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[The Gesture and the Interval: Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman, Jean Genet, Robert Bresson]

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Abstract

In this work, I try to understand how the movements, attitudes, styles, and positions of the body in representational artworks can be understood as gestures—that is, as moments that interrupt the unfolding of narrative time and produce an interval. The interval is not merely a space that opens up between two moments and then closes again, but rather, a rupture that transforms the nature of the work's temporal unfolding. I look closely at works by a handful of postwar French and Francophone authors in order to better understand in what ways reading them with this concept of gesture in mind allows us to untangle their political dimensions. Because gestures function as moments that suspend narrative time and turn our attention toward what is in the interval, they are able to draw power away from the precedence of action and its corresponding means–end logic. The gesture then offers us a privileged conceptual toolkit with which to understand the relationship between the formal innovations of these artists and what their works allow us to think.

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For Eva

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Introduction

Gesture, or "Remourir le mort"

In 1902 the poet Rainer Maria Rilke famously declared that Auguste Rodin's sculpture *Le premier homme*—a figure that would be reworked and renamed multiple times between 1840 and 1917—had given birth to gesture.[1] In his essay dedicated to Rodin's body of work, Rilke centralizes the concept of gesture, making of it the premier place of the artist's modernism—his unique form of questioning the existence of humanity as a frantic and feverish search for meaning. The appearance of the gesture as such, importantly, does not merely evoke this questioning as a search for *unified* meaning, but it unsettles these questions as an explosion of fragments that proliferate endlessly. The birth of gesture, in other words, is for Rilke the unleashing of an infinite number of gestures, the beginning of a "work of centuries." The explosion of fragmentary sense on the surface of Rodin's sculptures unleashes new ways of making meaning out of and with the human body; but, paradoxically, the proliferation of available readings coincides with a frustration of readability provoked by a series of withdrawals.[2] The production involved in gesture is also a stoppage, or a suspension; the birth of the gesture, in other words, produces a new relation not only to the forces of life, but also to the forces of death.

My inquiry into gesture inserts itself into this interval between creation and suspension, between the vitalist forces of life and the powers of death. In order to unfold the series of questions around which this work will revolve, I will set up here a constellation of artists that demonstrate

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[1] See: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rodin*, trans. Jessie Lemont and Hans Transil, (London: Grey Wall Press, 1946).

[2] The centralization of gesture in modernist art in its relation to the changing conceptions of the human body is a theme that has been recently revivified by several authors working on dance.
See: Lucia Ruprecht, *Gestural Imaginaries: Dance and Cultural Theory in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Juliet Bellow, "Hand Dance: Auguste Rodin's Drawings of the Cambodian Royal Ballet," *Art Bulletin* 101, no. 3 (September 2019): p. 37-65; Megan Girdwood, *Modernism and the Choreographic Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021); Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen, *Modern Art and the Remaking of Human Disposition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

the different ways of putting gesture to work in the image. Rodin will be accompanied by the artist Alberto Giacometti and the poet Jean Genet in a genealogy that traces the different ways in which gesture, as the isolation of the work of forces in an image, is simultaneously a production and a suspension, a repetition and a stoppage. The importance of death in relation to gesture is developed through the unique relationship between Rodin and Giacometti's use of gesture and is finally isolated in Genet's singular phrase "remourir le mort," what I argue can be understood as gesture's tagline. The unlikely phrase evokes the knot of questions contained within the concept of gesture as a problem of the relation between the unfolding of the work as an act of creative repetition that contains a logical and a plastic excess; making the dead die again requires bringing them back to life, bringing back their gestures in the interval between life and death where artistic creation puts the body to work.

The ways in which Rodin's vibrant, expressive forms rework the body could not seem more antithetical to those elongated, emaciated, and overstretched limbs of Giacometti's post-surrealist figures. In Rodin's work we discover, perhaps for the first time, the inexhaustible creativity of bodily forces that refuse to submit themselves to a preestablished anatomical grid. Leo Steinberg famously argued that Rodin's body of work produced an expressive materiality never before seen in the aesthetic field through its use of multiplication, fragmentation, and grafting.[3] Rodin, he holds, sculpts a body made of a new type of matter—a matter that is insubordinate to permanence and which forces the breakdown of naturalism in the visual arts. By sculpting forces, or what Steinberg refers to as "clothing a motion in body," Rodin created a repertoire of gestures, each of which isolates the work of these forces in the sculpture.[4] The representational imperative that calls

[3] Leo Steinberg, "Rodin" in *Other Criteria; Confrontations with Twentieth-century Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 322-403.
[4] Steinberg, "Rodin," p. 363.

upon the artist to recreate the world exactly, producing beauty through the will to truth, is replaced by the necessity of a clear gesture. Rosalind Krauss underlines the ways in which this "externalization of gesture" that can be read on the surface of the work—what I call the isolation of the work of forces—signals a new relation between time and space. She writes, "meaning does not precede experience but occurs in the process of experience itself."[5] For Krauss, this is the true meaning of Rodin's revolution—an autonomy of the surface that places gesture, for the first time, in a privileged position.

If Rodin's figures (even in their death throes) are bursting with a creative life force freed from the shackles of naturalism, Alberto Giacometti's walking men and women, on the other hand, seem to be traversed by the forces of death. Their bodies have been sapped and stretched to a point just before they might disintegrate entirely—indeed Giacometti accidentally destroyed many of his sculptures by working the material to its breaking point. It is strange, then, that Giacometti began to obsessively sculpt these skeletal figures around the same time that he rediscovered Rodin's *Balzac* (1897) monument in 1945.[6] Krauss describes the monument to Balzac as a singular exemplar of Rodin's ability to "lodge meaning in the surface," an effect produced—

Steinberg often uses the term "forces" in his text on Rodin, which he likens to a host of adjacent terms including pressure, spatial turbulence, and energy. I understand these forces in the Deleuzian sense of the word, which is to say in the ontological sense. Deleuze's ontology of forces posits reality as a collection of "things" with no real essence or permanence, troubling traditional dichotomies between essence and appearance, being and becoming, and subject and object. The body, in particular, is dramatically redefined as a set of actions and reactions existing among infinite processes of becoming. No longer the seat of an intending consciousness nor a rhetorical construction buoyed along by a field of signifiers, the body is instead a set of percepts and affects in constant mutation—a relation of forces.

[5] Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), p. 30.

[6] Rodin had always been a major influence in Giacometti's life, from the time he was a young boy learning painting techniques from his father to the moment he entered *la Grande Chaumière* in Paris in 1922 to study with Antoine Bourdelle, one of Rodin's most prolific students. While Giacometti always admired Rodin, it wasn't until his post-surrealist period, which accelerated after the end of the Second World War, that the former began modelling his works off of the latter's.
See: Catherine Chevillot and Catherine Grenier, "Giacometti Rodin, affinités plastiques" in *Giacometti-Rodin,* (Zurich and Martigny: Prolitteris and Fondation Pierre Gianadda, 2019), p. 9.

paradoxically—by swathing the writer's body entirely in a dressing gown.[7] The body underneath the cloak seems to be continuously remade through the writer's invisible but recognized gesture of holding it tightly to his body; his proud head, according to Rilke, sits atop his shoulders "like those balls that dance on jets of water."[8] "Wrapping his gown around him," writes Krauss, "the figure *makes* his writer's body through that momentary, ephemeral arrangement of surface."[9] Giacometti, too, performed this long and strenuous surface-work in hopes of inscribing movement in the figure.

Rodin's influence on the post-surrealist, figurative sculptures that Giacometti obsessively worked on until his death in 1966 can only be understood through the notion of a continuous making (and unmaking) expressed in a singular, ephemeral gesture. The poet Jacques Dupin, a friend of Giacometti's, described the latter's process of sculpting as one involving endless gestures of struggle, a process of continuously reproducing an "abrupt and infinite birth" in an effort to bring to presence a radical absence.[10] Rodin and Giacometti shared this vision of the sculptor's vocation as a process of infinite making—something within the act of creation was a form of work bound to (in both senses of the term) failure.

Moreover, both artists expressed working through this problem as a problem of representation, though not in the traditional sense of the term. Rodin's disruption of figuration made representation into a problem of expression—of rethinking "faithfulness" to reality as a question of time and affect. His love/hate relationship with photography bears witness to this concern as an eminently historical one: Rodin personally oversaw the photographing of his works and took a great interest in the new art form while maintaining that the photograph could not

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[7] Krauss, *Passages*, p. 30.
[8] Rilke, *Rodin*, p. 58.
[9] Krauss, *Passages*, p. 30.
[10] Jacques Dupin, *Giacometti: Three Essays*, (New York: Black Square Editions, 2003).

capture "le déroulement progressif du geste."[11] Clearly Rodin's criticism of photography's inherent incapacity to capture movement expresses a central concern with regard to his own sculptural work: how to create a work that continuously renews the movement of gesture while also freezing it in a recognizable form. Catherine Chevillot and Catherine Grenier, in an introductory text to a recent exhibition on Rodin and Giacometti, summarize this shared concern as an effort on the part of the artist to understand the work "…non comme un achèvement, mais comme un arrêt sur image au sein d'un processus de renouvellement continu."[12]

The flipside of sculpture's central aesthetic problem—that of creating an image that captures but does not arrest the unfolding of time—can be found in the cinema.[13] Repetition and stoppage—what Giorgio Agamben claims are the two "transcendental conditions of montage"—represent the forces of "renouvellement continu" and "arrêt sur image" at work in both Rodin and Giacometti's oeuvres.[14] Reading with Agamben, we can understand the desire for a continued renewal or reiteration as the work of restoring possibility to the past, not by remembering, but by *projecting* possibility towards the past, by placing oneself in the past (in time). The unfolding of time in Rodin's sculptures, as evoked earlier by Krauss, is transformed here into something different; time is no longer the unfolding of a series of instants before the beholder of the sculpture, but rather what is offered up as an experience within which one might place oneself—a *durée.* Alongside this renewed possibility is the other side of montage—the "arrêt" or stoppage which pulls the image or the body out of a "flux of meaning" and exhibits it "as such."[15] This is the

[11] Auguste Rodin, *Entretiens réunis par Paul Gsell* (Paris: Grasset, 1911), p. 86.
[12] Chevillot and Grenier, "Giacometti Rodin, affinités plastiques," p. 11.
[13] Krauss begins her entire reflection on narrative time and sculpture with a discussion of cinema, in particular the dialectical montage of Eisenstein, with whom Rodin can be seen to institute a radical break.
[14] See: Giorgio Agamben, "Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films," trans. Brian Holmes in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), p. 313-319.
[15] Agamben, "Difference and Repetition," p. 316.

gesture's function of suspension, which does not suspend time, but rather introduces a disjunction between means and ends. Rodin effectuates this radical break when he discards the anatomical model and, along with it, the body whose whole is the sum of its parts and their various functions, or the body whose gesture is a result and revelation of an inner structure. Instead, Rodin constructs bodies and gestures that are opaque and unreadable according to what one already knows. The measure of life, for Rodin, is this meaning that dances on the surface—an expression that disavows an internal cause.[16]

In this structuralist interpretation we can observe how the gesture, as it isolates a relation between force and form, turns the question of figuration away from representation and towards production; just as the cinematographic image is not a re-presentation of reality, but rather the creation of a new reality, the sculpture is not a failed mimesis of a bodily movement, but the creation of meaning in time, meaning without cause.[17] In Giacometti's sculptures we observe how the expressive body and its gestures of bearing something radically unknowable are taken to an extreme—an extreme that threatens the medium itself, literally stretching it thin. There is no one who expressed this creative force at work in Giacometti's sculptures better than the poet Jean Genet in his 1963 essay "L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti," where the writer recounts his experience sitting for hours on end in Giacometti's studio while the former drew his portrait. The narrative essay immediately transforms itself into a philosophical reflection on all of Giacometti's post-surrealist oeuvre, a reflection in which Genet will argue that Giacometti's sculpted figures, in their restless seizure of life, draw their powers from the dead.

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[16] I follow Krauss here, who notes in her reading of Rodin the ways in which this meaning divorced from an internal cause forces us up against "a wall of unintelligibility."
Krauss, *Passages*, p. 26.

[17] There is a slight equivocation at work here where "without cause" also refers to a Spinozist immanent cause—the cause as an effect of one of its own effects.
See: A. Kiarina Kordela, *$urplus: Spinoza, Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 1.

We must understand "the dead" here not thematically—though surely it is an important theme that marked Giacometti's life and work—but ontologically. When Genet speaks about the dead, he is referring to at least two different forms of "nothing": the nothing that corresponds to negativity (and can thus be situated on the dialectical side of gesture) and the nothing that corresponds to becoming (the creative, Spinozist form of nothing). The nothing of negation or non-being was dear to Genet's master Sartre, while the nothing that falls beneath being but refuses negativity—the logic of which can be captured in the image of a rotting corpse which continues producing new sensations—represents all that which Sartre criticized in Genet's work.[18] While some have commented that Giacometti's walking men evoke death in a representative manner by, for example, referring to the emaciated bodies of all those victims of the Shoah, Genet's reading offers up a radically different reading. The figures themselves are not dead; rather, they know death intimately.[19] Genet proclaims that, "Chaque statue semble reculer—ou en venir—dans une nuit à ce point lointaine et épaisse qu'elle se confond avec la mort."[20] The statues both recoil from and are in proximate relation to this far-off point that merges with death or the forces of nothing.

The relation to the dead—the nothing—that Genet draws up here is quite complex; on the one hand there is the idea of the hollowness of all images, the statue's struggle to "défaire" all those "faux-semblants" accumulated in the image and show us the solitude of man; on the other hand, beneath all these false images is yet another image, the image of a secret, original "blessure" that continues working in the present. But what unsettles these first two functions of the image, and yet appears alongside them, is Genet's claim that every artwork (and presumably it is

[18] See: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet, Comédien et Martyr* (Paris: Gallimard,1952).
[19] "…elles connaissent enfin la mort, car trop de vie est tassée en elles."
Jean Genet, "L'atelier d'Alberto Giacometti" in *Oeuvres complètes de Jean Genet; IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), p. 57.
[20] Genet, "L'atelier," p. 62.

Giacometti's works that demonstrate this) offers itself not up to the living, but rather to the dead: "…que tout oeuvre d'art…doit descendre les millénaires, rejoindre s'il se peut l'immémoriale nuit peuplée de morts qui vont se reconnaître dans cette oeuvre."[21] Only here does it become clear that, for Genet, "the dead" are not really dead—rather, they constitute the virtual workings of the immemorial, or what is without re-memorable origin. So, Giacometti's works have put us in touch with, on the one hand, a negative origin and, on the other hand, an immemorial force that is not the past being remembered in the present, but rather, the present's being constituted by a series of virtual (unactualized) images. Giacometti's works, in other words, offer us both a hollow image and an image of becoming—two versions of nothing.

These two versions of nothing that make up the image can be grasped formally in the gesture. In other words, the gesture allows for a reading that disavows "content" and yet attends to all that can only be grasped up close, which is what is in-between words or in-between images. In an earlier text, Genet offers us another spectacular image of the dead that encapsulates the logic of the gesture: the image of the funeral mime. He writes:

> Avant qu'on enterre le mort, qu'on porte jusqu'au devant de la scène le cadavre dans son cercueil; que les amis, les ennemis et les curieux se rangent dans la partie réservée au public; que le mime funèbre qui précédait le cortège se dédouble, se multiplie; qu'il devienne troupe théâtrale et qu'il fasse, devant le mort et le public, remourir le mort.(Genet III p. 17).

When Genet evokes the image of the funeral mime "replaying" the life and death of the deceased before the corpse and a crowd of mourners, he is not being metaphorical. He is nevertheless hinting at something beyond what this empirical experience might look like; the presence of the corpse is necessary for theater because theater is not a representation, but a production. It needs something from which to draw its powers of creation, and only the dead—in their immemorial quality—can provide this power of multiplicity and "dédoublement." Only the

[21] Genet, "L'atelier," p. 43.

rotting corpse can provide the necessary energy for the theatrical troupe to "remourir le mort." This strange phrase must then refer to drawing upon the powers of the dead to create a series of images, a series of gestures that formalize the relations of at least two "types" of forces—the forces of the absent origin (the wound) and the forces of becoming. For Genet, what is in-between images or in-between theatrical masks is this force of multiplicity at work in every image, every gesture whether on stage or immobilized in the plaster of a statue.

And Rodin? Are the forces of multiplicity at work in the "vitalist" sculptor those of life or of death? At the end of his essay on Rodin, Steinberg recounts a visit to the sculptor's studio at Meudon with artist and friend Jean Tinguely in the summer of 1962. Observing Rodin's 1880 bronze statue "Adam," Steinberg attempts to mimic the gesture of the figure's twisted, outstretched arm, wondering if Rodin drew inspiration for this arm "with its extended, quivering index" from Michelangelo's fresco of the Creation of Man.[22] But after experiencing the extreme powerlessness that the gesture imposed upon him, Steinberg supposes that "it must be an ancient indicator of death," and concludes the inspiration to be Christ's pronated arm in Michelangelo's *Florentine Pietà.*[23] Tinguely agrees with him, proclaiming that the gesture is not one of work, sport, or love: "ce n'est pas dans la vie."[24] Clearly there is something at work in Adam's twisted arm that gives life and yet is not *of* life; here we may recall that for Deleuze what repeats in repetition is life (*Eros*), while what *gives* this repetition to life is death (*Thanatos*). The death drive is not a negative force that works against life and all its vitality, but rather a transcendental principle that determines the openness of subjectivity as an affirmative and creative form of repetition.[25]

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[22] Steinberg, "Rodin," p. 402.
[23] Steinberg, "Rodin," p. 402.
[24] Steinberg, "Rodin," p. 403.
[25] The forces of life and death, in other words, are both on the side of *Thanatos*: "Érôs et Thanatos se distinguent en ceci qu'Érôs doit être répété, ne peut être vécu que dans la répétition, mais que Thanatos (comme principe transcendantal) est ce qui donne la répétition à Érôs, ce qui soumet Érôs à la répétition.
See : Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1968), p. 29.

The Rodin-Giacometti-Genet constellation that has been set up here unfolds a series of questions that outline the singularity of gesture as I will try to understand it in this dissertation. Gesture, as the isolation of the work of forces in an image, is simultaneously a production and a suspension, a repetition and a stoppage. It is the place of time in the image, and therefore conceptually it shows us how every problem or question we might have in relation to an image is a problem or question that relates to cinema. Finally, the gesture is related to the two forms of nothing so brilliantly offered up by Genet—negativity and becoming. There where one bears nothing—where one bears the unbearable—a gesture emerges.

To read these gestures, I argue, is to begin to unearth the political stakes of the artworks in question. As suspension of a means-end paradigm, what gesture arrests—or at least slows down to a zero-degree movement—is the exhaustion of potentiality in actuality, the instrumentalism of a politics of appropriation and realization.[26] Rodin's sculptures do this by disactivating the anatomical grid that assigns every body part its organic function; the works thereby free up the non-organic, expressive body whose parts at once retain their potential not-to and explore *new* potentials that have nothing to do with function. A new subject is born, a non-cognitive subject with no internal cause; might the subject of the unconscious not also be called the subject of gesture?

And yet, on the other hand, the productive side of the gesture that links it to becoming disavows this subject as soon as it arises. Becoming stays on the level of the pre-individual, the virtual, or the immemorial, and offers up political possibilities only insofar as these can never be

[26] Agamben has reinvested this Aristotelian thematic and centralized it in his critique of Western politics, most notably in the *Homo Sacer* series. In the first of the nine volumes that make up the project, Agamben declares: "Until a new and coherent ontology of potentiality (beyond the steps that have been made in this direction by Spinoza, Schelling, Nietzsche, and Heidegger) has replaced the ontology founded on the primacy of actuality and its relation to potentiality, a political theory freed from the aporias of sovereignty remains unthinkable."
See: Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 44.

identified with a subject who seeks to represent themselves to power. In Genet's words, "An art that is at the service of the revolution is in danger of becoming entirely at the service of the political power of the revolution."[27] The uselessness of art proves to be ultimately "of use" to a revolutionary politics precisely by *not* serving its purpose directly. Politically engaged art must call for the revolution to *extract itself* from the power that it wields, resisting the inevitable exaltation of revolutionary power by preserving within itself (within the artwork) the *betrayal* of that power.

Methodology

My project inserts itself into the burgeoning field of scholarship on the concept of gesture, a field constituted in the interstices of Film and Media Studies, Comparative Literature, Anthropology, and Philosophy. I consider much of this scholarship to divide itself into two "camps": on the one hand, a group of scholars holds close to Walter Benjamin's elaboration of gesture, a concept developed in close relation to the theater of Bertolt Brecht that has recently been intellectually reinvested and resuscitated by Giorgio Agamben.[28] I lump these scholars into the dialectical camp, so named in reference to Benjamin's reading of the dialectical materialism developed by Marx. Benjamin's last text—*On the Concept of History*—offers us a striking image

[27] Jean Genet, "The Palestinians" in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 3, no. 1 (1973): p. 34.

[28] See: Sam Weber, "Citability—of Gesture" in *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 95-114; Vilem Flusser, *Gestures*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Jeff Wall, "Gestus" in *Selected Interviews and Essays* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007), p. 85; Sartre, *Saint Genet*; Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2002); Asbjørn Grønstad, Henrik Gustafsson, and Øyvind Vågnes (eds.), *Gestures of Seeing in Film, Video, and Drawing* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Pasi Väliaho, *Mapping the Moving Image: Gesture, Thought, and Cinema circa 1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).
Another group of authors tackles gesture in a more straightforwardly anthropological way, relying upon phenomenological and historical approaches.
See: Yves Citton, *Gestes d'humanités: Anthropologie sauvage de nos expériences esthétiques* (Paris: Arman Colin, 2012); André Leroi-Gourhan, *Technique et Langage (Le geste et la parole, vol. 1)* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1964); Leroi-Gourhan, *La Mémoire et les rythmes (Le geste et la parole, vol. 2)* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1965).

of dialectical materialism that differs from almost every other Marxian interpretation. I follow Slavoj Žižek's brilliant exegesis of Benjamin's theses on history which exposes, in particular, the relationship between historical materialism and the materialism of the signifier in Lacan. Žižek writes:

> What specifies historical materialism – in contrast to the Marxist doxa according to which we must grasp events in the totality of their interconnection and in their dialectical movement – is its capacity to *arrest,* to *immobilize* historical movement and to *isolate* the detail from its historical totality.[29]

The dialectical gesture is precisely the immobilization and arresting of a detail that, pulling this detail out of the historical totality, also snatches it from the present and allows it to be redeemed in the past. The redeemability of the gesture is intimately linked to its citability, or its ability to disrupt action and context while at the same time fixing or framing detail in a form.

On the other hand, another group theorizes gesture through a more Spinozist materialism, most notably Deleuze in *Cinéma 2*.[30] As we saw above in Deleuze's interpretation of the death drive, even the forces of *Thanatos* are linked to a creative vitalism in which the body's substance is not split from the rest of Being. There is no substance called *jouissance* which would originate negatively in the signifier. The body is thus not an expression of something "real" in the sense of Lacan's impossible or lacking real, but rather an expression of affects or forces that traverse it like those sculpted by Rodin—the flow of matter which constitutes the body is shaped by these forces, pointing towards an alternative version of form-giving. These two versions of materialism—one which considers gesture in relation to an absent origin, or a certain negativity, and another which

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[29] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), p. 155.

[30] Here we might also place Steinberg's and Rilke's readings of Rodin in the works I cite above, as well as the following authors: Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Gilles Châtelet, *Les enjeux du mobile: Mathématique, physique, philosophie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993); Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scènes du régime esthétique de l'art* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2011); Philippe Roy, *Trouer la membrane: penser et vivre la politique par des gestes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012).

renounces the question of the origin along with negativity—are supported by different (subjective) forms. One version of the subject stands in relation to an object, derived from (but not necessarily faithful to) the phenomenological tradition, while the other—the Spinozist—betrays this subject-object relation and moves on towards a subject-less becoming. What they have in common, of course, is the hypothesis of an *other* subject and an *other* body—a gestural body—beyond the empirical and the cognitive, which is to say in step with the discursive effects of the scientific revolution.[31]

I have briefly outlined the general philosophical stakes of these different theorizations to better situate my twofold methodological wager; on the one hand, in a broad sense, the true critical power of gesture emerges only when it is placed in the interval between the dialectical and the Spinozist camps; on the other hand, the originality of this reframing of gesture can be demonstrated in my readings of particular gestures in Varda, Akerman, Genet, and Bresson. The postwar gestural obsession, however, can only be read under the sign of its cultural precursor—modernism's initial imposition of the concept of gesture as a category for understanding "life," another modern invention. The emergence of theories of gesture at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth is directly linked to anthropological and psychological concerns with defining, categorizing, and, ultimately, controlling human life. Charles Darwin's *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* and Wilhelm Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie* are paradigmatic examples of a growing interest in the identification and classification of life through an

[31] "For the non-identical subject of the unconscious, Freud and Lacan argued that it could be discovered only under the conditions and within the horizon of the modern scientific revolution. This means that the subject of modern politics is the subject of modern science, and while politics grounded on the economic and legal abstractions repeats the capitalist rejection of this negative subjectivity, communist politics would have to start from the practical mobilisation and organisation of the subject that Marx isolated in his science of value."
Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (New York, Verso, 2015), p. 233.

understanding of the interplay of biological and symbolic forces.[32] These paved the way for "cultural scientist" Aby Warburg's more dissident *Mnemosyne Atlas*, an unfinished project, carried out in the 1920s, composed of sixty-three image panels in which the historian attempted to map out a theory of *pathosformel*, or pathos formula.[33] Warburg grouped images together by gesture rather than by historical period, breaking open the continuum of chronological historical time in order to create an iconography of human gestures and understand the relevance of their expression in images.[34]

Around the same time that Warburg was compiling his *Atlas*, Benjamin was attempting to radicalize Husserl's phenomenological reduction by imagining a "sphere of total neutrality" in which man is neither subject nor object of experience.[35] It wasn't until Benjamin's later writings, in the 1930s, that he would explicitly foreground the notion of gesture in his work on Brecht's epic theater.[36] In these essays, Benjamin defines the Brechtian gesture as a movement that suspends and interrupts the action of the play. Importantly, however, the gesture also interrupts *itself*, and it is precisely this self-interrupting quality that bestows upon the gesture its citability and thus its "latent possibility of becoming-other, of being transported elsewhere."[37] It is thus the gesture's suspending character, its interruption of its own expression, that relates it to all of Benjamin's

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[32] Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1872] 2013); Wilhelm Wundt, *Elements of Folk Psychology: Outlines of a Psychological History of the Development of Mankind*, trans. Edward Leroy Schaub, (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1916).
[33] Aby Warburg, *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne, The Original*, eds. Roberto Ohrt and Axel Heil, (Berlin and London: Haus der Kulturen der Welt and The Warburg Institute, 2020).
See also: Roberto Ohrt and Axel Heil, *Aby Warburg, Bilderatlas Mnemosyne Commentary Volume* (Berlin, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2020).
[34] Warburg sums up his project in the following terms: "The question is: What is the genesis of spoken or pictorial expressions, by what feelings point of view, conscious or unconscious, are they preserved in the archive of memory, and are there laws by which they are set down and force their way out again? Aby M. Warburg, ''Memories of a Journey through the Pueblo Region'' (unpublished notes) (1923) reproduced in Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, trans. Sophie Hawkes, (New York: Zone Books, 2004), p. 313.
[35] Walter Benjamin. "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" in *Selected Writings Vol. 1*, trans. Mark Ritter, Ed. Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, [1918] 2004), p. 100-110.
[36] Walter Benjamin. *Understanding Brecht*, (New York: Verso, 2003).
[37] Weber, "Citability," p. 103.

earlier work which sought out a realm of expressionlessness, the equivalent of a pure language which expresses nothing but its own communicability. I understand this interrupting quality of the gesture to bestow it with the characteristic of inhabiting the interval, in a space that is decidedly between two things.

If Benjamin's analysis of Brecht's gestus can be read as inserting itself into an intellectual trajectory beginning perhaps as early as his essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," then for him, gesture is always, either directly or indirectly, about language.[38] We could say the same of Agamben, who, in his essay "Notes on Gesture," argues that at the end of the nineteenth century the European bourgeoisie undergoes a crisis of gesture which inscribes itself in cinema via chronophotography. Cinematographic images register human movement, making them both tools of the capture and control of human life through the body and sites of latent potentiality where a *dynamis* has remained intact, a force capable of breaking open historical time and giving us back experience, memory, and movement that were thought to be irremediably lost. Agamben's argument is profoundly optimistic in that it argues for the latent potentiality of all cinematographic images, however, it suffers from a generalizing impulse that prevents the conceptual framework from being used to read any one image *in particular* (or even one film) and a compulsion towards the linguistic that blinds the theory of image-as-gesture to a consideration of the body as anything other than an expression of "man's linguistic being."[39] On the other hand, in more contemporary works such as *The Use of Bodies,* the last installment of the *Homo Sacer* series, Agamben draws

[38] Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in *Selected Writings Vol. 1,* trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, [1916] 1996), p. 62-74.
[39] It is in this sense that Agamben undoubtedly belongs to the dialectical camp, despite the fact that he cites Deleuze's cinema books in the gesture essay. His understanding of images as "mobile cuts" stops short of situating his argument in the Spinozist camp because it criticizes something that, for Deleuze, is a false problem: the extraction of movement from bodies. For Deleuze, bodies are already corrupted movement in the sense that they institute a becoming-substantive or a "privileged" image on the plane of immanence. Cinema gives us two distinct possible forms of images: those that remain tied to these privileged centers of perception and those that radically break with them and allow us to encounter the absolute outside of thought.

nearer to theorizing the gesture beyond the linguistic by treating it as an auto-affection inhering in particular movements such as that of walking.[40] Nevertheless, he remains faithful to the dialectical camp, where (de)subjectivization always takes place in relation to the signifier and the negativity it institutes.

Gesture in Deleuze's Time-image

On the other side of materialism—where I locate the Spinozist Deleuze—stands a different notion of gesture and a different definition of the interval. I argue that one of the main neglected takeaways from Deleuze's cinema philosophy is the importance it claimed for gesture in modern cinema. The radicality of this claim must, however, be situated within the broader context of Deleuze's main interventions in *Cinéma 1* and *Cinéma 2,* interventions that made a radical break with the French school of the 1980s, where the phenomenology of André Bazin and the "psychoanalytic" film theory of Christian Metz were dominant.[41] Deleuze rejects both the phenomenological view that the cinematic experience is one that can be related to a central, subjective point, and the presupposition that images are dialectical productions that take place in relation to the signifier. Instead, he posits that cinematic images instantiate a radically new form of perception that is decentered and detached from a subject—perception emerges independently of a subject's look and is, following Henri Bergson, *in the things themselves*. The result is that cinematic images are not representative, but creative; images are not the means by which subjects might think differently, they are already the forms of this different thought. The classification of

[40] Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

[41] I agree with authors like Joan Copjec and Todd McGowan who have argued that Metz and the subsequent *Screen* school were not properly psychoanalytic in the sense that they *exclusively* relied upon Lacanian writings on the mirror stage and the imaginary order. This led them to theorize the screen as a mirror and an ideological apparatus that traps the subject in the imaginary.
See: Joan Copjec, "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan," *October* 49, (Summer, 1989): p. 53-71.
Todd McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and The Rules of the Game* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

cinema's images into two categories—the movement-image and the time-image—is a way of taking stock of how these radical effects of cinema were put to work in two different historical regimes.

In the first volume, Deleuze elaborates a taxonomy of the first historical regime—that of classical cinema and the movement-image. He argues that the movement-image constructs chronological narratives that subordinate time to action through a certain relation between framing and montage. The dispersed perception in the image attaches itself to action and is reorganized into a Whole that presents itself indirectly through montage, making time dependent on movement as a measure of distance covered. The narratives of classical cinema correspond to this particular functioning of the movement-image because they present us with a philosophical idea of time, history, and representation centered on action. A classic Hollywood example of this image regime is the musical *Swing Time*, where dance—even if it threatens to show movements of the body disconnected from any goal—is always reigned in under the sign of a love plot that must come to its neat and predictable resolution. The time-image, on the other hand, presents time directly to the viewer, and coincides with the emergence of films with non-narrative tendencies, stories about people who don't react to or strive against the unfolding of a series of significant events, but simply bear the weight and consequence of the ordinary non-events of everyday life. This direct presentation of time occurs because time is no longer subordinated to action. The interval between perception and action, or action and reaction—what Bergson calls a "centre d'indétermination"—is no longer excluded from the image, but is included within it.[42]

[42] "Si les êtres vivants constituent dans l'univers des 'centre d'indétermination,' et si le degré de cette indétermination se mesure au nombre et à l'élévation de leurs fonctions, on conçoit que leur seule présence puisse équivaloir à la suppression de toutes les parties des objets auxquelles leurs fonctions ne sont pas intéressées."
See: Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire: Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, [1896] 2012), p. 33.

It is precisely because the irrational interval is no longer excluded from the image that the gesture takes on a new importance in modern cinema. Exemplary of this tendency, Varda's time-image foregrounds female characters that stroll aimlessly, in films like *La pointe courte* (1955), *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), and *Murs Murs* (1980). The female walker takes the place of the nineteenth century *flâneur*, establishing for women a newfound freedom of movement that corresponds with the possibility of encountering unrecognizable phenomena in the postwar European city and beyond.[43] Deleuze summarizes the radical shift that the time-image initiates towards the beginning of *Cinéma 2* where he writes:

> Or, dès les premières apparences, il se passe autre chose dans le cinéma dit moderne : non pas quelque chose de plus beau, de plus profond ni de plus vrai, mais quelque chose d'autre. C'est que le schème sensori-moteur ne s'exerce plus, mais n'est pas davantage dépassé, surmonté. Il est brisé du dedans. C'est-à-dire que les perceptions et les actions ne s'enchaînent plus, et que les espaces ne se coordonnent plus ni se remplissent. Des personnages, pris dans des situations optiques et sonores pures, se trouvent condamnés à l'errance ou à la balade. Ce sont de purs voyants, qui n'existent plus que dans l'intervalle de mouvement, et n'ont même pas la consolation du sublime, qui leur ferait rejoindre la matière ou conquérir l'esprit. Ils sont plutôt livrés à quelque chose d'intolérable, qui est leur quotidienneté même.[44]

In describing the conceptual reversal at stake in the postwar cinematic, Deleuze draws up a relation between the interval, the unbearable, and everydayness. Once perception is no longer organized around a stable, central point of view from which movement can be measured, the subject is no

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[43] At first glance it would seem that the logic of Benjamin's dialectical image and its principle of montage would run counter to the virtual temporality (direct image of time) offered up in the time-image; indeed, for Deleuze, montage (understood dialectically) is only capable of presenting time as subordinate to movement and as such is connected to a conception of organic unity and faith in History as change produced through (collective) action. On the other hand, both the flaneur and the walker embody new modes of perception within unrecognizable social spaces: while Deleuze's time-image *voyant* (the word emphasizes both voyaging and seeing) perceives the perpetual bifurcation of the present into virtual and actual (in crystals of time), Benjamin's Ur-figures of modernity are dialectical images that seek "to educate the image-creating medium within us to see dimensionally, stereoscopically, into the depths of the historical shade." Both figures, in other words, embody a mode of perception that allows one to *see better*, whether into the depths of history or on the surface of a plane of immanence.
The quote above is originally from the poet, historian, and translator Rudolf Borchard who Benjamin cites multiple times in his *Arcades Project.*
See: Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), p. 292.

[44] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1985), p. 58.

longer pragmatically oriented towards life (that is, oriented towards recognition, understanding, and action). A de-centered form of perception emerges in the place of the subject, embodying the breakages of the sensorimotor schema much liked Freud's crystal thrown to the floor. The disconnected, emptied-out spaces of the image teeming with perceptions that are not yet connected to actions become linked together through a gesture—the gesture produced in the *balade.* There is thus a direct relation between being condemned to errancy in the interval and needing to invent a new gesture that will relink perceptions in novel ways.

Importantly, Deleuze's account of the changes that emerge in postwar cinema takes as its point of departure the images themselves rather than historical determinations of postwar Europe. Consequently, the walker can be considered first and foremost in relation to the "nouvelle forme de réalité" brought forth by the formal innovations of postwar cinema, beginning with Italian neorealism. Deleuze refuses to submit his analysis of these changes to any causal, historical logic, referring instead, rather ambiguously, to a "…nouvel élément faisant irruption, qui allait empêcher la perception de se prolonger en action pour la mettre en rapport avec la pensée."[45] Instead of trying to decipher this new element, Deleuze focuses on tracking the effects of its irruption into postwar films themselves, constructing a taxonomy of images and their signs. The proliferation of characters who walk or wander through the city can then be understood in relation to attentive perception, a new form of perception arising in the time-image that neither reflects the world nor links back to a center of subjectivity, but rather ceaselessly returns to the object, provoking "une

[45] Deleuze does, of course, evoke the ontological crisis brought on by World War Two as an event that fundamentally changed cinema's potential. But he does not make any causal arguments about these historical events and the changes undergone by cinematic images.
See: Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 8.

expansion simultanée de la mémoire *et* de la connaissance de la réalité, de la matière *et* de l'esprit."[46]

The problem thus shifts, in Deleuze's account, from a historical or social context as the origin of cinematic "content" towards an understanding of the image as a reality (both actual and virtual, that is, insisting in the actual but not given in it) that makes new forms of thought possible. Much like Benjamin's flaneur, whose shift in perception opens up an alternative temporality lodged in the interval between past and present, or between individual and collective history, Deleuze's walker perceives the virtual dimension of existence within which the preservation of the past (memory) surges forth as it meets the present moment that passes on.[47]

While Deleuze was interested in giving a rather exhaustive taxonomy of all the effects of this radical new mode of putting images to work, I am more interested in the power and singularity of individual gestures that unfold new dimensions of the problematics of the time-image. If walking is one gesture that formalizes the unbinding force of the interval, then there must be others, other figures that embody this force in differing configurations.[48] By associating specific gestures or clusters of gestures with individual works, I seek to better understand how particular modes of image making, writing, and performing dramatize the philosophical problem of gesture in specific political and historical contexts. Situating my inquiring between the dialectical thinkers of gesture and Deleuze's understanding of the concept allows me to grasp what it is that is "given back" in

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[46] Paola Marrati, *Gilles Deleuze: Cinéma et philosophie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2003), p. 91.

[47] "…c'est l'opération la plus fondamentale du temps…Il faut que le temps se scinde en même temps qu'il se pose ou se déroule : il se scinde en deux jets dissymétriques don't l'un fait passer tout le present, et don't l'autre conserve tout le passé."
See: Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 109.

[48] My focus on gesture can be compared to a recent surge in studies on embodiment in the field of History, Cultural Studies, and Sociology. This body of literature, which is adjacent to studies on affect, seeks to account for the body in language-centric fields by turning to cognitive models of the subject and the body-brain connection. I offer gesture as an alternative concept for thinking the relation between language and the body that refutes the cognitive model because it forecloses upon the possibility of both a subject of the unconscious or a (non) subject of becoming.
See: Lisa Blackman, *Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

the gesture and what it is that is being created or is radically new. It is only from this privileged theoretical position—my unique position of critique—that I can elucidate the political stakes of gesture in these works. The political (non) subject that is attached to these different configurations of gesture emerges at the limit between the openness of an unlimited becoming and an attachment to what one was or will have been—between the necessity of difference and the temptation of messianism. Here it is not a matter of simply understanding what repeats in repetition—whether it be an originary negativity or a creative force of difference/life. Rather, it is about understanding *how* this repetition takes on a (bodily) form and places itself in a world within which certain possibilities take shape.

In attempting to respond to this "how," the work of the dissertation diachronically (that is, in each chapter) performs three functions, each of which outlines a new contribution to the scholarship. First, I re-read a carefully chosen constellation of postwar French and Francophone works through the gestural framework I have set up, one which attunes my readings to understudied aspects of the works in question, namely: a desubjectivizing feminist politics in Varda; transference of fatigue in Akerman; Genet's politics of race and theatricality; and Bresson's ethical foregrounding of the symptom. Second, I create a dialogue between the dialectical thinkers of gesture, represented by Agamben, and Deleuze's Spinozist understanding of the concept. In doing so I turn to psychoanalytical concepts like transference, drive, and symptom, which help me to unpack the significance of gesture as a term that lodges itself between language and the body. Third, I elucidate the specific political stakes of gesture in these works, arguing for what I believe to be a more radical interpretation of their politics. As it operates a suspension of all means-end paradigms, the gesture also suspends goal-oriented action and the utilitarian politics attached to it. On the other hand, as it embodies the unbinding force of a limitless becoming, the gesture does

something more than simply suspend—it creates something new, a new linkage, a new form, or a new thought.

Chapter descriptions

The dissertation is divided into four chapters, each of which addresses a single work through close reading. While such an approach remains limited in that it does not facilitate making more general claims about the authors I study—since I focus on individual works rather than entire *oeuvres*—I maintain that this form of close reading is necessary when working at the level of the gesture. Because my inquiry addresses the question of how what repeats itself in (bodily) repetition gets repeated, a slow working-through of the gestural movements, scenes, and figures of these works is useful when trying to grasp their meanings. I presuppose that every gesture draws up a meaningful relation to both the gestural category to which it belongs (walking, the domestic, ritual, theft) and to a certain declination of the concept of gesture in general. Reading the gesture—what always contains something unreadable—therefore requires not a neat separation and classification of these different levels, but rather an intuitive, immersive style in which the reader situates herself in the interval rather than outside of it. The productive tensions that arise there allow for new readings to emerge that cut across these different levels of meaning, opening up new lines of questioning that dialogue with existing readings. This dialogue, however, is not without critical determination; my readings do make claims, and these claims are made in the hope of countering existing readings that misread in the sense that they foreclose upon the political and ethical potential of the works in question. At the same time, the claims that I make for each work depend upon the conceptual framework that guides my reading, a framework which is unstable and constantly changing. What remains constant throughout is my presupposition that gesture is the

site of a simultaneous production and suspension that emerges in the interval. Gesture maps a relation to the outside and thereby gives us the possibility to think something new, the very prerequisite of politics. In each chapter, this setup guides my reading and allows for the emergence of a parallel concept (becoming, transference, ritual, and symptom) which momentarily stabilizes the ambiguity of gesture and grounds my argument.

In my first chapter, "Walking in the New Wave: Agnès Varda's *Promeneuses,*" I reread Agnès Varda's quintessential film *Cléo de 5 à 7,* arguing that Varda constructs a novel relation between movement and time in the image through the repeated gesture of walking. A most banal, everyday movement, walking is transformed into a gesture when Varda constructs a world in which it is no longer instrumental, a means of getting from point A to point B. She performs this magical shift via structural—that is, cinematographic—inventions, using her camera to create a perception in the image that is dispersed rather than centered. Cléo as *promeneuse* thereby shows us what Deleuze only hinted at in *Cinéma 2*—the part to be played by the feminine in the time-image, specifically in the new cinema of bodies for which Varda was clearly a pioneer. The female walker steps in(to) the interval and remains in relation to it, opening onto a vision of the subject as a figure of becoming rather than of identification.

Before Deleuze wrote *Cinéma 2,* Varda had already reinvented the gesture for cinema. In the postwar cultural-theoretical landscape where the category of the everyday was being recast as both the place of the production of modern ideology and a space of political potential, Varda's *Cléo* makes a unique feminist intervention. She reconstructs the everyday as a series of disconnected spaces linked together anew by the interval of walking, the space where the feminine subject had previously fallen out of the image but now steps back in—she is granted a space, a gesture. The woman does not, however, appropriate this space in the image, for it remains—like

the gesture as Agamben defines it—radically inappropriable. Rather, she positions herself there, in a space of becoming, where dis-identification with one's self makes possible the emergence of something new. *Cléo* thus constructs a radical feminist politics, a practice of what Linda Zerilli calls "abyssal freedom" that escapes the instrumentalist impasse (action) only by grounding itself in the subject's becoming (gesture).[49] In *Cléo*, I argue, this abyss of freedom is in the interval, and Varda makes it available to us via a radical cinematic retooling of the gesture of walking.

In my second chapter, entitled "Dying Inside: Gesture and Exhaustion in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080, Bruxelles*," I argue that Akerman's emblematic film is about reclaiming the cruelty of the body—the exhausted female body that, at the limits of the bearable, begins to put fatigue to work differently. This *other* type of work is what works against housework in the images of Akerman's female protagonist Jeanne, who remains trapped in a stifling frame in which the unplanned eruption of the interval in her routine becomes unbearable. Building upon the existing scholarship, I argue that Akerman achieves this radical perceptual shift through a set of meticulous cinematographic strategies that enact a simultaneous hyperrealization and de-dramatization of the image. But I also diverge from these readings insofar as I propose that the primary effect of Akerman's structural choices is a form of cinematic transference in which exhaustion bleeds across the screen, moving in between Jeanne and the viewer. This transference allows for the viewer to become attuned to the proliferation of gestures in the image rather than seeking to know something about the fantasy that supports Jeanne's desire. Transference here is thus linked to a movement away from fantasy and towards gesture, an unbridled transference that destitutes the *sujet supposé savoir* and works against the cure, against the neurotic guilt of the Oedipal subject and for "schizophrenic cruelty."[50]

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[49] See: Linda M.G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).
[50] Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2016), p. 173.

In my third chapter, "Ravaged Rites: The Gesture Gone Astray in Jean Genet's *Les Nègres*," I examine how one of Genet's most politically charged works relies upon what I call "the ritual gesture gone astray" to construct a politics of the possible. This politics emerges with Genet's impressive interrogation of the stakes of theatricality for the black subject, an inquiry which leads him to draw a singular ontological and historical relation between blackness and the powers of theater. In a whirlwind dramatic text whose every page is bursting with violence, outrage, laughter, and the excess and incalculable loss that marks blackness, Genet strategically uses the ritual gesture to break apart the symbolic order that upholds white supremacy. While the traditional ritual gesture reactualizes a once fully present origin to ensure that the ritual repeats the symbolic order's founding act, Genet's gestures inaugurate a space of virtuality onstage, making the body of the actor present as a dislocation, a separation. The body in Genet's theater *is* the interval, the locus of the absolute violence that thought imposes on being (when it thinks the violence that being imposes on thought), that the *nègre* imposes upon the white world, leaving it forever devastated.

In my fourth and final chapter I argue that Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* relies upon the gestures of stealing to construct the figure of the symptomal-ethical thief, a subject/automaton endowed with a novel expressive capacity in the image. Bresson's unique cinematographic style links images together via the unbinding force of the interval; the body produced in these images is thus disconnected from itself, a series of divergent drives and forces that resist unification. I bring in the psychoanalytic concept of the symptom to try to understand the expressive capacity of this drive body that is given to us in the image via the gestures of pickpocketing. Like the drive, the pickpocket covets any-object-whatever, and desires not so much to possess it, but rather to make it circulate in space differently.

By shifting the understanding of the film's protagonist Michel away from a spiritual-transcendental paradigm in which he rejects social norms and commits thefts because he is spiritually "lost," I try to excavate Bresson's radical politics.[51] I take seriously Michel's thefts as symptomal—that is, as expressions of an inorganic, disorganized body and as the site of the emergence of a truth of the image, a truth that may go beyond what psychoanalysis itself proposes. As *Pickpocket* ultimately demonstrates, the relationship between the gesture and the symptom remains tenuous, since the subject of the unconscious and the spiritual automaton never fully converge. And yet, it is precisely because of the resistance of this interval that Bresson's gestures of stealing are able to initiate a dialogue between these two paradigms, unearthing a radical Bresson for whom the ethics of cinematic creation is not about the necessity of a God that guarantees meaning, but the possibility of radical choice.

[51] Here I follow in the footsteps of Brian Price, who only recently published the first book-length study of Bresson to counter the spiritual-transcendentalist readings.
See: Brian Price, *Neither God Nor Master: Robert Bresson and Radical Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

Chapter One
Walking in the New Wave; Agnès Varda's *Promeneuses*

Walking in the Interval

In the third chapter of *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps*, "Du souvenir aux rêves," Deleuze describes the type of "pure optical image of the thing" that is produced in the cinema of the time-image as that which, instead of extending into movement, enters into relation with a series of recollections or blocs of memory.[52] In other words, movement, in the optical image, is not extension in space, but rather, in-tension in time. In the "dream-image" a character no longer *reacts* to an optical-sound situation but, deprived of movement as extension in space, *undergoes* a "movement of world," or a depersonalization of movement. This does not mean, of course, that characters are frozen or immobile, but rather, that their movements or bodily states can now be seen to link up with the movements of a world. Deleuze showcases a few examples from Italian Neorealism, pointing, in particular, to the fairgrounds in Fellini's films; the rides, slides, and tunnels of the amusement park act as configurations of space that lead the visitor from one space-time to another.[53] In the carnivalesque dream-space of Fellini's images, a character's bodily adjustments to the configurations of space imposed by the amusement park can be read as cosmic movements, readable not in terms of the psychology of the individual, nor of the character's position within a narrative, but in relation to the dream world itself.[54]

Depersonalized movement is also embodied by the figure of the dancer in musical comedy. As if in the trance of a sleepwalker, the dancer is summoned or taken over by the movement of a world that her dance will trace: "C'est le mouvement de vérité où le danseur marche encore, mais

[52] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1985), p. 62-91.
[53] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 82.
[54] This is certainly the world Deleuze evokes when he insists, in an interview with Claire Parnet, that, "on ne délire pas sur nos mamans et nos papas…on délire le monde".
See: *L'Abécédaire* directed by Pierre-André Boutang and Michel Palmart (Éditions Montparnasse, [1996] 2004).

déjà somnambule qui va être possédé par le mouvement qui semble l'appeler: on le trouve chez Fred Astaire dans la promenade qui devient danse insensiblement." And then, a few lines later, Deleuze continues, "Entre le pas moteur et le pas de danse, il y a parfois…un 'degré zéro,' comme une hésitation, un décalage, un retardement, une série de ratés préparatoires, ou au contraire une brusque naissance."[55]

While these remarks surely point towards the dream-image and its prevalence in the musical comedy, they also reveal two things about walking in the time-image that Deleuze will elaborate elsewhere in *Cinéma 2*: first, that walking in the time-image becomes movement in time rather than extension in space, and second, that walking, as a movement in the interval or in between—that movement that could turn into the dance step at any moment—is a movement of great *potentiality*. Between the virtual and its actualization, walking is a continuously arrested falling, a movement akin to the organization of chaos; it is just *almost* falling, just *almost* dance. As hesitation, zero-degree movement, or delay, walking displaces the question of origin and shifts the philosophical focus onto emergence—that is, from transcendence to immanence.

In *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), Agnès Varda creates her own dream-world through novel camera techniques that disperse the center of determination of all movement in the image; walking is transformed from a movement in space into a movement in time, or a movement that is not executed by the character but imposed by the world itself, plunging the character into a deeper stratum of duration. The film's final scene, where we see Cléo and the friendly stranger Antoine walking together towards the camera, is emblematic of this transformation. Moments before this shot, we see Cléo's doctor, who has just announced to her the shocking news of her medical test results, driving away from the pair who are literally left behind in the dust, speechless. Varda uses

[55] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 83.

a dramatic dolly-out—it's as if the camera is attached to the back of the doctor's car—and cuts the scene's diegetic sound to evoke the radical shift in the cinematic world itself that is undergone by these characters [See Figure 1]. The space between them and the camera is literally stretched, creating a warp in the temporal order. The pulling motion is transformed into a pushing in the next shot, which shows Cléo and Antoine in close-up walking side by side *towards* the camera, slowly and deliberately. Because the pair is shown in close-up, we only see their heads bobbing from side to side and the hospital and trees in the background are blurred, the change in their proximity to the camera barely noticeable. Cléo and Antoine seem here to be walking without travelling in space, without traversing any distance in the image. The new world they have entered affects their bodies and gestures differently; the appearance of a little bit of time in its "pure" form, in other words, is infused in the image through this change in cinematic world induced by Varda's camera eye which becomes a subjective-objective presence, occupying the imagined interval between the "inside" and the "outside" of the image.

Figure 1. *Cléo de 5 à 7* (Agnès Varda, 1962): The doctor leaves Cléo and Antoine in the dust.

In this chapter I show how Varda's filmmaking practice can be understood as proposing a radical feminist politics that pushes beyond the paradigm of representation. In *Cléo*, Varda achieves this through a series of formal techniques that emphasize walking in the time-image as an interval for the becoming of a character, for the transformation of a person in relation to place and memory.[56] She thus offers us images that express a politics of becoming and difference rather than of identification; the feminist freedom she proposes is an aporetic freedom that remains radically open. The close readings of Varda's inventive camerawork that follow seek not only to

[56] Asli Özgen Tuncer has already explored a Deluzian/Guattarian politics of walking in *Cléo, Sans toit ni loi,* and *Les Plages d'Agnès* that focuses on merging the concepts of nomadism and *flânerie.* She focuses on the concepts of smooth and striated space, outlined in Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille Plateaux,* in order to argue that *Cléo* puts forward a "figure of walking in favour of nomadic consciousness."
See: Azli Özgen Tuncer, "Women on the Move: The Politics of Walking in Agnès Varda," *Deleuze Studies* 6, no. 1, (2012): p. 114.

demonstrate, but equally, to work through the relationships between image and thought that emerge throughout the film. How do these walking scenes allow for the specific movements of thought that come to articulate a politics of becoming or a disjunctive feminist freedom?

In the cinema of the time-image, as articulated by Deleuze, walking scenes are those sequences that show the viewer the emptied-out spaces of European cities destroyed by the Second World War and rebuilt in the image of capitalist modernization. Cinema becomes a site of the philosophy of the everyday, that new triumphant category that privileges the affective dimensions of communal life, linking the negotiations of modern space to the rhythms and resonances of subjects who, in navigating urban space, do not simply inhabit it but create it anew. However, the shifts undergone in film practice from the classical period to the post-war period cannot be reduced to a historical logic; these changes are essentially tied to different configurations of space and time in images, formal changes that define a whole new aesthetic (although, in Deleuze, there is also a shift away from the "aesthetic object" and towards the act of creation). Spaces become, in the time-image, *espaces quelconques*, images that are no longer linked to one another through the logical progression of past, present, and future, but experienced by the viewer as a juxtaposition of presents made through a continuous process of irrational cutting. In other words, the links between actions are undone, and optical and sound images (or "situations") surge forth, giving something to be seen and heard in the image, rather than recognized and understood. The characters that populate the time-image are thus "condemned to walk" because walking becomes the gesture where these two poles—the historical and the ontological, the emptied-out space and the *espace quelconque*—converge. The unrecognizability of destroyed and rebuilt space is transformed, in Deleuze, from a simple failure of memory or reason into a "new experience of the mind."[57]

[57] The question of a "failure of memory" reveals the implicit links between Deleuze's earlier writings on Freud, particularly in *Différence et Répétition,* and the cinema books. In the former text, Deleuze is clear about his

But this novel "spiritual" experience cannot be severed from a new experience of the body; in fact, it is the gesture that serves as a sort of diagram for reading the relation between new possibilities for thought and new bodily attitudes. In Varda's cinema, what I call a cinema of gesture and what Deleuze refers to as a *cinéma du corps*, a proliferation of aesthetic figures and social types emerges through walking sequences; across the bodies of these figures Varda sketches out a female conceptual persona that allows her to articulate a politics, a creative political practice that grounds itself in the subject's power of becoming-other rather than in the solidity of a female subject position from which to execute critique. In *Cléo,* Varda's *promeneuses* compose a feminine *gestus* that functions as a "minor" point of enunciation within the "major"—history as "*l'Histoire des hommes*." In Varda's cinema, the gesture of walking, as both an index of the social and a movement of expression, is privileged as a paradigmatic gesture of daily life that contains a specific political potentiality in the cinematographic image. Framing my reading with these questions in mind allows for a long overdue shift in interpretative focus within Varda scholarship, a move that highlights her body of work as constructing a feminist practice through images that are capable of rethinking the potentialities of cinema.

The New Wave and Feminist Filmmaking

Following in the footsteps of the legendary documentarist Jean Rouch, New Wave filmmakers—many of whom openly paid homage to the former—sought to capture the unpredictability and contingency of everyday life, ditching Hollywood pretension for immersion in the chaos of the ordinary. But unlike the pioneers of *cinéma-vérité* and *cinéma direct*, New

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understanding of Freud's discovery of the symptom: "On ne guérit donc pas par simple mnésie, pas plus qu'on n'est malade par amnésie."
See: Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), p. 30.

Wave directors were experimenting with elements of the documentary form in the service of developing narrative film techniques that expressed a newfound freedom of the *auteur*; the documentary value of the acts, gestures, words, and sounds recorded by the camera would contribute to the construction of a fictionalized world, one crafted around a personalized story born out of a visionary director's "acte d'amour."[58] If Varda didn't necessarily see herself as an auteur taking cues from the experimental documentary scene—she has always claimed to have never seen any Italian neorealist films nor ethnographic documentaries before shooting her first film *La pointe courte* (1955)—she nonetheless developed a film style that incorporated many of the techniques developed by Rouch: a handheld camera that captured subjects close-at-hand in busy street scenes, on-location filming that privileged the minute details of an environment to lifeless aestheticism, and exterior as opposed to interior shooting. All these elements facilitated projects restricted to a small budget, a proviso both Rouch and Varda often had to respect.

The style that Varda developed early on in *La pointe courte*, *Du côté de la côte* (1958), *L'opéra-mouffe* (1958), and *Cléo* was marked by a play between *cinéma-vérité* style images of her subject matter (often locals who, upon the arrival of the film crew, agreed to participate in the making of the film) and highly theatricalized sequences involving contemplative characters whose psychological content nevertheless remained largely unexplored. This playful juxtaposition of the ethnographic and the theatrical, or the fictional and the historical, would remain Varda's signature throughout her over sixty-year career as a filmmaker. Like other post-war film oeuvres, Varda's is marked significantly by a proliferation of walking scenes, whether through the streets of Paris, the Latino neighborhoods of East L.A., or the fields of provincial France. Walking is a privileged movement that allows for her characters to continuously develop bodily attitudes and postures, out

[58] For more on this type of relation to authorship in the French New Wave see: François Truffaut, *Les films de ma vie* (Paris: Flammarion, [1987] 2019).

of which emerge a privileged gesture. In Deleuze's re-reading of the Brechtian *gestus*, when he sketches out the contours of a *cinéma du corps,* the philosopher directly addressed Varda's oeuvre. Quite provocatively, and indeed enigmatically, Deleuze states:

> Les auteurs féminins, les réalisatrices féminines, ne doivent pas leur importance à un féminisme militant. Ce qui compte d'avantage, c'est la manière dont elles ont innové dans ce cinéma des corps, comme si les femmes avaient à conquérir la source de leurs propres attitudes et la temporalité qui leur correspond comme gestus individuel ou commun.[59]

What matters, for Deleuze, much more than a particular political interest or position that may or may not have inspired women directors to make films, is the innovative forms that their images have brought into existence. Interestingly, the creation of these new forms is understood to be in the service of understanding an origin, a "source" of bodily "attitudes." If this source is not historical in the deterministic sense of the term, or, in other words, if it is not exhausted in the structures of patriarchal domination under capitalism, then what could it be? I argue that Varda herself undertakes this search. As an "auteur féminin" she was (and still is) relegated to an "outsider" status within the New Wave. What one might discover as the "source" of her relegation to the margins is not, however, the same as the "source" of her images.

In this study Varda is considered as a consistently marginalized New Wave filmmaker, but historical context is not the primary factor in my interpretations of her films. Rather than work from the basis of a theory of aesthetics which privileges the forms of mediation between objective social reality and the subjective artist or creator, I offer close readings that theorize images, subjects, and histories on the same plane of existence. In an ontology of immanence, thinking and writing about works of art does not require a theory with which to understand subject-object relations as causal. Artworks and artists can be considered, in Spinozist terms, as different

[59] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2,* p. 256.

attributes that are nonetheless part of the same substance, partaking in an immanent causality in which, as Kiarina Kordela claims, "the cause is itself an effect of its own effects."[60]

Thinking in this constellation requires entering into the substance and registering the affective resonances of its forms and forces. The art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, writing about the image as pathos in Aby Warburg's archival image project, the *Atlas Mnemosyne*, describes the philosopher as a seismograph, "l'inscripteur et le transmetteur des mouvements invisibles qui survivent, qui se trament sous notre sol, qui se creusent, qui attendant le moment – pour nous, inattendu – de se manifester soudain."[61] The object of study, for Warburg, cannot be reduced to its objective elements, for it implicates the historian-seismograph in a mysterious movement of forces. In other words, artworks cannot be reduced to the historical conditions under which they were produced, nor to their formal qualities; analyzing works requires an affective attention to how forms and their movement involve forces of time—the memory and forgetting of different versions of the past in the present.[62] Close reading becomes a practice that privileges at once the composition of a work and an immersion in the world to which it belongs, as well as a collision between that "fictional" world and the historical present. The historical is therefore not negated but rather transformed into an open form, one in which time is not a succession of pasts, nor a progressive chronology, but a pliable materiality or collection of forces that pass through subjects and objects.

This genealogical project that registers historical change as a play of forces links up with feminisms that attempt to find alternatives to the simple application of aesthetic theory as ideology

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[60] Kiarina Kordela, *$urplus: Spinoza, Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 1.
[61] Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Les Éditions de Minuit: Paris, 2002), p. 123.
[62] Here remembering and forgetting are not thought of in a commonsense way but rather as engagements with the past as a virtual dimension that coexists with and forms the present. Didi-Huberman's reading of Warburg, in its Nietzschean and Deleuzean inspirations, also conceptualizes time in this way.

critique. Politically, a Deleuzian-inspired feminism rejects both equality and autonomy as guiding principles of feminist struggle and instead asserts the necessity of the creation of feminist concepts.[63] "Feminist theory," Elizabeth Grosz suggests, "affirms only what we can become," a distinction, of course, with regard to what women already "are."[64] The shift away from female subjects does not, however, imply a complete disavowal of agency; feminist agency is reconfigured as the capacity to act or to deal with the chaos of events and their "race, class, and gender effects."[65] Concepts are responses (and not solutions) to the problems that events pose; feminist concepts, in particular, are techniques of knowledge that can be used as forms of contestation against what Grosz calls "the patriarchal guarantee of the precedence of the masculine."[66] In order to counteract this precedence, Grosz and others return to the problem of sexual difference as a productive site of emergence and becoming. Concept creation is intimately linked to the forces of time at work in the chaos of the world, and to the ways in which that chaos can be approached and organized in different configurations of thought.

The walking sequence stages this encounter with chaos in the time-image; as movement, walking constitutes processes of unbinding the potentialities of the body and navigating modern space in the "new world" that emerges in the postwar period. It is in this world that women will

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[63] Perhaps we can refer to these as constituting a "No wave feminism". Beyond all of the other "waves", but certainly inspired by the groundwork they laid, No wave feminism is the dissident, atonal, noisy, and anarchic response to Marxist and liberal versions of feminism that privilege autonomy (the development of a new norm) and equality (the achievement of an already existing norm). The moniker is inspired by the short-lived No wave music scene that exploded in New York City in the 1970s, comprising groups like Theoretical Girls, The Contortions, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Mars, and DNA. No wave sought to create an avant-garde musicality that was not merely a reaction against existing musical traditions (primarily rock and roll and pop) but creative in its own right. The sought-after sound of No wave musicians often privileged texture over melody, hence its atonal tendencies. Feminism that privileges concept-creation over the content of group interest and its subsequent promotion through electoral politics or revolution could also be said to privilege texture over melody, rhythm over time-signature, or vibration over purity of tone.

[64] Elizabeth Grosz, "The Future of Feminist Theory: Dreams for New Knowledges," Feminist Theory Workshop, Duke University, filmed March 24, 2007, video of lecture, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwHoswjw5yo&t=11s.

[65] Grosz, "The Future."

[66] Grosz, "The Future."

begin to invent concepts that respond to the problem of their domination and "secondariness." As David Rodowick has convincingly argued, the postwar crisis of the action-image provoked a rearrangement of the universal masculine subject through a proliferation of male characters that embodied the dissolution of the hero capable of transforming the world through action.[67] Women, in turn, were dislodged from a passive position, and their mobility became a power of creation. Walking women thus embody a newfound freedom of movement, but it is movement in time rather than in space. It is not the case that women are represented in places from which they were previously banned, but rather, that women occupy the irrational interval in which thought becomes possible. In other words, women are granted the privilege of their own becoming in the time-image, of becoming something other than secondary, immobile, or domestic.

If we follow Deleuze's account of gesture in the time-image, it might, at first glance, seem as though he rejects feminist politics; indeed, he does seem to claim that any reading that interprets images in a representative manner, including all those that engage with ideology critique, fails to actually think through the concepts that cinematic images create. But a Deleuzian reading of Varda's films in no way forecloses upon their political elements; in fact, I argue that to think through the relationship between time and the body through the figure of the walker in Varda is to take her feminist politics quite seriously. Both the expressive and social sides of the gesture that Varda consistently works with in these sequences can be linked back to what Deleuze calls the powers of the false and the irruption of time into the image. A creative power of invention in the image emerges through this chaotic interruption of time, making possible new forms of thought and action that can be thought in relation to what I have called "No wave feminism."

[67] See: D.N. Rodowick. "Unthinkable Sex" in *Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze's Film Philosophy,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 177-190.

But to pose the problem in these terms is to already carry out an interpretative shift. What becomes necessary is a Vardian reading of Deleuze, or a methodology that gives Varda's images the theoretical attention they deserve. Before Deleuze wrote *Cinéma 2,* Varda's cinema of invention was offering women not equality, nor autonomy, but freedom—a non-normative freedom of creation. This open form of freedom resonates with what Linda Zerilli calls a "power of beginning," a term that emerges from Hannah Arendt's "abyss of freedom."[68] Feminism, rather than grounding itself in a unified and pre-determined subject ("woman"), constitutes itself through a process of dis-identification, a reshuffling of the distribution of roles in a particular social order that disturbs politics as a means to an end. The process of woman's dis-identification in the time-image is a spatial and temporal displacement, one that can be read through the diagram of gesture, the site of experimentation for new modes of thought and new bodily attitudes.

Cléo de 5 à 7

Perhaps Varda's most acclaimed film, *Cléo* chronicles the comings and goings of a French pop singer who, nervously awaiting the results of a biopsy, goes on an aimless walk through Paris and experiences a profound change. Cléo shuffles through a series of traditional feminine roles—seductress, hysteric, spoiled child, submissive lover, commodity-form, etc.—before extracting a "true image" of herself (as Florence) from all of these clichés. Walking, I argue, is the film's paradigmatic gesture, one that signals Cléo's radical ability to invent new modes of existence, to conjure up a renewed faith in life such that her fear of death, at least momentarily, subsides. Time, as it appears in the interval of walking, becomes for Cléo not the enemy but rather the secret power that constitutes the substance within which she lives and changes—a sort of de-individuated

[68] Linda M.G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 24.

singularity. The film's title then—*Cléo de 5 à 7*—does not describe the film's time frame, but its very content; the substance of Cléo's subjectivity is time itself, or what Deleuze calls the only "real" subjectivity.[69]

The "true image" of Cléo-becoming-Florence is thus related not to the self-possession of a female subject who reclaims an experience that has been expropriated, but to time as a motor of becoming that draws its power from sexual difference. Illness—a form of cancer in Cléo's case—is transformed into the Nietzschean health of the convalescent, or what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the condition of the artist:

> Les artistes sont comme les philosophes à cet égard, ils ont souvent une trop petite santé fragile, mais ce n'est pas à cause de leurs maladies ni de leurs névroses, c'est parce qu'ils ont vu dans la vie quelque chose de trop grand pour quiconque, de trop grand pour eux, et qui a mis sur eux la marque discrète de la mort.[70]

The task of the artist, and indeed of the character in the time-image, is not to "bear witness" to experience, nor to fantasize about or imagine what experience could be, but to make an unbearable moment of the world durable as sensation. In *Cléo,* "the unbearable"—what Deleuze refers to as "l'intolérable"—in everyday life surges in the image as Cléo walks through the city.[71] It is in this way that walking becomes the mode of composition of what we might call Varda's female *gestus*.

In the film's first half we witness Cléo's obstinacy as she faces the task of performing all of her designated feminine roles. The people in her entourage, though in reality they should be threatened by the deterioration of Cléo's health (since her very person, as commodity, produces

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[69] Yvette Bíró makes a similar statement about Varda's entire body of work: "…time itself is the main protagonist of Varda's films—not just its passage, its fertile construction-destruction, but its many facets, its metamorphoses and burdens."
See: Yvette Bíró, "Caryatids of Time: Temporality in the Cinema of Agnès Varda," *Performing Arts Journal* 19, no. 3, (September, 1997): p. 1.
[70] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1991), p. 163.
[71] Deleuze and Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, p. 161.

capital for them), do not take her illness seriously; it produces no visible signs and cannot, therefore, be read on the surface of her body. Indeed, even Cléo is comforted by her own reflection as an index of her health and vitality, a reassurance of her beauty's power of covering over anything that might threaten it. She seeks out her own image multiple times in the first half of the film, in a series of scenes that Varda constructs with the playful machinery of the mirror's image production in mind (at the entryway to the fortuneteller's apartment, in the café, and in the hat shop).

But the self-recognition that Cléo desires is always revealed to be a mere postponement of her feelings of dread; recognition, as a concept, is linked to her desire for identification, for absolute knowledge of the present and, more importantly of the future—she explicitly expresses her fear of death. Over the course of the film, this paradigm of recognition is overturned and replaced by a logic of creation. In many ways Cléo's lesson is that the desire to know the future can only produce suffering; the only remedy for the dread of the present is to approach it in its unknowable dimensions. Only then can one understand that to see the future from the perspective of the present, as if the future could be a forward projection made in the image of that present, is useless. Just as useless for thought as the logic of the mirror understood as a reduplication of the world by conscious perception. But Cléo as time-image will come to replace this representative logic with that of the *voyant* (the one who walks and sees) whose formula is: "on voit d'autant mieux qu'on reconnaît moins."[72] And seeing as not knowing plunges itself into the virtual dimension of the present rather than projecting itself into the future. Cléo's turn away from mirrors and away from her own reflection is thus an opening that allows her to observe what is unrecognizable to her. To see what is unrecognizable in the image is to enter into a process of

[72] Paola Marrati, *Gilles Deleuze: Cinéma et philosophie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2003), p. 78

becoming that makes possible thinking the unthought, not only its content, but also its form, its points of enunciation, and its intercessors.[73]

Both the chaos of the unknown and the figure of the *voyant* appear in the film's opening scene, which takes place at the fortuneteller Madame Irma's apartment. Paradoxically, although *Cléo* is all about invention and the possibility of creating something new in a world ruled by the paradigms of recognition and reproduction, the film announces, from the very beginning, how its story will unfold. Cléo, seeking some cosmological advice about her health issue, is confronted with the "truth" of her ill-omened future; the Tarot cards announce a sickness, a maligned doctor, and a total transformation of her being ("une transformation profonde de tout votre être"). Captured from above by a camera that hovers above the two women's heads, the film's first images establish a vertical axis of vision that situates Cléo and the fortuneteller at a small table sitting across from one another; but the women are in fact mostly outside of the camera's field of vision—we only see two pairs of hands manipulating the cards, a collection of gestures mostly dominated by the psychic's deliberate movements of shuffling, arranging, and pointing. In the first hand Cléo draws from the deck, representing her past, present and future, we are offered a condensed vision of her life story through the iconography of the cards. All of the characters we will meet during the film's unfolding are presaged in the series of stereotypes that appear as illustrations on these cards: the young lover who influenced Cléo's career, the devoted widow who, though perhaps morally dubious, granted her a "vie plus libre," a generous young man who finances her musical career, and, eventually, the effusive stranger she is destined to meet who will "amuse" her.

[73] According to Deleuze and Guattari the philosopher's intercessors are "les vértiables sujet de sa philosophie." See: Deleuze and Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*, p. 62.

The illustrations of the characters are shown in a series of close-ups that disturb the vertical axis by appearing in the picture plane as right-side up, providing the illusion of horizontality [See Figure 2]. Soon this juxtaposition between vertical and horizontal is rendered even more visually jarring when Varda suddenly cuts to a black and white medium close-up shot of the fortuneteller who asks, prompted by the appearance of cards that indicate illness and suffering, if Cléo is sick. In a quick reverse-shot we see Cléo, in an extreme close-up that cuts her face mid-forehead and mid-chin, as she responds anxiously, "Oui." This time the horizontality of the image is no illusion, but its "reality"—not only the reality of space presented from the "proper" perspective but also the reality of the characters who are no longer disembodied voices but now attached to bodies—is disturbed by a sudden shift to black and white coloration. In these shots, it's almost as if the characters appear (for the first time) in a different temporal order within which the narrative is destined to unfold, one that is somehow less "real" than the card-reading séance that foretells it.

Figure 2. *Cléo de 5 à 7* (Agnès Varda, 1962): Madame Irma's cards provide the illusion of horizontality.

Here the visual field is constructed through a series of playful visual shifts that disperse and transform perception. We can understand the figure of the fortuneteller as the one who operates these shifts—Varda herself is a *voyante*. As Corey Shores underlines, "The falsifier uses clairvoyant seeing to make the physically real take on a logic of caprice, endowing a playful non-necessity and logical discontinuity to what is physically before us."[74] Clairvoyant seeing is what is granted to the viewer by way of the interferences that constantly disperse perception in this opening scene. They foreshadow the film's weak narrative structure which no longer relies upon the action-reaction sensorimotor schema of the movement-image. The intervals between images are no longer subsumed under a regime of organic representation for which time is the whole; instead of a mere negative moment, the interval becomes valuable for the image "in itself." In Deleuze's words, "…ce qui compte n'est plus l'association des images, la manière dont elles s'associent, mais l'interstice entre deux images."[75] When the shot is privileged in this way (no longer subordinate to montage), Paola Marrati points out, "un sens fragmentaire et lacunaire, jamais préétabli," is restored to reality.[76] The explicit foreshadowing of this scene then points at once to the structure of the film; Cléo will encounter a fragmented, incomplete reality and re-invent its meaning through a process of becoming-other that can only take place through her walk. Like the clairvoyant she seeks advice from, she herself must become a *voyant,* the figure that emerges

[74] Corey Shores, "The Primacy of Falsity: Deviant Origins in Deleuze," *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 81 (2019): p. 122.
[75] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2,* p. 260.
[76] Marrati, *Gilles Deleuze,* p. 75.

simultaneously with the *forme-bal(l)ade.* Dork Zabunyan describes the subjective experience of the walker-*voyant* in the following terms:

> …je me balade, et tout ce que je rencontre relève certainement de la banalité la plus quotidienne (le plus souvent); malgré cela, *derrière* cette banalité quotidienne, je pressens qu'il existe toutes sortes de problèmes urgents, ou brûlants, enveloppés dans la situation urbaine au sein de laquelle je suis, et que je ne vois pas nécessairement, que je suis même peut-être condamné à ne pas voir. Il faut atteindre à ces problèmes si l'on veut *devenir voyant.*[77]

It's important to point out that the "banality" of the everyday becomes unrecognizable not only because of a change in narrative structure—what Zabunyan points to here—but, in addition, because of the composition of the images themselves. The valorization of the cut or the interval between images is linked to a change whereby perception no longer associates images in relation to a privileged action-image that organizes all the visual elements into an organic whole; in other words, the viewer is no longer forced to extract from the image only those elements which would be useful to her from the point of view of action. We are reminded again of Marrati's formula: "on voit d'autant plus qu'on reconnaît moins."[78] It is no coincidence that Deleuze brings up the valorization of the irrational interval in the context of his discussion of gesture in *Cinéma 2*; the attitudes and postures of the body are transformed, in the *cinéma du corps* that persists in the *Nouvelle Vague,* into those elements that coordinate with one another and serve as new linkages between images.

In the opening scene of *Cléo* we can observe how the gestures of the characters—the handling of the cards, the exchange of money between Cléo and the psychic, and the opening and closing of doors, all of which are shown in close-up—link the images together.[79] It is as if once

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[77] Dork Zabunyan, "Un détour par la "forme-balade", in special issue of *Murmure*: *le mouvement des concepts*, (*esthétique – cinéma*), out of series, (2008): p. 29.
[78] Marrati, *Gilles Deleuze,* p. 78.
[79] For Deleuze, it is director John Cassavetes who institutes this technique with the improvisational *Shadows*: "En règle Générale, Cassavetes ne garde de l'espace que ce qui tient au corps, il compose l'espace avec des morceaux

the interval between images becomes irrational, or once things, people, places, and objects are unable to be situated as points of reference organized by force of habit, the image shows us what we could not see before. It is this same process that Cléo will undergo as she is transformed into a walker and seeks to attain what is "behind" the surface of her quotidian reality, one that structures her various feminine roles. If the Tarot cards announce the film's entire plot before it even begins, it is perhaps because the disclosure of *Cléo*'s images will valorize not necessarily *what* happens, but *how* it happens. The necessity of what we see before us breaks down paradoxically at the point at which it becomes *narratively* necessary or predestined. In other words, the "how" of the film has to do with gesture as a means that is deprived of its connection to an end; all of its action is a mere pretext for the development of gesture that takes place across Cléo's errant city walk.

As Cléo leaves the psychic's apartment—outside of which a handful of anxious women are seated and waiting—we see an intertitle superimposed upon the image; it announces the beginning of the film (its first chapter) and marks the diegetic time: 17h05. Throughout the entire film Varda will intersperse these title cards that indicate both the film's progression and its division into separate chapters, each of which is constituted by a certain number of minutes. The camera then follows Cléo as she descends the stairs, first framing her on the left from a slightly downward facing angle and then cutting to a shot that captures her straight on from just a few steps below. As she begins her descent a melody starts to play on the soundtrack—a slow, orchestral march that will return several times over the course of the film—and the rhythm of her footsteps corresponds with the tempo of the music. The coincidence of diegetic and nondiegetic sounds reveals their differences in origin; the spectator suddenly becomes aware of the existence of two different layers

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déconnectés que seul un gestus relie. C'est l'enchaînement formel des attitudes qui remplace l'association des images".
See: Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 251.

of sound and thus the possibility of their divergence. It is a sonic episode that perhaps foreshadows the film's climax where Cléo, rehearsing her new song "Cri d'amour," is projected into an indeterminate space somewhere in between the diegesis and its extra-diegetic outside when a full orchestra suddenly joins her voice although she remains in her bedroom, accompanied only by Michel Legrand's piano. As Rodowick has pointed out, Cléo's voice in this later scene is both direct and indirect, "surging in an indeterminate space" wherein she is "transformed into an image of becoming and differentiation."[80] Singing, like walking, is a symbolic gesture of emergence in the film, one which shifts the focus from the origin of sound or movement towards its "brusque naissance." The passage between diegetic and extra-diegetic sound is also a movement between the objective world of the camera and the subjective world of the character, a fluctuation that ultimately blurs the distinction between the two.

This contamination of the subjective and the objective, which will return in the "Cri d'amour" scene, can be observed in this first sequence as Cléo descends the stairs in Madame Irma's apartment building. As Cléo walks, Varda captures her first from a medium shot in front and then, unexpectedly, cuts to a shot of the building's courtyard as seen from behind the wooden panels of the hallway window. This shot creates an abnormal movement in the image, as the camera moves up and down unsteadily following the tempo of Cléo's footsteps. The movement embodies Cléo's perspective of the space within which she moves, an undetermined space whose coordinates have been dispersed by the constant shifts between and subsequent ambiguity of objective and subjective viewpoints. We then see a close-up of the textured concrete wall along which the staircase is set as the unstable camera moves downward, lacking the smooth control of objectivity. The spectator is again invited to embody Cléo's perspective, but only insofar as it is

[80] Rodowick, "Unthinkable Sex," p. 187.

continually displaced, unable to be located in space and thus radically open to an experience of time as Bergsonian *durée*—time that is not reduced to a measure of movement in space but experienced as such, as an intensity, or an encounter with the virtual.

In the shots that follow, Varda uses a series of jump cuts to produce a pseudo-repetition of the same image three times; she captures Cléo—whose footsteps are still in sync with the music in the background—with a close-up front angle shot in which the protagonist's head moves from the top left-hand side of the frame to the bottom right. She cuts back to the same image, with exactly the same movement, while the soundtrack continues in the background, indicating the ongoing passage of time. Even the cuts between these repetitions are synched with the musical score in the background, so that the sound of Cléo's footsteps, her movement downwards in the image, the tempo of the song, and the cuts that produce the series of repetitions all occur in concert with one another. There is thus a significant escalation of coherence within a moment of complete rupture, in which the glitching effect that disturbs the forward movement of the diegesis is accompanied by an insistence upon its continued unfolding through sound. The startling repetition of the same image three times disturbs the forward movement of the diegesis by making Cléo appear to move forward in time *but not in space.* If the jump cut is normally used to deliberately show the passing of time, here it shows instead the *presence* of time as a visual glitch. There is an indiscernibility between the preservation of the past and the passing on of the present, or the virtual and actual dimensions of Cléo's lived time. And it is this Proustian dimension of time, that dimension in which persons and objects occupy incommensurable positions, that Varda's images open up for us. Cléo can be seen here to exist in a temporality that does not correspond with the space she inhabits, so that the gestural side of walking is linked to a particular framing that transforms space. The space that is linked to this non-chronological dimension of time constitutes

a world made up of breaks and disproportions, deprived of all its centers, a world in which the furthest space can become the closest.

Concentrated together in this first scene, these atypical compositional techniques ("visions insolites de la caméra, l'alternance de différents objectifs, le zoom, les angles extraordinaires, les mouvements anormaux, les arrêts…"[81]) prepare Cléo's fictional universe, positioning her as both a walker and a *voyant.* It is the abnormality of the camera's movement that sets up a filmic space within which perception is continually dispersed rather than centered; without a center of perception, movement can no longer be measured in terms of space and, no longer subject to this measurement, it becomes movement in time. But it is also the gesture of walking itself that constructs this new relation between movement and time, unbinding certain habits and releasing potentialities; for walking is movement in the middle or in the interval, deprived of its being a means to a particular end and thus transformed into a site of experimentation. Gesture thus depends on both the camera's eye and what it sees, for it is a matter of *how* the camera sees, and not only of what is being filmed. In its relation to emergence, gesture is situated in the gap between filming and being filmed, dissolving the subjective/objective relation. Cléo too occupies this gap, as a figure of emergence rather than transcendence, of becoming rather than transformation.

When she reaches the entrance hall of Madame Irma's building, Cléo pauses to observe herself in a round-top mirror set into the shallow relief of an arched doorway. Because of the presence of another mirror on the wall directly behind her, Cléo's reflection becomes infinite, casting itself backwards towards a vanishing point that recedes endlessly into the virtual distance of the mirror's depth [See Figure 3]. Reminiscent of the geometrical constraints of Renaissance perspective, the cast of the repeated reflection is visually unsettling within the filmic medium. In

[81] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 194.

the soundtrack we hear Cléo's inner thoughts as she contemplates her multitude of selves, seemingly unfazed. The projection of her inner monologue outwards and onto the track again provokes a slippage between the diegetic and non-diegetic planes; the indeterminate space is dreamlike, unable to be placed in relation to the scenes that have come before. Like the series of jump cuts that directly precede it, the mirror scene produces a crystal image in which time is presented directly, where the virtual and the real become indiscernible. Even Cléo herself seems to fall into the space of ambiguity produced by this image, the unreality of her spatialization catapulting her into a *durée* such that she becomes almost unrecognizable to us. Marrati glosses Deleuze's remarks on the crystal image in Orson Welles's *Lady of Shanghai* noting that, "l'omniprésence des miroirs fait proliférer les images virtuelles au point que celles-ci semblent avoir absorbé toute l'actualité du personnage, devenu une 'virtualité' parmi les autres."[82]

[82] Marrati, *Gilles Deleuze*, p. 96.

Figure 3. *Cléo de 5 à 7* (Agnès Varda, 1962): Cléo observes her infinite selves.

But this virtuality is still connected to the character "Cléo" as both an aesthetic figure and a social type, and her becoming-infinite in this scene marks an important moment in her trajectory; as aesthetic figure she is imprisoned by her own emotional volatility in the face of crisis, and as social type she is one *marchandise* among others, her body disciplined and alienated within the structures of commodity fetishism. This sequence perfectly creates both of these dimensions of Cléo through the effects of the mirror's crystal image; Varda frames Cléo in a medium shot from slightly behind at a forty-five-degree angle so that what the spectator observes being reflected infinitely in the mirror is not just an image of Cléo, but a doubled-image of Cléo observing herself. The infinite projection of Cléo's stereotypical beauty mimics her position within the capitalist social formation, one in which the value-form makes possible infinite desire, desire that necessitates its own projection. And although Cléo feels reassured by her reflection because it provides proof of a beauty powerful enough to cover over the signs of sickness, the spectator—who cryptically inhabits the image as a pair of eyes on the plaque advertising Madame Irma's atelier upstairs—sees very clearly her imprisonment within an endless pattern of recognition. She is trapped within a representative image of thought, or a way of perceiving in which the creation of something new remains impossible. But it is precisely within the infinite reproduction of the mirror image that something new might emerge, since this space in the image is also the opening up of the virtual. It is thus by way of this virtual image that Varda will resist the paradigm of recognition, and she will do so through the creation of another aesthetic figure: Florence.

Much has already been written about the Cléo-Florence transformation, typically understood as a conversion triggered by the narrative shift of "Le cri d'amour" and fulfilled by

Cléo's subsequent episode of "flânerie."[83] But rather than focus on what is certainly a clear shift in the protagonist's condition as a transformation from one state to another, I suggest that we think about Cléo as a walker/*voyante* who, in her becoming-Florence, invents a new point of enunciation that corresponds to neither Cléo nor Florence, but to an absent other who remains *à venir*. While it is certainly true that Cléo desires and indeed performs a rejection of her weak position—a position illustrated previously by her crying in public, "capricious" consumerism in the hat shop, erratic sensitivity in the face of the musicians' prankishness, and obsequious charm in reaction to her slippery boyfriend who mocks her illness and refuses to commit to even one date—she is not simply transformed into a negative version of her previous self. Cléo and Florence are rather intercessors for Varda in her process of creating a conceptual persona. This persona, the one who says "I" in the image, who could be named the subject of Cléo's transformation, is always a third person, an "other" who embodies the Rimbaudian dictum "Je est un autre." Following Rodowick's suggested interpretative itinerary, *Cléo* can then be understood as constructing "woman" as a conceptual persona across a series of social types and aesthetic figures that rely upon the "errant city walk" for their construction.[84] The walking woman, as conceptual persona, claims no

[83] Perhaps the most well-known description is Janice Mouton's: "At this moment of insight, when Cléo recognizes that her femininity is indeed a masquerade, she literally propels herself out of herself-out of the false identity she has constructed and out of the room designed to reflect that identity-into a new world where her transformation begins". See: Janice Mouton, "From Feminine Masquerade to Flâneuse: Agnès Varda's Cléo in the City," *Cinema Journal* 40, No. 2, (Winter, 2001): p. 5.
Lauren Elkin and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis have also written about Cléo's *flânerie* as a sort of feminist triumph that grants her subjective freedom.
See: Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse; Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017); Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Cléo from 5 to 7" in *To Desire Differently; Feminism and the French Cinema*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 268-284.

[84] It's important to note that what Rodowick is suggesting here—and I follow him in this—is a different form of reading than those suggested by previous scholars, such as Delphine Bénézet, who have understood "the city" as a particular content made up of a series of situations that offer Cléo the possibility of experiencing "difference" and provoking her "transformation." Focusing on Cléo's "interactions" with her "environment" obscures a reading that is more attuned to the images as images, rather than representative schemas that bear a certain content and transmit a message or a politics.
See: Rodowick. "Unthinkable Sex," pp. 177-190; Delphine Bénézet, *The Cinéma of Agnès Varda: Resistance and Eclecticism* (London: Wallflower Press, 2014).

representative power or function, but instead expresses sexual difference itself as a power of becoming in the time-image, what comes to disrupt a certain image of masculinity embodied by the action-image and its necessary universal subject of history.[85]

While this disruption has already begun taking place, it is at the film's point of narrative climax that Cléo's process of becoming intersects with her psychological and social high point of affliction. About midway into the film, distressed by the emotional lyrics of "Le cri d'amour," and once again brushed off by her colleagues as fickle and childish, Cléo snaps, letting loose on Bob, Maurice, and Angèle. She exclaims, "C'est vous qui faites de moi une capricieuse…maintenant je vais faire une révolution avec des mots macabres…vous m'exploitez." Having huffily changed into a simple black dress and removed her wig, Cléo goes down the stairs and crosses the courtyard, walking by an unaccompanied toddler playing with a toy piano whose dissonant notes blend with the music that floats in on the soundtrack; it is the melody of "Le cri d'amour," but a completely stripped-down, staccato version plucked out on a muted violin. Varda captures Cléo in a longer traveling shot as she steps out of the courtyard and begins walking down the deserted rue Huyghens. While the earlier scene in which Cléo walks from Madame Irma's apartment to the café to meet Angèle featured a cluttered visual and aural field, full of the sights and sounds of street vendors and their wares, the traffic of a busy intersection, and men soliciting Cléo's attention either out of commercial or sexual interest, in this later scene the frame is emptied of nearly all these elements. As she strolls by icily a group of three indistinguishable men in suits clustered in the entryway of an unmarked building follow her with their eyes but remain silent, huddled in the

[85] There is much to be said about the notion of sexual difference that Rodowick employs in his reading of Deleuze. Elizabeth Grosz also uses this term to refer to a "real", biological difference that, although epistemologically meaningless, nonetheless represents a sort of exemplary difference that is productive rather than problematic for thought. As long as the problem is not one of equality between the sexes, then reasserting sexual difference as a productive force is not off limits for feminist thinking.
See: Elizabeth Grosz, "The Nature of Sexual Difference: Irigaray and Darwin," *Angelaki* 17. no. 2, (September 2012): p. 69-93.

shadows of the doorway. Even the buildings she walks by are unembellished concrete facades, flat geometric surfaces that reflect her chilly mood.

This rarefaction of the image is related to a disassociation of perceptions and actions in the time-image; perception, because it is fundamentally de-centered, no longer precedes through an encounter with sensible data that can then be organized as a set of obstacles to be overcome by action. Thus, at the same time as perceptions and actions are no longer linked together through a sensorimotor schema, "…les espaces ne se coordonent plus ni ne se remplissent."[86] The characters who find themselves in these situations where they must confront "pure" visual and sonic material—which is to say, material that is no longer organized as an obstacle to be overcome through action—are those very characters who, as pointed out earlier, are "condemned to walk," to become those "purs voyants" who must confront the intolerability of their quotidian experience.

As Cléo sets out on her walk she is indeed immediately confronted with visual elements that seem to overwhelm her perception; reality appears as a spectacle in the sense that there is something about it that she cannot relate to her everyday preoccupations, her habits of organizing and interpreting.[87] This is certainly true of the street performer she observes swallowing frogs near the boulevard Raspail; the sudden interruption of the rather grotesque display is not an indicator of Cléo's uneasiness in the face of the spectacle of the everyday, but rather a materialization of the unrecognizable in the image. The intolerability of this image comes less from its social content than from the fact that it cannot be integrated into a prior experience and therefore must be *seen*

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[86] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 58.

[87] The spectacle is thus not necessarily what is spectacular in the sense of "out of the ordinary"; it is not even what is socially constructed as authentic but subsequently reveals its performative nature. It is, rather, what demands to be seen and heard in such a way that it cannot be reintegrated into a "normal" perceptual schema. This is where my reading would diverge from Liandrat-Guigues's claim that these visual and auditory elements are important for their "ephemeral" nature or for the fact that they are strange fragments out of which Varda constructs an allegory or a parable.
See: Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues, *Modernes flâneries du cinéma* (Paris: De l'incidence éditions, 2009).

and felt as a collection of sensations—the man posing the frog on his nose and slowly dragging it down into his mouth, for example, makes visible the haptic impressions in the image.

After a quick brandy in the café *Le Dôme,* where Cléo observes diverse groups of strangers and overhears their conversations about the Algerian war, Mirò's "Femme" ("Ça s'appelle 'Femme' et moi j'y vois un taureau, ça prouve que Mirò est espagnol"), and poetic decadence, she returns to the street to walk towards the studio where her friend Dorothée is posing nude for a group of art students. In this walking sequence we hear only the exaggerated sound of Cléo's footsteps which resonate loudly over the ambient noise of the street; the empty soundtrack provokes a sense of anxiousness that is intensified by Varda's filming technique. The first shot captures her from behind as a group of men pass on her right, collectively turning their heads in Cléo's direction. Suddenly the camera shifts to a position that captures her point of view, as another man crosses the sidewalk just ahead of her and turns to stare, this time directly at the camera. Varda cuts to a medium, eye-level shot of Cléo walking, captured just a few feet in front of her and then again to the frame that incorporates her perspective. With all of these perspectival shifts Varda plays with the different registers of objectivity and subjectivity embodied by the camera eye and Cléo. Ultimately, she shows the contamination of these two registers and creates a free-indirect discourse in which the images that capture Cléo's subjective perspective are marked by the "objective" presence of the camera—Varda shows those who pass Cléo on the street staring uneasily into the camera's lens, even moving their heads to the side as if to avoid the filmmaker's gaze but unable to look away. The attitudes of the onlookers are thus directed at both Cléo and the camera, not because Cléo has become a subject, but because of an indiscernibility of objectivity and subjectivity in the image.

The effects of this free-indirect discourse continue to proliferate in the rest of the sequence; Varda creates a montage in which she mixes footage of passersby who interrogate the camera's gaze, eye-level shots of Cléo staring ahead blankly as she continues walking, and tableau-like images of snapshots from Cléo's memory—all people or things she has encountered earlier in the day: the man swallowing the frogs, Madame Irma looking up from her card table, Bob sitting on a chaise in her room, staring listlessly, a ticking clock, Angèle, Raoul on the edge of her bed, and even her blonde wig hanging on the edge of a mirror, eerily evoking Cléo's absent body. The ambiguity of the objective and the subjective is transformed into an indiscernibility of real and imaginary elements, as the narrative becomes deliberately falsifying; the images that appear as Cléo's memories are in fact constructed tableaux—they re-create moments that in fact never actually "happened" in the film. As Deleuze notes, "la formation du cristal, la force du temps, et la puissance du faux sont strictement complémentaires, et ne cessent de s'impliquer comme les nouvelles coordonnées de l'image."[88] These virtual images are linked to Cléo's present (the actual) through the persistent sound of her footsteps, the constant reminder of her movement through space that is nevertheless rendered aberrant and unplaceable—she moves instead through time, as the before and after are incorporated into a direct image of time through the movement of walking which has become gesture.

This direct image of time as a nonspatial perception is what becomes necessary, according to Rodowick, for the emergence of conceptual personae. "When the interval passes into the subject," he writes, "there is no longer an identity that can return to itself, nor is there the possibility of sustaining a binary logic opposing masculinity and femininity—'I' has become an other."[89] It is thus the walking sequence, with its intercutting of virtual images, that provokes a change that

[88] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 172.
[89] Rodowick. "Unthinkable Sex," p. 185.

goes beyond Cléo's subjectivity, beyond her presence as an aesthetic figure or social type, and towards an "other" that might make possible thinking sexual difference. While it may seem that Cléo is transformed into this "other" when she meets Antoine in the Montsouris park and reveals to him that her real name is Florence, I argue that both Cléo and Florence remain stereotyped aesthetic figures that Varda utilizes only to construct a position of enunciation for herself as a filmmaker. For Florence too embodies the stereotyped roles of femininity; as she descends the wooden steps into the park, she sings to herself, "Mon corps, précieux et capricieux…," performing a seductive dance for an absent audience. She seems disturbed when greeted at the bottom of the steps by the indifference of chirping birds, who respond with their own songs. And while she is indeed granted more dialogue in her conversation with Antoine, she remains, for the most part, a passive interlocutor, exaggeratedly impressed by his banal facts and observations.

If it were the case that Florence is the version of Cléo through which she realizes her authentic female subjectivity, Varda's feminist filmmaking practice would be questionable at best, since it would mean that this "transformation" necessitated the presence of a man. On the contrary, Florence is merely another aesthetic figure whose errancy and delocalization is a pretext for the continued creation of *clichéd* images. Through the ongoing creation of a falsifying narrative in which Cléo/Florence improvises a series of postures vis-à-vis Antoine, Varda shows how a binary logic that would separate masculine and feminine—the same logic that guaranteed the universality of the masculine subject in pre-war cinema—can no longer function once a female protagonist begins falsifying. "Le personage ne cesse de devenir un autre," writes Deleuze, "et n'est plus separable de ce devenir qui se confond avec un peuple."[90] The "people to come" is, within the context of Varda's filmmaking practice, the promise of a woman to come, woman as a peculiar

[90] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 198.

form whose existence appropriates what is excessive about the category of sex, and thus makes it function as a political category beyond the traditional constraints of what Zerilli calls "the subject question." As Rodowick suggests, the problem of the conceptual persona addresses itself to the creation of an ethos, or a new mode of existence. Varda's feminist filmmaking practice is aligned with this task insofar as she creates images in which the "nomadism" of feminine intercessors breaks with both the compositional and narrative strategies of the movement-image. The viewer is given up to a direct image of time in which movement is no longer spatial; specifically, walking is a privileged gesture that becomes an aberrant movement, deprived of an end and endowed with a durée that unlocks the virtual elements at play in a given event. The walking figure discloses a cinematic abyss of freedom that functions as a creative power for feminist thinking beyond questions of identification and their corresponding liberal politics. This is the radical potential of Varda's cinema that Deleuze had only hinted at in *Cinéma 2*:

> Les auteurs féminins, les réalisatrices féminines, ne doivent pas leur importance à un féminisme militant. Ce qui compte advantage, c'est la manière don't elles ont innové dans ce cinéma des corps, comme si les femmes avaient à conquérir la source de leurs propres attitudes et la temporalité qui leur correspond comme gestus individuel ou commun.[91]

The militant feminism Deleuze denounces would correspond to those previous readings of *Cléo* that sought to align the protagonist's becoming with a transformation whose end was a new, somehow more "authentic" or autonomous subject position. Instead, we must understand the shifts undergone by Cléo/Florence as pointing towards a temporal dimension that destitutes identification (ego=ego) and whose potentiality emerges as a power of difference. It is this power of becoming that "conquers" the "source" of women's' subjugated position (that source being, perhaps, the time of action, of the sustained binary oppositions that produced a hierarchy of

[91] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 256.

domination), opening onto what Arendt calls the "abyss of freedom." Putting this creative power of difference at the center of her film practice through the presence of female walkers and *voyantes,* Varda makes possible anew the formation of a collective "we" of feminism that is no longer bound to the logic of representation, that no longer attempts to "cover over or deny" the aporetic character of women's political freedom.[92]

Varda's feminist politics are not overlooked then, in a more philosophical reading of *Cléo*; filmmaking itself, as thinking or concept making, is revealed to be a creative practice that inaugurates difference as the very condition of politics. Varda's images recast feminist politics as a practice of freedom that seeks out the destruction of a means-end paradigm; her feminism does not ground itself in a female subject, but rather in the interval between two figures, or between two images. The question of whether or not Cléo becomes a "fully realized female subject" is thus erroneous to the formulation of Varda's feminist politics; political relations, as Zerilli has argued, are never given in themselves, and have little to do with the pursuit of predetermined group interests bound together through a common identity or subjectivity. Varda's figures break apart subjectivity and employ its shattered fragments in a process of becoming, a process that opens onto the abyss of freedom which is precisely located in the irrational interval, the fissure opened up when "an unconnected new event break[s] into the continuum, the sequence of chronological time."[93] While Varda's films are certainly prone to a liberal feminist interpretation that emphasizes the politics of representation, the images themselves tell a different story. Chantal Akerman's cinema, too, sets out to overturn a certain feminism by proposing radical new forms of image-

[92] Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom,* p. 25.
[93] Hannah Arendt, "The abyss of freedom and the *novus ordo seclorum*" in *The Life of the Mind Vol. 2: Willing,* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1978), p. 208.

making that offer up the materiality of time to spectators, opening for them the abyss of freedom as a cavity of fatigue.

Chapter Two
Dying Inside: Gesture and Exhaustion in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080, Bruxelles*

Bearing Nothing: Gesture and the Domestic

Halfway through Chantal Akerman's 1975 film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080, Bruxelles*, a static camera captures widowed housewife Jeanne at her kitchen table peeling potatoes in silence. For three long minutes the viewer becomes immersed in the rhythm of Jeanne's micromovements, painfully aware of the chaos bubbling under the surface of an apparently harmonious domestic order. In these moments, the cinematic image is made meaningful through the affective charge transmitted by Jeanne's gestures rather than by the content of her action. We feel the pressure of something unbearable mounting within a character whose personality, sociality, and self-understanding we know almost nothing about—a character presented to the viewer exclusively through the repetition of domestic tasks that cinema had previously excluded from its repertoire. In Akerman's revolutionary film—which has now been recognized by *Sight and Sound* as the greatest movie of all time—the otherwise concealed labor of housework is not a secondary element made meaningful within the context of a dramatic plot, but rather constitutes a new type of cinema—a cinema of gestures.[94]

While Deleuze describes postwar cinema as taking on the task of offering up "a little time in the pure state," or of creating images capable of breaking our habitual modes of perception and history, the meaning of these images for a feminist politics remained an open question throughout his oeuvre. Addressing this question will require an exploration of how within the shift from movement to time—a shift in modes of framing, cutting, and linking images—women were

[94] Peter Bradshaw, "Brilliant and radical, Chantal Akerman deserves to top Sight and Sound's greatest films poll," December 1, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/dec/01/sight-and-sound-female-directed-greatest-film-of-all-time-chantal-akerman-jeanne-dielman-23-quai-du-commerce-1080-bruxelles (accessed March 22, 2023).

allowed not just to occupy a role that had previously been reserved for male subjects, but, in addition, to invent new positions for themselves, places from which to think and create with images. If Neorealism and its influence on the French New Wave represented a chance for women to wander through urban space unsupervised, discovering new ways of looking and remembering, these Italian films also explicitly announced the time-image's intimate connection to housework and domestic space. But it wasn't until Varda's and, later on, Akerman's contributions to the body of avant-garde filmmaking practice of this period that the gestures of the everyday within the domestic sphere became explicitly bound to a feminist politics of possibility. By exposing the exhausted female subject as a site for constructing a feminism of possibility that pushes the boundaries of instrumental, or action-based politics, Akerman and Varda show us what the cinema of the time-image can do for—and with—women. They expand the notion of the everyday as a site of banality where "nothing happens," turning it instead into a field of possibility where women are no longer condemned to live their marginal freedom inside of a series of events of small order; they are granted the freedom to explode the frame of understanding of this domestic order, transforming the everyday into a space of feminist possibility.

The development of the feminist possibilities of the time-image has already begun to be explored by scholars, most interestingly by Cesare Casarino in his article "Images for Housework: On the Time of Domestic Labor in Gilles Deleuze's Philosophy of the Cinema." He argues that the proliferation of the "visible evidence of housework" in postwar cinema is not coincidental, but necessary to the very concept of the time-image, thus granting the presence of women in the time-image a logical necessity.[95] Scenes of housework, he claims, are those moments where some kind

[95] Cesare Casarino, "Images for Housework: On the Time of Domestic Labor in Gilles Deleuze's Philosophy of the Cinema," *Differences* 28, no. 3, (December 2017): p. 67-92.
See also: Teresa Rizzo, *Deleuze and Film: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

of potential in representation gets released by turning towards expression, as female characters bear the weight of time in situations of exhaustion, void, and sensory overflow. Gesture plays a particularly important role here since the paradigm of action connected to the sensorimotor links that held together the movement-image is foregone in favor of situations in which characters do not act, but simply endure. The gestures of the woman who suffers from the exhaustion of her domestic position are described like those of Deleuze's Beckettian character; these movements of the body testify not to being tired, but to being exhausted. And as Deleuze explains, "On était fatigué de quelque chose, mais épuisé, de rien."[96]

In other words, the object of women's exhaustion is not the housework itself, but rather, *nothing*. Once the whole of the possible has been exhausted, there is nothing left to make one tired. As the ambiguity of the previous phrase suggests, this nothing is actually something—it takes on certain resonances and that produces "positive" effects in the image. In their book *Sex, or the Unbearable,* Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman together define the so-called negativity of the "nothing" as "the psychic and social incoherences and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike, that trouble any totality or fixity of identity."[97] Opening up the psychoanalytic discourse of negativity to the insights of affect studies, Berlant and Edelman claim for the former a transformative potential, "the energy that allows for the possibility of change."[98] It is this type of negativity—the "nothing" or disjunction that provokes "toutes les fatigues du monde"—that takes on a form of its own in the image via the gestures of domestic work.[99] I argue that Akerman's

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[96] Gilles Deleuze, "L'Épuisé," in *Quad et autres pièces pour la television suivi de L'Épuisé par Gilles Deleuze,* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1992), p. 59.
In Domietta Torlasco's video essay "Philosophy in the Kitchen", she too makes explicit reference to this quote with reference to images of women's domestic work. Interestingly, Torlasco puts the quote in the mouths of the female characters her montage links together, forming a collective "we" that asserts: "When exhausted, we have exhausted the whole of the possible."
[97] Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), p. viii.
[98] Berlant and Edelman, *Sex,* p. viii.
[99] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2; L'image-temps* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1985), p. 266.

Jeanne creatively figures the relationship between this ontological fatigue and gesture by offering up a paradigmatic form of nothingness—women's domestic labor—and showing it to us by way of the virtual image that frees itself up once the end of the possible has been reached. It is through the emergence of this virtual potential that we can access the feminism of possibility that Akerman's film constructs. Not only does *Jeanne* masterfully construct a cinematic world in which something new becomes possible for feminist thought, but she also clarifies a whole constellation of Deleuzian concepts linked to "toutes les fatigues du monde"—the unbearable, the nothing, and the sickness of Chronos. The aim of my reading is to clarify what these concepts mean for cinema as well as what they mean for women.

Jeanne is one of the most important films in history to thematize the relationship between death and domestic labor.[100] Beyond this linkage between death and the domestic, what interests me here in particular is the way in which Akerman privileges gestures of exhaustion, showing how a woman coming up against the fatigue of the world transforms, cinematically, the space of the everyday into a place for thinking possibility and freedom beyond the routines to which she is bound. By employing a minimalist, hyperrealist cinematic style that is totally emptied out of psychological drama, Akerman uses the exhaustion of small gestures in order to divest from modes of fantasy, or what Berlant and Edelman connect to the passive dream of a better life that appears to the subject as a "consolation for living on."[101] While the realm of fantasy may seem to open onto endless possibilities, it paradoxically ties the subject to the world they already know, foreclosing upon the possibility of the new. While we can never be done with fantasy entirely,

[100] While Martha Rosler's 1975 short film "Semiotics of the Kitchen" already established a critical link between the space of the domestic interior and violence, I continue in this tradition while shifting the focus to scenes of death, where violence is at once evenly distributed affectively through the repetitions of the death drive and concentrated in the moment of murder or suicide. Torlasco also addresses the violence of murder as the "aberrant offspring of domestic labor" in her short film "Philosophy in the Kitchen."
[101] Berlant and Edelman, *Sex*, p. 39.

gesture pushes at its limits—which are also the limits of the exhausted body—where we might glimpse a true territory of potentiality, where a *non-domesticated* form of thought becomes available to us.

In Akerman's film, it is the work of reproducing the home that provokes Jeanne's fatigue. But Akerman also succeeds in transferring this exhaustion of the body and the possible onto the viewer, whose own fatigue is then put to work *against work*—domestic work, that is—and allowed to participate in the gestural breaking down of fantasy that opens up thought to its outside. This transfer, which shifts away from the typologies of desire linked to the subject's structuring fantasy, opens the psychoanalytic concept of transference to a latent creativity residing within it. Akerman invents a form of *non-domesticated* transference, a transference between screen and viewer that is no longer a "bridle," and indeed leads one away from the "cure." Freud himself had already theorized the radical, and potentially dangerous, nature of "unbridled" transference. In "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through" he writes:

> Occasionally there are also bound to be cases where one does not have the time to put the bridle of transference on a patient's rampant drives, or where the patient in the course of an act of repetition destroys the bond that ties him to the treatment.[102]

Could Akerman's cinematic gestures—her repetitions that eat away at fantasy by always coming back to the same place—be likened to this act of repetition that destroys the subject's bond to a *sujet supposé savoir,* delivering her over to the drive rather than to the cure?[103] Akerman certainly "has the time", but she uses it to develop a radical form of cinematographic transference that allows

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[102] Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through," in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings,* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 40.

[103] In his eleventh seminar, Lacan introduces this term to define the phenomenon of transference in analysis when he says, "Dès qu'il y a quelque part le sujet suppose savoir…il y a le transfert." He will come to understand the end of the analysis—and of the transference—as the moment at which the analyst falls from this position of knowledge. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire Livre XI, Les quatres concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), p. 258.

something to leak across the screen. Uninterested in taming rampant drives, Akerman instead develops the potentials of an affect that is not tamed or minimized. It is this power of a potential that is allowed to go unresolved, that does not end with the emergence of a new signifier, that is at the heart of Akerman's feminist politics. In *Jeanne,* this politics sets out the very specific stakes of this politics for the female subject, or the one who is relegated to the domestic interior. "Dying inside"—in both the literal and the metaphorical senses—is thus transformed into the "inside dying"—a death by a thousand gestures of the domestic sphere as the banal, everyday space of women.[104]

Gesture, as it emerges from the Latin root *gerere,* is attached to an idea of bearing oneself and one's assigned task; women who have been relegated to the domestic sphere must not just make the home (as "homemakers"), but they must also *bear* it. Beyond that, they bear the fatigue of nothing formulated by Deleuze, or the exhaustion of using up all the possibilities of one's life and still having to live on. Gesture, in this sense of bearing the self and coming up against nothing, is an interruption of the "bad" versions of aesthetics (an end in itself) and politics (a means to an end) that, according to Agamben, plague artistic creation.[105] As Deleuze insists, the exhaustion provoked by nothing relies upon a combinatory of variables that functions "à condition de renoncer

[104] Wendy Wall has argued that early modern dramatists succeeded in "defamiliarizing ordinary domestic life" by introducing themes that transformed the banality of the home into an unsettling discourse about the bizarre, disquieting nature of everyday experience. Interestingly, Wall ends up arguing (historically) for domesticity as a realm of fantasy that allowed for new modes of modeling English national identity onstage. My account, while also foregrounding something like the defamiliarization of the everyday domestic, goes in the opposite direction; these films posit gesture as an alternative to fantasy, thus divesting from modes of identity formation.
See: Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[105] Agamben privileges the ethical as that territory where a pure means might emerge. For him, all discourses of aesthetics have been tainted by the idea of a pure ends, re-inscribing themselves within the domain of positive law.
See: Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture" in *Means without End: Notes on Politics,* trans. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 48-59.

à tout ordre de preference et à toute organisation de but, à toute signification."[106] In other words, the gestures of bearing this nothing are indeed suspended from any predetermined ends.

Akerman's film privileges gesture not only in order to emphasize and give visibility to the experience of women in the domestic sphere, but in order to provide an alternative way of thinking about the structure of this sphere, the preconditions that determine its sensory organization, and, ultimately, how to destroy it. This shift away from a representative mode of expression in filmmaking and towards formal innovation that provoked non-instrumental forms of philosophical and political reflection was radically ahead of its time and continues to challenge dominate models of politics and aesthetics today. Especially in feminist film scholarship, representative models of politics and aesthetics have been difficult to break with, given the fact that women have indeed suffered from a lack of visibility. In the seventies, when Akerman began making films and Varda had already established herself as a female visionary in the French-speaking cinema world, radical politics demanded that women speak up and show themselves. It is my aim not to show the failure of this model, but rather to point to its weaknesses and demonstrate how we might push against its limits, specifically when it comes to interpreting films and identifying the relationship between forms of cinematic expression and the politics they make possible. In Akerman's *Jeanne,* gesture's destitution of fantasy is the specific mode by which expression saps representation.

Feminism and Cinema; From Representation to Creation

The most important reference for understanding the political claims of European feminists in the 1970s, specifically with regard to domestic labor, is Silvia Federici's 1975 polemic "Wages Against Housework" in which she argues that women's struggle to attain pay in exchange for

[106] Deleuze, "L'Épuisé," p. 59.

domestic labor is the basis of a revolutionary political perspective.[107] Federici demonstrates that because it is unwaged—and was destined to be so from the very beginning of capitalism—housework has been transformed into a natural attribute of the female character, something that is not only unavoidable, but, additionally, appears to satisfy an innate need or aspiration. Women, in turn, cannot struggle against the oppression of the domestic since it is posited as existing outside the sphere of labor. As Federici puts it, "We are seen as nagging bitches, not workers in a struggle."[108] Capital hides the work of "physical, emotional, and sexual services" that women perform, denying it a wage and transforming it into an "act of love." In turn, struggling for wages for housework isn't comparable to male workers struggling for better salaries; it is *more* revolutionary in the sense that it is a direct struggle against a social role imputed to all women. By forcing capital to restructure social relations in a way that unifies the working class, wages for housework challenges the ways in which capital maintains its power. To make such a demand of capital is to at once *make visible* that women's minds, bodies, and emotions have been "distorted for a specific function" and to expose the fact that women's physical and emotional labor creates value for capital.

It is easy to see the appeal of Federici's argument, particularly regarding feminist filmmaking practices of the seventies that positioned themselves as carrying out a radical politics through the very act of *representing* women's domestic tasks. Making visible the "social real" of everyday life or, as Akerman herself says, "prenant les images…les plus dévalorisées"[109] is indeed

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[107] Federici, along with Selma James, Brigitte Galtier, and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, formed the "Wages for Housework Movement" in 1972 after having worked with the International Feminist Collective. The movement first spread across several cities in Italy before Federici established the "Wages for Housework Committee" in Brooklyn, New York in 1975.
See: Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Bristol and London: Power of Women Collective and The Falling Wall Press, 1975).
[108] Federici, *Wages*, 3.
[109] Marie-Claude Treilhou, "Interview-Chantal Akerman: 'La vie, il faut la mettre en scène'," *Cinéma* 76, no. 206, (February 1976) : p. 93.

radical insofar as it challenges an entire tradition of classical cinema within which women have been reduced to negative roles circling around the male protagonist—considered the "true subject of history," the only one granted the possibility of struggle. "The simple gesture of directing a camera towards a woman," Mary Ann Doane reminds us, "has become equivalent to a terrorist act."[110]

One cannot deny that the gains made in this period afforded feminism a newfound freedom—a freedom in *what* one represents. But the subsequent desire for a faithful representation of women's work, for a newfound visibility of something that is, so to speak, "hidden," limits the political possibilities of cinema. As Olivia and Christinia Landry point out, implicit in both the Wages for Housework Movement and the representative claims for aesthetics that accompany it is the idea that housework has some kind of transformative potential. On the contrary, they claim that "the nothingness that is housework epitomizes the complete absence of possibility and transformation."[111] We can take their most radical claim even further by insisting that it is the exhaustion provoked by this nothingness itself—once detached from the sphere of the domestic and its corresponding chores—that *does* contain some possibility for transformation, as it opens onto the potential of something new.

However, the emergent freedom contained in the possibility opened up by the nothing that triggers female exhaustion arises not because women's fatigue is *represented* in the image—that is, reduplicated, verified, or transmitted—but rather because the image of the woman bearing this ontological fatigue emerges in the interval between perception and action, where movements of the body detached from any predetermined goal—as *affective* movements—are released. In the

[110] Mary Ann Doane, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body", *October* 17, (Summer 1981): p. 22.
[111] Olivia Landry & Christinia Landry, "Torlasco's 'Philosophy in the Kitchen': Image, Domestic Labor, and The Gendered Embodiment of Time," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 17, no. 4 (2019): p. 468.

cinema of the time-image, because the center of perception that previously organized sensory data has been dispersed, this interval is no longer covered over as what might disturb the organization of sensory data into knowledge (cutting out the part of the image that is interesting for action); instead, the interval takes on a value in itself, releasing gestures as movements in between images that have the power to break apart the clichés of which those images are composed. If an image of women's work is already capable of disturbing the order of the world, then an image of women's work that emerges in the interval between perception and action has the power to destroy it. It is precisely in this interval between images that gesture emerges, providing an entirely new way of linking images together.

These films show us how a movement from the representational model of politics to one based on creation is carried out by the gestures of women's exhaustion and, more specifically, of this exhaustion being *put to work*. In scenes of fatigue, we witness the complications of identity and its loss; if the weakness of representational politics resides in its urging us to adhere to an identity that is itself a vector of exploitation and domination, then affection allows not only for the loss of that identity, but for a contemplation and development of one's clinging to that loss itself. A radical politics as an abolitionary politics (of identities as well as norms, institutions, roles, etc.) is thus nuanced in order to make space for the gestural and the affective; and these are not just minor aspects of the political but (as we can see from the reading of Deleuze above) what make politics possible in the first place. Akerman constructs this politics of the possible in the domestic sphere, where the everyday—released from the interval where it was reduced to banality—is no longer the space where "nothing happens"; instead, the everyday becomes the site of thinking beyond utilitarianism and necessity, where the possibility of women's freedom emerges.

Jeanne Dielman; Gesture, Order, and Neurosis

Akerman's film is an excruciating cinematic experience; for three hours and twenty minutes the viewer looks on as the banal routine of a forty-something widowed housewife and mother (her taciturn, teenage son lives with her) slowly unravels over the course of three days, one missing button at a time. Tightly framed and strikingly uniform throughout in texture and rhythm, Akerman's acclaimed film draws the viewer into its long, actionless takes by creating a certain complicity between Jeanne and her observers. What was, at the start, almost unbearable (a real-time scene of Jeanne making breaded veal cutlets that goes on for more than fifteen minutes, for example) eventually becomes familiar and even desired on the part of the one who watches. We desire to see Jeanne repeat the tasks in her routine and at the same time we want to see her falter, every hair out of place providing a jolt of "materialist melodrama."[112]

The intensity of the gaze upon Jeanne's domestic existence is escalated by the fact that her afternoon prostitution (she receives one client per day at the apartment) is almost totally elided. Tasks like making meatloaf, peeling potatoes, eating dinner in silence with her son, or washing up are given the importance of real-time representation, while the sexual act is completely omitted. The episodes of Jeanne's prostitution are indicated only by the flicking of a light switch in between the male clients' arrivals and departures. If, at the time that it was made, the film inscribed itself into a feminist discourse of representing social reality, it also knowingly drove that imperative into the territory of its limits, there where faithful representation tipped into the literalness and self-reflexivity of an avant-garde aesthetic. As Ivone Margulies points out in her seminal study of the film, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday,* the total elision of the

[112] "Materialist melodrama" should be contrasted with the commonsense notion of melodrama which would be linked to the genre in which the psychological development of characters within a traditional plot provides for a certain amount of tension, expectation, catharsis, etc. Instead, the materialist melodrama makes the modulations of matter itself the site of tension and expectation.

prostitution scenes along with Akerman's relentless consistency of the static frame created the effect of a wavering between the registers of minimalism and performativity.[113] The result is a film that engages both feminist debates about representation, labor, and value, and cinema's own self-reflections on representation, time, and formal innovation.

These reflections emerge in the cramped space of the domestic interior, there where the emergence of the new appears as an interruption that disturbs and undermines a well-ordered routine; the structure of the film mirrors this logic, constructed as a painstakingly long build-up that establishes the domestic order followed by a series of little breakdowns in that order before the arrival of a shocking climax. Domietta Torlasco has recently argued that this "emergence of a disorder…breaks with the logic of equalization at work in the rest of the film," culminating in the release of an excess that transforms the value of conjunction—that is, of the interval—for the image and makes the domestic order quiver.[114] I follow Torlasco's account of the importance of the interval while shifting the focus onto the ways in which Jeanne's routine is made up of a series of ritualized gestures, bodily attitudes or "attitudes du corps" particular to the female character that seem to be at once totally in control and executed at the limits of the subject's capacity to act. Without pathologizing Jeanne, we can say that it is in part her obsessive-compulsive tendency that makes every gesture appear as a smooth, deliberate execution. Nevertheless, the exhaustion, or the bearing nothing that underlies each micromovement eventually bursts to the surface of the image, shattering her identity and displacing the fantasy that supports it, making way for something new.

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[113] See in particular: Ivone Margulies, "The Equivalence of Events: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*" in *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 65-99.

[114] Domietta Torlasco, *The Rhythm of Images; Cinema Beyond Measure* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2021), p. 61.

The series of breakdowns that Jeanne undergoes are made readable to the viewer not through a logic of melodrama—which would be linked to fantasy—but rather by way of a slight displacement of gesture. Time presents itself in the image when gestures are released from the interval and given their own weight and attention. Through the repetition of these gestures and the ways in which they show the exhaustion of the actual (possibilities) of a life, the domestic sphere as the place of women's banality and secondariness is denaturalized. The banal everyday is transformed into the event-everyday, where what takes place is nothing less than a complete rupture of the frames of understanding that legitimize the precedence of the masculine.

The film's first scene maps out the territory of Jeanne's domestic interior by building a connection between exhaustion and compulsion. It seems to the viewer as if Jeanne's obsessive compulsion is a permanent state that doesn't permit fatigue. What is demanded of her is continuous absorption in the work at hand and a smooth covering over of any interval that might appear as a gap in her routine.[115] In the film's opening images, as she prepares the potatoes that will accompany that evening's dinner, Jeanne's gestures are assured and confident, devoid of any trace of weariness or hesitation. The deliberateness with which she unbuttons her apron and hangs it on a hook off-screen before washing and meticulously drying her hands signals not only her complete immersion in a routine, but additionally, a bodily adherence to that routine that is at once unwilled

[115] There is much to be said about absorption and theatricality in *Jeanne* that must, unfortunately, be left out here. Suffice it to say that in another work about *Jeanne* one might argue that it is a film that strikes a devastating blow at Michael Fried's famous theses in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot.* What Fried's argument is incapable of assimilating—and it does present itself as a totalizing thesis about the "ontological basis of modern art"—is an entire twentieth-century tradition of theater that precisely engages and assimilates concepts of antitheatricality. Akerman's materialist melodrama relies upon absorption precisely to draw attention to the frame as a device that exhausts the viewer, provoking not a "pure" contemplation of the image but an uneven, affectively charged spectatorship.
See: *Absorption and Theatricality; Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).
On the concept of antitheatricality see: Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright; Modernism, Anti-theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press: 2002).

and pleasurable, a seeming contradiction. Impelled by a necessity that seems to come from the outside but has been transferred in the psyche into an inner impulse that "belongs" to her, Jeanne emits all the classic signs of the obsessive-compulsive character who longs not for autonomy, but only to be able to comply to an external demand.

Her relentless absorption is mirrored by the way in which she is filmed: by a static camera, silently, and in real-time. The absence of extradiegetic sound, dialogue, camera movement, and action creates a tedious frame that is indeed exhausting for the viewer to hold in attention. But if it is difficult for us to watch Jeanne, it also seems *necessary*; there is an element that prevents us from looking away, but what is it? On the one hand, we can agree with Margulies that what binds the viewer to Jeanne's world is an oscillation between the "too much" and the "too little" that the image provides; hyperrealism indeed contains within itself the competing tendencies of rarefaction and intensification, and these may construct a dramatic world of their own.[116] But this frame also produces another effect that binds the viewer to Jeanne and her self-legitimizing order; it makes itself necessary to the viewer by transferring the weight of Jeanne's fatigue—what she cannot permit herself to feel but what constitutes the "real" of her experience—onto the spectator. In other words, we are bound to the image of Jeanne's banal, everyday gestures through the *difficulty* of looking. What's more, as viewing subjects, we are made to put this exhaustion of looking to work.

After the titles roll, we see Jeanne in her kitchen, lighting a match to ignite the gas burner underneath a pot of potatoes. The camera frames her from waist height and is situated in the doorway of the room so that it captures all of Jeanne's movements within the small, square space.

[116] Margulies argues that the interplay between these two registers creates a proto narrative that holds the viewer in an interplay of attention and inattention. Akerman also builds up this naturalistic presentation in order to better explode it through emphasizing the excess it contains. Margulies often stresses that the film's ultimate achievement is this commentary upon the "filmic order," its ability to point out its own paradoxes and impasses.
See: Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, p. 69.

Although this visual field is obviously limited both in terms of its form and its content—i.e., because of the camera's immobility and the mundaneness of the housework it captures—it is not what the frame excludes that immediately strike us. Instead, we cling to the visual material that is offered up, honing in on every detail and micromovement to glean some sort of clue as to why we are here, watching and waiting for something to happen.

Cut at the sides by the kitchen door on the left and the cabinet doors on the right, the frame's rectangular form is squeezed under the centrifugal pressure at its center and becomes square. The square is everywhere, presenting itself as an inescapable and inevitable form; the black and white kitchen parquet, the background upon which is inset a flowered pattern on the curtains, the checkers on Jeanne's robe, the tiled wall, the kitchen table, the windows, the oven door, the motif on the dish rag; almost every form present in the images of the kitchen resembles a square, a perfect symbol of correspondence between repeated lines and angles and the area they mark off [See Figure 4]. The proliferation of square patterns in the mise-en-scène, mirrored as it is by the square frame, also serves to bind the spectator's vision to the scene, no matter how difficult looking is. On the one hand, the square (and square-filled) frame connects us once again to Jeanne's psychic structure, since it mirrors the obsessive compulsiveness at the heart of her neurosis; on the other hand, it transfers to us, again, the fatigue that Jeanne cannot bear, this time as a fatigue of seriality—the endless square patterns—that presages how the rest of the film will unfold.

Figure 4. *Jeanne Dielman* (Chantal Akerman, 1976): The proliferating square patterns of Jeanne's kitchen.

Over the course of the next few minutes Akerman continues to establish the aesthetic and affective order that legitimates both Jeanne's domestic space and her "character"—what is ultimately constructed not through psychological content, but rather through the repetition of tasks and an attention to the ways in which they are performed. When her first client arrives—at precisely the moment when she finishes up in the kitchen—Jeanne greets him at the door, handling the man's belongings (scarf, hat, and coat) with the same punctuated animation given to the items in the kitchen; every object inside of the home, by passing through the ordering force of her body and its way of grasping things, must fit into its particular place. The exchange of belongings is filmed at midrange in a frame that decapitates Jeanne, sacrificing her head in order to show more

clearly the movements of her hands and those of the anonymous man. Remarking upon this scene in a recent interview, the film's cinematographer Babette Mangolte comments that in order to communicate the "essence of what the film is going to be about…you evacuate what is not essential and you privilege what is essential, which is the gesture."[117] This particular frame gives an importance to Jeanne's gestures both by cutting out what is visually unnecessary to their exhibition and, additionally, by representing these gestures in their "real" duration. The viewer clings to these movements through the visual attachment created by the transferred fatigue and comes to understand the relationship between time and place in Jeanne's universe: the perfectly-timed order (or ordered time) of her universe, which requires the work of looking, or of bearing that time, is tightly linked to a spatial order. This sense of place is bound to a temporal order that designates the time it takes for things to get to their right place; it is an order that tolerates no intervals, gaps, or lulls.

When Jeanne emerges from the bedroom with the man just moments later, following a sudden change of light—indicating both a passage of time and the shift from afternoon to evening—we see her again from the same angle as before, framed at waist-height and headless. She repeats the same gestures from the man's arrival, methodically handing him his coat, hat, and scarf. We then see a shot of the pair face to face in front of the door, where the man hands Jeanne a few bills and tells her that he will see her next week. Jeanne turns the lights off and leaves the frame.[118] The camera lingers for a moment before cutting to a shot from within another darkened room—the living room, where from behind a dining table we see the reflection of a blue light

[117] Babette Mangolte, "Babette Mongolte on *Jeanne Dielman,*" Interview by Criterion Channel, April, 2009, Video. https://www.criterionchannel.com/videos/babette-mangolte-on-jeanne-dielman.

[118] Many have commented on Jeanne's light switching habits, but Torlasco offers the most compelling account when she claims that "…these intervals in luminosity are put into place less to 'preface' the cut than to stand 'next to' and reinforce it, as if they were hinges guaranteeing that the right distance between gestures be preserved in space as well as time and at the level of both diegesis and enunciation."
See: Torlasco, *The Rhythm,* p. 63.

flashing up and down across the glass doors of a china cabinet. Jeanne enters briskly and turns on the lights, approaching the dining table upon which sits a decorative soup tureen. She places the cash inside, replaces the lid, and turns the lights off as she leaves the room and heads back towards the kitchen and her potatoes.

We could say that Akerman's film is not a character study, but rather, a gesture study, in which what is at stake is not a deeper understanding of the ways in which a protagonist interacts with and understands the world, but a more sensitive measure of the modulation of her affect. This passage is measured by the viewer in precisely an affective way, since we are, from the beginning, placed in the position of bearing Jeanne's fatigue. In this way, we become the seismograph of Jeanne's gesture, able to register difference as the force of motion relative to a particular frame. It is this measuring that emerges as a form of work against housework—the putting to work of the fatigue that we, as viewers, have been conferred. *Jeanne* thus represents a certain way of developing the time-image; by relentlessly extracting affection from the interval, a proliferation of gestures creates repeated series. Gesture, as Georges Didi-Huberman has argued, serves here as a diagram or a map of the relation between the force of an affection and the form it takes on in the image: "ce sont les forces qui nous soulèvent, sans doute, mais ce sont bien des *formes* qui, anthropologiquement parlant, les rendent sensibles, les vehiculent, les orientent, les rendent plastiques ou résistants, c'est selon."[119]

The viewer's sensitivity to slight changes in Jeanne's affect and gesture is part of a complicated set-up in which the former is implicated in a process of exhausting viewing. But if the weight of Jeanne's unbearable fatigue—what she cannot, for the moment, permit herself to feel—is transferred to the spectator so that the latter might bind herself to the psychic structure of

[119] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Désirer Désobéir: Ce qui nous soulève, 1* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2019), p. 31.

a character as a means of enduring the laboriousness of looking, this is part of a more complicated scheme. Just like the perfectly-timed domestic routine, the displacement of exhaustion is constructed so that it may later on be interrupted—transferred back, that is, to Jeanne herself. The foregrounding of gesture rather than action is yet another mechanism of setting up a space in which there is enormous potential for misfire; the emphasis on the micromovements of Jeanne's gestures prepares the viewer to recognize when a gesture is "off," or when Jeanne's way of performing a task takes on a slightly different affective charge. And it is precisely these small disturbances that will signal to the viewer that something is amiss in Jeanne's world, and indeed, in our world.

The Return of Fatigue as Exhaustion

If the first half of the film can be understood as an exhaustive (and exhausting) visual description of Jeanne's everyday existence that establishes the careful balance of the domestic order with the repressed sexual sphere, the second half is a slow build-up of tension in which Jeanne's order and its perfect timing come undone. This shift is not only a narrative one, but it also takes place via the transfer of the spectator's fatigue back to Jeanne; since Jeanne is unable to bear this exhaustion, she begins to unravel and we witness a series of mishaps, tears in the fabric of her psyche that manifest as the revolt of objects and of time itself, as the out of place, the too-early or the too-late. Her exhaustion is then registered in the modulation of her gestures, those moments when an affective charge surges in the image and threatens the domestic order and its perfect timing with an excess—the excess of what I described above as the nothing. Ultimately this nothing can be linked to what Deleuze refers to as the unbearable; this is the productive motor for thought that Berlant and Edelman point towards as having a certain "positive" energy, the experience of which they describe as "bearing the unbearable encounter with the unfinished

business of being."[120] It is with respect to this encounter, they maintain, that we must transform ourselves, without simply producing new fantasies.[121]

The most iconic scene in which we witness Jeanne in her struggle with this unraveling is one that has received a lot of attention from critics; indeed, Akerman's own mother indicated that it was the most important moment of the film.[122] The scene in question shows Jeanne at the kitchen table peeling potatoes. Just before, an overcooked batch—the result of uncharacteristically faulty timing in her cooking routine—necessitated an extra trip to the store, which was dangerously close to closing when Jeanne stopped by; the external world indeed dictates the hours of Jeanne's movements, and one single interruption proves to have a domino effect on the whole series.

In this scene Akerman frames Jeanne squarely, from waist-height, with the usual immobile camera that is attentive to nothing but the task at hand. The viewer notices immediately that something about Jeanne's affect has radically changed, and it is visible both on her face—her look is one of fatigue and resignment—and in the way in which she handles the potatoes [See Figure 5]. At first, there is a strange mixture of necessity and weariness that characterizes the way in which she peels. Her movements are slow, and we have the impression that at any moment she will give up and walk away. This hint of resignation is all the more powerful since it is a departure from Jeanne's obsessive-compulsive abiding to the tasks she sets out for herself. The moment is thus not only an experience of fatigue, but one in which she struggles against submitting to a feeling that her psychic structure cannot tolerate. Fatigue thus becomes exhaustion, the experience

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[120] Berlant and Edelman, *Sex*, p. 68.
[121] Fantasy would also be distinguished from phantasm, for the latter would have a more "positive" meaning in Deleuze's reading, specifically in *Logique du sens*, where he argues that the creation of the phantasm is the first real "event" in which thought is energized after overcoming the traps of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. See: Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969), p. 245-260.
[122] Akerman quotes her mother in an interview as saying: "Chantal, dans le plan des pommes de terre, il y a tout." See: Chantal Akerman, "Entretien avec Chantal Akerman," Interview by Blandine Jeanson and Martine Storti, *Libération*, February 9, 1976.

of reaching the end of the possible, or the point at which the thought of something new emerges. Deleuze calls this the virtual, and it is where time "in its pure state" enters the image, allowing for not only a suspension of chronology and the narrative ordering of events, but for the arrival of a novel perception.[123] If after a minute or so Jeanne gradually picks up the pace, surpassing the momentary pull of exhaustion and once again complying with the external demand of the domestic, her momentary faltering in the face of the unbearable force of time, which, it turns out, is radically out of her control, has provoked a radical shift that will continue to affect her behavior.

Figure 5. *Jeanne Dielman* (Chantal Akerman, 1976): A touch of resignation while peeling.

[123] The breakdown of a sensorimotor schema in the time-image, through its dissipation of a center of perception that would need to filter sensory data in the name of a particular goal, allows for the virtual, or time, to surge in the image. Deleuze describes exhaustion in a similar manner in his essay "L'épuisé": "Tout autre est l'épuisement : on combine l'ensemble des variables d'une situation, à condition de renoncer à tout ordre de préférence et à toute organisation de but, à toute signification." The virtual is also a renouncement of signification and an opening onto affect.
See: Deleuze, "L'épuisé," p. 59.

The brutal weight of exhaustion is transferred back onto Jeanne at the very moment at which the spectator no longer needs it in order to be interested in looking; once the breakdown of Jeanne's routine begins, the materialist melodrama that ensues—what provokes the viewer's attachment to the image—is more than enough to keep us on the edge of our seats. The brutal, unplanned repetition of the potatoes is what signals a crack in the domestic order, and it is from this crack that a long dramatic build begins, opening onto a larger fissure where the powers of sex and death erupt in unplanned violence. The transference at stake here in the image is one that goes both ways, supposing not only the porousness of the screen, but the emergence of a new form of knowledge; knowledge in the unconscious becomes knowledge in the interval. Neither Jeanne nor the viewer is the *sujet supposé savoir,* but perhaps the subject supposed to think the unthought within thought.

More than one critic has commented upon how the change in pace and tone registered in Jeanne's gesture of peeling the potatoes already presages this rupture; the film's hyperminimalist aesthetic is what allows for these changes—the slightly more intense mechanical nature of the movement, for example—to be registered. The viewer has grown accustomed, in other words, to Jeanne's way of bearing herself, or of gesturing, because they have also adapted to the camera's frame; even a small modulation of Jeanne's movements provokes suspense, even distress. Corinne Maury describes the potato-peeling scene as one in which we observe "…à la fois la répétition des tâches du quotidien, la maîtrise impossible d'un vide à contenir et l'écoulement d'un effondrement de l'être."[124] Maury's phrase is suggestive for the impossible visual metaphors it evokes: the containment of an emptiness and the flowing out of a collapse of being. Her phrasing evokes the encounter with nothing or with the intolerable as something outside of thought that might be

[124] Corinne Maury, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles de Chantal Akerman* (Paris: Yellow Now, 2020), p. 83.

encountered at the end of the possible. In order to better understand the relationship between the intolerable, or the unbearable nothing and sexual difference as both emptiness and an excess, we cannot avoid looking more closely at the concepts that both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis have given us. Indeed, the structure of the nothing here closely resembles what Lacan would come to call the real—the impossible which, resisting symbolization, is traumatic for the speaking being in that it is both excessive and lacking at the same time.[125]

There is indeed a connection to be drawn between this "flowing out of being's collapse" and the death drive as one vector of the unbearable, or one motor for thinking the unthought within thought. In Alenka Zupančič's reading of the death drive, she makes a rather Deleuzian connection between Thanatos, fatigue, and affect—a link that can be re-read back into Deleuze's cinema theory and its treatment of the sickness of Chronos. After describing life as what simply "happens" to the inanimate, throwing it slightly off-course through the introduction of *jouissance* and the drives, Zupančič claims:

> Life is but a dream of the inanimate. More precisely, it is a *nightmare* of the inanimate (its nightmarish disturbance), since the inanimate wants nothing but to be left alone. In this sense we could say that the death drive is not so much a drive as an ontological fatigue, a fundamental affect of life—not that it is necessarily experienced, "felt" as fatigue; it is present as a kind of "objective affect" of life.[126]

Life's inherent and fundamental tendency to return to the inanimate, because it has been disturbed by the introduction of the drives, is experienced as a generalized, "objective" affect of fatigue. Clearly Zupančič makes a distinction here between animate and inanimate life that places her outside of Deleuze's theoretical framework. But what is interesting here is the way in which the

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[125] Though Deleuze does not use the term "Real", he does follow Lacan insofar as he describes what the phallus marks off as both excess and lack. He writes, "Car, dans son évolution et dans la ligne qu'il trace, le phallus ne cesse de marquer un excès et un manque, d'osciller entre les deux et même d'être les deux à la fois."
See: Deleuze, *Logique du sens,* p. 265.
[126] Alenka Zupančič, *What is Sex?* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), p. 97.

introduction of affect causes her own discourse to falter, or at least to reveal its underlying inconsistencies. For if the inanimate just wants to be left alone, then isn't it also tired? What would it do if left alone? The boundaries between the animate and the inanimate must already be dissipating in order for the claim about life being a dream of the inanimate to function. And it's perhaps because of this tension that Zupančič here comes into dialogue with Deleuze's formulation of fatigue as an ontological affect in the time-image:

> L'attitude quotidienne, c'est ce qui met l'avant et l'après dans le corps, le temps dans le corps, le corps comme révélateur du terme. L'attitude du corps met la pensée en rapport avec le temps comme avec ce dehors infiniment plus lointain que le monde extérieur. Peut-être la fatigue est-elle la première et la dernière attitude, parce qu'elle contient à la fois l'avant et l'après : ce que Blanchot dit, c'est aussi ce qu'Antonioni montre, non pas du tout le drame de la communication, mais l'immense fatigue du corps, la fatigue qu'il y a sous "Le Cri," et qui propose à la pensée quelque chose à "incommuniquer," "l'impensé," la vie.[127]

While Zupančič links this fundamental fatigue to the death drive, embodied objectively by the subject as "reality's contradiction," Deleuze understands affects through the lens of a slightly different materialism.[128] For the latter it is in the attitudes, postures, and gestures of the body that the unthought—the death drive or sex for Zupančič —can be thought, contemplated, and felt. Antonioni's characters show us the unthought of time through their "daily attitudes" in which time modulates bodies as the weight of the before and after, proving that the image in cinema is never in the present. In other words, the image is not in time, but rather, time is in the image as a sort of materiality that characters embody, carry, and bear. The affects that characters pass through and experience are "categories of life" that surpass them, altering their bodily attitudes to show us the physiological side of exhaustion, or the necessary alteration of gesture, posture, and movement of a body that exhausts the possible. In short, if for Zupančič the everyday is in fact underwritten by an ontological fatigue linked to a subjective temporality that arises as a form of resistance to the

[127] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 247.
[128] Zupančič, *What is Sex ?*, p. 121.

drive for self-extinction, for Deleuze, on the other hand, it is the everyday attitude of the body that, because it bears time, unlocks the unthought for thinking, the unperceived for seeing. Time comes from the outside and allows us to understand the notion of the everyday differently, categorically shifting our perception of this space as banal, ordinary, and devoid of events that would provoke thought.

If Antonioni had already instituted a shift in this conception of the everyday through the creation of images traversed by the forces of time as a sickness, Akerman achieves a slightly different yet equally radical shift. She puts all of the time back into the image as "real time," creating a world in which what seems excessive is perfectly contained by the legitimizing routine of the domestic. Real time, or the time of duration, is what eats away at fantasy—the fantasy of being able to magically skip through a painfully long scene of Jeanne making coffee, for example, to arrive on the other side with the perfectly finished product.[129] And what comes in place of the fantasy's breaking down is the gesture, the gestures of the minutiae of making the products.[130] This shift is made meaningful to the spectator through the creation of cinematic transference, when Akerman—after binding the viewer to Jeanne via her unbearable fatigue—shifts the weight of that fatigue back onto Jeanne. It is a transference that leaks across the screen and goes both ways, presupposing knowledge in the interval, or the possibility of thought in affection. Akerman makes this transformation readable in the image as a set of modulated gestures, movements that index the

[129] This is also the fetishistic fantasy of capitalism, as Marx noted many times; money-breeding-money (*Geld heckendes Geld*) that magically appears as if it had not passed through the radical negativity of labor power.
[130] Jeanne also embodies particularly well the constitutive split of the proletariat since she is very obviously *both* what makes the products (commodities) and appears as a product on the market herself, as prostitute (the commodity labor power). This is how I would read Jeanne's prostitution in the film—through a value-theory critique that understands Jeanne to embody the very constitutive negativity of the proletariat since she embodies the very contradiction of being and making commodities. We could understand her prostitution as the "realization" of her labor, since it is a process of objectification. We can also, of course, understand the prostitution through the lens of psychoanalysis, for which all subjects are, to a certain extent, sex workers, and for which the most obscene sexual acts are precisely those that involve no sex at all—the exchange of money or the handing over of a coat and hat, for example.

deterioration of sensory-motor connections; this is perhaps what Deleuze means when he writes of *Jeanne* as a film that wants to show "des gestes dans leur plénitude."[131]

In the scene where Jeanne peels the potatoes, this "plenitude" registers as a deceleration of gesture, a slowing down of movement as it becomes heavy with the weight of an excess of time (time that is paradoxically excessive or "extra" even though she is running late, out of time in a sense); not only stasis, then (sitting at the table drinking coffee or waiting in the living room with the baby), but also tasks themselves become moments invested by this excess, by the "before and after" that her body contains. This before and after is linked to the temporality of repetition in the most radical sense of the term; it brings to the fore the non-presence of the body to itself, the body's being akin to the interval, or to the time of both the everyday and the domestic. It is this radical form of repetition, as Deleuze points out, that also marks the time of both transference and of the death-drive, or *Thanatos.* Here one can see the connections between Deleuze's earlier writings in *Différence et Répétition* and the later developments of cinema volumes. In the earlier text he writes:

> Freud marquait dès le début que, pour cesser de répéter, il ne suffisait pas de se souvenir abstraitement (sans affect), ni de former un concept en général, ni même de se représenter dans toute sa particularité l'événement refoulé : il fallait aller chercher le souvenir là où il était, s'installer d'emblée dans le passé pour opérer la jonction vivante entre le savoir et la résistance, la représentation et le blocage. On ne guérit donc pas par simple mnésie, pas plus qu'on n'est malade par amnésie. Là comme ailleurs, la prise de conscience est peu de chose. L'opération autrement théâtrale et dramatique par laquelle on guérit, et aussi par laquelle on ne guérit pas, a un nom, le transfert. Or, le transfert est encore de la répétition, avant tout de la répétition.[132]

The ways in which Akerman shows us Jeanne's fatigue-turned-exhaustion, or her body that contains all the weight of time, reveals to us the hidden relationship between transference and affect—between the clinic and cinema. For Deleuze, even Freud erects a set-up in which one must plunge *into* time, allowing one's body to be penetrated by the repetition of *Thanatos.* This is the

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[131] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 255.
[132] Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition,* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), p. 29-30.

same formulation that will come back in the cinema books, albeit divorced from the vocabulary of psychoanalysis. The theatricality of transference is this particular relationship to affect, to a power of becoming-other, or a distribution of roles and masks.[133] Deleuze claims that transference has less to do with identifying events and people from the past than it does with the authentication of roles and the selection of masks.[134] Rather than a "prise de conscience," the transferential relation has to do with the affection and the creativity generated by repetition; it thus has to do with thought as much as it has to do with something that happens to the body.

The shift in focus from Antonioni to Akerman as the paradigmatic author who privileges fatigue in the time-image involves consequences that extend beyond the philosophical field sketched out by Deleuze, for these open onto the field of feminist politics proper. Akerman's cinema of gestures engages the feminist struggles of the women's movement and the fatigue of women in particular, what Deleuze only hinted at in *Cinéma 2* when he referred rather enigmatically to the tiredness and waiting of the female body. *Jeanne* reconfigures the everyday as a space that deserves our attention, a space where looking involves seeing or contemplating something new—not just a representation of women's suffering, but an expression of the affect of this suffering which takes on the form of exhaustion. The displacement of representation occurs via Akerman's use of gesture to displace fantasy as the paradigm that usually secures the fetishization of domestic labor.

As Margulies points out in her chapter on Jeanne's prostitution, a 1974 issue of *Les Temps Modernes*—one of the most important cultural and intellectual publications of the postwar

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[133] Monique David-Ménard explores the relationship between transference and the powers of invention and becoming in her book *Deleuze et la psychanalyse: L'altercaltion.* Her account is particularly enlightening since it addresses the question of transference both in philosophical and clinical terms, relying upon a case-study of an actual patient.
See: Monique David-Ménard, *Deleuze et la psychanalyse: L'altercation* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2005), p. 95-101.
[134] Deleuze, *Différence,* p. 30.

period—outlined the major demands of the women's movement and collected anonymous testimonials from housewives across the country. The magazine, edited by Simone de Beauvoir, argued for housework wages and emphasized women's impossible position vis-à-vis solidarity and worker struggles. A woman named Nicole writes that the domain of women is that of the potato, the most base vegetable that nonetheless offers up an infinite number of possibilities for consumption. She then enumerates her daily tasks in a list that ends with the word "forget." Margulies goes on to claim that, for women trapped in the domestic sphere, "the only way to repeat is to forget."[135]

But if repetition is indeed a process of "pragmatic amnesia" for women, allowing them to keep going, it is not so in *Jeanne,* where repetition is precisely what allows for difference to emerge. Again, as Deleuze reminds us, "On ne guérit donc pas par simple mnésie, pas plus qu'on n'est malade par amnésie."[136] The film thus offers up an alternative logic of repetition, one that remains bound to the everyday experience of women in the domestic sphere but that turns away from the logic of repressing in order to repeat; instead, repetition becomes the cause of repression, a reversal that unlocks the hidden productivity of the everyday, the nothing as an outside that contains or unlocks all of the potentialities of the virtual. Repetition becomes the cause of repression because what is repeated in Jeanne's experience is not only the domestic task (the object), but the visual focus on gesture as an interruption of goal-based action and of chronological or narrative time. In psychoanalytic terms, "what is repeated is not an original traumatic experience, interrupting whatever has taken place before, but the *interruption itself.*"[137] Gesture is this traumatic interrupting moment, and while it does not cancel out the content of the task that is

[135] Margulies "'Her' and *Jeanne Dielman,*" p. 141.
[136] Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition,* p. 29.
[137] Alenka Zupančič, *What is Sex?,* p. 117.

being repeated, nor the physical fatigue associated with it, the gesture does turn away from these representative (fantasy) aspects of the image and towards a different form of expression that affirms what remains unactualized in the event.

This reconfiguration of repetition offered up by Akerman's film transforms the everyday as the site of banal suffering and willed amnesia into a site of political potential. "Philosophizing the kitchen" can be understood as this process of re-reading the repetitions of the domestic via cinematic transference, or a transfer of fatigue and labor across the screen. This re-reading is no longer interpretation that seeks to bridle unruly transference, but takes place within its irresolution, opening onto an alternative feminist politics and ethics. A feminism of possibility emerges from Akerman's cinema of gesture as an alternative to Federici's insistence upon the domestic sphere as a site that must be represented or recognized in a different manner. Reconfiguring gestural repetition as a "positive" motor for thought leads to a totally new understanding of the legitimacy of women's claims vis-à-vis the domestic realm, and it ultimately grants them the freedom to *destroy* that realm as, we shall see, Jeanne herself does.

Sex and Death

These transformations of the space of the everyday must be understood not only in the realm of domestic repetition and the fatigue it brings on but, additionally, with regard to Jeanne's prostitution and the film's "repression" of the sexual realm leading up to the cataclysm of the murder. This violent event not only transforms the domain of the everyday at the level of representation (the everyday becomes the place where significant things happen, like murder), but also reconfigures it at the conceptual level. If sex, in the film, is what constitutes the quotidian by way of its exclusion, its eventual *inclusion* seems to provoke a total undoing of the everyday as a

legitimizing order that represses all forms of transgression. This cataclysm is, in my reading, the eruption of a potential for thought that Jeanne's exhaustion (of the possible) has made available. But if domestic fatigue leads to murder, it is not through a psychological understanding of this schema that we will be able to elaborate a politics, but rather through a more thoroughly philosophical analysis of the relation between the time-image and sex.

Specifically, our task here will be to understand how *Jeanne* sketchs out a relation between the political potential opened up by the time-image and an overcoming of the Other-structure—the main task of the Deleuzian clinic. Indeed, many of the themes Deleuze and Guattari sketched out in L'*Anti-Œdipe* were taken up again in the cinema books, albeit within a different set-up. But the *reactionary* nature of neurotic organization cannot but be related to the reactionary nature of the movement-image that neatly seals the intervals between images, dialecticizing time through montage. The time-image, on the other hand, because it signals the disintegration of the sensorimotor schema operating in conjunction with a center of perception and action, undoes the efficacy of the structure of the Other, what, for Deleuze, is "an anonymous a priori structure that organizes the world of representation and assures the identities of subjects and objects that appear within it, akin to the phenomenological horizon."[138] The other (pejorative) name he uses for this structure is Oedipus—"source où la psychanalyse se lave les mains des iniquités du monde."[139] The organizing forces of Oedipus—what Deleuze and Guattari find to be at work in the psychoanalytic clinic—foreclose upon the actual potentials of desiring production.[140] In cinematic

[138] Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure; Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), p. 92.
[139] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L'Anti-Œdipe: Capitalisme et schizophrénie 1* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972), p. 155.
[140] In a seeming reversal, Deleuze and Guattari describe desiring production in *L'Anti-Œdipe* as the actual and Oedipus as the virtual. But what they are really getting at here is the radical undecidability of Oedipus; as virtuality, Oedipus can be actualized as a neurotic factor of organization *or* it can be actualized as an anti-oedipal force. This is why the authors claim that there is no difference between psychosis and neurosis. In both cases, desiring production, or the actual, is cause.
See: Deleuze and Guattari, *L'Anti-Œdipe,* p. 153.

terms, by refusing to valorize the disruptive interval—the "coupures abberantes" of the desiring machines—Oedipal organization exchanges a little time in its pure state for the reactivity of familial resonances: "Achetez des madeleines de Combray pour avoir des résonances."[141]

In Jeanne's universe, the murder is what interrupts the neurotic organization of the world—an order indeed based on the presupposition of identity; things can only be in their right place and time if they maintain a certain ontological consistency that is guaranteed by the Other. The neurotic subject needs this consistency in order to function, since they can only experience a "guaranteed being"—i.e. a being that does not break down—in the universe of the banal everyday. What needs to be interrupted then, by a drive—the death drive, which can be linked to the nothing of exhaustion—is this banality of neurotic organization. In Aaron Schuster's words: "…the point is not to turn neurotic suffering into everyday unhappiness, but to transform everyday neurotic guilt into 'innocent' schizophrenic cruelty."[142] Releasing the virtual potential of the image—what lies in the interstices of the present—is akin to reclaiming the "cruelty of the body" from which Oedipus had offered an escape (an escape not into freedom, but into the least bad form of suffering—neurotic guilt).[143]

Within the set-up of Akerman's film, sex is carefully folded into the perfectly ordered domestic sphere as a structuring absence; throughout, it slips into the diegesis directly only through her son Sylvain's nightly monologues, which Jeanne quickly silences when they begin to get too "obscene."[144] Carefully elided visually, sex (as prostitution, another form of work) nonetheless

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[141] Deleuze and Guattari, *L'Anti-Œdipe,* p. 151.
[142] Schuster, *Trouble,* p. 173.
[143] Schuster, *Trouble,* p. 172.
[144] Margulies interprets Sylvain's speech as purposefully offering up a clichéd image of the Oedipal conflict in order to "be done with it." This reading is in line with a Deleuzian desire to break apart the cliché of Oedipus in order to discover those "more compelling things to suffer from than the family and (neurotic) lack" (Schuster). "Sylvain explicitly maintains his desire to defend his mother from his father's fiery sword (hurtful penis), indicating an oedipal scenario that the film exposes almost as if to dispose of it, to be done with it, before going into the heart of another narrative, one whose texture is provided through Jeanne's solitary dealings" (Margulies).

occupies an important place in Jeanne's daily routine. She is careful to time the evening's dinner preparations around the arrival and departure of her clients, and we can observe her greeting them and then bidding them farewell before washing up, getting rid of the evidence of the sexual act (the towel she puts on top of the comforter), and depositing her wages in the soup tureen on the dining table.[145] If the sex itself is meticulously (and conspicuously) hidden, everything that surrounds it is given the same importance—in terms of duration—as the other household chores.

On the representative level, Akerman's choice to hide Jeanne's sex work in contrast to her housework was in dialogue with a radical discourse about women, domesticity, and prostitution in the 1970s. By 1975, the Belgian feminist party had organized a congress and outlined a list of concerns; included among them was securing both pay for domestic labor and worker status for prostitutes.[146] In the rest of Europe and in the United States, the International Women's Movement was also addressing these issues, gaining momentum through a discourse of consciousness-raising that often took the form of individual testimonials. Although voiced in a confessional register, these shared experiences were gathered under the sign of constructing women's solidarity and employed in order to execute issues-based campaigns.

Akerman's film enters this field obliquely, refusing to offer a didactic message of empowerment, and yet cleverly inverting dramatic expectations so that Jeanne retains the power to surprise viewers; the fact that she murders her client doesn't ultimately symbolize a powerful move in the struggle against patriarchy that would be embodied in one man, but rather shows how she reserves the power to explode the field of possibilities itself. What Akerman's film ultimately

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See: Schuster, *Trouble,* p. 171 and Margulies, *Nothing Happens,* p. 84.

[145] Laura Mulvey, in her reading of the film, understands the soup tureen as a symbol of Jeanne's prostitution, a key object in the film's mise-en-scène that plays a particularly important role in the accumulation of melodramatic tension. "While the secret stays hidden," she claims, "its associated objects seem to announce its presence." See: Laura Mulvey, "A Neon Sign, A Soup Tureen: The Jeanne Dielman Universe," *Film Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2016): p. 28.

[146] Jacqueline Aubenas-Bastie quoted in Margulies, *Nothing Happens,* p. 140.

demonstrates is that the explosion of this field also requires the dissolution of the center of perception organizing the filmic world of representation. In other words, politics requires the disordering power of sex. This disordering power appears filmically through Akerman's mechanism of cinematic transference, a form of transference *against* the cure that, rather than preventing against a violent "acting out," allows this violence to emerge as a bit of innocent schizophrenic cruelty.[147]

The film equally enters into relation with other cinematic representations of the housewife/prostitute persona. Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle* remains the most iconic example of a construction of this figure that executes a scathing social critique while at the same time constructing a filmic language that makes philosophical claims of its own.[148] Luis Bunuel's *Belle de jour,* released in the same year and starring Catherine Deneuve, operates in the surrealist realm between reality and dream, presenting the bourgeois housewife/prostitute as a figure whose masochistic fantasy has the power to operate a critique of moralism.[149] In comparison, Akerman's much later film is the first explicitly feminist cinematic representation of the prostitute/housewife figure—and the first film on the subject written and directed by a woman. The formal shift she operates in favor of real-time sequences of housework is a clear recasting of

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[147] The innocence of schizophrenic cruelty is important to Deleuze and Guattari's critique of psychoanalysis, for it marks the renunciation of the (paternal) law and the guilt-debt complex it administers. The three fundamental errors of interpreting desire—lack, law, and signifier—drag behind them a "cortège théologique" made up of "insuffisance de l'être, culpabilité" and "signification."
See: Deleuze and Guattari, *L'Anti-Œdipe,* p. 135.

[148] For an excellent comparison and analysis of *Jeanne* and Godard's film see the chapter entitled "'Her' and Jeanne Dielman: Type as Commerce" in Margulies, *Nothing Happens*.

[149] Deleuze relates this film to the concept of a crystal-image in *Cinéma 2,* in which events are presented in a "pluralité de mondes simultanés." In *Belle du jour* the housewife is thus presented as having a special access to these multiple worlds; the mode of fantasy is transformed, productively, from one in which a subject creates multiple perspectives on one objective world to one in which subjects exist only insofar as they constitute and move through multiple objective worlds. Fantasy becomes tied to the possibility of the time-image, and yet it still appears as though the housewife's freedom hinges upon escape. Akerman pushes even more forcefully against fantasy until it turns into gesture—the complete "blocking" of fantasy is what forces exhaustion of the present and allows for the possible to emerge differently.
See: Deluze, *Cinéma 2,* p. 135.

the traditional mode of critique, as it advocates for an image that seeks to make durable the unbearable sensation of fatigue that the housewife/prostitute endures. Akerman ultimately proves that the temporal excess of *Jeanne* is not only a minimalist or materialist provocation but is in fact what allows for the "excess" gestures of women's exhaustion—or the time in the interval—to displace fantasy. The exhaustion of the possible is also the exhaustion of fantasy itself, and the possibility of a transformation of the everyday into a field of possibilities for feminist thought.

At the beginning of the murder scene, Akerman places the viewer directly in the previously off-limits domain of the sexual (in Jeanne's bedroom *with* her client), signaling a drastic shift in the world of the film—one could even argue that this first shot inside the occupied bedroom is the film's true climax. We first observe Jeanne undressing in front of her vanity, carefully unbuttoning, removing, and folding her blouse. Because of the camera's position behind her and in front of the mirror, Jeanne appears twice in the frame, shown in the "usual" way—centered from mid-range—*and* shown from behind at an angled shot that features her left side. Although we have seen shots of Jeanne looking in the mirror already in the film, this is the first time that Akerman shows her doubled within the shot [See Figure 6]. This doubling is particularly disorienting in the context of the filmic order because it perturbs the so-far absolute *locatability* of Jeanne not only in the visual frame, but within the domestic order itself. What allows for such a uniform order of space and time in the film—for objects and people to always appear in their "right" time and place—is precisely the way in which the camera gives Jeanne a particular consistency through its way of framing. As a doubled figure, she loses that spatial consistency and falls in-between the two versions of herself—the one looking and the one being observed. This sensation of not being able to place Jeanne—of her being *in-between* spaces—is a radical shift in the filmic structure which has so far always presented her as supremely locatable. She is not simply "out of place" here—as she was

when sitting, idle, on the living room chaise—but rather she has, herself, fallen into the interval. The shot thus signals the disintegration of Jeanne's consistency as a self-identical subject that can be represented, located, placed, and seen from a central point of perception—the consistency granted by the Other.

Figure 6. *Jeanne Dielman* (Chantal Akerman, 1976): A doubled Jeanne undressing moments before the murder.

After Jeanne removes and carefully handles her blouse, Akerman cuts sharply to a shot of the bed, where we see the client on top of Jeanne, the camera positioned slightly above the pair and angled downward. What is perhaps most disturbing here is the explicitly violent nature of the sexual act coupled with an almost total motionlessness—that is, coupled with the undeniable *absence* of sex itself; the sounds of the man breathing heavily are accompanied by a sort of zero-

degree movement, the slowest possible modulation of his body against hers, so that we have to read his movements through Jeanne's expression—she is not only brutally subjected to him physically but becomes an instrument or medium of his enjoyment via the camera eye. She looks off to the right of the frame, clearly exerting the effort it takes to detach but at the same time unable to absent herself completely from whatever it is that's going on. Again, what's interesting here is the unlocatability of sex itself. It's not as if sex was excluded and now it is included; rather, sex was previously elided and now what is being included in the image is the absence of sex, the "with-without" of it. The man's minimal thrusting is almost unable to be registered, while the eventual spasms of Jeanne's right hand transform into a squirming and contorting of her entire body, her head thrashing back and forth in an attempt to escape. Paradoxically, there is a correspondence between Jeanne's effort to evade "the sexual act" and what could be read as her moment of orgasm—the extreme discomfort she displays is unable to be distinguished from the so-called moment of jouissance. But Akerman presents viewers with a clichéd image of the psychoanalytic subject's being forced to enjoy not in order to proclaim impossible/prohibited jouissance as the truth of the image, but rather, in order to underline its conceptual imposition—the imposition of Oedipus—as itself what makes the subject suffer.

It is perhaps in what follows, as Jeanne detaches herself from the inert man and goes to get dressed, that we can observe Akerman's most explicit move to break apart the Oedipal cliché and release from it the cruel powers of the body. Jeanne sits again at the vanity and finishes buttoning her shirt, seemingly stricken with anxiety and torment following her moment of combined struggle and pleasure. She glances down at the pair of scissors on the wooden table—what she had used just before to open the surprise gift of a nightgown from her Aunt Ferdinande—picks them up, and quickly walks over to the bed and stabs the man in the neck, using the weight of her body to conjure

a forceful blow. We hear a groan from the man and see him gesticulate rapidly, grabbing at the wound in his neck, before his body falls lifeless. Jeanne leaves the scissors, now bloody, on the vanity; the camera lingers for a moment on the murderous object that still vibrates with Jeanne's compulsive energy. The almost Hitchcockian shots in this sequence—specifically those of the murder weapon—are surprisingly off-key paired with the automaton-like execution that Jeanne enacts; traditional narrative devices are used in conjunction with the mechanical movement of a totally unreadable subject whose act is emptied out of all intention and will.[150] It's as if the fantasy of murder as an act of evil or bad intention is interrupted by murder shown as simply another set of gestures, a banal "going through the motions."

The next shot—the film's final frame—shows Jeanne sitting at the dining room table in the dark, her white blouse stained with blood; the stain stands in sharp contrast to her normal hygienic perfection, specifically her usual, obsessive self-scrubbing routine in the bath after the departure of her male clients. She looks off into the distance with a blank stare, immobile and, perhaps for the first time, calm. The only movement that punctuates the seven-minute scene is that of the flashing light outside; it pulsates and rolls over the room in waves, seemingly moving through Jeanne's figure without illuminating it. There is something inhuman and disturbing about the light, and its purposelessness is suddenly highlighted as never before; we realize, in retrospect, that it had always been out of place, an intrusion of the outside into the ordered consistency of the domestic interior, and a light that flagrantly disobeyed the predictability and punctuality of Jeanne's light-switching habits. In other words, all that is left of the domestic order—which had

[150] The extreme violence of the image that usurps the power of narrative in order to channel it into the object is the very definition of Deleuze's under-developed concept of the drive-image or *l'image-pulsion.*
See: Deleuze, "De l'affect à l'action: l'image-pulsion" in *Cinéma 1* and Tom Conley, "From Image to Event: Reading Genet through Deleuze," *Yale French Studies,* no. 91 (1997): p. 49-63.

appeared so legitimate and impenetrable—is precisely that which had always been a transgressive element within it.

If sex was repeatedly excluded from the film's principle of "reel-time" representation, its eruption into the image marks gesture's final cut into fantasy. "Fantasy," Slavoj Žižek reminds us, "is basically a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void."[151] Jeanne's last act shows us that the space of a fundamental impossibility is not a closing-off, but the site of a radical potentiality. This is the potentiality unlocked by the virtuality of the time-image; what interrupts the cliché (and fantasy) is both an image within which we cannot place subjects and objects in space and time with the hyper-consistency of recognition *and* a drive that is disconnected from the pessimism of desire, or from the Oedipal regime that frees the body up only long enough for it to reconfigure the drives around a particular pathology. Allowing for a "belief in this world," what Deleuze claims is the ethical task of cinema at the end of *Cinéma 2,* indeed requires a sort of schizophrenic attachment to the present in all its disturbing multiplicity—"the schizophrenic is having it all *now,* whether he wants it or not."[152] And so emerges the danger of the line of flight that the body's cruelty rides out of neurosis; the line of new potentialities for life might turn rather quickly into a "line of death."

There is no guarantee that what Jeanne has accomplished won't turn out badly; as viewers we are left to contemplate this in the dark (both of the theater and of the film world itself): whether it was worth it for the "secret" of sex's nothingness to be revealed, or for the everyday to have been interrupted so violently. This is perhaps why the most philosophically interesting readings of the film are not the most optimistic with regard to the symbolic power of the murder. Laura Mulvey, for instance, insists that the "deep secret" of the sexual facilitates a cinematic language

[151] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 141.
[152] Deleuze quoted in Schuster, *Trouble,* p. 174.

that points to "the need to find new ways of visualizing ideas and freeing cinema to be an instrument for thought."[153] But she avoids commentary on the murder, refusing to interpret it as either a positive political moment or part of Akerman's materialist melodrama.

Mary-Ann Doane, on the other hand, folds the murder into her argument about the film's challenge to the order of language, an order within which the female body is elaborated as a non-speaking term.[154] By constructing a film almost exclusively out of those in-between moments that are excluded from the classical narrative and inserting a moment of climax into the diegesis only as a "parodic mime," Akerman disavows the traditional codes of narrative suspense that Roland Barthes has argued embody "the very idea of language."[155] By constructing an alternative filmic syntax for "speaking the female body," Akerman thus challenges the very order of language; "this unchangeable 'order of things' in relation to sexual difference," Doane claims, "is an exact formulation of patriarchy's strongest rationalization of itself."[156]

Doane's forceful argument underlines the explicit feminist politics of Akerman's film, pushing the claims of psychoanalysis into the realm of the social, where, she argues, they can become something more than a reiteration of patriarchal power. But the "order of things" that she describes goes beyond the order of language; I am arguing that the female body does more than speak and is more than spoken. This body—Jeanne's body—bears what is unbearable in life; it is the body that takes on a fatigue that turns into an exhaustion capable of overturning the sexual and sensorimotor order of things, of extracting a "true image" from the clichés of the movement-image and the Oedipal Other-structure. The "true image" is the image of a gesture, what displaces fantasy by unleashing the powers of unresolved and irresolvable transference. What Jeanne thereby reveals

[153] Mulvey, "A Neon Sign, A Soup Tureen," p. 27.
[154] Doane, "Woman's Stake," p. 34-35.
[155] Roland Barthes quoted in Doane, "Woman's Stake," p. 36.
[156] Doane, "Woman's Stake," p. 26.

is not only that habit is a cultural construct, but that *it is a poor form of life*. It is worth quoting Schuster at length on this subject, for he reveals in detail some more of the connections between sex, death drive, and the time-image's profound force of unbinding:

> And perhaps there is no better answer to the problem of life, which is essentially a matter of habit, the repetition of certain regular patterns and rhythms. And at the heart of this habitual existence there is something like the lazy id, the feeling that life is nothing but a chore and a drudgery and a burden, and cannot go on, yet does not stop doing so. But habit is a poor form of life. To really be alive it is necessary that the habits that sustain life down to its tiniest imperceptible foundations break down, that a crisis (a desire) forces the body to lose its dull clichéd vitality in order to produce a new arrangement of its forces, to discover afresh what it can do and from which affections it can suffer. This loss of habitual orientation points and exposure to chaos is how Deleuze reconceives the Freudian death drive as the power of unbinding—not the opposite of life and Eros (the return to the inorganic), but their extreme point and highest condition, what is most alive and unlivable at the same time.[157]

Akerman shows us the body exposed to chaos when she films "the real" of Jeanne's sexual encounter. And she does so precisely within the context of the everyday domestic sphere, the order of banal habit within which Jeanne is tired of living but can't not go on living. This points to both the structure of exhaustion and its supreme applicability to the domestic as a domain of women's subjection to the burden of living. And it is precisely a crisis—the crisis of the sexual itself which contains the power of the death drive as the force of all the drives—that produces a "new arrangement of forces," unleashing the cruelty of the body against the Other—the binding order itself.

Unbearable Sex

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[157] Schuster, *Trouble*, p. 125.
One must, of course, also reference Jean Laplanche's work with regard to the binding and unbinding forces of the drives, particularly in *Vie et mort en psychanalyse* where he writes: "Alors que, depuis les origines de la psychanalyse, la sexualité était par essence hostile à la liaison, principe de 'dé-liaison' ou de déchaînement (*Entbindung*) qui ne trouvait à se lier que par l'intervention du moi, ce qui apparaît avec Éros c'est la *forme liée et liante* de la sexualité, mise en evidence par la découverte du narcissisme."
See: Jean Laplanche, *Vie et mort en psychanalyse* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1970), p. 187.

If sex, following Berlant and Edelman, is what is unbearable in life, then this allows us to understand the empirical fatigue provoked by domestic tasks differently; for sex is unbearable *in a particular way for women*, which is closely related to their relegation to the domestic sphere. Being tired of being a woman is at some point synonymous with being exhausted by nothing, and Akerman shows us precisely this moment of contact between "woman" and nothing through Jeanne's exhaustion and breakdown. In turn, we are able to reflect upon sexual difference in terms of its difficulty for women, or in terms of the ways in which the internalization of "feminine" norms *does not work.* As Jacqueline Rose convincingly argues, "…psychoanalysis becomes one of the few places in our culture where it is recognized as more than a fact of individual pathology that most women do not painlessly slip into their roles as women, if indeed they do at all."[158] The difficulty of completing mindless chores, being relegated to a cramped space, or facing the fatigue of endless work is thus put into dialogue with or understood through the difficulty of not being able *to be* a woman; that is, not being able to assume completely an identity. While the point of Federici and many of the voices of the International Women's Movement was to say that women *should not* assume their feminine identity because it is a socially constructed position of weakness, which is of course true, there is another point to be made, the one that Rose elucidates: women *cannot* assume the feminine identity because it is split from within, and thus impossible to adhere to. It is this impossibility—one which goes beyond questions of representation—that is at the heart of women's political struggles.

Jeanne is a character that shows us this very difficulty of attachment to the feminine, to a role that is thrust upon her but appears as a perfectly natural vocation. At the same time, as a subject she is also attached to her "varieties of being undone," to the disorganization of being (a

[158] Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London and New York: Verso, 1986), p. 91.

woman) that is the very frame of understanding.[159] This is what we witness in the second half of the film, as the fatigue of the domestic is transferred back onto her, provoking a series of misfires that fundamentally disturb both Jeanne and the order to which she adheres. But in the face of this collapse, Jeanne clings to her own becoming-undone as if it is her only lifeboat in a turbulent sea; she perhaps clings to it so strongly as to be led to the murderous act by the strength of this attachment alone.

In this final reading of the film, I decline the politics outlined so far in terms of a possible feminist ethics. The final question to which the film must respond in this context is: does Jeanne's response to what she undergoes in the film—the trauma of coming up against one's limits, limits that have been set by someone or something other—offer the outline of something more than "just shoring up the ego for survival or self-defense"? [160] I turn to Berlant and Edelman, again, to understand these political implications for feminism, to probe the same question that they pose in the following way: "What politics proceeds from undoing, from breakdowns in the subject's forms of attachment? What would it mean…to take seriously the question of what it means to face *living* with negativity?"[161]

The authors go on to suggest that politics can be seen, in a Rancièrian register, as a process of keeping up the structural antagonism that refuses a totalization of meaning. Rather than seeking consensus, that is, politics seeks "dissensus," or the interruption of a certain distribution of roles and values that appears as natural and legitimate. Indeed, Rancière's conception of politics contains the seeds of a feminism of possibility, in the sense that it also stresses the ways in which (patriarchal) power always seeks to appropriate dissonance, building it into a "neutral" higher

[159] Berlant and Edelman, *Sex*, p. 6.
[160] Berlant and Edelman, *Sex*, p. 69.
[161] Berlant and Edelman, *Sex*, p. 66.

order that appears to be a plausible narrative. Zupančič notes the importance of this same understanding of politics for feminism, that is, with relation to sexual difference, in the following passage:

> The traditional division between masculine and feminine worlds (domains, spheres: for example, public/private) actually does not see sexual difference as difference, but as a question of belonging to two separate worlds, which are "different" from a neutral bird's-eye description, but otherwise coexist as integral parts in the hierarchy of a higher cosmic order, the wholeness and unity of which is in no way threatened by this "difference." These are parts that "know their place." And feminism (as a political movement) puts in question, and breaks, precisely this unity of the world, based on massive suppression, subordination, and exclusion. Once again: this exclusion is not an exclusion of female identity; on the contrary, the mythology of female identity is precisely what has made this exclusion possible, and what sustains it. The theme of "female identity" sustains the difference and exclusion on the prepolitical level, on the level of belonging to two different worlds. In this sense, (emancipatory) politics begins with "loss of identity," and there is nothing deplorable in this loss.[162]

In the terms of Akerman's film, we can say that Jeanne's very "belonging" to the feminine world is not simply an ideological subjugation, but, in addition, it is already "false" in a sense, because she cannot belong completely there, or anywhere for that matter. Her act of exploding that world, via the murder, is thus not only her breaking out of the feminine world to which she has been relegated, but a breaking apart of the "unity of the world" that her very being there represents. The claim that politics begins with a loss of identity echoes what Margulies has already noted about Jeanne as a character/type—that she offers up a model of "a-individual singularity" that could be useful politically. Such a figure would resist the call to universalizing women's experience and folding it under the banner of humanism in an instrumentalist way while at the same time expressing an experience that resonates as a social type, a product of the dominant power structures.

[162] Zupančič, *What is Sex?*, p. 36.

Bringing together the insights of this broad range of thinkers (Berlant, Edelman, Zupančič, and Margulies), we can say that a loss-of-identity politics will always cling to a historical notion of type, therefore engaging women at the level of their particular social experiences, and, on the other hand, that this politics will involve an affective dimension of clinging to loss itself, remaining attached to the self that is breaking down. *Jeanne* achieves this highly intricate interplay of elements through its focus on the gestures of bearing the unbearable and their eventual interruption by the force of a drive that unleashes the cruelty of the body. The opening up of the field of the possible is always attached to the affective as the realm of turning away from action, the territory of seeing and feeling before recognizing. This is the true territory of politics if it is to be a politics of the possible, of the emergence of thought as thinking the unthought within thought. The affective process of clinging to the loss of a self is thus folded into this political process as its most precious ethical dimension, where one engages in a process of auto-affection in the midst of self-loss.[163]

Paradoxically perhaps, attaining true freedom requires undoing the fantasy of sovereignty and confronting the impasse of the unbearable. Gesture is an alternative to fantasy in the sense that it opens onto creation rather than consolation for what is and always will be—the Oedipal consolation for ontological lack, for example. It is through the modulation of gesture as an undoing of sensorimotor recognition that we experience and feel the breakdown of Jeanne's order. And what explodes this order is ultimately the sexual, whose hidden signs rise to the surface of the image—a hair brushed out of place, an unbuttoned apron, a slightly more or less enthusiastic polishing of a shoe. What is revealed are not only the signs of her prostitution, but the fact that

[163] The reflection on politics as both an auto-affection and a loss of identity can be explicitly tied back to Agamben's ideas on politics, particularly those sketched out in *The Use of Bodies*, where he elaborates on the concept of form-of-life, defining it, with Benjamin and Foucault, against the paradigms of recognition and identities.

what legitimates the domestic order is a covering over of the sexual, of the unbearable in life which, it turns out, is the interval of enjoyment itself. If Jeanne's murderous impulse ultimately proves that what organizes her domestic sphere is the repression of sex, then sex can be characterized by its disorganizing function. To take this claim a step further—the chaos of sex doesn't have to be reined in under the sign of Oedipus; the force of the drive can be instead appropriated as a power of the body—something new from which it can be affected. The power of this affection is the power at the heart of the feminist politics of possibility outlined here. As a line of flight out of the self-rationalizing patriarchal order, however, the force of the drive is also always at risk of producing a powerful new form of suffering, an excess of feeling in the face of a profound loss (or, a new form of the unbearable). In other words, unbridled or irresolvable transference put to work in the image might lead one towards an unbearable violence if it detaches itself completely from fantasy. Gesture without fantasy also has the power to destroy life.

Cruel Feminist Forms of Life

Akerman transforms the everyday from a place of banal suffering to a space of feminist political potential through the development of a cinema of gestures. Her extreme focus on the domestic sphere as a privileged domain of women's exhaustion is not arbitrary; the director made a calculated choice aimed at targeting the patriarchal power structures that give precedence to the masculine. The exhausted female bodies that have been relegated to the domestic sphere are also those bodies that—because they are occupied with the repetitive, clichéd gestures of non-work—are not worthy of the cinema. In the time-image, however, these gestures are finally given the space to express themselves—to literally become expressive in the sense that Deleuze understands this term—as the undeveloped potentialities of the image that will completely transform the stakes

of representation for women. Gestures of domestic work have the power to release cinematic images into the realm of expression and potentiality because they show women that have exhausted the possible and yet persist in experimenting with the body's capacities. These images put fatigue to work—a work against domestic work—via a radical form of cinematic transference that pushes the boundaries established by the analytic cure.

Casarino points to Maria, the maid from Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952), as an exemplary figure of the relation between gesture and exhaustion in the time-image when he says, "Maria may be exhausted by nothing, yet she still endures this nothing: all her bodily gestures continue to endure, support, and bear the weight of the nothing that is."[164] Akerman, too, develops female exhaustion not only as a theme, but formally, as a method of composition that requires an intensified focus on and expansion of the gesture in the image.

In Akerman's *Jeanne,* exhaustion is felt as an affect that bleeds across the screen which has become a transferential surface. It is an affective charge that can be read as a modulation of the character's micro-movements that are experienced by the viewer in real-time, and yet whose intensity grows so much that it resists reading or interpretation and develops into something else—unbridled transference. Though *Jeanne'*s images are made of the stuff of everyday life, they are deeply penetrated by the specter of death, as both event and affect. They literally stage life as a series of repetitions propped up by the Freudian death drive—a secret pact between the life processes and the "full void" of nothingness within Being that Deleuze, following Artaud, calls the body without organs.[165] I have argued that this focus on death (drive) has an important place within the feminist politics that Akerman develops insofar as it is the creative force behind the formal shift from fantasy to gesture. It is within this shift that one can grasp to what extent this

[164] Casarino, *Images*, p. 86.
[165] Schuster, *Trouble*, p. 181.

politics is bound up with the search for new forms of life. Just as the time-image allows for an escape from habitual modes of perception by breaking apart a sensorimotor schema, the encounter with death drive is an exposure to chaos strong enough to unbind the Oedipal body or the signifying chain.

The task of feminist politics today is the search for new forms of life, even when the risk of the body's cruelty turning against itself is strong. The presence of the death drive in the image is akin to the presence of the sexual, and as Jacqueline Rose reminds us, "…one of the chief drives of an art which today addresses the presence of the sexual in representation [is] to expose the fixed nature of sexual identity as a fantasy and, in the same gesture, to trouble, break up, or rupture the visual field before our eyes."[166] Rupturing the visual field involves seeing without knowing or recognizing. In other words, the rupture involves the violence of thinking the unthought within thought, or placing oneself in the interval of the unconscious where even the *sujet supposé savoir* doesn't know. It is in this way that the time-images of Akerman and Varda's cinema of gestures construct a feminism of possibility that disavows instrumentalism in the name of women's freedom. The gesture emerges as a paradigm of the possible within unlivable life, a claim to potential rather than action.

[166] Rose, *Sexuality*, p. 227-8.

Chapter Three
"Ravaged Rites": The Gesture Gone Astray in Jean Genet's *Les Nègres*

The Ritual Gesture Gone Astray

In the opening scene of Jean Genet's *Les Nègres,* Archibald, the play's master of ceremonies who communicates directly with the audience, explains to spectators that he and the black[167] actors flanking him onstage are, outside of the theater, just normal, everyday people: "Quittée cette scene, nous sommes mêlés à votre vie: je suis cuisinier, madame est lingère, monsieur étudie la medicine, monsieur est vicaire à Saint-Clotilde…."[168] But Archibald's declaration, instead of offering reassurance, both complicates and terrifies; the multilayered mimesis into which spectators have been thrown is one in which the "reality" of the theatrical set-up, though it is repeatedly being referred to, highlighted, and emphasized, is constantly slipping out of one's theoretical grasp, constructing a whirligig effect where true and false, reality and theater, become indistinguishable from one another.[169]

Disconcerting and disorienting, *Les Nègres* is centered around a present-absent scene of violence: the ritual rape and murder of a white woman by a group of black actors (directed, in a

[167] Although certain contemporary diversity style guidelines suggest capitalizing the word "black" to refer to the shared sense of history, community, and identification among those subjects who either self-identify or are identified as black, I choose not to do so in this chapter. Throughout *Les Nègres,* Genet himself almost always capitalizes both "Nègre" and "Noir" when these are used as nouns. He also capitalizes the noun "Blanc," likely to intentionally create the idea of an ideologically invested and unified white enemy. Fred Moten, who will be an important interlocuter in this chapter regarding questions of race, does not capitalize the noun, nor the adjective, nor the term "blackness." Because the theoretical framework of this dissertation relies upon a structuralist approach to language, in which discursive effects that escape the intention of speakers are precisely what constitute language, this type of normative (i.e. not meant to be performative) gesture would be out of place here.
See: Rachele Kanigele, *The Diversity Style Guide* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2019); Mike Laws, "Why we capitalize 'Black' (and not 'white')," *Columbia Journalism Review,* June 16, 2020, https://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.ph; Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Case for Capitalizing the *B* in Black," *The Atlantic,* June 18, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/.
[168] Jean Genet, *Les Nègres* (Décines: L'Arbalète, 1960), p. 24.
[169] Sartre refers to the whirligig effect produced by Genet's theatrical writings in his text on *Les Bonnes.*
See: Jean-Paul Sartre, "Les Bonnes," in *Saint Genet, Comédien et Martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), p. 675-690.

certain sense, by Archibald) that present themselves both as clowns and revolutionaries.[170] The complicated and opaque theatricality of the play posits a repetitive temporality in which the ritual is supposedly repeated every night before the audience, similarly to a run of shows, however with no predetermined final performance. The play also sets up a dizzying representative schema in which a black theater troupe plays black and white characters who admit their status as actors putting on a fake show in order to distract the audience from their revolutionary activities offstage. Onstage, these actors thus "break the third wall" by highlighting the theatricality of the theater, but somehow their doing so does not solidify the boundaries between stage and spectator, or performance and reality, but renders them even more uncertain. When Archibald exclaims that the blacks onstage are *involved* in the lives of the spectators, he therefore intimates something quite sinister: the non-identity of the blacks to themselves and the whirligig of continual disidentification they set in motion are what will haunt the spectators long after they have left the theater.

In the original 1958 edition of the play and in all subsequent reprintings of the text, Genet's brief preface indicates how the play is to be received, insisting that it is intended for a white audience and thus must always be performed in front of *at least* one white person.[171] Genet even goes so far as to say that should the audience be entirely composed of black spectators, the stage hands will distribute white masks to all of them at the entry to the theater. And finally, Genet reiterates, covering all his bases, "Et si les Noirs refusent les masques qu'on utilise un

[170] It is worth pointing out that, at least in the American context, the staging of such a crime could not but evoke the brutal murder of the 14-year-old African American boy Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi in 1955. Till was tortured and shot in the head after being accused of whistling at then 21-year-old Carolyn Bryant. Fred Moten comments extensively on the image of Emmett Till's broken body and how it provokes a questioning of the hegemony of the visible through the resonances that emanate from his body as an open wound.
See: Fred Moten, "Visible Music," in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 71-232.

[171] When he wrote the play, Genet composed a longer version of this preface, but it wouldn't be published until long after his death, in 2002.
See: Jean Genet, "Préface inédite des 'Nègres' in *Jean Genet, Théâtre complet*, eds. Michel Corvin and Albert Dichy, (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), p. 835-844.

mannequin."[172] It's a strange request indeed, and one that seems to contradict theater's disinterestedness—the supposed universality of its mimesis which makes the events that it stages both recognizable and potentially pedagogical. But Genet is clearly interested in neither verisimilitude nor pedagogy; his belief in the theater's powers of transformation is rather related to the presence of the body onstage.

In *Les Nègres,* this complicated presence is articulated through gesture as both a guarantee of the authenticity of the ritualistic sacrifice that takes place (the assurance of the distribution of roles and the performance of those roles) *and* as a remainder, the materiality of the black body that resists all meaningfulness, as well as the legitimacy of the ritual and its sacred separation from everyday life. The ritual or ceremonial gesture is, in other words, meant to at once establish and interrupt its own function of reinforcing the symbolic order. The hieratic, ceremonious, and unifying quality of the ritual gesture is thus coupled with and inseparable from a divisiveness that disrupts the possibility of unity, of an origin, or a "pure" actualization. What takes place on stage is what the poet and scholar Fred Moten calls the actualization of blackness, or a reproduction of the disruption of a primal scene as origin; in the case of this particular play, I argue that this actualization of blackness (which may actually be more accurately described as a *virtualization*) takes on the form of the ritual gesture gone astray, or the ritual that develops all of its disturbances and refines them into its most critical constitutive elements.[173]

If we understand the ritual gesture to be constituent of Genet's theater practice as it is theorized and "realized" in *Les Nègres,* then theater's essential element, or its most theatrical

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[172] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 7.

[173] Moten, in the preface to his book *In the Break; The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition,* ascribes to black performance a critical power to disrupt the paradigms of origin and capture. As linked to voice, flesh, phonic matter, maternal reproduction (invagination), and accented speech, blackness can be ontologically defined as disrupting racist, capitalist, patriarchal systems of power that reinforce themselves via the abstractions of both economic and linguistic value.
See: Moten, "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream," in *In the Break,* p. 1-24.

attribute, according to Genet, is its inherent possibility of interruption, the making visible and audible a series of intervals. The gestures of Genet's characters can be read as moments that articulate how, in the theater, the separation touched upon and re-enacted in every theatrical performance is *originary*—it goes back, in other words, to an original power structure or desire and dismantles its conditions of possibility. The scenes offered up on Genet's theatrical stage can be understood as primary scenes that betray their own originary repression through the emission of ritual gestures gone astray.[174]

In what follows, I closely read a series of thematically (rather than chronologically) organized scenes from *Les Nègres* to reconstruct the play's political aesthetics around the question of the ritual gesture that interrupts itself. I choose to interpret Genet's theatrical politics by mobilizing a handful of thinkers whose concepts can contribute to constructing what I have called a politics of the possible—a politics and a mode of critique that privilege the suspension of means-end schemas in favor of the virtual, unthought, and unrealized potentialities at work in images, texts, and voices. This reading of Genet runs counter to the canonical Sartrean interpretation of the former's work in existentialist terms, deliberately bringing out and valorizing all those elements at work in Genet's text that Sartre criticized and diminished for having represented moments of unfreedom, objectification, or mythology.

While Sartre draws out of Genet's texts a compelling interpretation of images as hollow, emptied out of meaning, and fixed as an eternal form of Being, he represses the infinite side of the image, of death as a continuous disappearance that overflows the fixed nature of the image and

[174] Genet himself, in a letter to Antoine Bourseiller, writes of the theater as consisting in the possibility of a gesture or a word to go astray or to "not have its place." He writes: "La féerie dont je parle n'a pas besoin de miroirs, d'étoffes somptueuses, de meubles baroques : elle est dans une voix qui se casse sur un mot – alors qu'elle devrait se casser sur un autre – mais il faut trouver le mot et la voix ; elle est (la féerie) dans un geste qui n'est pas à sa place à cet instant ; elle est dans le petit doigt qui s'est trompé…"
See: Genet, "Lettres à Antoine Bourseiller," *Théâtre complet,* p. 903.

throws it into becoming. Against Sartre, my reading thus draws closer to the theatrical concepts created and experimented by Antonin Artaud and his theater of cruelty, a theater in which the ritualistic violence of *Les Nègres,* with its emphasis on a minimally signifying gestural language, finds its originary echoes. The glossolalic screeching of Artaud—configured in *Les Nègres* as insolent, a-signifying laughter—is taken up and reconfigured by Fred Moten as what he calls "the resistance of the object" located in the sounding of the slave Aunt Hester's scream.

If the emphasis on ritual rather than reality renders the historical context of *Les Nègres* rather ambiguous, the play nonetheless openly situates the diegesis within the context of French colonialism. At the end of the play, after the re-enactment of the ritual killing in which one of the blacks has stood in for the white victim, the white judges descend from their posts high above in the flies and join the blacks on the ground level of the stage, indicating that they have arrived "under colonial skies." This encounter in the "native land" is staged as the first time that the whites confront the blacks *in person,* and they seem to have come to dole out their final judgement, which is, at the last minute, transformed into a promise of absolution: "En échange d'un crime nous apportions son pardon et l'absolution du criminel."[175] The blacks, however, refuse this absolution and instead reclaim their crime as the object of an originary criminality so powerful that it cannot be recognized by the white judges; it is capable of destroying both the whites and their powers of judgement. While Jared Sexton argues that the slave's powers of reasoning are only recognized in the context of the juridical as indices of criminal intent, rendering all forms of resistance "illegitimate and illegible a priori," Genet offers an alternative form of criminality that resists by activating the virtual potential that emerges from an originary site of violence.[176]

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[175] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 145.
[176] Jared Sexton, "People-of-Colorblindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," *Social Text* 28, no. 2, (Summer, 2010): p. 42.

This final scene is interrupted by one of the black revolutionaries named Ville de Saint Nazaire—the only character who crosses the boundary between onstage and offstage, or false appearance and real appearance—who arrives bearing the news that a traitor has been executed. The white judges remove their masks to receive this news, reminding us of their complicity with the blacks (they are all revolutionaries, after all), then put them back on, insisting that they are willing to go on "to the bitter end" with the performance. In what follows, the white judges, who have been ordered by their queen to commit a collective suicide, die a series of strange, syncopated deaths before finally exiting the stage, followed by the blacks.

If the play begins with a decisive cut that collapses a previously established distance—via Archibald's direct address of the audience—it ends on much more ambiguous terms. The suicide/execution of the whites by the blacks seems to reinforce their respective roles, even though the audience knows these to be mere distractions. We are left wondering, as Archibald does of Diouf, who seems to have a hard time transitioning back to his authentic self from the role of the to-be-murdered white woman, if these characters are still *playing*, or if they are now speaking for themselves: "Mais, il joue encore ou il parle en son nom?"[177] It is this very doubt, situated in the minimal difference between roles or between realities, that constitutes the movement of the play; we might say that the interval between character and actor, or between two roles, has been radically *included* within the space of the theatrical, rather than excluded.

All the while, as Genet indicates in the longer preface to the play published for the first time in 2002, the whole spectacle is meant to show the white audience their own fantasy of blackness, to play it out before them and make it wound them, or at the very least, plant the seeds of doubt in their minds. Genet theorizes the play as an attempt to bombard the oppressor with his

[177] Genet, *Les Nègres*, p. 164.

own fantasmatic images of the oppressed subject reduced to servility—in other words, the images of blackness that the whites need in order to establish themselves as white. If these images are "charming" and "reassuring", they can also quickly be transformed into something more sinister. Genet writes, "Elle n'est qu'une image, et c'est semblable à elle qu'il essaiera de transformer l'opprimé. Si cette image, qui d'abord est en lui, tout à coup inquiétait l'oppresseur?"[178] Something in Genet's theater must *disquiet* the white spectator in a fundamental way, such that the symbolic and social order upon which all of their identifications rest is unsettled. The ritual gesture gone astray is the theatrical means by which this breaking apart of the symbolic is administered.

Les Nègres is a radical text that constructs both a politics of theater and a politics of race, both of which draw upon the aesthetic power that emerges from an interruption of origin or wholeness of being—the insistence of the radical interval. But while Genet's aesthetic politics can clearly be put into dialogue with Fred Moten's concept of black performance, thus allowing for a crucial update in the critical discourse on Genet's theater poetics, he could not be categorized as an abolitionist, nor as a communist in Moten's sense of the term.[179] And though Genet's text makes

[178] Genet, "Préface inédite des 'Nègres'," in *Théâtre complet,* p. 838.

[179] Moten links the possibility of communism to the very specific version of black radicalism that he outlines in his theory. Thus Marx, for example, can "point to but not be communist," given that he elided the question of slavery in his work and completely missed the potential of the slave who, as a "speaking commodity," contains the most radical potential for disrupting a system of value and, thus, capitalism. I would question Moten's reading of Marx, and demand of it more precision when it comes to defining slaves as commodities under capitalism. From the Marxian perspective, slaves cannot truly be considered commodities because they are not produced according to the imperatives of commodity production. They *cannot* be produced according to these imperatives, for insofar as slaves exist, the imperatives have not been universalized. Labor power becoming a commodity (which, along with value, is an essential and indeed determining characteristic of capitalism) implies its universalization in the social, and an institution like chattel slavery must therefore—again, according to Marx—be either minor or nonexistent. The question of the continued existence of slavery and non-waged labor under global capitalism is of course an interesting one, and it may be addressed in Marxist terms through the concept of the surplus population. Besides the fact that slaves are not commodities, and thus do not speak as commodities, Moten's argument also contains some logical ambiguities when it comes to the question of value. His thesis that there is something—some kind of value—prior to exchange (of both commodities and signifiers) does not really strike the blow he thinks it does, for Marx also conceived of a value that is prior to exchange: the value created in commodity production that is only "realized" in exchange. Moten cannot take up (a theory of) value as an object of critique in Marxist terms without understanding it as being already, before exchange, a vector of abstract domination.

explicit reference to chattel slavery as a primary scene of blackness, he is more interested—like the *Négritude* authors emerging alongside him in the French post-war period—in creating images that link the subjects of colonized Africa to those of enslaved America. While Moten identifies the chattel slave as an ontological paradigm of blackness, Genet constructs an ontology of blackness out of a series of global scenes of violence that can then be linked to nothingness as what is not just non-being, but an excess that is both infinite and infinitesimal, a more-and-less-than-nothing that opens onto creative forces of becoming.

Genet's Theater

Les Nègres belongs to Genet's second cycle of supposedly more political plays. In 1955 he began writing *Le Balcon* and *Les Nègres,* both of which focused on revolutionary politics and their relation to the theatrical staging of power, the sexual, and death. *Les Paravents,* written and reworked shortly after and performed for the first time in 1961 in Berlin (in an abridged and dubiously translated version), would not appear on the French stage until April of 1966 at the *Théâtre de l'Odéon.* French audiences weren't yet ready for Roger Blin's production, which provoked violent demonstrations both inside and outside of the theater, as well as political stirrings at the National Assembly that had to be quelled by then minister of culture André Malraux.[180] Since the play loosely evoked the Algerian war (Algerian independence had been won in 1961),

For more on the abstract domination of value in capitalism see: Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital* (London: Verso, 2023).

[180] An excerpt from the summary of the parliamentary debate that took place on October 26, 1966 in response to the political outrage provoked by *Les Paravents* reads: "La représentation des *Paravents* a donné lieu à une véritable empoignade des critiques, des spectateurs et des personnalités officielles, puisque le débat a été porté jusqu'à la Chambre des députés, les uns (de gauche et d'extrême gauche) défendant la liberté d'expression, d'autres (conservateurs ou partisans de l'Algérie française) estimant que le Théâtre national qu'était l'Odéon-Théâtre de France n'avait pas pour mission de gaspiller les deniers publics pour vilipender l'armée, la patrie et les bienséances." See: "Compte rendu du débat parlementaire du 26 octobre 1966 à l'Asemblée nationale," in *Théâtre complet,* p. 1364.

all of its content was criticized as if it were seeking to create some kind of faithful representation of the French colonial regime and the revolutionaries who fought to dismantle it.

Before the writing and publication of these later plays, Genet had already published scripts for *'Adame Miroir, Haute Surveillance, Les Bonnes,* and *Splendid's* between 1944 and 1948.[181] This first cycle of plays represents, within Genet's oeuvre, the creative beginnings of a dramaturgical practice that would culminate in the eventual rejection of "the whole traditional structure, intellectual, logical and conceptual, of the European theatre."[182] In contrast to the later plays though, both *Haute Surveillance* and *Les Bonnes* rely upon an unexpected level of restraint; each play is relatively short and succinct, takes place in only one locale, has a small cast of only three main characters, and is scenographically rather simple. These plays focus on a dialectical and sexed power relation between three characters, and both culminate in an act of extreme violence. *Les Bonnes,* although it was put on by the extremely well-known and highly respected Louis Jouvet (who refused an offer to direct the *Comédie Française* because he was too busy with other projects), received an ambiguous reception from audiences and critics. Although it won the *Prix de la Pléiade* in 1947, Genet later considered it a failure, even if Sartre continued to praise it as an existentialist masterpiece.[183]

These two cycles of plays can of course be said to share many similarities, and the argument that the later works are by definition more "mature" wouldn't hold if one were to engage in close readings of the texts that took into account Genet's politics as constituted with and as an aesthetics. One could easily point out, for example, that the later plays offer up the same tripartite structure,

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[181] *'Adame Miroir* was written by Genet as a ballet and *Splendid's* was only published posthumously, so the two pieces, though still considered part of the early drama cycle, are much less discussed in Genet scholarship.
[182] Richard Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 285.
[183] Sartre considered *Les Bonnes* to be one of Genet's major achievements. He calls the play, "Le plus extraordinaire exemple de ces tourniquets d'être et d'apparence, d'imaginaire et de réalité…"
See: Sartre, "Les Bonnes," in *Saint Genet,* p. 675.

only now using groups rather than individuals (the colonizers, the colonized, and the absolute others, in *Les Paravents*; the revolutionaries, the sex workers, and the police in *Le Balcon*). And, as Lucien Goldmann has pointed out, referring to *Haute Surveillance, Les Bonnes, Les Nègres, Le Balcon,* and *Les Parevents* all at once, "The action of these plays unfolds in a static, insufficient universe; but this insufficiency is compensated by a fantasy ritual which permits the ruled to identify either with the rulers or with subjects who end domination through revolution."[184] The static universe is constructed through the tableau image, and indeed the ritual fantasy is always present, though I will argue that the ritual gesture does not function to establish identifications, but rather to disrupt and transform them.

Let us return for a moment to Sartre's critical biography, *Saint Genet: comédien et martyr,* which was published in 1952, four years before the appearance of *Le Balcon.* This play marked a significant shift in Genet's conception of theater that indeed moves away from being so easily assimilated into an existentialist reading. Moving away from the more straightforward, psychological character structure of the earlier plays, which could easily be squeezed into Sartre's dialectics, Genet seems, in *Le Balcon,* to accelerate and intensify all those things that Sartre found problematic in his novels: the imaginary, the sacred, an indistinguishability between being and appearance, a "diabolical" use of language, and, importantly, an emphasis on gesture rather than action.[185] Though Sartre doesn't outrightly deny the importance of these aspects of Genet's writing, he certainly does treat them as mere stages that must be passed through so that Genet can arrive on the other side of the dialectic, there where existence appears, or the possibility of Genet

[184] Lucien Goldmann, "The Theater of Genet: A Sociological Study," *The Drama Review* 12, no. 2, (Winter, 1968): p. 4.

[185] On the "squeezing"—we are reminded of Susan Sontag's famous quip that Sartre "drowned" Genet in this "cancer of a book" (which Sontag nevertheless admired in many of its other aspects).
See: Susan Sontag, "Sartre's *Saint Genet"* in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1961), p. 93-99.

the subject to claim himself as his own "diabolical cause." In Sartre's words, "Genet se pose comme une cause de soi démoniaque—cette subjectivité impensable qu'il touche au-delà et en deçà de l'être, au-delà et en-deçà du possible, c'est *l'existence*."[186]

According to the Sartre of *Saint Genet,* after having made of himself an absolute object, and then recuperating his life of crime and abjection by wanting it just as it is, Genet finally arrives at a morally ideal position where he can assign meaning to his actions. He transforms the pure will to evil initiated in the second step of the dialectic into a subjection of that will to his original "nature," realizing the existentialist project of becoming his own transcendental cause. Sartre paints a picture in which the realization of freedom is contingent upon a Hegelian relation between self and other, in which, according to Susan Sontag, "each new level of freedom carries with it a new knowledge of the self."[187]

In Sartre's reading, Genet's writing is assimilated into this project of developing a knowledge of the self, and thus subjected to certain linguistic demands. Language must function to impose meaning on action, so that speaking or writing means approaching an ideal end and introducing change into the world; in other words, it means to act in accordance with one's existential freedom. Unlike the poet or the "mute painter," the ideal writer (of prose) uses words to signify, and thus to create meaning. And although Sartre certainly never argues that the prose writer enjoys a relationship of transparency or absolute appropriation to linguistic signs or to language as a whole ("le parleur est en *situation* dans le langage, investi par les mots"), he explicitly rejects what, for him, is a poetic relation to language in which "le langage est une structure du monde extérieur."[188] Sartre argues that the prose writer, because she inhabits language

[186] Sartre, *Saint Genet,* p. 210.
[187] Sontag, "Sartre's *Saint Genet,"* p. 97.
[188] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 19.

from within, is able to make use of words as if they were unified elements, extensions of her senses that make up a "corps verbal" with which to extend her action upon the world.[189] This is in contrast to the poet, who positions herself outside of language and sees words "à l'envers," exiling herself from "la condition humaine."[190]

Sartre's pre-structuralist approach to language is linked to a humanism that Genet ultimately rejects. In fact, Genet's emphasis on gesture could be described as explicitly anti-humanist for exactly the reasons Sartre points out: like poetic language, gesture disintegrates the boundaries between being and appearance, threatening to efface reality entirely. And, unlike actions, gestures are *what cannot belong to the subject*—they liquidate both subjects and the objects they might act upon, and thus, the meaning that might be assigned to the latter. In Sartre's words, "Ces gestes exceptionnels qui sont des actes retournés enveloppent l'universel et sa contestation, l'impératif social les habite mais renversé, devenu l'exigence magique des choses…"[191] The universality of the human condition is "covered over" by the gesture, assimilated to an upside down use of language.

Sartrean existentialism can thus be said to take part in the will to a "universal science of language" that Moten will criticize and assimilate into humanistic yet racist, capitalist, and patriarchal systems of domination insofar as all of these rely upon a concept of (linguistic) value as abstraction from the materiality of sounded speech.[192] It is in these terms that we can argue for Genet's *Les Nègres,* precisely because of its radical racial politics, as a profoundly un-existentialist

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[189] Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?,* p. 20.
[190] Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?,* p. 20.
[191] Sartre, *Saint Genet,* p. 298.
[192] "Above all, they (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Saussure) open a possibility of a critique of the valuation of meaning over content and the reduction of phonic matter and syntactic 'degeneracy' in the early modern search for a universal language and the late modern search for a universal science of language. This disruption of the Enlightenment linguistic project is of fundamental importance since it allows a rearrangement of the relationship between notions of human freedom and notions of human essence."
See: Moten, *In the Break,* p. 7.

work. Genet's emphasis on gesture as an "excess beyond signification" indeed aims to develop something that is, as Sartre himself calls it, "en deçà des choses"—something that is approached through poetic language.[193] What if, in reading Genet, we took seriously his interest in going *below*, rather than forcing him to always go, in Sartrean fashion, beyond? We could say that the territory of the gesture is precisely this below, where the power of theatricality to decompose identities is also revealed to be a power to stage this decomposition as a productive and creative activity.[194] In other words, the decomposition of identity leads not to an absence, but rather to a sort of rotting that has to do with the *infime* and the *infini*.

The Ritual Setup

The setup into which we are thrown in the opening moments of *Les Nègres* establishes a complicated relation between two different groups: the blacks, dancing around a catafalque on the ground-level of the stage, and the "white" members of the court, seated on chairs high above the stage on a platform that goes all the way up to the flies. There are multiple other landings set up at different heights along both sides of the stage. Genet insists that at the start of the performance the curtain must be drawn rather than raised so that what is revealed first to the spectators is the co-presence onstage of these different levels, the way in which relations are established spatially and, conversely, movement of the actors onstage configures relation. If the curtain were to be raised, we would see the blacks first, *without the white judges;* but this will not do, for their very being

[193] The full quote is worth noting here: "L'homme qui parle est au-delà des mots, près de l'objet ; le poète est en deçà. Pour le premier, ils sont domestiques ; pour le second, ils restent à l'état sauvage."
See: Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?,* p. 19.
[194] See: Scott Durham, *Phantom Communities; The Simulacrum and the Limits of Postmodernism* (Stanford: Stanford university Press, 1998).

depends upon the presence of the whites, and the performance they are putting on dedicates and submits itself to their powers of judgment.

In the scenographic notes, Genet also gives precise indications for the characters' costumes: the blacks dancing around the catafalque and decorating it with flowers are to be dressed in eveningwear—garish, sequined evening gowns for the women ("le plus grand mauvais goût")[195] and suits with white ties and tan shoes for the men. The five court members—the Queen, her Valet, the Governor, the Judge, and the Missionary—are all wearing white masks that reveal a band of their black skin underneath ("un visage de blanc posé de telle façon qu'on voie une large bande noire autour, et même les cheveaux crépus"). The Queen's mask is painted with a sad, drooping mouth, so that she is permanently—at least visibly—upset. Each of the court members is decorated or accompanied by a set of objects that indicate their status: the Queen is holding a scepter and a crown sits atop her head; the Valet holds a towel on his arm which, Genet indicates, will be used to wipe away the Queen's tears; the Governor holds a pair of field glasses; the Judge wears a black and red robe; and the Missionary, perhaps most spectacularly, is decorated with a set of rings, a white robe, and a pectoral cross.

The play begins as an interruption of sorts, for it starts when the black characters who had been dancing to a Mozart minuet around the decorated catafalque—observed from above by the interested court members—*stop short* (the exact phrase from the English translation) in their dance, walk to the edge of the stage, then turn around ninety degrees and bow, first to the court, and then to the audience. The blacks thereby initiate themselves and the audience members into a ritual that begins in the interval of interruption, demonstrating already its own inability to manifest an origin that does not repress part of itself, or that does not already contain a repetition.

[195] Genet, *Les Nègres*, p. 16.

Something essential is touched upon in this initiatory gesture, for it highlights the radical and, perhaps exclusionary, difference between the performance of a ritual and the performance of a play. "Between ritual and theatre," Richard Webb points out, "is the difference between manifestation and mimesis."[196] While the participant in the ritual must adhere to its status as a process of actualization, the theatergoer (in the form of both actor and spectator) *knows* that what they are either observing or participating in is fictive, a mimetic exercise whose powers have a carefully circumscribed *limit.* Webb, who is a careful reader of *Les Nègres,* will go on to argue that Genet's play is politically powerful insofar as it disturbs theater's mimetic boundaries, creating a point of impact between stage and auditorium where what is performed is no longer mimetic, but actual. What becomes actualized in *Les Nègres,* for Webb, is the "shock of confrontation" between the white audience and the black theater troupe, specifically at the end of the play, when the whites unmask themselves, unveiling an image of black solidarity onstage.[197]

I locate the play's politics elsewhere—at that place where theater's taking place (rather than producing mimesis) happens via a ritual that must interrupt itself in order to constitute itself as ritual. The dichotomy of disbelief versus belief (theatrical spectatorship versus participation in ritual) is overturned so that spectators enter a realm where disbelief is turned against the self—the ritual here develops its latent powers of disidentification. *Les Nègres* thus stages a theater without limits, a theater where the actualizing power of ritual is transformed—via a divisiveness that divides and separates the origin from itself—into a *virtualization.*

Genet with Artaud and Moten

[196] Richard C. Webb, "Ritual, Theater, and Jean Genet's *The Blacks,*" *Theatre Journal* 31, no. 4, (Dec, 1979): p. 452.
[197] Webb, "Ritual, Theater, and Jean Genet's *The Blacks,"* p. 459.

The virtual might be the essential category with which to link Genet's theater to that of his predecessor, Antonin Artaud, who also theorized a theater without limits. Artaud wanted his *théâtre de la cruauté* to enact a violent disruption of humanism on a cosmic level, as a reminder that "the sky can still fall on our heads." It could do so precisely because of its powers of virtualization—its existence as a space and a place where acts are no longer goal-oriented and, beyond that, are *useless* for actuality.[198] Artaud's famous definition of the theater reads: "…la gratuité immediate qui pousse à des actes inutiles et sans profit pour l'actualité."[199] As Samuel Weber underlines, virtualization for Artaud was not so much something that would run counter to actualization, but rather, a force that would render the latter impossible through the emergence of a violence that, like the plague, destroys all possibility of meaning, unity, and appropriation.[200] In this virtual theater, Artaud argues, gestures, sounds, and movements must be singular acts that will replace meaning with a purer form of signification.

Like Genet, Artaud's emphasis on all those scenographic and material elements that appear in excess of meaning is coupled with a theorization of singularity as emerging through a series of violent interruptions. He imagines "…un langage de gestes faits pour évoluer dans l'espace et qui ne peuvent avoir de sens en dehors de lui."[201] Gestures and their meaning must be tied to a singular space and place onstage. They thus defy language's usual subordination to value—to the necessary abstraction of materiality in the form of sounded speech and, subsequently, its rematerializing inscription that marks the spot of a particular place.

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[198] "…l'alchimie comme le théâtre sont des *arts* pour ainsi dire virtuels, et qui ne portent pas plus leur fin que leur réalité en eux-mêmes."
See: Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 71.
[199] Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double,* p. 33.
[200] Samuel Weber, "The Virtual Reality of Theater: Antonin Artaud," in *Theatricality as Medium,* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 292.
[201] Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double,* p. 92.

Paradoxically, it is because of the gesture's being tied to its singular taking place—what Artaud calls its being "l'idée lui-même"—that its origin is interrupted.[202] This interruptive quality of gestures on their way to materialization is, in one instance, described by Artaud in the following terms: "C'est pourquoi une image, une allégorie, une figure qui masque ce qu'elle voudrait révéler ont plus de signification pour l'esprit que les clartés apportées par les analyses de la parole."[203] The gesture, as image, is thus interrupted insofar as the consistency of its signification depends upon that signification masking itself. A theater of cruelty demands a radical form of expression that hides what it manifests, opposing to the "manifestation-illusion of nature" an emptiness in thought that Artaud considers key to constructing a non-psychological metaphysics. It is by achieving the virtuality of this emptiness in thought that gestures can attain the status of true signs, and that the theater can assure itself that there will be "pas de mouvement perdu."[204]

The idea of virtuality as developed in Artaud is key to understanding how Genet transforms ritual from a process that reinscribes and reinforces the symbolic order into a radical political expression. Genet draws from the traditional concept of ritual the idea of a non-mimetic repetition, a singular and yet anoriginal gesture. But if in the traditional ritual the singular gestures of actualization that take place are re-actualizing a once fully present origin, in Genet's theatrical ritual these gestures instead inaugurate a space of virtuality, in which every possible origin has already interrupted itself. The Queen is right when she accuses the blacks of subjecting her and

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[202] Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double,* p. 93.
[203] Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double,* p. 108.
[204] Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double,* p. 150.
In the scenographic notes for *Les Paravents,* Genet advises actors that there should be "pas de gestes inutiles" in the play. This comment might at first seem strange, given the play's otherwise flamboyant and excessive stylings (an extremely complicated stage set-up involving the use of movable screens on multiple levels, brilliantly colored and garish costumes, prosthetics, difficult if not impossible staging, a large cast, multiple diverse settings…), but makes more sense given the Artaudian context; the gesture would be useless if it were to be *un-singular*. It must be instead tied to its unique taking place—taking part in an expression that, by hiding what it manifests, prolongs its sense, and becomes a "true sign."
See: Genet, "Quelques indications," in *Théâtre complet,* p. 756.

her entourage to an insidious ritual: "Chaque soir, et à chaque seconde, vous vous livrez, sur moi, sur les miens, je le sais, à un rite saugrenu et néfaste."[205] The disruptive ritual the blacks perform is so injurious that it is felt to penetrate the life of the whites "at every second," even if it only takes place at a designated time each night. The contamination of diachronic time by the chaos of synchrony is indeed the sign of a ritual that veers far too much on the theatrical, threatening to create a space of passage between these two temporalities, or between the living and the dead.[206]

Moving from Artaud to Moten provides us with the key for understanding the symbolic order as a political order with particular consequences for black sujects. Artaud's theater of asignifying gestures is taken up by Moten as "the politico-aesthetics of a surplus of content irreducible to identity in or for itself, but held, rather, in identity's relation to a general upheaval."[207] This preservation of a relation to chaos is what I referred to above as an emptiness in thought, or what, in Deleuzian terms, might be called the inclusion of the irrational interval in the image (this will be developed more in the following chapter on Bresson's *Pickpocket*). Moten writes about Artaud in a chapter that puts him in dialogue with Beauford Delaney, an American avant-garde painter who moved from Harlem to Paris and, suffering from mental illness and Alzheimer's in the final years of his life, came under the care of the same doctor that had previously treated Artaud: Gaston Ferdière. Moten understands Delaney's decline in Paris as symbolically representing the usurpation of his creative powers of interruption—in his method of laying color onto his paintings in a thick impasto, or in the shrill, cutting voices he would hear in hallucinatory states—by the "asylum of the West."[208] And yet, some kind of potential is not usurped, but is

[205] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 151.
[206] Giorgio Agamben has a brilliant exposition of the relationship between ritual and play in his essay "In Playland: Reflections on History and Play" in *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience,* trans. Liz Heron, (New York: Verso, 1993), p. 73-96.
[207] Moten, "The Sentimental Avant-garde," in *In the Break,* p. 35.
[208] Moten, "The Sentimental Avant-garde," in *In the Break,* p. 41.

virtually preserved so that it might be released at a later date, precisely the "political-economic, ontological, and aesthetic surplus" of the gestures of voice and body, of speech and painting.[209] This surplus is, for Moten, the place of a "side-stepping" of the white supremacist "gaze" that jostles the entire apparatus of vision; it is the material excess that, by overflowing identity, interrupts origin.[210]

The dialogue Moten constructs between Delaney and Artaud resonates here not only for the political stakes it excavates, but also because it allows for thinking about *Les Nègres* in between the French and American contexts very concretely. Indeed, Genet's transatlantic references are exemplary not only of his desire to construct a certain politics of race, but also of his awareness of a particular historical context in which exchanges between America and France were particularly fruitful for both the emerging anti-colonialist movement and the civil rights movement. On the American side, the play premiered in New York at St. Mark's Theater in 1961 and ran for a total of 1,408 performances, making it the longest running off-Broadway show in history. It also famously provoked the outrage of some of the most important black intellectuals and artists in New York at the time, including Lorraine Hansberry and Langston Hughes.[211] Sixty years later, the debates that emerged at the time over the different ways in which to make art that celebrates black revolt and critiques white racism are still going strong. *Les Nègres* thus remains timely and still manages to unsettle all those questions of representation, experience, and critique that have always been crucial to constructing a politics of race.

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[209] Moten, "The Sentimental Avant-garde," in *In the Break,* p. 41.
[210] "Whereas a powerful strain of postcolonial theory structures itself as the reversal of that direction and its gaze, I'm interested in the discovery of a necessary appositionality in this encounter, an almost hidden step (to the side and back) or gesture, a glance or glancing blow, that is the condition of possibility of a genuine aesthetic representation and analysis—in painting and prose—of that encounter."
See: Moten, "The Sentimental Avant-garde," in *In the Break,* p. 34.
[211] John Warrick, "*The Blacks* and Its Impact on African American Theatre in the United States," in *Jean Genet: Performance and Politics,* eds. Clare Finburgh, Carl Lavery, and Maria Shevtsova, (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), p. 131.

If we have not gone beyond the violence and domination of blacks by capitalist, patriarchal, and white supremacist logics against which this play speaks, we have also perhaps not gone beyond the more theoretical debates it resuscitates about what it means to think about the relationship between theatricality and blackness. If Moten emphasizes voice and gesture in the interruption of origin, it is no surprise that theatricality plays a central role in his investigation of black aesthetics. In the introduction to *In the Break*, Moten re-reads Saidiya V. Hartman's interpretation of the scream as described in the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* a text that is central to Hartman's own claim that theatricalizing the black body, although it relied upon empathizing and humanizing the black subject, served only to "tether, bind, and oppress."[212] For Hartman, Douglas's narrative describing the spectacular beating of his Aunt Hester is an account that makes clear the stakes of theatricality for the black subject: "the terrible spectacle dramatizes the origin of the subject."[213]

Moten returns to Hartman's reading in order to draw out its most radical but as yet untheorized potentials. He is interested in the ways in which Hartman draws attention to the original scene of violence against the black subject—which is also the birth of the black subject—by making of it at once a recitation and a repression. The "conjunction of reproduction and disappearance" enacted by Hartman's reading (in which she refuses to reproduce the scene of violence) leads Moten to theorize a counter-tradition of black performance that is parasitic on the black theatricality of minstrelsy and blackface.[214] The black radical tradition can then be reconstructed and recharacterized as a disruptive, anoriginary repetition of the work of black critique through artworks. *Les Nègres* can be seen as a point of dialogue between Genet's politics

[212] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 5.
[213] Hartman, *Scenes*, p. 2.
[214] Moten, *In the Break,* p. 5.

and the problematic that Moten and Hartman point to—black theatricality as constitutive of black subjectivity. As a political project, Genet's play can be seen to offer up its own version of the theatricality of the black body and its virtual potentials. The blacks in Genet's play at once offer up a counter-theatricality that clearly attacks white spectatorship, while also performing the "hidden step" to the side that Moten refers to, a step that—like the ritual gesture gone astray—breaks apart the founding political order.

Qu'est-ce que c'est donc un noir?

If I locate the politics of *Les Nègres* in the ritual gesture's interruption of itself, or its becoming virtual, it remains to be seen what the relationship is between this claim and Moten's theorization of "the anoriginality of black performance."[215] In other words, reassessing the play's radical politics in an attempt to update the critical discourse on Genet's work requires the staging of an encounter between a theorization of theater's ritualistic powers and the powers of anoriginality or disruption that belong to or are enacted *only* by blackness.[216] Genet also understood *Les Nègres* to be a play that addresses itself to blackness (*not to blacks*—Genet specifies that the play is specifically for whites) as both a historical and an ontological problem. He expresses the twofold nature of blackness as a political question in the play's inscription: "Un soir un comédien me demanda d'écrire une pièce qui serait jouée par des noirs. Mais, qu'est-ce que c'est donc un noir? Et d'abord, c'est de quelle couleur?"[217] On the one hand, Genet historicizes the play as a response to a specific demand—the demand for a play that could be performed by

[215] Moten, *In the Break,* p. 23.
[216] The question of whether "powers of blackness" belong only to black artists or can be ascribed only to works performed by blacks will be, for the most part, elided in this discussion. Though important, these questions are far too complex to be only cursorily addressed.
[217] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 5

black actors[218]; on the other hand, he declines this historical question ontologically by asking not *who* could be considered black, but rather, *what* black(ness) actually *is.*[219]

Genet poses this difficult historical-ontological question through the very act of naming when he titles the play *Les Nègres*—which will be translated into English by Frechtman as *The Blacks*. The title of course evokes the *Négritude* movement, linking Genet's political project to the black internationalism of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor. It also implicitly evokes France's history of colonialism and slavery, since the term *nègre* began to be associated and even interchangeable with the term for slave—*esclave*—with the enactment of Louis XIV's *Code Noir* and the 1723 publication of Jacques Savary's *Dictionnaire universel de commerce.*[220] This explains perhaps why by the beginning of the twentieth century French abolitionists had become attached to the word *noir* to designate the subjects of their political struggle. Frantz Fanon famously wrote about the difference between *les noirs* and *les nègres* in his 1955 polemic "Antillais et africains" for the review *Esprit,* explaining that *noir* was a term that non-African French colonial subjects used to distinguish themselves from African blacks—slaves or *nègres.*[221]

How did *nègre* then go on to become, by the eve of the Second World War, the term that Césaire and Senghor would adopt to create the fraught space of a black internationalism? Historian Brent Hayes Edwards points to Lamine Senghor's 1927 article "Le mot 'nègre'," published in the

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[218] This was not only a representative political demand but also a material one. Keith Q. Warner points out how the New York version of the play, because it was so successful, provided work for a large number of black actors who has previously had a hard time finding roles.
See: Keith Q. Warner, "*Les Nègres*: A Look at Genet's Excursion into Black Consciousness," *CLA Journal* 57, no. 3, (March 2014): p. 194-209.

[219] Moten understands this to be the task that Afro-pessimism (with which he understands himself to be in apposition) sets out for itself: "…to begin to consider *what nothing is,* not from its own standpoint or from any standpoint but from the absoluteness of its generative dispersion of a general antagonism that blackness holds and protects in as critical celebration and degenerative and regenerative preservation."
See: Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *The South Atlantic Quarterly,* 112 vol. 4, (Fall, 2013): p. 742.

[220] Brent Hayes Edwards, "Variations on a Preface" in *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 26.

[221] Frantz Fanon, "Antillais et africains," *Esprit* 23, no. 2 (February 1955): p. 261-269.

first issue of *La voix des nègres*, as a decisive moment for the term's transformation. There, L. Senghor criticizes the colonialist drive to divide black subjects through language by breaking apart the term *nègre* into two terms—*noir* and *nègre*—thus creating another hierarchy to police and manipulate. He goes on to promote the reappropriation of the term *nègre* as the basis of a new anti-imperialist Black solidarity. By the time Césaire reclaims the term for *négritude,* the groundwork has already been laid by L. Senghor, and the term *nègre* has been transformed into its political-cultural equivalent in the United States—black.[222]

Genet's historico-ontological questioning of blackness unfolds within this fraught historical context, and any contemporary reading of *Les Nègres* must take it into account. I understand the productive tensions between Genet and Moten to reflect the ways in which they each conceive of a radical black politics and aesthetics at a particular historical moment. Moten's insistence upon the historical and para-ontological priority of chattel slavery as a paradigm of blackness (blackness being here defined as social death), for example, puts him at odds with the black internationalisms of the post-war period. As his interlocutor Jared Sexton explains, "The deracination of the slave, reduced to a tool, is total, more fundamental than the displacement of the refugee, whose status obtains in a network of persecuted human relations in exile rather than in a collection or dispersal of a class of things."[223] For both Sexton and Moten, the slave's status as *thing* marks and ruptures its very being, while the refugee or colonial subject is merely displaced in the social hierarchy. Genet doesn't attend to these distinctions, inscribing himself into the very tradition that the French term *nègre* historically represents—the construction of an international

[222] Edwards argues that the best translation for "nègre" at the time of the publication of *Les Nègres* is indeed "black," since by that time Black revolutionary thinkers in the United States had also moved on from the previously upheld "negro" and decided to adopt "black" as a positive term.
See: Edwards, "Variations," p. 34-35.
[223] Sexton, "People-of-Colorblindness," p. 41.

black struggle around the figure of the black as both slave *and* colonial subject. This perhaps explains why Genet, rather than re-staging the scene of gratuitous violence against the slave (Moten uses the scene of Frederick Douglass's Aunt Hester and reads her scream as a rematerializing inscription that marks the place of a revaluation of value), imagines blacks that invent their own counter-scene of originary violence in which what takes place (or rather, remains conspicuously absent though continuously evoked) is a gratuitous act of violence against a white woman.

Unlike the violence of the white master against the slave, the ritual killing of the white woman is recognized as a crime and will be judged as such. But Genet's blacks revendicate their own criminality and assimilate it to the essence of black performance. To be a criminal—in the way that Genet understands this role—is not to be socially dead, nor is it to be fatefully included-excluded in the socio-juridical order; rather, it is to inhabit that space of interruption where the originality of a primal scene fails to make itself fully present. The judges repeat several times that they *need* the evidence of the blacks' crime, not just so that they may judge them accordingly, but so that they may *exist* as judges. The crime is understood by Genet as what, by transgressing a juridical order, gives birth to it. It is a self-interrupting origin *par excellence,* a cause that is merely an effect of one of its effects.

It's only at the end of the play that the white judges come to understand the weakness of their position. Throughout the play they had considered the blacks' ritual staging of the murder as a self-incriminating demonstration, a presentation of evidence that might be used against the blacks to incriminate them. But by the end, the whites realize that the ritual, rather than providing material upon which their powers could be exercised, has in fact been surreptitiously undermining this power and the origin upon which it draws. The dawning of this stark realization is first

acknowledged by the Judge, who begins to panic when he realizes that the corpse—the most important proof of the blacks' crime—is missing:

> A vous écouter, il n'y aurait pas de crime puisque pas de cadavre, et pas de coupable puisque pas de crime. Mais qu'on ne s'y trompe pas : un mort, deux morts, un bataillon, une levée en masse de morts on s'en remettra, s'il faut ça pour nous venger ; mais pas de mort du tout, cela pourrait nous tuer.[224]

Here the Judge reveals the insidious logic at work in the court's functioning: it doesn't matter how many deaths there are, only that the whites can prove the truth of guilt in order to avenge themselves. Justice is thus this act of vengeance against the guilty, and has nothing to do with fairness, reasonableness, freedom, or protection. What's more, this version of justice carries itself out in the name of justifying its own existence and is thus infernally caught up in a circular logic. In other words, it continuously seeks to affirm its own origin and, because it fails to do so, requires more and more transgressions against itself—more death. No death at all, as the judge reiterates, *could kill us.* This ironic statement encapsulates the law's functioning as a death machine. *Les Nègres* stages not just the functioning of this machine as one that produces specifically black death, but, additionally, what kinds of virtual scenes and schemes will be released from the ghosts and corpses of those who are already dead and yet still present.

This is why when the Queen suggests, as if it were a favor, that the court pardon the blacks' crime in exchange for a sort of admission of guilt, Felicité responds so vehemently:

> Ah, vraiment? Eh bien, Dahomey ! Dahomey ! Nègres, venez m'épauler. Et qu'on ne laisse pas escamoter le crime. *(A la Reine.)* Personne n'aurait la force de le nier. Il pousse, il pousse, ma belle, il grandit, verdit, il éclate en corolles, en parfums, et c'est toute l'Afrique ce bel arbre, mon crime! Les oiseaux sont venus s'y nicher et dans ses branches la nuit s'y repose.[225]

[224] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 143.
[225] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 146.

The blacks' ultimate political goal—the one that is given form through the "distraction" play—is to throw a wrench in the socio-juridical machine of death the whites have constructed. Doing so requires reclaiming and making use of the interruption of the law's founding origin and reclaiming that interrupting power under the sign of blackness. The transformation of blackness from empty negativity to productive political and aesthetic force takes place via its laying claim to crime and criminality. The Judge himself announces this very principle in a last gasp attempt to save himself right before he is killed by Archibald: "Loi du 18 juillet. Article 1. Dieu étant mort, la couleur noire cesse d'être un péché: elle devient un crime…"[226]

Throughout the play Felicité uses the word "Dahomey" as a sort of rallying cry that at once gathers the blacks together in solidarity and positions their unity as a force to be wielded against the whites.[227] "Dahomey" is in fact the name of a West African kingdom of the Oyo Empire that was one of the most important regional powers in the 18th century before it became a French colony in 1894. Known for its development of elaborate religious practices of voodoo and its all-female military units referred to by Europeans as the "Dahomey Amazons," the Kingdom of Dahomey was also a major supplier of slaves in the Atlantic slave trade. Its political and economic dominance in the continent was intimately linked to this role. To sum up, Dahomey is weighted with all the symbolic implications of its history and the ways in which these have been interpreted and elaborated in European discourse; the images, myths, and imaginaries that circulate around it contribute to the phantasmatic ground upon which the white/black racial dichotomy rests.

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[226] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 173.

[227] In a 1929 article for *La Revue de Paris,* Frank L. Schoell refers to Europe, and France specifically, as the meeting point between "Harlemites" and "Dahoméens." The freedom of movement granted to former slaves and their children allowed for a black internationalism to flourish, as thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes travelled to Paris and Marseille, meeting their African counterparts. Schoell specifically references the neighborhoods of Pigalle, Montmartre, and Montparnasse as gathering places where Harlemites and Dahomeans could meet up—three of Genet's most frequented quarters.
See: Frank L. Schoell, quoted in Edwards, *Variations,* p. 25.

In the context of *Les Nègres,* Dahomey can be understood as a ritual calling up of all these associations that opens onto blackness in all its virtual dimensions—here the latent possibilities of connection between the colonized subjects of Africa, blacks in metropolitan France, the Creole populations of the Caribbean, and North American chattel slaves can be drawn upon and experimented with. Felicité's speaking the word "Dahomey" is an incantatory call that throws all the weight of white civilization back upon itself. If the black subject is, to quote Frantz Fanon, "victime d'un apparaître dont il n'est pas le responsable," then he is also able to make of that "apparaître"—blackness—a commons that is both a virtual space to inhabit collectively and a power to wield against whiteness, which relies upon the consistency of both origin and law.[228] "Dahomey" is a sort of counter-call to the white/colonialist interpolation of black subjects made famous by Fanon—the small child's fearful "Tiens, un nègre!"—that assigns to black subjects the negative supplement of color, or the absence of no color.[229] "Dahomey" takes that Black negativity and transforms it into a transhistorical counter-interpolation of whiteness, an aggressive signaling of the whites' absence of color as a lack of power in criminality.

Felicité, in her riposte to the Queen, invites us to think blackness—if it is to be the possibility of this commons or virtual space—as crime itself. Here the use of the verb "escamoter," which means both to steal and to hide from view, indicates that the blacks' crime must be at once exposed and laid claim to, *yet not avowed*, for an avowal would indicate the summoning of a defense, while what is called for is a more radical claim to a crime that is both indefensible and unjudgeable—a crime that is not an action, but a *gesture* insofar as it cannot be attributed to any subject. But what exactly does Felicité mean when she refers to a crime that is so powerful that no

[228] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire masques blanc* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), p. 27.
[229] Fanon, *Peau noire,* p. 90.

one will be able to negate it? For the white judges, after all, don't seek to negate the crime either, but rather to affirm it—affirm it in such a way that they can fulfill and justify their roles as judges.

This logical impasse—the point at which the blacks claim to affirm their crime against the judges, and the judges claim to affirm the crime against the blacks—reveals the aporia of the law that is not merely a lack or a space of negativity, but rather a lively and creative site of productivity; it is an aporia more akin to Deleuze and Guattari's body without organs, the whole that is less than the sum of its parts, the *infime* that goes infinitely lower and lower, or even the phenomenon of the black hole.[230] While the whites try to cover over and get beyond this aporia by folding it into a master narrative—law, nation, court, kingdom, race—the blacks reveal that they are capable of making *use* of it by transforming it into a productive and creative site. In this situation the whites could be said to inhabit the dialectical image of thought while the blacks make use of thought as a non-dialectical space of becoming. The whites are stuck in the master-slave dialectic (and thus "think like slaves"), while the Blacks are not afraid to become what they are—that is, to develop their powers of being hierarchically "lower" in an infinite way. When the Queen, nearing her own defeat and trying, desperately, to craft a "dernier mot" that will be convincing enough to create a memorial image of herself worthy of her illustrious life, realizes that she may actually be on the verge of death, she exclaims:

> Vous n'empêcherez, ma belle, que je n'ai été plus belle que vous ! Tous ceux qui me connaissent pourront vous le dire. Personne n'a été chantée plus que moi. Ni plus courtisée, ni fêtée. Ni parée. Des nuées de héros, jeunes et vieux, sont morts pour moi. Mes équipages étaient célèbres. Au bal, chez l'Empereur, un esclave africain soutenait ma traîne. Et c'est pour moi qu'on a décroché la Croix du Sud. Vous étiez encore dans la nuit…[231]

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[230] For scholars working on critical black studies in dialogue with (astro)physics see: Michelle Wright, *Physics of Blackness; Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Dalton Anthony Jones, M. Shadee Malaklou, and Sara-Maria Sorentino, eds., "Black Holes: Afro-pessimism, blackness, and the discourses of Modernity," *Rhizomes* 29 (2016): entire issue.

[231] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 153-154.

The Queen's discourse aims to prove in what ways, after her death, her image will live on—an image that reproduces and continues to transmit the events of her life (the most important of which are, apparently, those moments in which she was praised and lauded by others). Because the blacks—she addresses Felicité here specifically—have been living their lives entirely "in the dark," their memorial images will have no material from which to create themselves, and thus, in the end, the whites will prevail and continue to conquer even long after they are dead and gone. To this, Felicité responds:

> Au-delà de cette nuit foudroyée, fragmentée en millions de Noirs tombés dans la jungle, nous étions la Nuit en personne. Non celle qui est absence de lumière, mais la mère généreuse et terrible qui contient la lumière et les actes.[232]

Felicité's response to the Queen takes up the latter's metaphor of being "in the dark," using it to prove, once again, that the only way to break apart the dichotomy night/day, dark/light, black/white, is to make productive use of the aporetic core at the point of the two terms' originary separation. "La Nuit en personne" is a conceptual persona born out of this making-productive of the interruption; it is the place of criminality that the blacks inhabit, where the figure of the patriarch has been replaced by the generous mother, and where night is not the opposite of day, but rather, is what holds them together in their absolute difference.

The figure of the mother overtakes the father here, evoking an earlier scene in which Archibald chastizes Village for evoking his father with tenderness, insisting that the name of the father be destroyed in favor of a new act of naming that, rather than reinforcing an existing symbolic order, destroys it. When Village begins, "Mon père m'a raconté…," Archibald quickly cuts him off and exclaims, "Votre père? N'utilisez plus ce mot. En le prononçant il vient de passer

[232] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 154.

dans votre voix, monsieur, comme un tendre sentiment."[233] When Village asks him what, then, he is to call "le mâle qui engrossa la négresse et de qui je suis né," Archibald responds: "Faites ce que vous pourrez. Inventez, sinon des mots, des phrases qui coupent au lieu de lier. Inventez non l'amour, mais la haine, et faites donc de la poésie, puisque c'est le seul domaine qu'il nous soit permis d'exploiter."[234] Archibald's aversion to the Name-of-the-Father is assimilated to a desire to be inventive, to cut up language and use it poetically, and to invest in hate rather than love. Transforming the paternal metaphor that holds the symbolic together into something else is a way of making *something* out of the nothing upon which the signifier of the Name-of-the-Father is based. The law of the symbolic is full of holes, and the blacks are keenly aware that these holes are a site of exploration and creativity with which to experiment their crimes. Crime and theatrical experimentation go together on stage, where the use of poetic language to interrupt the symbolic order's functioning (administered by the law of the father) is constitutive of the blacks' ritual.

Moten, too, in his elaboration of the concept of black performance, insists on the recovery of the maternal in its proximity to the "phonic materiality" of the repressed part of language that returns in the audiovisual realm of black poetics. The "breakdown" of language is "a positive trace of a lyrical surplus," that appears, according to Moten, in David Leeming's biography of Delaney.[235] Throughout *In the Break,* Moten emphasizes the connection between materiality and matrilinearity, arguing that the anoriginality of black performance is a disruption of the primality of the patrilineal; importantly, this disruption was not willed but forced upon black subjects. Following Hortense Spillers, black subjects become subjected to the "law of the Mother…because

[233] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 38.
[234] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 38.
[235] Moten, *In the Break,* p. 34.

legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from *mimetic* view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law."[236]

Because of the way the social is set up, the black male simply cannot *be* the signifier "Father" upon which the law of the symbolic order rests; this does not mean that the mother *replaces* the father, but rather that the maternal makes a mark, a counterinscription that disrupts the mimetic and lays out the social field—as it is lived by black subjects—as one in which being maternal is indistinguishable from being material.[237] Genet's blacks also recognize that they have been relegated to the territory of the maternal—the only domain left for them to exploit.[238] The generous mother evoked by Felicité can thus be ascribed this poetic and anti-mimetic role, the role of disrupting the origin with (re)productivity or inventing a mode of genesis that does not institute an origin. Moten calls this the "ongoing event of an antiorigin," and it defines, for him, "the reproduction of blackness in and as (the) reproduction of black performance(s)."[239] Importantly, it is this denial of legal kinship ties transmitted through the paternal that characterizes the social death of the slave, according to Orlando Patterson.[240] Moten's ascription of a certain potentiality to this position of relegation to the maternal is thus a continuation and a radicalization of Patterson's original study.

The reconfiguration of the maternal function established in black performance equally affects the sexual relation as it is expressed (covered over) in love. One of the play's sub-plots—the budding romance between Village and Vertu—seems at first to be a mere distraction from the

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[236] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2, (Summer 1987): p. 80.
[237] Moten, *In the Break,* p. 16.
[238] We cannot agree with Richard Coe's interpretation of the play as creating a symbolic order in which "black is virility"' and "white is effeminacy."
See: Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet,* p. 290.
[239] Moten, *In the Break,* p. 14.
[240] See: Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 7-8.

ceremony at hand; but insofar as this thread gets developed as distraction, or as some kind of surplus enjoyment, it reveals something essential about the relationship between the blacks and the whites on stage. The denial of love to black subjects is transposed onto the taboo of love between black and white subjects, before finally being developed into a retrieval of this refusal—a reclaiming of the "unlovability" of blackness that, rather than counter it with a positive claim, makes use of it infinitesimally, or goes ever lower.

The love relationship between Village and Vertu is first hinted at when Vertu reveals that she is a prostitute in "real life," and tries to argue that the theatrical ceremony will have "less effect" on her, since she performs another, even more hateful and shameful ceremony ten times a day: "Je suis la seule à aller jusqu'au bout de la honte."[241] When Village seems to be hurt by Vertu's declaration, Archibald, in keeping with his role of master of ceremonies, tries to convince the former that it doesn't matter; what really matters (more than the possibility of love) is what is at hand—the theatrical space itself. Archibald exclaims, "Mais alors, quel domaine nous reste! Le Théâtre! Nous jouerons à nous y réfléchir et lentement nous nous verrons, grand narcisse noir, disparaître dans son eau."[242] Love, it turns out, isn't simply a distraction, but an impossibility, since it would prevent the blacks' required disappearance. The tension between Archibald's desire to direct the ritual's unfolding and Village's distraction by the possibility of a romance with Vertu is thus connected to these larger concerns. Village pleads with Archibald and proclaims that he wants to live, that his *body* wants to live, but Archibald responds that he must instead become a ghost: "Sous leurs yeux tu deviens un spectre et tu vas les hanter."[243]

[241] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 56
[242] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 57.
[243] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 58.

To Village's persistent claims that he loves Vertu, Archibald responds harshly by telling him that he will be forever denied the kind of love he seeks: "Tu es un nègre et un comédien. Ni l'un ni l'autre ne connaîtront l'amour."[244] According to Archibald, what blacks and actors have in common is their movement towards a disappearance, or their becoming-ghost. While it may be what allows them to haunt the white spectators, this bodily disappearance is also felt, by Village, as a burden and a source of suffering. His desire to love is experienced as a desire to cling to a place that precedes the theater, to his life "outside" of the play. Archibald, in order to fulfill his role, must censure this desire and ensure that Village plays his part. When Village momentarily refuses to accept the ban on love, Archibald gets angry and tells him to go join the spectators and to *decolor* himself before he does.

Village and Vertu decide to leave the group together, thus disrupting the ceremony and the play within the play; but as soon as they distance themselves from the others by moving upstage, Village becomes afraid and cries out the names of the other characters. He runs towards them, but their bodies don't move—they have frozen in time. The ceremony is momentarily interrupted and Village and Vertu are allowed to play out their fantasy without sabotaging the ritual's unfolding. Meanwhile, the court members have become agitated, worried that the love story between Village and Vertu will interrupt the show that was programmed for them. They also aren't fond of observing Village and Vertu entertaining the possibility of being loved by one another, a privilege that should be reserved for the whites.[245] These fears turn out to be well-founded, since in the scene that follows Vertu experiences a moment of ecstasy in which she not only becomes white, but she becomes the Queen.

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[244] Genet, *Les Nègres*, p. 58.

[245] "That the realization of a Black love would constitute a fatal threat to the White man's supremacy, the Court realizes only too well."
See: Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet*, p. 293.

In this extraordinary and hallucinatory scene, Vertu seems to possess the Queen, who has been suddenly awakened and is now transfixed by the scene below her.[246] Vertu recites a series of poetic and incantatory lines in unison with the Queen, whose voice seems to have been partly ventriloquized by Vertu. At the same time, Village is possessed by another foreign voice; he recites a poetic monologue in which he is transformed from an animal hunted by a "lance-bearer" in a primitive African landscape populated with "les poissons, les buffles, le rire des tigres, les roseaux" into a chattel slave in the Americas: "Aïe! Aïe! Aïe! J'ai rampé dans les cotonniers. Les chiens ont réniflé ma trace. J'ai mordu mes chaînes et mes poignets. L'esclavage m'a enseigné la danse et le chant."[247] The transatlantic image of blackness that inhabits Village's recitation is punctuated by a striking final line: "Je suis mort dans la cale des Négriers…Je meurs à n'en plus finir."[248] Bernard Frechtman's translation of this line—"I'm a long time dying"—doesn't quite capture the double meaning of Genet's phrase; the line actually translates to something more like "I'm dying to no end," where the English idiomatic expression "to no end" actually aligns quite nicely with the French, which could also have been expressed as "sans qu'il y ait de fin." But while this alternate translation captures the general *idea* much better, it still doesn't evoke the grammatical set-up of the original French, which juxtaposes the present tense of the verb "dying" with the infinitive of the verb "to finish." It's not just that the dying here is taking a long time—it has *no end,* and thus opens onto the infinite. The phrase thus evokes a death that is also a sort of rebirth, an opening onto something indestructible.

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[246] There is an ambiguity here about who is possessing who. Allan Francovich argues, for example, that it is the blacks who allow themselves to be possessed by the whites in order to then exorcise that possession in the form of the ritual sacrifice. His argument, in Sartrean fashion, ultimately claims that all this is in the name of reconstructing a new identity: "a dissolution of personality followed by its reintegration." I distance myself from this approach, which submits the ritual's unbinding powers to the eventual task of revolutionary reunification.
See: Allan Francovich, "Genet's Theatre of Possession," *The Drama Review* 14, no. 1, (Autumn, 1969): p. 32.
[247] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 66
[248] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 66

In this disturbing and chaotic scene of the lovers' address, it seems that as Vertu becomes white, Village becomes *ever blacker* (if the blackest he can be is to be dying endlessly in the hold of the slave ship). Thus, their love would seem to be more and more impossible. But something interrupts this interruption—it is the fact that Vertu does not become *completely* white, even if she calls upon a mysterious power to make her transformation complete: "Soit que je suis en bonne santé, éclatante et rose, soit qu'une langueur me mine, je suis blanche. Si la mort me fixe, c'est dans la couleur de la victoire. O nobles pâleurs, colorez mes tempes, mes doigts, mon ventre!"[249] Unexpectedly, there is a shadow—a quantum of blackness—that is unable to turn itself white: "…sauf qu'un peu d'ombre est restée sous mon aisselle…"[250]; "…un cerne bistre, violet, presque noir, gagne ma joue. La nuit…"[251]

What Vertu cannot rid herself of is blackness as night, as the power of difference situated at the place where black and white are (an)originally separated from one another. If in this particular scene it seems as though the refusal of Vertu's desire to become white, or to be victorious and loved, is a failure, it is actually what allows the show to "go on." A failure to become white is thus what allows for the theatrical ritual to proceed, and thus for the blacks to develop and experiment their virtual powers of blackness, to make use of the aporia that stands at the place of origin.[252]

Village and Vertu's delirious episode comes to an end when Felicité interrupts it with her own counter-incantation; echoing the use of the word "Dahomey" later on in the play, Felicité uses

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[249] Genet, *Les Nègres*, p. 64.
[250] Genet, *Les Nègres*, p. 65.
[251] Genet, *Les Nègres*, p. 66.
[252] "If to love is the very core and symbol of Whiteness, then she and Village have only two alternatives: either to go away and lose themselves for ever among the alien race; or else to 'love blackly', inventing a new love, a new langiage and formula of love, in spite of all the power, poetry, and beauty of Europe. If they can achieve this, then not only will the realize themselves, but the secret power of the White world will be destroyed."
See: Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet*, p. 292.

it here like a battle cry to reassemble the blacks who have been fragmented (half of them remain frozen in place downstage). She cries out:

> Dahomey!... Dahomey!... A mon secours, Nègres de tous les coins du monde. Venez! Entrez! Mais pas ailleurs qu'en moi. Que me gonfle votre tumulte! Venez. Bousculez-vous. Pénétrez par où vous voudrez: la bouche, l'oreille – ou par mes narines. Narines, conques énormes, gloire de ma race, pavillons ténébreux, tunnels, grottes béantes où des bataillons enrhumés sont à l'aise! Géante à la tête renversée, je vous attends. Entrez en moi, multitude, et soyez, pour ce soir, seulement, ma force et ma raison.[253]

Again, evoking the figure of the mother in her reproductive role, Felicité calls upon the blacks to penetrate her, to enter her through all her orifices and swell her up with their tumult. She creates an image of herself as a giant, a figure that will receive all the blacks into her as a multitude. She equally transforms the idea of being penetrated from a mode of passivity to a productive creativity; the erotic exchange of inside and outside becomes the ambiguity of the cave or the tunnel, places which can be considered neither inside nor outside. The racist representation of the black subject as having large nostrils is used here to evoke glory rather than shame; the image that, in its actuality is used to stabilize a political order of domination, becomes, in its virtuality, capable of disturbing or interrupting this order. The interruption is not merely chaotic, but constitutes a new force and reason, an anarchic order that disrupts the patriarchal with the infinitely penetrated mother who gives infinite birth to the new.

Insolent Laughter and the Dead

Les Nègres stands out as one of the most explicitly and aggressively politicized texts in Genet's oeuvre, which is why it is no surprise that some of the themes it develops are resuscitated in Genet's posthumously published memoir *Un Captif amoureux* in which he chronicles time spent with the Palestinian rebels in Jordan and Lebanon as well as with the Black Panthers in the United

[253] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 68-69.

States.[254] *Un Captif*, coming in at over 600 pages in the French folio edition, expands and develops nearly all of the themes Genet had introduced in his political essays written between 1968 and his death in 1986. One of the novel's precursors was Genet's 1982 essay "Quatre Heures à Shatila," an unclassifiable text in which the author describes the scenes in the camps at Sabra and Chatila on the outskirts of Beirut just days after Christian Lebanese military forces brutally murdered thousands of Palestinian refugees under the watch and protection of Israeli troops.[255]

Near the end of the text, as Genet reflects on the larger political and aesthetic implications at stake in a piece of writing that attempts at once to bear witness to the Palestinians' incalculable suffering and keep alive their revolutionary struggle as an event that resists memorialization, he makes this striking remark:

> Il faudrait peut-être reconnaître que les révolutions ou les libérations se donnent – obscurément – pour fin de trouver ou retrouver la beauté, c'est à dire l'impalpable, innommable autrement que par ce vocable. Ou plutôt non, par la beauté entendons une insolence rieuse que narguent la misère passée, les systèmes et les hommes responsables de la misère et de la honte, mais insolence rieuse qui s'aperçoit que l'éclatement, hors de la honte, était facile.[256]

The ways in which this passage articulates the relation between beauty as a laughing insolence and revolutionary politics not only echoes the general political-aesthetic thematics of *Les Nègres* (and *Les Paravents*), but it also reactualizes one of the play's key gestures: the shrill, orchestrated laughter of the blacks that is an integral part of their theatrical ritual. This laughter too is both a product of past misery *and* a realization of the ease with which the bursting forth of the new is achieved.

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[254] See: Jean Genet, *Un Captif amoureux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).
[255] Jean Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," in *L'ennemi déclaré* : *Textes et entretiens choisis 1970-1983*, ed. Albert Dichy, (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 175-204.
[256] Genet, "Quatre heures à Chatila," p. 200.

In what follows I will return to the very first moments of the play, in which this gesture—which will be repeated throughout the piece—is established as one of its most important theatrical elements. The orchestrated laughter, understood as a precursor to what Genet later calls a "laughing insolence," is indeed important to the blacks politically, to the possibility of their theatrical critique of the whites, and indeed to the possibility of theater itself. If "Quatre heures à Chatila" is a text about the dead—much of the text is dedicated to descriptions of mutilated and tortured bodies—it ends in this uncanny reflection on laughter's role in the revolution. *Les Nègres* too makes this connection between laughter and the dead, as the insolent laughter of the blacks becomes the site of a radical disjunction that points to theater's essential relationship to the dead.[257]

After the curtain has parted in the opening moments of *Les Nègres,* Archibald's first line ("Mesdames, Messieurs…") is interrupted by the shrill, well-orchestrated laughter of the white court members seated above him. Not only is the laughter unsettling because it occurs in unison, but it is also distinctly *out of place* given the presence of the dead woman in the catafalque onstage. The disjunction that this laughter institutes immediately brings it into relation with the dead body, whose presence would seem to have required a more hieratic and serious tone. Genet specifies that it is "un rire pas en liberté", an irruption expressed as a sort of collective symptom, a performance that they all take part in forcibly. The blacks onstage below them respond with an even shriller collective laughter and the Court, bewildered, falls silent. Genet uses the word "déconcertée" to describe their group response to this insubordinate laughter, and the scene immediately evokes what Genet had laid out in the preface as the play's ultimate goal—to make white audiences *doubt*

[257] Genet outlines this relationship between theater's proximity to the dead and detachment in his letters to Roger Blin, when the latter was staging *Les Paravents.* Genet writes: "…je cherche seulement à vous encourager dans votre détachement d'un théâtre qui, lorsqu'il refuse la convention bourgeoise, recherche ses modèles : de types, de gestes, de ton, dans la vie visible et pas dans la vie poétique, c'est-à-dire celle qu'on découvre quelquefois vers le confins de la mort."
Jean Genet, "Lettres à Roger Blin," in *Théâtre complet,* p. 848.

themselves, or to disconcert them, literally to prohibit them from being able to constitute themselves, in the symbolic order, as whites.

The blacks' insolent laughter here seems to draw upon something that the whites' laughter could not; it is shriller, falser, even more out of place, and thus more forceful. But it is also more powerful because it comes from below; if the whites' laughter is an image of ridicule or mockery, the blacks return this image in an intensified version that, because it functions as a radical interruption, is not merely a negation, but a counter-image of becoming; its powers of dissolution (of the symbolic) have been activated, and developed to another degree (that is, by going *lower*).[258] If the whites laugh at the blacks because they are supposedly clowns—they are playing in a *clownerie* after all—then the blacks' reciprocal laughter (which is even more out of place and creates even more distance by alienating both spectators and court members) confirms that they (the blacks) *are* these imagined actors. Their faker, shriller laughter indicates that they are indeed putting on a show, and that they are in fact the actors and clowns that the whites make them out to be in their collective fantasy. This realization of the white fantasy that was supposed to be confined to the "private theater" of the individual's inner world of imagination is a powerful collapsing of the distance created by the repeated gesture of the collective laughter.[259] As a riposte to white ridicule, the blacks' mimicking laughter is a dangerous threat; it is a reminder that the show they are putting on for the whites, though it may be a distraction, also contains and will wield all the

[258] The presence of this laughter here already presages some of the themes of Genet's later play *Les Paravents,* in which the tragic laughter of Saïd's Mother, her laughter that breaks into a sob and then becomes laughter again, symbolizes a power of becoming embodied in all the "lowliest" characters that never cease "going lower."

[259] In Freud and Breuer's first case study of hysteria it is noted that Anna O. described her "systematic daydreaming" as taking place in her own "private theatre."
Josef Breuer, "Fräulein Anna O." in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume II (1893-1895),* trans. James Strachey, (London, The Hogarth Press: 1955), p. 22.

powers of theater, most importantly its making the human body present as a dislocation and therefore introducing an element of unknowability and unpredictability.[260]

The orchestrated laughter, through its first appearing as a symptom and its subsequent repetition as mimic, becomes isolated from any intentional context. It is thus a theatrical gesture par excellence, which (literally) interrupts communication in order to draw attention to theater's taking place as the possibility of detachment. This idea is developed by Samuel Weber in his seminal essay "Double Take; Acting and Writing in Genet's 'L'étrange mot d'…," one of the most illuminating texts to date on Genet's conception of theater's relation to the dead. Weber understands Genet's theater practice to be fundamentally about this very possibility of detachment, or about "bodies separating as they coexist in a determinate site."[261] The facticity of the body in theatrical space, especially as it is set up and conceived by Genet, must then be understood as no longer self-contained, but rather as marked by a radical division from itself as present. It is this detachment that is so *unsettling* about the presence of the (black) body onstage—its present-ness as the rendering visible and palpable the impossibility of a consistent and locatable self-presence. The ritual gesture, rather than suppressing this radical and unknowable aspect of bodily presence as interval, instead highlights and showcases it, redefining theatrical ritual as what establishes and betrays its own authenticity.

A reflection on these questions—detachment, separation, and presence, to name only a few—arises explicitly through the play's text in a short monologue made just moments after the

[260] In Martin Puchner's *Stage Fright* he emphasizes that the anti-theatrical thrust of modernism was linked to precisely this uncontrollability of the body's "emission of signs" onstage.
See: Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright; Modernism, Anti-theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press: 2002), p. 6.
[261] Samuel Weber, "Double Take; Acting and Writing in Genet's 'L'étrange mot d'…,'" *Yale French Studies* 91 (Yale University Press, 1997): p. 41.

laughter episode. In this speech, Archibald, our master of ceremonies, directly addresses the live audience:

> Silence. (Au public.) Ce soir nous jouerons pour vous. Mais, afin que dans vos fauteuils vous demeuriez à votre aise en face du drame qui déjà se déroule ici, afin que vous soyez assurés qu'un tel drame ne risque pas de pénétrer dans vos vies précieuses, nous aurons la politesse, apprise parmi vous, de rendre la communication impossible. La distance qui nous sépare, originelle, nous l'augmenterons par nos fastes, nos manières, notre insolence – car nous sommes aussi des comédiens. Mon discours terminé, tout, ici – (*du pied il frappe le plancher d'un geste de rage*) ici! se passera dans le monde délicat de la réprobation. Si nous tranchons des liens, qu'un continent s'en aille à la dérive et que l'Afrique s'enfonce ou s'envole…[262]

The explosive speech commands the attention of the audience, not only because it addresses them directly, but because it comments self-reflexively on exactly *how* the performance will unfold, and in what ways the audience will be either protected from it or at risk of being wounded by its powers. One of Archibald's first claims is that the play will not penetrate the "precious lives" of the individual audience members, so that they can view the spectacle "at ease" in their chairs. This relaxed attitude can be guaranteed through the impossibility of communication—there will be nothing communicated to the audience, and thus they can be assured that they won't have to learn any lessons or be told something with which they may disagree. Genet's method, though it works through different levels of distancing, turns away from the Brechtian mode here and draws closer to Artaud's project to create a non-signifying theatrical language. Artaud structures his theater poetics around the idea that we might "considérer le langage sous la forme de *l'Incantation*"—incantation rather than communication.[263] Words, sounds, and gestures are used to create specific effects, and to address and think through certain problems, but this "poétique de l'espace" is profoundly non-communicative, and in that sense, it is a radical reversal of the codes of classical

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[262] Genet, *Les Nègres*, p. 20-23.

[263] Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double*, p. 67.
The term "incantation" here draws near to Sartre's term "diabolical"; both refer to a "poetic" use of language that renders communication impossible, drawing upon a level of speech beyond or below its enunciated content.

theater. Archibald—and Genet—know that the promise of non-communication can be used to set the white audience at ease, but they also understand that this promise of comfort is only established early on so that the ritual gesture's power to disturb audiences—which is, precisely, not about communication—might have an even stronger impact.

The next thing Archibald addresses is the *distance* between the audience members and the black actors. The point will be, he says, to augment this "originary distance"—which we might also call an originary interval—through a spectacle of splendor and insolence embodied in a set of manners. Throughout the play the blacks' emphasis on luxury and magnificence (reflected in their costumes, their choice of the Mozart minuet, and their formal mode of address) is coupled with their being assigned (by themselves and by the whites) the status of the non-human, and with their grandeur being constantly offset by grotesque elements. The ceremoniousness that accompanies the blacks' staging of the ceremony, in other words, is marked by a set of elements that render the ritual "off" or slightly astray. The Queen notices, for example, that during the delivery of this very monologue, Archibald's mouth hangs open and "columns of flies" buzz around it (whether they're going in or out she isn't quite sure).[264]

"La distance qui nous sépare" can thus be understood not only as the distance between white and black, or revolutionary and actor, but also as the interval opened up between the hieratics of the ritual and the excesses of the bodies that perform it—between the blacks and another version of themselves, or between good manners and insolence.[265] Cutting all ties is here understood in the explicitly (de)colonial terms of the African continent detaching itself from its European masters. But whether this newly freed Africa will sink or fly is yet to be determined, and is in fact

[264] Genet, *Les Nègres*, p. 24.
[265] This distance was already explored by Genet in *Le Balcon,* where it appeared via Madame Irma's insistence that each costume worn by the prostitutes must contain one authentic detail and one false detail.
See: Genet, *Le Balcon* in *Théâtre complet*, p. 291-292.

explicitly left as an open question. As Scott Durham suggests, "The question underlying all of Genet's political engagements—What new desires and powers, what new forms of life will appear in the space opened by the death of the old order and its identities?—remains an open one."[266]

If the blacks do not pursue the parody and destruction of white identity in order to replace it with another founding narrative (the reference to Africa here is never offered up as consistent or historical enough to actually become a place of *identification*), they wield the powers of theatricality with other designs in mind. Their project in fact has no particular goals, but rather emerges as a demonstration of theater's powers through a series of acts of experimentation. This experiment can be summed up, as it is by Archibald in the speech above, as taking place in "le monde délicat de la reprobation." As he delivers this line, Archibald stamps his foot down violently on the stage, emphasizing the "here," or the place that theater "takes" when it takes place. Indeed, space and place can no longer be taken for granted, and nor will they be strategically neutralized in favor of uniformity or verisimilitude (as in the classical theater).[267] Rather, the "here" of the theatrical stage will be emphasized as a specifically un-neutral ground, a ground that serves as a productive motor for theater's spatiality and its relation to bodies.

This relation can be understood through the seemingly out of place term "reprobation" that Archibald uses to describe the theatrical world. Generally understood as condemnation, censure, or rejection, reprobation is also a theological term that refers to the reprobate, or the one who is rejected by God and excluded from eternal salvation. The theater is therefore the place of impossible salvation, as well as a place that allows for and indeed calls for a certain going *beyond*

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[266] Durham, *Phantom Communities,* p. 167.

[267] Sam Weber notes that although Aristotle always sought to reduce the scenographic elements of theater as a medium-specific art, he nonetheless preserved within his thought the necessity of all these elements to theater's proper functioning as the place of a *peripeteia,* a sudden shift in meaning, that leads to an *anagnoresis,* or a moment of recognition.
See: Samuel Weber, "Double Take," p. 28-48.

(or perhaps *below*) the censure of civilization and/or religion.[268] But what does the fact that theater is the place where no one will be saved have to do with its emphasis on spatiality and detachment? We might turn again to Genet's obscure and difficult essay "L'étrange mot d'…" (1967) to make these connections. Indeed, in the essay, he draws conclusions about the ethics and politics of the theater that seem to have already been at work in the much earlier *Les Nègres.*

Importantly, the first striking relation between the two texts is that *Les Nègres* seems to provide what is described later in "L'étrange mot d'…" as an ideal theatrical set-up—that is, one in which the presence of the dead is established and centralized. In one passage of the text Genet describes a scenario where workers servicing a crematorium are whistling Mozart tunes as they insert corpses into the mouth of a furnace. This scene is eerily similar to the opening scene of *Les Nègres,* in which the blacks dance around the catafalque humming a Mozart minuet. Genet indicates in "L'étrange mot" that this placement of the crematorium (or any other death apparatus, including the cemetery) in the center of the city is what allows for the continued possibility of theater ("le théâtre pourra se perpétuer").[269] The theater is to be erected in the shadow of this crematorium, or in the midst of tombs—that is, either in proximity to the dead or to the monuments that "digest" them.

This proximate rituals of cremation and burial, as well as the erection of tombs, have the power to "save" the theater because they strike a devastating blow at the temporal order imposed by Western Christianity, an order that Weber says dedicates itself to "the temporal overcoming of

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[268] Psychoanalyst Willy Apollon considers this "beyond the censure of civilization" to be the proper place of aesthetics, precisely what is (again) made possible by the "discovery" or postulate of the unconscious. If civilization is what imposes an "impropre-à-dire," then what cannot be said given the limits of this censure will emerge through aesthetic acts.
See: Willy Apollon and Fernande Negrete, "The Unconscious, with Willy Apollon," *Penumbr(a)cast* (podcast), December 2021, accessed March 27, 2023, https://open.spotify.com/episode/3a1COvojtmo1H4Y3uVm241; Willy Apollon, Danielle Bergeron, and Lucie Cantin, *After Lacan: Clinical Practice and the Subject of the Unconscious,* eds. Robert Hughes and Kareen Ror Malone, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).
[269] Genet, "L'étrange mot d'…," in *Théâtre complet,* p. 879.

time."[270] In Genet's words, "Entre autres, le théâtre aura pour but de nous faire échapper au temps, que l'on dit historique, mais qui est théologique."[271] The time of the Advent has its origin in the Incarnation of Christ, and subsequently inaugurates the promise of eternal life, of a "triumph of life over death."[272] The theater, as defined by Genet, has the power to overturn this calendar and put in its place a temporality without commencement nor end, or to replace the Christian calendar with a multiplied and perhaps infinite number of advents and calendars: "Il semblerait donc urgent de multiplier les 'Avènements' à partir desquels des calendriers, sans rapport avec ceux qui s'imposent, impérialistement, puissent s'établir."[273] The time of Christian history is replaced by a more deranged temporality that cannot erase its being marked by death; it is replaced by history as the production of the dead, and to this history will correspond the revised urbanism Genet suggests—the architectural schema that places theater and the crematorium/cemetery in close proximity to one another.

This deranged historical temporality, no longer obligated to provide a smooth continuity, becomes defined in terms of its possibility of fragmentation. The rupturing of a continuum is what will then define the "theatrical act" in Genet's terms. It is precisely because theater is no longer the place of the temporality inaugurated by the Incarnation—that is, no longer a place of salvation—that it retrieves the radical possibility of becoming a space of *acts* rather than of *action.*[274] Theatrical acts, which can emerge from any event that is duly "isolated" or

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[270] Weber, "Double Take," p. 44.
[271] Genet, "L'étrange mot d'…," in *Théâtre complet,* p. 888.
[272] Weber, "Double Take," p. 44.
[273] Genet, "L'étrange mot d'…," in *Théâtre complet,* p. 880.
[274] Whereas action is linked to the time of Incarnation, or a form of causality that emerges from a fully-present origin that can re-presence itself, the act—as revolutionary act—interrupts this causality with the time of theatricality and disincarnation. This act is not unrelated to what Lacan calls the psychoanalytical act in his unpublished fifteenth seminar *L'acte psychanalytique* (1967-1968). Žižek calls this a "*purely formal* act of converting reality as something which is objectively given as 'effectivity', as something produced, 'posited' by the subject."
See: Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), p. 247.

"fragmented," can be defined as such only insofar as they "take place" under the sign of reprobation. In defiance of the "attitude de la prière chrétienne" that, Genet complains, "ne favorise pas la meditation," theatrical acts are *cursed.*[275]

As Genet's text proceeds, the urban architecture he refers to is gradually transformed into a "verbal architecture," and the focus shifts from the spatial to the linguistic elements of theatricality, though these of course maintain a close relation to one another. The "drama," another name for the theatrical act, must be given a language capable of at once containing and cultivating the "foudre" at its origin. It's author then, must organize "une architecture verbale—c'est-à-dire grammaticale et cérémoniale—indiquant sournoisement que de ce vide s'arrache une apparence qui montre le vide."[276] Genet's complex phrase emphasizes a relationship between the grammatical and the ceremonial, and indicates that it is this type of "verbal architecture" that will be capable of tearing out of space an appearance that, theatrically, shows the place that space takes.

Alternatively, Genet's argument could be posed in the following way: only a certain type of language, in which the ritual leaves its mark, can produce true theatrical gestures. The mode of language necessary is the one theorized earlier by Artaud and Moten: the incantatory, poetic mode in which the *gramma,* or the material trace of sounded speech, reinscribes itself in language as an empty cipher—as an absence that marks the place of death. Giorgio Agamben theorizes the voice in poetry as precisely this gramma or letter that "dies into signification"; as a pure intention to signify, this trace of the voice cannot say or signify anything except its own absence.[277] This mode of exposition is similar to the one Agamben uses to describe gesture as the exhibition of a mediality, which is again reminiscent of Genet's wording: the indication of an appearance that

[275] Genet, "L'étrange mot d'…," in *Théâtre complet,* p. 883.
[276] Genet, "L'étrange mot d'…," in *Théâtre complet,* p. 883.
[277] Giorgio Agamben, "Pascoli and the Thought of the Voice," in *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics,* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 70.

shows the space or emptiness from which it emerges. In *Les Nègres* what is at stake is the theatrical exploration of this emptiness that *takes place* as a political struggle between blacks and whites, in the world of a performance where the blood being shed is "un sang qui saigne."[278]

(Death) Masks

The theater's privileged relation to the dead, and the ways in which Genet articulates his desire to show an emptiness onstage are themes closely connected to the use of masks in *Les Nègres.* As Carl Lavery has suggested, the ways in which Genet simultaneously deconstructs the theatrical frame and emphasizes it at the point of its disappearance are strategic moves that construct an anti-colonialist politics. For "…while the French state wants to fix blacks as objects of knowledge, epistemologically and spatially, the ambivalence of the play is a technique for liberation."[279] The way masks are used throughout the show contributes to this violent ambivalence that turns the standard elements of the minstrel show on their heads, reframing the stakes of theatricality for the black subject in-between colonialist France and post-emancipation America. Lavery continues: "Where white racism, as the black review show demonstrates, compels Blacks to become what they (supposedly) are, *The Blacks* permits them to become other than self."[280]

The mask in *Les Nègres* is indeed a symbol of both separation and becoming—of the potential to make oppressed subjects visible and tear apart the conditions of possibility of the visible. Both the blacks and the whites make use of masks onstage in a fluid and hyper expressive manner; the unmasked blacks paint their faces with black wax, Diouf is transformed into the white woman by donning a mask that he eventually removes, and the court members wear white masks

[278] Genet, *Les Nègres*, p. 116.
[279] Carl Lavery, *The Politics of Jean Genet's Late Theatre: Spaces of Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 151-152.
[280] Lavery, *The Politics of Jean Genet's Late Theatre,* p. 158.

that they end up removing and putting back on repeatedly at the end of the play. These masks that the black actors don to turn themselves into the white court members are exaggeratedly expressive, as is the mask that Diouf puts on to be transformed into the white woman. The mask's dissimulating function—its usual manner of concealing the identity of its wearer—is completely distorted and transformed into something like its opposite: the mask serves instead to *simulate,* in the sense that it produces an infinite number of fictional identities, thereby breaking down the concept of identity itself. The originary *separation* between character and actor that is symbolized by the mask is here intensified rather than dissolved—it is *played with* to such an extent that it too is transformed into a form of indistinction.

The set-up established at the beginning of the play is one in which the distance between actor and role is explicitly highlighted (i.e. shown theatrically), for the white court members are adorned with masks that don't actually cover up what's underneath of them. The essential *masking* function of the mask is thus distorted; instead of creating a reliable appearance, the white mask signifies, consistently nonetheless, the unknowability of the difference between appearance and the "truth" it covers up (the face or the actor). While the black band that remains exposed might indicate, truthfully, that the actor underneath the white mask is, in fact, black, it cannot reveal *who* that actor is in any determinate way, or if, when the mask is removed, the actor will be themselves, or simply incarnate another character (we are reminded of the Nietzschean mask behind every mask). In fact, when the actors *do* remove these masks later on in the play it is indeed confirmed that underneath the mask is yet another character—that of the black revolutionary. The black band of skin and hair that peaks out from underneath the white mask is thus not a sign of possible

identity, but rather one of pure difference—the kind of difference that disrupts a ritual whose function is to reinforce the symbolic order.[281]

In his recent book *Pulcinella ovvero Divertimento per li regazzi,* Agamben makes the connection between the sphere of the dead and the theatrical stage via the masked *Commedia dell'arte* figure Pulcinella. Like Genet's clownlike characters, Pulcinella's comedic essence derives from and is intimately connected to the interruptive function of language when it is unable to communicate meaning.[282] The mask is the formal instantiation, in the theater, of this fundamental inexpressivity that emerges from a non-communicability within language—the place of death within language.

At one point, Agamben addresses the question of the relationship between the mask and the ritual in a brief discussion of Pulcinella's role of embodying Carnival. In this role, Pulcinella is beaten and executed in the name of the law after the celebration of Carnival, evoking the plates in Giandomenico Tiepolo's series of drawings that depict these scenes. But what is mysteriously missing from the *Divertimento* are the images that would show Pulcinella's actual trial, or the moment at which he is taken into the sphere of the law. This is so, Agamben argues, because Pulcinella's very existence threatens the law, thus demonstrating his power to erase the images of its mysterious power. Specifically, Pulcinella demonstrates an inherent impossibility within the law of judging a figure who interrupts and dissolves every identity and expressivity; the law must

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[281] In *Les Nègres* Genet purposefully avoids staging a "face to face" encounter like the one Frantz Fanon famously talks about ("Tiens un nègre") and that Pierre Macherey uses to push against Louis Althusser's "race-blind" theory of interpolation. This leads to a confrontation between Genet and Moten that cannot be addressed here but would certainly be fruitful for outlining the points at which their politics diverge. Reassessing Genet's position in this critical debate would certainly require engaging Sartre, for whom Genet's politics draws amply from the phenomenological tradition.
See: Pierre Macherey, "Figures of Interpollation in Althusser and Fanon," *Radical Philosophy* 173, (May/June 2012): p. 9-20.

[282] "Mostrare, nel linguaggio, una impossibilità di communicare e che questo faccia ridere—ecco l'essenza della commedia."
See: Giorgio Agamben, *Pulcinella ovvero Divertimento per li regazzi* (Roma: Nottetempo, 2015), p. 23.

judge Pulcinella for what he *is,* must attribute to him certain actions. But, Agamben argues, ventriloquizing Pulcinella, "Il lazzo non è un'azione imputabile, non prevede responsabilità—è un puro, irreparabile *come,* senza sostanza né persona morale."[283] As Pulcinella himself points out, he can be called "insolente, fraudolento, mendace, vorace, lordo, balordo, onto, bisonto...," but he cannot be judged for *being* any of these things.[284] These are only things that he is *come* ("like"), but are not attributable to him as a *com'è* ("as he is").

If Pulcinella needed to be burned in effigy at the end of the Carnival celebration so that, as a ritual, it would successfully reproduce the social order from whence it issued, then there is something strange and mysterious about the fact that Pulcinella doesn't actually die. As the story goes, no matter how many times he is judged, condemned to death, and executed, Pulcinella is unable to be killed. In terms of the ordinary functioning of the ritual then, Pulcinella represents something in it that has gone astray, or a figure who has drawn a power out of the ritual that exceeds it and threatens to transform or even destroy it. His mask, with its operations of identity-dissolution and absolute indeterminability between scene and life, represents a part of the ritual that ultimately interrupts it, deviating it from its proscribed end so that it (the ritual) may continue developing its powers of difference *without any end in sight.* For Agamben, this is the function of the *lazzo*—the gag, joke or jest:

> Il lazzo fa ridere, perché l'azione in cui consiste è disdetta nell'atto stesso in cui si compie. L'azione che, secondo un'antica e venerabile tradizione, è il luogo della politica, qui non ha più luogo, ha perso il suo soggetto e la sua consistenza. Il comico non è solo un'impossibilità di dire esposta come tale nel linguaggio—è anche una impossibilità di agire esposta in un gesto. Ma Pulcinella non è, per questo, semplicemente impolitico, egli annuncia ed esige un'altra politica, che non ha più luogo nell'azione, ma mostra che cosa può un corpo quando ogni azione è diventata impossibile.[285]

[283] Agamben, *Pulcinella,* p. 70-71.
[284] Agamben, *Pulcinella,* p. 70
[285] Agamben, *Pulcinella,* p. 71.

Agamben's formulation here explicitly evokes the Spinozist question "What can a body do?" and places it within the Deleuzian framework of exhaustion discussed in chapter two. A body discovers what it can do when it is no longer tired, but exhausted—when all of its possibilities for action have been used up and what becomes available is the domain of gesture, the sphere of the possible. The comedic is thus here declined as relating eminently to the politics of the possible, making this politics accessible to thought by destroying the subject of action through a series of gags.

What we might add to Agamben's argument is that the mask represents a necessity or usefulness of the ritual gesture gone astray within this politics of the possible; the mask is not only important because it dissolves identity, but also because it constitutes the sphere of politics (or theater) as a ritual that interrupts itself, transforming its rite into a *rite saccagé.* Only the devastated ritual has the power to puncture the symbolic, making it a site of possibility. What Genet ultimately brings to the table that Agamben seems to consistently neglect, is how different forms of the political emerge and are translated into others. By explicitly foregrounding blackness and the question of theatricality as having specifically high stakes for black subjects, Genet forces himself into a confrontation with the question of *form*, a question that will continue to preoccupy him in *Un Captif amoureux.*[286] Criminality—his personal identification of predilection—here gets transformed into the realm of race, where ritual gestures become particularly important to breaking down a discursive order and extracting its virtual potentials. In short, *Les Nègres* goes where Agamben has never dared go, all the while complexifying his notion of gesture.

[286] Referring to the funeral mass of a fallen Palestinian fighter in terms that evoke his earlier writings on theater, Genet writes: "…les jours de colère, les tubas, le tremblement des rois, cela n'était pas une messe mais le récit chanté d'un opéra qui se jouait en moins d'une heure, *le temps d'une agonie* vécue et jouée dans l'effroi de perdre le monde pour se trouver dans lequel? Sous quelle forme?"
See: Jean Genet, *Un Captif amoureux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p. 90.

The failed execution of Pulcinella reminds us of the final scene of *Les Nègres*—in which the white court members are all killed—and forces us to reconsider exactly what kind of death this ending proscribes. Are the whites actually dead or are they, like Pulcinella, unable to be killed since their entire being is suspended in the *jeu* of a series of jokes and gags? In any case, it is quite clear that the play's ambiguous ending is at once staged *and* improvised, and that it takes place precisely in the zone of indistinction between actor and role. It is perhaps for this reason that the actors remove and replace their masks many times in the course of this last scene, occasions which serve as pretexts for characters to comment reflexively on their own ambiguous status.

The sequence is initiated by the return of Ville de Saint-Nazaire to the stage, as he announces the execution of the traitor offstage. His return prompts the whites to remove their masks, momentarily becoming the black revolutionaries and actors that they "really are." All of the court members' names are, at this point in the script, transformed into "celle" or "celui qui tenait le role du/de la…" followed by the title of the character's function. Here even the script itself becomes a site of ambiguity and confusion, for the writer—Genet—seems to be no longer the one in control of what is being written, but rather himself created and dictated to by the characters he has supposedly originated.

At this point it seems as if the play might reach its natural conclusion; the traitor to the black revolutionaries has been executed offstage, and so the diversion (that is, the play) being performed onstage is no longer necessary to distract the audience. However, the blacks who had been playing the white court members seem to want the show to go on. When Neige says that she has to go, "Celui qui tenait le role du valet" responds that she cannot leave until the representation has been "achevé."[287] While Archibald quickly resumes his role of master of ceremonies and

[287] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 164.

indicates that this last little bit of the show was indeed "prévu," some of the other black characters still seem confused. When "Celui qui était le gouverneur" announces that they must go "jusqu'à la mort," for example, Village is perplexed about the apparent absence onstage of any weapons with which to kill the whites. "Pour nous débarrasser de vous," he asks, "faudra-t-il qu'on vous égorge?"[288] At this point "Celle qui était la reine" responds that, since they are actors, their massacre will be lyrical. She then commands the four other court members to put on their masks: "Messieurs, vos masques!"[289]

In what follows, the Queen announces that the court members will commit a collective suicide, but Archibald objects, exclaiming: "Non, non, n'allez pas mourir. Monsieur le Gouverneur, restez! Ce que nous aimions, c'était vous tuer, c'était faire crever jusqu'à la blancheur de votre farine, et jusqu'à votre mousse de savon…"[290] Archibald's appeal highlights the paradoxical nature of the blacks' desire to kill the whites: once the latter are gone, the blacks will no longer be able to enjoy killing them and, more specifically, killing the colonial order of white supremacy that the whites institute and maintain. Genet's ending must therefore be able to show the whites' simultaneous disappearance and survival; what is needed is a contradictory image that will disturb the possibility of a final portrayal of black solidarity, haunted as it will be by the ghosts and corpses of the whites. This ambiguity of the whites' deaths appears in the acts of execution themselves, which all appear to be interrupted by the failure of death itself. If these coordinated killings are themselves rituals, then they are also only constituted as such insofar as they interrupt themselves.

[288] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 165.
[289] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 165.
[290] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 169.

The Queen is the last to be killed and, naturally, proves the most resistant to her own death; when the sound of the detonation is heard she simply announces that she is dead and continues speaking, delivering yet another monologue:

> Moi aussi je vais descendre aux Enfers. J'y conduirai mon troupeau de cadavres que vous ne cessez de tuer pour qu'ils vivent et que vous ne cessez de faire vivre afin de les tuer. Or, sachez-le, nous n'avions démérité que de vous. Il vous était facile de me transformer en Allégorie, mais j'ai vécu, j'ai souffert, pour en arriver à cette image…[291]

The Queen, like Archibald, points to the logical impasse that the blacks must face in their final act of cruelty, and she does so by highlighting several complicated factors: she first of all points to the fact that the whites consider themselves to be a troop of cadavers, and are thus *already dead*, before bringing up the fact that the blacks must make the whites live in order to kill them and vice versa, *ad infinitum*. But the last point she announces is perhaps the most important; the facility with which the blacks create an image or allegory out of the queen by murdering her is met, on her side, with the difficulty of *living*, suffering, and shaping the contents of that very image. The possibility of killing the queen necessitates her having lived and sculpted herself as an "eternal ruin." As she herself points out earlier on, "…c'est la mort qui me compose."[292]

The fact that the queen speaks as a corpse on its way to hell, and thus beyond the limit imposed by death, leads one to question whether or not the play is really ending. Indeed, it seems as if Genet is crafting a scenario in which things could continue to go on…forever. The next act of the play might just take place *aux Enfers.* The virtual space that has been opened up through the theatrical ritual is one that is truly without limits, for it gives voice to all of the virtual possibilities contained in the nothing behind the mask, what is embodied in the mask itself. In this theatrical space then, the traditional ritual which reinscribes an existing symbolic order cannot be completed,

[291] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 177.
[292] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 151.

for it is interrupted by its own encounter with the infinite and its own being made infinite. Paradoxically, it is the limit set out by death that allows for Genet's characters to encounter this infinite, becoming themselves immortal subjects. In other words, the ritual cannot attain its established end because it has been transformed into a rite *without end,* a ravaged rite.

We are now in a position to better understand the mysterious lines from which this phrase originally issues, lines delivered by Félicité towards the end of her debate with the Queen: "Voyez nos gestes. S'ils ne sont plus que les bras coupés de nos rites saccagés, enlisés dans la fatigue et le temps, d'ici peu vous ne tendrez plus vers le ciel que des moignons coupés…"[293] In his evocation of the ravaged ritual gesture, Genet uses the image of a phantom limb that, though mutilated and, indeed, lobbed-off, continues going through the motions of the rite.[294] Félicité here warns the Queen that she too will soon be a ghostly figure, performing her own ceremonies with stumps rather than arms. But if the Queen, and thus, the whites, will soon be themselves performing their own ravaged rites, does that not mean that all of the political potential wielded by the blacks will then be passed onto them? At what point does the play itself determine its own politics with regard to this question?

The answer can perhaps be found, again, in Genet's preface to the play, where he asserts that it is to be performed by *and only by* an all-black theater troupe, and that it is to address itself to the question "qu'est-ce que c'est donc un noir?" The interruptive power of the theatrical ritual, which restages an originary scene of black violence (rather than white violence), is wielded, in the

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[293] Genet, *Les Nègres,* p. 154.

[294] In *Un Captif amoureux,* Genet again uses the image of a severed limb to evoke the possibility of transformation and becoming that the dismemberment represents. In their reverie, the place of the male "transsexual's" (Genet uses but criticizes the term) castrated penis comes to be occupied by breasts that emerge through the very desire to caress them. The trans woman's realization that she will now be referred to by the female pronoun provokes a joyful exclamation that is directed not at the final "stage" of the transformation, but the process of becoming itself: "Adieu, chère moitié, je meurs à moi-même…"
Genet, *Un Captif,* p. 91.

last act (which is not really a last act), against whiteness as a system of judgement that always only seeks to establish its own origin. To understand what blackness is via the elaboration of a theatrical ritual means to try to begin to understand what kinds of latent virtual potentials it contains. To return to Moten, it is "…to begin to consider *what nothing is,* not from its own standpoint or from any standpoint but from the absoluteness of its generative dispersion of a general antagonism that blackness holds and protects in as critical celebration and degenerative and regenerative preservation."[295] The *clownerie* that Genet stages is indeed a critical celebration that both disperses and preserves a central antagonism—the antagonism that blackness as nothingness poses to whiteness as the imposition of an origin and a law. Only the blacks can carry out such a ritual celebration, for, like Pulcinella, they are those figures who are always both subjected to death and yet expected to make one laugh.

[295] Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," p. 742.

Chapter Four
The Ethics of the Interval: The Symptomatic Gesture in Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket*

Introduction

The beginning of Robert Bresson's 1959 film *Pickpocket* announces not only the entire film's plot, but also shows us in detail the repertoire of cinematographic strategies that Bresson will use throughout: the refusal of the establishing shot, a preference for close-ups, little to no extradiegetic sound, redundant voice-over, antitheatricality in the mise-en-scène, and fragmentation of the event at the level of montage. This minimalist, deliberately alienating aesthetic is put to work to recount the story of Michel, a social outcast who seems totally disaffected and unmotivated when it comes to work, family, and love.

Over the course of the film, it will be revealed that Michel is not only estranged, but fallen, since he is neglecting his dying mother whom he previously robbed (she knew it was him yet didn't denounce him to the police). It's not even possible to say if Michel avoids the mother over feelings of guilt and shame, since his steadfast inexpressiveness coupled with the film's completely depsychologized atmosphere render such an interpretation impossible. What we do know is that Michel has decided, at the beginning of the film, to start stealing—specifically, picking pockets. Though he provides no real reason for doing so, Michel lives this decision to steal—and the thefts themselves—as extremely important events that will forever change him. Stealing is thus the cinematic event that Bresson constructs in *Pickpocket*, the act that will be detheatricalized and depsychologized through his carefully crafted cinema aesthetic. I argue that stealing is the gesture that instantiates the symptomal-ethical subject who is endowed with a new expressive capacity in the image—a capacity that emerges at the limits of will and cognition.

Bresson deliberately chooses stealing as the film's central gesture, and we must take seriously this formal choice as something that goes beyond the necessities of the film's plot—in

which Michel, at the end of the film, "overcomes" this socially deviant behavior in order to accept both heterosexual love and, according to many, God's grace. The film itself, because of the way it is both narratively and visually constructed, seems to point towards an opposite reading; it's rather the plot that is a pretext for an aesthetics of stealing, one that privileges gesture over action. Again, we must note how stealing was carefully chosen by Bresson, for although he loosely based the film on Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment,* he changed the main character's criminal activity of choice from murder to theft. Commenting upon this narrative shift, P. Adams Sitney remarks that "Bresson has substituted a nearly invisible act (which the camera can unveil with great compression and even erotic power) for the lurid horror of a scene of blood and violence."[296] The unrecognizability of the adaptation thus serves a particular purpose—Bresson's choice of stealing is about exploring Dostoevsky's themes as questions that belong to the cinematic field.[297]

Though Bresson's film displaces the literary by swapping out Dostoevsky's main theme, it is stealing, rather than murder, that stands at the origin of the literary. Hélène Cixous has sharply argued this point in her essay "Vols d'aveugle autour d'une librerie," where she locates the originary literary scene—which will of course not be exempt from exposure to the forces of deconstruction—in Saint Augustine's *Confessions.*[298] She writes:

> Comme on le sait, depuis Saint Augustin en apparence, la littérature, l'idée de livre ont commencé par un vol de fruit. Il faut un fruit. Il faut un vol. Toujours. Mais attention, il s'agit tout de suite toujours de *mots,* il dirait peut-être de vocable. Le fruit n'aurait aucun intérêt, le vol non plus, s'ils ne jouaient pas aux lecteurs des tours…de *cochon*—je pense aux poires justes bonnes pour les cochons de Saint Augustin—je veux dire des tours de langue. Il faut qu'il y ait lapsus, *calami et linguae,* faute au bout de la langue et pas seulement faute par petite

[296] P. Adams Sitney, "Cinematography vs. the Cinema: Bresson's Figure," in *Robert Bresson,* ed. James Quandt, (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 1998), p. 159.
[297] Bresson went back and forth between praising Dostoevsky as one of the only authors he could "agree" with and claiming that he had never even read *Crime and Punishment.* For more on the film as an adaptation of the novel see: Olga Peters Hasty, "On Not Showing Dostoevskii's Work: Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket*," in *Border Crossing: Russian Literature into Film,* eds. Alexander Burry and Frederick H. White, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), p. 64-84.
[298] Hélène Cixous, "Vols d'aveugle autour d'une librerie," *Études françaises* 38, no, 1-2, (2002): p. 263-275.

> délinquance. Le goût inoubliable du vol n'est pas lié, comme le sut Saint Augustin à l'instant à l'appropriation de la chose volée, mais à ses conséquences littérales.[299]

Cixous describes the ways in which stealing establishes a novel relation between subject and object, since what is interesting (for the subject) about stealing is not the fruit (the object), nor the act of stealing itself, but rather the *tour*—the traversal of a circuit. Here Cixous herself plays with language—with the difference between the literary and the literal as what constitutes language, making it material in a novel sense. Even the "tours de langue" invoke both language and the tongue involved in the enjoyment of the stolen fruit that is never tasted and yet nevertheless possesses a singular "goût."[300]

The movement she evokes here is thus also both literary and literal, since it no longer concerns objects as empirical *things,* but rather involves the signifier—"matter transcending itself into language." When language is involved, she points out, there is also an immediate instantiation of lapsus or sliding (Freud's famous "slip" of the tongue or pen)—that is, there is something interesting happening *in the intervals* between signifiers. The subject of this sliding of signifiers (the subject in language) experiences her own undoing in the act of stealing. Saint Augustine himself describes the perverse joy of his adolescent theft thus: "The malice of the act was base and I loved it—that is to say I loved my own undoing, I loved the evil in me—not the thing for which I did the evil, simply the evil…"[301] At the originary scene of subjectivation we thus find an undoing of the subject—a self-undoing that is *loved* by the subject.

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[299] Cixous, "Vols," p. 273.

[300] What is between the literal and the literary might be the strange, non-empirical materiality of language as embodied in the signifier which "violates the spontaneous understanding of materiality," appearing as a "torsion within materiality."
See: Samo Tomsic, *The Capitalist Unconscious; Marx and Lacan* (New York: Verso, 2015), p. 52.

[301] Saint Augustine, *Confessions,* trans. F.J. Sheed, ed. Michael P. Foley, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), p. 29.

What Cixous already points to in her reflection—the gestural quality of stealing in its forgetting of the object in favor of the movement around a circuit—is further developed in Genet's reflections on stealing. There is perhaps no other writer (besides Sartre on Genet) who wrote so extensively about the ethics and aesthetics of theft. In his most autobiographical novel *Journal d'un voleur,* Genet writes:

> Il s'accomplira vraiment au cœur des ténèbres auxquelles s'ajoute qu'il le soit plutôt la nuit, durant le sommeil des gens, dans un endroit clos, et soi-même peut-être masqué de noir. La marche sur la pointe des pieds, le silence, l'invisibilité dont nous avons besoin même en plein jour, les mains à tâtons organisant dans l'ombre des gestes d'une complication, d'une précaution insolite—tourner la simple poignée d'une porte nécessite une multitude de mouvement dont chacun a l'éclat d'une facette de bijou.[302]

While Genet's criminal universe is quite different than that of Michel—the latter steals in broad daylight in open spaces with large crowds—they can be linked together via their common emphasis on gesture. Genet, too, describes stealing as a simple pretext for all the complicated, precautionary, and sparkling gestures that surround it; and yet, in the same text he will also describe stealing as "…un acte très dur, très pur, presque lumineux, et que le diamant seul peut représenter."[303] The jewel is thus both the gesture and the theft itself, so that the space separating the act from the gestures necessary to carry it out disappears. The jewellike gesture displaces the figure of the jewel thief—the stuff of Hollywood thrillers—and replaces it with a figure who is much more difficult to interpret: the symptomal-ethical thief, or the one who elaborates a complex theory of theft, thereby granting himself freedom in the act, and yet also, paradoxically, seemingly subject to a compulsion to commit the free act.

Both Genet and Michel fit this description, and thus for both the object is secondary and the gesture primary. As an aesthetic and ritualistic act, this type of stealing is not about attaining

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[302] Jean Genet, *Journal d'un voleur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 32.
[303] Genet, *Journal,* p. 91.

the object, but, again, about making it circulate in space differently. This process of making the object circulate differently is precisely what involves the production of gestures—it is an explosion of micromovements of handling, carrying, transferring, caressing, hiding, making appear or disappear. The displacement of the object from a position of means toward an end into the position of means *without end* is what makes stealing eminently gestural—it includes within its own logic a betrayal of its end and could therefore be likened to a pure means. In this sense, stealing follows the logic of the drive, whose functioning is detached from the subject's will or cognitive reasoning and therefore opens onto the unconscious, with its temporality of lapsus and sliding. The unconscious, in fact, is constituted by the intervals that appear in conscious life. And this is how Freud can prove that its existence is both "necessary and legitimate"—"…because the data of consciousness have a very large number of gaps in them."[304]

Though Bresson's work has been extensively researched and interpreted for over fifty years, his cinema—*Pickpocket* included—has very rarely been considered in relation to the subject of the unconscious and its symptoms. Instead, Bresson is primarily though not exclusively known as a "spiritual" filmmaker, whose pared-down *mise-en-scène* and fragmenting montage, coupled with models advised to show almost no facial or bodily expression, creates an aesthetics of alienation. The banal, empty affect of the everyday, referred to by Paul Schrader and Susan Sontag as a "cold" environment, is a frame used to introduce a hot, "human" quality that makes visible the necessity of something beyond this world to placate characters' feelings of absolute alienation.[305] In the end, for Schrader, the emergence of what he calls "disparity" in the everydayness of Bresson's images offers the viewer the free, non-choice of accepting Bresson's

[304] Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. XIV (1914-1916),* trans. James Strachey, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 166.
[305] See: Susan Sontag, "Spiritual style in the films of Robert Bresson" in *Against Interpretation,* (New York: Dell Publishing Co, 1961), p. 177-195.

spiritual lesson: "man's freedom consists in being a 'prisoner of the Lord' rather than a prisoner of the flesh."[306]

Schrader's understanding of Bresson's cinema as embodying what the former calls a "transcendental style" has dominated English language criticism of the French *auteur* since the seventies. As Brian Price points out, the religious reading of Bresson was developed in the 1950s in France, imported to the US by Sontag, and then reaffirmed with the publication of Schrader's now classic *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer.*[307] The most important figure in the development of French film criticism on Bresson was André Bazin, who co-founded the *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1951. Bazin was a huge fan of Bresson, despite the former's preference for cinematography that did not rely upon montage to create its poetic effects—the long takes of Italian neorealism and Orson Welles' depth of field, for example. The documentary quality of Bresson's images seemed to make up for the fact that these images also did precisely what Bazin claimed neorealism triumphantly avoided: "morceler l'évènement."[308] Bresson ultimately proved to Bazin that cutting up the event could also deliver its ontological truth over to the viewer, allowing a space for that viewer to co-construct the image by way of feeling. As Price observes, what Bazin refers to as the imprint of reality in time on the filmstrip is a physiological trace not of a materiality, but rather, of an immateriality, of Spirit itself.[309]

Price's own contribution to Bresson scholarship sharply diverges from the transcendental tradition, marking a crucial intervention in a stagnant field. His book, *Neither God nor Master: Robert Bresson and Radical Politics,* argues for a politically engaged Bresson whose cinema,

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[306] Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), p.115.
[307] Brian Price, *Neither God Nor Master; Robert Bresson and Radical Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 4
[308] André Bazin, *Quest-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Le Cerf, 2011), p. 74.
[309] Price, *Neither God,* p. 7.

though it may be engaged in reflection on religious matters, does not give up on this world, but rather, stays immanently grounded in it to develop a "radical critique of life under capitalism."[310] Price's reading of *Pickpocket* refutes the spiritualist interpretations of the film with a radical materialism: Bresson's aesthetics construct a politics wherein the cinematographic emphasis on gesture is meant as a monstration of crime as social liberation. Bresson show us "hands at work" so that we might be able to visualize and conceptualize a type of labor that goes against value, the form of social wealth under capitalism. Price even brings in Genet as an interlocutor whose short film, *Un chant d'amour,* clearly influenced Bresson's aesthetics of crime and desire. It's worth citing Price at length in his reflection on the connection between Bresson and Genet:

> Of interest here [in the quoted first lines from *Journal d'un voleur*] is the inevitability of desire, the link Genet cannot help but see between the heedless drives of crime and love. It is no stretch to describe Michel in Pickpocket as having plunged lucidly into his own world of crime and love, one that depends on the sensitivity of touch and on the recognition in the face of other men a bond that cannot be given a public voice. In Bresson's sensuous shots of Michel and his coconspirator's work, we find a palpable link between dexterity, crime, and desire conveyed in Genet's flowers.[311]

Price displaces the inexorability of fate onto the drives, unearthing a split subject marked by a deadly desire. Of note is the way in which Price describes Michel's decision to act as a dramatic entrance into a world of love and crime; as we will see, the film begins with Michel recounting and displaying his first theft at the races at Longchamp. Price's shift in framing—which moves away from an image of Michel caught up in something sinister beyond his control and towards attachment, desire, and decision—allows us to take seriously Michel's (homo)erotic experiences of pickpocketing, both on his own and with two other men. Price underlines the ways in which Michel's learning to decipher visual cues, thus approaching and transforming the boundary

[310] Price, *Neither God,* p. 14.
[311] Price, *Neither God,* p. 35.

between the visible and the invisible, is what evokes the sensual dimension of crime. This formalist project of rendering crime beautiful, what evokes Genet's *Journal*, is thus linked to a subject's desire and the fantasy that supports it, rather than to the contingency of an alienating world and the higher power whose presence is felt within it.

While Price opens up an entirely new line of inquiry into *Pickpocket*'s erotic images that allows for the consideration of Michel as a subject of the unconscious, rather than a servant of God, his analysis moves in a different direction shortly after the comparison with Genet. He ultimately understands *Pickpocket* as a radical retooling of the crime film that makes visible a new form of knowledge that can work against capitalism: "Where the crime film typically works to punish the criminal for his crimes against the state…Bresson's approach to the genre presents us with blueprints for the realization of both prison escape and pickpocketing."[312] I follow Price's reading by similarly emphasizing the film's development of a new form of knowledge, but rather than a conscious knowledge, I understand this to be an *unconscious* form of knowledge, one that is linked to the spiritual automaton. I arrive at this form of knowledge by developing the relationship between crime and desire along cinematographic lines, taking into consideration the fragmented body that Bresson privileges throughout his oeuvre.

Like Price, I argue against Schrader, Sontag, and the apolitical transcendentalists for a radical Bresson whose cinema of gestures goes beyond the functional/narrative and yet does not do so in theological (pathological) terms. Instead, I consider the gesture as a pure means that suspends the body part's functioning as a component of an organic whole. The image constructs a body that is marked not by an organic cause, but by a set of forces or drives, a body endowed with an expressive capacity detached from cognition and will. This is the true subject of politics—the

[312] Price, *Neither God,* p. 39.

subject that emerges not only at the limits of the psychological subject, but at the limits of the bearable, of what exhausts that subject. Within the interval, this subject also undergoes the slip or the lapsus and enters into a process of becoming. I bring in the psychoanalytical concept of the symptom in order to better understand the relationship between this new expressive capacity and the body that it creates. Ultimately, I argue that Bresson constructs *Pickpocket* around the gestures of stealing precisely so that he might showcase this symptomal subject (matter). This, we might say, is the *truly* spiritual side of Bresson's cinema—the subject of the unconscious *is* the spiritual automaton. Stealing instantiates a dizzying logic wherein the subject is undone in language, and where the interval opened up by the lapsus takes on a new significance—it creates a new type of meaning, a knowledge that might displace the psychoanalytic subject or push it out of the frame entirely.

Since the symptom can be understood not only as a metapsychological concept, but also as a temporal form, it is extremely pertinent to reading cinematic images. In close relation to Deleuze's time-image, the symptom brings to the fore a process that operates in the interstice—that between affects arising from memory-traces and ideas that are "incompatible" with the ego's functioning.[313] If repression separates these two things—affects and ideas—the symptom, as the term's etymology suggests, creates linkages that seek to hold these functions together (at the same time as they work at creating something new, what Freud calls the "surrogate"). In an 1899 letter to Wilhelm Fliess, Freud writes, "A symptom arises where the repressed and the repressing thought can come together in the wish-fulfillment."[314] Like the dream, the symptom serves to fulfill an

[313] Sigmund Freud, "The Neuropsychoses of Defense" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. III (1893-1899),* trans. James Strachey, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 48.
[314] Sigmund Freud, "Extracts from the Fliess Papers" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. I (1886-1899),* trans. James Strachey, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 278.

unconscious wish, but it is also constitutive of the psychic apparatus in its production of "reality"—the patient, or the viewer, is not asleep, but awake. It therefore follows that the waking wish-fulfillment must hold together two contradictory terms or forms. In the same letter to Fliess, Freud describes a patient's symptom of sweating nervously in front of certain women while at the theater. He describes how "…the time at which he directed his wishes onto this phantasy has left its trace on the psychical complex which releases the symptom."[315] Here Freud refers to the past time from which the patient's repressed thought emerges (a lower-school Latin class), and describes how the conscious unfolding of the present takes place via a psychic apparatus that is marked by a past to which the patient, unconsciously, addresses himself, subsequently changing the meaning of that past. The radical temporality introduced by Freud's theory of trauma is already given in its outline here.

The symptom, described as a compromise that holds together affect and idea to shore up the subject against its possible destruction, is in tension with the function of the interval as proposed by Deleuze. Isn't it the non-associative function of that interval in the time-image that provides all the radicality of the modern image? While certainly contrasting the disjunction introduced by the interval to the dialectical montage of classical cinema, Deleuze nevertheless does propose that the gesture or the bodily attitude replaces the associative function of intervals between images with another function—the function of *enchaînement.*[316] The chain here is no longer a chain of signifiers, but a chain of gestures that flows through a body—the body of the spiritual automaton. The central question that emerges in the tension between Deleuze and the psychoanalytic concept of the symptom concerns the degree to which one can understand this figure as a subject of the unconscious. For this subject might require, for its emergence, that the

[315] Freud, "Fliess Papers," p. 279.
[316] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2; L'image-temps* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1985), p. 262.

metonymical force of desire be *stopped* by a metaphor.[317] But what is the relationship between metaphor and interval? Does the metaphor really fill in the interval, or close it down? Here it is Lacan—for whom the symptom is not meant to be extinguished—that can provide us with the conceptual tools to think about this passage between Freud and Deleuze. According to Lacan, the stopping function of the metaphor is paradoxically what keeps the metonymic chain going—what allows for the emergence of a creative force of desire and what *perpetuates the interval*.[318] Even if desire is always missing the mark or lacking its object, it is nevertheless always—and perhaps paradoxically—desire for something more, something in excess of the object demanded. This excess is not something that is simply a fountain of radical potential that must not be reined in, but it is what must be *put to work.* Similarly to the function of the suture, the metaphor is what appears to close off but what really keeps the chain open.

Another tension that arises between the psychoanalytic subject and the spiritual automaton (which is specifically *not* a subject) lodges itself in the question of temporal consistency. What is time made of and how does it operate across these divergent systems? The art historian Georges Didi-Huberman addresses these questions when he transfers the formal lessons Freud produces here—and elsewhere in his work—to the realm of aesthetic images, where the idea of a simultaneous preservation and destruction of time allows for an alternative historical methodology to emerge. The eminent figure of this methodology in the art historical field is self-proclaimed "psycho-historian" Aby Warburg, whose curious methods Didi-Huberman explores in his book-

[317] See: Luisa Muraro, "To Knit or to Crochet: A Political-linguistic Tale on the Enmity Between Metaphor and Metonymy," in *Another Mother; Diotima and the Symbolic Order of Italian Feminism,* ed. Cesare Casarino, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 67-119.

[318] "Il faut définir la métaphore par l'implantation dans une chaîne signifiante d'un autre signifiant, par quoi celui qu'il supplante tombe au rang de signifié, et comme signifiant latent y perpétue l'intervalle où une autre chaîne signifiante peut y être entée. »
See: Jacques Lacan, "À la mémoire d'Ernest Jones: sur sa théorie du symbolism," in *Écrits,* (Paris: Les Éditions du Seuil, 1966), p. 708.

length study, *L'image survivante; Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes*.[319] Linking together the fields of history, philosophy, and psychoanalysis, Did-Huberman understands the temporality of the symptom through the concept of *Nachleben,* an interruptive counter-time within the image. The corporeality of the symptom, on the other hand, is conceptualized using Warburg's term *Pathosformel.*[320] Didi-Huberman—by way of his critical reinterpretation of Warburg's work—emerges as a crucial interlocutor for thinking through the relations between image, symptom, and gesture.

Within Warburg's system, the image is understood to be a dynamic, tension-laden moment with the power to rupture the temporal consistency of the present, much like the symptom that rises up from the unconscious, combining the divided and repeated past of a repressed thought with the presently activated repressing thought. Didi-Huberman qualifies this combination as a moment "…où viennent débattre et s'entrelacer le présent du pathos et le passé de la survivance, l'image du corps et le signifiant du langage, l'exubérance de la vie et l'exubérance de la mort, la dépense organique et la convention rituelle, la pantomime burlesque et le geste tragique."[321] Here he draws upon the early formulations of the hysterical symptom, emphasizing how Warburg in many ways goes beyond Jean-Martin Charcot's iconographical system of mapping the symptom, which sought to reduce and master difference. Warburg, like Freud, didn't try to erase, but rather emphasized the overdetermination of the symptom. Its plasticity remained, for both, a play of contradictory forces that revealed an unconscious at work—a temporal consistency of the present that might rather be characterized as an inconsistency.

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[319] Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Les Éditions de Minuit: Paris, 2002), p. 285.
[320] Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante,* p. 274.
[321] Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante,* p. 270.

Both Freud and Warburg revealed something that radically broke with previous historical methods and theories of the subject and time. Rather than a cognitive subject of consciousness who exists in a stable, chronological time, we are given the Freudian unconscious, a radical new metapsychological form that shakes the world by introducing the unsteady time of repetition and repression. Didi-Huberman explains exactly what this form of time and subjectivity means for the image: "Car l'expression, selon Warburg, n'est pas le reflet d'une intention: c'est plutôt le *retour d'un refoulé dans l'image.* Voilà pourquoi le *Nachleben* apparaît comme le temps d'un contre-temps dans l'histoire."[322] It is in this precise sense that expression in the image is "symptomal" (*symptomale*) and time is deranged, acting out a play of preservation and destruction, of effectuation and counter-effectuation. This intentionless expression is in line with the displacement of character that Bresson himself had imagined when he wrote in *Notes sur le cinématographe*: "Supprime radicalement les *intentions* chez tes modèles."[323]

The suppression of intention turns Bresson's camera away from certain modes of image-making and towards something new—a body that is fragmented in a world without contextualization, or the consistency of narrative. The manipulative hand of the intentioned artist that puts all the pieces together in order to construct a legible universe is exchanged for a new set of hands in the image; these hands are the essence of gesture, since they operate as parts of an inorganic whole that is not predetermined, but rather open to change and difference. Bresson's close-up images show us expressive elements that go beyond the body's (and the sensorimotor schema's) organization and organicity—the movement of the symptomal body. What I want to focus on here is building a connection between Bresson's unique method of creating film images and the symptom as a non-pathological event (of the body) and a mode of expression. Doing so

[322] Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante*, p. 281.
[323] Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 27.

allows us to depathologize Michel and understand stealing as a symptom that is not the sign of illness or social deviancy, but rather a particular mode of enjoying.[324] The film's ending then poses a different set of problems to interpretation, namely: if Michel has developed a new symptom or mode of enjoyment out of what was a mere complaint (arguably the goal of psychoanalysis), why does he give it all up to be with Jeanne?

In a first section I will bring together Deleuze's scattered reflections on Bresson in *Cinéma 1* and *Cinéma 2* with Didi-Huberman's concept of the *image-symptôme*, arguing that an understanding of gesture as symptom provides an alternative linkage between the subject of radical choice (the choice between choice and non-choice) and the spiritual automaton that emerges in the intervals between images. In a second section I will go on to discuss the erotics of suspense that emerges in *Pickpocket,* arguing that non-psychological suspense carries with it a radical potential. To conclude, I re-examine the spiritual-transcendental readings of the film and reconsider the role of necessity in relation to the logic of the symptom. The tension between the subject of the unconscious and the spiritual automaton resurfaces as a key Bressonian theme that has remained unaddressed in existing scholarship. Does the gesture belong to one of these camps, or does it emerge (in the interval) between them?

L'image-symptôme

[324] The police commissioner understands Michel as a pathological subject who steals compulsively because of a failure to adhere to social norms. Even Deleuze, to some extent, underwrites this view. In *Cinéma 1,* he seems to sympathize with the comissioner's position, citing the latter approvingly : "…comme le commissaire dit à Michel, 'on ne s'arrête pas'—vous avez fait un choix qui ne vous permet déjà plus de choisir." Deleuze also points to Bresson's original title for the film, *Incertitude,* as further proof for his argument that Michel is not a truly free subject, for he doesn't exhibit his power of radical choice but instead becomes trapped within a closed series within which he becomes a "slave" of his own acts.
See: Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 1; L'image-mouvement* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1983), p. 162.

In the opening scene of *Pickpocket*, just after we see a close-up of Michel's hand-written diary where he chronicles his thefts, the camera fades in to another close-up; this time we're shown a woman's hands removing money from a leather purse, a wad of bills that she promptly hands to a man who then uses them to purchase something from a nearby ticket window. The man walks away from the counter and glances at something out of the frame which the camera then cuts to—another, younger man, who is staring intently at him and quickly looks down when the camera meets his gaze. These images tell us very little about the situation at hand, and yet the relay of gazes and gestures they record conveys a great deal of affective knowledge, something more difficult to describe but easily grasped by the viewer.

These opening images forge a very particular aesthetics of fragmentation in which the refusal to establish the spatio-narrative context in which close-up and medium shots appear leads the viewer to lend a different sort of attention to the images. These images do not co-construct a legible cinematic world in which bodies are spatially and temporally locatable because perception is not organized around a single, central point. Instead, perception in the image is dispersed, and the images create a world in which the irrational gaps between moments are not covered up but are highlighted and forced to penetrate thought rather than evade it. The woman's hands, the husband's purchase at the counter, and the gaze he exchanges with Michel are all fragmented moments that respond to one another but never meet. They are organized around the non-relation of the interval which refuses to make itself disappear. Not only does the interval persist in the image, but it becomes the organizing principle of Bresson's montage—that is, it constitutes a structure of meaning making that will eventually allow for new thought to emerge.

The frame in which we see Michel's gaze cuts to a mobile shot that captures him from close behind as he approaches a large crowd of onlookers all faced away from the camera. We still

don't know where he is, or what the crowd is observing somewhere in the distance, although the intense scrutiny of the circulating bills has clued us in to the potentially shady nature of Michel's presence there. In the next shots, Bresson moves in behind Michel, who has approached the group of spectators and placed himself directly behind a woman. The camera then captures the woman in front of Michel turning around and throwing him a disdainful look before he, in counter-shot, is seen staring blankly and quickly averting his gaze to look downwards. For the second time within the span of a few seconds, Michel has placed himself at the center of a series of relays by catching the horizontal line of the gaze and diverting it downwards, creating a (non) meeting point between the horizontal and vertical axes in the image.[325]

Bresson cuts to a medium shot that finally shows the makeup of the crowd, with Michel standing behind the now intently spectating woman [See Figure 7]. Many of the people have binoculars, and appear to be watching some sort of race, as their collective gaze is focused on a single point in the distance behind the camera that slowly moves across the horizon. Now the exchange of bills between the couple at the beginning of the scene makes sense: the man was placing a bet at the window, a bet on a horse race. The image of Michel standing there at the back of the crowd now strikes us as unsettling, since he hasn't placed any bets, doesn't seem to be very interested in the race, and has, from the beginning, been eyeing the couple and their wad of cash. We already know from the voice-over which doubles the recorded account in Michel's diary that we saw in the beginning that he is about to do something for which, from an unknown future

[325] The non-correspondence between horizontal and vertical lines in the image reminds us of the ways in which the Renaissance perspective—which promises the existence of a central point at which these planes meet—is at once impossible and, as Domietta Torlasco has pointed out, "contains the principle of its own implosion." Bresson's emphasis on the infinite non-meeting of these two planes within the image paradoxically makes present this insistently absent meeting point as the non-locatable place of the gaze.
See: Domietta Torlasco, *The Time of the Crime; Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Italian Film* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 10.

perspective, he will have felt some sort of regret. But the images are no less ambiguous than the words used to describe the act*;* they tell us nothing about Michel's motivations.

Figure 7. *Pickpocket* (Robert Bresson, 1959): The gazes of the crowd construct the horizontal plane.

In the images that follow we see a series of cuts between a medium shot of Michel's expressionless face next to the distracted woman and a close-up of her handbag. Again, Bresson is playing here with fragmentation, using the non-relation between the horizontal and vertical planes in the image. While we see Michel staring straight ahead emotionlessly, synching his gaze with that of the crowd on the horizontal axis, the close-up of the handbag reveals his deft hand carefully attempting to undo the buckle that holds it closed [See Figure 8]. This close-up—which establishes the vertical line of movement in the image constituted by Michel's very body—is

intercut with the medium shot of the faces in the crowd with their unified line of sight to produce a fragmentary effect. The two lines—Michel's face and his hands—must be related, but we cannot understand just *how*. The pivotal point that marks the non-meeting place of these two axes occurs at the moment when Michel succeeds in opening the clasp on the woman's bag. First, we see his fingers gently pop it open; then, the camera cuts to the shot of his face and we see his expression vibrate every so slightly to register the shock of the purse opening. The event, of course, is situated between these two shots, in the interval between them that registers in the image as an infinite lapse that renders seeing the event as present in space and time impossible. Michel's reaction is delayed because Bresson refuses to show us *his entire body* as a unity—this delay and non-correspondence, we might say, are constitutive of his subjectivity.

Figure 8. *Pickpocket* (Robert Bresson, 1959): Michel's fingers maneuvering the clasp on the woman's purse.

The primacy of the gap between images in Bresson is brilliantly analyzed by Deleuze, who understands the former's cinema to be important to understanding both the movement-image and the time-image. In the first volume of the cinema books, Deleuze turns to Bresson, along with Dreyer and Sternberg, to describe the ethics and aesthetics of lyrical abstraction. This particular cinematic form, Deleuze goes on to argue, signals a turn away from a character's internal struggle and towards her radical encounter with the world outside. It involves the character's being forced to make a spiritual choice, not between two different terms, but rather, between choice and non-choice: "Le choix spirituel se fait entre le mode d'existence de celui qui choisit à condition de ne pas le savoir, et le mode d'existence de celui qui sait qu'il s'agit de choisir. C'est comme s'il y avait un choix du choix *ou* du non-choix."[326] The alternative is no longer one between two different terms, but involves the potential of changing one's mode of existence ; it is a choice, Deleuze emphasizes, involving "une alternative entre l'état des choses lui-même et la possibilité, la virtualité qui le dépasse."[327]

The ability of the cinematic image to reactualize virtual potentials is precisely what Deleuze expands upon in *Cinéma 2,* where he gives a more affirmative reading of *Pickpocket,* labeling Michel a "spiritual automaton" who encounters the material automatedness of images as the unthought within thought. Bresson's fragmenting of cinematic space and time privileges the intervals between images rather than the associations between them, demonstrating the image's potential to unplug habitual connections and think differently; in his *Notes sur le cinématographe,* Bresson himself calls this an "approche inhabituelle des corps."[328] Ronald Bogue provides a helpful gloss on the relationship between automaticity and the unhabitual that Deleuze develops:

[326] Deleuze, *Cinéma 1,* p. 161.
[327] Deleuze, *Cinéma 1,* p. 161.
[328] Bresson, *Notes,* p. 46.

> In the modern cinema, thinking differently consists of unchaining the image-chains of received opinions and beliefs and then reenchaining images through the gaps between them. Each gap is a locus of the Outside, within which conventional thought stutters and collapses, while in that same gap, another thinker within thought begins to arise, an alien, nonhuman (or ahuman) thinker, an automaton produced by and productive of the Outside.[329]

The figure of the automaton emphasizes the ways in which "choosing to choose" does not involve a strong will and the fortitude to make a personal decision, but instead requires an "alien thinker" that emerges "at the limits of will and reason."[330] Such a choice cannot then be a matter of aligning one's will with the will of God—it cannot involve the will whatsoever. What's more, as *Pickpocket* demonstrate, the free choice only seems to emerge to thought as such *after* the fact and presents itself via the future anterior mode of recounting: Michel tells us how he will have had made a decision. The entire film, in fact, takes place in this strange in-between temporality; it is not quite in the past, present, or future, but in the interstices of all three. We could also understand the radical choice Deleuze is evoking, drawing upon both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, as another type of choice—the Kantian choice between the pathological self and the moral self, or the subject of freedom. In psychoanalytic terms, or according to Deleuze's brilliant student Willy Apollon, this is a choice between pleasure and enjoyment, between the pathologized body as a collection of immune functions and the drive body that goes beyond the pleasure's limit and "exits immunity."[331] The latter choice—the choice of freedom—also diverges from the subject of the will, at least in the most radical readings of Kant's ethics.[332]

Although Deleuze's reading of Bresson at times draws near to some of Schrader's remarks about *Pickpocket,* it clearly diverges sharply from a spiritual-transcendental reading at the point at

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[329] Ronald Bogue, "To Choose to Choose—To Believe in this World," in *Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze's Film Philosophy,* ed. D.N. Rodowick, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 125.
[330] Bogue, "To Choose," p. 126.
[331] See: Willy Apollon and Fernande Negrete, "The Unconscious, with Willy Apollon," *Penumbr(a)cast* (podcast), December 2021, accessed March 27, 2023, https://open.spotify.com/episode/3a1COvojtmo1H4Y3uVm241
[332] See: Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (New York, Verso, 2000).

which the latter insists upon Michel's "Will to pickpocket" and its eventual coincidence with the will of a "wholly other" higher power.[333] And yet, Deleuze still refers to the figure of the automaton as a *spiritual* automaton. He opposes the spiritual and the material—which are paradoxically placed on the same side of the opposition—to the intellectual: "C'est l'automatisme matériel des images qui fait surgir du dehors une pensée qu'il impose, comme l'impensable à notre automatisme intellectuel."[334] Deleuze thus constructs an alternative materialism—in line with that of Spinoza—in which Being (which is also a social form) is grasped as a single substance. This speculative materialism is what will allows Deleuze to consider the body and its gestures beyond the mind/body split.

If the spiritual automaton is what allows for the emergence of new thought in the image, it is the body that remains the privileged site of this alternative knowledge, since the automaton is essentially reduced to its fragmented gestures. In Bresson's work in particular, Deleuze sees the close-up of the hand as what emblematizes the automaton's creative function in the interval. In *Cinéma 2* he writes :

> La main prend donc dans l'image un rôle qui déborde infiniment les exigences sensori-motrices de l'action, qui se substitute même au visage du point de vue des affections, et qui, du point de vue de la perception, devient le mode de construction d'un espace adéquat aux décisions de l'esprit. Ainsi dans *Pickpocket,* ce sont les mains des trois complices qui donnent une connexion aux morceaux d'espace de la gare de Lyon, non pas exactement en tant qu'elles prennent un objet, mais en tant qu'elles le frôlent, l'arrêtent dans son mouvement, lui donnent une autre direction, se le transmettent et le font circuler dans cet espace.[335]

We have already seen how in the first scene of the film, the close-up of Michel's hand intercut with the shots of him in the crowd makes the interval emerge in the image as something that disturbs the sensorimotor schema of the action-image. This hand belongs to a body that is no longer

[333] Schrader, *Transcendental Style,* p. 103.
[334] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2,* p. 233.
[335] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2,* p. 22.

an organic unity—it cannot unify time and place for the viewer but will rather break the two apart so that time can no longer be measured as distance in space. But how does this irrational interval become a site of possibility and choice?

Following Deleuze, because the image of the hand reaching into the purse is an encounter with something radically outside of the sensorimotor schema as a way of organizing thought and measuring time and space, it is also an encounter with the unhabitual, or the unthought. This is clearly the case for Michel, who is committing his first theft, and so by executing the gestures necessary for the crime is encountering something new within himself, a new way of using his body must be a new way of thinking too. The close-up of the hand thus constructs a space that is "adequate to the decisions of the spirit"—in contrast to the decisions of the intellect, or what Bergson calls "l'analyse"[336]—in the sense that the spirit is what encounters the new and attains a type of knowledge that doesn't know itself, an affective knowledge that is material (bodily) and, therefore, spiritual.

Deleuze's last sentence about the hands of Michel and his accomplices refers to the way in which the close-up of the body part also reconfigures the relation between the body and the object it grasps—in the film's first scene, between Michel and the money he steals. We clearly see this illustrated when the camera spends painstaking minutes recording Michel fondling and grazing (*frôler*) the woman's purse and a mere millisecond grabbing the cash and stuffing it in his pocket. The act is less about *taking* the object, or repossessing it, and more about coaxing it into a different trajectory; in the case of the first scene, this coaxing is also clearly a form of seduction. The hand—now a piece of a fragmented body, the site of a linkage of spaces that goes against this body's ordinary habits and movements—takes hold of the stolen object not in order to change its position

[336] Henri Bergson, *Introduction à la métaphysique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2011), p. 5.

or ownership, but to make it circulate in space differently. Making the object circulate in space differently also creates a different form of space, a space that Deleuze calls adequate to the decisions of the spirit. The paradigmatic decision of the spirit is of course the choice between choice and non-choice, a choice that, in being made, divides the subject who makes it and locates the decision-making faculty somewhere beyond the willful control of that subject, beyond cognition and what Kant refers to as the pathological.[337]

Didi-Huberman's concept of the *image-symptôme* is useful insofar as it allows us to conceive of the relation between this divided subject and the image as non-representative. The art historian defines the image as an event that makes visible relations of forces that institute a different temporality—the temporality of the lapsus or *Nachleben* that the split subject of language embodies. The concept also stages a productive encounter between Deleuze's understanding of the symptom and a more psychoanalytic conceptualization of the term. Deleuze began to develop his ideas on the symptom in his earlier writings on Nietzsche, where he describes the philosopher as a "médecin de la civilisation" whose task is to create a symptomotology of our collective modes of existence.[338] For Deleuze, the concept of the symptom allows for an understanding of a phenomenon as an expression of a relation of forces. Consciousness, for him, is "rien que le symptôme d'une transformation plus profonde et de l'activité de forces d'un tout autre ordre que

[337] "One cannot attain the realm of the ethical by means of a gradual elevation of the will, by pursuing more and more refined, subtle, and noble goals, by gradually turning away from one's 'base animal instincts'. Instead we find that a sharp break, a 'paradigm shift', is required to move from the pathological to the ethical."
See: Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real,* p. 10.

[338] "L'interprète, c'est le physiologiste ou le médecin, celui qui considère les phénomènes comme des symptômes et parle par aphorismes."
Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche: sa vie, son oeuvre, avec un exposé de sa philosophie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1965), p. 17.

spirituel."[339] Ironically, this order which is *anything but spiritual* in the earlier writings is what will be called spiritual in the cinema books.[340]

In psychoanalysis—from which Deleuze eventually distanced himself, though still referring to his philosophy as "clinical"—this other order would be the unconscious. By the time Deleuze is writing the cinema books we might refer to it as "the Outside." It's in *Cinéma 2* that the "médecin de la civilisation" is transformed into the spiritual automaton; as a "seismograph" of history, the automaton places herself in the interval between images rather than on the fault lines of earthshaking historical events. This is precisely the problematic that Didi-Huberman addresses in his reading of Warburg and his conceptualization of the *image-symptôme,* although he only mentions Deleuze's *Cinéma 2* once, and cursorily, in his 600-page tome. In the art historical context within which Didi-Huberman is working, the return of the repressed in the image as the reactualization of virtual potentials needs to be addressed as a methodological problem for history, a problem involving the way in which art historians are reading and interpreting images. But even though Didi-Huberman ends up making claims about non-cinematographic images that Deleuze could (or would?) only ever make about the cinema, the former describes the task of the historian in very similar terms to those Deleuze uses to classify the time-image cinematographer: the historian must "translate" graphic movement into temporal relation, understanding it as a series of forces acting upon one another through difference, distance, and rhythm.[341] It is precisely in the time-image that movement in space gets "translated" into movement in time; if, for Deleuze, this

[339] Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962), p. 44.
[340] Deleuze seems to be opposing the spiritual to the bodily in this text—but here the term spiritual signifies something quite different and is used in the sense that Nietzsche gives to the word when he refers to the "spiritual condemnation" of resentment.
[341] Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante*, p. 139.

power belongs to images themselves, for Didi-Huberman it is a power located between the images and the historian.

Despite these differences, Didi-Huberman's understanding of gesture as symptomatic ("symptômal") expression is extremely useful for reading cinematographic images, particularly time images that, although they have broken completely with the sensorimotor schema, still privilege the narrative trajectory of one character. In other words, the *image-symptôme* is another concept with which to understand the de-psychologization of character in the time-image, which intersects with the emergence of the spiritual automaton. Didi-Huberman, following Warburg, links the absence of intention in the expressiveness of images to the return of the repressed in those images, the emergence of symptoms that belong to another temporality:

> …il ne faut pas traduire la *Pathosformel* en termes de sémantique – voire de sémiotique – des gestes corporels, mais en termes de *symptomatologie psychique.* Les 'formules de pathos' sont les symptômes visibles – corporels, gestuels, présentés, figurés – d'un temps psychique irréductible à la simple trame de péripéties rhétoriques, sentimentales ou individuelles.[342]

Like Deleuze, Didi-Huberman seems to theorize the eruption of time into the image as what displaces a state of affairs and opens on to the event. But in Didi-Huberman's version, the virtuality of the event is explicitly linked to the repetition of a historically inscribed desire that only becomes readable in a later encounter. His account thus draws closer to—and indeed draws upon—Walter Benjamin's dialectical image. But both Didi-Huberman and Deleuze ascribe the expressiveness of images the power to create new forms and figures linked to a different sort of subject—a subject whose psyche constructs and occupies a scene located far from the psychological.

In Bresson's cinema, this form/figure is called the model. The model comes to replace the dramatic actor, replacing the intentionality of a character's will with automatism, with something that produces a new *substance.* In his characteristically telegraphic style, Bresson writes: "Modèle.

[342] Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante,* p. 281.

Tu lui dictes des gestes et des paroles. Il te donne en retour (ta camera enregistre) une *substance.*"[343] The model thus produces a new cinematographic substance—a new body. I propose that we understand this new body as a spiritual substance made up of symptom-gestures, taking seriously Bresson's proposal that "chaque geste a des dessous."[344] The gesture of the spiritual automaton can thus be understood as a relation of forces that is produced by and interacts with an Outside, opening up thought to virtual potentials, or to new possibilities of linking, organizing, and responding to what Deleuze calls "the unbearable in life." In many ways, cinema is already this Outside of thought, for it is what introduces the interval or gap—from the very beginning—as what itself performs the re-enchaining of images. Cinema inaugurates this reversal of thought and films organize and reorganize the singularity of its instantiations through various forms and modes of expression.

The gesture is in step with this reversal, but it is also a repetition—in the sense of a *rehearsal,* a model's recitation of the words and movements that Bresson dictates to him. The rehearsal too bears the meaning of its opening onto the virtual—to the Outside. If individual personality and an actor's singular talent are "transcended," it is not in the name of an ascetic "surpassing of the self," as Sontag would have it, but rather, so that an encounter with the Outside or the unconscious may occur, an affirmative choice of the virtual rather than the actual state of affairs. Bogue, quoting Deleuze, formulates the movement in the following terms:

> What repeats in repetition is life (not knowing, as in recollection), and that vital repetition consists of a manifestation of an open, ungraspable Whole in a concrete instant (an 'actuality'), which is followed by a subsequent instant in which the open, ungraspable Whole yet again 'now comes into existence.'[345]

[343] Bresson, *Notes,* p. 41.
[344] Bresson, *Notes,* p. 35.
[345] Bogue, "To Choose," p. 118.

Bogue constructs an image of the brush with the ungraspable Whole, or the virtual, in which its temporality is clearly linked to repetition—but not just *any* sort of repetition. It is a repetition that radically changes the temporality of the entire structure, in which what is being repeated is not a particular content or state of affairs, but a "not knowing," or life as indetermination. This way of posing the problem draws near to Freud's formulations in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* where he discovers that the repetition of the child's *Fort-Da* game enacts a repetition which "carried along with it a yield of pleasure of another sort."[346] This *other* pleasure is repeated and insisted upon in life, and it is inextricable from the psychoanalytic conception of the symptom. Willy Apollon, analyst and former student of Deleuze, writes, "…the symptom inscribes in the individual's life the insistence of an other jouissance, a jouissance amenable neither to the satisfaction of needs nor to the structuring of coexistence …"[347] What's at stake in the symptom, then, for psychoanalysis, is closer than we might think to the Nietzschean symptomatology adapted and transformed by both Deleuze and Didi-Huberman; the symptom is an act of creation that emerges from the encounter with this *other* jouissance, and what it creates is a new mode of existence for the subject, a subject who encounters the unbearable in life.

At the end of the introduction to *Cinéma 2,* Deleuze describes what he calls a "néo-réalisme sans bicyclette" (referring to Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*) that replaces movement with "…un poids spécifique du temps s'exerçant à l'intérieur des personnages, et les minant du dedans (la chronique)."[348] What is unbearable in life is Chronos, or difference itself. Deleuze continues, "Chronos est la maladie même. C'est pourquoi les chronosignes ne sont pas séparables de lectosignes, qui nous forcent à lire dans l'image autant de symptômes, c'est-à-dire à traiter l'image

[346] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* trans. James Strachey, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), p. 10.
[347] Apollon, *After Lacan,* p. 119.
[348] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2,* p. 36.

optique et sonore comme quelque chose de lisible aussi."[349] The symptom in the image, or the *image-symptôme,* gives itself up to a radical mode of reading that is inextricable from bearing the thing in life that keeps repeating—the unbearable. It is at the juncture between repetition and bearing (which evokes the latin *gerere*), that we might begin to think about the relationship between the *image-symptôme* and the gesture.

Michel as Symptom

Michel's first theft at the Longchamp racecourse, where we witnessed the emergence of a symptomatic gesture and a new type of image, was ultimately successful. As we see him walking away from the woman he has just robbed, amongst the crowd that has now begun to disperse because the race has ended, we hear him reciting these lines from his diary in the voiceover: "I no longer felt the ground under my feet. The world seemed to belong to me." However, just a few seconds later this ecstatic success is threatened when we see him being briskly followed by two plainclothesmen. The next shot is of Michel in the back of a police car squeezed between the two men, and the following one shows him in front of the police commissioner who tells him that he is free to go, since they cannot prove any wrongdoing.

The next night, at the Café Mahieu where Michel meets his friend Jacques—a clear foil who values work and is described by Michel as "upright and resourceful"—the same police commissioner from the previous day randomly appears at the bar. Michel stares at him for a few moments, and even approaches him to shake his hand, without remembering who he is. This second meeting between Michel and the commissioner is thus experienced by Michel—at least

[349] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 36.

momentarily—as a first encounter, and it indeed becomes one that retroactively changes the terms of their relation to one another.

After the men approach one another and shake hands the camera cuts to a scene of Michel, Jacques, and the commissioner seated around a table discussing the ethical implications of stealing. It's Jacques—whose presence is perhaps necessary to this reconfiguration of the relation between Michel and the commissioner—who brings it up when he asks, "Are there many thieves?" The conversation then turns to Michel's apparently long-developing theory of "superior men" who should be permitted to steal because they are so intelligent and capable that society absolutely needs them. Coming from Michel, who so far has not appeared in any way to resemble one of these "superior men"—he lives in a run-down, empty apartment, sleeps fully clothed, forgets to eat for days at a time, avoids his sick mother, and doesn't have a job— the theory sounds scarcely credible. And because it is almost a direct reiteration of Raskolnikov's "extraordinary man" theory, which becomes a sort of hermeneutic key to understanding *Crime and Punishment,* we are struck by how *little* it reveals about Michel as a character. As S. Ceidlidh Orr underlines, "…when we hear Raskolnikov's theory, we penetrate to the core of the novel and his psyche; when we hear Michel's, we doubt that he himself believes it."[350] The police commissioner, unsurprisingly, is also unconvinced, and he responds that even if these supermen think they are in control, they won't be able to stop themselves—their stealing will have always been compulsive and thus not the outcome of a freely made choice.

This scene represents the beginning of a cat and mouse chase in which the commissioner relentlessly pursues Michel. It eventually becomes clear that arresting him and punishing him for

[350] S. Ceidlidh Orr, "Stealing the Scene: Crime as Confession in Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket,*" in *Border Crossing: Russian Literature into Film,* Eds. Alexander Burry and Frederick H. White, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 95.

his crimes is secondary to the commissioner's real goal: to reveal to Michel *what he is*—that is, to show him and make him understand the unethical nature of his actions and the logical inconsistency of his superman theory. The commissioner's role in the film vis-à-vis Michel has often been understood in ambiguous terms; obviously Michel is the protagonist, and one doesn't hope for his downfall at the hands of the police inspector. At the same time, the inspector is often understood to be in possession of a truth about Michel that the latter is unable to see. Even Deleuze underwrites this view in his initial reading of *Pickpocket* in *Cinéma 1,* where he expresses ambiguity about Michel's choice to embark upon a life of pickpocketing, even going so far as to quote, affirmatively, the police commissioner's warning: "On ne s'arrête pas."[351] Deleuze understands Michel's first choice, or his *passage à l'acte,* to be free, but not in the Kierkegaardian sense, since Michel does not *know* that he is making a free choice and thus remains stuck in a series of subsequent non-free choices: "…nous autres diables ou vampires, nous sommes libres pour le premier acte, mais déjà esclaves du second."[352]

Deleuze then points to Bresson's original title for the film—*Incertitude*—and uses it to characterize Michel as somehow lacking a "connaissance de cause" that would free him from being a pathological subject, stuck in a permanent mode of indecision.[353] I argue that Bresson's actual title, *Pickpocket,* is more fitting to describe the film's course of events, since in it Michel is clearly a *depathologized* subject whose symptom-gestures can only be understood as creative repetitions that produce aesthetic forms of a singular mode of enjoying, which is also a way of responding to what is unbearable in life. These symptoms cannot be understood in the banal psychological sense as signs of a personality disorder over which he has no control, otherwise we risk losing all the

[351] Deleuze, *Cinéma 1,* p. 162.
[352] Deleuze, *Cinéma 1,* p. 162.
[353] Deleuze, *Cinéma 1,* p. 162.

radical ethical and political potential of Bresson's film.[354] Michel's *incertitude* can thus be understood as the radical uncertainty of being in possession of a type of knowledge that doesn't know itself—unconscious knowledge. It is perhaps the destabilizing nature of this type of knowledge that provokes the subject's invention of an ulterior, logical theory or meaning that would prop it up; this is precisely the nature of Michel's superman theory, which serves its purpose for him no matter how unconvincing it is to those around him.

Against the banal psychological reading, we can draw upon Deleuze's more affirmative reading of Michel as a spiritual automaton, while considering the automaton to be in possession of a drive body that produces symptoms. In Bresson's film Michel's acts of stealing become an aesthetic form that envelops a symptom, or an "attitude passionnelle" that appears in the image as in excess of the habitual—what remains at the level of the *analyse.* As described above, we can already see this framing in the film's first scene at *Longchamp*, where Michel narrates in the voice-over his first theft.

Let's return again to this first scene, this time to the moments before the film officially begins, when we see a few lines of omniscient narration appear on the screen describing how the film will unfold. The first line of white text that appears against the backdrop of the black screen announces what the film will *not* be: "Ce film n'est pas du style policier." Bresson seems to be

[354] This type of banal psychological interpretation is made by Tony Pipolo in his reading of *Pickpocket* in a chapter tellingly titled "Triumphs of the Will." Pipolo pathologizes Michel, describing him as "an obsessive-compulsive personality with an unresolved Oedipal complex that drives him toward sociopathic activity with homoerotic components." This characterization may as well have come directly from the mouth of the police commissioner, who ruthlessly pursues Michel in order to "open his eyes" to what he *is*—a social delinquent. Despite the fact that he puts forward a normative psychological understanding of the human subject and—dangerously—of sexuality, Pipolo is one of the most important Bresson scholars in the American literature. His argument that pickpocketing as an activity has, for Michel, "a dissociative status" cannot be extricated from the psychological framework within which the whole of his analysis operates. Since this framework posits a normative sexual and social orientation, it cannot but comprehend symptoms as derivations from these pregiven norms. The fact that Pipolo also subscribes to a spiritual-transcendental reading of Bresson, a particularly Catholic version, ultimately leads to conservative claims about what I would argue, along with Price, is actually a quite radical cinema.
See: Tony Pipolo, "Triumphs of the Will" in *Robert Bresson: A Passion for Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 126.

telling us that the most important thing about the film is its invention of a counter-style that will completely go against the psychological thriller, with its reliance upon the creation of melodrama via characters' interpersonal relations and inner psychic conflicts. What will Bresson invent in its place? The text continues: "L'auteur s'efforce d'exprimer, par des images et des sons, le cauchemar d'un jeune homme poussé par sa faiblesse dans une aventure de vol à la tire pour laquelle il n'était pas fait." This is followed by a close-up image of Michel's hand in the process of writing his confession in similar terms—he admits to being ethically condemned to the group of "ceux qui ont fait ces choses."

The redundancy of this first textual narration, followed by the image of the written confession and reinforced by the voice-over that reads it aloud, serves a very specific purpose for Bresson. In fact, this rather dramatic mode of de-dramatization, involving a doubling of the image in either writing or voice-over, is typical of his films, in which a tendency to de-psychologize characters often renders narrative secondary; the spoilers that occur in this opening sequence then—such as the announcement that the film will end with the "reunion of two souls"—do not take away from the affective charge of Bresson's images, since it is *how* the models deliver these actions (that have become gestures), rather than the content of the actions themselves, that counts above all.[355] This privileging of gesture over action is certainly linked to the model's automatism, which is also an autonomy—the possibility of choice. Deleuze writes: "Avec Bresson, c'est un troisième état qui apparaît, où l'automate est pur, aussi privé d'idées que de sentiments, réduit à l'automatisme de gestes quotidiens segmentarisés, mais doué d'autonomie."[356] Even Michel's

[355] Deleuze also writes about the function of the voice-over in Bresson, which becomes more of a *voice-difference,* disrupting the separation between the diegetic and the extradiegetic to become a pure difference that constitutes the image: "…l'extérieur de l'image est remplacé par l'interstice entre les deux cadrages dans l'image (là encore Bresson fut un initiateur)."
See: Deleuze, *Cinéma 2,* p. 236.
[356] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2,* p. 233.

written confession—ostensibly a form that elicits a minimum of emotion or melodramatic affect—seems void of sentiment; it is, indeed an automaton's confession that, read in Michel's totally neutral voice, is rendered even more flat and unexpressive.

Instead of the psychological mode of expression that belongs to the *style policier*, Bresson favors the automaton and its fragmented, gestural body. As we have observed in the first scene of *Pickpocket,* the expressionlessness and depsychologizing of Bresson's characters cannot be separated from the *way* in which he films those characters—using a fragmenting montage devoid of contextualizing shots that shows us a different sort of space and a different sort of body. Both the elements of the world presented to us and the gestures that fill it are so many segments or parts that, together, always add up to either more or less than the whole. In the moments of the opening narration, we attempt to add up the on-screen text, the written confession, and the voice-over, but the computation seems to give the result of a subtraction; instead of meaning being made, it seems to be taken away, subtracted from the image. And yet this omission can appear only through what is clearly an excess—a surplus of words. This "more or less" is what exceeds the sensorimotor function in the image, what appears in its field as the irrational interval. Even Michel is traversed by this irrational interval—it exists *within* him and literally constitutes him as a character. As the voice-over announces, he is pushed by his weakness into a series of events for which he was not made. But if it was his weakness that led him to commit these very acts, how could he also not have been made to endure them? This contradiction is held within his body—the body of the pickpocket— as a collection of unconscious drives that emerge from the irrational intervals in both the image and in consciousness.

Understanding Michel as a symptom is a useful way of establishing the link between the body of the automaton and the expression of Michel's singular mode of enjoying in the image. As

we have already seen, the intentionless expression of the body is a central aspect of the spiritual automaton's spirituality; in order for thought to encounter its outside—the unthought, or the unbearable in life—it must disorganize itself and undo habitual linkages and organizations of sensation, opening itself up to new linkages that retain the primacy of the gap. In Bresson's images, this bodily disorganization is cinematically produced via fragmenting montage and the intentionless affect of the models. But what Michel embodies, as symptom, is the re-enchaining of images that constitutes itself through the interval.

The series that constitutes itself around this structuring gap is akin to the movement of the drives, a movement that, again, echoes the logic of theft. Freud consistently referred to the drive as a frontier concept situated somewhere between the somatic and the psychical, though it remained an ambiguous category in his thought. He didn't use the term to refer to what we now know as the "sexual instincts" until the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* published in 1905.[357] Even so, he would eventually write, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* that the drives are "at once the most important and the most obscure element of psychological research."[358] On the one hand, the standard and often repeated definition of the drive seems rather simple; in "Instincts and their Vicissitudes" Freud writes that the drive is "the psychical representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism and reaching the mind."[359] On the other hand, the concept of the (death) drive would eventually explode the homeostatic model of the psyche, describing something that both originates from within the organism and pierces it from without. If the drive is said to be the representation of an originary force from which issues a whole set of psychic problems and movements, it is at the same time described at times as what comes from *the Outside.*

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[357] See: Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey, (London: Imago, 1949).
[358] Freud, *Beyond,* p. 28.
[359] Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and their Vicissitudes" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIV (1914-1916),* trans. James Strachey, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 122

It is precisely Freud's own undoing of the homeostatic model that allows for us to "overturn the (Freudian) clichés," just as Bresson does in *Pickpocket.* Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues, in her reading of the film, points to the ways in which the interval effects this same process of overturning: "Ménager un interstice logique de même que substituer l'effet à la cause, permettent le retournement des clichés."[360]

The Erotic Image, or Suspense without Drama

So far, I have been arguing that Bresson deliberately crafts *Pickpocket* as an antitheatrical film by emptying out all actions of their dramatic content and constructing characters that resist psychological interpretation. It cannot be ignored, however, that from its very first moments *Pickpocket* also puts into play and indeed relies upon a great deal of suspense. In the first scene at Longchamp, for example, the lack of contextual knowledge about who Michel is or why he is stealing does not prevent the build-up of a great deal of tension as we witness him attempt what seems to be impossible—opening the turn-closure clasp on the woman's purse without her noticing. Indeed, what is so unnerving about witnessing the act of pickpocketing specifically is the necessity of at once extreme proximity—closeness so intimate it almost immediately reads as sexual—and absolute unawareness on the part of the victim. The interpretation of the "violation" at stake really has little to do with moral outrage over what has been stolen, and everything to do with the terror of an intimacy and enjoyment that escapes knowledge. It is, one could say, a question of form rather than content.

[360] Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues, "La conversion au 'cinématographe' ou l'art de Robert Bresson," in *Les Gestes de l'art,* ed. Guillemette Bolens, Camille Carnaille, Yasmina Foehr-Janssens, Laurent Jenny, Jean-Yves Tilliette, (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2020), p. 244

What emerges in the image is a unique type of suspense that is emptied out of all drama and yet still produces a certain amount of pleasure (though, of course, that pleasure may take on the form of anxiety). And this suspense, of course, is not only produced by the film's thematic content, but carefully constructed cinematographically. The eruption of the interval plays its part, too, in the crafting of a de-dramatized suspense. As Liandrat-Guigues points out in her reading of *Pickpocket*, "Les enchaînements dramatiques ou émotionnels n'étant pas requis, règne la perception de ces écarts."[361] The dramatic and emotional has been scrapped not only in terms of narrative, but in terms of how images are linked together. The perception of the interval becomes possible *because* of the explicit disavowal of the psychological.

What I want to look at here is the relationship between Bresson's cinematographic methods of de-dramatizing the image that, paradoxically, still manage to infuse it with suspense. Specifically, what becomes interesting in terms of understanding Michel's gestures as symptoms is the element of eroticism that also emerges with this suspense. Throughout the film, Bresson constructs scenes that combine different levels of suspense and eroticism, finally bringing both together in the triumphant scene at the Gare de Lyon, where Michel and his accomplices perform a dazzling spectacle of pickpocketing that magically evades the inspector and his officers at every turn.

If the Gare de Lyon scene exhibits Michel at the height of his powers, the scenes leading up to it can be understood as a training ground for both the suspense and the pleasure that will be experienced there. After the first theft at Longchamp and the run-in with the police commissioner, after which Michel recounts to Jacques how he had been falsely accused of stealing and promptly let go (Jacques is obviously suspicious), Michel witnesses someone else pickpocketing in the

[361] Liandrat-Guigues, "La conversion," p. 246.

Parisian metro. The voice-over provides a steady flow of narration that explains Michel's thoughts while we see him move through the crowd, a wooden and impassive figure. Again, the voice-over serves to alienate Michel even more, since the psychological account it provides—with emotionally charged phrases like "Remonter dans ma chambre me faisait horreur"—doesn't match up with the version of him that we see in the image.

Michel steps onto the train and appears to be mesmerized by something a few feet away from him; he stares straight ahead and then wonders aloud, in the voice over, why he is so drawn to "the strange man" on the other side of the crowded car. In the voice-over Michel admits that he cannot tear his eyes away (se détacher les yeux) from him. After a brief exchange of shots and counter-shots between Michel and the man with the newspaper, we are propelled towards the man by way of a dolly-in that guides our eye towards the newspaper, which he is now carefully folding in midair, pressing it ever so slightly against the suit jacket of the man in front of him. Then, in the same close-up, in which the open paper acts as a screen to conceal the movements behind it, we see the victim's lapel move slightly outwards from his chest, as if someone is pulling it away gently in order to retrieve something from the inside pocket. But, again, because the newspaper is a *screen,* in this instance what is fascinating—to both the viewer and to Michel—is precisely what is *not* seen.[362] The last shot shows the skillful pickpocket pass the newspaper—which now contains the other man's wallet—to his other hand and bring it down to his side.

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[362] My reading of this scene can be contrasted with that of P. Adams Sitney, who understands the presence of the newspaper to indicate the importance of reading the image. Sitney argues that in this scene, the sight of the man with the newspaper takes on a special meaning—and thus, appears as *readable*—to Michel only. "The film viewer, who has not directly experienced Michel's anxiety and elation at the first theft," he writes, "cannot interpret the filmic image of the subway scene as he does." Against the idea that these images take on meaning only for those who possess the right foreknowledge or hermeneutic key, I argue that it is precisely their quality of screening, or showing a point of absence or unreadability, that makes them interesting cinematically. The point is that Michel's life has changed not because he has developed any ability to read scenes differently, more knowingly, but rather, that he has developed a new symptom and thus has invented a new mode of enjoying.
See: P. Adams Sitney, "Cinematography vs. the Cinema: Bresson's Figures," in *Robert Bresson,* ed. James Quandt, (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 1998), p. 157.

The image fades in to an almost match-cut of Michel's hand holding an identically folded paper at home in his apartment; he is practicing the new technique. He turns the folded paper so that it is completely vertical and what slides out of it is not a wallet, but a small notebook. After, crossing the room to close the door, seemingly anxious that someone might be watching him, Michel takes off his jacket, hangs it up in front of the window, and slips the notebook inside the front pocket. In the voice-over he asks, "Comment le prendre? Avec quels doigts?" The camera shows us a close-up of his hand sliding the notebook in and out of the pocket using different combinations of fingers.

In this combination of scenes, the erotic element of pickpocketing—which was already presented in the film's emblematic scene at Longchamp—is again emphasized. First, we witness Michel's enjoyment as he watches the stranger skillfully pickpocketing in the metro, and then we see the more creative side of this enjoyment as he goes home and tries the techniques out for himself; the image of his fingers sliding in and out of the pocket *repeatedly* cannot avoid evoking a sexual connotation. Bresson uses two contrasting modes of showing us the erotic enjoyment at stake: in the first instance, what provokes this enjoyment is the fact that the newspaper acts as a screen, in the sense that it both prevents us from seeing what is going on behind it *and,* crucially, that it provides a place onto which desire can be projected (the very principle of cinema). In the second instance, Michel seems to then go home and develop this image that he has projected, in almost Baudelairean fashion.[363] And the images that exhibit this development are ones that, in contrast to the screening or blocking function, make use of the close-up that reveals in great detail the movements and gestures that make up the act.

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[363] See: Charles Baudelaire, *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2010).

What's crucial in the movement between these two sequences and modes of showing is that, in the first instance, the man is not a *mirror* for Michel's actions, but rather, a *screen.* This is precisely what allows for the passage to the second instance of enjoyment in the solo practice session. It is important to underline that the claim about the screen indicates that Michel's gaze is not panoptic—he cannot see all, because what excites and interests him is precisely what he (and we, as spectators) cannot see and thus, cannot know. This latter claim is what stands at the center of a highly contentious debate in cinema studies about the relationship between the image, the gaze, the look, and the production of truth and knowledge—concepts that all relate, of course, to the psychoanalytic subject and its desire and enjoyment. One can trace this debate back to Jean Pierre Oudart's 1969 text "La Suture," which appeared in two separate installments in the April and May issues of the *Cahiers du cinéma* and was subsequently translated into English, merged into a single text, and published in the British film journal *Screen* in 1977.[364] For Oudart, Bresson is the eminent filmmaker of the self-differentiating sequence that at once creates a space of

[364] Oudart's text—where he lays out the relationship between cinema and the psychoanalytic concept of suture developed by Lacan's student Jacques Alain Miller—is centered around the central claim that it was Bresson who made the "fundamental discovery" of suture as a cinematic articulation. And although Oudart does not offer any close-readings of Bresson's images, his underlying claim that the filmmaker's unique way of linking images operated a shift in the way in which the viewer-subject relates to the discourse of the film is structurally similar to Deleuze's later claims in *Cinéma 2*; when Deleuze claims that Bresson introduces the irrational interval into the image as an encounter with the unthought that eliminates the *hors-champ,* he too is reading Bresson as filmmaker who creates self-differentiating sequences. Though Oudart's text is difficult and, at times, enigmatic, its author clearly praises Bresson's cinema for revealing, cinematically, that there is no discourse without suture. Comparing the radicality of Bresson's cinema to that of Godard, Oudart underlines that Bresson "…puts the filmed subject within a structure and in a symbolic place which are those of cinema per se, no longer as a fictive subject located in an illusory existential relationship with its surroundings, but as the actor in a representation whose symbolic dimension is revealed in the process of reading and viewing." Suture, in other words, give us access to the *logic* of the cinematic. What this means for the spectator is not only access and possession of a new form of knowledge about how cinema's discourse works, but a radical destabilization. "The spectator," Oudart claims, "is doubly decentered in the cinema." First, the spectator must occupy the position of the one who posits the film's discourse as a discourse of "no one," a signifier or *énoncé* of absence. Second, the viewer must occupy this unreal space of *énonciation*—which is its proper field—and experience it as a relation of "alternating eclipse" that the subject always has to its own discourse. It is precisely this relation of eclipse that is "represented within the process of reading the film, which it duplicates."
See: Jean-Pierre Oudart, "La suture*," Cahiers du cinéma,* no. 211, (April, 1969): p. 36-39; Jean-Pierre Oudart, "La suture (2)," *Cahiers du cinéma,* no. 212, (May, 1969): p. 50-55.

pleasure for the viewer and displaces her from the field of looking as an all-knowing, all-seeing subject. To look, in and with Bresson, means not simply to not know what one is looking at, but, more radically, to realize that all knowing organizes itself around a point of something unknown—the point of a discourse's suturing. It is this point that is both terrifying and pleasurable.

It's clear from what we've seen that in the first scene where Michel observes the other pickpocket in the train that the screen-function of the image is what provides Michel and the spectator with some sort of enjoyment. It seems to condense all of our non-knowledge of Michel and his motivations for pickpocketing into a single point where what emerges is a different sort of non-knowledge: when we see the newspaper held up against the stranger's jacket and are forced to fix our gaze on it, we *know* what it is that we aren't seeing/knowing, as does Michel.[365] This point of the emergence of truth as non-knowledge marks the annihilation of the viewing subject. Joan Copjec describes the movement thus:

> The point at which something appears to be *in*visible, this point at which something appears to be missing from representation, some meaning left unrevealed, is the point of the Lacanian gaze. It marks the *absence* of a signified; it is an *unoccupiable* point, not, as film theory claims, because it figures an unrealizable ideal but because it indicates an impossible real.[366]

This point of the "impossible real" within the image can be likened to what Oudart, in his remarks on suture, calls "the Absent One." The point that Oudart makes is about the ways in which, cinematically, this invisible point is produced and constructed in relation to a subject. This process

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[365] The non-correspondence between knowledge and perception in Bresson's films has already been underlined by T. Jefferson Kline in his reading of *Pickpocket.* Kline argues that this ambiguity is concentrated in the images of the journal, where the past tense of the written narration in the voice-over contrasts with the present-tense status of the images before us. Ultimately, however, Kline's claim that this divergence between perception and knowledge "disturbs our ability to trust the narrator" is quite different from what Copjec points to and what I underline here. More radically, this non-correspondence disturbs the viewer's ability to trust *any* image, for what constitutes every image is a point of absence—a gaze that does not grant knowledge or recognition.
See: T. Jefferson Kline, "Picking Dostoevsky's Pocket: Bresson's Sli(e)ght of Screen," in *Robert Bresson,* ed. James Quandt, (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 1998), p. 237.

[366]Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire; Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), p. 34-35.

is deemed specifically erotic by Oudart, who ends his article by insisting that when cinema speaks about discourse, it is speaking about eroticism. Remarkably, however, Oudart leaves this part of the essay underdeveloped, saying nothing about just *how* we can understand the eroticism of Bresson's images. I am suggesting that in *Pickpocket* this eroticism emerges from the dedramatized suspense Bresson creates with his images.

Michel returns home and shows the viewer all the ways in which the destabilizing experience on the metro—"why is my gaze drawn here?"—can be repeated, not in a compulsive way, but in a creative way. Bresson takes care to show us the micromovements of Michel's long, slim fingers as they move in and out of the jacket pocket, from above and below. The gesture thus emerges at the point of the symptom's creativity, where the annihilation of the subject marks the emergence of the spiritual automaton. The gaze in the image is akin to the irrational interval in the image—it becomes not only a point of non-knowledge but a place of possibility and choice, what Deleuze refers to as the throw of the dice, referencing Mallarmé. In the metro Michel didn't actually *see* the man's theft, and neither did we. It is an indestructible and yet unknown part of him that projects that act into being so that it may become a source of inspiration, a support for desire and a motor for creation (of a symptom).

The next day, Michel attempts to test the newspaper technique of pickpocketing on the subway. His first attempt fails, but the second is successful. All four of these scenes—from the scene of witness to the scene of Michel's success—are connected to one another via shots of the newspaper, with fade-ins continuously made using that object as a connector between different times and locations. Bresson draws our attention to the screen function of the image via this intense focus on the newspaper. What's more, he shows us the newspaper not only as a screen upon which desire of the unknown may be projected, but as a screen that *folds*—a screen whose surface

contains a "behind", or another hidden surface. Peter Szendy emphasizes the ways in which Bresson's use of folding imagery in *Pickpocket* deliberately reveals the essence of cinematic images in their potential to circulate and to create interstices that are not mere moments of absence, but instances of film folding upon film. He writes:

> A door half-open, clothing that falls open, the gap between the mattress and the box spring, a folded newspaper: These are all so many interstices that introduce a slight stratification into the projection surface, where a banknote can disappear and then reappear. These gaps, these crevices, these folds remark, in the story, in the filmic diegesis, the streaming of images, that is, the metadiegetic slide changers that make the film possible.[367]

Szendy's argument is structurally similar to Oudart's, though it emphasizes the filmic apparatus and its projection surface rather than the symbolic space of enunciation. The enjoyment procured in looking without knowing that emanates from the newspaper scenes can thus additionally be described as the pleasure of seeing the opening up and folding upon itself of a gap, a crevice into which—as Szendy reminds us—one might slide one's fingers. Szendy thus gives us another way of articulating the filmic interval as a gap, crevice, or lapsus that involves not a mere breach of negativity, but the creation of something new. Rather than simply the irruption of an emptiness, a not knowing, or a nothing, the interval gives us something—a gesture, a symptom that is a failure of the repression of the body and its affects.[368]

When Michel succeeds with the newspaper method on his second attempt, he chalks up the favorable outcome to luck rather than skill. After a week of picking pockets on the train, he almost gets caught when a man notices that Michel has taken his wallet and demands that he give it back near the metro exit. In the face of this almost catastrophic failure, Michel retreats to his apartment

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[367] Peter Szendy, *The Supermarket of the Visible; Toward a General Economy of Images,* trans. Jan Plug, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), p. 19.

[368] For more on the relationship between Lacanian psychoanalysis, affect, and the body see: Jacques-Alain Miller, "Biologie lacanienne et évènement de corps," *La Cause freudienne Revue de psychanalyse,* no. 44, (February, 2000): p. 5-45.

to regroup, realizing that something is missing. That very evening, as Michel descends the stairs to the ground floor of this apartment building, he notices a strange man outside his doorway peering inside. The stranger surveys the building façade distractedly but he also glances intermittently at Michel, seemingly communicating something to him. Michel stares at him, clearly perturbed by his presence, and looks down at the floor almost as if he is ashamed. He turns around and goes back up to his room, where a few seconds later Jeanne and Jacques arrive with the news that his ailing mother is on her deathbed. Jeanne urges him to go to her, but Michel hesitates, sending Jacques instead. He then descends the stairs again, exits the building, and begins walking down the sidewalk. The camera follows him from in front using a waist-level travelling shot. We can see almost nothing behind Michel except the glare of a few streetlights, and because of the angle we have no idea what he is intently staring at out of frame to the camera's right. We do hear another pair of footsteps and can surmise that Michel is walking with someone. Finally, he addresses a few words to the invisible presence when he says, feigning hostility, "Que me voulez-vous? Qui êtes-vous?" The camera then shifts to show us the stranger walking beside him—the same man from before. He doesn't respond but simply nods his head and continues walking.

So begins Michel's mysterious relationship with his pickpocketing comrades—a relation that begins with a disavowal of his mother's fatal illness and an indestructible desire to follow someone he doesn't know. The stranger in this scene—played by real-life pickpocket artist Henri Kassagi—takes Michel to a bar where, hesitating at the door, he says in the voice-over, "Il fallait que je sache." He sits down at the bar hesitantly next to Kassagi, and a fade transitions to the pair still seated at the bar but more relaxed, as Michel claims that they had become fast friends. Kassagi turns towards the camera and tells Michel to "venez voir," then walks towards the camera as it moves backwards, deeper into the bar.

In the series of shots that follows, the film's usual extradiegetic silence is replaced by a slow, somber suite from Jean-Baptiste Lully's 17th-century opera *Atys*.[369] The sequence begins with the now recognizable medium shot of Michel that first captures him with his eyes looking downwards and waits long enough for him to raise them to stare straight ahead coldly. His gaze is met by a similar shot of Kassagi, but the pickpocket artist doesn't linger with his look at all, instead moving immediately towards Michel and reaching into his jacket pocket to remove his wallet. The camera moves in to capture the gesture in close-up, and we see Kassagi's deft fingers reach in and remove the wallet from the inside coat pocket, lingering inside for a moment. The camera pans down the length of the jacket until we see, at the bottom, Kassagi's left hand pulling on its hem. Then the wallet appears in this left hand, which had been poised to catch the wallet all along. The focus on Kassagi's delicate and cunning gestures is emphasized and made interesting to the viewer by the play between the visible and the invisible. Indeed, the most exhilarating movement here—the fall of the wallet—is precisely what cannot be seen, what remains hidden behind the screen of the jacket. It is precisely this thrill produced by what is not seen in the image but clearly linked to a desire to see that constitutes the eroticism at stake.

The next images show Michel practicing the same move on Kassagi, who directs his hand down into the pocket. However, this time Kassagi holds his jacket open by the right lapel and the camera captures the gesture from the side so that we see Michel's fingers slipping down into the pocket, rather than simply going behind the lapel. Bresson spends time showing us these gestures not only in great detail, but repeatedly. While this repetition emphasizes the technical aspects of

[369] Price, in his reading, reminds us that Lully was openly gay, which deeply disturbed Louis XIV, for whom the work was composed. He also points to the fact that it was during Louis XIV's rule that the prison system in France expanded its reach, feeding upon a discourse against social deviancies of all kinds including begging, idling, and practicing perverse sexual acts. For Price, then, Bresson's choice of music signals the presence of both homoerotic desire and the discourse of the prison as a site of moral reeducation and class domination.
See: Price, *Neither God*, p. 33.

the gesture, these remain secondary with respect to the affective charge the images communicate. The repetition is not so much instructional, but rather, pleasurable, for both Michel and for the viewer. Michel's desire to pickpocket is of the kind that pulled his gaze towards the stranger in the subway, or that led him to the bar with Kassagi in the first place—it is a desire to know that he follows without knowing precisely what it is about. Here in the bar, we might say that for the first time this desire reveals in what ways it is sexual, but not only because of the scene's homoerotic undertones. When we see Kassagi, in close-up, walk past Michel and pop the button of his jacket open with a flick of his fingers, for example, the camera lingers on the pair for a moment, capturing a moment in which Kassagi brings his hand back down to waist level as he passes Michel, brushing up against him as he goes. This shot is extremely dark, so that at the point at which Kassagi's hand moves downward towards Michel's waist, we can no longer distinguish between the two figures, and can make out only two hands floating between two bodies that are no longer locatable in space [See Figure 9].

Figure 9. *Pickpocket* (Robert Bresson, 1959): The floating hands of Michel and Kassagi.

Kline remarks of this scene that, "Here Bresson lubriciously approaches his camera to a close-up that eliminates faces and leaves only bodies prey to myriad hands that reach inside clothing at both breast and crotch levels, unbutton buttons, pull out secret and preciously guarded objects."[370] But it is not only the proximity of Kassagi's and Michel's waists and the slow deliberate movements of their hands that reach in and out, opening what should have remained closed, that make this sequence erotically charged. It is the proximity to and focus upon something that is at once depsychologized—there is no particular bond or link between these two men, other than pickpocketing, the practice of which has no apparent motive—and the fact that the close-up both reveals and conceals what we desire to see. These bodies are not only disconnected from the

[370] Kline, "Picking Dostoevsky's Pocket," in *Robert Bresson*, p. 262.

faces attached to them, but from themselves as whole, organic unities. Bresson's focus on gesture is linked to a form of expression that is eroticized insofar as it has to do with the limits of what we can know. Beyond that limit, as he shows us, is something that we cannot know and yet might still desire, something located in the folds of the jacket pocket, and in the foldings of the film itself. To take Szendy's claims about the film seriously would mean to assimilate what is concealed in the image to the "behind" of the image that is evoked through its folding upon itself. Eroticism thus emerges not only from the thematic of reaching one's hand inside the fold, but perhaps even more forcefully from the *form* of the images—from the way in which they reveal and conceal the folds of the visible touching one another.

As we see Kassagi initiating Michel into the practices of finger stretching and coordination drills, including playing at the pinball machine, Bresson again reminds us of how the technical and the beautiful can be combined in the gesture. What counts in these images is the way in which movements are filmed, in close-up shots that suspend that constitution of a whole by momentarily taking us outside of it. The images of the metal ball being propelled around the pinball machine's circuit, aggressively and indiscriminately thrown back into circulation every time it threatens to *stop* moving, remind one of the compulsive nature of the drive, but also of its quality of suspending, of creating—literally, in the case of the pinball machine—suspense. What Isabel Millar refers to as the drive's "indefinite circulation around a void" (here the void might be the hole at the bottom of the machine that the ball must not fall into) is shown here to be linked not to a pathological subject, but rather, to the spiritual automation or the subject of the unconscious. This subject is characterized simultaneously by intentionlessness and creativity. What's interesting is that Bresson's combining the close-up images of the thieves practicing their techniques with the logic of the pinball machine gets to the heart of this scene's main paradox: one has to practice and perfect

one's compulsion. The technical skill that Michel works to develop is indeed put into the service of a practice—pickpocketing—but he performs this act not (as far as we know) to attain valuable objects or to become rich, but only because one day he felt *compelled* to do so (that is, after a bit of reflection). This combination between free choice and compulsion aligns with the logic of the symptomal-ethical thief described earlier.

The drive creates antitheatrical suspense that not only wants to keep desire going and abhors the object's disappearance, but also functions by way of a complete repudiation of the subject's conscious intentions regarding object choice. Copjec describes the Freudian drive in similar terms: "…it *so wills what occurs that the object it finds is indistinguishable from the one it chooses.* Construction and discovery, thinking and being, as well as drive and object are soldered together".[371] This version of suspense is echoed in Bresson's images of the three pickpockets at work in the Gare de Lyon, as they circulate through the station executing a series of masterful, complicated thefts that seem to produce an entire substratum of activity below the surface of the bustling crowd. Indeed, what Bresson's camera captures mostly happens at the waist-level, evading the gazes of both bystanders and victims but also denying the dramatic mode of suspense that would rely upon facial expressions, dialogue, or shot-counter shot relays between characters and things.

It is true that the scene at the train station is framed through a more traditional narrative device that places the viewer in a state of expectancy; it begins with Michel, in voice-over, reading from his diary which is shown in close-up, announcing that he has become audacious in his thefts. He then proclaims that "Cela ne pouvait pas durer," essentially signaling to the viewer that the team's downfall is imminent. But the scene also shows Bresson at the height of his non-narrative

[371] Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman; Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2002), p. 40.

powers, as he relies upon the gestures of stealing more than ever to link images and spaces together, creating an antitheatrical, eroticized form of suspense. The sequence begins with a rare contextual shot that shows Michel from afar approaching the entrance to the Gare de Lyon where the camera is situated. Michel walks past the camera's right and it stays fixated on a couple that enters behind him, lingering on them long enough to make us suspect they may be the pickpockets' first victims. But suddenly the camera begins following another woman that passes by the couple, honing in on the leather handbag tucked under her arm. Michel files into the ticket line behind her and moves in close, eyeing the handbag. He throws a glance over his right shoulder, clearly signaling to one of his accomplices. The woman puts the bag down in front of her to pay, and when she goes to replace it under her arm, Michel reaches in with one hand to grab the purse and places a newspaper in its place. The woman—whose gloved hands don't notice the difference between the two objects—walks away, and we see a close-up of the purse being passed from one set of hands to another behind it, and then to another.

It's important to note that as soon as we've entered the Gare de Lyon, Bresson completely denies us access to the space as a whole—we have no idea how the station is organized, in what direction the crowd is moving, or even where, at any given moment, Michel and his accomplices are in relation to one another. We are also never shown an image of them communicating with one another in order to choose their next victim. Instead, it appears as if the camera itself chooses the victims by randomly being attracted to them. In other words, the compulsive nature of the drive seems to have infiltrated the camera's one and only organ—its eye. What links the disconnected spaces together is the irrational interval of the gesture that Bresson deliberately gives us in close-up. This time we really have the feeling that these gestures are the expression of something that goes beyond both narrative and individual psychology, that they give over to the viewer the

symptomal body that plunges itself into a different time, containing past and future (the future anterior from where Michel speaks), actual and virtual. It is precisely this body that Deleuze reminds us, over and over again, is *never in the present;* it is for that reason that we cannot locate it in space, in the space of the train station.

In the series of thefts that follow, we witness levels of technical skill and prowess far more impressive than in the previous scenes. What's more, it even seems as though the pickpockets are showing off, performing feats so complex that one wonders if they could have been performed—and the object achieved—through much simpler methods. The thefts are also more complex because, this time, they involve three thieves rather than one or two; everything must be coordinated. Bresson makes this careful coordination appear out of thin air, since he only shows us the successful stunts in medium and close-up and none of the contextual, "behind the scenes" shots. These stunts involve distraction, the relay of objects through the crowd, the coordination of drops and exchanges, and a constant, stealthy movement through the station that must remain synchronized, yet imperceptible. At one point the pickpockets even pilfer a wallet from one man and drop it into the pocket of another who acts as an oblivious carrier. They follow the second man onto the train and are able to retrieve the wallet from his pocket as he lifts his suitcase up and into the storage compartment.

Michel passes the wallet off to Kassagi who has been waiting behind him. Kassagi continues walking and throws a jacket over the exposed wallet nonchalantly, ensuring that he can keep the object in his hands—ready to pass off to someone else—without being caught. As he walks down the train car's hallway suddenly the third accomplice emerges from a compartment on Kassagi's right. He slowly turns around and backs into the compartment, passing the wallet behind him to the third man as he moves. It is at this point that one begins to wonder if the thieves

are not producing an excess of circulation; why would Kassagi pass the wallet off to the third man if they were hiding in the same place?

In the next shot, the camera is situated in the cramped space of the compartment behind Kassagi and the third accomplice. A passenger shuffles past, his open jacket seemingly flattened against the compartment's opening, and Kassagi reaches his hand up, inserting it in between the man and the jacket lapel. As the man slides past, the wallet Kassagi has snatched with his two fingers remains suspended there as the man continues sliding leftward [See Figure 10]. Szendy takes note of the way in which the train compartment scene displays a certain flattening not only of the characters, but of the image itself, and how Bresson's manner of filming the theft just described constructs the two bodies (Kassagi's and the victim's) as "…two sliding panels, like two slide-changers [*passes-vues*] that ensure that the images change within the lantern—a magic lantern in more than one sense—that this windowed car is."[372] The metaphor of the slide-changers again evokes the appearance of the film's folds, the crevices that are at once *between* images and *within* images. The pickpocket is the one who dares to slide her (or, in this case, his) fingers into the crevice to retrieve from it a bill—money, or time itself.[373]

[372] Szendy, *The Supermarket*, p. 17.

[373] Szendy, in his readings of *Pickpocket* and *L'Argent,* provides a brilliant reading of Deleuze's proclamation in *Cinéma 2* that money is the reverse of all images. Since under capitalism money is a general equivalent that consistently functions within circulation as debt or credit, one can say that it is, in fact, time itself. Money is thus what makes film possible in an ontological, and not just a historical, sense. When a filmmaker tries to show money, what she really exposes is film as such.

Figure 10. *Pickpocket* (Robert Bresson, 1959): Kassagi slides his fingers in as the victim slides past.

In the next close-up we see Kassagi's hands retrieve the cash from the wallet and pass it off to the accomplice behind him. But in between, Bresson shows us a medium shot of the train car aisle as the man moves further down to find a spot for his luggage. He therefore radically disrupts the flatness of the images shown just before, with their sliding elements and crevices, and instead emphasizes the image's depth of field, exaggerated as it is by being tightly framed on both sides by the compartment windows and filled up by a line of travelers that reaches further and further towards the end of the car. Our gaze is squeezed in between this tight space and has nowhere to go but straight forward *into* the image, which is no longer flat, but extensive. If, based on

Szendy's reading, this counter shot takes us *into* the fold, then the fold reveals its potential to stretch on infinitely.

The close-up of Kassagi handing off the cash that follows the aisle depth shot also shows, with the same flat framing from before, the pickpocket placing the empty wallet back into the victim's jacket pocket. The victim is thus doubly violated, for not only has he been robbed, but he has been robbed twice, once of his money, and once of his knowledge (like the proletariat). One imagines that he will spend the entire journey reassured of the presence of his wallet in his jacket pocket and will not discover something has been taken until the next time he goes to use the wallet, opening it up to find nothing inside. While we as spectators gain more knowledge of the intricacies of pickpocketing and the maneuvers required (and those, perhaps, not required but enjoyed nonetheless), the victims come out even more duped than before. Even when there is a production of knowledge in the film's images, a seeming revelation of what's "going on", there is at the same time a collateral production of non-knowledge, an increase in deception. And this is certainly related to the symptom as the place of truth in the image, a conflictual truth that pierces knowledge.[374]

A Touching that Disturbs the Symptom

After Michel's accomplices get caught at the Gare de Lyon, a fate he narrowly escapes, the film's narrative briefly accelerates. Michel, fearful of the inspector on his tail, flees Paris for Milan, Rome, and finally London. A close-up image of the train's exterior sliding across the screen (echoing Szendy's slide changers) signals a two-year time-lapse in which Michel reports, via the

[374] "Sans doute le travailleur est-il le lieu sacré de cet élément conflictuel qui est la verité du système, et qui émerge quand un savoir, qui se tient d'autant plus parfaitement qu'il est identique à son propre perçu dans l'être, se déchire quelque part."
See: Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI, D'un Autre à l'autre,* ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, (Paris: Seuil, 2006), p. 39.

journal entry which we see on screen, to have spent all his money on cards and women. He ends up, "by accident," at Jeanne's apartment, where he discovers that she has had a child with Jacques, though the latter has apparently been absent for three months. Astonished and apparently moved at this news—and also seemingly aware that Jeanne refused to marry Jacques because she was really in love with him—Michel pledges to get an honest job and support the family himself.

In the next sequence of images, we see a montage that includes Michel punching a timecard and receiving his pay envelope and Jeanne opening the envelope, reaching in, and retrieving a wad of cash. The gestures of reaching into the folds that were earlier charged with eroticism and linked to Michel as symptom are now declined differently. The circulation of objects such as money has been attached to a normative scheme of love and work, one in which a contractual agreement is fulfilled through consensual exchange. It seems as if Michel has "overcome" his compulsion to steal, but this sentiment is short-lived, for it's only a few frames later that we see him enter the bar he used to frequent with Jacques and approach, from behind, a man reading a newspaper. Michel peers over the stranger's shoulder before the man inquires, "Vous êtes joueur?" and we see a close-up shot of the front page of the paper where the upcoming horse race at Longchamp is featured. The stranger's question appears as a provocation to the newly cleaned-up Michel; the man seems to be asking him not only if he is a gambling man, but, additionally, if he is willing to gamble, to play with all that he has now "won," to sacrifice everything he now does to somehow prove what he *is*.[375]

In the next scene, Michel returns to Longchamp. He seems to have come full circle—the entire scene is structured similarly to the one at the beginning of the film which showcased

[375] Although we find out only retroactively, this man is an undercover agent—the one who shows up in the next scene at the race—who was probably tailing Michel, just waiting for him to slip up and fall back into his old habits. It is no surprise then that this temptation poses this question of Michel's pathological being in the same terms as the police inspector from the film's first half.

Michel's first theft. This structure Bresson sets up here, in which the film's first scene is "repeated," points to the fact that this repetition is given to the image from the voice of the diary—a futural point which exceeds both instances but retroactively infuses them with meaning, projecting possibility into the past. What repeats in the image is thus not the content of the initial scene, but rather the absent future voice that narrates it.

We see Michel approach the stranger from the bar, who discreetly shows him a wad of cash inside his jacket pocket—the man seems to have won big, but Michel remarks that the horse he had bet on wasn't the winner of the race. Ignoring this detail, Michel follows the man into the crowd gathering to watch the next race, this time positioning himself in front of him rather than behind. The camera shows the crowd in medium shot with their gazes all aligned toward the track, setting up within the image a strong horizontal plane, similarly to the first scene at Longchamp. The camera then cuts to a close-up of Michel's hand, below his waist, slipping behind him and moving towards the stranger's open jacket. The vertical axis is established here as a movement between Michel's straight-ahead gaze and his hands working at a level "below" the crowd, below its consciousness. Like in the first scene, these two planes are totally disconnected from one another, and the viewer has difficulty associating the delicate movement of the hands slipping into the victim's open jacket—behind its folds—and Michel's steely gaze forward outwards toward the track. But what interrupts this dissociation is the hand of the victim that—for the first time in Bresson's film—reaches back, reacts. The stranger's hand slowly follows Michel's hand as it carries the wad of cash downward, carefully wedged between his index and middle fingers; then suddenly, the stranger's hand grabs Michel's arm, the cash falls, and the victim's other hand slides in from the left side of the frame with an opened hand cuff and closes it around Michel's hand. All of a sudden, the vertical and the horizontal become inextricably linked through this gesture of

capture, which reintroduces action back into the frame, and then the subsequent pathos evoked by Michel's limp, trapped hand which angrily yet defeatedly clenches into a fist. The object—the money—falls out of circulation.

In many ways this scene is the first ending of the film; it seems to close the series opened up at the beginning where Michel announces "the things he has done" in a neatly circular manner that corresponds to the structure of the film's narration. The voice-over gives times to the image as a future-anterior—these are the things Michel will have done—or as a voice from the future that has already recorded its past. The fact that the last scene repeats the first would mark a sort of closure of a messianic opening—the future was always what had already happened, what had been announced as bound to happen, though it clearly happened to someone who had a choice. Perhaps this is what Deleuze hinted at when he declared, apropos of Bresson, among others, that "Ne choisit bien, ne choisit effectivement que celui qui est choisi."[376] Michel is both split and unified through this dictum, which, along with the opening credits, puts him in a position that he cannot possibly occupy (in a story that he was not made for); he must choose freely what has already been chosen for him. We might add another temporal layer to the dictum by writing it this way: I choose to choose what I didn't choose but will always, already have chosen. It is precisely in the interval between choosing and not choosing (having something radically external imposed upon one's self) that the subject is granted the possibility of the ethical act.

This structure neatly corresponds with the psychoanalytic subject of the unconscious and the logic of the drive. Copjec, in order to describe this logic, gives the example of Leo Steinberg's commentary on Jasper Johns's use of a standard letter-type stencil in many of his paintings. Steinberg asks the rhetorical question, "Does this mean that it is Johns's choice to prefer given

[376] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 232.

conditions…that he so wills what occurs that what comes from without becomes indistinguishable from what he chooses?"[377] Johns's choice of stencil is imposed upon him from without, and yet he retroactively confirms this imposition as a choice when he says that he buys the stencils because he likes them that way—"the way they come." This logic echoes the correspondence Deleuze sets up between choosing and being chosen, and, strangely, it also seems to intersect with Schrader's spiritual-transcendental reading of the film. Schrader writes: "Bresson hopes to make the viewer so free (by leaving him uncommitted during everyday and disparity) that the viewer will be forced to make Bresson's predetermined decision (during the decisive action)."[378] And yet, while it may be structurally similar, Schrader's reading ends up closing the gap within the subject—between choosing and being chosen—by introducing a substantial Other (God) that can guarantee the validity of the ethical or religious choice. Schrader forces Bresson into the position of providing a solution to the intolerability of the everyday in the form of divine justice, a sort of corrective to man's abandonment to the "prison of the Lord."[379]

Deleuze, on the other hand, reconfigures the meaning of the intolerable in the time-image when he writes, "L'intolérable n'est plus une injustice majeure, mais l'état permanent d'une banalité quotidienne."[380] If the intolerable in the world confronts us with the unthought within thought, or the impotence of thought within thought, then we are incapable of responding to it. This is precisely Deleuze's point when he remarks that the character of the time-image is a seer or an automaton. Stripped of the capacity to react, the automaton is the image that grasps the unthought without attempting to envisage a better world, divine reason, or even justice. Belief no

[377] Leo Steinberg, "Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of his Art," in *Other Criteria; Confrontations with Twentieth-century Art*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 32.
See also: Copjec, *Imagine*, p. 38-39.
[378] Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 116.
[379] Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, p. 115.
[380] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 221.

longer addresses itself to another world to come, but to this world. And this belief, Deleuze remarks, "C'est simplement croire au corps."[381]

In what I am calling the film's "coda," we witness something that displaces the symptom to perhaps draw closer to this belief in the body. Bresson gives us three distinct scenes here that contain a repetition and the interposition of something new—a letter; in the first scene we see Michel in a prison cell that eerily resembles his room. A distressed Jeanne arrives and professes to Michel that she has nothing left but him, seeming to offer her support. Michel is cold and rejects Jeanne's rapprochement as a hostile form of mocking, proclaiming, "Je ne veux personne, rien." Immediately after pronouncing these words, however, Michel panics and implores Jeanne—"Reste!" In the next scene we see Michel pacing back and forth in his cell and in the voice-over, he intimates the presence of suicidal thoughts. At what seems to be Michel's nadir, something arrives that changes everything—a letter. Michel unfolds the letter and the camera pans in to show us the message in close-up. It is not the first time that the spectator has seen writing in the film, and yet narratively—in terms of the chronology of the diegesis—it is. As Michel reads the letter, he relays in the voice over that his heart is pounding. His face lights up and something in him seems to shift. In the note Jeanne explains that her child has been sick for weeks but that she will come to visit soon. While it's understandable that Michel might be excited about Jeanne's visit, there is still an excess of excitation in this scene that doesn't seem to be attributable to her message. It seems as if it is more the presence of the letter itself—the writing—that excites Michel. It presents a possibility to him—a possibility that will soon be realized through his recounting of the events of the film in his journal, a form of writing which he will presumably decide to invest himself in and begin working on from his prison cell. The moment at which Michel realizes the

[381] Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 225.

absolute impossibility of escaping his fate, the radical absence of a horizon of possibility, is also, paradoxically, the moment at which he begins to have faith in "this" world—that is, the world of the film. We can agree with Schrader that some kind of faith is presented to us here, however it is a faith without God, a faith that is not directed towards the divine.[382]

When Jeanne returns to the prison she too seems to be possessed by this new weight of possibility. Her face is glowing, illuminated by a mysterious light source that seems to come from another world entirely. When she approaches the bars that separate her from Michel, he reaches through them to embrace her, kissing her forehead passionately. The change provoked by the arrival of the letter and the possibility of belief in this world has also made possible a new form of touch in the image, a form radically different from that instituted by stealing and its drive-like logic. While the touch associated with pickpocketing was always about reaching into a dark corner of the image where one could not see what was there, about an absence that drove metonymic desire forward and echoed the circulation of objects, the touching of the last scene is not about what is absent from the image but rather what is excessively in it. While the body presented to us in the image is still fragmented, never fully whole, it goes beyond the autonomy of parts and towards their automatedness—that is, in Deleuzian fashion, towards a place without the giving of a law, where clichés may be overturned. The belief in the body and the symptom are not radically heterogeneous here, but they nevertheless stand in tension with one another, a tension that Bresson does not resolve but rather emphasizes. This tension is perhaps that between two different interpretations of the film's last image, the cliché that finally undoes all of the clichés. The image is punctuated by a very memorable phrase: "Ô Jeanne, quel drôle de chemin il me fallait prendre pour aller jusqu'à toi." On the one hand, the phrase can be interpreted as having to do with the

[382] The faith that is presented here does not exclude God altogether, but we might say that it corresponds only to a God that does not know he is God.

lawful necessity proper to the sphere of ethics as it is outlined by psychoanalysis.[383] On the other hand, the statement can be interpreted, in Deleuzian terms, as having to do with the relationship between the unthought and the thought that thinks this unthought as a form of automatism of the spirit which performs a sort of *lawless* necessity. The hypothesis of a God is perhaps necessary to both scenarios, but just what type of God remains radically open.

[383] "*…one has to discover the point where the subject itself plays an active part in lawful, causal necessity*, the point where the subject itself is already inscribed in advance in what appear to be laws of causality independent of the subject."
Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, p. 33.

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