's embodied and impersonal being. Spectatorship's acts of illumination can in this respect be taken as the exact opposite of the pedagogical "displays" of enlightened reason and of the subject's self-regulatory identifications. Spectatorial illumination does not proceed by a reduction of the world to the principles of its intelligibility, in fact, but is rather based on a reflexivity and an involvement that negate the separation of the subject from the object of knowledge, thereby not only thwarting the attempts of institutional control, but also radically troubling the mastery that the subject might want to exert upon itself. Because of this, they suggest that subjectivity and agency in fact produce a form of dispossession. What spectatorial *theory* is to the gaze, we can say, sexuality would be to the embodied subject: a form of erotic turning back of the subject upon itself,³⁶⁶ which at the same time individuates the presence of the subject to the world and (partially) shatters the subject as a "person" with a recognisable identity and an autonomous agency. The recognition of the passivity of the spectator's agency and the realisation of the subject's heteronomy at the same time put the spectator beyond the imaginary power of the apparatus. Which is not to say, however, that they put the spectator beyond the dimension of power and discourse, as we have repeatedly affirmed, but only beyond, or rather against, what is made intelligible about them within an authoritarian regime of knowledge.

Heteronomy and homoness. Illumination is a look that is also a passionate contact but, at the same time, precisely because it blurs the distinction between

³⁶⁶ Leo Bersani, "Sexuality and Aesthetics," *October* 28 (1984): 31.

subject and object, it does not take place as a definite *relation* between clearly established parts. From this perspective, aesthetic subjectivity ceases to be defined in terms of the articulation of specific positions, and is rather reimagined as a site of an *impersonal relationality*: for Bersani “the desiring individual” is erased in order to become a site of correspondences with the world.”³⁶⁷ The subject can then be seen as the history of her illuminations: she is, at once, what of her has been brought into being by her encounters, and what, of the people and objects and situations that she has come into contact with, she has brought into being. In this sense, Bersani’s connectedness of being would be another name for what I have called so far the heteronomy of the subject.

An heteronomy that we might as well call “homoness”.³⁶⁸ It is unfortunate that centuries of heterosexist mentality may tend to give *homoness* and *heteronomy* oppositional connotations, that in fact have no reason to exist: as much as *homoness* is not specific to an homosexual identity, indeed, but rather refers to an homosexual modality of desire that is shared by all subjects,³⁶⁹ *heteronomy* does not entail, in my view, a reaffirmation of sexual difference or of a heterosexual, sadistic, “split” identity.³⁷⁰ If I maintained a difference between the two terms, in the end, it is because, in the permeability of the border between object-love and identification which is characteristic of both *homoness* and *heteronomy*, *heteronomy* does not imply a perfect correspondence between the subject and the world, nor the latter’s boundless hospitality.³⁷¹ While Bersani appears to predicate the possibility of universal connectedness and of the self-shattering and self-dissemination of the subject on a universal solidarity of being,³⁷² I tend to see the possibility of this correspondence and impersonality precisely in the fact that there is no essential order or harmony that guarantees them. Rather than universal correspondences, we would have universal, but

³⁶⁷ Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, 70.

³⁶⁸ *Homoness* is defined by Bersani as “a communication of forms, [...] a kind of universal solidarity not of identities (44) but of positionings and configurations in space, a solidarity that ignores even the apparently intractable identity-difference: that between the human and the nonhuman.” Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, 43-44.

³⁶⁹ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 120.

³⁷⁰ See Leo Bersani, “Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 2 (2006), 145-146.

³⁷¹ Cfr. *Ibid.*, 152-153.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 150.

dissensual and inessential, contingent associations.

Heteronomy would thus name a connectedness that does not rest upon, nor necessarily encounters, a perfect correspondence with the world - one that does not depend on *immanent* resemblances,³⁷³ or, as Kaja Silverman puts it, on “ontologically equalizing similarities,”³⁷⁴ one that does not promise, nor expect, any unscathed and boundless bliss. To say that all is connected but that not everything harmonically and essentially corresponds - in between subjects, things, and within things and subjects themselves - does not seem to me to constitute a relapse into the idea of a fundamental hostility of the world to the subject, but rather to be the necessary recognition of the existence of suffering and struggle, and of our responsibility toward this existence.

In order to begin to question what appears to me a troubling disappearance of trouble and dissensus from Bersani’s aesthetic subject, we could ask, from a Butlerian perspective: how does one *become* an aesthetic subject? Would it be through a *realisation* of this essential harmony of being, in the same way one is supposed to become a woman, a homosexual, or a human being, by realising the imaginary harmony and by embodying the transparency of what in fact are their normative definitions?³⁷⁵ What about those subjects that are unwilling, or unable, to correspond? Or, from a Rancièrian perspective, we could ask: can a world of perfect correspondences also be hospitable to dissensus? Aesthetic being would prove, Bersani and Dutoit write, that there are “no gaps, no empty spaces in creation. [That we] are not *cut off* from anything; [that] nothing escapes connectedness, the play of and between forms.”³⁷⁶ In this sense, it would name the perfect, and most oppressive, of regulatory regimes. And while I agree that everything is indeed *connected* (heteronomy and dissensus clearly are

³⁷³ “Immanent in every subject is its similitude with other subjects (and other objects).” Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Being*, 8. “Universally immanent” connections that are in turn made to correspond to a “limitless extensibility [of the subject] in both space and time.” *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁷⁴ Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 4. Her concept of world spectatorship seems to entail, if I am not misreading her, the *ontological* presence of phenomenal forms. Strictly speaking, we cannot say that phenomenal forms exist outside the subject, for they only exist as the presence of the subject to the world. As such, they do not correspond to visible forms (they cannot be *seen*), but they are rather the forms that exist in the subject’s experience (they *are* the seen). See: Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 2.

³⁷⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 152.

³⁷⁶ Bersani, Dutoit, “Beauty’s Light,” 28.

a form of our connection and implication with the world), Bersani's insistence on an essential *correspondence* risks to make of the aesthetic subject the subject of a consensual fantasy.

Within Bersani's universal connectedness of being, then, heteronomy would name the moment of dissensus, a realisation of non-correspondence that corresponds in fact with the finiteness and contingency of our being. Heteronomy would name the moment in which the subject does not perfectly correspond with itself and with the world, a moment that, in turn, is open to the emergence of something radically incommensurable to the existing order of correspondences (to the existing distribution of the sensible). Something that in the realm of form would not yet or no longer be form, that in the domain of speech would not be recognised as a voice, something that in respect to the subject, would not yet or no longer be a human body, and so on. Heteronomy would thus bear with it a responsibility which is not comforted, nor limited, by the world's hospitality, nor by any given regime of its understanding: a feeling of connectedness beyond correspondence that is, I believe, not merely an ethical instance, but, more fundamentally, the unavoidable condition of the subject's emancipation and of its embodied and political presence in the world.

And still, heteronomy and homoness should not be seen to compete. If, for Bersani, difference (which is, in this context, not really sexual difference but rather the distance that separates one individual from another)³⁷⁷ becomes in aesthetic experience the "unthreatening supplement of sameness,"³⁷⁸ from the standpoint of heteronomy this difference is never neutralised, is never unthreatening. But still, homoness remains to the heteronomous subject as something like falling in love, and, possibly, as a drive toward the realisation of the material conditions of the equality we desire. In this sense, heteronomy can be seen as the complementary shadow of aesthetic illumination,³⁷⁹ the scene in which we can imagine - rather than a world of immanent forms - the very "shape" of

³⁷⁷ Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, 43, 87.

³⁷⁸ Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 86, 100.

³⁷⁹ In the end, illumination still suggests a framing of the body, if not in terms of its visibility, at least in terms of its visibility. Aesthetic illumination still relates to a body of form: but what can it say about the non-visual body, the improper body, the body of the entrails, which is at the same time the mortal body and the body of a more troubling and unintelligible agency?

the forms of being to falter and emerge.

Afterimages. So, in a way, we are back in the dark. This time, however, it is a darkness that envelops and permeates the subject, one that does not allow to distinguish it from other people and that at the same time connects everyone and everything impersonally, beyond the performance and the discipline of identity. This other regime of the spectator's presence to the scene of film corresponds, on one hand, to the extended space and the shared dimension of spectatorship and theory that we have discussed. On the other hand, this other scene is present, more materially, in the spectator's memory. Beyond the conventional text of the film, what remains of the cinematographic encounter in fact is the imprint of the spectator's subjective performance of the film (in a musical and in a discursive sense), and the fleeting trace that the film has left in the subject's history: together, these two kinds of traces make up our embodied memory of film.

How pale and uncertain these traces can seem, however, when compared with a medium that has in its mastery over memory (even more, perhaps, than in its mastery over contingency, although the two are clearly connected) one of its defining features. Like the Freudian unconscious, film apparently never forgets, and every projection seems to entail a repetition (even more drastically, without the spectator's contingent subjective illuminations we would have not only one film in several copies but, so to speak, *one projection* "reappearing" in time and space identical to itself). On the contrary, embodied human memory is defined by its capacity for forgetfulness - which is not oblivion or a resurrection of the past, but rather corresponds to the presence of the subject's history in the very act of perception. At the same time, the repetition that the technological medium enshrines would correspond less to the return of something from the past, than to the impossibility to deliver oneself from the past's immobilizing presence.

Forgetfulness, then, would name the contingency of embodied memory, a form of aesthetic and non-objectual relation that is not really a relation to the past, but rather to the passage of time, to our mortality, and to the mobility of desire. Memory (*mémoire*), Pontalis thought, is something different than

an archive of memories (*souvenirs*),³⁸⁰ it cannot be reduced to a collection of items or translated into a string of data. Our embodied memory is rather like a flux of associations and disassociations and it is only when this flux is frozen that the souvenir appears - a Rosebud, an object of memory and a reification of the dimension of the past. For Pontalis, to free associate is already to come close to memory and its wavering.³⁸¹ To speak freely might be our only way to remember. That is, at least, what psychoanalysis has imagined: through a speech that is free from the constraints of the secondary process and from the fantasy of mastery - from the imaginary fixity of consensual meaning as well as from the speaking subject's own pretence of mastery over itself - one can return memory to the flow of living and not so much revive the past as work through its insistence in the present. The memory of a film would then be a flow of free associations that traverses, and by this constitutes, the moving images as well as those afterimages, thoughts, and sensations that linger on after the projection and that have already become, in fact, integral part of the subject's capacity to experience. We can only find the memory of an image in another image, in other words that we associate, in other people and other things in the world. On the contrary, to remember a film in detail, or to entirely forget about it, could be taken as a sign of resistance against the heteronomy of the cinematic encounter and thus as a hint that this encounter has not really taken place. In this sense, the spectator's memory is the space in which the moving image, as well as the spectator's pleasure and fantasy, maintain their mobility and exercise their agency and emancipation.

This space, both in the sense of the contingency of film experience and the heteronomy of the spectator, and in the sense of the extended dimension of spectatorship that these concepts imply, is the "subject matter" of Paul Auster's novel *Man in the Dark*. In the novel, we can see a comprehensive representation of spectatorship that includes film watching, the sharing of this experience, and the beginnings of the elaboration of a theory of film. A representation that furthermore addresses the way all this is inevitably connected with the ungraspable contingencies of life and the inevitable subjectivity of lived-experience. The novel presents a complete and quite realistic figure of the spectator, draw-

³⁸⁰ Pontalis, *Fenêtres*, 106.

³⁸¹ Pontalis, *Avant*, 25.

ing almost all of its possible relations with film, and showing how spectatorship constructs film as a space of interpersonal relations, and the heteronomous subject as an erratic, personal history of significant and signifying encounters. In particular, as we will see, this representation takes the form of a felicitous encounter of rememory and storytelling, of subjectivity and its *fiction*.

Man in the Dark.

In the desert of Vermont's wilderness, during a long night of insomnia, the narrator August Brill is making up in its mind a very roundabout story about his suicide, involving a dystopic alternate reality in which 9/11 has not taken place and the United States have fallen into civil war. The character of the story imagined by Brill, Owen Brick, awakes into a pit in this other universe of which he knows nothing and to which he has been "called" by an organisation that is plotting for the murder of the sole individual responsible for the war: none other than August Brill who is imagining the story. Brick is threatened into accepting the mission to return back to the parent universe and kill the man who is dangerously fantasizing about him in the obscurity of his house. But we do not need to spoil the narrative line any further.

For Brill, making up this narrative is not only a means of coping with the lack of sleep, but also a way of keeping at a distance the memories of a series of mournful events in his life and in the lives of the close members of his family. Brill's wife died of cancer, leaving him ageing and alone. Their first daughter, Miriam, divorced from her husband five years earlier and she is now alone, too, and stuck while writing an academic book on Rose Hawthorn. Miriam's daughter Katya has lost her fiancé, Titus, in tragic circumstances: he was beheaded by an unknown terrorist group while working as a contractor in the Middle East. Brill himself crashed his car while driving to the house in Vermont, was hospitalised for a long period, and is now facing partial paralysis in his bed. Brill makes a constant effort, throughout the book and throughout the night, not to think about all this, he tries to replace the thoughts and images of his memory with other thoughts and other images. In particular, he tries to erase the violent images of Titus' death that the terrorists had recorded and uploaded on the internet, where the family had been able to watch them:

"I think about Titus' death often, the horrifying story of that

death, the images of that death, the pulverizing consequences of that death on my grieving granddaughter, but I don't want to go there now, I can't go there now, I have to push it as far away from me as possible [...]. That's what I do when sleep refuses to come. I lie in bed and tell myself stories. They might not add up to much, but as long as I'm inside them, they prevent me from thinking about the things I would prefer to forget.”³⁸²

In part, Brill tries to forget by “turning the world around,” as he calls the imagining of his dystopian story. In part (which leads to us) by watching films with his granddaughter Katya, who had been a film scholar in New York before dropping out after Titus's death. Brill and Katya watch films together, compulsively, and then talk about them, discussing their views and making up their own theories of film. In this, the two literally represent the permeability of the space of spectatorship and theory as well as the minimal “coupling” that defines film experience. The space of spectatorship, indeed, is not essentially, or not just, the space between the spectator and the screen, but the space between two subjects sharing their experience of film. Even in the case of a single spectator watching a single film, I believe, it is this scene of sharing that is re-evoked, and it is through this projection of a heteronomous subjectivity onto the moving image that the film acquires its significance and that spectatorship becomes an aesthetic experience.

In the discursivity and contingency of its encounter with film, the subject evokes a history of its other encounters. Even if for Katya and Brill watching films is an attempt to escape their reality and their traumatic memories, then, as their dialogue unfolds they cannot avoid returning to the events of their life - because their words and the moving images themselves are made of them. By telling each other the story of the films that they have watched, at the same time they are asking one another about their past, they are working through it as they begin to question their present and their future. “She begins her story,” Auster had written about Scheherazade in his first book, “and what she tells is a story about storytelling, a story within which there are several stories, each one, in itself, about storytelling - by means of which a man is saved from

³⁸² Paul Auster, *Man in the Dark* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 2.

death.”³⁸³ Not from death, maybe, but surely from his obsession with it - the story of storytelling appears to be essentially one of self-dissemination, working against the anxiety of a paralysing and deadly identity. In *Man in the Dark*, then, what is a theme of the novel and its structural cypher - a *mise en abyme* storytelling and spectatorship and the mutual pervasion of life and fiction - is further characterised in terms of free association and rememory.

Free association, Christopher Bollas writes, is always a compromise formation between psychic truths and the self's effort to avoid the pain of such truths.³⁸⁴ Brill and Katya's wished-for forgetfulness, in this sense, their warding off of their memories of pain through film watching, their free-roaming conversation (as well as the artificial “sleep” that Brill finds in his solitary fantasizing), are all free associative activities. In this way, free association becomes a means for the connection between the contingency of spectatorship and storytelling, on one hand, and the heteronomy of the subject, on the other. The site of this connection is the memory of the film, a space that is not irrepresentable (on the contrary, like the dream, it is already in itself an act of signification), but that nevertheless is not entirely intelligible: it can find a correspondence in another subject, but it cannot be defined in terms of the sharing of a meaning. Indeed, it is only by way of its associative connection that a memory becomes significant - strictly speaking, that embodied memory can exist at all.³⁸⁵ But more than this, it is only through an inter-personal sharing that memory itself becomes significant. It is only by introjecting the scene of dialogue, that we acquire a voice. The memory of film is at the same time the trace of film experience, it is almost the only form in which the contingent encounter between spectator and film is accessible to the subject as a more or less distinct, but still ungraspable, object (the other being, of course, the subject's uninterrupted lived-experience of the world). Returning to the memory of the film, would be already to change it to a more or less evident, but always significant, extent. There would be no “seeing” of this memory, and still, memory would not be something irrepresentable: the only way in which it can exist, in fact, is to be signified - that is, to be shared and, thus, to change.

³⁸³ Let's not forget, though, that what Scheherazade sets out to stop is first of all a massacre of women. Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 161.

³⁸⁴ Bollas, *Free Association*, 10.

³⁸⁵ Pontalis, *Avant*, 50-51.

Theory as a form of forgetfulness. A long passage in the book is entirely dedicated to a theory of film.³⁸⁶ Brill and Katya have just gone through roughly six hours of screenings:

“Each time we finish a movie, we talk about it for a little while before Katya puts on the next one. [...] Just tonight, however, after we watched three consecutive foreign films - *Grand Illusion*, *The (16) Bicycle Thief*, and *The World of Apu*, Katya delivered some sharp and incisive comments, sketching out a theory of filmmaking which impressed me with its originality and acumen.

Inanimate objects, she said.

What about them?, I asked.

Inanimate objects as a means of expressing human emotions. That’s the language of film. Only good directors understand how to do it, but Renoir, De Sica and Ray are three of the best, aren’t they?”³⁸⁷

Maybe we could have expected something different from a film scholar, perhaps something more, or maybe that is exactly what there is to be expected, for Katya is actually making an aesthetic remark, and she is then proposing an understanding of cinema which depends on her aesthetic feeling more than on anything else. “Aesthetics of taste,” Christian Metz would have dismissively commented.³⁸⁸ This taste is the driving force of both spectatorship and theory - still, this is not the point of the passage. In the pages that follow, Katya supports her theory with examples from the films that they have watched.

The first scene she picks is from *Bicycle Thieves*.³⁸⁹ when the unemployed Antonio (Lamberto Maggiorani) returns home after he has been robbed of his bicycle, he finds his wife Maria (Lianella Carell) carrying two buckets of water into the house but, as Katya remarks, he only picks up one bucket to help her. “Everything we need to know about their marriage,” Katya tells us, “is given to us in these few seconds.”³⁹⁰ Moments after this scene, Maria goes to a pawn

³⁸⁶ Auster, *Man in the Dark*, 15-22.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

³⁸⁸ Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, 10.

³⁸⁹ Vittorio de Sica, *Ladri di Biciclette* [Bicycle Thieves or, in the United States, The Bicycle Thief] (ENIC, 1948). 35mm.

³⁹⁰ Auster, *Man in the Dark*, 16.

shop to pawn the family bed sheets, wrapped into a bundle, in an effort to raise the money to buy another bicycle, which her husband will need in order to look for a job. The pawn shop is rendered by Katya on a grand scale: “[it] isn’t a shop, really, but a huge place, a kind of warehouse for unwanted goods.”³⁹¹ As the camera pulls back, she describes, the film reveals a ceiling-high shelf full of similar bundles, suddenly universalising the scene into a representation of the poverty of the entire country: “in one shot we’re given a picture of a whole society living at the edge of disaster.”³⁹² Which would be an engaging interpretation, only the camera does not pull back at all. The scene is actually shot from two alternating perspectives: one is Maria’s subjective, in which we see a medium shot of the clerk, and the other is taken from behind the back of the clerk, framing the wicket through which he and Maria are talking from a one-hundred-and-twenty-degree angle. The shelves full of bundles are visible, out of focus, in the background from the woman’s point of view, but no camera movement highlights them in any particular way. Similarly, the shop proportions are not as epic as suggested, on the contrary, it is a rather claustrophobic space, cut in two by a screen of glass panes. People are pushing behind the counter and there is very little space on the side of the clerk too - a similar set-up is used again later in the film for the bicycle shop, arguably suggesting by connotation more the tightness of the economic situation, than its scale.

We see here how Katya’s experience and her retelling of the film scene deformed (that is, informed), more or less intentionally, but still in a significant manner, what can be regarded as the objective text of the film. The passage shows how the film which is experienced and remembered frequently and substantially diverges from the conventional text of the film, suggesting the subjective presence of the spectator within the images. Katya’s reading of the film is in fact already a use of it and Auster, of course, is giving us, more or less intentionally, but still in a significant way, a *representation* of this process. In turn, my own reading cannot be but partial and oriented as well: for instance, as I read again the lines that I have just written, the space behind the clerk does not seem so cramped any more, and I recognize that I might have slightly

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Ibid.

exaggerated the effect for the sake of my own argument. I can go back to the film and, eventually, choose to correct my impressions: academic writing could be distinguished by this return to the image, by a sharpening of our memory of film until, in fact, what we have in us is almost no longer a memory, but merely a souvenir - a readily intelligible but rather insignificant object. The hyper-mnesia that all technologies of the images essentially perform and encourage, the possibility they give to return to our experience of film as if it were made, like the reel, of distinct immobile frames, goes at the expenses of our embodied memory: by circumventing the forgetfulness of its experience, isn't the pensive spectator cutting itself off from its significance?

Katya is definitely using the film, but so far it is still not clear how this use could be described in terms of a process of free association and memory. Katya, Brill, and Auster make it clearer with the next example. From Renoir's masterpiece *La Grande Illusion*,³⁹³ Katya selects what she calls the "dishwashing scene". The scene takes place toward the end of the film, when Maréchal (Jean Gabin) and Rosenthal (Marcel Dalio), two French fugitives on the run from the Germans, leave the house of Elsa (Dita Parlo), where they have been hiding on their way to the Swiss border. As they leave, Maréchal and Elsa - who, in their few days together, have fallen in love - know that they will never meet again. Katya is describing the scene for her grandfather, and for us readers:

"Renoir then cuts to Gabin and Dalio running through the woods, and I'd bet every other director in the world would have stayed with them until the end of the film. But not Renoir. He (18) has the genius - and when I say *genius*, I mean the understanding, the depth of heart, the compassion - to go back to the woman and her little daughter, this young widow who has already lost her husband to the madness of war, and what does she have to do? She has to go back in the house and confront the dining table and the dirty dishes from the meal they've just eaten. The men are gone now, and because they're gone, those dishes have been transformed into a sign of their absence, the lonely suffering of women when men go off to war, and one by one, without saying a word, she picks up

³⁹³ Jean Renoir, *La Grande Illusion* (RAC, 1937). 35mm.

the dishes and clears the table. How long does the scene last? Ten seconds? Fifteen seconds? No time at all, but it takes your breath away, doesn't it? It just knocks the stuffing out of you.

You're a brave girl, I said, suddenly thinking about Titus"³⁹⁴.

The dishwashing scene that Katya so compellingly evokes lasts indeed no time at all - it simply is not there. The rest of the scene, as well, is not exactly as Katya recalls it. There is no cut to the two men running through the woods, but only a shot of them going away from the front door and into the dark. After that, there is a short pan following Elsa as she escorts her daughter to the table and picks up the dishes. The meaning is there, suggested, but its full expression is Katya's doing. In the end, it would be our loss, and an act against the spectator's emancipation, to remove the dishwashing scene from the film, to argue against its existence: after reading Auster, Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* should indeed be seen to be a few frames longer. It is this kind of fantasmatic extension of the material film, and of the conventional film text, that makes of spectatorship a form of theory and an aesthetic practice.

With this passage of *Man in the Dark*, we begin to see connections between the spectator's creative, forgetful, retelling of the film and its embodied subjectivity. This connection acts associatively, and takes first of all the form of a secondary identification.³⁹⁵ Katya is the one living the trauma of those un-homely dishes turned into a symbol of death: at the same time that she projects this association onto the character, she has to let Elsa remind her of Titus. It is only in her dialogue with Brill, however, that this association is consciously spoken. We can see here how using a film also entails a capacity of letting oneself be used by it - to be illuminated and, often, even interpreted by it. As Pontalis wrote, reading a book is to allow oneself to be read, which implies a double movement of appropriation and estrangement.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁴ Auster, *Man in the Dark*, 17-18.

³⁹⁵ Secondary identification - identification of the spectator with some identifiable feature of the characters on screen - clearly works in the other direction as well: in our experience and memory of film, characters assume subjective features that only us, as specific spectators, can project onto them. Semiological film studies clearly preferred to concentrate on the first kind of movement of identification, and on the spectator's primary identification with the camera, arguably because they allow to downplay the permeability of the space of film and to make film experience and the position of the spectator more intelligible.

³⁹⁶ Pontalis, *Fenêtres*, 110-111.

Brill understands what Katya is hinting at with her associative construction of the film scene. He gets it, unconsciously, and replies somewhat automatically, abruptly associating the death of Katya's husband. The association remains unspoken (Brill merely tells her that she is a brave girl), but, as Katya replies that she does not want to talk about "him", it is clear that the death of Titus has been suggested to both. Brill's association has been understood and it has not been harmless. Indeed, Katya immediately retorts with a joke. As Brill tries to move on the conversation, proposing to "stick to the movies," and says that he liked the Indian film best, Katya replies ironically: "that's because it's about a writer."³⁹⁷ We can see how she is turning the previous situation on its head: where a moment before Brill spoke the unwanted and painful memory lying beneath Katya's rendering of the scene, now she mocks his identification with the character of another film, turning the very idea of identification into something harmless and somewhat senile.

After having discussed all three films, Brill adds to Katya's theory, returning on the subject of his granddaughter's personal life. Brill is saying:

"There's another thing about those three scenes. I wasn't aware of it while we were watching the films, but listening to you describe them now, it jumped right out at me.

What?

They are all about women. How women are the ones who carry the world. They take care of the real business while their hapless men stumble around making a hash of things. Or else (22) just lie around just doing nothing. [...]

At last, Katya said, giving me a small poke in the ribs. A man who gets it.

Let's not exaggerate. I'm just adding a footnote to your theory. Your very astute theory, I might add.

And what kind of husband were you, Grandpa?"³⁹⁸

Again, the free associative character of Brill's words is made evident - "it jumped right out at me" signals an instance of *Einfall*, and it is an expression that also contains a potential element of threat. From here on, the subtle references

³⁹⁷ Auster, *Man in the Dark*, 118.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

and cross-references between the story, the films, and the character's lives will continue to expand throughout the night, toward dawn and the symbolic writing of Brill's memoirs, toward the moment in which he and Katya, in the diegetic reality of the novel, will finally talk openly about life and death - a process she describes, with her characteristically crude expressiveness, as "Truth Night at Castle Despair."³⁹⁹

Halfway through the book, another film comes to Brill's mind in support to Katya's theory:

"Thinking about films again, I realize that I have another example to add to Katya's list. I must remember to tell her first thing tomorrow morning - in the dining room over breakfast - since it's bound to please her, and if I can manage to coax a smile out of that glum face of hers, I'll consider it a worthy accomplishment."⁴⁰⁰

The film is Ozu's *Tokyo Story*,⁴⁰¹ that Auster/Brill narrates for the length of seven pages.⁴⁰² Brill can translate most of the situation he is living into the film. Noriko (Setsuko Hara) is Katya, for she has lost her husband in the war and she is also Miriam (Brill's other daughter, whose part in the story we cannot address) for she has chosen to take care of her lonesome father, Brill himself, who acts as the old man in Ozu's film (Chishû Ryû). What can be easily recognised as an extensive structure of identifications between Brill's personal experience and the discourse of the film is in fact made up by a myriad of small-scale associations, which are part of a greater net, including the other films the film-watching couple have seen, the memories evoked by them, and the discourses arising from them (Brill says that Noriko is Elsa in Katya's dishwashing scene, for instance).⁴⁰³ *Tokyo Story* is charged by Brill of particular significance: not only has he watched the film twice, the first a long time before, but he has asked Katya to play again the scene of the dialogue between the old man and Noriko, a scene that is also a doubling of Brill and Katya's "scene", their intimate film watching and the space of their dialogue.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 153.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁰¹ Yasujirô Ozu, *Tokyo Story* (Shôchiku Eiga, 1953). 35mm.

⁴⁰² Auster, *Man in the Dark*, 73-79.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 75.

What comes out the most from the net of relationships and associations that Brill finds in the film is the phrase (a wish): “I want you to be happy.”⁴⁰⁴ At this point of the narrative, however, there is an abrupt change, for instead of going on to address his relationship with Katya, Brill suddenly thinks of his sister Betty: “impossible not to think of my sister now,”⁴⁰⁵ we are told. Auster/Brill introduces then a new character and brings us, avoiding the closure of meaning, through another wide, circular, associative gesture. Betty is another widow of war, a fact which opens up a sequence of memories and stories about her and her husband Gil, from a race riot in Newark to the eviction of Gil’s corpse from the graveyard at the end of a “Balzacian inheritance war”⁴⁰⁶ and Betty dying of a broken heart. As it is peculiar to memory and experiencing, meaning is never final, but can only be scattered further, always remaining incomplete.

To add a further layer of complexity, we can also find various trespassing of Brill’s life in the alternate universe he is imagining: for instance, the name of Brill’s first love is the same as Brick’s, and at one point Brick himself starts planning *his* suicide. Brill comments about his activity as a writer, in fact describing the alternative between grounding aesthetic experience in memory and subjective contingency, or not: “either I put myself in the story to make it real, or else I become unreal, a figment of my imagination.”⁴⁰⁷ Either we accept the living-ground of the spectator’s subjective experience, or else we cannot but render the experience of the spectator unreal, turning it into a mere instance of the text or of its consensual interpretation.

It takes two (to make less than one).

There is much more in the book than cannot be discussed here and, indeed, much more that the readers may add on their own - we have to turn back to film theory and, which is harder, approach the conclusion.

At a first glance, Auster manages to evoke through Brill the whole spectrum of the spectator’s experience. Brill is the classic male, fetishistic, and partially paralysed cinematographic subject trying to escape from the real in order to

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 79.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 102.

better redeem the wounded reality he feels he is forced to inhabit. He is that “man among other men plunged into darkness for the time of a screening, living the vision of his intimate memory in that intimate memory that the film offers to him”⁴⁰⁸ that Bellour sees at the cinema. He is a pensive spectator, and a talkative one as well: not only does he watch films, but he is aware of his position as a spectator and of the role spectatorship plays in his life. He makes use of the films and he is able to use the passivity and the alterity that they put him into. At the same time that Brill theorizes about cinema, and by the same token, Auster is theorizing about spectatorship and film theory. All this, moreover, is made with a light touch and a sensibility to the contingencies of conversation and the nuances of writing that not all viewers, and surely not all film theorists, can have. In this Vermontian night, in fact, everything is quite brilliant: the fine grain of the dialogues is extremely convincing, the fiction is sensational, the anecdotes are both incredible and life-like, the narrations of the films are perfect in their imprecision - this is indeed how the novel becomes relevant to this work, because it makes so many things so clearly and so perfectly visible.

Still, what we are facing is not spectatorship, it is not free association, and it is not really the heteronomy of the subject: it is, of course, only their representation. As Brill represents an embodied spectator he is also inevitably, to some degree, a *mise en discours* of its waywardness. Being a character - and such an exceptionally well written one - he is deprived of a fundamental part of the tension, of the indeterminacy, of the ambivalence and the mobility that trouble the position of the real, ordinary, spectator - a tension we can only find again in our embodied experience as troubled and ordinary readers. In their intimate connection, literature (dialogue, film, any form of signification) and lived-experience are animated by their incommensurability. Without this tension, we might still indicate an object as art, but strictly speaking, no aesthetic experience would be possible. So as Auster signifies the faltering texture of contingent experience he inevitably weaves it back together, and it is to the reader to unweave it again.

Auster can be seen to treat language and dialogue themselves - a scene of

⁴⁰⁸ “Un homme parmi d’autres plongé le temps d’une séance dans le noir et vivant la vision de sa mémoire intime dans celle que le film lui propose.” Raymond Bellour, *Le Corps du Cinéma: Hypnosis, Émotions, Animalités*. (Paris: P.O.L., 2009), 17. Translation mine.

speaking subjects - as the contingent “animal” of the two other stories that we have discussed. To put it naively, we could say that the bat and the fly’s flight become here like the flight of the signifier: fixed on the page but ever mobile in its embodied contingency. Auster’s storytelling and spectatorship are not reduced to narrative, but rather bound with narration: they circumvent the *Einfall* precisely by performing and showing its incorporation and its inevitable presence in every act of signification. The unexpected and the erratic of free association is embroidered, so to speak, in Brill and Katya’s exchanges: after a long period of silence in their life and against the stillness that defines the insomniac, hyper-aware, subject, language is returned its mobility and, with it, comes the presence of death. In order to really talk to each other, the two must mourn. Still, this contingent and deathly beast is somewhat tamed. It disrupts the conversation so that it can become more significant, and as it unsettles the characters, it eventually soothes the reader.

A story is told about watching a film and the position of the spectator is rescued from its melancholic oneness. A story is told about death and loss and two people are rescued from the meaning of solitude. In a way, *Man in the Dark* is a redemptive novel - or at least a novel about the redemptive power of writing and spectatorship - in the sense that it represents aesthetic experience and, more specifically, free associative film watching and storytelling, as a remedial completion to a solitary vision of subjectivity and an essentially wounded world.⁴⁰⁹ In the novel, trauma can indeed be seen to act, specifically in relation to the significance of spectatorship, as the hypostasis of the dimension of meaning: meaning-making itself is made meaningful not just in relation to its incommensurability with lived-experience, but through a certain relation with the inexpressible. In other words, the elusive flight of free association and the chinese-box play of narration are eventually brought back to meaning - or, better, they are sutured to a certain idea of *meaningfulness* - through a background reference to the irrepresentable. In fact, they are made meaningful through a reference to a particular, and particularised, irrepresentable: the recording of Titus’ beheading (at the same time an unbearable film image and, if we like, a metaphor for symbolic castration). To put it in another way, by anchoring signification and its significance to the process of rememory of a

⁴⁰⁹ Bersani, *Redemption*, 10.

quintessential trauma, the associativity of stories and the contingency of the dialogue lose much of their dissensual disruptiveness, and rather become, when confronted with the universality of death (but is death really universal, as long as life remains unequal?) something essentially conciliatory. In this way, writing and spectatorship themselves become less hospitable to the *Einfall* and are rather transformed in a support for its inscription.

On one hand, then, Auster is illuminating the reader to itself: as a reader, as a heteronomous subject, and as a mortal body. On the other hand, however, in being mediated by the text, this heteronomy loses something of its essentially troubling and dissensual nature - something that can only reemerge in the contingency of the subject's embodied experience. It is in this sense that the free associative and dissensual nature of film spectatorship necessarily escapes the forms that make it intelligible. Not just the authoritarian forms of pedagogical film theory and the static forms of normative identity, but also, at least to some extent, the very aesthetic forms that make it significant. Aesthetic experience is traversed by the incommensurability, the heteronomy and the dissonance that at the same time allow it to exist and make it ambiguous and potentially troubling. Embodied experience and aesthetic use remain thus as external points of tension in relation to signification, which is not irrepresentable but forever ungraspable and always already traversing the subject positions it implies.

If we can grasp the contingency and embodiment of the heteronomous subject in *Man in the Dark*, in fact, it is not through Brill alone, but rather through the relationship and the space that exist in-between Katya and him. The man in the dark is only part of the picture: if Brill is a spectator, and a subject, it is also Katya's doing, for we can only address embodied experience through contingent and interpersonal experience. We can say that one spectator is made by *more than one* viewer, then, and that a viewer already is a contingent and embodied history of spectators. The men and the women and the children in the dark are a cluster of stories and positions: at the same time spectators, filmmakers and theorists. The body itself is not whole, but it is rather made of encounters, memory, and pleasures. What makes the couple of characters in the novel interesting is that, together, they allow to imagine a spectator with more than a metapsychological build, more than a mere ability to read, more than an autonomous agency, and something else than a definite sense of self. As I tried to argue, it is primarily by introjecting this scene of dialogue that

film experience becomes aesthetic and that the subject becomes hospitable to its own heteronomy and contingency, to the *Einfall*, and thus, to dissensus.

The spectator is always situated, associative, embodied, discursive: at the same time, it is never entirely graspable and never entirely in control of itself. It is always less than one subject and more than one viewer: *One, No one, and One Hundred Thousand*, to borrow from Pirandello again. We are one, because we are uniquely contingent, because there are limits to our embodied experience, because our presence is finite in time and space, and because our connectedness with the world is not necessarily comforted by a perfect correspondence. We are no one, because we are not a unitary, identifiable and self-same subject - in this we elude the grasp of normative discourse at the same time that we face the lack in our own mastery and understanding. We are a hundred thousand, finally, because in our situated and erratic encounters with the world we are multiplied and disseminated. Film spectatorship returns the subject to this heteronomy and radical contingency of being, to the estrangement of a child, to the dissent of the *infans*, to the muteness of passion, and to the perversity of theory, not, or not necessarily, to the state of need and dispossession through which these very feelings are framed and interpreted from an authoritarian and consensual standpoint.

The wayward spectator is an emancipated spectator, then, historically, culturally and subjectively contingent, situated and embodied and radically other to itself. It inhabits the tension between these dimensions and the grasp that would make them intrinsically intelligible: not a tension between the irrepresentable, or the misrepresented, and its true reality or mystified representation, but rather the measure of the incommensurability of the forms of being and signification to the principles that are supposed to order them. The experience of the wayward spectator is not a form of objectifiable knowledge, but rather a form of sharing and contact, it is not a self-affirmation, but rather a letting go of the self, it is not a form of active agency, but rather a way of acknowledging the power memory, objects and encounters have on us. It is precisely in the failure of a masterful theory, then - taken as a *mise en discours* and as a form of disciplinary self-observation - that spectatorship can exist as an emancipated *praxis*. And it is precisely in its connectedness with this dimension of spectatorship that film theory, in turn, becomes significant.

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