

POTENTIAL CINEMA: CLOSET FILM IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FICTION

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Nicholas Tobin Roth

January 2014

© 2014 Nicholas Tobin Roth

# POTENTIAL CINEMA: CLOSET FILM IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FICTION

Nicholas Tobin Roth, Ph. D.

Cornell University 2014

**ABSTRACT:** This dissertation lays the initial groundwork for theorizing *closet film* as a literary genre. Though closet drama—poetry written in playscript form—has received attention from a wide variety of critics in literary, performance and cultural studies, no such body of work exists for thinking about closet film—fiction written in the form of the screenplay. Aside from the self-published work of independent scholar Quimby Melton—with whom I have collaborated on his ongoing project to form an online bibliography of what he terms the *closet screenplay*—there exists quite literally no field of study, nor any initial attempt to theorize the limits and potentialities of the genre. This project offers a theorization of closet film informed by the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben, especially his focus on *potentiality*, which I argue helps describe closet film’s tenuous stance toward production—closet film is a genre organized around the potential-not-to produce. Studying closet film also helps us rewrite the boundaries of what is considered possible in terms of literary and visual realism, and the “closet” itself constitutes an excellent new paradigm for understanding the space between film and the novel, opening up discussions of texts that have been largely overlooked or marginalized and enabling us to encounter old ones afresh. This project thus completely revamps our understanding of the novel and its relation to cinema, realism, ontology, and aesthetics.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nick Roth was born and raised in Los Angeles. He graduated highest honors and Phi Beta Kappa from the University of California Berkeley in 2007 with a B.A. in English. In 2011, he received his M.A. from Cornell in English, and his Ph.D. in 2014. Nick has taught freshmen writing seminars on film, the year 1985, and Stanley Kubrick. He received the Martin Sampson Teaching Award in March 2013. He has published short articles on Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and on film adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A longer article on Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* is currently under review. He is more recently the author of a number of screenplays, including a co-authored Chinese feature film, *Chui Deng Legend*, the experimental documentary *Eva and Liza*, and the queer sci-fi short film *Nanoblood*. He is also working on a novel entitled *The Extraordinary Chicken* and is looking for a job writing for television if you know anyone who is looking.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are innumerable people who have helped either directly with this project or by supporting me while I worked on it. Here are those whom I would like to express my gratitude to in particular. Foremost, this dissertation would certainly not exist at all if not for three key people. The first is Quimby Melton, whose work laid the foundation for the present study, but also whose advice and friendship throughout the project have been invaluable. The second is Adam Cohen, in whose name I checked out more books from the UCLA Library than I care to mention, and who has done more proofreading for me, on this project and others, than any mortal ever should. And finally, Matt Bucemi, whom I owe one half of every academic thought I've had in the last five years.

I also wish to express my deep gratitude to my committee, all of whom have had a hand in guiding this project to its present state and helping immensely throughout the process. Amy Villarejo guided my thinking about historicism and genre, and tipped me off to several of the texts I analyzed. Nick Salvato inspired the initial idea for the project itself and offered advice on this project and others that shaped my thinking greatly. Kevin Attell has guided the direction of this project since its inception and supported it throughout. He is also entirely responsible for what grasp I have of Giorgio Agamben. And Jeremy Braddock offered much good criticism, called me on a lot of my bullshit, and kept me thinking about materialism.

There are also a number of people who helped in more individual and specific capacities. Jacob Seldes brought Mark Leyner's *Tetherballs of Bougainville* to my attention. Darius James (whose *Negrophobia* is the focus of Chapter Three) entertained a lot of my nonsense and grounded the project in reality by spending a whole afternoon showing me around New Haven. Harry Shaw gave me extremely helpful feedback on the section of the project that now forms the conclusion. All of my peers at Cornell, as well my dear friend Jackson Malle, proved deeply needed resources in the fields of professional advice, specific intellectual questions, and emotional support. Toby Bryan helped me conceive of *dunamism* as an art movement.

My parents encouraged and supported me throughout. Without the time and energy and money and guilt they exerted on me I definitely would never have been able to accomplish this.

And finally, I wish to thank the one person who kept me sane throughout, and without whose love I don't know what I'd have done, and who despite (reasonably) having little interest in the subject matter, put up with me working on this for years, the love of my life, Lindsey Haun.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: What Closet Film <i>Is</i>	1
Chapter One: The Japanese Closet Film from Akutagawa to Murakami	61
Chapter Two: The Impotentiality of Surrealist Cinema	114
Chapter Three: The Queer Black Closet Film	158
Chapter Four: Badass Literature & The Golden Age of Closet Film?	200
Conclusion: Realism as Potential Cinema	227
Bibliography	240

## INTRODUCTION

### WHAT CLOSET FILM *IS*

It is a weird and wonderful feeling to write a booklet about something that does not in fact exist.

—Eisenstein

Closet film is a literary genre defined in part by an absence: the films themselves do not exist. Instead, what we have is a unique kind of literary text: one rendered in screenplay format, but for which actual film production is neither intended nor, in some cases, even *possible*. This absence is in some ways even more stark than closet film's antecedent genre, closet drama, literary (often poetic) works rendered in playscript format. Whereas closet dramas have historically most often simply been *read* and occasionally performed in private and coterie settings, closet film, for various reasons discussed below, is perhaps even more literary in the sense that closet film *production* has been and probably will continue to be even less likely than closet drama *performance*. For example, Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1819 closet drama, *The Cenci, A Tragedy, in Five Acts*, a paradigmatic closet drama, was conceived of as unstageable for decades—until it received its first public performances in the late nineteenth century (Catherine Burroughs 217), and later a notable attempt by Antonin Artaud in 1935 (see below). No such record of attempted film production accompanies closet film (yet).

In fact, closet film, as a genre, though absolutely parallel to closet drama in several intuitively obvious ways, is *itself* radically absent in a way closet drama most certainly isn't. Closet drama bears a long history of scholarly study, and continues to this day to engender a strong critical interest. But no such record exists with closet film, a literary genre which remains almost wholly undiscovered. Not only is the present study the first booklength examination of closet film, but the existing field is constituted solely by a few essays by independent scholar

Quimby Melton, whose ongoing online bibliography of closet film constitutes the sole attempt at understanding closet film as such in the English language. But even Melton's interest in closet film is merely a subset of his more general interest in screenplays and script culture itself, and to that end Melton focuses on what he has termed the "closet screenplay" (more on this terminology below). What seems most striking is not simply that so few critics in film and literature have studied closet film, but that so few have even asked the question in the very first place. Given the history and sustained interest in poetry written as if it were a play, *should not* there be a corresponding genre of fiction written as if it were a screenplay? Since the screenplay at the formal level constitutes in a direct lineage the cultural offspring of the playscript, is it not the case that we might *presume* the existence of closet film? Is it not the case that we should expect to be *surprised* if closet film did *not* exist?

And yet attention to the question of whether there even *is* a genre of closet film has itself remained marginal. A rare example comes from Nick Salvato's excellent book on closet drama, *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance* (2010), which ends with a brief discussion of William Burroughs's *The Last Words of Dutch Schultz* (1970) as a kind of modern closet film. The novel is a fever dream based on the historical last words of the dying gangster Dutch Schultz, rendered in a vague kind of screenplay formatting, though pastiched throughout with photographs and drawings of film negatives. It turns out that Burroughs's formal experiment is not a totally singular one. There are, as one might expect, other closet films. But while critics have certainly noted the formal idiosyncrasies of several of the works discussed below, to date Melton's is the sole attempt to group together the entire body of such texts under the rubric that they are screenplays not intended to be filmed, or are otherwise unfilmable. Melton has thus begun the important work of collecting these texts as a semi-



coherent whole, and this dissertation takes the next logical step: a more fully fleshed out account of the limits and potentialities of closet film as a genre, with an extended study of several of the most notable closet films to have emerged in the radically different temporal and geographic situations that seem to have engendered the form: from Tokyo and Paris in the 1920s, to New York and Los Angeles in the 1990s. The boldest way to put the underlying contention of this project is that closet film constitutes one of the most magnificently under-recognized literary subgenres in twentieth-century fiction. My aim here is simply to demonstrate that *this thing exists*, and, perhaps most importantly, that it is worth paying attention to.

### ***Closet Film as Genre of Potentiality***

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
—Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (11-12)

Let us now approach with some specificity what exactly this *thing* is by claiming that closet film is itself a literary *genre*, as opposed to something like a literary *mode*. One seeming advantage to the latter is that it would allow us to take account of a group of texts that are intensely varied in form and publication history. No matter how you slice it, there are very few texts that are totally or purely closet films in the sense that they are entirely written in true screenplay form and which were not intended to be produced as films and/or are unproduceable. Consequently, the few closet film texts we must necessarily look to exist in very different settings, and are read in very different ways, and the extent to which they represent themselves as properly cinematic also differs a great deal. Understanding closet film as a *mode* would allow for reading texts as closet-filmic; a novel could *partake* of closet film, rather than simply having

to *be* or *not be* a closet film. For example, Nick Salvato views closet drama as an elastic mode, rather than a more or less fixed, stable *genre*, which allows him to take a more fully developed accounting of the complexities of closet drama as it manifested in Modernist queer performance practice in the first half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, there is a great deal of value in understanding closet film as a genre, as something somewhat stable or fixed along a set of formal properties, or those pertaining to a given text's material production. Since, with the sole exception of Quimby Melton's work, closet films have literally *never* been brought together along any kind of set of properties, fixed or not, it seems high time a lengthy study aimed to do precisely that: establish closet film as a kind of fixed *thing*. While the definition of what constitutes "film" varies tremendously between the different historical, linguistic, and geographic locales where closet films have been written, the genre is united around the fact of a certain tenuous and ambiguous stance towards film. The cinema of Ryunosuke Akutagawa's mid-twenties Tokyo shares little in common with Mark Leyner's mid-nineties Hollywood, but there is a unique continuity regarding the space these texts occupy between literature and the filmic – even if the specific language of cinema is different in both cases.

Jonathan Culler has recently argued along similar lines for understanding the Lyric as a kind of genre. In "Why Lyric?" (2008), Culler argues:

New lyric studies, of the sort instantiated by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins's manifesto "Lyrical Studies," appear to share [René] Wellek's skepticism about the possibility of the lyric as a transhistorical category... But if we are to encourage the study and teaching of poetry, the historical study of different poetic practices should be joined to a revival of the idea of the lyric as a poetic activity that has persisted since the days of Sappho, despite lyric's different social functions and manifestations. (202)

Critics like Wellek mistake a narrow generic conception of the lyric for a problem with generic conception altogether. On the contrary, Culler Argues, it makes a good deal of sense to

understand the Lyric as something that is both fixed and historical. Culler expands dramatically on this in “Lyric, History, and Genre” (2009), where he is more explicit about the importance of genre in understanding literary history: “If literature is more than a succession of individual works, it may be at the level of genre (the modifications of genres, the rise of new genres, and the eclipse of the old), that literature has a history” (879). In the article, Culler praises *NLH*’s founder and director of forty years, Ralph Cohen, for supporting a broad interest in what Culler describes as an “unpopular topic” (879). He quotes Cohen: “Genre study is more than another approach to literature or to social institutions or scientific practices; it analyzes our procedures for acquiring and accumulating knowledge, including the changes that knowledge undergoes” (qtd. in Culler 880). Culler’s theorization is also useful in considering the lack of a historical theorization of closet film. Arguing the unproductivity of distinguishing genres *either* on the basis of theoretical *or* historical conceits, Culler insists we intertwine the two:

If one avoids the temptation to separate generic categories into the theoretical and the empirical but insists that genres are always historical yet based on some sort of theoretical rationale, they are more defensible as critical categories, essential to the understanding both of literature as a social institution and of the individual works that take on meaning through their relations to generic categories. (881)

Closet film, correspondingly, is inherently both a theoretical and a historical construct. This dissertation focuses on the history of this genre, even as the genre itself has never been theorized as such. In this way closet film literally has and also has not existed. We can trace the genealogy of its appearance throughout twentieth century literature, but its delimitation as a totality is a purely retrospective and theoretical one. Likewise, the theoretical delimitation of the closet film as a genre is not hampered by quibbles surrounding the lack of historical continuity. It is unclear which later practitioners of the closet film were even aware of its prior iterations, but that is not essential to a study of closet film as a kind of dynamic totality. Culler stresses that

“conceptions of genres are not just accounts of what people of a particular period thought; it is crucial to the notion of genre as model that people might have been wrong about them, unaware of affinities or ignoring continuities in favor of more striking novelties, or recognizing only an attenuated version of a larger tradition” (883). With Culler, we might understand a genre as both dynamic and fixed, such that closet film constituted a certain kind of genre within the larger field of literary history despite the dearth of historical examples, as well as the near-total absence of critical recognition.

Culler’s theoretically motivated defense of genre study is thus quite useful in thinking about the importance of genre in general, but perhaps more directly to the point are Catherine Burroughs’s remarks about closet film’s most immediate generic predecessor, closet drama. Burroughs offers an overview of the history of closet film as a literary genre that has persisted since classical times. Though not in these precise terms, Burroughs in effect emphasizes the literariness of the genre over its theatricality. While certainly the period before 1900 includes a great deal of “unperformed drama” in which plays might be concerned closeted by virtue of their subjects or topics, Burroughs is more interested in “consciously constructed closet play[s]” (215). She argues that “there are significant dramaturgical differences between a play that has been ‘unperformed’—for whatever reasons—and a play written solely to be read” (215). The same maintains for screenplays. Unproduced films constitute a broad range of textual artifacts, but the focus of the present study is the consciously constructed closet film, a narrower category defined by its own range of unique formal, literary, and cinematic characteristics.

Genre, for Burroughs, is the essential term that categorically divides “plays written for reading” from “those that have never been staged” (216). The generic conception of closet drama thus stands against a conception of closet drama as a “mode of reception” (216) which

encompasses both—generically distinct—types of works. Burroughs further distinguishes consciously written to be read “closet plays” from “chamber plays,” written for private stagings, as well as plays dealing with the subject matter of sexual closeting. Identifying closet drama as a genre in its maximum specificity is thus, for Burroughs, the first step in parsing its dramaturgical properties. Likewise, identifying and isolating true closet film—as a genre—from Quimby Melton’s more general conception of the “closet screenplay” (see below) is the present study’s necessary key focus. Burroughs offers a good summary of the need for establishing a narrower conception of closet drama that precisely parallels my focus here on delimiting closet film its greatest specificity:

The move to make the genre of closet drama more inclusive is tempting because it allows us to ignore the circumstances of a play’s creation as well as to bypass the issue of ‘intent’—the author’s perception of her own process. The result, however, is that not enough attention is paid to the fascinating tradition of deliberately crafting a play written for readers only. Moreover, if we expand the term ‘closet drama’ to include those plays that were never staged or never produced until many years after composition (for reasons ranging from public to self-censorship), we bleed the term into another category—that of ‘the historically closeted’ or, to use John Galt’s phrase from the periodical he briefly edited in 1814, ‘the rejected theatre.’ (217)

As this dissertation will show, there exists a body of texts which possess a great number of affinities and continuity, such that they certainly form a coherent single genre, but whose formal idiosyncrasy has been repeatedly marginalized by critics (if they have not ignored the work altogether). And, to be sure, Burroughs demonstrates that formal and structural features, and not *only* intention, inform the genre of the closet:

Are closet plays ‘closet’ because their authors say they are? Of course not. And yet, while a broad swathe of twentieth-century theory would have us ignore intentionality, when playwrights telegraph that their dramas have been crafted for the closet (or for the stage), they not only acknowledge that certain formal traditions and generic expectations lie behind their choices but they also indicate a *willingness* to engage with the specific structural demands dictated by that choice. It is this consciousness that can trigger us to pay more attention to the

discoverable formal features that may align particular playscripts with the closet.  
(218)

While intention thus can serve as a helpful tool in beginning to formulate a canon of closet film, it is clearly only the tip of the generic iceberg, an indicator of where to look for the myriad formal and structural features that constitute closet film as an individual genre. It is therefore the contention of this project to institutionalize closet film as a genre that has persisted in the margins of twentieth-century literature, so that from now on we might be able to read closet films *as* closet films, placing them in their proper tradition and taking a full accounting of their unique formal potentialities.

The specific kind of genre I see as defining closet film is best termed a *genre of potentiality*, since the film in “closet film” constitutes a genre defined precisely by its *potential*, or ironically its impotential (its potential not-to) to be filmed. What do I mean then, specifically, by this key term of “potential cinema” and closet film as a “genre of potentiality?” For, if one were to take as one’s object of critical study that body of filmic works which do not exist as such, there would be, ostensibly, a range of approaches one could take, and correspondingly a range of terms one could use to label this field. What does one *call* this cinema? “Potential,” I should be clear up front, is a choice distilled from a range of options, and certainly not the only way to conceptualize a study of this sort. One motivation for this ontologically leaning terminology is to distinguish potential cinema from studies of cinematic *adaptation*. Whereas adaptation studies (broadly defined, inclusive of cross-appropriation of filmic/literary form and technique as well as adaptation of content) focus on the differences and similarities *between* media, potential cinema emphasizes the way cinema always already adheres *within* literature, and vice versa. *Potential* here helps us emphasize the different *modes of being* within a text. It makes *possible* the reification *as a work* of things that do not *actually* exist. Potential cinema

does not refer to hypothetical cinema; it refers to a kind of cinematic object that exists in a potential mode of being.

That being said, certainly I am arguing for a conception of closet film and potential cinema in terms that are much more specific and complex than the colloquial definition of “potentiality.” In a moment I will turn to contemporary Italian biopolitical philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who has spent his career developing a theory of potentiality which will help us understand the unique, complicated relationship closet film tenuously holds between film and the literary. But before that, I want to briefly explore alternative terminologies that one might consider as offering alternative philosophical foundations for approaching the study of closet film. In part, *potential cinema* borrows and departs from Christian Metz’s seminal arguments regarding the integral relationship between cinema and the *imaginary*. One could well envision a more psychoanalytically focused study closet film, comprising the same field of works, which might well be termed *imaginary cinema* rather than *potential cinema*. Metz argues that cinema is already imaginary in multiple ways, both in the “ordinary” (3) and “Lacanian” senses (4), as a kind of “prosthesis for our primally dislocated limbs” (4). If cinema, for Metz, is always already imaginary, then one could hypothesize that in the case of potential cinema—where there is no actual film—one would be dealing with a doubly imaginary cinema: no longer a prosthesis, but perhaps rather a ghost limb. For, as Metz articulates, cinema is already an internalized function, a kind of extended human organ. Metz argues that “the cinematic institution is not just the cinema industry (which works to fill cinemas, not to empty them), it is also the mental machinery—another industry—which spectators ‘accustomed to the cinema’ have internalized historically and which has adapted them to the consumption of films” (7). The term *imaginary cinema* is thus perhaps best suited to discussions of the cinematic function we already have

within us.

Another alternative to *potential* cinema can be found in Derrida's later work. In *Specters of Marx* (1993), Derrida takes seriously (also playfully) the possibility of a scholar who "deals with ghosts" and "all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality" (11). What would it mean then to imagine a *spectral* cinema? For one thing, it absolutely reverses the order of temporality from potential cinema: where a potential work is defined specifically as such because it does not actually exist but might exist in the future, something which is spectral seems to be so by cause of its being an echo or trace of something which actually existed in the past. Spectral cinema, it would then seem, is by definition even more abstract than potential cinema. But what is perhaps most notable in Derrida's account of spectrality is the quasi-Utopian way that he suggests that the specter resides beyond the very binarisms which his previous work so often seeks to deconstruct (in this way, as we shall see shortly, it parallels the *gesture/gestural* in Agamben): "Marcellus [in *Hamlet*] was perhaps anticipating the coming, one day, one night, several centuries later, of another 'scholar.' The latter would finally be capable, beyond the opposition between presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life, of thinking the possibility of the specter, the specter as possibility" (12).

It may be worth pausing here to point out just how interrelated these sets of terms are. I used "ghost limb" as an apt analogy in my discussion of "imaginary" cinema, and now even spectrality begins to shade into potentiality. All of these terms seem to coalesce in a dissatisfying account of textual objects as always only occurring as autonomous, concrete, unchanging, etc. Though these established categories have been subject to the radical critique of poststructuralist thought and have been repeatedly demonstrated to be untenable, they maintain a stranglehold on academic study. How many articles have been recently published about a text



that cannot be definitively said to actually exist? And yet, as far back in the history of cinematic theory as Eisenstein, we can locate a certain fascination with precisely that which does not. Can we understand Derrida's injunction for an anticipated future scholar, who is capable of thinking the specter as possibility, as, like Eisenstein, attempting to study spectral textual objects, as well? If we are haunted by the specter of Marx, are we not also always haunted by the specter of cinema? Does not cinema have its own *hauntology* as well?

In one of his last books, the filmed interviews with Bernard Steigler published as *Echographies of Television* (2002), Derrida continues his thinking of the specter and its relationship to visual media:

What has, dare I say, constantly haunted me in this logic of the specter is that it regularly exceeds all the oppositions between visible and invisible, sensible and insensible. A specter is both visible and invisible, both phenomenal and nonphenomenal: a trace that marks the present with its absence in advance. The spectral logic is de facto a deconstructive logic. It is in the lament of haunting that deconstruction finds the place most hospitable to it, at the heart of the living present, in the quickest heartbeat of the philosophical. Like the work of mourning, in a sense, which produces spectrality, and like *all* work produces spectrality. (117)

What potential cinema borrows most distinctly from Derrida's thinking of the spectral is this attention to things that are at once "phenomenal and nonphenomenal." And inasmuch as cinema studies are never truly complete with an accounting of their relation to psychoanalytic theory, what would a study of potential cinema look like without an acknowledgement of its structural correspondence to trauma, castration, the anxiety of a marked absence, etc.? Perhaps, if nothing else, the more clinically ontological term *potential* helps limit the scope of the current study to the "phenomenal" side of the spectral equation. For, as much as potential films do not actually exist, the whole point here is that they do exist, potentially.

Before turning to *potentiality* itself, we should examine one last alternative, the one

perhaps most closely aligned with potential cinema (though again not without a certain paranoia-inducing tug back towards the realm of the unconscious and our accounting to Freud and Lacan). I am thinking here of *virtual cinema*. I mean “virtual” less in the sense of Brian Massumi’s notable recent work, *Parables for the Virtual* (2002), than that of Slavoj Zizek recent film theory. In his 2004 documentary, *Slavoj Zizek: The Reality of the Virtual*, Zizek lectures at length about a distinction he draws between a superficial reality of the film-text and a deeper truth he calls the film’s *virtual texture*. Very loosely, the former refers to content and subject matter, whereas as the latter refers to form, representational politics, etc. Zizek’s illustrative example is *The Sound of Music* (dir. Robert Wise, 1965), in which the superficial texture or plot of the film concerns good freedom-loving folk oppressed by fascist Nazis. But on the level of the film’s virtual texture, Zizek says, the oppressed folk are represented as typical idyllic Aryans, and the Nazis are bureaucrats, not soldiers: mustachioed stereotypes of the Cosmopolitan Jew. The *virtual* film of *The Sound of Music* thus adheres in between the lines of the film itself. The distinction is perhaps simply one of grammatical mood: virtual texture/cinema is the truth of what cinema *is*, whereas potential cinema is the truth of what cinema *could be*. And it is precisely this sense of subjunctivity that underlines the project of potential cinema.

## *Agamben's Potential*

There is something that all people, whether they admit it or not, know in their heart of hearts: that things could have been different, that that would have been possible. They could not only live without hunger and also probably without fear, but also freely. And yet at the same time—and all over the world—the social apparatus has become so hardened that what lies before them as a means of possible fulfillment presents itself as radically impossible.

—Adorno

Leland de la Durantaye, in his recent critical study of contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, fittingly calls attention to this striking passage of Adorno's and suggests it helps to articulate the central position of Agamben's thought:

Adorno's expression of the difficulty of grasping the means for radical change is echoed in Agamben's writing, and a similar imperative motivates the extreme positions he adopts. Whatever their differences, a fundamental idea they share is that the heart of the philosopher's vocation is found in the fact that so much that presents itself as 'radically impossible' is not—and must not continue to be accepted as such. (16)

As de la Durantaye notes, "no idea is so important for [Agamben's] thought as *potentiality*" (14-15) and the connection between potentiality and power (in Italian *potenza* and *potere*). The work of philosophy, then, is to seek an experience of pure potentiality, to render potential that thinking which seems "radically impossible," not so much only to imagine how it *might have been*, but to conceive of a new mode of thinking altogether, one that is purely potential; that is, outside of any relation to the actual. As Kevin Attell explains in "Potentiality, Actuality, Constituent Power," the interplay between Aristotle's concepts of *dunamis* and *energeia*, potentiality and act, appears in Agamben's earliest works and later becomes his "signal concept" (37).

While Agamben is perhaps best known today as, along with Antonio Negri, the most influential figure in *biopolitics*, recent Italian thought's most dominant field (Attell, "Potentiality, Actuality, Constituent Power," 35), this work hinges upon the ontological arguments of his earlier works. Since *Homo Sacer* (1995) Agamben has for the most part focused on overtly

political themes, such as sovereign power, the state of exception, and the concentration camp as biopolitical paradigm. But even in the manifestly political *Homo Sacer*, Agamben emphasizes the importance of the philosophical grounding in his earlier theories involving an ontology that asserts the primacy of potentiality over actuality. This ontology of potentiality, or *potentiology*, as Kevin Attell has called it (“Potentiality/Impotentiality,” 162) constitutes the first philosophical foundation underlying the later more overtly political work. As Attell puts it, “The centrality of this doctrine of potentiality for Agamben’s thought can hardly be overstated, as it constitutes the ontological underpinning of virtually all of his work from the mid-1980s on, especially that concerning sovereignty” (162). In *Homo Sacer* Agamben explicitly claims that his politics always comes back to and turn upon potentiality:

And only if it is possible to think the relation between potentiality and actuality differently—and even to think beyond this relation—will it be possible to think a constituting power wholly released from the sovereign ban. 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 free from the aporias of sovereignty remains unthinkable. (44)

Throughout his career, Agamben has developed this ontology of potentiality out of a lineage which traces its history to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. In Book Theta, Aristotle outlines the relationship of potentiality and actuality, and in a somewhat surprising gesture argues that—a it is commonly understood—actuality is ontologically prior to potentiality. Agamben, however, makes a series of surprising claims here. The first is that the primacy of actuality is actually ambiguous in Aristotle, and that “it is never clear, to a reader freed from the prejudices of tradition, whether book Theta of the *Metaphysics* in fact gives primacy to actuality or to potentiality” (47). On this point Attell explains, “Whether or not this is indeed unclear in Aristotle, it nevertheless is clear that Agamben wants not only to call this hierarchy into question

but also to tilt the balance distinctly toward potentiality” (41). Agamben makes this clear in his focused study on a single pivotal line of Book Theta, his idiosyncratic translation of which comes to form the fulcrum of his ontology. Indeed, Attell argues, “It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that Agamben’s entire argument hinges on his reading of this last phrase of Aristotle’s opaque sentence” (42). The sentence reads, “Esti de dynaton touto, hoi ean hyperarxi hé energeia ou legetai ekhein tén dymanén, ouden estai adynaton” (1047a, 24-26). The crux of the translation, for Agamben, concerns the last word here. Attell explains this pivotal detail:

The majority of Aristotle’s translators and commentators understand the alpha-privative as indicating the negation or opposite of dunamis (whether as possibility or as capacity) and thus read adunamia as meaning either impossibility or incapacity/impotence. Agamben, however, offers a very different reading: not impossibility or incapacity, but “potentiality not to,” “capacity not to,” or in his distinctive usage, “impotentiality” [impotenza]. (41)

Agamben thus translates the sentence as, “A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing impotential” (*Potentialities* 183) where impotentiality refers not to inability, but to the potential-not-to. Another term for this in English might be a “contrary possibility” (Attell, “Potentiality, Actuality, Constituent Power” 41).

It is this notion of impotentiality, or the potentiality not-to, that crucially frames Agamben’s entire ontology, and which makes this particular conception of potentiality—as opposed to a colloquial understanding of the term—so apt to describe closet film as a kind of potential cinema that exercises its filmic impotentiality, the potential *not-to* make a film. In fact the genre of closet film is most precisely described as a playful withholding of cinematic production. For even more so than the playscript, the film script is generally seen as a *production* document, a kind of blueprint with a set of specific purposes that serve production functions. Conserved throughout this document of potentiality, then, we find everywhere the

impotentiality—the potential not to—produce. If the film is the actual, realized work, then the closet film can be understood as a work of pure potentiality. Two key terms for Agamben help specify precisely how we could imagine closet film functioning in this regard: *play* and *désœuvrement*. Catherine Mills's *The Philosophy of Agamben*, which like de la Durantaye's and Attell's studies places the central focus of Agamben's work on the key term potentiality, offers an excellent summary of the interrelation of these two key terms as they play out in several of Agamben's major works, principally *Homo Sacer*, *The Time That Remains*, *Infancy and History*, and *The Coming Community*:

The notion of inoperativity and the closely related concept of *désœuvrement* or the unworked are central to Agamben's theorization of political liberation. However, this is not to suggest that he simply reiterates a political theology or politics of faith. Instead, he emphasizes the necessity of a politics that renders the current biopolitical machine inoperative through play and profanation. That is, he highlights the power of a relation to things, concepts and ultimately law itself that desacralizes and *plays* with things as a child does with toys (123).

Mills's adroit summation helpfully distills the interrelation across Agamben's career of potentiality, play, and *désœuvrement*. While it may first seem an unlikely case study for such thinking, closet film, however, emerges as a kind of supreme genre of Agambenian impotentiality in light of this distillation. Its relation to the world of cinematic production maps on quite exactly to Agamben's conception of the unworked—as an unworked film that profanes cinematic law. The deep sense of irony, self-mockery, and acerbic resentment of the cinema industry that characterize closet film's most notable works—Darius James' *Negrophobia* and Mark Leyner's *Tetherballs of Bougainville*—underscore the degree to which closet film, perhaps out of necessity, attains a playful stance from the world of cinematic production, one that neither outright denies it, nor fully embraces it. Closet film is an exploration of the limits and blurred lines between literary and cinematic production and representation. But perhaps the most

important aspect of *play* in Agamben's sense of the term, for our purposes here, is emphasis on the denial of use-value characterized by the child's experience of a toy. As Mills summarizes Agamben's thinking in *Infancy and History*, "play preserves profane objects and behaviours that otherwise no longer exist, evident in the use that children make of objects that have outlasted their functional use-value but are still taken up as toys" (124). Against the common understanding of a film script as an object of pure use-value (see below regarding arguments for appreciating the literariness of actual, uncloseted film scripts by Melton, Boon, and others), closet film appropriates the prefilmic objects for other purposes which are inherently more playful in the sense that they are literary, experimental, and decidedly less motivated by the desire to profit economically—even within the literary world, closet films are less saleable commodities than novels. Closet films can thus be conceived of as toy scripts, screenplays playfully deprived of their use-value. In that sense, closet film is thus the genre of (im)potentiality par excellence, defined thoroughly by its playful unworking of the film object toward which it ostensibly points.

Claire Colebrook's recent article, "Agamben: Aesthetics, Potentiality, and Life," offers an account of very different methods regarding how to bring Agamben's theories to bear on art and literature, but which ultimately points us in the direction of a similar conclusion: that cinema, and particularly cinema that does not *actually* exist, might be the perfect expression of an Agambenian art form. She argues, "Agamben's seemingly metaphysical concerns, such as his writings on the different senses of potentiality in Aristotle, are motivated by a historical project of *retrieving* and *restoring* the emergence of a distinction or difference from life" (108). Strikingly, Colebrook claims that, for Agamben, it is precisely "art" that can do this. "It is Agamben's commitment to a concept of potentiality," Colebrook asserts, "that explains the

crucial status of the work of art in his politics” (111). Art, she argues, has a potential disclosive function in Agamben’s thought, one which has been lost and which Agamben seeks to recapture: “What renders the world of the human and art possible, and if such a world emerges from a potential, what other worlds and other modes of the human are possible? For Agamben it is the work of art that *should* disclose this pure potentiality. Today, however, our notion of art as nothing more than the object created by a will precludes us from recognizing art as disclosive of potentiality” (108). She elaborates, “Art today either is mere potential for enjoyment or is valuable only insofar as it is the product of an irreducible will” (108), and, therefore, “Art functions for Agamben, then, as a site of loss (for art is now a mere product rather than a revelatory act) and as a site of redemption (for only art can reveal what politics has covered over)” (108). So modern art (in the broadest sense), is both *closed off*, but also loaded with the potentiality of *opening up* precisely pure potentiality itself. Colebrook claims Agamben sees “art as the possibility of reopening the world” (109), and that it “should be the revelation of pure potentiality” (110). In other words, Agamben is interested in critiquing “a history of Western culture that has all too readily accepted the human as a being and not as one who must bring himself into being (and must do so properly and openly in the work of art)... Agamben finds the proper image of potentiality *in* the artwork” (116), and, “It is the work of art, here, that *represents* humanity not as situated within relations but as opening up relations” (116). We might say that for Agamben (according to Colebrook), the *content* of art represents precisely its lost potential, that “modern art has lost *poiesis*, or a genuine bringing forth” (116). It is for this reason, Colebrook asserts, referencing Agamben’s work in *The Man Without Content*, that “[t]here is, then, for Agamben, a need to destroy the aesthetic, to get away from an art that is seen as the product of some action or the work of an artist (*MC*, 47) and instead think of art



*poetically* as the disclosure of presence, the opening of space in general” (117). Notably, for Colebrook, art does not resolve the dichotomy between poetry and philosophy, but poetry and politics: “For Agamben the political is properly poetic, and the poetic is properly political” (118). Suggestively, Colebrook’s article posits that this potentiality might be latent within modern art, and that, hypothetically, certain modes of art might be able to *open* this potentiality. I say *open* rather than *actualize*, since the goal here is to unfold or amplify potentialities, not to reduce them to realized actualities. Where might we look for this art? What sort of art is preoccupied with this specific task?

This question has largely not been asked, and Agamben, popular as his political philosophy might be, goes largely unheeded in *literary* studies. When Agamben’s theories have been put into the service of literary analysis, the results have been underwhelming. Take, for example, William McClellan’s 2005 article “‘Ful Pale Face’: Agamben’s Biopolitical Theory and the Sovereign Subject in Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale.” Here, the mapping of Agambenian politics onto one of the *Canterbury Tales* is relatively straightforward, simplistic, and ultimately reductive. Which is not to say that McClellan isn’t more-or-less *right*: the Clerk’s is, after all, one of the more opaque of the *Tales*, and has resisted most attempts at straightforward interpretation. McClellan makes a good case for thinking about it in terms of biopolitical sovereignty. If we understand the text as a “political allegory” (110, 132) about the paradoxes of sovereignty and bare life, then Agamben does help us finally “get” Chaucer (134). McClellan makes a strong case for understanding the political potential of the tale in its exposure of the true despair of sovereign power’s paradoxical relation to subjecthood. But ultimately it is not clear that specifically *Agambenian* political thought is necessary to understand this relatively simple political allegory, and the wider implications of Agamben’s philosophy are not brought to bear.

Perhaps Chaucer simply is not the best target. What sorts of texts might offer more fertile ground for this kind of thought? William Watkin, in his study *The Literary Agamben*, which only nominally relates Agamben's thought to literature, briefly gestures towards something like a potential literature:

Writer's block is a phenomenon best explained by the ontology of potentiality, as it the writing of pure inspiration. There are the great books that were never written, and the great works never created: Mallarmé's *Livre*, Agamben's *La voca umana*, the late Rimbaud, Duchamp, DeChirico. These works did not come into being because they were not possessed of genius. The author attempted to merely will them into existence. They are the art of pure character. Then there are the great works that were written purely through genius: 'Kubla Khan,' *The Magnetic Fields*, *On the Road*, *As I Lay Dying*, Kenneth Koch's *When the Sun Tries to Go On*. Here the author seemingly had little or nothing to do with writing. Writer's block and pure, inspired flow are two sides of an imbalance of writerly potentiality, too much character in one and overabundance of genius in the other. (67-68)

Here, however ephemerally, the literary comes into full fold in Watkin's study. But, teasingly, instead of developing this thread, he closes the chapter thus: "The pen that grazes the page, the brush as it is lifted from the canvas not when it is applied, fulfill, for Agamben, the powerful unfulfillment of true potential being" (68). Later he will once again briefly address this question, only to leave it hanging as a provocative site for further work: "To paint absence is one thing, but surely the greatest works of modernism are those which were never created: Lautréamont's third book, Bruno Schultz's first novel, the final version of *Le Livre*, Nietzsche's *Will to Power*?" (106). What are we to do with this (rhetorical?) question? What is the status of the *surely* Watkin employs here? And to what extent is Watkin suggesting that *he himself* thinks (maybe) these are the "greatest works of modernism," or that Agamben *himself* would think so?

On a note that is not quite so different as it may at first seem, cinema in particular might be a good direction to turn for Agambenian literary studies. Taking into account Agamben's works specifically on cinema, Benjamin Noys argues that "Agamben has developed a new theory

of ‘gestural cinema,’ in which we might understand cinema as one sphere, tied to philosophy, in which we might find a messianic recuperation of the originary potentialities of language and the human” (np). Noys argues, “What philosophy and cinema exhibit, according to Agamben, is this pure mediality or pure gesturality” (np). And, “Therefore philosophy and cinema converge on the gesture, on the loss of the gesture, and on recovering the gesture as the realm of both the ethical and the political” (np). “Agamben,” Noys thus suggests, “redeems cinema as a site of the messianic promise contained in the image” (np). Noys’ appraisal of cinema as of particular worth to thinking about Agamben’s relation to art and the literary is based on two essays of Agamben’s, “Notes on Gesture” and “Difference and Repetition,” to which I would suggest we might also add “The Six Most Beautiful Minutes in the History of Cinema,” a piece as short as it is cryptic, that offers a brief leading summary of Orson Welles’ unfinished film version of *Don Quixote*. But to be sure, Noys does not claim that this is true of cinema *generally* for Agamben, but for a much more specific body of filmic works: “Certainly Agamben is hostile to narrative cinema and applauds an avant-garde cinema that can reveal the cinematic medium as such.” Setting aside the validity of this sweeping claim, Agamben’s attention to Guy Debord and his short ruminations, at the end of *Profanation*, “The Six Most Beautiful Minutes...” certainly suggest a leaning towards non-traditional and potentially non-narrative modes of cinema as those which most directly approach the “gestural.” And a cinema of pure potentiality, or “potential cinema” for short, might be one way to conceptualize what form a gestural cinema might take. Indeed, we might even conceive of closet film, in its playful gesture of unworking the actual film itself, as performing the work of gestural cinema better than any of the *actual* films discussed by Noys or even Agamben himself.

### ***What Closet Film is Not and What It is Like***

Before turning towards delineating a specific accounting of what constitutes closet film as a genre, let us briefly step back and survey the wider critical landscape concerning the broader field of the relationship between film and literature, in order to eventually spiral in and carve out the specific sphere of the closet film. The entire critical discussion of the relationship between film and the novel—from Sergei Eisenstein through Claude-Edmonde Magny to today—has been overwhelmingly circumscribed by what are presented as the twin rubrics of adaptation and appropriation: adaptation meaning the translation of a given work from one medium to another, and appropriation referring to the related phenomenon of translating formal techniques from one medium to another. While many critics treat studies of formal appropriation as if they followed a wholly different paradigm from studies of textual adaptation, it is my contention that we can just as easily describe this critical history as having been invested all along in only a single paradigm. Formal appropriation is simply another way of talking about adaptation: adaptation of form, rather than content. The use of techniques in the novel that parallel filmic crosscutting, for example, might be understood as an adaptation of formal practice, akin to the adaptation of single works or texts from literature to film, or vice versa. Both appropriation of form and adaptation of content are basically ways of comparing and contrasting two media, and inevitably only account for a fraction of the total complexity of the relationship between film and literature. A general conception of adaptation—adaptation of both form and content—appears to be the only available critical mode for understanding the relationship between film and literature.

This dissertation is part of a larger project that aims to change that, which I am calling *potential cinema*, a study of films that, strictly speaking, do not exist as such. Potential cinema examines overlooked literary spaces between film and the novel for new ways of articulating

their relationship. The *closet* constitutes one excellent new alternative paradigm for productively understanding the space between film and the novel, opening up discussions of texts that have been largely overlooked or marginalized by criticism, as well as putting these in dialogue with majors works and authors. The result is a completely revamped and revitalized way of understanding the novel and its relationship to cinema, realism, ontology, and aesthetics. But there are other paradigms, besides the closet, through which we might grasp a more thorough conception of this relationship. I call these paradigms variously *impotential cinema*, *weirdly filmic novels* and *cinematic notional ekphrasis*.

On the very outside of what constitutes *potential cinema* we find *impotential cinema*. These are films which have been conceived, but which do not exist as films. While that could mean literally *anything*, this field can be productively limited to unfilmed films that have found life in some other textual way. They have left a kind of trace, and this trace can be studied. But the theoretical problematics of how to approach the study of a text which does not exist have not been properly spelled out. I will take up precisely this question below, but for now, let me simply offer two brief examples. In early March 2013, the entertainment world became briefly dominated by the news that Steven Spielberg intends to adapt Stanley Kubrick's uncompleted *Napoleon* project into a television mini-series. An article in *The Independent* announced, "The film that defeated Kubrick: Spielberg to turn *Napoleon*, the greatest movie never made, into a TV mini-series." Kubrick's *Napoleon* has long fascinated cinema lovers, but until now hadn't caught the public's attention. Kubrick had set out with a very lofty vision, boldly stating, "I expect to make the best movie ever made" (qtd. in Webster 1). Though he worked extensively in the late 1960s on the project, developing a script and substantial notes regarding everything from equipment to costumes to locations, the film fell apart and Kubrick shifted his attention to

*Clockwork Orange* (1971). In 2009 Taschen published a massive volume, collecting all the existing research and preproduction material into one consolidated archive. Initially available only as a super-hard-to-find and ferociously expensive collector's edition, *Stanley Kubrick's Napoleon: The Greatest Movie Never Made* is now widely available (and affordable). But what would we even *call* a critical study of this volume? Is it possible to conceive of a study of *Napoleon* that isn't invested in an author-centric critique of Kubrick's production methods, his biography, etc.? Could we study *Napoleon* as itself a *text*? To do so would require a theorization of something like *potential cinema*.

A second example is Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Dune*, a film that does not exist, but about which there now exists a documentary, an article by Jodorowsky himself, and innumerable blogs and comics by fans. In his article, "The Film You Will Never See," Jodorowsky outlines a story of a film almost too good to be true, a film that even rivals *Napoleon's* claim to the title of "greatest movie never made." He opens the piece:

There is a Hebraic legend which says: "the Messiah will not be a man but one day: the day when all the human beings will be illuminated." Kabbalists speak about a conscience collective, cosmic, a species of méta-Universe. And here are what for me all the DUNE project was. (np, all typos Jodorowsky's)

Jodorowsky represents his *Dune* project as swathed in just such an incredible aura. He expounds at length upon this mythmaking:

There is an artist, only one in the medium of a million other artists, which only once in his life, by a species of divine grace, receives an immortal topic, a MYTH... I say "receives" and not "creates" because the works of art its received in a state of mediumnity directly of the unconscious collective. (np)

It is difficult not to quote the entire article, since Jodorowsky's plans for the film are almost literally unbelievable:

In my version of Dune, the Emperor of the galaxy is insane. He lives on an artificial gold planet, in a gold palace built according to not-laws of antilogical.

He lives in symbiosis with a robot identical to him. The resemblance is so perfect that the citizens never know if they are opposite the man or the machine... In my version, the spice is a blue drug with spongy consistency filled with a vegetable-animal life endowed with consciousness, the highest level of consciousness. It does not stop taking all kinds of forms, while stirring up unceasingly. The spice continuously produces the creation of the innumerable universes. The Baron Harkonnen is an immense man of 300 kilogrammes. he is so fatty and heavy that, to move, he must make continuous use of antigravitational bubbles attached at his limbs... His delusion of grandeur does not have limits: he lives in a palace built like a portrait of itself... This immense sculpture is drawn up on a sordid and marshy planet... To enter the palace, one must wait until the colossus opens the mouth and draws a tongue from steel (landing strip...). (np)

But the only thing more incredible than Jodorowsky's vision for the film is the simply preposterous wealth of talent he was able to assemble for its production. Though relegated to a campy cult figure in today's cinematic consciousness, Jodorowsky was, in the seventies, potentially a hot commodity. Famously, George Harrison and John Lennon fell in love with his earlier film *El Topo* (1970), and despite the financial failure of his radically noncommercial follow-up *The Holy Mountain* (1973), Jodorowsky was ostensibly still in a position to put together quite a team for his proposed *Dune* project.

The story of how this project came into being begins thus: Once, the Divinity agreed to say to me in a lucid dream: "Your next film must be *Dune*." I had not read the novel. I lifted myself to a height of six o'clock in the morning and as an alcoholic who awaits the opening of the bar, I waited until someone opens the bookshop to buy the book. I read it of a feature without me stopping for drinking or eating. At midnight exactly, the very same day, I finish the reading. At one minute past midnight I called from New York, Michel Seydoux in Paris... He would be the first of the seven samurai that it was necessary for me to have for the immense project. Michel was for me a young man (26 years) without experience in the cinema, but his company Camera One had bought the rights for the *Holy Mountain*, my last film and had distributed very well it... He had said to me: "I will want to produce a film with you". I did not know much about him but by an intuition which today surprises me, by seeing it, in spite of his youth, I see in him the largest producer of the time... Why? Mystery... And I was not mistaken. When I say to him that I wanted that he buys the rights for *Dune* and that the film should be international because it would exceed the ten million dollars (fabulous sum for the time: even Hollywood did not believe in science fiction films, *2001* would be unique and unpassable), he did not stumble: "OK. We'll be in Los Angeles in two days to buy the rights". (np)

Jodorowsky would go on to put together an art team that included famed French artist Moebius, Christopher Foss, H.R. Geiger, and Dan O'Bannon. For the cast, he intended his son Brontis to play the lead, opposite David Carradine. For the Emperor of the Universe, he engaged in extensive negotiations with Salvador Dali, whom he agreed to pay \$100,000/hour, thinking he would shoot him for one day and use plastic doubles the rest of the time. For the giant evil Baron, Jodorowsky is rumored to have no less a personage than Orson Welles formally attached. Perhaps most amazing of all—and depressing in the light of the film falling apart and David Lynch being tapped to direct what is arguably Lynch's worst film—is that Jodorowsky's *Dune* would have been scored by an entirely original double-album by Pink Floyd, fresh off recording *The Wall* in 1979.

The entry points into analyzing *Dune* itself are difficult to pin down. Much of the artwork and production design from the project found a new recycled life in Jodorowsky's graphic novels, mostly notably his *Incal* series. It was for allegedly plagiarizing *The Incal* comics that Jodorowsky would later sue Luc Besson, claiming that he stole elements of the story and design for his much more well-known and celebrated film, *The Fifth Element* (1997). Jodorowsky later dropped the lawsuit, claiming that stories do not belong to any individual but are merely channeled through artists by the divinity. Nevertheless, this raises important questions about how to approach a critical study of something like Jodorowsky's *Dune*. With *Napoleon*, there is a more clearly delineated archive, though even in that case we could hypothetically include *Barry Lyndon* (1975) in our discussion, since much of Kubrick's research and design for *Napoleon* ended up recycled into that later project. With *Dune*, however, the borders of its ghostly archive are even more diffuse. This is especially true when you note that the team assembled to make this science-fiction wet dream in Jodorowsky's insane blend of



psychoshamanism and alchemy went on in the years immediately following to instead create and design the sci-fi worlds of the *Alien* (1980) franchise. To what extent do those worlds constitute elements touched by Jodorowsky's *Dune*? And if they don't, how can we look to the imaginary what-if world of science fiction cinema that would have existed if its most brilliant and influential minds had been working for Jodorowsky instead of Ridley Scott? It is this very productive ambiguity that makes *impotential cinema* such a fascinating and generative cite for further work.

Let us now turn to actual published novels that have an interesting relationship to film. To be clear, I am certainly not referring to literary genres whose content speaks to cinema, such as the "Hollywood Novel." Though we might understand it as another kind of conceivable relationship between film and literature that exists outside the adaptation paradigm, the Hollywood Novel is manifestly not interesting for my purposes here, and I therefore am not considering it part of the project of potential cinema. Nancy Brooker-Bowers defines the Hollywood Novel as "an American regional fictional [sic] genre that features characters who work in the film industry either in Hollywood or with a Hollywood production company on location" (ix). Here we have a genre that takes cinematic production as its subject or setting. In neither Brooker-Bowers's nor Anthony Slides's annotated bibliographies of Hollywood Novels are any closet films included—there is no mention of Baldwin or Burroughs or Darius James, for the clear reason that formal appropriation of cinematic production is not the issue here. What is interesting about the Hollywood Novel is that in fact there is one way in which it is more closely related to closet film than it might seem at first. For, if the majority of critical attention has focused on novels that appropriate either the form or content of films themselves, the Hollywood Novel appropriates cinematic *production* at the level of content. In a similar way, the closet

film, in taking the form of the screenplay, which is after all essentially a production document, appropriates cinematic production at the level of form. What really interests me—from the perspective of the project of potential cinema—are novels that more obliquely adhere in the nebulous space between film and literature. If closet film constitutes a more-or-less cut-and-dry case of cinematic production's formal appropriation akin to the Hollywood Novel's appropriation of the content of cinematic production, then we must also take account of novels that do not fit neatly into either camp. There is no perfect term for these novels, because the various ways in which they are shaped by their relationship to cinema are unique and difficult to fix. For this reason, I call these novels *weirdly filmic*. A proper analysis of such novels would require a dissertation of its own. In the space I have here, I wish merely to point out a few examples as they begin to gesture more closely towards the terrain of the closet film.

Cinema has become the dominant metaphor for ontological play in the contemporary novel. One way long narratives, such as novels, keep their readers engaged is to shift the ground of the relationship between reader and text. I am here gesturing towards a theory of ontological dynamics, in which narratives are successfully engaging inasmuch as they playfully alter the ontological status of text itself as part of the diegetic world(s) the novel constructs. The principle here is relatively simple. For a very superficial example, consider a novel which reveals that a previous chapter somehow *was* itself a dream, or at least that what happened *in* that chapter was a *description* of a dream. More generally, one could see instances of playing with the boundaries of fiction and nonfiction, with framed narration and metalepsis, with questions of metafiction, etc., as instances of ontological dynamics. It is my *sense*—the breadth of knowledge of contemporary literature it would take to strongly make this claim far surpasses me—that, increasingly, cinema has become the primary metaphor through which ontological dynamics

operate in the contemporary novel. Let us briefly look at a handful of such novels—all written in the last thirty years by extremely notable authors—before turning to an extended analysis of the way this works in David Foster Wallace’s magnum opus, *Infinite Jest*, to get a handle on what I’m talking about here.

In Steve Erikson’s *Zeroville* (2007), the cinema-obsessed and maybe-autistic (he is called at one point “cineautistic”) protagonist Isaac “Ike/Vikar” Jerome moves to Hollywood in 1969 to pursue a career in the movies. The novel is organized into short, numbered sections that seem vaguely correlated to shots or scenes, which increase in number to 227 and then decrease back to zero, ostensibly referencing Genesis 22:7, the pivotal moment where Abraham tells Isaac not to worry about why there is no lamb to offer. The novel’s central concern is the relationship between cinema and violence, and between fiction and reality, boundaries which become increasingly indistinct in the novel’s last fifty-or-so pages, in which Vikar embarks on a quest to discover the hidden film within all films, one that exists as a single frame in each of the prints of all extant films. The narrative becomes increasingly disjointed, variously dreamlike and vaguely cinematic. What does it do for us as readers to involve ourselves in this multiply-nested framework of cinema, novel, and dream? What are the several ways we have to imagine how the action transpires here, and what is the effect of that multiplicity? How do we conceive of the “reality” or “world” that this otherwise fairly naturalistic novel constructs for us, and how is this modified or indeed *determined* by the fact of its being always already an ambiguously cinematic construction?

Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega* (2010) is another novel about films. Pointedly, the novel is structured around the relationship between a mutated form of a film that *does* actually exist, and the impotentiality of another, fictive film that does not, and perhaps *cannot* exist. The brief

opening and closing sections detail an eccentric nameless character mesmerized by a museum installation of Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, a (real) video work in which Hitchcock's film is slowed down so that it takes exactly twenty-four hours to run. The longer main narrative in the middle of *Point Omega* concerns an aspiring avant-garde documentarian's attempts to convince an aging academic and former political consultant to participate in a conceptual project of "pure cinema." This provocative and puzzling short novel pushes the limits of representing cinema in prose in interesting ways. The central formal question of the novel is how the slowing down of *Psycho* relates to the existential and ontological debates raised in the main narrative. The novel offers no easy answers, but its success hinges on the reader's asking a range of questions about the temporality of cinematic and novelistic representation.

But perhaps the most concise and fascinating example of such cinematic ontological dynamics comes from the same nation that produced the world's first closet film. Haruki Murakami's *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985) is a novel with a split structure in which we get, ostensibly (it is ambiguous), the conscious and unconscious minds of the protagonist. We find out halfway through the novel that the eccentric scientist who operated on the protagonist's brain in order to prime his mind for storing encrypted data (the 'conscious' half of the novel takes place in a futuristic alternate mid-eighties Tokyo plagued by infowars and data-theft) was, before World War II, a film editor, and that this radical brain surgery basically involved "editing" the protagonist's unconscious into a more linearly organized narrative: in other words, a narrative film. To complicate matters, this seems to have only worked on the protagonist (it killed every one of the experimental procedure's twenty-six other participants) because his unconscious mind was *already* organized cinematically. In other words, in the *End of the World* half of the narrative, what we seem to be encountering is a rendering of the

unconscious mind of the protagonist, which has been re-organized into a narrative film even though it was already basically cinematic. Half this novel, it would seem, is itself a written film that somehow *is* the cinematic unconscious of the protagonist as he exists in the other half of the novel (*Hard-Boiled Wonderland*). Somewhat like Burroughs' *Blade Runner, a Movie* (1979), Murakami's novel offers a provocative rendering of what it would mean for a novel not simply to *refer* to film, but to somehow *be* that film (see Chapter One for an extensive close reading that fully exfoliates the novel's complication of the neat division between the literary and the filmic).

Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007) follows Murakami's novel in many of these formal and thematic interests. Hall even makes the debt clear by including an epigraph to Section Three from Murakami himself, a quote from one of Murakami's most celebrated novels, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1995). But like Murakami's lesser known early novel, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* involves both a conscious and unconscious rendering of a watery underworld and a protagonist with a fractured mind, and, like in Murakami, film is used as a metaphor for this fracturing. The themes of cryptography, memory, and imaginary animals (the unicorn in Murakami, the conceptual shark in Hall) adhere strongly throughout both novels. Both of the protagonists are attracted to yet are ultimately unsatisfied by a perfunctorily ordered lifestyle. Hall's protagonist, Eric Sanderson, describes his life early on as "perfect and pointless" (31), which would just as aptly describe Murakami's unnamed protagonist.

Though Hall's text doesn't hinge as centrally as Murakami's on new ways of thinking the relationship between film and literature (see Chapter One below for a lengthy analysis of this issue in Murakami), *Raw Shark Texts* does begin to tackle this terrain and offers an excellent recent example of the trend in the contemporary novel towards mobilizing cinema in new literary

ways. The first part of the novel concerns a protagonist named Eric Sanderson suffering from recurring bouts of amnesia who receives messages from his past self aimed at coaching him through the problem. His doctor suggests he seems to have developed a “ ‘circuit breaker for the brain’ ” to “ ‘block out memories which are too painful or difficult for the mind to deal with’ ” (11). Through a series of suggestive fragments, we piece together that his wife Clio was killed by a shark while vacationing in Greece (though much later it is revealed that she actually just drowned, no shark involved (411-412)), and that Eric is now haunted by a *conceptual* shark that fragments his mind. His past self tells him: “The animal hunting you is a Ludovician. It is an example of one of the many species of purely conceptual fish which swim in the flows of human interaction and the tides of cause and effect” (64).

Notably, film is one of the primary mechanisms both through which Eric operates and which Hall mobilizes to express this scenario. When Doctor Randle first explains Eric’s situation to him, she asks him to say a line from *Casablanca*. Eric is able to produce the line, as well as the character who speaks it and several other details from the film itself, but he is not able to remember himself having seen it. He can’t say *when* the last time he watched *Casablanca* was. Doctor Randle explains: “ ‘All that seems missing, Eric, is you’ ” (13). The first real message Eric gets from his past self is a videotape (35), and in the accompanying textual fragments his past self narrates, among other things, a dream of his dead wife in which they communicate using film and television as a helpful intermediary. He writes, “I stared at my feet with as serious an expression as I could manage and answered in my gruff, B-movie samurai voice” (48), and she responds “ ‘Good... Now tell me what’s happening in *East Enders*’ ” (49). She is visiting him from the dead and her main concern, ostensibly, is a popular British soap opera. When Eric is first attacked by the conceptual shark, it seems, hallucinogenically, to come

out of the television itself like something out of Cronenberg (60). When he finally learns (from the previous Eric's notes) how to keep the conceptual shark from attacking again, it is an immensely complicated process that involves playing multiple audio feedbacks to prevent his own mind from bringing the shark into being. He finds throughout past Eric's writings a self imbued with cinema. For example, when Clio buys an underwater camera, he says it reminds him of *Toy Story*'s Buzz Lightyear (116), and then they discuss her fearlessness of the sea versus his terror via *Jaws* (117). With the underwater camera sitting on the table and Eric growing especially fond of it, Clio has to remind him that it is *hers*, to which he responds that he "winked at the camera in a knowing way" (118). This serves as both a literal description of him winking at the camera on the table in farcical cahoots, but also reads like a scene direction in which the character is breaking the fourth wall and winking directly at *us*.

The bulk of the narrative concerns Eric's descent into the dreamlike "un-space" in search of the mysterious Trey Fidorous, a cryptic figure his past self assures him has answers, and might even be able to help him be free of the conceptual shark. The novel turns into a surrealistic adventure-odyssey to conquer the conceptual shark in which dream, textuality, and memory all blur together as a kind of cyberpunk parody of *Jaws*. Eric eventually finds himself aboard Trey Fidorous's conceptual boat, the *Orpheus*, made of feedback loops from streaming data, along with Scout, a girl he becomes romantically involved with who also uses him because she needs his conceptual shark to attack Mycroft Ward, the conglomerate self that is after her just like the shark is after him. The novel itself offers a stunning breadth of formal play, and is filled with concrete poetry and other variations on textual representations of visual and conceptual imagery that frequently gesture toward the filmic. One particularly stand-out passage is the shark approaching the *Orpheus*, literally animated in text, constituted by a flip-book that makes it

appear as if it is swimming towards us until it attacks (328-379). Hall's website suggests that for every chapter in the book, a "negative" chapter exists or will exist, fragmented from the book, and many are "hiding" on the internet. Ultimately, *The Raw Shark Texts* gestures towards the range of formal literary innovations that constitute an important mode of potential cinema.

Novels like *Point Omega* and *Zeroville*, and to a lesser extent *Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, point towards a trend in the contemporary novel towards an increasing reliance on filmic notional ekphrasis. Defined by James Heffernan as "the verbal representation of graphic representation," ekphrasis constitutes a parallel paradigm to the closet for approaching novels' relations to films. Notional ekphrasis simply denotes that the verbal representation pertains to a graphic representation of something that does not exist in reality. While ekphrasis and the closet might at first seem markedly distinct, both involve the way different media variously represent each other and the real. Both describe written modes that gesture towards non-verbal modes of expression. Both techniques are therefore decidedly *written*, but also *intermediary*. In fact both terms are strikingly parallel: the closet is reserved for written works whose form gestures towards live performance (or the recording of live performance), and ekphrasis describes writing that seeks to represent a visual media through literary description. These twin ideas, of writing that either gestures outside writing by appropriating the schematic blueprint of performative media (the closet), and writing that simply describes a visual work (ekphrasis), have had a lasting interest in the arts and critical theory for thousands of years.

The oldest known closet dramas in the western tradition are attributed to Seneca the Younger (4BC-65AD), and the most heavily cited example of classic ekphrasis remains Homer's extended description of Achilles's shield in Book 18 of the *Iliad*. The two concepts have had pervasive critical histories in the last few millennia far too complex to outline here. Rather, the



point I wish to make is that given the historical import and longevity of both terms, it seems quite striking that neither has been extensively employed in understanding the relationship—so often discussed in the last century—between film and the novel. They seem well-suited for the task, especially when looking at the postmodern American novel's typically experimental modes that seek to gesture outside of writing, to play on questions of media and the representation of realities. Closeted and ekphrastic cinemas, couched in prose, constitute distinct and almost entirely untapped paradigms for understanding the novel and its relationship to film. What is at stake here are questions resulting from writing that represents itself as something else, something other-than-writing (and, consequently, films that are somehow also not films). In a closet film, there is no actual cinema. In a notionally ekphrastic description of a film that exists only in the world of the novel in which we encounter that description, there is also no actual film. But that is different from saying *there is no film, period*. Rather, there *are* films to talk about here, but not *actual* ones. Instead, there are *potential* films. They exist, but in a different ontological mode. How then, are we to talk about films that exist only in novels? Or about writing that presents itself *as* film? Or about novels and short stories that take the form of the screenplay? And what, finally, are the consequences that the answers to these questions will have for our understanding of the novel and its relation to film in general?

For that is what is truly at stake here: questions of Reality and of Being, and the ways the novel since about World War II has attempted to represent those things. Especially if we are to accept Brian McHale's famous and well-formulated schematic that postmodern novels are defined by a prioritization of ontological questions over epistemological ones, as in modernism, (*Politics of Postmodernism* xii and 58-60; see also *Constructing Postmodernism* 247), then one immediate consequence would be to look at how those novels complicate the very fabric of what

they *are*. The related modes of the closet and the ekphrastic have been fundamental tools in the novel's exploration of this terrain, though they've been mostly overlooked. For this reason, a study of the closet film form would not be complete without at least a brief discussion of filmic ekphrasis in the contemporary novel. There is one novel that does this better and more fully than any other, and that is David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*.

We should pause to note that in the classic example of ekphrasis, Homer's description of the shield of Achilles, the attention is focused more on how the shield was made than on what is depicted on the shield itself. We might see an echo here of the way that the Hollywood Novel appropriates cinematic production at the level of content; in this case, Homer appropriates material production (of the shield) at the level of its content. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace goes one step further, blurring the boundaries between the literary appropriation of cinematic form and content entirely. The whole novel centers around a missing film "cartridge," as it is called in the dystopic near-future North America of *Infinite Jest*, directed by one of the novel's characters—James O. Incandenza—whose oeuvre serves as the connective tissue that ties this sprawling book together. *Infinite Jest* is a novel *about* film, and it makes sense to conceptualize that film as a kind of potential cinema. The centrality of film in the plot gradually unfolds as it becomes clear that one particular film, aptly titled *Infinite Jest (V?)*, turns out to be the ultimate Entertainment, a missing cartridge which is sought by a Quebecois separatist terrorist group, called the *Wheelchair Assassins*, for its power to kill anyone who views it via an overload of pleasure. This film was directed by James O. Incandenza, the father of the protagonist Hal and his two brothers Orin and Mario. Several passages throughout the novel seem ambiguously to either describe short films from Incandenza's oeuvre or to narrate the actual events or memories from Incandenza's youth that would later inform his films. These sections establish a complex nesting

of multiple potentialities: passages that potentially describe films that potentially exist within the fictive world of the novel, which itself occupies a fictive relationship to any actuality. It is in this way that the purely potential status of cinema in the novel informs its structure at its very core: film here is both *infinite* in its proliferation of endless possibilities, as well as *jesting* in the absurdity of its radical impotentiality.

The main narrative of *Infinite Jest* is fragmented by the use of endnotes, which interrupt frequently and serve various ambiguous purposes: occasionally clarifying, correcting, analogizing, simply adding, etc. Most are short, but some are very long. Endnote Twenty-Four, which comes sixty-four pages into the novel, is itself eight pages long. The note comes on the heels of a twenty-three-line-long sentence describing the life and work of James O. Incandenza, who is mostly frequently referred to as “Himself” by his family. He is the founder of the Enfield Tennis Academy, where much of the novel takes place, as well as an impossibly brilliant and prolific scientist in the field of applied geometrical optics. He is the inventor of multiple technologies leading to advances in something called “annular fusion,” and in software, weapons systems, lighting and film equipment, as well. He is also a raging alcoholic, and, finally, especially towards the end of his life, an accomplished experimental filmmaker.

Endnote Twenty-Four is comprised of a seventy-eight-entry-long filmography of James O. Incandenza, a subnote to the heading of which presents a bibliographic citation of the work (invented by Wallace of course) from which we are to believe this filmography comes:

From Comstock, Posner, and Duquette, ‘The Laughing Pathologists: Exemplary Works of the Anticonfluent *Après Garde*: Some Analyses of the Movement Toward Stasis in North American Conceptual Film (w/ Beth B., Vivienne Dick, James O. Incandenza, Vigdis Simpson, E. and K. Snow).’ *ONANite Film and Cartridge Studies Annual*, vol. 8, nos. 1-3 (Year of D.P. from the A.H.), pp. 44-117.

Some of these references are to real artists, others not. Comstock, Posner and Duquette appear to

be Wallace's creations, but several of the filmmakers listed are definitely real: Beth B. is real, and Vivienne Dick is an actual well-known contemporary Irish experimental and documentary filmmaker. Vigdis Simpson is created, and with the incompletely named E. and K. Snow it is hard to be totally sure.<sup>1</sup> In any case, the reliability of Comstock, Posner and Duquette as archivists is clearly to be called into question. The description of *Wave Bye-Bye to the Bureaucrat* ("a harried commuter is mistaken for Christ by a child he knocks over" (990)) seems woefully inadequate in comparison to the much longer description we get in the novel's main narrative. Also, multiple entries contain suggestions that other scholars and archivists have categorized things differently, under different years or as unfinished or not.

The filmography is preceded by a lengthy overview of Incandenza's oeuvre and explanation of the format:

The following listing is as complete as we are able to make it. Because the twelve years of Incandenza's directorial activity also coincided with large shifts in film venue—from public art cinemas, to VCR-capable magnetic recordings, to InterLace TelEntertainment laser dissemination and reviewable storage disk laser cartridges—and because Incandenza's output itself comprises industrial, documentary, conceptual, advertorial, technical, parodic, dramatic noncommercial, nondramatic ('anti-confluent') noncommercial, nondramatic commercial, and dramatic commercial works, this filmmaker's career presents substantive archival challenges. These challenges are also compounded by the facts that, first, for conceptual reasons, Incandenza eschewed both L. of C. registration and formal dating until the advent of Subsidized Time, secondly, that his output increased steadily until during the last years of his life Incandenza often had several works in production at the same time, thirdly, that his production company was privately owned and underwent at least four different changes of corporate name, and lastly that certain of his high-conceptual projects' agendas required that they be titled and subjected to critique but never filmed, making their status as film subject to controversy.

---

<sup>1</sup> Later references include real historical personages such as D.W. Griffith and Taka Iimura, a contemporary Japanese video and new media artist. Ironically, the latter apparently appears in a 1997 documentary about mid-century avant-garde cinema entitled *Birth of a Nation*. Sidney Peterson and his 1947 classic *The Cage* (subnote b to endnote 24, page 986) are also real. Godbout is I think real, but I don't know about Vodriard. Hollis Frampton (24, 988) is real. Woititz and Shulgin, and their "poststructural antidocumentaries" (24, 988) seem to be fictive filmmakers, but both are names of actual people who have written about or are otherwise related to issues of addiction and drug dependency: Janet G. Woititz wrote the book *Adult Children of Alcoholics* and Alex Shulgin is a Berkeley chemist and pharmacologist who basically invented ecstasy.

Accordingly, though the works are here listed in what is considered by archivists to be their probably order of completion, we wish to say that the list's order and completeness are, at this point in time, not definitive.

Each work's title is followed: by either its year of completion, or by 'B.S.' designating undated completion before Subsidization; by the production company; by the major players, if credited; by the storage medium's ('film' 's) gauge or gauges; by the length of the work to the nearest minute; by an indication of whether the work is in black and white or color or both; by an indication of whether the film is silent or in sound or both; by (if possible) a brief synopsis or critical overview; and by an indication of whether the work is mediated by celluloid film, magnetic video, InterLace Spontaneous Dissemination, TP-compatible InterLace cartridge, or private distribution by Incandenza's own company(ies). The designation UNRELEASED is used for those works which never saw distribution and are now publicly unavailable or lost. (24, 985-986)

The list that follows describes a body of work that we might call a kind of purely potential cinema. Wallace goes about as far as possible to foreground their lack of concrete actuality and the spiraling expounding of their potentialities. In addition to the repeated emphasis on unreleased and unfinished films, many of even those ostensibly most realized do not seem like actual films at all. Some of the films' descriptions read more like a joke or an anecdote than as an actual synopsis or "critical overview." For example:

*Cage 3 — Free Show.* B.S. Lactrodectus Matrass Productions/Infernatron Animation Concepts, Canada. Cosgrove Watt, P.A. Heaven, Everard Maynell, Pam Heath; partial animation; 35 mm.; 65 minutes; black and white; sound. The figure of Death (Heath) presides over the front entrance of a carnival sideshow whose spectators watch performers undergo unspeakable degradations so grotesquely compelling that the spectators' eyes become larger and larger until the spectators themselves are transformed into gigantic eyeballs in chairs, while on the other side of the sideshow tent the figure of Life (Heaven) uses a megaphone to invite fairgoers to an exhibition in which, if the fairgoers consent to undergo unspeakable degradations, they can witness ordinary persons gradually turn into gigantic eyeballs. INTERLACE TELENT FEATURE CARTRIDGE # 357-65-65. (note 24, *IJ* 988)

It is easier to imagine this as a clever idea for a potential film rather than as an actual description of an actual film. Once we read the synopsis, there is almost no need to actually watch the film. It less points at an imaginary citation than appropriates the formal features of filmography for

ends that are basically comic. But at other moments the medium of the “film” *is* clearly foregrounded, even when that medium is arguably more like performance art or a happening:

*The Joke.* B.S. Latrodectus Mactans Productions. Audience as reflexive cast; 35 mm. X 2 cameras; variable length; black and white; silent. Parody of Hollis Frampton’s ‘audience-specific events,’ two Ikegami EC-35 video cameras in theater record the ‘film’s’ audience and project the resultant raster onto screen—the theater audience watching itself watch itself get the obvious ‘joke’ and become increasingly self-conscious and uncomfortable and hostile supposedly comprises the film’s involuted “antinarrative” flow. Incandenza’s first truly controversial project, *Film & Kartridge Kultcher’s* Sperber credited it with ‘unwittingly sounding the death-knell of post-poststructural film in terms of sheer annoyance.’ NONRECORDED MAGNETIC VIDEO SCREENABLE IN THEATER VENUE ONLY, NOW UNRELEASED. (24, 988-9)

Other entries describe works whose status as “film” are even more questionable, the works they describe even more opaque. Aside from the multiple interspersed entries that simply read “*Untitled.* Unfinished. UNRELEASED,” there are also series such as:

*Found Drama I.*  
*Found Drama II.*  
*Found Drama III.* ... conceptual, conceptually unfilmable. UNRELEASED. (24, 989)<sup>2</sup>

It might be worth pausing here to compare and contrast this filmography with one of its obvious principle antecedents: Jorge Luis Borges’s short piece “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” in which an ostensible archivist presents a list of the complete works of Pierre Menard (before discussing at length his greatest (though unfinished) achievement, to write *Don Quixote*). The bibliography itself bears many striking resemblances to Incandenza’s filmography (certainly enough that, if one so desired, the argument could easily be made that Wallace definitely had Borges on his mind when he was composing it—that and the other obvious antecedent of a fictive unreliable compiler of an another fictive artist’s works: Charles Kinbote in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*): for example, the meshing of fictional characters with historical figures from the arts

---

<sup>2</sup> A little lower we get V and VI, same thing, but never a IV. Then later a IX, X, and XI (990), without a VII or VIII.

(Menard, we are to believe, was good friends with Paul Valéry), the repeated calling into question of the reliability of the archivist (Borges' narrator admits early on, "I am aware that it is quite easy to challenge my slight authority") and, notably, the brief anecdotal joke-structure of many of the entries, such as:

e) A technical article on the possibility of improving the game of chess by eliminating one of the rook's pawns. Menard proposes, recommends, discusses and finally rejects this innovation.

And, as in Wallace's work, many of the entries form jokes only when placed in dialogue with each other. At one point in Borges, for example, the way one entry serves as the punch line for the previous one seems to threaten to undermine the formal conceit altogether:

I) An examination of the essential metric laws of French prose, illustrated with examples taken from Saint-Simon (*Revue des langues romanes*, Montpellier, October 1909).

j) A reply to Luc Durtain (who had denied the existence of such laws), illustrated with examples from Luc Durtain (*Revue des langues romanes*, Montpellier, December 1909).

The recalling of "such laws" in entry J from the previous entry reminds us we are reading a narrative with only the jocular gambit of a list with any pretensions to being actual. What makes Incandenza's filmography so distinct from Menard's is the way it goes so much further and deeper. While it certainly partakes of the anecdotal structure of Menard's bibliography, in which entries usually exist as autonomous nodes of humor, it also manically encourages connections not only between the entries, but throughout the giant sprawling narrative of *Infinite Jest*. With Borges, the bibliography of an invented archive is calculated for immediate comedic payoff. Wallace, however, with his playful interweaving of entries into a giant thing approaching a kind of totality, replete with unending, seemingly-trivial, paranoia-inducing details and endless opaque and nebulous resonances throughout the novel, is playing with the idea of an invented

film archive in a different way: it makes us paranoid, and it simultaneously holds out and undercuts the absurd promise of totality or completeness to which archives always aspire.

In several cases the filmography's entries aren't simply gags, and the ontological status of the films they describe proves central to the narrative. The most obvious example is Incandenza's final film, a cartridge that proves to be so entertaining that its viewer instantaneously becomes hopelessly addicted to the pleasure of watching it, immediately and totally losing all interest in everything else, until he or she starves to death or dies of thirst. It is the Master Copy of this Entertainment that The Wheelchair Assassins are searching for, and all of the action of the novel in some way revolves around this search. The entry reads:

*Infinite Jest (V?)*. Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar. Poor Yorick Entertainment Unlimited. 'Madame Psychosis'; no other definitive data. Thorny problem for archivists. Incandenza's last film, Incandenza's death occurring during its post-production. Most archival authorities list as unfinished, unseen. Some list as completion of *Infinite Jest (IV)*, for which Incandenza had also used 'Psychosis,' thus list the film under Incandenza's output for Y.T.M.P. Though no scholarly synopsis or report of viewing exists, two short essays in different issues of *Cartridge Quarterly East* refer to the film as 'extraordinary'<sup>d</sup> and 'far and away [James O. Incandenza's] most entertaining and compelling work'<sup>e</sup>. West Coast archivists list the film's gauge as '16...78...n mm.,' basing the gauge on critical allusions<sup>f</sup> to 'radical experiments in viewers' optical perspective and context' as *IJ (V?)*'s distinctive feature. Though Canadian archivist Tête-Bêche lists the film as completed and privately distributed by P.Y.E.U. through posthumous provisions in the filmmaker's will, all other comprehensive filmographies have the film either unfinished or UNRELEASED, its Master cartridge either destroyed or vaulted *sui testator*.

---

d. E. Duquette, 'Beholden to Vision: Optics and Desire in Four Après Garde Films,' *Cartridge Quarterly East*, vol. 4 no. 2, Y.W.-Q.-M.D., pp. 35-39.

e. Anonymous, 'Seeing v. Believing,' *Cartridge Quarterly East*, vol. 4 no. 4, Y.W.-Q.-M.D., pp. 93-95.

f. Ibid. (note 24, *IJ* 993)

I am quoting at length here because it is important to get a sense of the breadth of different ontological relationships established between the entries in the filmography and the filmic works they describe: that is, in what sense are we to imagine they "actually" exist? My argument is that



Wallace's virtuoso manipulation of this ontological ambiguity constitutes the central structural driving force of the novel. This is evident in three key entries in the filmography: *Valuable Coupon Has Been Removed*, *As of Yore*, and *It Was a Great Marvel That He Was in the Father Without Knowing Him*, all three of which describe ostensible films the plots of which we encounter in the main narrative of *Infinite Jest*, though it is radically unclear whether the longer passages in the main narrative are renderings of the actual events that the films were based on, or Himself's memories of those events, or the films themselves. And if it is the latter, it is unclear whether we are getting film treatments or synopses of the films, or if we are getting the prose-version-rendering of the films themselves. As I will shortly delineate, the text compounds and complicates at every turn our attempts to understand the ontological relationship between the main narrative and the filmography.

About halfway through *Infinite Jest* we get a rather long digression (491-503) that, without the help of handy endnote (note 208) would likely be even more puzzling than it is. The passage is introduced with a heading: "WINTER, B.S. 1963, SEPULVEDA CA" (491), and begins in the first person (rare for this novel): "I remember<sup>208</sup> I was eating lunch and reading something dull by Bazin when my father came into the kitchen and made himself a tomato juice beverage and said that as soon as I was finished he and my mother needed my help in their bedroom" (491). Endnote 208 usefully reads:

From Ch. 16, 'The Awakening of My Interest in Annular Systems,' in *The Chill of Inspiration: Spontaneous Reminiscences by Seventeen Pioneers of DT-Cycle Lithiumized Annular Fusion*, ed. Prof. Dr. Günther Sperber, Institut für Neutronenphysik und Reaktortechnik, Kernforschungszentrum Karlsruhe, U.R.G., available in English in ferociously expensive hardcover only, © Y.T.M.P from Springer-Verlag Wien NNY. (note 208, *IJ* 1034)

The reader quickly pieces together that the author/narrator here is James O. Incandenza himself, though it is odd that the endnoted citation does not actually name him. Also puzzlingly, while

*The Chill of Inspiration* is published by an actual German publisher, it seems to have come from Wien, New New York. We might read this as calling into question the authenticity of the endnotes and the authority of whomever we are to imagine is compiling them, or as simply one of the many idiosyncrasies of Wallace's quasi-dystopic sci-fi-future North America. In any case, we are given an unusually clear indication of this passage's ontological status within the novel: it comes from another book. Curiously, in Incandenza's filmography we find an intriguing entry from the very same year<sup>3</sup>:

*Valuable Coupon Has Been Removed.* Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad. Poor Yorick Entertainment Unlimited. Cosgrove Watt, Phillip T. Smothergill, Diane Saltoon; 16 mm.; 52 minutes; color; silent. Possible Scandinavian-psychodrama parody, a boy helps his alcoholic-delusional father and disassociated mother dismantle their bed to search for rodents, and later he intuits the future feasibility of D.T.-cycle lithiumized annular fusion. CELLULOID (UNRELEASED). (note 24, *IJ* 990-1)

It thus seems that this film came out of Incandenza's own putting into writing his memory from his youth. Or, that the written version was simply a byproduct of his working on the film. We have both the long version from his published written account, but much earlier in the novel we have already gotten (as part of an endnote that appears on page sixty-four) the information that that same year he also completed an unreleased film depicting more-or-less the same incident. This raises a rather odd set of questions: to what extent does the written account inform our knowledge of the potential film here (since we can never actually see the film)? And just how much can we assume about the films when the longer accounts of the events they depict represent them so differently in the luridly fleshed-out narrative tangents?

These questions, and our reading of the previous passage in general, are further complicated by other similar passages and their quasi-corresponding filmography entries. Take

---

<sup>3</sup> Though I am not totally sure about what it suggests, in 1963 James O. Incandenza would be about the same age (possibly slightly older) that his son Hal is in Y.T.M.P. Hal, we know, would turn 11 that year, and his father seems

for example the lengthy (157-169) rambling and increasingly incoherent monologue ostensibly spoken by James O. Incandenza's father (Hal's grandfather) to James under the heading

"WINTER B.S. 1960 — TUCSON AZ" (157). In the filmography, we get:

*As of Yore*. Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad. Poor Yorick Entertainment Unlimited. Cosgrove Watt, Marlon Bain; 17/78 mm.; 181 minutes; black and white/color; sound. A middle-aged tennis instructor, preparing to instruct his son in tennis, becomes intoxicated in the family's garage and subjects his son to a rambling monologue while the son weeps and perspires. INTERLACE TELENT CARTRIDGE # 357-16-09. (note 24, *IJ* 991)

There are at least four explanations of the relation between the Tucson 1960 section of the novel and the Y.T.M.P feature film. First, the former could be a rendering of Himself's memory of the actual event—specifically, in the form of his memory of his father's words. Second, it could be a transcription of the actual event itself, not from anyone's perspective in particular, just the actual words spoken. Third, it could be the monologue from the film *As of Yore*, simply transcribed here for us.<sup>4</sup> Fourth, it could be a description, like a treatment, of the content of the film, but not an exact transcription of the monologue from the film. We could speculate further, and of course it could possibly be almost anything (a transcription of the sounds coming from the video-room at the Enfield Tennis Academy where Hal often watches his father's films, for example, doesn't seem out of the realm of possibility, though there is little to support this reading here specifically), but these four options are each rendered totally potential. The crucial ambiguity is whether the Tucson 1960 passage is a description of an event within the world of the novel or of a film within the novel.

This is the same ambiguity at play in another episode—this one even more problematic.

---

to have been born sometime in the early 50s.

<sup>4</sup> If this were the case, the fact that it likely takes many fewer than 181 minutes to recite this monologue could easily be explained by the experimental nature of Incandenza's films. The fact that it is shot in multiple gauges of filmstock as well as shifting between color and black and white suggests that any number of silent or non-dialogue minutes could elapse.

In the filmography:

*It Was a Great Marvel That He Was in the Father Without Knowing Him.* Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar. Poor Yorick Entertainment Unlimited. Cosgrove Watt, Phillip T. Smothergill; 16 mm.; 5 minutes; black and white; silent/ sound. A father (Watt), suffering from the delusion that his etymologically precocious son (Smothergill) is pretending to be mute, poses as a 'professional conversationalist' in order to draw the boy out. RELEASED IN INTERLACE TELENT'S 'HOWL'S FROM THE MARGIN' UNDERGROUND FILM SERIES — MARCH/ Y.T.-S.D.B. — AND INTERLACE TELENT CARTRIDGE #357-75-50. (note 24, *IJ* 992-3)

In the novel, at the beginning of the chapter marked “1 APRIL—YEAR OF THE TUCKS MEDICATED PAD” (27), there is a five-page episode that closely matches the description of this film. The date marks it as exactly one year before Himself’s suicide. The film (*Great Marvel*), completed eleven months later, is clearly one of his last. What is not clear is whether the date establishes the time of actual action or the time setting of a film. To compound matters, it seems difficult to fathom how James could make a film that represents himself as the sufferer of the delusion here: if he really were delusional, it seems odd he is able to make a film that represents the situation so clearly. If he’s not delusional about Hal’s inability to communicate (we have, after all, just seen him spectacularly fail to do so in the opening chapter, where his attempts at articulate speech are discernable to us as readers of his interior dialogue, but come out as wild flailing incoherent mad-man ravings to everyone else (3-17)), then it is also odd for him to make a film in which, as in the longer narrative version (27-31), his father seems so clearly to be the crazy one.

Other details in the main narrative’s version of the episode (27-31) suggest that it might not simply be a rendering of the event (or Hal’s or James’ memory of the event), but might indeed bear a more direct relationship to the film listed in the filmography. For one thing, the father-son dynamic established in the other films is played out here very similarly, except in this

case Himself is the father-figure, instead of the son. Nevertheless, Hal here is apparently wearing a bow tie (28), which we know was an idiosyncrasy of Himself. The other key formal note here is that the whole scene is rendered purely in dialogue. The result is a passage that is impossible to pin down as describing an event, a memory, or a film produced as a result of the memory of that event.

*Infinite Jest* thus goes about as far as any novel can in the way of blurring boundaries between verbal and graphic representations. Perhaps more than any other novel, it complicates our conception of the ontological status of the narrative along the lines of cinema and reality (as event/memory). And by appropriating the formal structure of cinematic *scholarship* in the Filmography, it stands as the closest generic cousin to closet film, which appropriates the formal structure of cinematic *production* (the screenplay). At the very least, it stands as a testament to the overwhelming fact of the primary importance of film and new visual media as the dominant metaphor for gesturing, in writing, outside of writing. Whereas here that metaphor operates through ekphrasis, the rest of this project will tackle the specific question of the paradigm of the closet.

### *What Closet Film Is*

Readers will readily discern, too, that *The Dynasts* is intended simply for mental performance, and not for the stage. Some critics have averred that to declare a drama as being not for the stage is to make an announcement whose subject and predicate cancel each other. The question seems to be an unimportant matter of terminology. Compositions cast in this shape were, without doubt, originally written for the stage only, and as a consequence their nomenclature of “Act,” “Scene,” and the like, was drawn directly from the vehicle of representation. But in the course of time such a shape would reveal itself to be an eminently readable one; moreover, by dispensing with the theatre altogether, a freedom of treatment was attainable in this form that was denied where the material possibilities of stagery had to be rigorously remembered. With the careless mechanicism of human speech, the technicalities of practical mumming were retained in these productions when they had ceased to be concerned with the stage at all. . . . Whether mental performance alone may not eventually be the fate of all drama other than that of contemporary or frivolous life, is a kindred question not without interest.

—Thomas Hardy, preface to *The Dynasts*

Our conceptualization of closet film owes much to the more fully documented history of the genre’s most proximate literary ancestor, the closet drama. Dating as far back as the works of the ancient Roman writer Seneca, tracing a trajectory through Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*—which, along with *The Cenci*, argues Catherine Burroughs, continues to stand as the most famous example of the genre (217)—witnessing a revival amongst Romantic playwrights in the nineteenth century (Goethe, Byron, Shelley, etc.), the mode’s popularity has ebbed and flowed, but its legacy has been enduring. What defines the genre is fairly straightforward: texts written in the form of playscripts that are variously either never intended to be performed on stage, and/or are, for technical (and occasionally sociopolitical reasons) unstageable. In the early twentieth century—around the time a few brave souls in Paris and Tokyo were first starting to experiment with silent film scenario form in poetry and prose—a number of modernist authors’ interest in the closet drama resurged, and their efforts continue to draw critical attention. One recent example is Martin Puchner’s *Stage Fright*, a study of the modernist upswell of interest in

closet drama, arguing that a certain antitheatricalism was central to modernist theatrical practice. Puchner points to “a variety of attitudes through which the theater is being kept at arm's length” (2), and suggests that “a suspicion of the theater plays a constitutive role in the period of modernism, especially in modernist theater and drama” (1). Ultimately, Puchner asserts, “Central aesthetic values dominant in the period of modernism stem from a resistance to the theater” (9).

Puchner argues that this antitheatricalism, this keeping-at-arm's-length of the theater, stems from newly available modes of critiquing realism that become possible during the modernist period:

What they [modernist critics of the theater] tend to object to is a particular form of mimesis at work in the theater, a mimesis caused by the theater's uneasy position between the performing and the mimetic arts. As a performing art like music or ballet, the theater depends on the artistry of live human performers on stage. As a mimetic art like painting or cinema, however, it must utilize these human performers as signifying material in the service of a mimetic project. Once the nature of mimesis is subject to scrutiny and attacks, as it is in modernism, this double affiliation of the theater becomes a problem because, unlike painting or cinema, the theater remains tied to human performers, no matter how estranged their acting might be. The theater thus comes to be fundamentally at odds with a more widespread critique, or complication, of mimesis because this critique requires that the material used in the artwork be capable of abstraction and estrangement. (5)

The theater, in other words, with its reliance on human presence, chafed against predominant views regarding mimesis and the representation of the real. This context in the history of art marks the modernist closet drama as distinct from earlier forms and illuminates the “uneasy position” of the theater in modernism. A reciprocal gesture occurs during postmodernism, where the terrain of the context shifts from theater to the cinema. For where Puchner's formulation collapses painting and cinema together as both purely mimetic arts, where the postmodern period is concerned it makes more sense to linger on the distinct specificities that mark cinema's

relationship to mimesis as distinct from both theater *and* painting, and, more notably, from prose fiction, since the closet film adheres perhaps *most* visibly in the space between cinema and fiction. If, as Puchner argues, modernist closet drama derives from the uneasy problematics of theater's relation to mimesis, then the postmodernist closet film, we might posit, arises from a related set of uneasinesses regarding realism and the representation of the real that appear later in the twentieth century. Specifically, we might chart the growth of the genre against the rise and fall of the prevailing understanding (and later rejection of that understanding) of Bazin's theorization of the cinema as occupying a singular relationship to realist representation.

Philip Rosen has recently articulated the overly reactionary character of 1970s antirealist film theorists' attacks on Bazin for his alleged belief in a naïve realism, suggesting that Bazin certainly understood realism as always already illusionistic, as "the perfect *aesthetic illusion* of reality" (qtd. in Rosen 13, italics original), and that Bazin's understanding of realism was universally misinterpreted as a simplified and reductive account of the idea that cinema objectively and faithfully reproduces the real. Nevertheless, the (quasi-)Bazinian position of understanding film as being particularly suited to realist purposes has historically dominated the critical landscape ever since. Though many have been quick to reject Bazin, naïve realism is still the overwhelmingly dominant paradigm through which we first understand film, whether we like to admit it or not (and the novel as well—see Conclusion below). The closet film, like the closet drama, is a genre especially preoccupied with formal concerns regarding mimesis that potentially annoy its current dominant understanding in the culture. But it would be rather imprudent, for two reasons, to suggest that closet film and anticinematics is constitutive of postmodernism in the same way that Puchner asserts closet drama and antitheatricalism constitute the primary aesthetics of modernism. The first problem with this formulation is that there simply are not



enough closet films to argue that they are “constitutive” of postmodernist literary or cinematic practice. The second is that we must be more careful with what we mean by “anticinematic” than Puchner has to be with “antitheatrical.” Where Puchner’s term clearly denotes sentiments stemming from problematics regarding live performance versus symbolic abstraction, the question of “What is cinema?” is, from the get-go here, more fraught than its corollary with drama.

Two questions are immediately raised by positing closet film in relation to Puchner’s formulation of closet drama’s specific antitheatricalism in relation to mimesis. On one hand, we need to map out the convoluted terrain of the vexed relationship between film and the novel as they variously push the limits of realistic representation in the postmodern period, and the closet film serves as an excellent case study positioned at the fulcrum of this relation. The second question is why closet film has *not* garnered the same interest as closet drama. The fault here does not seem to fall totally on film and literary critics ignoring the genre, because we must admit that there are very few works that fall into this category to begin with. What mechanisms, then, are responsible for hindering the growth of an otherwise viable mode of literary expression? Surely, theoretically, it would make sense, given the immediate literary ancestor in the closet drama, given the climate of literary experimentation that overruns the period in question, given the often tendentious relationship between film and the novel, and given the fact that writers and filmmakers (which categories obviously overlap tremendously) often appropriate formal properties from each other’s medium *already*—given all this, we should perhaps *expect* to find a plethora of writers exploring the limits and potentialities of this intriguing form. That we do not requires an explanation that is likely quite complicated, encompassing factors both in the sphere of finance, publication, and dissemination on the one hand, as well as aesthetics, form and

genre, and the directions taken by avant-garde filmic and literary movements across the twentieth century on the other.

But the first point in question demands that examine exactly what we mean by “closet” when we say “closet film.” Building on Puchner’s arguments, Nick Salvato convincingly argues that closet drama is defined by a certain undecidability between writing and performance (5), and that “the queer potential of closet drama, treated only in passing in *Stage Fright*, belongs prominently among the reasons for its modernist renewal and for its distinction on the spectrum of modern drama” (8). Notably, though Salvato’s discussion is dedicated entirely to closet *drama*, he both opens and closes his project with gestures towards the *cinema* (and we should note that Puchner, as well, opens *Stage Fright* with an illuminative example drawn not from theater, but from film). Salvato ends his study by briefly gesturing towards William S. Burroughs’ *The Last Words of Dutch Schultz*, which he describes as a “closet film” (185), noting that John F. Keener has pointed out that “Burroughs intends [it] to be read explicitly as a form of proto-filmscript” (qtd in Salvato 185). Salvato offers a provocative reading of the work’s queer potential, and argues, “As one inheritor and transmuter of the modernist closet drama’s energies and attitudes vis-à-vis the theater, the postmodern closet film simultaneously courts and resists contemporaneous filmmaking conventions and parameters” (185). Burroughs’s courtship and resistance here, to use Salvato’s terms, is a complex one that warrants further study, especially in regards to the what we might understand as the *formal* queerness of *The Last Words*, a text that seems to describe a film, but in its incorporation of archival photos and its idiosyncratic outlay of dialogue and action, is not exactly a “screenplay” either.

We should also note that Salvato’s formulation, of closet film’s ambivalent stance towards cinematic practice, understands the genre as one executed primarily from the perspective

of the literary world in relation to film. The closet film, in other words, is foremost a mode undertaken by novelists like Burroughs. This is the approach to the genre that makes the most sense. Understanding the closet film as a subgenre of the novel (or, more loosely, of prose fiction, especially in the case of filmic short stories, for example) is more generative than the inverse (looking at the literary value of artists who are primarily screenwriters, as Kevin Boon argues for in *Script Culture and the American Screenplay*—see below), mostly because much of the best and most exciting examples of the genre, such as Burroughs's *Last Words* or Darius James's *Negrophobia*, are clearly as much “experimental novels” as they are “closet films,” and their value is essentially literary rather than filmic, but also because the archive of simply unfilmed screenplays is too unwieldy to analyze, and besides, it primarily opens up questions about film production and the culture of the film industry rather than ones about form and aesthetic practice. That said, it remains important that we take into account works that fall further to the filmic end of the spectrum. Quimby Melton, in a recent article outlining the history of the closet screenplay, understands the potentiality of the genre foremost as a tool for screenwriters:

And along with increased publishing opportunities for all scripts, the closet screenplay is perhaps the screenwriter's most powerful weapon for parrying attacks against, and launching vigorous ripostes in the interest of furthering, his literary bona fides and his text's literary value. (“Production's Dubious Advantage,” n.p.)

Melton is not alone in advocating an approach that looks at the current potential of the genre from the perspective of screenwriters. Kevin Boon's *Script Culture and the American Screenplay* (2008) sets about arguing for the study of screenplays themselves. But throughout his study, Boon underplays the way that the cinema industry, and the majority of artists within that industry, have themselves understood the screenplay as precisely non-literary, as merely one

element in the collaborative production of a film. Just as we likely wouldn't study the costumes of a particular film as autonomous from the context of the film itself, studying the screenplay as removed from the film is equally fraught: implicitly, it presumes a priori a superiority of the literary and the written, the legitimate authoritative word of the genius, over the collaborate and often industrial product of the film. Studying a given screenplay as an autonomous literary work therefore does not make as much sense, as, say, studying a closet film, since most regular screenplays are considered by both readers and writers alike as necessarily instrumental parts of works, not whole works. One problem with studying script *culture*, in other words, is that there isn't one, as such. Closet films, on the other hand, do constitute something like a distinct genre, between the literary and the filmic, and are therefore clearly in need of immediate attention.

If "closet drama" describes a genre of poetry which utilizes playscript form, then it makes sense to call a prose work in film-scenario or film-script form a "closet film." The term "closet screenplay" we should reserve for the broader category described by Melton with explicit reference to the Japanese term "Lesescenario" (or "Rezeshinario," depending on how you Westernize the characters—and also by Brian Norman and others (see Chapter Three). A plethora of other options also exist (bookfilm, closet cinema, read film, etc.), but it makes the most sense to understand the genre in a term that parallels its obvious literary predecessor. On a more fundamental level, we could say that it is the *film*, and not its *screenplay*, which is in fact the thing that is *closeted*. This distinction is more important than at first it seems. The term closet screenplay gestures towards *actual* screenplays that are meant to serve as components of film production, but which are for whatever reason not realized in film form and published. In this case, we have a screenplay that ends up in a kind of "closeted" state. In other words, closet screenplays could potentially include all unproduced film scripts ever written. Closet film, on

the other hand, gestures towards the more specific category of film-scriptic works written for the page in the tradition of the closet drama.

There is a pragmatic function of this distinction then: to identify as the object of critical study the entire body of unrealized and/or unpublished screenplays would be for obvious reasons an impossible task. Plus, focusing on such texts would open an entirely distinct set of critical questions from the ones most pressing at hand here. By using the term *closet film* then, I want to deemphasize the role of actual cinema and of actual screenplays, and place the focus more pointedly at prose fiction's, and especially the novel's, appropriation of screenplay form to execute effects that are "cinematic" in a very different sense from how that term has traditionally been used to describe literary techniques. For closet film is not about the appropriation of cinematic technique; it is about the appropriation of techniques drawn from one component of cinematic production, and that is a pivotal distinction. Instead of examining the "literary equivalent" or "formal translation" of cross-cutting or montage, closet film borrows from another written form: it is the novel appropriating from the screenplay, and film itself is only secondarily referenced. The relationship of the closet film to actual film is thus indexed more so by ontological questions related to the textual representation of visual anterior realities than it is by questions of formal appropriation. A closet film does not conceal its filmic nature; it announces it. It says to its reader, first and foremost: do not imagine this as reality, imagine it as film. And yet it goes one step further than that even, for it does not give us a direct representation of the film itself, but of a single component of the production of the hypothetical film. Closet film is thus first and foremost about multiple levels of remove from any anterior reality represented by the text. It says to its reader: take what you read here and imagine that it could *theoretically* be made into a film. And, as we shall see, in some cases the film obliquely evoked by the script

threatens to not even be theoretically filmable.

Closet film developed independently in Paris and Tokyo in the 1920s. In Paris, the French Surrealists, lead by Andre Breton, were pioneering new experimental forms of writing that sought to incorporate film and the filmic. The Surrealists, as has been extensively documented, were very interested in the cinema and its potential uses for their own ends, especially in regards to its ability to reflect and affect the unconscious mind. A few members of the inner circle of Surrealists even managed to make some actual films, though not very many (see Chapter Two). But several members of the group were content to explore cinematic form in poetry and in prose, and some even wrote screenplays. Their group left a vast and diverse body of work that we could classify as cinematic writing and as unfulfilled screenplays, and it is in the cracks between these works that we come across some early instances of what we can now term closet films, especially in the weird and relatively unstudied film oeuvre of Antonin Artaud and the more-or-less unknown-in-wider-circles Benjamin Fondane (both of whom will be discussed at length in Chapter Two). Meanwhile, in Japan, a number of young writers negotiating the shifting terrain of Japanese Modernism and its own inherent conflicts, and experimenting especially with Western forms, began also to explore filmic form in their writing. The most notable among them was Ryunosuke Akutagawa, who toward the end of his life began increasingly to incorporate structures borrowed from silent film scenarios into his prose short stories (see Chapter One). Though it is possible that other notable authors, such as Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (who is known mostly as a writer of novels and short stories, but who also wrote several filmscripts) wrote texts that could be constituted as “closet films,” none of these exist in English, and it is difficult to ascertain in any case except the singular one that is Akutagawa, whether unpublished Japanese screenplays were the result of intention and experiment or simply

the difficult realities of the world of film production.

A definitive closet film, a paragon of the genre, is rather hard to pin down. With closet drama, there are a plethora of examples to point to that illustrate exactly what epitomizes the form. Not so with closet film. There are several short stories that partake of scenario form, and even a few novels that incorporate scriptic structures. But if we take the strictest definition of the genre, as a *novel written entirely in the form of a screenplay*, then I have managed to find exactly one. That is Darius James's *Negrophobia: An Urban Parable* (1991). The long period between the genre's inception in the 1920s and its zenith decades later is populated, if sparsely, with half-examples, quasi-closeted and pseudo-filmic texts. In the chapters that follow, I'll explore several of the most notable and interesting examples I have been able to find, attempting a historical survey with an emphasis on outlining the potentialities of this literary form and analyzing its primary texts.

### ***Summary of Chapters***

In Chapter One I analyze the historical origins of closet film in silent film era Tokyo, looking at scenarios written exclusively with an eye towards literary publication by Ryunosuke Akutagawa in the mid-to-late-twenties. Existing criticism tends to read Akutagawa's rampant formal experimentation at the end of his life and career—he killed himself in 1927—as a desperate and failed attempt to reconcile opposing cultural and formal forces within his writing, and that this itself constituted an extension of his own spiraling depression. But in focusing on a few of his closet films, rather than his biography, my own reading showcases Akutagawa's

exciting innovation, prescient formal hybridity, and a profound exploration of the relation between literary and cinematic representation. Then I explore the lasting impact of Akutagawa's experimentations with closet film in the work of his literary inheritor, Haruki Murakami. Murakami, who has written extensively about Akutagawa, has also in his own novels taken to a new level Akutagawa's paradigm of exploring the complexities of Japanese identity in the context of East/West and Film/Literature binarisms.

In Chapter Two, I look to a movement contemporaneous with Akutagawa, in a very different linguistic and geographic situation: the formal experimentations undertaken by members of the French Surrealist movement in late 1920s Paris. I argue that Surrealist Cinema is best understood not through the very small body of films produced by the Surrealists themselves (which many critics number as few as *seven*, and some critics as few as *two*), but as the much larger body of *potential films* that exist only in traces: the failed film career constitutive of the celebrated drama-theory of Antonin Artaud, for example, or the relatively unknown film scenarios of Benjamin Fondane. Though much emphasis has been placed on *actual* Surrealist Cinema, I stress the importance of Surrealist *potential* cinema, especially at the level of the closet film. In this regard I explore the way Artaud's dramatic theory is imbued with his failures in screenwriting, and how Fondane's closet films explore similar terrain and establish the fundamental literary techniques of the Western closet film.

Chapters Three and Four turn towards more contemporary and local examples of the closet film. In Chapter Three, I offer an extended close-reading of Darius James's 1993 closet film, *Negrophobia*, which I argue is the single most fully realized example of the potential genre. Analyzing the particular formal idiosyncrasies of this outrageous and complex text illuminates the literary effects specific to closet film and foregrounds problems of realism, representation



and ontotextual stability. In the fourth chapter, I turn towards a series of contemporary examples that partially fulfill the criteria for inclusion in my closet film canon. After brief discussions of Adam Thorpe's *Ulverton* (1992), which contains various prose fiction chapters, written in a very diverse array of genres, culminating in a final chapter written in screenplay formatting, and David Flusfeder's *A Film By Spencer Ludwig* (2010), which contains several scenes in which especially dialogue, but occasionally also action, are rendered in screenplay formatting, I turn towards a final recent paradigmatic example of the closet film. The first half of Mark Leyner's *The Tetherballs of Bougainville* (1998) is written in the form of prose fiction, the second half as an extended screenplay written by the protagonist of the first half. Leyner, much like Darius James, explores the possibilities of literary play through a radically absurdist and hallucinogenic lens. Though only half the novel is written as a screenplay, the balance and interplay between the two sections offers a foundational exploration of what the closet film can do.

The Conclusion poses a brief analysis of the way that closet film complicates current theorizations of Literary Realism, and offers an experimental reading of a contemporary but traditional novel, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), as itself a kind of potential cinema. Central to this thesis is that Realist models that suppose a literary text should mimetically reference an anterior reality, typically conceived of as real reality or the mind of the author, would do better to posit a potential film as a kind of hypothetical/fictive textual object mimetically referenced by the text.

On a final note, it is not lost on me that an intriguing alternative structure for this project would have been to write this study itself in screenplay form. It has been done. Karen Pinkus's *The Montesi Scandal* (2003) is an excellent and highly original study of everyday life in 1950s Rome. The book is totally unique in that, though clearly a scholarly study, it understands that the

imbrication of cinema into the everyday life of Italians at the time ran so deep that a filmic mode is necessary in order to best examine it. The study relates the story of the scandal surrounding the mysterious death of Wilma Montesi just outside Rome in 1953. And it is rendered as a film script, heavily annotated with explanatory notes, a kind of meta-closet-film. Ultimately, this radical experiment is motivated by the importance of foregrounding how deeply cinema was woven into the everyday life, and so is part of a very different sort of project than this dissertation. That said, I remain willing and eager, should anyone like to option the rights, to adapt this dissertation or any portion thereof into a screenplay.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE JAPANESE CLOSET FILM FROM AKUTAGAWA TO MURAKAMI

One of the very earliest practitioners of works that can productively be called “closet films” is the modernist author Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927). In Japan he is a household name, known mostly for his short stories. In Europe and the United States he is best known as the author of the 1922 short story “Yabu no naka,” or “In a Grove,” upon which Akira Kurosawa based his film *Rashomon* (1950).<sup>5</sup> Akutagawa’s filmic legacy also lived on in two of his sons, the actor Hiroshi Akutagawa (1920-1981) and composer Yasushi Akutagawa (1925-1989). But most notably for our purposes here, towards the end of his brief life Akutagawa began experimenting with cinematic form in his writing. While at first this meant simply incorporating cinematic techniques of tone, structure, and montage, eventually his stories became more and more similarly structured to actual film scenarios. As early as 1920, in stories like “The Shadow” and “Shiro the Dog” (1923), Akutagawa was dealing with issues involving the impact of cinema on literature and the problematics of visual representation in prose within an emerging Japanese cinema culture. In even earlier works, Akutagawa had discussed film, but only as the content or subject matter, such as in “Unrequited Love” (1916). But by the time he wrote stories like “Asakusa Park,” shortly before his suicide in 1927, he had begun a full-scale appropriation not only of cinema, but specifically of the film-scenario form. This represents a distinct shift in modernist writing practice and its relation to cinematic form, and Akutagawa’s works represent some of the very earliest examples of the potential genre of the closet film.

There is a dearth of critical work on Akutagawa in English, especially in terms of his

---

<sup>5</sup> Akutagawa is also the author of a short story titled “Rashomon,” which has no direct relation to the film other than its title.

works' relation to film scenario form, but what studies that do exist are quite helpful. A.A. Gerow, in "The Self Seen As Other: Akutagawa and Film," sets out by "investigating the possible influences of film on Akutagawa's literary production" (197) and notes that he "did not frequently go to films, and when he did, often did not think much of them" (197). What Gerow offers us is an excellent framework for understanding in Akutagawa's work the twin matrices of a cinema/literature divide on the one hand, and a rapidly westernizing and modernizing Japan on the other. He elaborates:

Because he decided to confront the challenge of cinema not by making films but by attempting to express its Otherness within literature, Akutagawa was not only acknowledging the changing semiotic landscape of Taisho Japan, he was also attempting to regain control over meaning by inscribing what presented a threatening new language, film, in a more familiar semiotic system, literature. (202)

Gerow's view represents a popular position in regard to Akutagawa's closet films: that the "closet" here is a kind of defensive posturing. Closet film, in other words, is constituted by a reaction against film, which is represented as an encroaching, threatening force. Gerow is careful to note, however, that despite the fact that "[f]ilm in Akutagawa is an alien phenomenon" (198), and that "cinema is articulated through the sign of the Other" and "figures as the preeminent sign of the fantastic... [C]inema is not wholly assimilable to this East-West binarism" (198). And though cinema, Gerow claims, was dynamically opposed to the 'i-novel,' a Japanese literary genre comprising aspects of naturalistic and autobiographical literature which was the dominant mode of fiction during the Taisho period (1912-1926), which almost perfectly overlaps with Akutagawa's active career (200), we nevertheless cannot simply equate film for Akutagawa with cultural imperialism. This is because, as Gerow claims, film is about a differentiation not only between Self and Other, but also an interior differentiation with the Self: "Film to Akutagawa is the creation not only of an impersonal technology, but also of a self

increasingly technologized, split, and unknown to itself” (199). In Gerow’s account then, film represents a fulcrum in Akutagawa’s work upon which are balanced multiple fragmentations in a changing modern Japan:

Akutagawa’s incorporation of cinema into his literature is a contradictory effort to recognize the loss of Japaneseness while simultaneously attempting to construct a new identity through that loss. The presence of film in Akutagawa’s literature is deeply imbricated with the ambivalence and turmoil of the Taisho era, before the moment when literature ‘returned to Japan’ in the 1930s and less ambiguously served the project of constructing a homogenous national identity. (202)

Though Gerow notes that “Asakusa Koen” (*Asakusa Park*, 1927) and “Yuwaku” (*Temptation*, 1927) “are actually written in the form of film scenarios” (198), he does not differentiate between the different modes through which Akutagawa “incorporated... cinema into his literature.” For Gerow, in other words, not much stock is placed in the differences between Akutagawa’s being influenced by cinema, appropriating cinematic techniques, or in utilizing scenario form. Gerow’s study thus ends precisely where the present study begins: at the specific potentialities of the closet film form. We will see this in a moment when we turn our attention to “The Shadow” (1920), and Gerow’s analysis of the text, but first we could use more critical background on Akutagawa.

Seiji M. Lippit’s work proves pivotal here, especially his article, “The Disintegrating Machinery of the Modern: Akutagawa Ryunosuke’s Late Writings.” Lippit outlines the role of film in Akutagawa’s later writing:

Akutagawa experimented with writing for the film medium in two works in 1927, “Seduction” (translated as “San Sebastian”) and “Asakusa Park.” An earlier work, “Kage” (Shadow, 1920), also incorporates aspects of the film scenario into its structure. Beyond these specific works, the general principle of montage seems to have had a significant impact throughout his late writings. In effect, Akutagawa discovered in the film scenario form a process that violently fragments literature; montage represents literature’s dismemberment into a series of short, discrete units that are connected according to their contiguity rather than any linear logic of plot development. For Akutagawa, montage in the literary text was thus a

destructive, rather than constructive, principle, performing the literal dismantling of the novel form. (36)

Lippit, like Gerow and others, doesn't completely distinguish between Akutagawa's literal appropriation of scenario form on the one hand, and the more "general principle of montage" informing his work on the other. He views the one as a simple extension of the other. Moreover, he sees both as mechanisms, part of Akutagawa's larger arsenal, that adequately represent the fragmentary nature of modern reality. Lippit, like Gerow, views Akutagawa's work, and especially the texts written towards the end of his life, as grappling with increasing urgency with questions relating to the fragmentation of identity. This approach to his stories fits neatly with the narrative of Akutagawa himself spiraling into madness, depression, and eventually suicide. Lippit writes, "Caught in the interstices between rationality and madness, between universality and a native cultural imaginary, Akutagawa, in his late writings, defined the outlines of an intellectual crisis that would haunt Japanese writers and thinkers over the coming years" (49). It therefore makes some intuitive sense to position cinema as one of modernism's main instruments of fragmenting reality, and Akutagawa's use of film form in his texts as an attempt to deal explicitly with such questions. But while this accounts for *why* Akutagawa himself chose to experiment so heavily with cinematic form towards the end of his life, despite the fact that, as Gerow points out, he was not much of a film buff, it does not offer a way in to analyzing the texts themselves except in terms of basically biographical considerations. If we look at Akutagawa's short stories from 1926-1927 not as the *end* of his life and career, but as the very *beginning* of a brand new form, as the genesis of a new literary genre, then a slightly different narrative emerges: one in which the potentialities of the literary representation of visual reality are explored and experimented with in new and exciting ways, and one which opens up the potentiality of fiction anew.

Reading Akutagawa through the lens of the closet film thus rewrites a critical history centered on an established narrative in which Akutagawa's writings, like his life, tend towards increasing fragmentation, destruction, negativity, and a general sense of desperation. For understanding the invention of the closet film as an act of personal and literary desperation, as an act of last resort, constitutes an integral—but not necessarily the only—paradigm through which we can conceptualize the function of the “closet” in “closet film.” Lippit writes,

Akutagawa had been regarded by many as the archetype of the man of letters (bunjin) and a representative of the ideology of self-cultivation, which placed almost limitless faith in the value of literature and in ‘culture’ generally. Yet in his later writings, any coherency or unity of literary practice seems to have been shattered. His late writings, marked by the breakdown of literary form and narrative technique, seem to question the very basis of literary expression... Indeed, during the 1920s, the conventional boundaries of literary practice came under assault from a variety of phenomena, including both the growing emphasis on class consciousness and the increasing demand for literature to engage social reality, as well as the rise of popular fiction and other forms of mass culture (particularly through newer media such as film). (29)

Pivotal, it was only in Akutagawa's latest writings that the *form* of his literary endeavors changed at the most basic level. Lippit asserts, “While Akutagawa had always inscribed a variety of linguistic styles in his early works, they had more or less obeyed the demands of the short story form. These late writings, however, represent a collapse in the boundaries of genre; Akutagawa's writings dissolve into a multiplicity of form” (34). So it is only at the very end that Akutagawa broke completely from established form, looking for something wholly other. We should note, however, that he did not only find the screenplay. Indeed, Lippit offers a whole catalogue of forms Akutagawa experimented with in 1927:

In just the last months of his life, for example, he produced works in a multiplicity of genres. They include those that tend to be classified as I-novels (“Cogwheels” and “Mirage”), but also the fictional story “Genkaku Sanbo” (The House of Genkaku); a fragmentary text that he called an “autobiographical esquisse” (“A Fool's Life”); a satire that he modeled on Gulliver's Travels (Kappa); two experimental film scenarios (“Yuiwaku” {Seduction and “Asakusa Koen”

{Asakusa Park}); a “sketch” of Tokyo (“Honjo Ryugoku”); as well as various critical essays (including his most important critical works, “Saiho no hito” [The Western Man] and “Literary, All Too Literary”), a series of aphorisms (“Juppon no hari” [Ten Needles]), and different forms of poetry (including tanka and haiku). (34)

With so much breadth and variety, it is easy to see why his use of screenplay format has been overlooked. Nevertheless, for our purposes here the few experiments Akutagawa conducted with scenario form are pivotal in establishing some of the earliest parameters of the closet film.

Lippit understands this variety as the desperate act of a man grappling with depression and seeking to find meaning before ultimately failing to do so. Akutagawa’s intense generic experimentation is reduced to a signifier of his failure and his impending demise. Lippit’s analysis of “A Fool’s Life” (also translated as “The Life of a Stupid Man”) is case in point. He describes it appropriately as “an unclassifiable work, a mixture of diverse genres that contains aspects of the autobiography, prose poem, lyric, short story, confessional novel, film scenario, and aphorism” (35). Elsewhere it has even been called a “closet screenplay,” and Quimby Melton lists it in his ongoing closet screenplay bibliography since it *can* be construed as such, though it fits in the genre only loosely. Lippit asserts,

The work also appears to incorporate formal elements of the film scenario; it is, in effect, constructed as of a series of isolated, momentary scenes of his life that have been edited together. The work’s structure reveals Akutagawa’s inability to create a novelistic narrative of his life; he instead reduced the story to a succession of separate moments in time that are stitched together to form a somewhat disjointed, patchwork personal history. In this sense, the main technique Akutagawa deploys in this work is montage: it consists of a series of rapid shifts between seemingly random events, without reference to any sense of logical or linear development. The material body of the text—the graphic laceration of the work and prominent blank spaces between the scenes—seems to reflect the complete breakdown of Akutagawa’s faith in the capacity of fiction, and narrative in general, as a vehicle of self-expression. (36)

It is this sense of failure that defines Lippit’s view of Akutagawa’s final works, but that is not the only way we can conceive of them. For, quite to the contrary, they are also exciting, new,



revolutionary texts that pave the way for a potential, if marginalized, subgenre to take root and grow over the ensuing century. While the content of the stories might deal with grave issues (madness, depression, alienation, etc.), Akutagawa's formal play constitutes an energetic engagement with these problems.

Take, for example, "Kage" ("The Shadow," 1920), one of Akutagawa's earliest stories that engages fully with cinema, but also one of his most fully developed meditations on temporality, the gaze, scopophilia, and paranoia. Though this text predates by several years Akutagawa's attempts to utilize actual film scenario formatting, "Kage" sets up most of the principle themes and concerns that run throughout Akutagawa's late career, and especially his very final efforts at experimenting with film form in stories like "Asakusa Park." "Kage" is marked off by section titles that simply state the location: Yokohama, Tokyo, and Kamakura. In the first section, a man named Chen receives a letter alleging that his wife is cheating on him. In the second, Chen's wife Fusako becomes oddly convinced someone is watching her. In the very short third section, Imanishi gazes at a photograph of Fusako. In the fourth section, a man named Yoshii reports to Chen that all the while he's been watching Fusako he has not seen anything suspicious. In the fifth, Chen goes home and spies on Fusako himself. Hidden by darkness, he himself can only see the silhouette of a male figure in her room. He sneaks in, listens from outside her room, then lowers his eye to the keyhole: "The scene that flashes upon Chen's vision will haunt him forever" (100). Abruptly the section ends and we find ourselves back in Yokohama, where Imanishi finally stops staring at the image of Fusako. He gets up and starts typing another letter to Chen. The next section brings us back to Chen's home in Kamakura, where something very strange happens. Having forced his way into the bedroom, Chen,

immobile in the corner, stares at the two bodies on the bed, one lying upon the other. The one below is Fusako—or perhaps was Fusako till moments before. The entire face swollen and purple, the tongue protrudes halfway from the mouth and the partly closed eyes gaze toward the ceiling. The figure on top is Chen Cai, the very replica of the Chen Cai in the corner. The fingernails of this figure are buried in the flesh of Fusako’s neck, and the head rests upon her naked breasts. (101)

The rest of the scene offers little in the way of resolution: the two Chens stare at each other in dread and demand to know who the other is. This gets them nowhere, and they both seem to give in to despair. The final section takes us to a whole new location, a theater in Tokyo, where a man, sitting with a woman, has just finished watching a movie called “The Shadow.” But the woman is apparently confused when the man says, “ ‘So that’s how it ends,’ ” (102), as if they haven’t watched a film at all. They check the program and there is no film called “The Shadow” listed there. He wonders if he had been dreaming or something, and tells her about the film. She says she has also seen this film before, and one of them—it is unclear which—suggests they simply drop it altogether.

The bulk of the story is therefore rendered, by the last section, as retrospectively filmic—or possible something entirely *else*, a dream, or a vision. Gerow’s analysis of the story is insightful:

One could simply categorize ‘Kage’ as another in Akutagawa’s modernist explorations of the ambiguities of knowledge and subjectivity. What is noteworthy, however, is that this episode, and ‘Kage’s’ entire story, revolves around cinema and the process of viewing, being suffused with and structured by characteristics one can call cinematic. It does not merely attach film to a story to lend a fashionable air to a marketable literary text, but rather confronts the filmic phenomenon from a serious critical standpoint, delving into the nature of cinema and its possible uses for literature. ‘Kage’ is cinematic not in the trite sense of being ‘visual,’ but in being a text that apparently owes the form of its existence to the contemporary appearance of the cinema in Japan. (197)

Gerow also notes that the text’s “primary story is itself structured around and through a cinematic metaphor” (198) and that “the plot [is] structured with flashbacks and parallel

montage...” (197). He sums this up: “ ‘Kage’ is seemingly about viewing and the power and nature of the gaze, connecting paranoia, scopophilia, and visual investigation to the subjectivity of the film viewer” (198).

The story hinges on raising and deferring questions regarding exactly who is watching whom. At first, it is unclear whether Fusako might feel like she is being watched because Imanishi is staring at a photograph of her. This is accomplished with the abrupt juxtaposition of her increasingly irrational sense that someone must be watching her, even when she turns the lights on, etc., with the immediately following image of Imanishi quite literally watching her, in the photograph. But even when it is revealed that it is Yoshii who has been watching her, this doesn’t solve anything, since it then turns out, after Chen himself begins watching her, that, mysteriously, some other version of Chen has been watching her (and indeed has been murdering her) as well. Whether this alternate-Chen simply represents another part of Chen’s split consciousness, or Chen from another point in time (i.e., future Chen, after he paradoxically catches Fusako cheating on him with himself, and subsequently murders her), or some other possibility, is left radically ambiguous. This ambiguity is cast into further doubt by the *mise en abyme* structure in which the whole story is first revealed to be a film, and then even this is undermined, when that film is shown to have not actually been screened. But even then, when we think it might have simply been the unnamed man’s dream, the unnamed woman claims to have also previously seen the film version of the man’s dream/vision/memory. The “truth” of “what really happens” in the story is thus cast into an infinitely regressing series of Russian-doll paradoxes.

For this reason it makes a lot of sense for Gerow to understand what Akutagawa was up to here in terms of a rejection of cinematic realism:

Basic to Akutagawa's portrayal of the fantastic quality of the cinematic medium is a questioning of the indexicality of the cinematic sign. It is this quality of being a trace of a profilmic event authenticated by a technology considered scientific that is usually seen as justifying the characterization of film as an art of truly recording reality. 'Kage' in particular questions this as well as the ontological status of the art form itself by portraying a filmic text that is not a trace of a profilmic reality, but rather a work whose own reality has been put in doubt. In Akutagawa, the rationalistic forms of creation represented by cinema are themselves strange and Other, marking modernity and industry as somehow beyond the Japanese norm" (198).

But, again, implicit here is the idea that literary realism is somehow opposed to cinematic realism, and that a written film, a kind of closet film even, necessarily constitutes a defensive posturing against an encroaching modern Western technology. However, it is not only cinema, but indeed all forms of gazing, whose connection to reality is here called into question. The question of whether the film in the story traces a profilmic reality or not is not even askable, since the very existence of the film itself is so radically uncertain. In other words, Gerow wants to understand the story as a critique of a simpleminded understanding of film's scientific claim to objective realism. While it certainly is that, it is a lot more, as well. For not only does it call into question the objectivity of all such gazing, from the actual human eye to the dream to the short story to the film, but indeed the story hinges on particularly literary tricks in order to do so. For while throughout the story, the different sections (or, we could say, *scenes*) are both clearly filmable and function primarily through visual juxtaposition and montage, it clearly showcases *literature's* ability to accomplish these effects. That we read it first as a short story and then retrospectively as a film demonstrates the relative irrelevance of that very realization: rereading the text as a description of a film (or dream, or etc.,) is no different than reading it as a description of an anterior (or profilmic) reality. In other words, what is exposed by the very trick of retrospective recasting of the ontological status of the previous text is the failure of models of realism which rely on our understanding any given text as the representation of a specific reality

(anterior or profilmic), outside the reality of the text, instead of on its own terms: the ontology of fiction.

In some of Akutagawa's very last works though, he took his experimentation with cinematic form one step further, imbricating the fabric of fiction and film in a wholly original way. Instead of simply appropriating and translating filmic techniques into literature, Akutagawa began actually using the form of silent film scenario writing in his own stories. For example, "Asakusa Park" (published in April of 1927), one of Akutagawa's final works, is a dark, imagistic, surrealistic story of a lost boy (oddly, he is described as twelve or thirteen, though in the story he seems more like nine or ten) at the intersection of western consumerism and Japanese tradition (a shopping center featuring western-style goods being sold near an old Japanese temple). Our attention is immediately drawn towards the strong emphasis on vision and seeing, both in terms of what we see as camera/audience, and what the boy is able to or not able to see in the story. A few examples from the opening sections: "We look out across..." (1), "The Nakamise seen vertically" (2), the father "gazes into a hat store" (3), "A toy store seen at an angle" (5), and later: "A pumpkin field gradually comes into focus beyond the signs" (33).<sup>6</sup> In a more dramatic example, after the boy has lost track of his father:

12

The window of an eyeglass shop. Among a row of concave glasses, convex glasses, binoculars, magnifying glasses, microscopes, and protective glasses, sits the head of a Western doll, smiling and wearing a pair of glasses. The boy standing in front of this window. Seem [sic] from the waist up, at an angle from behind. The doll's head changes into a human head. It speaks to the boy:

13

"You must buy a pair of glasses. The glasses will help you find your father."  
"There is nothing wrong with my eyes."

We should note that the numbers clearly do not refer to individual scenes, but sections that represent beats or moments within scenes, potentially individual shots. The use of the numbered

sections is not necessarily a formally cinematic component here, though it can be read that way; rather, it is the use of a second-person plural seeing, as well as references to focus and angle, which mark the text as clearly cinematic. Later in the story, a helpful metaphor signals for us the problematic genre of the very piece we're reading: "A rectangular sign on which is written: 'an XYZ Production: Lost Child. A Literary Film.' It changes into a sandwich man with this signboard in front and back" (49). The question perhaps, with "Asakusa Park," is whether to conceive of it as a literary film or a filmic piece of literature.

In another important moment, the thematics of vision are allegorically interwoven with the problematics of cultural imperialism:

59

A concrete wall that leaves visible only a sliver of sky. The wall becomes transparent on its own, revealing several monkeys crowding together behind iron bars. Then the entire wall changes into a puppet stage. The stage consists of a Western-style room. There, a puppet of a Westerner nervously looks about. Given the puppet's mask, it appears to be a thief who has snuck into the room. In the corner of the room is a safe.

60

The puppet Westerner breaking into the safe. Some of the strings attached to the puppet's hands and feet are clearly visible....

On one hand, the boy in the story is subject to threats from shady, possibly western figures like the thief-puppet, but, on the other hand, the boy also seems to identify with the puppet here, since he himself is "nervously look[ing] about" for his father. It might be tempting to suggest a reading in which the film scenario is a western cultural form imposing itself on traditional Japanese forms, but the allegorical relationships between the story's surrealistic images and its own form seem more complicated than that, and trouble the easy parallels they seem to raise.

Haruki Murakami's introduction to the collection of Akutagawa's works that contains "The Life of a Stupid Man," but not "Asakusa Park," may offer some insight. Murakami is a

---

<sup>6</sup> Citations are to section numbers, not page numbers.

Japanese author especially attuned to the fraught relationship between traditional form and the appropriation of western literary models. His novels often thematize that very problematic in overt ways (see below for an extended discussion of Murakami's novel, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*). He argues that

Akutagawa successfully imported his propensity for modernism into a fictional world in the borrowed container of the folktale. In other words, he succeeded in giving his modernism a 'story' by skillfully adapting the pre-modern—the medieval tale form that had flourished almost a thousand years earlier. Instead of creating a purely modernistic literature, he first transposed his modernism into a different form. This was his literary starting point, and it was an extremely stylish, intellectual approach. (xxviii)

Murakami thus understands the way Akutagawa sought to deal with the problematics of combining a rapidly modernizing Japanese culture as a *formal* problem (xxix), developed in part because Akutagawa did not connect with the Realist trends of either Marxist fiction or the Japanese 'I-novel' (xxx). In the end, however, Murakami suggests that Akutagawa was never fully able to resolve the conflicts in his literary identity between Japan and the West: "Joining the two cultural systems through a clever technique is never more than a temporary solution to the problem. Eventually, the bond just falls apart" (xxxiv). While Murakami is not thinking explicitly here about the "clever technique" of adopting film scenario form, we might understand this as one of the "props" that Akutagawa experimented with towards the end of his life. The origin of the closet film we might thus understand as an attempt not to compete with or get away from the cinema, but to combine two different forms into something wholly other, something distinct unto itself: what Akutagawa, with some measure of irony, calls a "literary film."

Instead of a reading Akutagawa's later works as a desperate and even failed defense against cinema as an encroaching and threatening form—driving literature out of business, as it were—we can additionally understand his formal experimentation as an exciting celebration of

the potentiality of capitalizing on new forms of representation. For example, we might see the details through which Akutagawa renders the dark surrealistic images of “Asakusa Park” as meticulously drawn from the liberating gaze of the camera lens, offering an ability to go everywhere, to offer some objectivity to the narration and thus drawing our attention more closely to the character, and, perhaps most prominently, to guide our eye very carefully through the details of the story.

And furthermore, the manipulation of elements within the narrative—like angle, focus, and the rhythm created by numbering sections in terms of individual “shots”—casts into stark relief the fact that the story we are reading is not a representation of an anterior reality unless we take that reality as mediated by a filmic one. That is, as we read what presents itself to us as a film scenario, we have to imagine the text as a film. Unlike in “Kage,” where it is eventually revealed that what we have been reading is some kind of representation of a film, here we are from the get-go asked to imagine the text as a sort of potential film. But there is a pivotal distinction created by the use of scenario form that distinguishes texts that simply claim to represent films from ones that are written in scenario or screenplay form: film scenarios are an actual production element of actual filmic production. The potential film generated by a closet film such as “Asakusa Park” thus operates in a different ontological mode from those of stories like “Kage.” With the former, we are asked to imagine the film that *could potentially be produced* as a result of the blueprint we are reading, whereas in the later we are asked simply to imagine the story *as* a movie that already exists. In the latter case, in other words, the potential film is already made. It is identical with the story we have been reading. But in the former case, we are given a sort of choice. We can read imagining the story *as* film, or we can read imagining the story as a script for a possible film, a “real” one, one that would need to be cast, designed,



and shot with a crew and a budget. The point here, in other words, is that closet films like “Asakusa Park” underscore their filmicness in a distinct and much deeper way than those like “Kage,” though they are much, much more rare. Texts written in scenario form are in some sense more cinematic than texts which simply claim to be, or are revealed to be, representations of cinematic realities. Akutagawa’s late works help parse out the distinct mechanisms through which this distinction and intensification of cinema form take place.

Let us take a closer look at his story “Yuiwaku” (1927), translated variously as “Seduction,” “Temptation,” or “San Sebastian.” I should preface this discussion by noting the extent to which this work, which I am arguing constitutes a founding document of closet film, has been widely overlooked in the West. It exists in only one full English translation, and in an unlikely place at that: *The Real Tripitaka* is a study about—and collection of short stories relating to—the life of the historical seventh-century Chinese pilgrim of that name. Listed here as “San Sebastian,” it is contextualized as offering a window into the “Christian Period” of seventeenth century Japan, rather than for its wholly original and exceptionally notable formal innovation. Arthur Waley does note briefly in his Introduction to “San Sebastian” that Akutagawa wrote “a few pieces... in scenario form, using it, however, simply as a literary form, with no thought of having films made” (224), of which this is a prime example, but the text’s inclusion here is clearly motivated by its content (the role of Christianity in medieval Asia) rather than its form.

“San Sebastian” is organized as a listed series of “shots,” and it does not shy away from specifically filmic language, such as camera direction. For example: “*Shot 3*. Close-up of the sailing-ship running before the wind” (225). The story describes the surrealistic encounter between a Catholic hermit and the captain of a Dutch sailing ship. Waley describes it as

“broadly speaking an allegory of the struggle between the spiritual and material, or, as Akutagawa puts it in his note-books, between ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ ” (224), though it also clearly continues Akutagawa’s meditations on the encroachment of Western forms and cultural imperialism. Titling the piece “San Sebastian,” rather than the more intuitive and direct translation of “Temptation” or “Seduction,” perhaps obscures this political valence: the temptation of the Catholic padre by the Dutch trader, who seems to offer, on behalf the East India company perhaps, the world and the stars. In Shot 33, the Dutchman, having disembarked from his ship, offers Sebastian a telescope, and Shots 34-39 show us separate views through a telescope of different absurd domestic happenings in Dutch homes. This culminates in the captain plucking a star from the sky and placing it in the palm of Sebastian’s hand, at which point “Sebastian, trembling from hand to foot, struggles frantically to make the sign of the Cross; but this time he seems utterly unable to do so” (231), at which point the star morphs into a pebble, a potato, a butterfly, and finally “a diminutive Napoleon, in cocked-hat and uniform” (231). Sebastian is eventually able to overcome the temptation by clinging to the Cross (233-234), but the scenario ends with the goatee-bearded Dutch sea-captain, a clear parallel for the ultimate tempter, Satan, sitting comfortably in his living room, smoking a cigarette (234).

Characteristically, however, Akutagawa complicates a simple allegorical narrative in which an encroaching Western-Other tempts and is barely defeated by an original Japanese Self. Akutagawa’s Sebastian is here clearly a recent convert, ostensibly by the Spanish and Portuguese missionaries who in the early seventeenth century converted thousands of Japanese to Catholicism, despite resistance and persecution by the Tokugawa shogunate during the early Edo period. What is authentically Japanese here is thus already called into question. The temptation by the Dutch seacaptain is essentially secular, since what is in it for him in the suppression of

(Spanish/Portuguese) Catholicism is the potential for a Dutch trading monopoly (as in fact was historically constituted). In another complicated maneuver, Akutagawa demonstrates the first effects of the Dutchman's temptation *before* the seacaptain actually arrives:

*Shot 12.* Sebastian's hands, joined in prayer. They seem now to be holding something. It is a Dutch tobacco-pipe. At first it does not seem to be alight, but presently curls of smoke begin to rise from it.

*Shot 13.* Inside the cave. Sebastian scrambles to his feet and flings the pipe on to the rocky floor of the cave. As it lies there, smoke continues to rise from it just as before. He looks bewildered, but makes no further attempt to do anything about it. (226)

After this the pipe begins to morph into a flask of a wine, a sugared bun, and then a diminutive geisha (226-227). In this confusion of linear causality, as well as the ontological instability effected by the morphing pipe, a simple binary (whether East-West, politics-religion, old-new, or whatever) is rendered unavailable.

This is perhaps most clearly expressed in the *formal* experimentation at play here.

Akutagawa's appropriation of scenario form is complicated by the evocation of special effects techniques that likely would have seemed all but technically *unfilmable* in 1927. For example:

*Shot 5.* The head of the murdered sailor, face upward. Suddenly a long-tailed monkey crawls out of one of his nostrils and squats on his chin. It takes a good look round and then, as though satisfied with what it has seen, crawls back again into the dead sailor's nostril. (225)

or,

*Shot 24.* Sebastian's right ear. Out of the lobe grows a tree, heavily laden with clusters of round fruit. The ear-hole is a meadow with bright flowers growing among the grass. The grass is stirred by a gentle breeze. (228)

Uncannily, with its abrupt juxtapositions and radically plasmatic formal play, Akutagawa's scenario recalls the films of the French Surrealists (see Chapter Two below), such as *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928) and *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), well in advance of those productions, let alone their ubiquity in Japan. In a striking way, "San Sebastian" might be

understood as a Surrealist Film *avant la lettre*. It even predates the early Disney animations (again, see Chapter Two below) that “invented” some of these techniques. It is difficult to posit whether Akutagawa imagined his text was using *unfilmable* descriptions or if he was imagining the potential special effects of films to come. But in any case he was pushing the limits of the filmable in scenario form.

What is more pressing, for our purposes here, is the question of what it means to represent the dramatic and surrealistic staging of this conflict between Dutch economic interests and Japanese Catholicism specifically in the form of a film scenario. The primary effect here is that, with every repeated invocation of a “Shot,” the reader is reminded to imagine a film as the intermediary reality between the text and the posited diegetic world of Edo Japan. This insistent framing radically fictionalizes and historicizes the narrative in a way that it utterly inaccessible to other literary forms. That fact of the potential film’s anti-realism is thus pivotal here. What is invoked is a complicated matrix of conflicts: between the spiritual and material, between the literary and the filmic, etc., without these binaries lining up neatly with each other. The reader’s phenomenological experience is one of imagining the defining conflicts of feudal Japan through the lens of a perpetually fictionalizing process. That is, the story does not represent a view, allegorical or otherwise, of a seventeenth-century Japanese coastal mountain, but rather is a procedure of constantly representing precisely the representation of that image of Japan. And yet it does so gracefully, without disjointedly fragmenting the reader’s experience in ways other experimental and avant-garde fiction tend to do when attempting to complicate the reader’s desire to posit a coherent diegetic reality through the use of metafiction and other anti-illusionistic devices.

And there is a logical reason why the closet film would be so good at doing this,

seamlessly interweaving the telling of a narrative while simultaneously disrupting the conceit of its own claim to reality. And that is that we already do exactly this, to some extent, anyway. That is, when we in the age of cinema read, we are already playing a film in the screening room of our mind's eye. If we already read as if a text represented a reality always already mediated through film form, then perhaps the closet film's relative unpopularity is partly a result of its quasi-redundancy. But there is a pronounced distinction between reading a text *as if there were a film* and reading a text that explicitly invokes the production aspects of cinema. It emphasizes our role as *creator* of the text, it renders traditional Realism obsolete, since the referent is cinematic rather than "real," and it historicizes in a different sense altogether. Rather than establishing a nostalgic past *as if it were real*, closet film views the past as a visual construction of the past. Ironically, perhaps the most illustrative example of this principle comes not from closet film at all but from an *actual* film: Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975), in which we in the twentieth century understand the visual reality of the eighteenth century only by constructing it through the intermediary aesthetic of eighteenth century *painting*. In much the same way, what Akutagawa's foundational texts of closet film effect is a representation of feudal Japan in which we can only conceptualize what that looks like through the intermediary of cinema. Perhaps the real resistance to closet film, the real reason it holds so much less sway than its sister genre, closet *drama*, is that it bears something inherently *threatening* to our deeply held attachment to Cinematic Realism, to a view, in other words, of the film text in which it directly (if complexly) represents an anterior reality. Closet film, it would seem, might be a potentially revolutionary form, and it is high time we cease to overlook it as a genre.

More than half a century after Akutagawa's initial experiments in the form, the contemporary Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami has picked up this thread of experimental

fiction written in the margins between film and the novel while thematizing issues of orientalism and cultural imperialism and appropriation. Though Murakami does not utilize screenplay form in his novels, and his works are not by any measure “closet films,” a more extended discussion of his work is warranted here since he is very much the postmodern inheritor of Akutagawa’s modernist experimentations with potential cinema. With the exception (discussed in the Introduction, above) of *Infinite Jest*, perhaps no novel goes further with creatively refiguring the cinematicity of text than Murakami’s *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (first published in 1985 and translated into English in 1991). While not immediately clear from a surface reading, the novel focuses pivotally in the internalization of cinematic thought and the way it structures the everyday life of a typical mid-eighties Tokyo urbanite. At the level of plot, everything in this novel spirals from the central fact that its antagonist’s career as a film editor was disrupted by World War II.

On the formal level, the novel itself is split into two distinct narratives, “Hard-Boiled Wonderland” (hereafter HBW) and “The End of the World” (hereafter EotW). In HBW, an unnamed man in a futuristic alternative Tokyo who launders information using his uniquely structured brain gets caught up in a Chandler-esque detective mystery. In the EotW section, another unnamed man arrives in a vaguely allegorical town named The End of the World, where, separated from his Shadow, he learns to read dreams from unicorn skulls. Not only do the alternating chapters strictly follow this narrative dualism, but also much of the book’s design reinforces it. In the HBW chapters, “Hard-Boiled Wonderland” is written on the heading of the left-hand, even-numbered pages. In the EotW chapters, “The End of the World” is written on the heading of the right-hand, odd-numbered pages. In the Table of Contents, each of the respective sections follows a distinct naming convention. The HBW chapter titles (which comprise the

twenty odd-numbered chapters, 1-39) are each comprised of three distinct things mentioned in the chapter. For example: “Elevator, Silence, Overweight,” “Skull, Lauren Bacall, Library,” or “Rainy-Day Laundry, Car Rental, Bob Dylan.” The EotW chapter titles (comprising the twenty even-numbered chapters, 2-40) are generally shorter, describe one central image from the chapter, and are rendered in the Table of Contents in italics. For example: “*Golden Beasts*,” “*Shadow*,” and “*Dreamreading*.” At the beginning of each chapter is a low-resolution black-and-white image, about the size and shape of a postage stamp, though apparently having been torn from the pages of a notebook. For the HBW chapters, the image is spiral, ringed with musical notations, with a musical staff running through it. It appears to be a kind of spiral clef. For the EotW chapters, there is an obscure landscape image of what appears to be a mountain road or possibly a river, with two tree stumps in the foreground. Neither image is ever directly referenced anywhere in the novel. Though both sections are rendered in first-person narration, the HBW section is written in past tense, the EotW section in present (to reflect an otherwise untranslatable grammatical distinction in forms of the first person in Japanese).

I am emphasizing the material differences in the book’s construction of the novel’s two narratives at such length because much of the experience of reading this novel is entirely bound up in the attempt to figure out the precise nature of the relationship between the two sections. Indeed, the entire project of the book is precisely shaped around this question, and the deeper one looks into it the more complex this relatively simple-looking novel becomes. For if at times Murakami seems to set each section up along an axis of East/West, Self/Other, Film/Novel, Conscious/Unconscious, Totalitarianism/Democracy, Reality/Fantasy, and a host of other available binarisms here, then the complicated nature with which the narrative plays itself out temporally serves only to blur, complicate, and interweave these concepts. Indeed, in doing so

Murakami has borrowed two major lessons from Akutagawa's late experiments in form. On one hand, the rendering of Japanese selfhood here is as much internally split as it is externally. The novel foregrounds generic and formal distinctions between East and West, but it also delves into the historical disruptions within a particularly Japanese context. If it is tempting, in other words, to see the two narratives as embodying different sides of a Japanese/American coin—and it certainly is at times, as the novel clearly emphasizes its own hybridity in this regard—then it is at least as possible to read the two narratives as conjoining the two halves of a purely Japanese coin, on either side of World War II. And, on the other hand, all of this is bound up in overtly cinematic terms. One (oversimplified) way of reading the novel is to take at face value the possibility that the EotW narrative is the cinematic unconscious of the conscious literary reality of the protagonist in the HBW narrative. I will explain what this means below at length, but I point it out here to highlight the depth to Akutagawa, who similarly struggled and experimented (quite successfully) with combining multiple dualistic matrices (East/West, Ego/Id, Film/Literature). As I will shortly demonstrate, much of this turns on the central character of the Grandfather, the old professor, about whose past we learn two pivotal pieces of information and not much else. First, that he is responsible for the neurosurgery that altered the protagonist's brain such that his conscious and unconscious mind can (or must?) be rendered by two such different narratives. And second, that in his youth, before the war, he had been a film editor.

The first chapter opens in the HBW narrative with an unnamed man traveling in a huge, soundless elevator. As he continues to wait in the elevator, which moves so imperceptibly he cannot be sure whether it is moving or not, he separately counts the change in the left and right pockets of his pants, and subsequently muses on the strange nature of this hobby: "Whether or not I really do put the right and left sides of my brain to separate accounts, I honestly can't say.



A specialist in neurophysiology might have insights to offer on the matter. I'm no neurophysiologist, however" (3). This is an ironic observation because, unbeknownst to our unnamed protagonist, who we will come to know only as the Calcutec—none of the characters in either section of the novel is ever given a name—he is on his way to meet with precisely a neurophysiologist, and one intimately familiar with the Calcutec's own mind at that. Calcutecs, of which our hero is simply a "lower-echelon field independent" (27), belong to the "quasi-governmental" (33) organization called the System, a data encryption corporation. Their rivals are the Semiotecs, who work for the Factory, also known as the "Data Mafia," since "it does bear a marked resemblance in its rhizomic penetration to various other underworld organizations" (33). Semiotecs "traffic illegally obtained data and other information on the black market, making megaprofits" (33), whereas the Calcutecs, in theory, keep data safe. After a bout of minor anxiety about this odd elevator, he eventually elects to do nothing, and comforts himself, "I was here in proper accordance with my duties. No need to worry, no cause for alarm" (6). Eventually he emerges into a "gloomy, featureless" hallway where he encounters a young woman in a pink suit who motions for him to follow her, and who silently forms words with her mouth that he happens to be able to read, though not always accurately, and whom the Calcutec repeatedly describes as "beautiful" and "fat" (6-8). By the end of the chapter, all that has transpired, plotwise, is that she has led him, silently, to room 728 (11).

Our initial impression of the Calcutec is shaped around references to Western pop culture ("Henry Fonda in *Warlock*" (6), for example, or his incorrect reading of the girl's lips as articulating "Proust" (9))<sup>7</sup>, and his comparisons of this odd place to the mundane aspects of his

---

<sup>7</sup> References to Western popular and material culture are almost manically sustained throughout the novel. A very abbreviated list would contain whiskey (67), Coke (69), Hemingway (70), Bogart and Bacall in *Key Largo* (71), fast-food (72), John Ford (77), Kubrick (81), the Marx Brothers (93), Johnny Mathis (94), Nike (129), *Star Trek* (132), Budweiser (132), Godard (132), Turgenev (162) along with Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and *Stendhal* (163),

lifestyle: “You don’t get this much going over when you visit the Bank of Japan” (5), or, “Sex is an extremely subtle undertaking, unlike going to the department store on Sunday to buy a thermos” (8). He is a remarkably compelling character, especially since he seems so clearly a representation of a cynical, unemotional, and all-around boring Tokyo yuppie. This kind of dry wit, which itself overwhelms the characters unknowingly performing it, is a trademark of Murakami’s, and demonstrates his debt to, amongst, others, American noir writers, especially Raymond Chandler. But the humor here is so subtly interwoven, it rewards only a kind of paranoid attention to detail. For example, after the Calcutec has been musing about the way the girl’s cologne sends him on his own “nostalgic yet impossible pastiche of sentiments” (9), he asks her, “Long corridor, eh?” (9), to which she replies, in his estimation of her silent moving lips, “Proust” (9). Of course, what seems to have occurred is that the Calcutec’s own reverie regarding evocative sense-memories somehow itself evoked for him Proust’s famous madeleine-scene, but this is never directly mentioned, and the Calcutec never himself puts this together. In fact, the connection is so tenuous the reader might just as well consider this a sloppy or otherwise weird moment in which it was Murakami himself who didn’t catch his own reference. But what is clear in any case is that this ironic humor immediately effects at least three levels of disconnection: between the Calcutec and the girl, between the Calcutec and himself, and between the Calcutec and the greater environment in which he finds himself, in the form here of the total absence of sound.

The second chapter launches the reader into a radically different scenario. The dramatic shift in setting, tone and even grammatical tense—reflecting in the translation a similar shift in the Japanese pronoun for “I”—immediately places the reader into a whole new narrative, The

---

Hitchcock (340), *The Wizard of Oz* (341), Schonberg (344), Bob Dylan (345), Maugham (358), Ray Charles (364), and *Miller High Life* (387).

End of the World, in which another unnamed protagonist arrives in a “Town” we will come to learn is also called The End of the World. He describes one of the town’s prominent features, a herd of “Beasts” that live there. These are unicorns, though he doesn’t use this term, describing them rather as small horselike animals bearing a “long, single horn protruding from the middle of their forehead” (13). The Town, a map of which is featured in the frontmatter of the novel, is comprised of the generic features of a medieval European village, with a stone wall, watchtower, and a central clock tower. Like the elevator in Chapter One, which the Calcutec describes as a “hermetically sealed vault” (2), this place is closed off to the outside world: “This West Gate is, to my knowledge, the sole passage in and out of the Town. The entire community is surrounded by an enormous Wall, almost thirty feet high, which only birds can clear” (15). But where the first chapter’s main tonal feature was precisely the complete absence of noise and muted tactile sensations, here the narrator focuses on brilliant color and sound: “Spring passed, summer ended, and just now as the light takes on a diaphanous glow and the first gusts of autumn ripple the waters of the streams, changes become visible in the beasts. Golden hairs emerge, in scant patches at first, chance germinations of some unseasonable herb” (12-13). He also notes the call of the Gatekeeper’s horn: “Whenever I hear the horn, I close my eyes and let the gentle tones spread through me. They are like none other” (13).

The town, in other words, seems in odds ways both parallel to and the polar opposite of the Calcutec’s world. For example, in some ways the Town seems idyllic, Utopian, though with a clear aura of ominous portent. The world of HBW, on the other hand, appears immediately dystopian, urban, imprisoning, but with the oddly reassuring and generous figure of the Chubby Girl in the pink suit. The EotW takes on the characteristics of a fable or allegory, whereas HBW takes on those of the eponymous hard-boiled detective fiction genre. Where the Calcutec over-

analyzes his situation and presses for answers, in the Town everything is settled, static, unchanging and unchangeable. “ ‘Why do you round up the beasts at nightfall and send them outside the walls, only to let them back in again in the morning?’ ” the narrator asks the Gatekeeper. He replies, “ ‘We do it that way... and that is how it is. The same as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west’ ” (15). Though Murakami’s prose is eminently readable, breezy even, the potential for the reader’s analysis of the text is practically unlimited, as a function of the idiosyncratic dualistic structure of the twinned narratives. The primary question invoked on every page is what the precise nature of the relationship between these two narratives *is*. What makes the read so rewarding is the way that, as it unfolds, this question continues to grow in complexity even as the picture grows gradually clearer.

In Chapter Three, the Girl leads the Calcutec deep into Tokyo’s sewers in order to meet with her Grandfather, who reveals that all the silence has been due to him removing all the sound, and all the security is to keep out INKlings, a bizarre and apparently dangerous subterranean race akin to the Japanese folkloric figure of the Kappa (18-24), in part a nod to one of the most important texts about the Kappa figure, Akutagawa’s cynical satire *Kappa* (1927). The quirky Grandfather explains himself to the Calcutec, “ ‘I’m a biologist... But the word biology doesn’t begin t’cover all that I do. Everythin’ from neurophysiology to acoustics, linguistics to comparative religion. Not your usual bag of tricks, if I do say so myself. These days I’m researchin’ the mammalian palate’ ” (27). His interests, in other words, span precisely the unconventional and sprawling themes of this novel itself. Because, in a very rudimentary sense, if at the level of form the novel’s main mystery concerns the hazy connection between its two distinct narratives, then at the level of content the mystery concerns the connections between the things the Grandfather is researching: experimental neurosurgery and its effects on left-right

brain function, the removal of sound from reality, and unicorn skulls.

The Grandfather then shows the Calcutec his warehouse of hundreds of mammalian skulls, which include examples of “every species of mammal imaginable” (27), including humans. The Calcutec notes “Caucasoid, Negroid, Asiatic, Indian, one male and one female of each” (28). When the Grandfather mentions that the whale and elephant skulls are in the basement, the Calcutec muses to himself, “A few whale skulls and there goes the neighborhood” (28), an odd phrase in this context, borrowed as it is from the racist discourse that relies on the very sort of biological taxonomies of race that seem to be on display in the Grandfather’s laboratory. This inchoate invocation of race slowly clarifies over the course of the novel. Though it remains hazy, it gradually crystallizes around a discourse of eugenics, with the Grandfather as a kind of mad scientist doing experiments in the name of “pure science” to perfect the world in what seem to be increasingly nightmarish ways (such as removing all the sound). Here though, what the Grandfather says is extremely cryptic, and appears more charming and quirky than outright ominous: “ ‘Every bone has unique sound. It’s the hidden language of bones. And I don’t mean metaphorically. Bones literally speak. Research I’m engaged in proposes t’decode that language. Then, t’render it artificially controllable’ ” (28). But, the Grandfather cautions, the Semiotecs are after his research: “ ‘’Fraid the word’s out. They all want my research for their own ends. F’r instance, suppose you could draw out the memories stored in bones; there’d be no need for torture. All you’d have t’do is kill your victim, strip the meat clean off the skull, and the information would be in your hands’ ” (29). The Grandfather, therefore, needs the Calcutec to “launder” the research data, a kind of mental encryption. But, above and beyond the normal encryption Calcutecs are capable of, the Grandfather wants him to utilize a new, experimental super-encryption method, called

“shuffling,” which is why he has bypassed normal System hierarchies and summoned him directly and privately to his lab (29-31). The Grandfather sends him home to do the laundry and shuffling, and begs him not to be late, or else “ ‘something terrible will happen’ ” (32). The Calcutec asks him, “ ‘World going to fall apart?’ ” (32), to which, mysteriously, the Grandfather replies, “ ‘In a way... yes’ ” (32). Perhaps most ominously, the Grandfather suggests that one of the possibilities of artificial sound control, beyond the powers of turning off people’s hearing, is that “ ‘we can erase speech’ ” (35). The chapter ends with the revelation that the Girl is of course not indeed a mute, but rather that her Grandfather simply forgot to re-active her sound: “ ‘Darn... Plum forgot. She’s still sound-removed from that experiment. Darn, darn, darn. Got t’go and undo it right now’ ” (36).

The Calcutec attempts to explain the cryptic process of laundering as a function of moving information between the left and right brain:

‘I input the data-as-given into my right brain, then after converting it via a totally unrelated sign-pattern, I transfer it to my left brain, which I then output as completely recoded numbers and type up on paper. This is what is called laundering. Grossly oversimplified, of course. The conversion code varies with the Calcutec. This code differs entirely from a random number table in its being diagrammatic. In other words, the way in which right brain and left brain are split (which, needless to say, is a convenient fiction; left and right are never actually divided) holds the key.’ (32)

Here we have the beginning of a kind of “key” to decoding the structure of the novel, in which the apparent split is really a “convenient fiction.” In other words, the first key the novel gives us is the left-right brain split image, in which the HBW narrative and the EotW narrative are the split halves of one whole, but split only as a device for protecting or encoding the information—decryption, in other words, as a figure for the literary. The “totally unrelated sign-pattern” itself could be seen as Murakami’s own literariness. In this account, then, the two halves of the novel represent the same information, one the “laundered” version of the other. On the more literal

plot level, the stage is now set to understand the protagonists of both sections as potentially the left-and-right- brain versions of the same character, though what exactly that means remains vague.

In Chapter Four, the unnamed protagonist is instructed by the Gatekeeper to go to the Library to learn to read old dreams: “ ‘Ask whatever questions you want, but remember, I may not answer... There are things I cannot say. But from now on you must go to the Library every day and read dreams. That will be your job’ ” (39). At the Library is a “girl” (38) who will help him—at this point we can begin calling the protagonist the Dreamreader. A few things begin to crystallize, in the form of parallels between this narrative and the other. For example, the Gatekeeper and the Grandfather seem to occupy a similar position in relation to the protagonist in each narrative. They are each a figure of authority involved, in some nebulous way, in “employing” him, and, pivotally, they each clearly possess knowledge that would be of interest to the protagonist, but are reticent or unable to share it with him. They are both secretive, potentially malicious figures, the closest thing to a tangible antagonist in each of the two stories. The Grandfather is indeed a kind of gatekeeper, controlling the Calcutec’s experience of the world around him by, for example, hiring him in a secretive way outside of normal System protocols, bringing him to a secret location, turning off and on the sound in the world around him, and ultimately involving him inextricably in the greater conspiracy involving the shuffling of his coveted data. In both narratives, around this point (more on the detail of the temporal layout of the linear alternating chapters below), the protagonist receives definitive confirmation on his “job.”

In other words, Chapters Three and Four offer us two corresponding representations of a similar kind of experience. This becomes nearly explicit when the Dreamreader finally meets

the Librarian and finds her incredibly, but inexplicably, familiar: “I look at her and say nothing. Her face comes almost as a reminiscence. What about her touches me? I can feel some deep layer of my consciousness lifting toward the surface. What can it mean? The secret lies in distant darkness” (41). On one hand, it seems like perhaps the events of the EotW come much later than HBW. It is a place at the *end* where the Dreamreader faintly remembers the Librarian, perhaps even as a past life, suggesting the transmigration of the Calcutec and the Girl’s souls. The Dreamreader tells the Librarian, “ ‘Still, I have the impression that elsewhere we may have lived totally other lives, and that somehow we have forgotten that time’ ” (42). But at the same time, Chapter Three posited the potential “key” here as two parts of one mind, perhaps two “layers” of one “consciousness.” The EotW narrative, with its archetypes and fantastic objects, certainly seems to follow a kind of unconscious or dreamlike logic. “ ‘As you may know,’ ” she tells him, “ ‘in this Town, memory is unreliable and uncertain. There are things we can remember and things we cannot remember. You seem to be among the things I cannot. Please forgive me’ ” (42). While *memory* defines one possible connection between these two worlds, it might also be transmigration, something to do with the two hemispheres of one mind, or something to do with different conceptual *layers* of one mind. But Murakami stops well short of pinning this down here, and seems to figure exactly this experience of the reader’s in the chapter’s end, where the Librarian tells the Dreamreader: “ ‘You have nothing to do here today. Your work starts tomorrow. Please go home and rest’ ” (43), to which he responds inwardly, “It is certain: her face bears a fatal connection to something in me. But it is too faint. I shut my eyes and search blindly. Silence falls over me like a fine dust” (43). Though the exact nature of the connection is ambiguous, with multiple possibilities now on the table, what at least seems clear is that Chapters Three and Four form a kind of couplet, in which characters and events



parallel each other in some way.

This reading of the two sections' basic parallelism holds up to some extent for the entire first half of the novel. The Calcutec explains a little later:

My shuffling password was "End of the World." This was the title of a profoundly personal drama by which previously laundered numerics would be reordered for computer calculation. Of course, when I say drama, I don't mean the kind they show on TV. This drama was a lot more complex and with no discernible plot. The word is only a label, for convenience sake. All the same, I was in the dark about its contents. The sole thing I knew was its title, End of the World. (113)

So The End of the World is a complex drama inside the Calcutec's head that he does not himself know about. He explains that "The scientists at the System had induced this drama" via a complex kind of training such that ultimately, he says, "my conscious mind [was] completely restructured" (113). "First there was the overall chaos of my conscious mind, then inside that, a distinct plum pit of condensed chaos in as the center," he explains. So the EotW sections appear to be the "condensed chaos" at the center within his mind. The scientists tell him that the secrecy surrounding the drama's contents is to protect his shuffling ability. " 'You can call up the drama, because it is your own self, after all. But you can never know its contents' " (114). This drama inside his brain seems to interact in some way with his conscious mind, since parallel elements seem to turn up in either, though the arrow of causality is hard to pin down. In any case, what we now appear to have is an unconsciousness that has been induced by a kind of trauma and results in the expression of symptoms, including, for example, the Calcutec's erectile dysfunction. It is on one hand extremely Freudian, but on the other extremely political, in that this condition is "induced" by the "System," producing as it does a kind of unconscious drama that replicates a totalitarian state.

But at the same time, this simplistic structure of dualistic narratives does not quite hold

up. One thing that crucially complicates our attempt at a straightforward reading of the relation between the two narratives is the temporal schema, which is more complicated than one in which the even-numbered EotW chapter simply compliments the odd-numbered HBW chapter that came directly before it. Chapter Four does not simply retell and relate to Chapter Three. For example, after the Gatekeeper orders the Dreamreader to go to the Library, he performs on him a mysterious kind of operation that enables and/or makes this position official:

Next he reaches for a dull, rounded blade from his knife rack and heats the tip for ten minutes. He blows out the flame and lets the knife cool.

‘With this, I will give you a sign,’ says the Gatekeeper. ‘It will not hurt. No need to be afraid.’

He spreads wide my right eye with his fingers and pushes the knife into my eyeball. Yet as the Gatekeeper said, it does not hurt, nor am I afraid. The knife sinks into my eyeball soft and silent, as if dipping into jelly.

He does the same with my left eye. (40)

This event does not directly relate to an “event” in the previous Chapter. In fact, this grotesque image clearly recalls the famous shot of an eyeball sliced by a knife in Bunuel and Dali’s *Un Chien Andalou* (discussed, or rather explicitly *not* discussed, in Chapter Two). In one sense then, this is a cinematic image before it is a referent to an antecedent within the novel itself. At the level of the narrative, it might clarify something which happens there (the Calcutec’s ability to “shuffle”), but we can’t possibly know this until much later in the novel. In fact, this “surgery” seems to be the EotW version of an event which, in the HBW world, happened long before the events of Chapter Three, but which we don’t learn about until much later in the novel, when it is revealed that the Grandfather performed an experimental surgery on the Calcutec. But, as becomes clear, in that case it is equally ambiguous whether the surgery *enabled* the Calcutec to shuffle, or whether there was some other purpose or result (more below).

The other thing that complicates a reading of the two sections as presenting a simple dualism is that more is happening symbolically; there are other levels of allegory at play between

the two narratives. The Town is a kind of allegorical closed system representing the ideological ideal of Tokyo in the post-occupation boom years known as the Japanese economic miracle (1952-1989). It presents itself as utopia in which all of its citizens' primary needs are adequately met, a bare bones ideal of cleanliness and order: " 'This is a poor town. No room for idle people wandering around. Everyone has a place, everybody has a job' " (39), the Gatekeeper tells the Dream Reader. HBW on the other hand, represents a hyper-consumerist vision of mid-1980s Tokyo, the Calcutec immersed, mentally and physically, in a world of things—mostly things imported from the West. The two narratives thus begin to form a picture of an allegory of a political ideology whose surface is a technodystopia, but through whose underfabric runs a current of totalitarian nightmare. This reading, in no small part, turns on the triple meaning of *end* in *The End of the World*: as both a thing which delineates the terminus of the world, as well as the ideal goal of that world, and finally also a place physically located at the world's edge.

One of the town's citizens, The Colonel tells the Dreamreader that " 'this town is perfect. And by perfect, I mean complete. It has everything. If you cannot see that, then it has nothing. A perfect nothing. Remember this well' " (86). The Gatekeeper corroborates this view of the town as a quasi-utopia: " 'A body who works bad thinks bad, I always say' " (108). And: " 'The wall has no mortar... There is no need. The bricks fit perfect; not a hair-space between them. Nobody can put a dent in the Wall. And nobody can climb it. Because this Wall is perfect. So forget any ideas you have. Nobody leaves here' " (109). He says that in this town there is " 'No worry, no suffering' " (109). At the same time, the Dreamreader's Shadow, from whom he has been separated by the Gatekeeper, warns him, " 'There's something wrong here' " (63). An atmosphere of ominous portent hangs over the otherwise idyllic Town. The Librarian remembers her mother but says, " 'It is wrong to talk about people who have disappeared' " (61-

62). While the Wall seems to present a perfect and unbreachable mechanism of control, the Town seems to operate in more subtle ways to keep the Dreamreader in check. The Colonel tells him, “ ‘The Town is powerful and you are weak’ ” (170), and encourages him to keep his nose down. The Colonel, it seems, is the parallel in the HBW narrative of the character Junior, who, along with Big Boy, is one of two thugs (later revealed to be working for the Factory) that accost the Calcutec in his apartment (132). After confusedly filling him in on some of the details of the INKlings and their own role in all this, they ask him what things in his apartment he values the most, then destroy them for the purpose of “ ‘Destruction for the sake of destruction’ ” (141). He mentions his TV, videodeck, collection of whiskeys, his new suit and his “U.S. Air Force bomber jacket with a fur collar” (141). They proceed to thoroughly ransack his home: “Big Boy was bringing new meaning to the word destruction in my cozy, tasteful apartment” (142). After Junior grabs the Calcutec’s penis and stabs a horizontal gash into his abdomen (157), then leaves, his door broken off, the Calcutec says, “The mangled frame of my steel door was now open for all the world” (158).

The two atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were named Fat Man and Little Boy. It is unclear whether the Calcutec himself intends the allusion consciously or not, but what is clear is that, for the novel, this is a dense nest of political allusions. The connection between Junior and the Colonel is made clear in the identical advice they each give the protagonist. The Colonel tells him, over a game of chess, “ ‘Worth fighting to the end. In five moves your opponent can err. No war is won or lost until the final battle is over’ ” (85), and Junior reveals himself to be The Colonel’s doppelganger in the other narrative when he says to the Calcutec: “ ‘It’s like chess. You get checked, you beat a retreat. And while you’re scrambling around, maybe your opponent will screw up. Everybody screws up, even the

smartest players' ” (156). Both are vaguely threatening, authoritative figures who keep him in line, and both are the source of a certain level of wisdom and insight. The Colonel is simply the ideological version of Junior, who in effect represents the repressive apparatus. Where Junior stabs him, The Colonel offers vague threats in the guise of paternalistic advice. If Junior is like one of the two atom bombs he seems to be named after, then The Colonel represents the flipside of that coin, the unconscious lingering trauma of post-war Japan. For, crucially, the Town is a place *after* war, where former soldiers like The Colonel relax in useless retirement. The Town represents a certain ideal of a peaceful Japan, but one that necessitates great sacrifice.

As the Dreamreader goes through some abandoned luggage in the Town's Library, he starts to realize more about the insidious nature of this place: “It is as if someone has painstakingly removed any indication of individuality. Only person-less dregs remain” (228). What seems to have been removed in sloughing off one's shadow is *memory*. It is a town where people *forget* their pasts. It is for this reason that his Shadow, an embodiment of his past, his memories, encourages him to leave: “ ‘The Town seems to contain everything it needs to sustain itself in perpetual peace and security. The order of things remains perfectly constant, no matter what happens. But a world of perpetual motion is theoretically impossible. There has to be a trick. The system must take in and let out somewhere’ ” (248), and so they conspire to escape together. Later, his Shadow finally reveals that Dreamreading is the work that kills off the undead dreams of the townspeople: “ ‘Dreamreading is a task for newcomers to the Town—people whose shadows have not yet died. The Dreamreader reads each spark of self into the air, where it diffuses and dissipates’ ” (336). In this way the EotW world section can be read, not simply as the unconscious of the Calcutec/Dreamreader, but indeed as the political unconscious of postmodern Japan, as a satire of the existential alienation and loss of individuality that

Murakami sees as tied to the dogged economic drive that marked Japanese political rhetoric in the post-occupation period through the time of this novel.

But this relatively simple binary scheme—of the two sections as a political conscious/unconscious, or the repressive versus ideological apparatuses of power at work—can be further complicated when we add the East/West binary into the matrix of subdivisions that form the novel’s very structure. Perhaps nowhere is this made more clear than during the centerpiece discussion between the Calcutec and the Librarian (the one in the HBW narrative , not to be confused with the Librarian in the EotW narrative) about two books on unicorns. After the Grandfather gives the mysterious skull to the Calcutec and he deduces that it might be a unicorn’s, he consults the Librarian for research assistance. In Chapter Nine, the two of them go together through “two volumes” on subject: “One was *Archaeology of Animals*, by Burtland Cooper, and the other Jorge Luis Borges’s *Book of Imaginary Beings*” (94). Ironically, while the latter is of course a real work by a real author, it is the more straight-laced sounding *Archaeology of Animals* that is in fact made up by Murakami, along with its fictional author Burtland Cooper. These two works correspondingly add several more possible “keys” to the novel, stacking repeated binary structures on top of each other as metaphors for this novel itself.

The Librarian first offers an analysis of Borges, and this is presented to us as part of the main narration: “There are two types of unicorns: the Western variety, which originates in Greece, and the Chinese variety” (95). Both cultures, the Calcutec says the Librarian says Borges says, interpret these two mythological characters totally differently. Incidentally, Murakami has the Librarian taking some interpretive liberties with Borges’ scholarship. In reality, Borges is actually quite careful to point out the way that the unicorn inhabits a different place in the thinking and culture of Greece and China foremost because in China it was

developed as a mythological creature, whereas in Greece it was first documented as an empirical animal in exotic lands. The Librarian simplifies Borges in order to produce a streamlined binary reading of the Greek versus Chinese conception of the Unicorn. She suggests, “East and West could not agree on character and symbolism... The West saw the unicorn as fierce and aggressive... The Chinese unicorn, on the other hand, is a sacred animal of portent... Extremely gentle in temperament” (96). In case there is any question of missing the obvious, she summarizes: “In the East, peace and tranquility; in the West, aggression and lust” (97). So, in one narrative at least, the West is an aggressive invading force that disrupts the peace of the East. To some extent, this kind of framework plays itself out in the novel, for example in the scene in which our Japanese Calcutec is accosted in his “cozy” apartment by two thugs named similarly to the American bombs that targeted the relatively similarly tranquil citizen populations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But that the Calcutec is himself clearly carved out of the Marlowesque Western mold is only the first sort of complication to any kind of simple dualistic reading in this way. For the manner of Murakami’s appropriation, or perhaps better *combination* of Western and Eastern literary forms in this novel is substantially more hybrid than a condemnation of cultural imperialism. If anything, the novel’s deeply ironic love-hate satire of eighties Tokyo consumerism offers a closer paradigm for understanding its broader cultural implications. Murakami clearly finds himself attracted to the very things he seems to acknowledge are part of the existential problems of the Tokyo Yuppie lifestyle (more on this below).

But it is the second book on unicorns, Burtland Cooper’s *Archaeology of Animals*, that most concretely complicates the East/West reading and subsequently frames the novel’s historical and political valence. After a long passage ruminating on the scientific probabilities of

the existence of large single-horned mammals, the Librarian explains the text's section on a " 'recorded instance of a unicorn' " (100). What clearly emerges is a lost history of this potential creature that lines up precisely with a history of the two world wars: "In 1917, the very item was discovered on the Russian front. This was September, one month prior to the October Revolution, during the First World War, under the Kerensky Cabinet, immediately before the start of the Bolshevik Coup" (100). A soldier who had been a former biology student apparently finds a strange skull on a tablelands called the Voltafil. After a lengthy enumeration of the twists of the soldier's journey through the Russian front, the skull ends up in a stable in Petrograd where it remains until 1935 (100-101), when the stablemaster tries to sell it to the Chairman of the Faculty of Biology at Petrograd University, but is unable to find him because he was "a Jew who had been sent to Siberia after Trotsky's downfall" (102). He ends up selling it to another biologist, a Professor Petrov, who assembles a team to excavate the Voltafil. They find nothing, and future attempts are rendered impossible because, "During the Second World War, the entire plateau was bombarded beyond recognition" (103). Petrov is ridiculed by the academy for claiming the evolutionary plausibility of the skull as an example of a unicorn living on the isolated "lost world" of the Voltafil plateau. But it is finally the realities of international politics that again determine the history of the mysterious skull:

Thereafter, Professor Petrov waited valiantly for the winds of fortune to shift and his research to achieve recognition, but the onslaught of the German-Soviet War in 1940 dashed all such hopes and he died in 1943, a broken man. It was during the 1941 Siege of Leningrad that the skull vanished. Leningrad University was reduced to rubble by German shelling. Virtually the entire campus—let alone a single animal skull—was destroyed. And so the one piece of solid evidence proving the existence of the unicorn was no more. (104)

The Calcutec considers whether the skull the Grandfather gave him might indeed be this very skull, though this mystery is never conclusively solved. What *is* clear, however, is the way that,



strikingly, the history of this mythical animal is mapped onto a chronology of global military conflict, culminating in the events of World Word II.

In fact, throughout the novel, which for the most part remains within in a hermetically sealed off world of Tokyo sewers and supermarkets—the middle class consumerist existence of the white-collar Calcutec—historical references to violent combat seem to poke through, intruding on the Calcutec’s otherwise tightly controlled, isolated world. For example, when musing to himself about the sexually forward Chubby Girl, the Calcutec says, “The last time I’d slept with a fat female was the year of the Japanese Red Army shoot-out in Karuizawa” (73). There is no immediately clear connection between the Calcutec’s sexual life and the 1972 police siege of a hotel where a Maoist revolutionary group had taken a woman hostage, resulting in three deaths. But the Calcutec tends to map his own history along a trajectory of the history of contemporary global warfare and of post-war leftist violent revolution. At another point, he recalls, “I bought that jacket in 1971, I was pretty sure. The Vietnam War was still going on, Nixon and his ugly mug were still in the White House” (219). Later he sees a girl “who reminded [him] of a girl [he’d] known in high school. Neat and clear-headed, she married a Kakumaru radical, had two children, then disappeared” (345). In fact, hiding in every corner of this novel is a surprising backdrop of world war, communist radicalism, and even seemingly totally random violence. The Chubby Girl’s past is also defined by a single major traumatic event. She was in the hospital having a heart operation the night her “whole family got killed”—it is never explained what happened (220). But she says, “ ‘Well, it was the end of the world for me. Everything got so dark and lonely and miserable’ ” (220). And the Librarian (of HBW) tells him, “ ‘My husband was something of a jazz buff. You probably had similar tastes. He was beaten to death in a bus, with an iron vase’ ” (362).

This underlayer of violence and trauma, on both the personal and national levels, seems at least in part to explain the Calcutec's more immediate sexual dilemma, of not being able to achieve erections. By ignoring his own personal traumas and trying to shut himself off in a closed system that is in reality penetrated by these multiple violences, he renders himself impotent. The Calcutec describes the Librarian as "a regular machine gun of hunger, this girl!" (91). She eats a ton and then he says, "Probably that was the reason I couldn't get an erection. It was the first time I hadn't risen to the occasion since the Tokyo Olympic Year" (91), and he admits the last time he had sex was two weeks ago with a "Call girl," which seems *de rigueur* for him (92). The idiosyncratic metaphor, relating the girl's appetite to hunger, concretizes the connection between his sexual malaise and a history of violence, more specifically of intrusive violences that penetrate otherwise apparently stable closed systems. Perhaps this is why he is only finally able to achieve erections again after he has experienced and accepted the ultimate violence, his inevitable descent into his own unconscious mind, the end of the world. At this point, he is "cured," and states, "We made love three times... My erections had been perfect as the pyramids of Giza" (364). This is only possible only once he has accepted "the end of the world," in every sense: as the thing inside his head, as the agenda of a non-closed world system around him, and as the inevitable demise of the world and him in it. In the following *EotW* chapter he acknowledges, "Everything here is part of me—the Wall and Gate and Woods and River and Pool. It is all my self" (369).

In other words, what this novel depicts, on one level, is the disruption of the typical middle-class yuppie lifestyle of one Tokyo man who has been trying desperately to forge a clean, ordered, and superficial closed system around himself. On the structural level, this suggests that the main problem of selfhood and the relation of that self to the global political body is bound up

in the “drama” or film inside the mind of the protagonist, and the relation between that film and the outside world. If the mind works like a film, then the question of authority—who gets to *produce* that film, and more specifically who gets to *edit* it—becomes the pressing central question of this novel. The novel is certainly a critique of yuppism, but the specific manner of that critique is intimately bound up in questions of internalized media ideologies and the larger set of issues surrounding the possibilities for our imagining the relationship between the novel’s two sections. At the very center of the philosophy of selfhood and the relation of individual to state power that Murakami establishes in this novel, in other words, is very precisely the internalization—a la Christian Metz—of a kind of imaginary cinema, an unconscious cinematic logic, and the question of what kind of authorities can “edit” the “films” in our unconscious.

The Calcutec’s world is hyper-materialistic, superficial, and isolated. He is alienated from all human connection, walled off from others, and focused only on his career and the mundane facts of his routine existence. He embodies a postmodern ironic update of the exaggerated stereotype of the kind of alienated capitalist subject that Akutagawa and other artists focused their creative energies so intensely upon during the period of high modernism. Whether he is judging people based on their “choice of sofa” (45), or rationalizing his preference to never sleep with people he knows because it “only complicates things” (56), the Calcutec keeps himself sealed off in a neat, orderly consumerist life. He intentionally shuts out the outside world. Whenever outside forces begin to encroach, he presses back against them: “OPEC would go on drilling for oil, regardless of anyone’s opinion, conglomerates would make electricity and gasoline from that oil, people would be running around town late at night using up that gasoline. At the moment, however, I had my own problems to deal with” (188). To some extent this lifestyle works for him. It is certainly an attractive one. Murakami does not merely satirize it;

rather, the simple order and minimalism of the Calcutec's life has a certain profound something that is undoubtedly attractive. This is perhaps most clear in the way he describes the day after his initial encounter with the Chubby Girl and her Grandfather, which appears totally typical and quotidian for him:

At eleven o'clock, I left the apartment, headed for the supermarket near the station, stopping next at the liquor store for some red wine, soda water, and orange juice. At the cleaners I claimed a jacket and two shirts; at the stationary shop I purchased a pen, envelopes, and letter paper; at the hardware store, the finest-grain whetstone in the place. Then to the bookshop for two magazines, the electrical goods store for light bulbs and cassette tapes, the photo store for a pack of Polaroid film. Last, it was the record shop, where I picked out a few disks. By now, the whole back seat of my tiny coupé was taken up with shopping bags. I must be a born shopper. Every time I go to town, I come back, like a squirrel in November, with mounds of little things. (71)

It is this passionate and self-aware attachment to his superficial lifestyle that maintains it, keeping the outside world safely out. However, unfortunately for the Calcutec, this neat division of inside and outside the closed system of his life, like all other such divisions in this novel, slowly unravels. After completing the Shuffling, he readies himself for sleep: "Twelve solid hours. Let birds sing, let people go to work. Somewhere out there, a volcano might blow, Israeli commandos might decimate a Palestinian village. I couldn't stop it. I was going to sleep" (126). But right after this defensive rehearsal of his own separateness from the global political world, the Calcutec switches immediately into his protective yuppie fantasy of the his retirement—the "end," we might say, of consumerist life:

I replayed my usual fantasy of the joys of retirement from Calcutecdom. I'd have plenty of savings, more than enough for an easy life of cello and Greek. Stow the cello in the back of the car and head up to the mountains to practice. Maybe I'd have a mountain retreat, a pretty little cabin where I could read my books, listen to music, watch old movies on video, do some cooking. (126)

The Calcutec's retirement fantasy is matched as a parable of consumerist ideology perhaps only by his love of supermarkets, the quintessential postmodern space (not coincidentally, the central

image of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, published in the same year (1985), and often considered the postmodern novel par excellence). The Grandfather says of his granddaughter, the Chubby Girl: " 'The child really likes supermarkets, she's always going to them. Office to supermarket, supermarket to office. That's her whole life' " (48). And the Calcutec seems to approve of this life, rather than the Grandfather's ostensible rejection of it. When he goes later to meet the Chubby Girl at the supermarket, he describes the "housewives buying the breakfast bread and milk, university students hungry after a long night out, a young woman squeezing a roll of toilet paper, a businessman snapping up three different newspapers, two middle-aged men lugging their golf clubs in to purchase a bottle of whiskey. I love supermarkets" (130).

But all is not well with the Calcutec and his ostensibly perfect yuppie life. Early on, he describes himself: "On the whole, I'm a regular guy. I say I understand when I do, and I say I don't when I don't... Most people, when they go around not speaking clearly, somewhere in their unconscious they're asking for trouble" (50). Fair enough—but in the very next section, the Dreamreader does precisely the opposite. When the Librarian tries to explain dreamreading to him, he says, "I nod, but do not understand" (58). Since the latter, it is later revealed, is actually some kind of representation of the interior life of the mind of the former, it is clear that there is a polar disjunction in the way the Calcutec/Dreamreader understands himself. The levels of irony here stack several more times: he is misunderstanding his own understanding of what understanding means, and then to top it off he ironically nails exactly the problem, since it is precisely the case that his "unconscious" is "asking for trouble" with this. The puzzle starts to become clearer later in the novel when this disjunction between what he "says" and what he "understands" becomes directly related to the sexual dysfunction he experiences. For indeed, after being unable to achieve an erection with the Librarian whom he is ostensibly attracted to,

he finds he is able to achieve one when thinking about a sort of tableau of consumerist fantasy. As the Calcutec descends into the sewers in search of the Grandfather, he “kept thinking about that young couple in the Skyline, Duran Duran on stereo. Oblivious to everything” (204). And suddenly he gets a “hard-on” (205). He muses: “Just great. Why now? Why didn’t I get an erection when I needed one? And why was I getting so excited over two lousy bracelets?” (205). It is not only the material objects that arouse him; it is exactly the fantasy of “oblivious” materialist life. Ironically, it is right after this that, seemingly completely “oblivious” to his own advice, he tells the Chubby Girl in regards to her Grandfather, “ ‘Genius or fool, you don’t live in the world alone. You can hide underground or you can build a wall around yourself, but somebody’s going to come along and screw up the works’ ” (210).

There is a fine line between the degree to which the Calcutec is self-aware of this problem, or whether he is totally oblivious. Shortly after telling this to the Chubby Girl, while they are still underground searching for the vanished Grandfather, he finds himself “longing for the morning edition” (235), but, he says, “I’d given up on newspapers three years ago. Why? I felt disconnected. Converting numbers in my brain was my only connection to the world. Most of my free time I chose to spend alone, reading old novels, watching old Hollywood movies on video, drinking. I had no need for a newspaper” (235). He knows he feels disconnected, but is that a bad thing or not? He has no need for a newspaper, but he chronologizes his life in terms of global events. After the traumatic “two and half hours” in which Big Boy and Junior destroy his apartment and stab him, he appears to see middle-class Tokyo life differently. He goes to the supermarket again, this time seeing it from outside: “Housewives filed past, leek and daikon radish tops sticking up from supermarket bags. I found myself envying them. They hadn’t had their refrigerators raped or their bellies slashed. Leeks and daikons and the kids’ grades—all was

right with the world. No unicorn skulls or secret codes or consciousness transfers. This was normal, everyday life” (161). But while he is jarred out of “normal” life, it is not clear whether or not he sees the personally existentially destructive aspects of that conception of normality. He comes close to epiphany while identifying with Julien Sorel in Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, a character he says tragically had all his flaws cemented in by fifteen: “It was as good as sealing yourself into a dungeon. Walled in, with nowhere to but your own doom” (163). This leads him to envision “a world completely surrounded by walls” (164), which he acknowledges is an image his subconscious must have dreamed this up, despite the fact that “it was like a scene from a movie, a historical blockbuster. But which? Not *El Cid*, not *Ben Hur*, not *Spartacus*” (164). His unconscious drama is like, but is not, one of these films. He offers a “quick-and-dirty analysis” of this image as if it were a dream: “Certainly, the walls represented the limitations hemming in my life. The silence, residue of my encounter with sound-removal. The blurred vision of my surroundings, an indication that my imagination faced imminent crisis” (164), which is ultimately unfulfilling. He is overcome with a feeling of emptiness and general existential despair (164-165). This is as close as he comes to articulating his main problem: his lack of control over the filmic thing in his head. Even at the very end of the novel, with his great symbolic gesture of rejecting consumerism—destroying his credit cards—he equivocates: “I took out my credit cards and lit them with a match. I watched the plastic curl, sputter, and turn black. It was so gratifying to burn my credit cards that I thought of burning my Paul Stuart tie as well. But then I had second thoughts” (390). His “second thoughts” offer no final conclusion on his embracing or rejecting the lifestyle that Murakami so eloquently describes, in all its horror and attraction. But what remains pressingly, as if suspended in the very center of this dialectical equivocation, is precisely the question of the “historical blockbuster” in his mind.

But if half this novel is indeed some kind of prose-representation of just this “historical blockbuster,” then one—of many—questions immediately begged is who *authored* it. Of course, insofar as any “blockbuster” is de facto highly collaborative, it is only fitting that there are multiple. And consequently, it makes intuitive sense that the model of selfhood in this novel would be multiple, as well. While of course authorship of “The End of the World” can be attributed to Murakami, and much of it seems to have established by the Calcutec/Dreamreader himself, our knowledge of the ontological status of this section of the novel—what exactly it is supposed to *be*, within the fictive universe established by the novel—turns on the character of the Grandfather. Early on, we are made skeptical about this character via what turns out to be something of a red herring: his mad-scientist rants about sound removal: “ ‘Now listen up, son. I’m tellin’ this to you and you alone: The world ahead of us is goin’ t’be sound-free... That’s because sound is of no use to human evolution. In fact, it gets in the way. So we’re going t’wipe sound out, morning to night... Don’t blame me. That’s evolution’ ” (49). Through the middle section of the novel, it is increasingly implied, mostly by his granddaughter, the Chubby Girl, that the coming end of the world which will result from the Grandfather’s experience might in fact be just this (the total removal of sound from the world). For example, the Chubby Girl tells the Calcutec, somewhat cryptically, “ ‘If Grandfather’s research got out now, it’d be the end of the world’ ” (128). As they race to stop the clock on this apocalypse, however, it becomes more clearly an end of the world for the Calcutec only—in which he will be relocated to his personal End of the World drama in his mind. Eventually the Grandfather explains this: “ ‘Or t’put it another way, your mind will be living there, in the place called the End of the World’ ” (270), stuck that way forever when the junction box he implanted inside his brain melts. What is therefore more important about the Grandfather’s earlier discussion of sound and evolution,



though perhaps not immediately clear early in the novel, is actually the ominous connotation of eugenics evoked by his mention of sound “get[ting] in the way” of human evolution and his desire to “wipe sound out.” Later he will address this much more directly: “ ‘Of course, I deplore how those scientists cooperated with the Nazis conductin’ vivisection in the concentration camps. That was wrong. At the same time, I find myself thinkin’, if you’re goin’ t’do live experiments, you might as well do something a little spiffier and more productive. Given the opportunity, scientists all feel the same way at the bottom of their heart’ ” (264). The Grandfather occupies a somewhat ambiguous space: he believes he can perform “pure” science free of the constraints of the real world consequences of his discoveries and experiments, and yet he is aware of precisely the ethical quagmire this has historically resulted in.

The Grandfather’s connection to a kind of ethically reprehensible science of human experimentation is thus never explicitly laid out, but it is certainly invoked by repeated inference. For example, the Chubby Girl at one point chastises him: “ ‘You sometimes get so wrapped up in what you’re doing, you don’t even think about the trouble you make for others. Remember that ankle-fin experiment? You’ve got to do something to help him’ ” (274). There is no further mention in the novel of the ankle-fin experiment. There is, however, much discussion of the Calcutec’s ability to Shuffle, which, the Chubby Girl reveals, can be attributed to an experimental neurosurgery the Grandfather conducted, in which every other patient, of twenty-six subjects, died as a result of the surgery after a year or so, as a result of “ ‘some brain malfunction, nothing clear’ ” (194). The Chubby Girl tells him, “ ‘Perhaps you had natural antibodies. Your ‘emotional shell.’ For some reason you already had a safeguard factor in your brain that allowed you to survive’ ” (194). Almost accidentally then, the Calcutec has survived this vague surgery which killed twenty-five others, all in the name of protecting information for

The System. And what is the nature of that surgery? Basically, the Grandfather's "perfect" plan for heightened data encryption within the human mind is—though it is never explicitly stated—just a replication of the German Enigma machine, the cipher system developed by Arthur Scherbius after WWI and used extensively by the Nazis in WWII: “ ‘There's only one true crackproof method: you pass information through a 'black box' t'scramble it and then you pass the processed information back through the same black box t'unscramble it. Not even the agent holdin' the black box would know its contents or principle' ” (255). The Enigma machine is literally a black box in which the information is mechanically encrypted, effecting exactly the outcome the Grandfather describes here. What he has then managed to do is to internalize the black box in a split human mind, as the unconscious.

The mechanism through which he has accomplished this is film. Because the human mind, as a black box, changes in time, the Grandfather figured out a way to “fix” it (256-8). So he implanted a circuit junction in the brain and tracked out what the “core” of the subconscious looked like:

‘Next thing I did was t'read your black box into the computer pre-programmed with those patterns, and out came an amazin' graphic renderin' of what went on in your core consciousness. Naturally, the images were jumbled and fragmentary and didn't mean much in themselves. They needed editin'. Cuttin' and pastin', tossin' out some parts, resequencin', exactly like film editin'. Rearrangin' everything into a story.’ (262)

In other words, what the Grandfather has very literally done is edited calcutecs' brains to make them more like narrative cinema. It is at this point that he explains, “ ‘I used t'—before the War, that is—work as an assistant editor in the movies. That's how I got so good at this work. Bestowin' order upon chaos' ” (263). As the Chubby Girl already suggested, the experiment did not work on the others, only our Calcutec. The Grandfather explains, “ ‘You possess some special oomph that the others didn't' ” (265). It turns out he survived because, “ ‘Yours was the

least random, most coherent. Well-plotted, even perfect. It could have passed for a novel or a movie' ” (268). His consciousness was thus already basically structured like a narrative film. The Grandfather attempts to explain why this would be so: “ ‘I can think of many possible causes... Childhood trauma, misguided upbringin', over-objectified ego, guilt... Whatever it was made you extremely self-protective, made you harden your shell' ” (269).

This leaves us with a final, unresolvable ambiguity about the ontological status of the EotW narrative, with at least three distinct possibilities: (1) it is a representation of the narrative film edited together by the Grandfather that resides within the Calcutec's mind, (2) it is the unedited original unconscious of the Calcutec, which for some reason is stunningly structured like a narrative film, or (3) it is neither or some combination of both, raising, for example, the question of *what* exactly about the Town the Grandfather might have edited. When he explains to the Calcutec that inevitably he is going to end up stuck there in his mind for eternity, all he can offer is, “ ‘All's not lost. Once you're there in that world, you can reclaim everything from this world, everythin' you're goin' t'have t'give up' ” (274). Did the Grandfather edit the EotW drama to enable the possibility of escape from it? Or were his edits the very cement that makes escape so difficult? On another level, a major meta-question is raised: whether the EotW narrative we get there is actually what takes place right *after* the chronological end of the novel in the HBW narrative. The temporal structure is never made clear, leaving us with the possibility that the EotW narrative is not actually a representation of the drama in his core consciousness at all, but rather the events that take place once the Calcutec himself has *entered* into that level of his consciousness.

We are now in a position, having laid out in great detail the questions and range of possibilities regarding relationships between the two sections of the novel, to take a closer look

at the status of those two narratives. If the parallelism between the two certainly opens up the possibility of them being two sides of one coin: each explaining the conscious or unconscious version of the same events, the same characters, etc., then it is true that at the same time another possibility is maintained: that the events in the EotW section occur immediately following those in the HBW narrative, which ends with the character descending into a sleep that will land him squarely stuck for eternity in the drama inside his mind. Early after his arrival there, the Dreamreader narrates, “Looking at the skull beneath her slender fingers, I am overcome with a strong sense of déjà vu. Have I seen this skull before?... Is this a fragment of a real memory or has time folded back on itself? I cannot tell” (60). Here, at the beginning of the narrative, it is easy to read the linear chronology of the one narrative following the other, but, at the same time, that chronology is impossible to pin down.

But the most fully fleshed out, though perhaps also somewhat convoluted instance of the productive ambiguity surrounding the relationship between the novel’s two sections occurs in a bizarre, hallucinogenic passage deep in the Tokyo sewers, where the Calcutec and Chubby Girl have gone in search of her Grandfather. When they reach the sacred underground home of the INKlings, they find a giant mountainous tower, and promptly a waterfall is unleashed upon them:

It came. Torrents of water, gushing up from those hundreds of leech-infested holes. Tons of water, sluicing through the darkness. In the next instant, I am a child in a movie theater, watching a newsreel of the inauguration of a dam. The floodgates are open, a massive column of water leaps from the screen. The governor, wearing a helmet, has done the honors and pushed the button. Billowing clouds of spray, a deafening roar. (237)

After this, the Calcutec returns his awareness to reality, but after another moment, he turns “back to the newsreel, arcs of water shooting across the screen” (238). He “sit[s] there, transfixed... but [he] doesn’t know how to react as a member of the audience” (238). He believes, for some reason, that the shadow of arching water on the film screen is *his* shadow, which has been taken

from him, but he does not know what to do: “I’m a ten-year-old boy, wide-eyed and afraid to act. Should I get my shadow back from the screen? Should I rush into the projection room and steal the film? I do nothing” (238). Clearly, this bears some resonance with the workings in his unconscious mind, in the Town where his shadow is torn from him like a separate being. Is this then the cinematically generated trauma that induced for the Calcutec that element of his unconscious film-narrative in his dream mind? Is the fact that this trauma was indeed induced in an experience of the cinema accountable for the idiosyncratically cinematic structure of his unconscious? He describes this as a “memory” (238), but he admits, “I couldn’t be sure any of it had really happened to me. I had no recollection. Perhaps this was a hallucination induced by the sounds of the water in the darkness, a daydream dredged up in the face of extreme circumstances. But the image was too vivid. It had the smell of memory, real memory. This *had* happened to me, it came to me with a jolt” (238). He speculates that this genuine memory had been “sealed off” from his conscious mind by the “operation” in which the Grandfather had “stolen [his] memories” (239). This account certainly seems plausible, raising the possibility that this memory is tied to the initial traumas that defined his unique identity: generated *by* film, and structuring his mind *like* a film.

But when he explains later to the Grandfather that he feels this was a “substantial memory” “triggered” by the water, which he “know[s] beyond a doubt” (265), he is given yet another possible explanation: “ ‘No, it wasn’t,’ the Professor contradicted me flatly. You may have experienced it as a memory, but that was an artificial bridge of your own makin’. You see, quite naturally there are going t’be gaps between your own identity and my edited input consciousness. So you, in order t’justify your own existence, have laid down bridges across those gaps’ ” (265). In other words, what is inside the Calcutec’s mind has been irrevocably

“edited” by the Grandfather, who embodies the specter of WWII trauma, the futurist drive of logical positivism and pure empirical science removed from all considerations of ethics, and the growth of postwar Japan and its blooming film industry, all entwined together. His mind having been “edited” by trauma and cinema, he can now no longer be sure what is memory and what is internalized ideology. “I took a gulp of whiskey,” he says. “This was turning into a nightmare” (266).

Which, in a sense, is precisely what this novel is: a nightmare, a representation of the cinematically-motivated unconscious dreamlife of postwar trauma lingering in a high-tech, highly consumerist, contemporary Tokyo. Though it is ostensibly a hardboiled detective novel about infowars coupled with a Kafkaesque parable about unicorns, references to the lingering traumas of WWII and the imbrication of cinema into the psychology of the contemporary self symptomatically pop up and intrude into the narrative. The Calcutec cannot seem to help himself from using filmic metaphors, describing, for example, the couple in the Nisan Skyline as “character sketches for a TV treatment” (306). Pivotaly, this deeply internalized cinematicity in the novel traces its history back to the national and global trauma inflicted upon Japan and the rest of the world during WWII. In the EotW, the Colonel tells the Dreamreader, “ ‘Once every fifty or sixty years, there comes a killing winter’ ” (144). If this is indeed an alternate 1985, and we can expect this to be the next “killing winter,” that would conceivably place the last one around 1945 and/or the occupation period (1945-1952). What connects the twin thematics of film and WWII trauma in the novel is, pivotaly, *memory*. It is not totally clear until deep into the novel when the Calcutec tells the Grandfather, “ ‘Up until now, I’ve recalled only fragments of memories’ ” (265), but the Calcutec, as a result of his operation, has apparently very limited functional memory of his own past. It is no surprise then, that in his unconscious mind, he

remembers nothing of his “past” or what got him there: “Why did I cast off my past to come here to the End of the World? What possible event or meaning or purpose could there have been? Why can I not remember?” (109). Once there he is given a task to rid himself of mind and memory (i.e., dreamreading), and none of the characters there seems to properly remember the past either. Everything is future-thinking: the *end* of the world. But, strikingly, it is perhaps his absence of memory, rather than simple caginess, that accounts for why we learn so little of the Calcutec’s backstory in the HBW section of the novel. We learn early on that the Calcutec was previously married (55), but we don’t get details. This comes up near the very end of the novel, with a similar dearth of clarity, when he tells the Librarian about his divorce: “ ‘Five or six summers ago, she up and left. Never came back... Two people can sleep in the same bed and still be alone when they close their eyes, if you know what I mean’ ” (388). Memory then is the centerpiece of this novel, the true protagonist perhaps, besieged by the twin villains of a lingering historical trauma that teaches us to forget, and the cinematic editing that reshapes and ultimately destroys the memories we’d rather suppress. For Murakami, like Akutagawa, cinema is a trope for an invasive cultural imperialism but also an integral part of the interior of the self, and the exploration of this internalized cinematicity can be productively harnessed by such experimental literary works. Works by Akutagawa and Murakami that explore new ways of appropriating and incorporating cinema within literature thus help recuperate and work through the lingering memories of national traumas.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE IMPOTENTIALITY OF SURREALIST CINEMA

There is no longer a school, but a state of mind survives. No one belongs to this movement anymore, and everyone feels he could have been a part of it. In every person who writes there is a surrealist calling that is admitted, that miscarries, seems sometimes usurped, but that, even when false, expresses a sincere effort and need. Has surrealism vanished? It is no longer here or there: it is everywhere. It is a ghost, a brilliant obsession. In its turn, as an earned metamorphosis, it has become surreal.

— Maurice Blanchot

Never had a means of expression witnessed as much hope as the cinema. With it not only is everything possible, but the marvelous itself is placed at hand. And yet never has one observed such disproportion between the immensity of possibilities and the derisory results.

— Benjamin Peret

Around the time Akutagawa's career was flourishing in Tokyo, the Surrealist movement in Paris was just picking up steam. Though the Japanese author and the group of French poets almost certainly knew nothing about each other's works, they each took up the question of what to do with this new form of writing called the film scenario around the same time. As such, they each independently developed the early closet film. It makes a kind of intuitive sense that it would be in France and Japan, two developing powerhouses of the film industry, with long literary traditions as well, that the closet film would initially come to be. But where Akutagawa experimented in isolation towards the end of his life, the young group of French poets led by André Breton in the 1920s worked together to develop their ideas throughout their early careers. And where Akutagawa came to the scenario form only by engaging with all kinds of genres and as a result of formal experimentation with practically all available literary modes, the Surrealists were drawn to the scenario form by way of their attraction first to the cinema itself.

The well-documented importance of cinema to the Surrealist movement in 1920s Paris



(and vice-versa) is difficult to overstate. Steven Kovács, in his landmark study *The Story of Surrealist Cinema* (1980), argues that “Surrealism was the first major literary and artistic movement seriously to concern itself with cinema” (15), and the special relationship between cinema and Surrealism has been well-documented (see studies by Williams, Mathews, and Kuenzli for examples that privilege Surrealism’s relationship to cinema in particular). But what exactly *is* Surrealist Cinema? What constitutes a Surrealist film? In his book, Kovács proposes to look at films that “were made by members of the group and [which] were appreciated by the group for being Surrealist” (9). But his exhaustive study comprises only seven films: *Le Retour a la Raison*, *Emak Bakia*, *L’Étoile de Mer*, and *Le Mystere du Château de Dés*, all by Man Ray, Germaine Dulac’s *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (written by Antonin Artaud — more on this below), and Bunuel and Dali’s *Un Chien Andalou* and *L’Âge d’Or*. Kovács is unambiguous in his stance that these films constitute the *entire* canon of Surrealist Cinema. “No other films,” he argues, “satisfy the preconditions stated above” (10). Linda Williams echoes this sentiment when she asserts that “strictly speaking, there are very few films that did grow directly out of the Surrealist movement” (xiv). In fact, she argues, there are precisely two: “*Un Chien Andalou* and *L’Age d’or* are perhaps the only unquestionably Surrealist films” (xiv). In a footnote, she excludes *The Seashell and the Clergyman* because Germaine Dulac wasn’t really affiliated with the movement, and Man Ray’s *Etoile de Mer* on the grounds that the film and its author were really more Dadaist than Surrealist. And in the introduction to a collection of essays originally published in *Dada/Surrealism*, Rudolph Kuenzli cites other critics, such as Marguerite Bonnet and Odette Virmaux, who also “only include two or three films as truly Surrealist” (7), meaning in this case the Bunuel/Dali pieces and either *L’Etoile d mer* or *The Seashell and the Clergyman*.

This is an odd situation. A great deal has been made of Surrealist Cinema, but there are

only somewhere between two and seven actual Surrealist films. But if the Surrealists proper only produced a handful of bona fide films, it wasn't for lack of trying. Many of the original members of the group attempted to produce films, but, Kovács notes, "Their efforts failed dismally so that, despite their several attempts, none of the original group succeeded in producing a movie" (40). However, neither Man Ray, Artaud, Bunuel nor Dali were original members of the inner circle of Surrealism headed by Breton. The latter two only became part of the "in-group" as a result of the fantastic (and utterly *singular*) success of *Un Chien Andalou*. The original inner circle, as Kovács notes, attempted to replicate this filmic success, but failed. In a stunning footnote, he mentions,

In 1929 Breton had plans for adapting Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Rideau cramoisi* to the screen with Albert Valentin's assistance. Aragon had also planned to shoot a film with Valentin in 1930 based on his scenario *Le Troisième Faust*. In 1934 Soupault wrote *Le Coeur volé* for Jean Vigo, which was not produced because of Vigo's death. In 1935 Breton and Éluard improvised a scenario called *Essai de simulation du délire cinématographique* for Man Ray which was abandoned when the camera jammed. (47)

Similarly, none of Robert Desnos' early scenarios were realized (61) until his later collaboration with Henri Jeanson, in which he "wrote the text and songs for Roland Tual's *Bonsoir Mesdames, Bonsoir Messieurs*" (61), which was realized in 1944, but "a week later Desnos was taken away by the Gestapo. Although he lived to see Allied troops liberate his concentration camp, his health had been permanently ruined" and he died a month later (61). In some sense then, Surrealist Cinema seems to have been cursed: death, war, and faulty cameras damning projects from the get-go. Marguerite Bonnet puts it very succinctly when she argues that "the whole history of Surrealism's relation with cinema is, in reality, that of a great hope betrayed" (7). But why exactly does Surrealist Cinema seem to have been doomed? Kovács suggests,

That the Surrealists did not succeed more often in creating memorable, haunting sequences [like the eyeball getting slashed in *Un Chien Andalou*] may best be explained

by the fact that for them the cinema was an exquisite toy and nothing more. Their commitment was to painting, poetry, and drama first. Movies were another potential form for expressing their ideas, but by no means the only or even most important one. (41)

Why would Kovács write off the importance of the very thing he is talking so much about? How can Surrealist Cinema both be a pivotal object of scholarly inquiry as well as a novelty aside of a movement essentially focused on other media? To some extent Kovács here echoes an earlier seminal analysis, J.H. Matthews' *Surrealism and Film* (1971), in which, for example, Matthews looks at Philippe Soupault's early cinematographic poem "Indifference" (1918) and suggests that it "has more historical than intrinsic interest" (52), and that "the significance of Soupault's experimentation with his new literary form is not so much that it serves as an example to filmmakers but that it testified to responsiveness among the earliest surrealists to the cinema as an inspirational force" (53). And when he turns to look at film scenarios by Robert Desnos and Benjamin Peret, he suggests that they are simply borrowing from the cinema for basically literary/poetic projects (57). In other words, even when critics take deep and sweeping looks at the importance of the imbrication of cinema and poetry amongst the Surrealists, they tend to trivialize the formal innovation and the potentialities of their hybrid-media experimentations in favor of "historical" and basically biographical considerations of these poets.

Rudolph Kuenzli offers a more pragmatic explanation than Matthews or Kovács for why there are so few Surrealist films, but one that seems somehow equally unfulfilling: "Of the numerous Surrealist film scenarios, only very few were made into movies. The reason for the small number of films was probably due to the complexity of filmmaking" (9). In other words, films are just too hard to make. But that does not seem to totally explain it either. For one thing, these sorts of complexities were not isolated to film. Take the example of Antonin Artaud, whose failure as a theater practitioner, perhaps even more so than his failure as a filmmaker, was

the result of the complex financial, technical and basically industrial limitations not of *cinema* but indeed of *theater*. As Martin Esslin puts it,

By far the most glaring and disastrous example of the tension between Artaud's theoretical ideas and his need to try to find a *modus vivendi* with the theater as it was at that time is the production of *Les Cenci*, in which he had to cast an inexperienced actress because she gave him access to funds, use a theater building totally at variance with his ideas, and, in the final analysis, produce a play which, although he had written it himself, was far removed from his ideal of a theater beyond a conventional text and the traditional structure of classical tragedy, based on the movement of large numbers of performers in an open space. (84)

And for another thing, as Richard Abel notes, "Before the war, the French cinema, much like its American counterpart, relied on writers both inside and outside the industry to supply story ideas and scenarios for its films" (59). It would make sense that a group of *leading* Parisian *writers*, as much as anyone else, should in theory have been able to get more of their film scenarios made into films. It should therefore be quite striking that they did not, and that there are not more Surrealist Films cannot be written off merely by suggesting, as Kuenzli does, that filmmaking is more complicated than writing poetry, or as Kovács does, that the Surrealists were only tangentially interested in film in the first place.

As Richard Abel notes, the Surrealists were not the only writers interested in—but unable to produce—their own films. He argues: "In the twenties and thirties, French writers, many of them Surrealists, wrote a good number of film scenarios and published them as literary texts" (58), and suggests that these writers (Surrealist and otherwise) capitalized as best they could on the literary potential of texts that they could not actualize in film form: "Blocked from using their texts as blueprints to produce actual films... the writers turned them into a new textual form of *play*. If, as creators, they could not gain access to the new popular art of the cinema, at least they would use it to 'revolutionize' the forms and conventions of literature itself" (64). Young French writers, in other words, unable to see their scenarios made into films, "instead turned to what

Alain and Odette Virmaux have called the ‘bastard genre’ of the ciné-roman and the scenario or script as literary text” (60). Abel also points towards another phenomenon, in which writers were interested in publishing film scenarios not as a result of the *failure* to realize them as cinema, but simply on their own merit, publishing scenarios for their own literary value. As early as 1917, Louis Delluc was suggesting: “Now that we are getting respectable scenarios — much as happened in music not long ago — let’s publish them. Let’s print them just as they were written. And I predict that they will be read with delight” (qtd. in Abel 61).<sup>8</sup>

So even before young French writers turned towards publishing filmic literary texts in the twenties and thirties as a result of the unrealizability of these projects as films, they were interested in publishing cinematic texts for other reasons, towards ends more literary than filmic. As Kovács says, it was Philip Soupault, possibly at the suggestion of Appolinaire (32-33), who first started experimenting with writing Surrealist film scenarios and publishing them as unconventional poetic scenario hybrids in January of 1919 (33). Kovács calls these “cinematic poems” (33). Soupault really did want these to be made into films, but much of the writing produced by the Surrealists over the next few years falls somewhere along a spectrum between completely nonfilmic poetry and the totally filmic, such as Benjamin Peret’s film scenario *Pulcherie veut une auto*, which appeared in *Litterature* in May of 1923. Along this spectrum we would encounter Breton’s own *Nadja* (1928), a novel punctuated with photographs, Antonin Artaud’s unproduced film scenarios, and a variety of poems that can variously be described as “cinematic” in one way or another.

Abel, however, is basically alone in his emphasis on the textual publications of Surrealist film scenarios and other kinds of literary/cinematic “bastard” genres. Most of the critics who have published book-length studies on the relationship between Surrealism and cinema (Kovács,

---

<sup>8</sup> Louis Delluc, “Notes pour moi,” *Le Film* 94 (decembre 1917): 14.

Williams, Matthews, etc.) privilege almost exclusively the actual films produced during the period, even if that means isolating an archive of no more than seven films at the very outside.<sup>9</sup> The extent of the interest in the very few films that actually exist can perhaps best be demonstrated by the (unsubstantiated, but basically credible) piece of academic rumor that *Un Chien Andalou* is, minute for minute, the most written about film of all time. And in any case most of the major book-length studies tend to dramatically overprivilege Bunuel in this context—not that Bunuel is not deserving of such study, but whether a few of his early films should stand as the *entire* canon of “Surrealist Cinema” is another thing altogether. On the other hand, discussion of the unproduced, unrealized films tends to be relocated to footnotes and asides such as this one:

Apart from a few abortive attempts at producing films and writing a handful of pieces on movies, the original group of Surrealist poets stopped actively considering the cinema from the mid-1920s on. Philippe Soupault and Robert Desnos were the only two exceptions, and of the two it was Desnos who became the unofficial spokesman for Surrealist cinema. (Kovács 48)

Here Kovács seems almost determined not to discuss the “few abortive attempts” and “handful of pieces” that in effect compose an entire subgenre of Surrealist work. So in fact critics like Kovács and Williams might have it exactly backwards. That is, we might posit that *impotential* Surrealist Cinema, the whole discursive field of filmic literary works produced (and often even published) by the Surrealists in the 1920s, could be seen as more fundamentally constitutive of Surrealism Cinema than the two-to-seven *actual* films produced during that period. One can very well imagine a study in which a short film like *Un Chien Andalou*, itself a highly singular event in the history of Surrealism, is relocated to footnotes and dismissive asides, or at least simply considered a *secondary* document after the much wider and more primary field of

---

<sup>9</sup> Or see, for example, Graeme Harper and Rob Stone, eds., *The Unsilvered Screen: Surrealism on Film*, London & New York (Wallflower Press, 2007), for a more recent example of a collection of essays about Surrealist Cinema

literary-filmic texts produced by the group.

In other words, while at first it would seem to make sense that an examination of Surrealist Cinema would take as its major object of study the actual films produced by members of the Surrealist group in Paris in the mid-late twenties, in reality it makes more sense to look at what did not get actualized. What critics tend to relocate to footnotes seems the stuff of real import, and the seven actual films that form the totality of the Surrealist canon seem like the real trivial novelties. The real story of Surrealist Cinema is one of (im)potential cinema, not of seven anomalous and semi-arbitrary products, singled out because they were made by “members” and “appreciated by the group.” And with the exception of the Bunuel/Dali collaborations, the rest of the films were not even widely appreciated outside the group. Artaud and Dulac’s *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, for example, remains mostly overlooked and generally unwatched—and possibly unwatchable. And it is for precisely this reason that we must now turn our attention in that direction.

### *Artaud's Forgotten Cinema of Pure Possibility*

The cinema is an amazing stimulant. It acts directly on the grey matter of the brain. When the savour of art has been sufficiently combined with the psychic ingredient which it contains it will go way beyond the theatre which we will relegate to a shelf of memories. Because the theatre is a betrayal. We see more of the actors than of the work—at any rate, it is they who affect us.

—Antonin Artaud, “Reply to an Inquiry,” 60

Recent attention has spotlighted the filmic efforts of Antonin Artaud, known more for his own later writings on his *Theater of Cruelty*, though in the twenties he had been a fringe member of the Surrealists in Paris. It was his scenario for *The Seashell and the Clergyman* that some argue constituted the first truly Surrealist film. In a recent article, Lee Jamieson outlines what he terms “Artaud’s forgotten cinema” (4), a recuperation of Artaud’s lost film theory, which must be retrospectively scraped together since Artaud’s “polemic is difficult to define precisely because he failed to realize his proposals during his lifetime. Consequently, we must piece together Artaud’s revolutionary film theory from a number of unproduced film scenarios, a handful of essays and scarce interviews” (2). But while Jamieson notes the difficulty in establishing a clear picture of Artaud’s theory, it is apparent that it is immediately relevant here: “He advocated a complete eradication of all previous art, thus creating a cinema of pure possibility” (2). Artaud’s potential cinema—or impotential cinema, since it was never actualized—constitutes an important expression of the overall trend of Surrealist Cinema towards the impotential.

To start with, some have pointed toward the many film scenarios Artaud wrote in the late 1920s, and even identified in them something like the closet. As the writer of these eccentric blends of poetry, film treatment, and film scenario, Artaud is likely one progenitor of something we might call the proto-closet-film. Kovács notes that although only one of Artaud’s scenarios



(*Seashell*) was actually produced, in the late 1920s he was mostly dedicated to writing for the screen: “above all he devoted himself to writing film scenarios which he hoped to see made into movies” (155). But Kovács characterizes his first scenario, *Two Nations on the Confines of Mongolia*, as something more like what I’m calling a closet film: “While his other scenarios are plans for movies he has in mind, this one has an independent literary value. It is written in the form of a prose poem” (157). And, “The scenario wanders further and further away from its descriptive function and takes on a personal, meditative, sometimes imagistic character” (158). Kovács concludes, “Because of its ‘literary’ nature, there is little reason to believe that Artaud intended *Two Nations* to be made into a movie” (158). Actually, there is little reason to believe he *did not*. All of Artaud’s writing has a ‘literary nature,’ and most of it, even his nonfiction, has a “personal, meditative, sometimes imagistic character.” More strikingly, *Two Nations* is not very different in this regard from any of Artaud’s other film scenarios, even *Seashell*, which of course was not only *intended* as a film, but indeed *was produced*. Artaud’s scenarios all drift away from their function as a production document, going out of their way to establish tone and even to describe abstract concepts undergirding the projects. Moreover, all of the “scenarios” included in Artaud’s *Collected Works* are written in prose, and none of them have numbered sections. *Two Nations* is not totally singular here. We are therefore left with a pressing question: why is Kovács compelled to insist that *Two Nations* in particular might be more of a cinematic poem than a film scenario?

Kovács is right that *Two Nations*, of all Artaud’s scenarios, drifts furthest from direct film scenario towards something like poetry, though this is an issue of degree, not type. While in most of Artaud’s scenarios there are few direct references to the camera or types of shots, in *Two Nations* there are none at all. There is plenty in it that would make it unsuitable as a production

document. The scenario concerns two quarrelling nations in Asia, about which Artaud explains, “Russian gold is at the bottom of it all, of course” (15). This description is not directly translatable into film. It gives us an explanation of the conflict as readers, and it establishes for us the setting and the tone, but it does not tell us *how* this should be represented filmically. We can imagine different potential ways of portraying this, but only inasmuch as we can imagine filmic portrayals of *anything*. But the scenario gets much weirder:

French diplomats shrug their shoulders;  
amusing scenes between Poincaré and Briand who rush off to Montparnasse;  
intervention of love  
intervention of a woman  
definition of a certain Surrealism.

Dizzy speed, sound;  
how the aeroplane swims in time;  
a mist of occultism for air traffic. (15-16)

One can see why Kovács is tempted not only to describe this as poetic, but to insist even that Artaud intended it as solely poetic, as totally closeted and unintended for production. The scenario assaults with a series of ideas and abstract concepts, it tells us there should be “amusing scenes” but it doesn’t tell us exactly the content of those scenes; indeed, it seems to explicitly chafe against produceability. But where the question of intent is concerned, none of that is especially unique for an Artaud scenario.

*Eighteen Seconds*, which Kovács calls Artaud’s “first actual scenario” (159), and which he wrote in 1925, is only slightly more suitable to being a production document in an actual film. It bears most of the same marks of abstraction that render *Two Nations* closeted. While there are specific camera directions, such as “Close shot of the watch indicating the seconds” (11), there are also explanations that establish not even setting or tone but indeed comment on the project in general: “The point of the scenario is that although the events described happen in eighteen

seconds it takes an hour to project them onto the screen” (11). That is, instead of showing us how the film should do this, Artaud simply states that it should be known. This sort of commentary makes the “scenario” feel more like a treatment or a proposal for a film, rather than something like a shooting script. Moreover, there are abstract interrogative sections whose value is explicitly literary, and would puzzle any director trying to put together a shot list: “But what is the mind? What does it consist of? If only one could be master of one’s physical self” (13). It is therefore hard to identify why Kovács raises the sharp distinction between *Two Nations*, a literary work not intended for production, and *Eighteen Seconds*, his first “actual” scenario. Both works—and all of the scenarios that followed—blur the distinctions between poetry and scenario, between literary and film-production-oriented text.

For Artaud would go on to write more than a dozen others, though only one of them was produced. Artaud’s scenario for *The Seashell and the Clergyman* opens with a camera direction: “The lens discloses a man dressed in black, busy pouring a liquid into glasses of various sizes and volumes” (21). Nevertheless, the scenario is written in long prose paragraphs, and the camera descriptions are fewer and fewer as it progresses. And indeed, Artaud said of the project, “*The Seashell and the Clergyman*, before being a film, is an attempt or an *idea*” (*Cahiers de Belgique* 63). *Seashell*, in other words, differs from Artaud’s earlier scenarios only in the respect that it happened to get made. Artaud conceived of all these projects as potential *actual* films, but for Artaud films manifested not from text, not from a script, but from ideas. Here we can already see the seeds of Artaud’s later, and much more well-known ideas, in *Le Théâtre et son Double*, regarding a new theater that breaks from the classical dialogue-driven model of the playscript. For this reason it is difficult to determine what to call Artaud’s scenarios in the naming structure I’m laying out here. Can something be a “closet film” if it was both intended for the screen and

*did indeed get made?* Is the criterion for “closet film” status simply the literary nature of the scenario, or the degree to which the scenario chafes against its produceability or the pragmatics of the document as a production tool? Or must we be content for the moment with considering Artaud’s works something like proto-closet-films, inhabiting the grey zone of indistinction between experimental poetry and actual film scenario?

After the failure of *Seashell*, which was widely scorned by critics and even Artaud himself, “[d]espite his repeated efforts to raise funds, Artaud failed to realize any more of his scenarios” (Kovács 176). *Thirty-Two*, also written as a prose treatment, has no camera or production notes until seven pages in, when “The camera catches up with her” (33), and it reads very much like a short story, even recalling Akutagawa. *The Butcher’s Revolt* is also clearly intended as an actual scenario, though written in the same format, as a treatment with no camera directions, few production-oriented notes, etc. It is the same with *Flights*. It would barely seem filmic at all save for the cinematic terseness of the short sentences without verbs that imply inserts, like “His office. A calendar on the wall: a date” (43), and the few explicit film references: “Then again the client talking excitedly—the shot suddenly ends” (43), and “He keeps his bag in his hand—he gets into a car—the car drives off—the camera follows it like another car behind” (46). Perhaps it is because these scenarios describe films that are vaguely abstract, that are not dialogue-driven or plot-heavy, that make the scenarios themselves less enjoyable to read than, say, an Akutagawa short story in the form of a scenario. But perhaps because Artaud did intend them as production documents, he did not exercise the total literary potentiality of the form. These *can* be productively read, and in some ways are designed only to be read, but they do not capitalize on the potentialities inherent to the form of the closet film. In the end, then, what makes Artaud’s scenarios not qualify fully as “closet films” is less the

technical details of their having been made, or Artaud's intention to have them made, but rather the degree to which their closetedness seems more generally inconsequential. That is, there is little that is *interesting* about their not being filmed or their quasi-unfilmability. With Akutagawa (and as we shall shortly see with others below), the closet is not a place where the works just *happen* to fall. The closet itself is constitutive of the significance of the work itself.

Perhaps this becomes most clear when we look at Artaud's adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's 1889 novel *The Master of Ballantrae*. Even here, where Artaud has the opportunity explicitly to depart from the novel form, where the "ideas" are already in place and what Artaud is attempting is merely a translation across media, the scenario proves not particularly useful: "From the beginning of the film the relationships between the characters must be established" (48). Artaud tells us something we should already know, and then does not tell us how his scenario plans to go about doing this. He favors telling over showing: "From the beginning the problem of birth-right will be presented in all its painful agony through the reactions of all parties concerned" (48). This would not be especially helpful in producing the film, but, perhaps more to the point here, it does not exactly make for great reading either. It gestures only in an indistinct way towards a film that *could* be made, without directly giving us the idea of *that* particular film. Loathe as I am to suggest it, we might also have to grapple seriously with the question of whether these are "closet films," or just *very bad film scenarios*. There is a fine line, but in any case, what we have in Artaud's scenarios of the late 1920s is one of the earliest examples of a body of possibly closeted films: a poet experimenting with the line between the new form of the film scenario/treatment on the one hand, and the poem/short story on the other. Perhaps it is not so much *regrettable* as it is *fitting* that even in his *potential* films, much like his actual films and dramatic productions as well, Artaud failed as a practitioner though his *ideas*

remain foundational.

In 1933 Artaud abandoned cinema altogether and turned to the theater (Kovács 178), writing in *Les Cahiers jaunes*, “The world of cinema is a dead world, illusory and truncated” (qtd. in Kovács 178).<sup>10</sup> Kovács speculates, “Perhaps it was only because of his inability to realize his scenarios as films that he totally abandoned the medium” (178). Going one step further, we could say that the Theater of Cruelty itself actually comes out of—is somehow constituted by—precisely the impotentiality of Artaud’s cinema of pure possibility. On one hand, we could read the cruelty as the compulsive manifestation of the earlier trauma of that failure. On the other, we could turn instead towards understanding exactly how Artaud’s theory of theater contains within it the impotentiality of his theory of cinema. Here, in other words, is a provocative rendering of Agamben’s formulation (see Introduction) of impotentiality conserving itself in itself in the passage to act: an overlooked impotentiality constituting the actuality that is familiar to history. Jamieson notes:

Tragically, Artaud’s film theory was never fully realized and remains historically lost. Despite pursuing a number of avenues to raise funds, Artaud’s polemic remained purely theoretical. Although Germaine Dulac directed *The Seashell and the Clergyman* in 1927, the only one of Artaud’s fifteen scenarios to be produced, Artaud was denied artistic input during the process. (4)

How are we to recover and understand a film theory that is “historically lost” and “purely theoretical,” if not to understand the way its impotentiality did not simply vanish, but rather conserved itself *within* the potentialities that were actualized? His one film, *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, can only get us so far. The fraught history of its production and reception testify to this fact. Jamieson explains that the version of the film distributed in America had the reels mixed up in the wrong order (4), and that the film was banned altogether in England (4-5), the official decree proclaiming that “[The Seashell and the Clergyman] is so cryptic as to be almost

meaningless. If there is a meaning, it is doubtless objectionable” (qtd. in Jamieson, 5).<sup>11</sup> I myself recently encountered the film being shown on a small screen in the Museo Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, in Madrid, where the aspect ratio had been altered, distorting the original frame. A small crowd was gathered in the adjacent room, apparently mesmerized by an endless loop of *Un Chien Andalou*. Nobody paid *Seashell* much attention.

But Jamieson certainly has, and his description is very generative:

The film presents all corporeality as potentially unstable, and the boundaries that separate the three characters are impossible to locate. In the confessional box, the general sits next to the woman, lecherously listening to her secrets. Consumed with envy, the priest’s sexual frustration reaches boiling point and he attacks the general. Through a series of remarkable effects, where the general’s face is seen to crack and split, the image of the priest transfers, ‘slips under’ that of the general until he too becomes a priest. The intention is not to present a simple substitution of one image with another (the image of the priest replacing that of the general), but to convey a collision of identity. As the two men fight, touching for the first time, part of the priest’s inner essence merges with the general, their identities ‘slipping under’ one another. (6)

What Jamieson’s apt description clearly foregrounds in *Seashell* is a kind of emphasis in the film on potentiality, on a suspension of the realization of ontologically unstable entities into concrete realities. He describes the way “Artaud immerses the viewer into a world where all images are potentially unstable and dangerous. Reacting alchemically to the priest’s sexual appetite, all images have the capacity to stretch, vanish or mutate” (7). What Jamieson does not go quite so far as to suggest is that Artaud’s one film, in other words, replicates the logic of the unrealized nature of his theory of film, suspended in a kind of permanent unrealizability. It is a theory about the impotentiality of cinema which exists only impotentially.

It should not be surprising then that one of the foremost theorists of impotentiality should have been crucially attracted to Artaud’s work, especially in his early career. In “Agamben’s

---

<sup>10</sup> See Antonin Artaud, “La vieillesse precoc du cinema,” *Les Cahiers jaunes*, No. 4 (1933).

<sup>11</sup> See James C. Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action*,

Artaud,” Kevin Attell spells out the special place Artaud holds in Agamben’s thinking. Oddly, Agamben’s published works do not mention Artaud between the brief mention in his first book, *The Man Without Content* (1970), and the striking identification of Artaud between no less figures than Spinoza and Heidegger as part of “a philosophical school with which he [Agamben] clearly aligns himself,” (Attell, “Agamben’s Artaud,” 175), those who, in Agamben’s own words, “ ‘maintain that men do not think (or do not yet think)’ ” (qtd. in Attell, “Agamben’s Artaud,” 175). But, Attell notes, Agamben did publish several articles in the 1960s that focus on Artaud, though none have been translated into English nor even republished in any collected volumes in Italian, “making this early ‘Artaudian’ period... the least known in Agamben’s career” (176). Agamben’s interest in Artaud, here in some of his earliest published work, already sets the stage for his later philosophical engagements. To Agamben, Artaudian theater figures “not a return *to* the repressed, but a passage to the new by way of the gap opened up and held open by the separation of the two poles, a gesture that will occur with some frequency in various guises throughout Agamben’s work” (180). Attell sums up the continuity of Agamben’s concerns regarding Artaud that trace across his career: “The task to which Agamben consistently gestures is to define a new logic of relation between the poles of the binary metaphysical apparatuses that contain and constrain human thought and action” (184). Artaud’s work is focused on delving into the unconscious, “[b]ut the point is not simply to plunge into the so-called primitive and leave the rational behind. Instead the point is to exit from this impasse by means of the impasse itself” (185). We might thus look towards Artaud, and specifically the status of a potential cinema in his work, through an Agambenian-tinged lens. Attell’s summary of the lasting influence of Artaud on Agamben provides a good account of what this lens would look like: “What Agamben retains, centrally, from this early work on Artaud is the gesture of



casting off any and all appeals to an originary state of life or being (even in the form of deconstructing the illusion of such an origin) and orienting his analysis toward a new, future state that can be conceived (and possibly attained) only as the precipitate of the, so to speak, reaction between the opposed positive and negative poles of the aporetic binary machine of metaphysics” (185).

There is an unlikely source which might help shed some light on Artaud’s cinema of pure possibility through the context of Agamben’s emphasis on Artaud as a figure interested in dialectical suspensions and recuperating originary potentialities. In a 1942 essay, “Dickens, Griffith and Ourselves,” Sergei Eisenstein argues that montage, which many have asserted was invented by D.W. Griffith, can really be more accurately attributed to a much earlier and unlikely source: “Griffith came to [montage] through the device of parallel action. But it was none other than Dickens who gave Griffith the idea of parallel action!... What were Dickens’ novels, for their time? What were they for his readers? There is one answer: the same as cinema is now for those same sections of the population” (363-4). Eisenstein finds himself drawn to the “astonishingly plastic quality” (364) of Dickens’ novels, their “astonishing visual optical quality” (364). He then proceeds to read Dickens cinematically:

So I shall expect indulgence if, when leafing through Dickens, I find 'dissolves'.

How else can one term this description from *A Tale of Two Cities*?

*Along the Paris Streets, the death-cars rumble, hollow and harsh.  
Six tumbrils carry the day's wine to La Guillotine....*

*Six tumbrils roll along the streets. Change these back  
again to what they were, thou powerful enchanter, Time, and they  
shall be seen to be the carriages of absolute monarchs, the  
equipages of feudal nobles, the toilettes of flaring Jezebels, the  
churches that are not my Father's house but dens of thieves, the  
huts of millions of starving peasants!*

How many such ‘cinematic’ surprises must be lurking in Dickens’ pages!

But I shall gladly restrict myself to the chief constructs of montage which were shown crudely in Dickens’ work, and later flourished as elements of film composition in Griffith’s. (364)

Eisenstein goes on to quote the entire opening of Chapter XXI of *Oliver Twist*, and explains in a footnote: “For purposes of clarity I have broken the beginning of this chapter into smaller fragments than did its author, and numbered them” (365). The result is something we might call a closet film: a numbered series of highly descriptive short prose scenes. This raises a vital (and alarming) question: can it be possible that the only difference between a novel and a screenplay is the addition of scene numbers? Can “closet film,” we might take one step further, be understood as a function of reading? In other words, is it less about the formal properties of the text than with a mode of reading which privileges what Christian Metz has called the “mental machinery” of cinema? Is, in some sense, *everything* we read today, given the dominance of the cinematic mode in mainstream culture that our minds have in some way internalized, a closet film? Eisenstein seems to suggest as much, equating the place of Dickens and Griffith in our cultural and mental landscapes.

But there is more to Eisenstein here than the mere suggestion that film in some sense has culturally replaced the novel, and has done so with ultimately superficial formal changes. For there is a lot at stake here in Eisenstein’s appreciation of the “plasticity” in Dickens. Recall that what initially attracted Eisenstein to Dickens is his novels’ “astonishingly plastic quality” (364). This is the same attraction that Eisenstein finds in early Disney animations in his earlier uncompleted notes on Disney. In 1940-1942, the years leading up to Eisenstein’s article on Dickens and his conception of what we might call the formal plasticity between film and the novel, Eisenstein was working on a fabulously interesting article on early Disney animations. The unfinished result is a series of profoundly generative and provocative notes that, I will argue, begin to gesture at a theory of a cinema of pure potentiality very much in line with Giorgio Agamben’s writings on cinema and ontology, as well as with Artaud’s work in and around the

cinema.

As opposed to what one might presume in first encountering Eisenstein's views on Disney, he is radically supportive and just head-over-heels in-love with the animator's work. In language that sounds suspiciously like praising an opiate-for-the-masses, Eisenstein writes, "Disney is a marvelous lullaby for the suffering and unfortunate, the oppressed and deprived. For those who are shackled by hours of work and regulated moments of rest, by a mathematical precision of time, whose lives are graphed by the cent and dollar" (7) and, "Disney... through the magic of his works and more intensely, perhaps, than anyone else, bestows precisely this upon his viewer, precisely obliviousness, an instant of complete and total release from everything connected with the suffering caused by the social conditions of the social order of the largest capitalist government" (8). He even says that Disney explicitly allows one "to forget, to not feel the chilling horror before the grey wolf who, while you were at the movies, pitilessly turned off your gas and water for non-payment" (5).

Anne Nesbet appropriately sums up the tenor with which we should first approach Eisenstein on Disney: "It is astonishing how eloquently Eisenstein, famous for earlier attempts to create a cinema based on shocking its viewers with dialectical truths (the 'montage' of attractions), here defends the virtues of 'obliviousness,' a state generally associated, he admits a page later, with 'evil'" (22). Eisenstein's grounds for this praise of obliviousness are somewhat vague. At times he seems simply defensive and reactionary: "Even the string of a bow can't be strained forever. The same for nerves. And instants of this 'releasing'... are just as prophylactically necessary as the daily dose of carefree laughter in the well-known American saying: 'A laugh a day, keeps the doctor away' " (8). But he also takes up a more sober analysis, acknowledging that this all sounds a little like he's aligning Disney with filmmakers whose goal

is “to distract the attention of ‘the man on the street’ from the genuine and serious problems of labour and capital” (9), situations in which “obliviousness is evil” (9). He wants to separate the kind of obliviousness in Disney from the typical conception: “Obliviousness as a means of lulling to sleep; obliviousness as a way of distracting from the real to the fantastic; obliviousness as a tool for disarming the struggle. This is not what Disney gives us” (9). But what, then, *does* Disney give us, exactly?

It is important to recognize that Eisenstein seems more committed to appreciating Disney from the perspective of a fellow filmmaker than as a cultural analyst. In other words, what he finds in Disney, he finds in imagining Disney’s process of creation, not only watching Disney’s films. Though easily overlooked, this should be apparent from the outset, when Eisenstein exclaims, “What magic of reconstructing the world according to one’s fantasy and will! A fictitious world. A world of lines and colours which subjugates and alters itself to your command. You tell a mountain: move, and it moves. You tell an octopus: be an elephant, and the octopus becomes an elephant. You tell the sun: ‘Stop!’—and it stops” (3). This is appreciation rooted in the creation of such films, not in viewing them. The “you” here is Disney himself or Eisenstein imagining himself in that position. It is not the viewer, the masses. In other words, what is particularly compelling to Eisenstein here is the experience of imagining one’s control over what does and does not constitute reality. In this context it becomes clear why the fact of Disney’s films being animated is not trivial, but essential to Eisenstein’s whole theory: “This cry of optimism could only be drawn. For there is no such slant on truthfully shot capitalist reality which, without lying, could possibly sound like optimistic reassurance! But, fortunately, there are lines and colours. Music and cartoons.” (4). It is precisely the animated nature of cartoons that enables Eisenstein to assert that “Disney is simply ‘beyond good and

evil.’ Like the sun, like trees, like birds, like the ducks and mice, deer and pigeons that run across his screen” (9).

For Eisenstein then, Disney’s films are about the power of creating a new, fictive reality. But it is Disney’s ability to capitalize on the potential boundlessness of animated worlds that he finds so powerfully compelling. And, pivotally for our purposes here, the basic fact that makes Disney’s cinema so good at this creation of worlds is probably best described under the umbrella heading of potentiality, in precisely the Agambenian sense. For rather than seeming to resolve the dialectics of the class struggle, Disney represents for Eisenstein an earlier unity, somehow prior to the very division that makes the class struggle possible. Eisenstein continually draws our attention to the ways that Disney precedes, temporally or ontologically, dialectics. In very much the same way that Agamben’s method is to resolve dialectical aporias by attempting to recuperate a more originary unity (see Introduction), Eisenstein asserts that Disney “creates on the conceptual level of man *not yet* shackled by logic, reason, or experience” (2, my emphasis). What Disney offers us is therefore a kind of return to a unity specifically prior, in a conceptual way, to the class struggle, and in this way to achieve “absolute freedom from all categories, all conventions. In order to be like children” (2). Eisenstein’s notes here recall quite specifically Agamben’s interest in *play* and *infancy*, which help us conceptualize closet film as a *playful* genre insofar as the use-value of the film script has been reappropriated for more prophane ends (See Introduction).

Putting this into yet more dramatic terms, Eisenstein suggests that “Disney (and it is not accidental that his films are drawn) is a complete return to a world of complete freedom (not accidentally fictitious), freed from the necessity of another primal extinction” (3). Eisenstein here underscores the way that animation is essential here specifically because it creates a whole

new world: it effects a *complete* return. It is not bogged down by the aporias of representing something outside the class struggle from within the modern experience of that class struggle. Eisenstein, it seems, cannot himself quite pin down why this seems so important, so pivotal, and yet he feels certain that Disney is essential, despite his irrelevance from the material problems of labor and capital. “Disney’s films,” he argues, “are a revolt against partitioning and legislating, against spiritual stagnation and grayness. But the revolt is lyrical. The revolt is a daydream. Fruitless and lacking consequences. These aren’t those daydreams which, accumulating, give birth to action and raise a hand to realize the dream” (4). And yet somehow they represent for Eisenstein the very pinnacle of cinematic achievement. We might articulate this point as hinging on something like the difference between revolts that are potential, and ones which are actual. The dreamlike revolt of Disney’s animations represents potential action, and it is this potentiality—the potentiality of imaginatively placing oneself in the position of Disney-as-animator, creating and controlling a world of “complete freedom,” defining the very ontology of the world he builds—that Eisenstein is struggling throughout his notes so palpably to express.

Eisenstein takes this thinking one step further in his attempt to analyze what he deems the universal attractiveness of this sort of potentiality. What he most lauds in Disney is the “rejection of once-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, the ability to dynamically assume any form” (21). He terms this “plasmaticness” (21) and expounds at length upon its character: “A lost changeability, fluidity, suddenness of formations—that’s the ‘subtext’ brought to the viewer who lacks all this by these seemingly strange traits which permeate folktales, cartoons, the spineless circus performer and the seemingly groundless scattering of extremities in Disney’s drawings” (21). Again, what seems easily missed here, but is in actuality so vital, is that this plasmaticness is specifically *lost*, as if Disney’s animations were somehow a

full recuperation of the very thing destroyed by modernity: potentiality of form. It is as if, in some sense, Disney supplies us conceptually with precisely that which renders political liberation impossible: the potentiality to bend and permeate borders, to rewrite rules, to alter form and shape. Eisenstein calls the work of these animations “a displacement, an upheaval, a unique protest against the metaphysical immobility of the once-and-forever given” (33). He relates (at great length) this phenomenon (of the universally compelling representations of plasmaticness which Disney brings to perfection) to ghosts (22-24), fire (24-33), and animals (33-40).

In the third section of notes, written slightly later, in 1941, Eisenstein continues to work through these problems and attempts to invent the language to describe the political potential of such plasmatic representations. At times he is radically generalizing and ahistorical. One individual note, for example, which stands entirely alone, simply reads: “*Metamorphosis* is a direct protest against the standardly immutable” (43, emphasis original). At other times, he relates the historical bent of Disney’s work, if confusingly: “America and the *formal logic of standardization* had to give birth to Disney as a natural reaction to the prelogical” (42, emphasis original). At times Eisenstein’s prose seems to leap up like the very flames it describes: “the primal plasmatic origin, i.e. the use of poly-formic capabilities of an *object: fire*, assuming *all* possible guises. Doesn’t the attractiveness of fire lie in this, and *one* of the ‘mysteries’ of fire-worship?” (41, emphasis original). And: “Thus, fire is like an embodiment of the principle of eternal coming into being, the eternally life-producing womb and *omni*-potence. In this sense, it also resembles the potentiality of the primal plasma, from which everything can arise... *Fire is an image of coming into being, revealed in a process*” (45, emphasis original). It is this sort of thinking, as opposed to Eisenstein’s earlier, perhaps soberer writing that he is best known for,

which guided his filmmaking during the period he made *Ivan the Terrible* (1944-1946). Nesbet has eloquently spelled out the connections between Eisenstein's notes on Disney and the films he made in the 1940s. What remains important for our purposes here is the theory of potential cinema he begins to develop here, which helps contextualize the playful, even *plasmatic* conceptions of cinema offered by the work Artaud and other practitioners of Surrealist impotential cinema.

What is perhaps most striking is the direct similarity between Eisenstein's reading of early Disney animations and *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, a film which, as Lee Jamieson puts it, "presents all corporeality as potentially unstable." In other words, what we find in Artaud and Dulac's work from 1928 is already an attempt to create a film very much in the vein of what Eisenstein found so compelling in the early 1940s in Disney's animations, and subsequently attempted to capitalize on in his *Ivan* films. What *Seashell* perhaps best represents is an early attempt to represent in film a combination of the formal plasmaticness of animation with the special realism accorded to the cinema. It is notable that Eisenstein did not, even after praising Disney so intensely, become involved in animation himself. What *Ivan* and *Seashell* are both after is to produce the same effects on film, the obvious idea being to make this plasmaticness seem more real. The unifying concept underlying all this is something like a notion of potentiality: to create in film a world in which being is not a given, in which realities are suspended in a potential state rather than actualized. What these thinkers are developing, in other words, is precisely a theory of potential cinema.

But *Seashell* failed. As far as actualizing this theory in filmic practice, at least. What remains—and is, in many ways, more compelling—is the impotential underlying these cinematic efforts: Eisenstein's notes, Artaud's fourteen unproduced film scenarios, and closet films such as



those (discussed below) by Benjamin Fondane and others. In a moment I will turn to these additional case studies, but I would first like to finish up with Artaud by briefly considering the work he is best known for, his theory of the theater of cruelty as outlined in *Le Théâtre et son Double* (1938). With notable exceptions like Agamben's (see above), most approaches to the theater of cruelty view it as the teleological pinnacle that, despite Artaud's extremely diverse career, was truly his main focus all along and deservedly his only lasting major contribution to the arts. Bettina L. Knapp's early study of Artaud (1969) renders this point clearly. Even though there is a short section dedicated to the film scenarios (71-83), Artaud's filmic aspirations are undercut in general. From Anaïs Nin's preface, where she states, "When theatre failed... he turned to film" (xii), to Knapp's reiteration of that point later in the book, "If the theatre had closed its doors to him, then he would direct his talents toward the relatively young film industry" (65), film is rendered as a deeply secondary concern to Artaud. And where his contribution to film is lauded, it is only for his acting: "Though one cannot call the impact Artaud made upon the film industry sensational, he did, however, create two stunning portrayals which are remembered even today: Marat [in Abel Gance's *Napoleon*, 1926] and the Monk in [Carl Dreyer's 1928] *Jeanne d'Arc*" (71). Knapp expends most of her energy looking at the Theater of Cruelty through the twin lens of Artaud's personal psychological struggles and his lifelong dedication to theatrical theory and practice.

Martin Esslin's seminal follow-up booklength study, *Antonin Artaud* (1977), re-entrenches this paradigm for considering Artaud's work. Even though he notes in the Preface that "most books on Antonin Artaud hitherto available in English have concentrated on his theatrical theories and activities" (i) while this study aims to place in him in a wider context, Esslin focuses his study on the ways this wider context contributes to Artaud's ultimately

primary concern for the theater. Interestingly, even when Esslin does point to Artaud's "impact" outside of the theater, "in poetry, literary criticism, psychology, political ideology, philosophy, the drug cult, and the search for alternative life-styles" (2), cinema is conspicuously absent. And when he does discuss Artaud's role in the world of film, he does so *only* in terms of his acting career. Aside from a brief mention of *Seashell* (27), he emphasizes the point repeatedly that "the theater remained Artaud's main concern" (23). Reiterating Nin and Knapp, Esslin portrays cinema to Artaud as a kind of deeply secondary concern that only emerges in the cracks of his struggles with theater: "Having suffered a defeat in the theater, Artaud fell back on the cinema. He desperately needed money, not least to enable him to relaunch his theatrical ventures. He had hopes of selling some film scripts and, through these, breaking into film production" (31). None of this even begins to approach the question of the weird and potentially closeted nature of those scenarios. He doesn't seem particularly interested in the scenarios themselves, and he even states, "What he did, what happened to him, what he suffered, what he *was*, is infinitely more important than anything he said or wrote" (6). Which is an interesting way to downplay the written works of an author one is studying. Esslin's ultimate point is rendered starkly clear: Artaud struggled and experimented in other endeavors, "Yet he never lost sight of his main objective: to revolutionize the theater" (33). By casting Artaud's whole life and oeuvre in a teleological trajectory culminating in his works outlining the Theater of Cruelty, Esslin casts all of his filmic writing as trivia and asides, as fundamentally secondary.

Esslin's is not an idiosyncratic viewpoint. Albert Bermel's study from around the same time (1977) implicitly makes this same point when he mentions Artaud's film background as a context for the Theater of Cruelty in a very short section on "Related Arts" (52-54) that suggests Artaud was influenced by silent films (53). And even Lee Jamieson, one of the only scholars to

have seriously addressed Artaud's film theory (recall his article, discussed above, "The Lost Prophet of Cinema: The Film Theory of Antonin Artaud"), in a more recent work, his book *Antonin Artaud: From Theory to Practice* (2007), does not list Artaud's work in cinema as among the contextual background for the Theater of Cruelty. He states, "Although his experiences with surrealism and theatre had both ended in failure, they provided the essential building blocks for the development of his most ambitious project, the Theatre of Cruelty" (6). In other words, even as Jamieson acknowledges the way other failures were constitutive of Artaud's later and ultimate project, his (also failed) work in cinema is not considered relevant here. Across the board, it seems, Artaud the filmmaker is abjected in favor of Artaud the drama theoretician, for the sake—one can guess—of cementing his historical importance within neatly defined institutional borders.

But to relegate Artaud's filmic theories to the stuff of secondary trivia seems grossly incongruous with the image of Artaud we get from statements like the one quoted above in the epigraph to this section, which bears reproducing at this juncture:

The cinema is an amazing stimulant. It acts directly on the grey matter of the brain. When the savour of art has been sufficiently combined with the psychic ingredient which it contains it will go way beyond the theatre which we will relegate to a shelf of memories. Because the theatre is a betrayal. We see more of the actors than of the work—at any rate, it is they who affect us. (Artaud, *Complete Works*, vol. 3, 60)

So in contrast to previous critics and in the interest of opening up a fresh viewpoint for considering the Theatre of Cruelty, I would like to establish three specific contexts for understanding Artaud's writings about the theater. The first two I have already mentioned: first, Artaud's early film scenarios are arguably proto-closet-films, though they are fundamentally *actual* film scenarios, and second, by 1933, Artaud had abandoned the world of cinema proper altogether, writing in *Les Cahiers jaunes*, "The world of cinema is a dead world, illusory and

truncated” (qtd. in Kovács 178). The third context is that in May of 1935, Artaud attempted to stage Percy Bysshe Shelley’s famous closet drama, *The Cenci*, which Edward Scheer explains “was a failure and only ran for seventeen performances” (4). As Scheer notes, this is indicative of Artaud’s entire career; he is mainly known for his influence in the world of drama *theory*, whereas he “clearly failed as a practitioner” (2). The basic question I hope to pose by establishing this peculiar contextual framework for approaching Artaud is this: *How does the impotentiality of Artaud’s theory of a cinema of pure potentiality undergird, inform, or otherwise manifest in his theory of the theater of cruelty?* After all, Artaud’s friend Benjamin Fondane (discussed below), articulated exactly that “Artaud hoped to find in the Theater of Cruelty the lost path of the cinema” (Christenson 73).

### ***An Onto-Cinematic Contextualization of Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty***

Ultimately, the stakes that Artaud carves out for his Theater of Cruelty are essentially ontological. In “Theatre and the Plague,” Artaud compares the experience of theater to a literal plague: “Just like the plague, it [theater] reforges the links between what does and does not exist in material nature” (18). Artaud claims that “theatre can only happen the moment the inconceivable really begins” (18). Theater itself, in other words, rewrites potentiality. It determines the laws of what is possible. “In theatre,” articulates Artaud, “As in the plague, there is a kind of strange sun, an unusually bright light by which the difficult, even the impossible suddenly appears to be our natural medium” (21). We might expect that Artaud would relate these ontological questions about theater to his earlier career in film, since his attempts to create

cinema, most notably with *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, were so heavily inclined towards Surrealist concerns with questions of being, psychology, and metamorphosis. But the cinema is noticeably absent from Artaud's most famous work, the essays collected under the title *Le Théâtre et son Double*. There are zero references to film in the first five essays leading up to the manifestos on the Theater of Cruelty itself, more than halfway through the book. And when Artaud does finally address the cinema, he does so in not only tangential, but downright bizarre ways. On closer examination, however, there seems to be something of the cinema pervading the whole text on a deeper, more subtle level. For it is precisely Artaud's background in scenario-writing and his failure as a film practitioner that constitutes much of his later dramatic theory. For example, though nowhere in "On the Balinese Theatre" does Artaud mention cinema, many of his seminal descriptions of the form that perhaps most directly influenced his dramatic thinking seem to uncannily mirror descriptions of the medium of film, especially Agamben's thoughts on gestural cinema (See Introduction): "Everything in this theatre is assessed with living, unerring attention to detail. Nothing is left either to chance or individual initiative. It is a kind of sublime dance where the dancers are actors first and foremost" (40). What seems to attract Artaud to this sort of theater is somewhat cinematic: its attention to detail (think of the close-up), or the removal of chance and the aleatory that is so essential to live theater. Is not "sublime dance" an astonishing epithet for cinema? Artaud continues, "In the Balinese theatre one senses a state prior to language, able to select its own language; music, gestures, moves and words" (44), and adds, "This quintessent theatre where objects about-face strangely before returning to abstraction" (48). It is not just that these descriptions seem to resonate with the filmic medium; indeed, it seems that cinematic tools might be the most appropriately suited to carrying to fruition the ideas that Artaud finds so compelling within

Balinese theater. The ability to examine the most minute details of “music, gestures, moves and words”—think Muybridge—are perhaps most precisely articulated through film and photography. And yet, despite a deep and long-lasting (if conflicted) interest in film, Artaud does not bring it up here, though he does compare theater to painting and poetry frequently.

Nor is cinema referenced in “No More Masterpieces,” in which Artaud calls for a break from traditional textual dialogue-driven theater and outlines what he means by suggesting that *cruelty* should replace it. Artaud writes,

I suggest we ought to return through theatre to the idea of a physical knowledge of images, a means of inducing trances, just as Chinese medicine knows the points of acupuncture over the whole extent of the human anatomy, down to our most sensitive functions... Theatre can reinstruct those who have forgotten the communicative power or magic mimicry of gesture, because a gesture contains its own energy, and there are still human beings in theatre to reveal the power of these gestures. (61)

Again, what Artaud harps on is this attention to the concrete image, and a sort of metaphysical return to prelinguistic gestural communication. As Agamben and critics influenced by his philosophy have articulated (See Introduction ), cinema seems the perfect vehicle for such a task. But for Artaud at this point in his career, cinema is off the table in this regard. Instead, he writes, “Therefore I propose a theatre where violent physical images pulverise, mesmerise the audience’s sensibilities, caught in the drama as if in a vortex of higher forces” (63). Ironically, in practice history has borne out that arguably film, not theater, is best suited to “pulverising” audiences with “violent physical images.”

When Artaud does tackle the question of cinema directly, he does so energetically, if occasionally cryptically. In “Theatre and Cruelty,” he argues,

The damage wrought by psychological theatre, derived from Racine, has rendered us unaccustomed to the direct, violent action theatre must have. Cinema in its turn, murders us with reflected, filtered and projected images that no longer *connect* with our sensibility, and for ten years has maintained us and all our

faculties in an intellectual stupor. (64)

Here, cinema becomes the signifier through which Artaud vocalizes his feeling of distinction from living action, and possibly also registers his personal disconnection from the film industry. Film lacks the physical presence and immediacy of theater, but it is unclear exactly what Artaud means that filmic images do not “connect with our sensibility.” Then, Artaud goes on to say, “Practically speaking, we want to bring back the idea of total theatre, where theatre will recapture from cinema, music-hall, the circus and life itself, those things that always belonged to it” (66). Artaud thus casts his project not as necessarily against or opposed to cinema and other media, but as a recuperation from them of what is proper to theater. In establishing his own theatrical *language*, Artaud takes (or re-takes) from cinema objects which he believes *should* define the theater. Perhaps the vaguely cinematic emphasis on ritualized gestural detail that he finds so appealing in Balinese theater is part of that project.

In “The Theatre of Cruelty: First Manifesto,” Artaud’s turn away from cinema is clear, but the justification for this seems a vague rationalization. Artaud clearly experienced great difficulty in articulating his disdain for the cinema, likely for the reason that he felt personally abandoned or betrayed by it:

*Cinema:* Through poetry, theatre contrasts pictures of the unformulated with the crude visualization of what exists. Besides, from an action viewpoint, one cannot compare a cinema image, however poetic it may be, since it is restricted by the film, with a theatre image which obeys all life’s requirements. (77)

This passage is uncharacteristically unclear and obfuscating, even for Artaud. It is notable that Artaud’s categorical denigrations of film are amongst the least cogent of his writings. In “The Theatre of Cruelty: Second Manifesto,” Artaud takes an even weirder approach:

And just as there are to be no empty spatial areas, there must be no let up, no vacuum in the audience’s mind or sensitivity. That is to say there will be no distinct divisions, no gap between life and theatre. Anyone who has watched a

scene of any film being shot, will understand just what I mean. (84)

So while cinema represents in some sense an antithetical position to the Theater of Cruelty, in its textual distancing from the Real, the *production* of cinema itself is somehow very much akin to the spatial immediacy of the Theater of Cruelty. Artaud continues,

We want to have the same material means, lighting, extras, and resources at our disposal for a stage show, as are daily squandered on reels of film, where everything that is active and magic about such a display is lost forever. (85).

Again, the interest here is, bizarrely enough, on the theatricality of cinematic production. In an oblique way, Artaud thus gestures towards the same set of questions opened up by closet film: the introduction of the elements of cinematic *production* into another medium. Even if film itself is a superficial waste, the live making of the film is itself a kind of definitional Theater of Cruelty par excellence, an assaulting barrage that closes the gap between life and theater. Perhaps the Theater of Cruelty's debt to Artaud's thinking (and repression of thinking) about cinema, can be best summed up by his oddly Eisensteinian assessment in "Oriental and Western Theatre," that, "A playwright who uses nothing but words is not needed and must give way to specialists in objective, animated enchantment" (54).

### ***Benjamin Fondane and the Formal Foundation of Closet Film***

Let us now turn to one such specialist. In 1928, Benjamin Fondane, a Romanian expatriate who had moved to Paris and become involved there with the Surrealist Movement, declared: " 'Let us open the period of unperformable scenarios' " (qtd. in Matthews 74; the French has "*scénarios injouables*"). Matthews argues that whereas some other Surrealist poets



produced “awkward, unpolished imitations of the movies” (74), Fondane followed “a direction of thought in which the projection of the ‘film’ becomes conceivable only on the screen of the imagination... His is a form of a film scenario that actively resists adaptation to the cinema” (74). Fondane was thus the earliest practitioner of the closet film in the west, following Akutagawa’s major efforts by only a year. It is almost certainly clear that Fondane and the other French Surrealists developed the idea independently from Akutagawa, who was relatively unknown outside of Japan until 1950, when Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* was released to massive international acclaim. The film, which was based on one of Akutagawa’s short stories and took its name from another, catapulted Akutagawa into international awareness. Jeffrey Angles notes that while Akutagawa was “among the earliest contemporary authors to be translated into English. Several translations appeared during the prewar period,” most of these circulated only within Japan and not abroad. I have not been able to find any translations in French of Akutagawa’s works that date from before 1950. Though the years 1950-1955 certainly saw a veritable explosion of Akutagawa’s works in French, he was likely unknown even in literary circles before that, and certainly would not have been familiar or even available to the Surrealists in the late twenties.

Fondane called his first explorations into what I am now calling closet films “*ciné-poéms*.” Matthews argues that Fondane’s decree that these scenarios should indeed be unfilmable (*injouables*) constituted “less as a confession of failure than the expression of a wish to go beyond the technical restrictions of the film as form, in the direction of enlarged imaginative freedom” (74). Fondane published his first collection of these ciné-poéms, *Trois Scénarii*, in 1928. This, in other words, is an excellent place to look for Surrealist Cinema, albeit of a potential kind. But Matthews doesn’t offer more than a brief gloss of Fondane; rather, he

shifts his attention to a long chapter on—who else?—Bunuel, following the trend of isolating Surrealist Cinema to an extremely limited number of produced films.

Recently, however, we have seen a growing appreciation of Fondane's work, especially in the context of his Romanian Jewish expatriat standing—Fondane was killed in Auschwitz in 1944. Benjamin Ivry writes about this recent trend within France, but laments the lack of international fanfare around his work. Ivry argues that Fondane “deserves to be celebrated outside France, as well, as his far-ranging gifts and accomplishments are at the heart of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish artistic and philosophical modernism” (np). Ivry emphasizes Fondane's Jewishness and the theme of Jewishness in his oeuvre, almost to the exclusion of other avenues into his work. And though Ivry notes, “As a great lover of film (and director of “Tararira,” a now sadly lost 1936 musical filmed in Argentina), Fondane did not take kindly to the advent of talkies, observing, “ ‘As soon as films become garrulous, they become nationalist’ ” (np), he does not anywhere mention his early ciné-poéms. Of course, this is probably a fair assessment, and, to be sure, even in the small world of Fondane studies his early experimental closet films constitute marginalia. But they *are* very interesting from the perspective of the present study, however, as the earliest western examples of the genre. Fondane was one of the first to publish a collection of writings formatted entirely as film scenarios, but clearly intended to be published as literary texts without any real eye towards film production.

One critic to make note of Fondane's intriguing works in the specific context of Surrealist Cinema is Peter Christenson, who in his essay included in Rudolph Kuenzli's major volume *Dada and Surrealist Film* draws attention to Fondane's ciné-poéms. While ultimately Christenson neither contextualizes Fondane within a broader concept of filmic literature or closet film, nor does he analyze the formal idiosyncrasy of Fondane's scenarios themselves, he does an

excellent job establishing the context and terms in which Fondane was operating and experimenting. He writes, “Fondane’s own six-page preface, ‘2x2,’ to the scenarios also does not discuss the filmscripts themselves, only the rationale behind them. Fondane, who began as a symbolist poet, writing in his native Romanian, wanted his scenarios to be read only, not filmed” (72), thereby establishing, more-or-less definitively, the closet film avant-la-lettre. Here is the most important passage of “2x2,” translated (by my estimation very well) by Christenson:

Let us therefore inaugurate the era of unfilmable scenarios. A little of the amazing beauty of a foetus can be found there. Let us say at once that these scenarios written to be read will be suddenly drowned by literature (note the trace of acid in my cinemoems), the true scenario being by nature very difficult to read and impossible to write. But then why deliberately hold on to this nothingness? Because a part of myself which poetry represses, in order to be able to pose its own agonizing questions, has just found in the cinema an all-purpose amplifier” (qtd. in Christenson 72).

Fondane’s formulation, that cinema amplifies what poetry represses, is a remarkable one (In Chapters Three and Four I will discuss at length ways of thinking about how the closet film form has an *amplifying* effect), and sets the up the basic conceit of the genre quite eloquently. For it is precisely through the generation of multiple potential anterior realities offered by the specifically closeted nature of this film form that such amplification occurs. If poetry tends to point inward—at the text itself—then closet film gestures out: to the world of film *production* as well as the many potential films themselves. A read scenario is an occasion for the reader to imagine making the film as much as it is one for spectating it.

Christenson locates these closet films in their particular Dadaist context. He asserts, “The nihilistic and catastrophic element of Dada is apparent in the idea of films which cannot be filmed; they do not harden into works of art, but exist as events in the readers’ mind” (73). Taking this a step further, Christenson argues that these works constituted a critique of Surrealism and sympathize with the older aesthetics of Dada. He states, “Fondane’s scenarios

should be seen in the Dadaist tradition of returning to a zero state and beginning anew... *Trois Scenarii* makes a fitting close to the Dada era of metaphysical questioning. Even the film is gone” (83). The radical gesture and inherent absurdism of the form, in other words, is more closely in line with Dadaist principles than with Surrealist experimentation. Notably, however, Christenson makes this argument as much on the grounds of the confusing content of the scenarios as on their idiosyncratic form, claiming that “The lack of causation for many actions allows the reader to mentally project a film for himself/herself in which images will fill in some, but not all, of these gaps” (76). Not only is the form itself a return to ground zero, a beginning anew, but also at every turn the scenarios, through their very obliqueness—their frequent metalepsis, the “gaps” in their plots—encourage a parallel return to the zero state of the story. But we might qualify any suggestion that Fondane’s closet films constitute a kind of throwing up one’s hands at the seeming impasses of film poetry—that they tear down everything and start from something wholly new—and rather understand them in the specific context of a careful fusion of two forms—silent film scenario free verse—and geared towards specific literary effects.

Take for example, Fondane’s own epigraph to his *Trois Scenarii*: “The cuts and other technical information included in the text of these three *cinépoems* should not be understood as oblique references to film direction; they were merely intended to facilitate the creation of a temporary state of mind that the memory destroys along with the act of reading.” The emphasis here is on the creation of something already understood to be fleeting and ethereal, rather than some kind of reactionary or destructive force. Like Akutagawa, whose closet films are sometimes understood as reactionary and anti-cinematic, Fondane seems less interested in resisting the cinema in favor of literature than he is in creating a wholly new fusion out of

multiple intersecting forms. And in his attempt to do so in a way that plumbs the unconscious with absurdist juxtapositions, his work is at least as Surrealist as it is Dadaist. What is also clear from this epigraph is Fondane's awareness of the peculiar phenomenology of closet film form, which "facilitate[s] the creation of a temporary state of mind." This is precisely what it does so uniquely, for, like closet drama, closet film offers the reader an opportunity to read the text as a literary one while simultaneously imagining the potential film it references, as well as the production of that film. The difference is one of degree, since the screenplay bears so much less cultural capital than the playscript, but also degree of complication, since we—in the age of cinema—already understand texts through a kind of internalized cinematic lens. To read a poetic film scenario thus engenders multiple possibilities for the "state of mind" of the reader. It is a highly subjective experience that necessitates the dialectical suspension in the mind of the reader of multiple simultaneously ontological states for the diegetic world of the text, its potential filmic product(s), and the production process of realizing that text into film.

To achieve this end and capitalize on the specific formal potentialities of the closet film genre, Fondane employs a new literary device I would like to call *Surrealist Closet-Montage*. *Barre fixe*, which Quimby Melton translates as "Horizontal Bar" in his recent translation, opens much like a typical scenario. The first section seems fairly filmable and references the conceits of many typical silent films of the 1920s:

7      on the sidewalk a laborer reads a newspaper  
8      the young man's head leans out of the poster over the shoulder of the  
      laborer he reads:  
9      "Freedom!"  
10     the worker throws down the paper and runs away  
11     the young man steps down and picks up the paper  
12     he leafs through it for a moment  
13     and puts it back where he found it  
14     seen from behind the young man busies himself in front of the poster. (np)

The numbered sections seem to delineate individual camera shots, split mostly upon the lines of individual actions. The separate shot for “Freedom!” (9) gestures towards either an insert of the newspaper or a title card with the text on it. The head painted on the advertisement coming out of the poster is a familiar conceit, easy enough to do with one superimposition. But very soon after this, weirder techniques emerge in the form, and not just at the level of absurd individual shots that strain credulity and filmability, of which there are plenty, such as “60 a half-kangaroo, half-human child files a complaint” (np). Similarly, in *Paupières Mûres*, which Melton translates as “Eyes Wide Open,” though it more literally means, “mature eyelids” or “ripe eyelids” or, most surrealistically, “blackberry eyelids,” there are similar moments of technical challenge and absurdist imagery, such as “32 the unconscious man’s respiratory tract, his lungs expanding and contracting faster and faster until they detach — dead leaves” (np). And, on the other hand, there are moments of comically overspecific description, which seem to resist filmability from the other end of the ironic spectrum: “72 view of the *café* interior at a 57° angle” (np). In his Translator’s Notes, Quimby Melton sums up these sorts of devices:

Assuming it isn’t a simple printing error, which I think we’re safe in doing, one can interpret the absence of scenes 17 and 33-38, the repetition of scene 18, and the *cinépoem*’s other ambiguities — e.g., Fondane’s refusal to describe the murder method in scene 30, provide actual dialogue for his “pontificating man” in scene 40, or describe the contents of the newspaper page in scene 69 — a number of different ways: it helps create a highly subjective text that invites experimentation and individualized reading experiences; it adds another, formal layer of surrealism to the text; it allows Fondane to challenge the ways in which texts are ordinarily presented and read; and it allows Fondane to interrupt and manipulate the reading experience and, reminiscent of the metatheatricality of Brechtian epic theatre, emphasize the artificiality of the text, that is, remind the reader s/he is reading a text or, more specifically, a *cinépoem*. However, perhaps most importantly for Lesescenario studies, by sacrificing the script’s directive objectivity and syuzhet clarity, which all production-oriented filmscripts are expected to have, Fondane’s technique also weaves a strong anti-production sensibility into the text. (This is to say nothing of the various “special effect” challenges and technical impossibilities Fondane’s script would have presented to early 20th century filmmakers). (np)

But it is not so much in such individual instances that Fondane's formal techniques best capitalize on the scenario form. Rather, it is in the way that Fondane combines multiple shots together that the truly closeted elements of this closet film come to the fore. Take for example:

22     cut to a boy  
23     of whom nothing remains but a skeleton holding a satchel under its arm.  
      (np)

Though it is easy to simply read through *Barre Fixe* as a kind of fever dream poem, if you stop and consider the formal eccentricities of a passage like this something fascinating emerges. In a film, you cannot see the description of a character introduced in one shot in a different shot than the one that introduces him. That is, if we *see* the boy in Shot 22, it cannot be *revealed* a moment later that there is nothing left of him but a skeleton. We could choose to adapt this conceit by dissolving from a “boy” to a “skeleton” in one shot to the next, but since there is no specification here to do so, that would be a liberty not justified by the script. The effect here, in other words, is highly literary, and very anti-production. In fact, it constitutes a thing in this closet film that is quite literally technically unfilmable, because what is achieved here can only be done so by *reading* the scenario. Ironically, this is done right at the moment where direct technical information, in the form of the “cut to,” intrudes into the text. At the moment where the text most insists upon its scriptic function, calling the reader's attention to the filmic detail of editing, it simultaneously sweeps the rug out from the conceit of filmability by producing a purely literary effect that is untranslatable to cinema. This is the phenomenon I am calling Surrealist Closet-Montage, and it is a paradigmatic formulation of Closet Film, and by extension Potential Cinema itself.

Fondane exercises this technique throughout the *Scenarii*. Later in *Barre Fixe*, he writes:

101     cut to an ostrich  
102     eating an Eskimo. (np)

The primary question here involves how we conceive—and necessarily *re-conceive*—Shot 101 as we read this text. In the potential film referenced by the text, in Shot 101 is the ostrich eating the Eskimo? Or does the ostrich only begin to eat the Eskimo in the next shot? While this line of questioning might seem like we are quibbling over minutiae, it is actually precisely this formal oddity that constitutes the ground upon which the whole ciné-poem functions. The irony of the impossibility here is what engenders the humor, and the formal impossibility of shooting this as it is written forms the backdrop for the impossibility of the image itself, in which characters from literally opposite ends of the world are doubly inverted by their unusual pecking order, if you will. This is, in other words, an incredibly *economic* structure for accomplishing some of the primary literary effects sought by Surrealist authors in late 1920s Paris. The juxtaposition of bizarre symbolically laden images is rendered fantastically impossible. It is, in Fondane’s own terms, calibrated to “facilitate the creation of a temporary state of mind,” in which the unconscious can be accessed in a deep and innovative manner.

It is perhaps for this reason that mannequins play a distinct role in both *Barre Fixe* and *Paupières Mûres*, uncannily recalling the emphasis on puppets in Akutagawa’s *Asakusa Park* (See Chapter One). In *Barre Fixe*, “29 a group of mannequins stands at attention and immediately begins marching” (np), and then later the young woman flirted with by the young man transforms into a mannequin: “49 the young woman is a mannequin who breaks in his hands” (np). These images are recalled in *Paupières Mûres* when we see,

- 21 a pale tailor's mannequin in a shop window
- 22 applauds wildly with both hands. (np)

Both scenarios involve a basic love story between a young man and a young woman that goes surrealistically awry, and include murder and misunderstandings which result in mob chase



scenes. Typical of Surrealistic films (and literature), it is difficult to summarize anything like a plot, and in both cases what we have mostly gestures toward story and narrative in the form of a montage of absurdly juxtaposed images. So it is interesting that mannequins are an imagistic conceit that adheres not only in these closet films, but in totally independent Japanese ones as well. On one hand, it is clear that the mannequin-coming-to-life is a trope that silent film was able to handle with singular aplomb, the moving picture being able to perform this “trick” more nimbly than the stage, and more viscerally than literature. But, on a deeper level, what the trope foregrounds is the uncertainty between the animate and inanimate, the static and the moving. The mannequin reveals itself as alive through its ability to move, which is registered as a purely visual phenomenon. It is therefore not just a cinematic trope, but a cinematic trope that speaks to the essence of what cinema is perceived to have over and above the literary text: the ability to shock and delight with the visual spectacle of the unexpected, inanimate thing seeming to come to life. Or, on the other hand, the human woman who becomes a mannequin and subsequently breaks in the hands of the young man. These images gesture directly toward the question of what is real and what is illusion, as well as what is possible and what is impossible in the space between filmic and literary art.

### ***Surrealism, Realism, and the Real***

And at the same time it [surrealism] is in search of an absolute event, in which man manifests himself with all his possibilities, that is to say, as the entirety that surpasses them. It is an absolute event, the revelation of the *real* functioning of thought by automatic writing. It is an absolute event in which *everything is realized*, the discovery of a ‘certain point of mind in which life and death, the real the imaginary, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease being perceived as contradictory.

— André Breton

Surrealism, as a movement, has a basically ontological crux: it is a collection of ideas organized around the problematic relationship of art to being, and to questions about art and the Real. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the quarrel that occurred between the two factions of poets, each self-applying the title Surrealists, over the potential of cinema. As Kovács relates, in October 1924 a group of young poets, influenced by Appolinaire, published their own manifesto of Surrealism *contra* the group that would become “the Surrealists,” headed by André Breton. Their outlet was the first (and last) issue of *Surrealisme*, in which they denounced the other Surrealists’ emphasis on dream and thought and advocated the superiority of reality and the physical (25-26). It was this group, under the leadership of Ivan Goll, that vouched for the cinema in different terms: “Film is the most realistic art possible, pure art. Films of imagination are impure (“Manifeste de surrealisme,” *Surrealisme*, October 1924).” So where Breton’s group looked to the cinema for its potentialities in exploring the poetic, the emotional, and the psychological, Goll’s group of anti-surrealists, or perhaps alter-surrealists, loved cinema for a different, and perhaps obverse reason: aptitude for materialism, its attachment to the concrete and the real.

What is key here is the way that the group that would come to be called the Surrealists defined their own artistic relationship with the cinema as specifically opposed to Realism. Their

stance on cinema, in other words, was defined against the conception that the cinematic medium affords a special connection to representing reality authentically. J.H. Matthews states: “Among the cinema’s prime qualities, generally acknowledged even by those who would not accept this as its supreme virtue, is a remarkable aptitude for recording reality with admirable fidelity” (vii). But “In sharp contrast, the surrealists’ approach to movies takes its point of departure in the conviction boldly summarized by one of their leading spokesmen on film, Jacques B. Brunius, that the cinema is ‘the least realist art’ ” (vii). In this context it makes quite a lot of sense that Surrealist Cinema would be keep cinema itself at arm’s length. The Surrealist closet film thus emerges in part out of this schism, or perhaps as a way of reconciling Breton’s emphasis on the unconscious and the poetic with Goll’s on cinematic Realism. Fondane’s closet films, like a certain strain of Artaud’s thought, rewrite Realism within the confines of the closet film. There is neither a text nor a film that faithfully represents an anterior reality, but the text certainly represents the reality of the potential film it generates in a faithfully mimetic way. The model of realism emphasized by the Surrealist closet film—and in this it is indicative of the genre as a whole—is thus one in which the mimetic occurs at the level of representing not an *anterior* reality, but on the potential filmic reality gestured to by the text itself.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE QUEER BLACK CLOSET FILM

One of the rare texts to have been treated as a closet film, James Baldwin's *One Day When I Was Lost: A Scenario Based on Alex Haley's The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is a screenplay that was never made into a film as such. Rather, under unique and auspicious circumstances (discussed below), Baldwin published the screenplay in book form, as a literary work. Brian Norman, in an essay that eloquently and generatively outlines the text's unique publication history and its relation to American race politics and the limits of cinematic representation, describes the piece as something he "can only call a 'closet screenplay' " (103). Norman's befuddlement with how to contextualize such a work bespeaks the gaping hole of critical work in the field. That "closet screenplay" is the "only" term he can even *think* of demonstrates the fundamental absence of a theoretical grounding for the genre. There is clearly no existing technical vocabulary readily available here. For one thing, it is not immediately clear if the "closet," whether you call it a closet film or a closet screenplay or whatever, is even the most proper epithet in this case. For, at first glance, the closet is organized around the concept of *intention*, works not *meant* or *intended* for the stage or for film production (See Introduction). The *OED* defines the closet drama, for example, as "a play intended to be read rather than performed; such plays collectively." The most immediate correlate, we should think, in the world of cinema, should therefore be a screenplay not *intended* to be filmed. But, as Norman notes, Baldwin clearly intended this project to be made into an actual film, and the history of Baldwin's work on the project is well documented in, for example, his own *No Name in the Street* (1972), as well as other sources, such as his secretary David Leeming's biography of Baldwin (1994). As Norman relates, "Shortly after Malcolm's murder in 1965, Hollywood

approached Baldwin to adapt the *Autobiography*” (104). However, later Baldwin “hastily published his original version of the script in 1972 as *One Day, When I was Lost*, and split town,” (105) after he realized that Hollywood would inevitably turn “Malcolm X into yet another American monument on tourist expeditions into American history. With this danger in mind, Baldwin turned to his ‘scenario’ to extend the unfinished project of Malcolm X” (109, emphasis original). For example: “Baldwin’s former secretary, David Leeming, notes that familiar actor-heroes were considered for the role of Malcolm X, even Charlton Heston—‘darkened up a bit’ ” (104). What emerges in Baldwin’s and Leeming’s accounts is that when it became clear Hollywood would take the project away from Baldwin, he used literary publication as a method of protecting the integrity of his work, as well as securing the copyright on his portion of work on the project.

We might thus understand *One Day When I Was Lost* as a “closet” film in the sense that we can understand its publication as a kind of metaphoric retreat into the closet of small-scale literary circulation instead of the mass appeal of, say, Spike Lee’s eventual film version.<sup>12</sup> This would be very much akin to Catherine Burroughs’s discussion of pseudo-closet dramas labeled under the heading of “disappointed authorship” (217), in which playwrights have “aspired to theatrical success and then failed—and who then published their work so that it might be assessed anew, perhaps even eventually performed” (217). Burroughs insists that “closet drama should be framed... apart” (217) from instances of “disappointed authorship,” and likewise closet film should not be confused with instances in which the closet is an afterthought.

However, Baldwin’s work is uniquely positioned here as a work that was already *somewhat* of a

---

<sup>12</sup> Norman notes that “[t]he role of James Baldwin’s script in Spike Lee’s film has been thoroughly downplayed, dismissed, or in some way denied. Lee mentions Baldwin’s script as one of many from which he worked, and though he claims it to be the best, he succinctly dismisses it as lacking a finished ending, noting Baldwin’s heavy drinking and the assistance of Arnold Perl” (108). In other words, Baldwin’s screenplay isn’t even *totally* closeted

closet film *before* its author was disappointed by its failure to be produced. Partly, this is because we can also understand Baldwin's move to publish-as-literary-work as strategic, and even necessary. In other words, its failure was inbuilt, and Baldwin seems to have been aware of this even in writing it. Norman argues that "the 'closet screenplay' seems an appropriate vehicle for a version of Malcolm X written by a queer writer caught between a virulently homophobic Black Nationalist movement in one corner and a reactionary Nixon-era America in another" (103), because it

offers a *formal* lesson in the *politics* of 'mainstream' markets, crossover campaigns, and race relations at the salt point in American history where calls for integration recede and self-determination surfaces on a national scene increasingly dominated by visual culture. Further, the circulating print script might offer an example of a 'queer' reading practice that does not shut down questions of history, experience, and self-examination with the trump card of settled identity. (103)

Implicitly making the move Nick Salvato does more overtly and sweepingly in *Uncloseting Drama*, Norman thus equates the strategic closeting of his screenplay with a queer political practice. Reading Baldwin's film, rather than seeing it, offers its audience a different, and possibly *queerer*, experience of its content.

Another way to understand Baldwin's script in the context of the queer closet is that the term "closet drama" often refers not necessarily to the *intention* of the author, but to the technical—or, less often, sociopolitical—unstageability of the play. In this case, we might see Baldwin's work as in a sense beyond the limits of cinematic representation because of its controversial racial and political content. And, unlike drama, because of the hyper-collaborative and industrial nature of the cinema (movies, until very recently, could very literally not be made without the sort of funding that occludes individual and small-scale endeavor), we might understand this kind of constitutive censorship as very much a *technical* limitation of film.

---

at all: portions of it find their way into Lee's film.

Indeed, as this chapter will show, the closet film in general is perhaps most fully actualized when depicting the impotentialities of cinematic representation: that which cannot be filmed, but can be written about. Not only in the work of James Baldwin, but also in closet films by William Burroughs and Darius James, the closet of closet screenplay is a resoundingly queer one.

### ***The Closet as a Formal Problem***

Norman's analysis of Baldwin's relation to queer black politics is accurate overall, but his interest in the cultural and political context of the work dominates perhaps to the exclusion of a detailed examination of the text's specific formal properties. Indeed, he argues:

In the end, the relation between text and image brokered by the never-filmed 'scenario' is little concerned with generic differences between print and visual cultures or formal differences between film and text. The 'closet screenplay' makes visible the racial propriety of an increasingly visual popular culture while it negotiates between seemingly immiscible poles: white and black, man and woman, text and image, history and present, Harlem and Hollywood. (115)

In other words, the formal specificities of the "closet screenplay" only matter in relation to the contextual political "closeting" of certain unspeakabilities about race. But while much of Norman's analysis seems accurate, relevant, and clearly important, he (I think unnecessarily) jettisons from his discussion potentially interesting questions about "generic differences between print and visual cultures or formal differences between film and text." For example, Norman never discusses the implications of Baldwin's noteworthy choice of "scenario," a term for the pre-sound textual documents used in the production of *silent* films, nor does Norman discuss the repeated emphasis on multiple levels of refracted gazing (the opening lines: "We see the driver's bespectacled eyes in the rearview mirror: eyes both haunted and alert" (1)), that seem to

foreground the problematics of visual representation in a screenplay bound for literary publication.

Baldwin's script is mostly devoid of explicitly filmic references. There are no real scene headings explaining location or time of day, and there are very few directions regarding camera placement or other production details. But what is most fascinating (and what can only be arrived at by looking at the specific formal properties of the text and its complex negotiation of the "generic differences between print and visual cultures or formal differences between film and text" that Norman overlooks), is the way that what few direct invocations of filmic production do occur, do so at the moments of greatest affect and intensity. For example, there is a rare but extremely powerfully used "Close-up" (99) on Malcolm's face as he watches a wealthy white man get beaten by a black prostitute he was pimping. We see only Malcolm's face, hear them in voice-over (99-100). Another intense moment, where Archie is set to possibly kill Malcolm for allegedly cheating him at the numbers racket, and Archie shows up at the bar and pulls a gun on him, is where we get "MALCOLM's back is now to the camera" (111). There are explicit references to close-ups again when Malcolm and Sophia receive their prison sentences (119-120), and again on Malcolm and a prison guard at a tense moment when Luther is talking about blacks brainwashed into thinking they're white and starting a new country (126), then a whole slew of CUs in the tense scene where Luther seems to convince Malcolm to embrace his blackness and stop putting shit in his hair, etc., to look like the white devils who raped his mother and killed his father (129-131).

In other words, one line of thinking would suggest, at the moment when the burden of mimesis is felt most heavily, when the reader of this literary text is most significantly bound up in the verisimilar representation of its characters and events, the traditionally realist fantasy is



punctured by the reminder of cinematic impotentiality, the nonfilm that the script invokes. But another way of thinking would suggest that our attention is not drawn away from mimetic illusion here, but rather that the explicit filmic references invoke for us a different, perhaps intermediary mimesis: that the mimetic illusion conjured by the reading of this text is not one of an anterior reality, but rather of the film that it plays in our heads while we read. Thus this question, essentially of whether references to the camera here are jarring or not, is potentially a question about different kinds of readers, or different modes of reading. In turn, it raises the further question of the extent to which this same dynamic plays out while reading novels. And what consequences does that have for models of Realism in general?

***Further Down the Queer Black Closet Film Rabbit Hole...***

“One says to oneself: Either this guy is literally crazy or I’m in the presence of a real writer. I think that both possibilities should be entertained.”

—Dany Laferriere on Darius James

Ultimately, Norman’s central thesis, that the “closet” of literature offers a good platform for understanding racial dynamics in ways that are not accessible by film, is perhaps best borne out by another queer black closet film. Actually, *Negrophobia: An Urban Parable: A Novel* (1992), by Darius James (AKA “Dr. Snakeskin”), is probably the single best and most fully “realized” example of the closet film genre—I say “realized,” in scare-quotes, because I am also arguing that this genre is defined by its relation to potentiality explicitly *against* an understanding of the text as actualized, as realized totality. We might say that this text is the most fully “realized” closet film in the sense that it most fully amplifies the potentialities of the genre. To put it more simply, *Negrophobia* is literally the *only* work that fully and totally

answers the fundamental question that first instigated this entire project of potential cinema for me in the first place: *are there any novels out there that are written in the form of the screenplay, like closet dramas are poems written in the form of plays?* While there are myriad works that fit this description in some ways but not in others, stunningly *Negrophobia* is, to my knowledge, the *only* thing we can totally and appropriately call “a novel written in screenplay format.”

In the (not surprisingly extremely scant) critical literature on *Negrophobia*, however, this central fact of the novel has been largely overlooked. Ronald A. T. Judy’s “Irony and the Asymptotes of the Hyperbola” (1998) provides the first critical treatment of the novel, but examines mostly its publication history and the controversy surrounding its cover design, which originally featured an image of the black “Sambo” character and was later changed to a Samboesque mask. It was this controversy that the publishing house, Carol, sought to capitalize upon, but which ultimately, to some degree, backfired. Judy reads *Negrophobia* as a “contemporary novel that illustrates the danger of identifying representation with experience” (167). And though he does eloquently frame the text’s idiosyncrasy—“*Negrophobia* does not fit any of the recognized categories of literature, not even that of postmodern cult art. It is unrecognizable” (168)—the novel’s specific formal uniqueness is never discussed. In fact, though Judy does quote long passages, he never explicitly mentions its screenplay format except when he quotes Kirkus Review’s initial feature on the then-forthcoming novel, which mentions that it is “Written in the form of a screenplay” (qtd. in Judy 168). Judy is not interested in formal questions. Fair enough. He is, on the other hand, interested in examining the nexus of art commodification and black representational politics in the avant-garde art world, and he makes an excellent case for *Negrophobia*’s originality and productive case history. But taking the novel’s representational politics as the first fact of the text and largely ignoring the novel’s formal idiosyncrasy leads to a

few moments when its form *is* tangentially glossed: “The narrative of *Negrophobia* provides no clear perspective, no point of view from which it can be determined when one reality collides or slips into another. The recurring shooting directions make the autonomy of each scene even more pronounced, resulting in an aggregate of radically disjunctive episodes, whose relationship to one another is indeterminate” (181-182). That is a weird way to describe this novel, as if it were simply prose fiction that had shot descriptions interspersed throughout and not literally written almost entirely in screenplay formatting. Clearly, without a conception of something like the “closet film” to begin with, texts like *Negrophobia* prove literally illegible to many readers.

The only other article (to my knowledge) that takes up a reading of *Negrophobia* at length is Rolland Murray’s more recent “Black Crisis Shuffle: Fiction, Race, and Simulation” (2008), which offers extended readings of *Negrophobia* as well as Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) as novels which “usefully trouble existing strategies for reading contemporary culture” (215). Basically, argues Murray, these novels explore new potential modes for representing blackness without being bogged down by discourses focused on communal belonging and authenticity. They each open up dialectical potentials for black representation that don’t fall into reductive categorization. Instead, “They trade in the surprising aesthetic and political potential made available by racial identities that are more malleable and recombinant precisely because they have been so thoroughly abstracted from any social context but that of the commodity” (215). Ultimately, the article’s thesis is that “Beatty and James write a black postmodernity that insists upon greater attentiveness to the relationship between an evolving political economy and the most fundamental assumptions of the African American literary and critical tradition” (215). This seems both productive and accurate to me, though to my mind one of the most productive ways the novel engages with “an evolving political economy” is through

its incredibly distinctive engagement with intermediality and the specific formal fact of its closetedness. Murray gestures vaguely in this direction, but ultimately has nothing to say about the novel's formal structure: "James positions *Negrophobia* squarely within the minstrel tradition, and his work revels in the malleability that these mass-produced racial signifiers offer to the novelist. At the same time, the novel foregrounds the debilitating effects that attend these forms" (216). Even more-so than was the case with *Judy*, Murray is interested in foregrounding the text's engagement with identity politics and the representation of black characters: "James asks us to read *Negrophobia* as a political counter to America's long history of racist representation" (217), he argues. However, "The narrative seems bent instead on troubling the recovery of just such facile political readings. It repeatedly stages the failure of key characters to reconfigure racist iconography in the guise of liberation. And it is this disintegrative dimension of the novel's aesthetic that can be most adequately interpreted with reference to late capitalist culture" (218). Ultimately, he asserts, "The novel seems to promise a transformation of white consciousness itself by exposing Bubbles Brazil to an onslaught of a racist detritus that is both of her making and radically estranged from her. But as I will show, the promise of transforming white consciousness is finally a red herring; Bubbles' more revealing purpose in the text is to perform new modes of racial domination" (219).

The fact that *Negrophobia* is written in the form of a screenplay does not go entirely unmentioned, but is entirely foreclosed from the conversation here. Murray states, "The novel presents itself as a screenplay where narration takes the guise of detailed scene descriptions. Throughout this cinematic text, the characters that appear are never presented as if they were actual subjects... There is no reality to race in *Negrophobia* outside the mass production of racial signifiers" (219). Here we see the degree to which the lack of a defined genre is most felt. Like

Norman's befuddled characterization of Baldwin's *Malcolm X* text as something he "can *only* call a 'closet screenplay' " (103, my emphasis), Murray can apparently *only* understand the screenplay formatting of James's novel as a "guise" for a more properly conceived "narration." Sure, the "novel presents itself as a screenplay," but, Murray implies, really it is just a regular old novel, and we can therefore roundly ignore this seeming formal idiosyncrasy. He can then assert, on these grounds, that characters are never "actual subjects" without attending to the specific ontological questions that the closet film raises: if they are not "fictive" or "actual," then what are they? Cinematic? How do we define this specific brand of ontological slipperiness? Here we therefore find a fertile ground for specifically the questions that seem to interest Murray—the way *Negrophobia* engages the problematics of identity politics, late capitalism, etc. Instead he, like Judy, draws a conclusion that seems accessible before one has even read this novel—that, in other words, one could draw simply from judging this book by its cover: "With equal potency, then, the disintegrative logics of late capitalism surface both as a mechanism for countering the hegemony of simulation itself and as a technology for anatomizing the resistant strategies that are the philosophical legacies of black nationalism and poststructuralism" (223).

My initial framework for approaching *Negrophobia* thus involves two key points. First, we need to contextualize this work within the history of the previously unacknowledged closet film genre. While of course we can trace its political lineage through African American and Caribbean literatures, its formal genealogy also has roots in not only American film culture, but in the closet-film form developed first in Tokyo and Paris in the 1920s. Given this context and the overwhelming ignorance of such a genealogy, we should posit that the first and most central fact of *Negrophobia*—before we look to its potential political consequences and the history of its publication and marketing—is precisely that this text is "a novel written in screenplay format."

Not that we cannot call it other things as well. In fact, it calls *itself* a great many things. The title page includes three separate lines of text:

***Negrophobia***

**An Urban Parable**

A Novel

If, in one's confusion, one were to turn to the back copy on the cover jacket for some hope of generic illumination, one would likely find there only further befuddlement. There, Catherine Texier describes the work, "Comic strip, sci-fi flick, vaudeville, black-faced minstrel show, and lyrical poem all rolled into one, *Negrophobia* is a funky, raunchy, angry, hilarious nightmare vision of black culture." *Kirkus Reviews* calls it "...a pop-schlock phantasmagoria." Steve Canon says, "This book is not a novel but a curse which will explode in your mind and cause your bottom to drop out." That all six of the back-jacket blurbs emphasize the *literary* merit of the text perhaps bespeaks the publisher Citadel's especial concern with how to characterize such a novel, as if to say, "It's all these crazy things, but don't worry, it's definitely *literary*." Kathy Acker's entire blurb consists of the sentence, "Darius James is a great writer," a position echoed by George Trow and Joel Rose. Texier notes, "Darius James bursts into literature with a wild, surrealistic imagination," and *Kirkus* calls *Negrophobia* the "the best novel to emerge from New York's Lower East Side literary scene." Trow notes that while James is one of the funniest American writers, he is also "one of the most serious." Joel Rose calls him, among other things, "a nubile perpetrator of the great felony on new literature. This is a writer of blazing intensity. Forever may he wave." Cannon says with this book James "proves himself to be the most promising" of "all the neo-hoodoo cosmogonic jesters." All of this makes for titillating back-copy, but does not exactly clarify what is inside; rather, it serves to radically overdetermine the

formal and generic markers of the text.

If we do flip the thing open, James' epigraphs only add to this obtuse complexity. The first, a parody of a legal disclaimer, blurs the distinction between "fiction" and truth:

**Negrophobia**  
is a work of fiction,  
a product of the author's imagination.  
Any resemblance to any person,  
living or dead,  
is  
purely coincidental.  
*Negrophobia* is a work of fiction.  
Every word is true. Fuck you.  
THE AUTHOR

And the second, a quote from Steve Cannon (of back-jacket-blurb fame), blurs the distinction between history, image and reality:

'Jim, the whole history of this republic is the rape of a white woman and the lynching of a nigger. Those two images.'  
'You're speaking of images.'  
'Images my ass. I'm speaking of reality. That's what makes this swirl go around. The lynching of niggers and the raping of women.'

What is clear then is that this is a text that wants to position itself at the interstice of literary representation ("fiction") and the extra-textual realities they not only reflect, but perhaps *construct* as well. In other words, the reader is set up to read against the paradigm of Realism—understanding the text as a representation of the anterior reality of, say, Darius James' mind, or the social context of race in America, or even American *cinema*. Quite to the contrary, we are encouraged to read along the axis of the incantatory and creative power of its words. Indeed, the book has been marketed to us, before we even get to the text itself, as not only novel, comic strip, sci-fi film, and poem, but also a sort of performance or show, a kind of phantasmagoria, *and even a curse*. In some sense then, the model of a Voodoo spell is invoked here as a mode of reading in which the text acts with or even upon the reader, ostensibly to cleanse us of the

demons of racism instilled in us by previous media images we've already encountered.

Then there are several epigraphs. These establish a more overtly political context for the novel. The first is from Louis Farrakhan, on the "Donahue" show, talking about the guilt and fear white people have for their history of violence against blacks, projecting that violence onto the minds of black people. Donahue, apparently uncomfortable with this line of reasoning, responds: "And we'll be back in just a moment." The second is a related quote from Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," urging those who are oppressed to regain their humanity without becoming oppressors of the oppressors. And the third, slightly pithier quote, is from Michael O'Donoghue: "Sometimes I think this whole world is a big sharecropper's shack. Some of us are niggers. And the rest of us are black." The work done by all three quotes is clearly aimed at dispelling an easy dichotomy of white vs. black, us vs. them, and correspondingly against understanding this novel as on a single side of that—or any—binarism. Farrakhan demonstrates the psychological complexities underlying racial stereotyping, Freire encourages the oppressed "to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well," and O'Donoghue links all of us in a racial enmeshment that rewrites the lines of identity in terms of semantics—the racial epithet "nigger" versus "black—instead of skin color.

All three quotes also gesture pointedly at history. Farrakhan dismisses the racist stereotyping of blacks as violent by wittily—and cogently—remarking, "We do not have a history of killing white people. White people have a history of killing us." Freire describes the process of liberating oppressed and oppressors both as "the great humanistic and historical task." And O'Donoghue's harkening back to the days of sharecropping—which could refer to antebellum sharecropping among poor whites or to post-emancipation sharecropping of black freedmen that persisted in the South until the mid-twentieth century—locates the contextual



setting of what follows in the complex history of racial struggle over several centuries. The text of *Negrophobia* itself is thus in part determined by the rich context of overdetermined generic markers and the complex of racial politics, American history, and collective psychology. Much of this is congealed in the fifth (and final) of the epigraphs, a longer section drawn from James' own "The Blackman's Guide to Seducing White Women With the Amazing Power of Voodoo," which can be found in its entirety in his book *That's Blaxploitation: Roots of the Baadasssss 'Tude (Rated X by an All-Whyte Jury)* (1995). There, he describes Voodoo as "a powerful creative vehicle for pushing beyond the conventional modes of being into the self's dangerous terrain" (2), which in effect defines the project of the novel itself: it is a text whose "mode of being" is the very object of inquiry. The first question we have to ask about *Negrophobia*, in other words, is: what *is* this thing?

Judging from the cover, front matter, and back matter, perhaps the one thing we likely would *not* presume *Negrophobia* to "be" upon beginning to read it, is a "screenplay," a word mentioned only once, on the inside front jacket synopsis from the *Village Voice*.<sup>13</sup> If we approach this text thinking that it is going to be a "parable," a "novel," a "comic strip," or a Voodoo curse, we are likely to be surprised when the format is, to a tee, that of the modern screenplay. It begins like this:

OPEN ON:

INT. Brownstown in Manhattan's Upper West Side—Bedroom—Dawn.

EXTREME CLOSE-UP OF A JOINT balanced on the rim of a silver ashtray. (3)

From the very outset, unlike the "closet films" of Akutagawa or the Surrealists, what we have

---

<sup>13</sup> I feel confident in so closing analyzing the materiality of this book itself for several reasons. For one thing, all the preparatory material is vital to the experience of reading *Negrophobia*, since the novel is both so unexpected (you will *not* have seen this coming) and also specifically *about* the demons you bring *to* it, the preconceptions about race, about the novel in general, and the way film and other visual media influence or even construct our subjectivities. Another reason is that, to my knowledge, the book has seen only two printings (the hardback and subsequent paperback), has been read by relatively few people, and is probably totally unknown in most critical literary circles. I would be tempted to suggest that I expect it to have a devoted cult following, except that it does

here appears, unambiguously, in the form of screenplay. In contrast to its exterior framing—as a novel, published in the form of a book—the text itself is rendered in scrupulous screenplay formatting. In fact, *Negrophobia*’s only failure to reflect something like normal or typical screenplay formatting is that it goes perhaps *too* far out of its way to appear as such. There are too many specific camera directions, too many production-oriented notes, in comparison with most normal shooting scripts. It reads, in some sense then, more like some kind of hyper-screenplay. Notes for “SFX: The joint’s sizzle is amplified, punctuated by the sound of pot seeds popping” (3) would, in a normal production-oriented shooting script, probably look more like this: “The joint SIZZLES, punctuated by the sound of pot seeds POPPING.” James here manages to amplify both the literary quality of the phrasing, to establish tone and setting, as well as relentlessly draw the reader’s attention to its scriptic quality. The reader is reminded, again and again, that this is a screenplay, that this is a production document for a film (that of course, as I will discuss below, cannot possibly be produced), and invocations of filmic notes like “SFX” reinscribe this continually. In the first scene alone, the reader confronts repetitions regarding “camera pans” (3, 4), “Over-the-shoulder” shots (5), and “camera tilts” (6), as well as repeated references to specific camera movements, such as “Dolly in for a close shot of Bubble’s face” (7), or “Stop tilt on face for head shot” (7). The lack of clarity in this last direction—what exactly is a “head shot?”—betrays perhaps most of all that the commitment here is not to screenplay realism, faithfully duplicating the production documents of actual films, but to a kind of exaggerated and hyperfilmic performance of cinematic production. Because, even as the text over-indulges in production-oriented notes and camera directions, it totally lacks scene numbers, which would be pivotal if one were to realize *Negrophobia* as an actual film—far more necessary than all the minutiae of camera movement, etc., which normally occupy the space of

---

not even have a Wikipedia entry (as of 25 November 2013).

the director's mind, notes, and/or shot list, but *not* the script.

But, unsurprisingly, *Negrophobia* is unlikely to be made into an actual film any time soon. The closest it has come was suggested by James himself in a 1994 interview with Cups Magazine,

John Cusack and Steve Pink, who have a motion picture deal with Paramount, and a theatrical company called New Crimes, which is out of Chicago, are supposedly going to have me flown out to LA to work on a live theatrical production of *Negrophobia* with musical assistance from the band, Fishbone. (np)

This project was never realized, and attempts at translations of *Negrophobia* to film and stage have been almost as fruitless as those, for example, into other languages. In an interview by Quimby Melton with Hiroo Yagamata, who translated into Japanese not only *Negrophobia* but also *The Last Words of Dutch Schultz*, Yamagata says of the former:

Its reception has been non-existent. Hakusuisha, the publisher, asked me to do it. They wanted to start a new series of avant-garde US writers which they called "Writers-X." The series included Acker, Michael Blumlein, Karen Tei Yamashita, several others. Has it sold well? No. They printed 3000 copies, I think, but it never sold out. I'm quite famous as a translator, and statistically speaking, my name on the cover manages to generate 2-3000 extra sales. But even I couldn't save Darius James. As you point out, *Negrophobia* was a bit too local. (np)

*Negrophobia*'s lack of attention in Japan is not totally surprising. It is difficult to determine the degree to which the reason for this is due to its idiosyncratic form (screenplay), or its incredibly edgy, provocative, and controversial content. Or perhaps the difficulty here lies in the way the two are so intricately interwoven for James. In the aforementioned interview with Cups Magazine, he offers no less than three partial accounts of *Negrophobia*'s singular design. On the most basic level, congruent with many filmmakers and screenwriters who turn to the novel as a sort of refuge for work that can be done alone, without the industrial burden of filmic capital, James suggests that *Negrophobia*'s unique format is at least partially the result of pragmatic concerns:

Basically, writing is really inexpensive. It only requires a typewriter, a pen and paper of some kind, or a computer if you can afford it. Originally, as a child, I wanted to write, direct, and star in my own monster movies—which I did. I would do eight millimeter movies and things like that. I was known as the Werewolf of Winchester Avenue by my own playmates. (np)

But in another instance, James also suggests that the “closet” of this closet film has to do with the problem of writing a film outside language:

My problem in writing *Negrophobia* was trying to express things outside of spoken and written language. Its essence is not only about me being at war with racist imagery, it's about me being at war with English. To me, English is a colonial language. Theoretically, I was not intended to speak it. I'm supposed to speak some variation of Indian, Native American or African. So I'm working with concepts that are opposed to me. So I wanted to work with forms and language in a way that was contrary to how we normally process information. (np)

James echoes this sentiment in his interview with Christian Hays preceding the book's release (Summer 1992), when he says, “It's my belief that in order for racism not to have a real psychic effect, Black people who are victims of racism have to take back the imagery of racism and turn it on those who use it against them. It's taking back the vocabulary of racism and redefining it (12). But at his most programmatic (and eloquent), James lays out his agenda (in the later interview) for the novel like this:

One of the ideas for me was that the reader himself, who might have a racist thought after reading *Negrophobia*, would become ill and throw up. But magically, I would like the reader to step back and look at the absurdity of these images and laugh: laugh at the images, laugh at their own racism and not feel cowed by it. And also, black people should laugh at these images and realize that these images are not reflections of black people but rather a reflection of some diseased mind, which is a real distinction. Because some people—and not a lot of them—become critical of the book because they confuse what I'm writing about with the actual lives of black people. My book has nothing to do with the real lives of black people. It has to do with mapping out the terrain of a racist psychology and making fun of that. (np)

All three of these ostensible authorial intentions for the novel play into the deeply complex formal-political structure undergirding its unique form and content, but the latter gestures most

overtly toward its pivotal focus on humor as a source of potential sociopolitical subversion.

James says this even more bluntly in the earlier interview with Hayes, when he says, “Basically, what I’m doing is trying to subvert how one thinks about racist imagery. Every time a person has a racist thought they become physically ill. That’s my intent. How successful I am at doing that I won’t know until the book is out there and people are reading it” (12).

“Primarily,” James adds, “I consider myself a satirist” (14). But the novel’s overall effect is not purely rendered on the trajectory of satire or the comedic. In a very real sense, the idea of reading *Negrophobia* as a kind of curse, or, perhaps more accurately, an *anti-curse*, an exorcism of the demons of racism *via* a specific way of invoking them, is arguably the most plausible reading of the text, and the most convincing explanation for its lack of mainstream circulation. What is most important for our purposes here is that the specific form of the closet film is uniquely and perfectly suited for this vital, if idiosyncratic task. That is, the closet film is potentially the *only* mode of writing in which one can effectively evoke a specific set of racist visual imagery created by and subsisting wholly inside of televisual and cinematic media without simply reproducing it. Since the collaborative and industrial nature of such media prohibits for various reasons (see below) the actual making of a film that fully grapples with the most difficult images embedded in the reader’s unconscious, some kind of closet film is needed to do so. No text does this more explicitly, directly, or effectively than *Negrophobia*. In this way, Darius James has confirmed the radical nature of the form described by Brian Norman in regards to James Baldwin’s *Malcolm* project. That is, that the closet film is precisely the site of radical hybrid forms required by projects attempting to negotiate the cognitive terrain of the history of race in America. But James has gone way, way further. Indeed, we might propose that the extent to which *Negrophobia* goes further than Baldwin’s semi-closeted pseudo-film is inversely

proportional to the extent to which each author has been known and read.

Within the complex nesting (discussed above) involving the various epigrams and front- and back-matter, the short (about 170 pages) quick-paced text of *Negrophobia* is organized around a series of episodes, or we might call them sequences, that seem to take the place of chapters. Multiple individual scenes, demarcated by typical slug lines (i.e., “INT. Brownstone in Manhattan’s Upper West Side—Bedroom—Dawn” (3)), make up these episodes/chapters/sequences, which are demarcated by a full page break and a thick black line, a move which locates them as clearly literary, and non-scriptic. For this reason, “chapters” is likely the best description of these bodies of text, and their presence marks the novel’s most pointed literary formal feature and departure from typical screenplay format. The first of these opens on an “EXTREME CLOSE-UP OF A JOINT” (3)—out of which in a moment the film’s title will gather in the smoke (4)—and pans to a tremendously profane image that instantly renders any conceivable film of *Negrophobia* as markedly unproduceable for political reasons:

In a profusion of fluted-paper-coffins, spilling over the sides of the box, and lying scattered across the tabletop, are several fez-capped, frog-faced fudge figurines. Each leering figurine bears the likeness of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. He clutches candy genitalia in tiny fudge fists. Spurts of white chocolate fleck his thighs. (3)

From the outset then, *Negrophobia* pushes the limits of visual representation by giving us precisely the sort of controversial imagery that few film studios would be interested in manifesting as visual content. The status of these irreverent images of Malcolm X’s mentor, recalled later when a CARTOON BUCKWEED cries out, “Elijah Muhammad didn’t eat no pig tails, but he ate plenty o’ pussy!” (146), are complicated by the fact they are located in the bedroom of Bubbles Brazil, our protagonist. Introduced first as a “DRUG-ADDLED TEENAGE GIRL” (4), Bubbles outlines in a voice-over her personal history on a trajectory from Rocky-

Horror Transvestite Rock through bona fide sixties hippy freak and finally blonde bombshell, “the reigning queen supreme of the cover-girl wet dream” (7). Outfitted lasciviously in Spandex that “outlines her protuberant pudendum,” a “black T” that reveals her “puffy pink areolas,” and “Dr. Martens marked with anarchosatanic symbols in metallic paintpen” (6), we first see Bubbles standing in front of a mirror painting a figure-eight on her face. Notably, her face is radically nonindividualized. It is represented as a kind of archetypal ur-face located in the collective unconscious. In one of the more eloquent/literary passages counterpoised against the shockingly frank and sexual descriptions of Bubbles’ clothes and physical appearance, James describes her face, “The face in the glass is an uncommon one in the world of the wakeful. It’s a face seen in the soup of sleep. A face that surfaces in a stew of haunted imagery. A face of fevered dreams” (5).

The second chapter (which is also rendered in a single scene) takes us downstairs, where the MAID is talking on the phone while “stirring a thick white brew in a black cast-iron pot” (8). The mixture, which we learn contains at least grits, fish entrails, and (graphically rendered) a live white mouse, appears to be some kind of horrible Voodoo breakfast that already recalls the “soup of sleep...the stew of haunted imagery” that marked Bubbles’ own face. We are introduced to the Maid via minute descriptions of individual parts of her body, tracing over her form with the camera, and cutting between her body and the comparatively rendered stereotypes of black mammy-figures on the food items she cooks with. The scene itself opens on a “Close-up on a chunky, brown-faced, kerchief-headed woman grinning from a cylindrical box of Savanna Sal’s Hominy Grits” (8), and then right away we “Pull back and reveal a hefty black arm, with sagging hamhock-shaped biceps, stirring a white brew in a black cast-iron pot” (8). When she speaks, her dialogue is rendered in thick dialect, and we see only her mouth:

Black woman's mouth into view. Her gums are dark chocolate. Her teeth are canary yellow.

BLACK MOUTH

When 'at boy gwine to learn his sef some sense? Ah don tol' 'at  
boy messin' wif dem whyte gals gwine a git 'im kil. (8)

Immediately, the “Camera pulls back and reveals a monstrous, mammy-sized cookie jar of a woman with doughy animal features and crazed incandescent eyes” (8). In this way we meet the Maid in a tangle of racial signifiers. If she seems on the one hand directly juxtaposed as a real three-dimensional character against the flat stereotype of Savanna Sal—which strongly recalls the sort of mammy-stereotyping in figures like Aunt Jemima—then this immediately is complicated by the description of her as a “mammy-sized cookie jar of a woman.” Clearly the relationship between cartoonish stereotypes and the “actual” characters of *Negrophobia* is more complicated than any simple polarity. This is manifestly *not* the sort of work that sets up a stereotype with the conceit of using it to highlight the gritty realism of the three-dimensional characters themselves. The Maid and Savanna Sal are perhaps best understood as floating together in the same sort of dreamy soup in which Bubbles Brazil exists alongside the multiple cartoonish depictions of teenage white girls.

James' description of the Maid continues: “Her nappy bleached-blond Afro is a crown a spiky thorns matted with sweat and splashed with splotches of Day-Glo colors. Her face and arms are splotched with leaflike patches of missing melanin. The twirl of brown and pink stripes on her left arm resembles the markings of a tiger's coat. A pair of mascara lobster claws wing her eyes” (8-9). As she talks on the phone, reciting the familiar comic litany of mammy-wisdom regarding the dangers of “some young whyte gal's pussy” (9) to black men, Bubbles enters the kitchen, eating the chocolate Elijah-Muhammad-figurines from the first chapter (10). When the Maid asks her about the make-up on her face, Bubbles defends the “war paint” (10) as a



necessary defense against the “jigaboos” who populate her school—the Maid point outs that she has been kicked out of the “fancy private schools” her parents initially sent her to, spent some time in a “crazy house fo’ rich dope fiends,” and now she is “jus’ gon’ hafta put up wid dem niggas” (11). Their ensuing argument highlights the essential problematic of Bubbles’ deeply imprinted and overtly hypocritical racism:

Bubbles wrinkles her nose.

BUBBLES

But they’re gross and they spit!

A half-eaten nigger baby spits from her mouth.

MAID

Spit back at ’em.

BUBBLES

But you don’t know what it’s like! Girls yank my hair and guys yank my tits! That place is a fucking Monkey House!

She eats another nigger baby.

BUBBLES

*Jigaboos!* (11-12)

The two argue the merits of Bubbles’ plain racism against the Maid’s understanding of blacks as “*hostages* misplaced in time, captives of a racist hist’ry ’n’ a oppressed peepus dissolvin’ in d’stomach acids of whyte amerika” (12), until Bubbles reveals she got the idea for her figure-eight “war paint” from one of the maid’s own books, at which point the Maid attacks her: “The Maid springs for Bubbles’ throat, her fingers curled and clutching. As her mandarin-curved fingernails near Bubble’ throbbing jugular, she freezes. She stands eerily immobile” (14). What happens next is not entirely clear. Apparently Bubbles’ “war paint” has worked, defending her from the Maid’s attack, to which the Maid responds by going into a convulsive seizure-like

trance:

The Maid slithers into a convulsive snake dance, foams at the mouth, and tears off her clothes. Sweat clings to the hairs of her armpits. Fish-eyed pancakes are slung Frisbee-style across the kitchen. Bruce Lee's kung fu cat cries mingle with James Brown's R&B funk shrieks. The Maid mindlessly misquotes lines from *Gone With the Wind* ("Ah knows all 'bout birfin' babies, Miz Scarlet. Jus' fetch me dat dusty coat hanga ober dere!"). Twirling across the floor in a daze, the maid cackles and then collapses into a heap. Her tongue lolls from her mouth. (15).

Then the Maid commands Bubbles to wash her face, and Bubbles immediately complies. She "leaps to her feet and dashes from the kitchen. The Maid laughs long and loud" (15), ostensibly having effectively countered Bubbles' amateur attempt at Voodoo with something much more powerful.

In the next scene-chapter, as Bubbles rides the subway and is ranted at by a crazy black Wino, the nature of the Maid's spell is revealed: "Bubbles tries to ignore the Wino, but as the Maid's counterspell begins to take effect, exposing Bubbles to her Negrophobic predicament, she grows fearful, her body appearing to wilt smaller and smaller in size" (15). Things quickly grow worse for Bubbles. Soon, "DOMESTICS, FACTORY WORKERS, STREET HUSTLERS, JUNKIE TRANSVESTITES, and other SLUM DWELLERS of increasing strangeness board the subway car and converge on Bubbles from all sides" (19). The scene ends with Bubbles, cringing and hiding in a corner, listening to a conversation between two "ILL-TEMPERED YOUNG NEGROS" about sexual exploits with white women—"I was pullin' fistfuls o' blond pussy hair out o' my crotch!" (21)—and other talking points equally unsettling for Bubbles—"Gunnin' the Great White Bitch! I swore the total annihilation of the entire whyte race and anything left over with the faintest trace of that demon hunkie scent" (22).

The next scene-chapter takes us to Bubble's high school, where a pan across the faces of the students and a voice-over from Bubbles delineates the total nature of her negrophobia:

## BUBBLES

(v.o.)

My high school was overridden with niggas. Not the slow-witted, slow-shufflin', eyeball-rollin', flapjack-flippin' niggas in the brownstones off Central Park West. Or the upwardly mobile, paper-bag-colored Klingon niggas of the bougie boogahood. But nigger niggas—*the nightmarish kind!*

Mindless angel-dusted darkies slobbering insane single syllables, flicking switchblades and flashing straightrazors. Hip-hoppity jungle bunnies in brightly colored clothes, carrying large, loud radios we white wits call "Spadios," who drank bubbling purple carbonates and ate fried pork rinds and bag after bag of dehydrated potato slices caked with orange dust. Crotch-clawin' niggas who talked *Deputy Dawg* and shot dope. Saucer-lipped ragoons who called me the "Ozark Mountain She-Devil" and asked to feel my lunch money. Percussive porch monkeys who fart with their faces to a heavy-metal beat.

These were the kind of niggas my daddy warned me about. The kind of niggas my daddy said would whisk me off to the Isle of Unrestrained Negroes far, far away, and turn me into a coal-black pickaninny with a nappy ribbon top and white button eyes if I wasn't a good girl and didn't do as daddy said.

At the close of the Ku Klux Cartoon Coon Show in the classroom, stop on Bubbles seated at her desk. (25)

It is at this last moment, when the scene directions retrospectively cast the voice-over we have been reading/hearing as part of a "Ku Klux Cartoon Coon Show," that the specific formal fact of this closet-film is brought to the fore. Previous to Bubbles racist tirade of a voiceover, we have not had any description of the long panning shot that suggests that the images either seem to corroborate or conflict with Bubbles' description, except the vague, "each face a frightening caricature of the grotesque" (25), which could go either way. In other words, it is not clear that we are necessarily supposed to imagine that over Bubbles' narration we are to *see* "nigger niggas—*the nightmarish kind!*" as opposed to either other stereotypes or even just a typical diverse body of mostly nonwhite students. The relationship between Bubbles' description and

the visual image we are supposed to imagine the film to be simultaneously projecting is uncertain, until the narration tells us that what we have been experiencing is a “Ku Klux Cartoon Coon Show.” At this point, it seems that we should have more-or-less taken for granted that the slow pan of the students was indeed depicting Bubbles’ racist litany with a more or less confirming precision. Not only is the sort of dreamlike diegetic world here thrown into some measure of ambiguity—is this world in Bubbles’ mind? Are we to take it as at all realistic? Is this movie *animated*? Are we supposed to be immersed in a dreamlike stew of purely allegorical signifiers?—but also our relationship to the text and the unconjured film are likewise difficult to pin down. If we cannot help but visualize Bubbles’ narration as a consequence of our reading this work, as opposed to viewing it, then it complicates things immensely that our task is to simultaneously visualize the film the text purports to reference as well. Because of the unique form of the closet film, that is, we have to read *Negrophobia* as simultaneously a novel *and* a film. In this moment, for example, we as readers have to be able to dialectically suspend multiple options about whether the visual image corresponds with or juxtaposes against the voice-over narration. We have to be able to project ourselves into the role of potential spectator of the film of *Negrophobia*, where the relationship between what we are seeing and hearing is at times (like this one), ambiguous. We are at once *reader*, *spectator*, and *imagined filmmaker*. It is precisely this singular mode of reading that is actualized by the closet film form, in which the reader is forced to account for multiply and simultaneously nested levels of fictions within fictions *on a formal level* (as opposed to, say, framed tales, *mise en abyme*, or other modes of narrative involution that occur primarily at the level of *content*).

In this case, what is so densely packed together is on the one hand a rendering of all the unconscious racist fears regarding African Americans, and on the other our personal imbrication

in the way the closet film text constructs this rendering. Because we are forced to both imagine Donald Goines Senior High as Bubbles describes it and simultaneously suspend the question of whether the film visually represents the students in the exact same way until the narration seems to confirm this fact, we have to be able to conjure multiple versions of our own unconscious racist fears. That is, we have to imagine exactly what Bubbles describes, what other racist versions of stereotypical black classrooms would look like (via Bubbles' denials of various other kinds of "niggas"), *and* what we might expect an *actual* urban New York classroom to look like. In this way, with great economy the reader is forced to take the measure of his or her own negrophobia, lining differently variously racist versions of imagined black youths against each other along various axes of different levels of fiction, fiction with fiction, and reality.

As we learn more about Donald Goines Senior High, it quickly becomes clear that we are far from any conceit of accurate portrayal of urban education. It is a surrealistic nightmarish feverdream of unconscious fears and desires. The compound is guarded by a machine-gun tower replete with "barbed wire, a cyclone fence, and a pack of slaving Doberman pinschers" (25), and the physical space seems to corroborate Bubbles' racist description of the students who populate its halls, marking the text not as one in which a racist character will be shown to overcome that racism, but one in which a whole racist dreamscape is conjured and subsequently unraveled:

The corridor's column of lockers is a dazzle of wildstyle designs: multicolored sprays of Vaughn Bodé nymphs entangled inside gnarled, Eschersque girders who fellate duck-billed home boys with floating thought balloons of musical notations and fried chicken parts above their heads. Huge posters of Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Bob Marley are wheat-pasted all along the hall. Black, red, and green sewer steam billows from a manhole cover sunk into the floor. The front end of a car with a drinking fountain built into its toothy chrome grill projects from a wall. Iron grates are pulled across the doors. Sections of the wall are crumbling, and bricks are strewn about the floor. Neon BAR, PAWN SHOP, JESUS SAVES, and HOT PORK CHOPS AND COLD BEER signs flash in

distracting sequence.

Throngs of students congest the corridor smoking resinous Rasta spliffs; inhaling in brown paper bags sticky with airplane glue; snorting smack from tiny, waxed-paper sacks; drinking pints of Wild Irish Rose; sucking tubes of crack; fighting with razors; firing pistols; dry humping each other against lockers; hawking stolen goods; miscarrying half-formed fetuses; singing gospel; and wailing the blues. (26)

A 200-POUND BLACK MUSLIM hawks bean-pie until he and a number of others are massacred by machine-gun fire, “All in disgusting *Dawn of the Dead* detail” (27), and the scene ends with a long fight-sequence in which the “apparently, invulnerable” (28) Bubbles is accosted by AUNT JEMIMA’S FLAPJACK NINJA-KILLERS FROM HELL (28-35) in the girl’s bathroom. Exhausted, in the next short sequence, a chapter with two brief scenes, she returns to her brownstone and smokes a joint in the bath, where she passes out (36-37).

From there we cut abruptly to the White Womb Theater, where a naked Bubbles is incased on stage in some kind of bizarre white gel-like afterbirth and a witch doctor removes a white rabbit from between her thighs (38). Bubbles looks into the audience, which is comprised of an extremely long list of black characters ranging from James Baldwin, Rosa Parks and Richard Pryor to Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben. Muhammad Ali *and* Cassius Clay. Shirley Temple is there, “in pickaninny blackface” (39). A list of some fifty black entertainers, cartoon characters, musicians, filmmakers, and political figures. We crossfade into a forest where a flute-playing Satyr with a “sable skin” seduces Bubbles with his “massive dick” (41), until he disappears and the dream—if that is what this is—turns nightmarish: “Tarred lynching victims hang from the trees. Corpses protrude from the ground in grotesque poses. A WOMAN with her stomach slashed drags a rotted fetus on the end of an uncoiled umbilical cord. A face in the clay. An arm. A severed hand. The SHADOWS OF HOODED MEN prowl amid the woods’ other shadows” (42). It is as if, thanks to the Maid’s “counterspell,” Bubbles can no longer rest

in the comfort of her negrophobia. The historical materiality of that very racism manifests itself in her subconscious—in the White Womb Theater of her mind. Finally, Bubbles awakes with a gasp to find the bathtub filled with blood.

In a candlelit ritual, Bubbles sits on her bed, a figure-eight painted on her face in menstrual blood, trimming her heart-shaped pubic hair. The scene directions are explicitly focused on her vagina: “dissolve to a close-up of Bubbles’ cunt” (45), for example, or “Tilt up the moist pout of her vulva” (45). In a voice, over, she relates herself to “the little girl in *Night of the Living Dead*” and asks, “Why do I want to eat my parents?” (45). She answers herself, “*To puke them up, of course!*” (45). The theme of consumption and regurgitation is vital to *Negrophobia*, in which the primary objective of the (anti-)cursive text is to evoke for the purposes of purging interiorized racist ideologies. In these explicit and outright disgusting scenes, we might say, the reader/audience is literally consuming the racist inheritance of the past along with Bubbles, who wants to “eat [her] parents.” It is only in the scenes that follow that, with Bubbles, we might begin to “puke them up.” For it is at this precise moment, where Bubbles lolls in bed and “zazens in the radiance of candlelight,” musing on the desire to consume and puke up her parents, that the Maid suddenly bursts into the room, blowing out the candles and felling the mirrors. She is brandishing a pair of cutting shears and a tube of KY personal lubricant. Dragging through the melted wax and broken glass up into the attic, she explains what she plans to do to her:

MAID

*First, ah’s gwine cut d’locks off’n y’haid!*

...

*Den ah’s gwine grine hembane ’n’ bellydonna berries wif some o’  
dat good rasta reefa dem nappy-haired niggas sell down at  
d’candy sto’ ’n’ mix it up wif d’K-Y!*

...

*Den ah’s gwine glop d’K-Y Juju jelly-jam down ’round y’titties ’n’*

*up 'twixt y'ass—arubbin 'n' apokin' till it melts into y'pores 'n' gits down into y'blood! 'N' whilst yo' ass be doin' d'freakie-deekie on d'bellydonna, ah'mo roll d'res' o' dat rasta reefa into a big spliff, slap on some zootin' Calloway sides, 'n' blow dat spliff lak ahs a howg-ridin' hophead in Harlem! Hah! (46-47)*

The closet film form lends itself uniquely towards constructing this scene. On one hand, in an actual film, we likely would not need to have the Maid to explain in dialog what she could also show us by doing. But since we are reading as well as in some sense also seeing this movie, rendering her dialog in thick dialect offers an additional layer of resistance that slows down our processing of the information. And it does so while also maintaining the strictly filmic valence of the rendering of black dialect. Pivotaly, this black dialect is not just what the character we imagine says; it is also overtly a *script* for a (hypothetical) actor to recite. The closet film, in other words, is a form in which character is always also actor. Even more so than with playscripts, this sort of filmic text wears its multiple ontological valences on its sleeve. Partly, this is because we imagine actual imagined realities to be much more similar to films than to plays. So when we read the Maid's dialogue here, we have at least three levels of fictive reality working: (1) an imagined film world; (2) an imagined film that could be produced from this text; (3) the textual reality of the novel itself—that is, the imagined reality produced by *reading the novel*, rather than the case with (1), which is the imagined reality produced by imagining the film that is not present but is always being referenced obliquely. *Negrophobia* capitalizes on this multiplicity by rendering similar events multiple times in several ways. Here, the Maid *says* what she is about to *do*. And then we get her *doing* it.

Immediately after she tells Bubbles her plan, she begins to carry it out. We get a more detailed scene of her cutting Bubbles' hair (49-50), and preparing the hallucinogenic Voodoo mixture of marijuana, belladonna, henbane, and KY jelly (50-51), all rendered in stage directions



with occasional interjections by the Maid. Bubbles remains silent. The stage directions are extremely blunt, offering straightforward descriptions rather than establishing tone or creating the extreme affects (like shock and disgust) that pervade much of the text elsewhere:

The Maid drops her shears. She falls to her knees and unloads the contents of her apron's front pockets on the floor: mortar, pestle, K-Y tube, a branch of belladonna, henbane, and a compressed square of marijuana buds. White noise issues from the boom box's speakers.

...

The Maid plucks berries from the belladonna branch, crumbling henbane in her first, and unravels buds from the reefer square.

...

She tosses the herbs into the mortar's bowl and grinds them down with her pestle. (50)

This sort of matter-of-fact repetition reinforces the multiple formal techniques active in the unique closet film form here, and the reader is afforded the opportunity to more fully comprehend the scene through varying perspectives, understanding its multiple levels of fiction separately. It is as if we are being guided through multiple understandings of the complex multiplicity of fictive realities generated by the form here.

Notably, in this scene the characterization of the Maid remains tied to her stereotypical baggage, her role as Aunt Jemima-like food preparer. Again, the specific form of the closet film offers a unique mode of economically communicating this information. As the Maid begins mixing the concoction, after dipping her fingers into Bubbles' vagina, she "puts her menses-tipped fingers in her mouth. Her fevered grin spreads like buckwheat batter plopped into a hot buttered skillet" (51). The simile that links the Maid to the network of racist imageries on display so far throughout the novel and which appear frequently as Mammy-figuration on food items, especially breakfast items like pancakes (Aunt Jemima) and grits (recall Savanna Sal from the opening), is of course specifically literary. A similar effect is of course conceivable on film, in what would likely register as a cheesily outdated modernist technique: cutting away from the

Maid's smile to an actual skillet of buckwheat pancakes to create the impression of a visual simile. The closet film, on the other hand, gets to have it both ways. Prose lends itself better to this particular kind of simile, economically tying together the Maid's cartoonish stereotypical aesthetic with the visceral imagery of the pancakes in the skillet. The finely crafted alliteration of big breathy 'b's and 'p's and fricative 't's here makes our mouths (or our cognitive renderings of mouth movements) form the same sorts of pops as hot butter itself. The onomatopoeia of 'plopped' helps render the movement of the spreading batter all the more vividly. The imagery is haunting and evocative, and is rendered quickly and effectively by the simile in prose, where its corresponding filmic technique would register as either the clunky transposition of the metaphor-shot, or be lost altogether if we simply understood the stage direction as establishing tone and not directly translatable into the film. And yet, since this is after all a stage direction in a script, and not simply prose in a novel, the reader must also grapple with the directorial problem of how to film this sticky passage. Since we are additionally imagining a film going on here, we have to consider how this particular simile would have to be translated, or produced, in cinema. The text achieves the literary efficacy of the prose simile while also putting into our heads the explicitly filmic 'shot' of the pancakes as well. For, after all, is not the primary effect of the closet film form to place us in the role of *filmmaker*? Do we not have to imagine how we would shoot this, who we would cast, where we might make cuts? Is it only because of my own personal experience with film that I read it this way, or is there a deeper truth here that the closet film form gives the reader the opportunity for an imagined experiencing in *directing* this film in the same sense—yet much more intensely perhaps—that attracts Eisenstein to early Disney animations (see Chapter Two)? After all, audiences do not read scripts. Filmmakers read scripts. The closet film, in appropriating the process of reading the script and handing it to the

audience, precisely makes filmmakers of us all. Eisenstein's ultimate fantasy for early Disney animations was due to their ability to let him project himself into the role of the creator, to be a reader and a maker all at once. It is this experience which the closet film form can provide and which excellent little descriptions like James' regarding the Maid's grin here executes to its fullest potential.

As the Maid disrobes herself and mounts and begins grinding Bubbles' body, "pube to pube," the action suddenly cuts, via "Spin-wipe," to "EXT. Cotton field of Old South—Day" where "Toothless OLD COONS strum Happy Nigger Banjo Tunes for dancing PICKANINNIES slapping hambone on their knees and thighs" (52). We "Reverse spin-wipe" back to the Brownstone, where Bubbles is screaming and the Maid collapses on the floor. As the hallucinogenic Voodoo craziness intensifies, the stage directions become consequentially abstract:

Her head, arms, hands, legs, and feet move with an independence of their own. They begin to talk, change shape, and emit sounds: Music. Radio white noise. Reptile skin. A bird's head. A cat with a coat of flames. TV commercials. Radio white noise. The BERNHARD GOETZ confession mixed to hip-hop rap rhythms. Pentecostal tent-house shouts. Police sirens. MALCOLM X speeches. Harlem bar talk. The bark of heroin pitchmen. The assassination of JOHN F. KENNEDY cross-edited with the *Amos and Andy* radio show. And the recurrent image of a YOUNG BLACK BOY repeating the phrase, 'Yo, man! You got five dollars? Yo, man! You got five dollars?' answered with gunfire. (52)

Here the narration begins to lose its grasp on the pretense of a (farcically) production-oriented screenplay. It is not clear whether "A bird's head" suggests that the Maid's head transforms into a bird's head, or that we should cut to an insert of an actual bird's head, or something else altogether. The rest of the description bears the same multiplicity of potential relations to the Maid's body. Is it her body itself that (via what we can safely assume would have to be some kind of animation) changes into these things? If her limbs "begin to talk" and "emit sounds,"

what exactly is the mechanism through which they produce the following list of sounds? And are they all just sounds, or is the film we have to imagine here also cutting to visual clips of things? Take, for example, Kennedy's assassination (much more commonly associated with its striking visual imagery than sounds) or the "recurrent *image*" (my emphasis) of the young black boy being shot (ostensibly by Bernhard Goetz, the famous "Subway Vigilante" who shot four young black men in a New York City subway in December of 1984; he alleged the youths tried to mug him, but they claimed to have been merely panhandling; Goetz was acquitted of all charges except one for unlawful possession of a concealed handgun, though he later lost a civil case to one of the young men who was rendered paraplegic). But even as it becomes more difficult to treat this as a screenplay, the repeated use of all-caps lettering (a standard script device used to help directors, production managers, etc. keep track of what actors, major props, etc. will be needed in a given scene) and references to specifically filmic techniques, such as cross-cutting, keep the fact of this text's relation to a nonexistent film in the forefront. It also seems notable that at this moment when realism seems all but totally abandoned, and the film stretches the limits of filmable—if surrealistic—images, that here we get several of the most direct and concretely political intertextual references. There are no references to cartoonish stereotypes at this point. Rather, when it becomes unclear what is even *happening* in regards to the Maid's morphing body, when the film seems to reflect the beginning of the psychotropic drug trip that the Maid and Bubbles are going to begin together, the primary references here reflect the real history of violence, a hodgepodge of historical assassinations and attempted assassinations.

But the Maid is overcome by the high and collapses on the floor in a psychedelic freakout, while Bubbles, who has much experience with hallucinogens, keeps her cool and

manages to escape (54-59). Bubbles then breaks into a paint factory where she stumbles into a hallucinogenic dreamworld rabbit hole (60-64), and there begins her odyssey through a series of increasingly manic and terrifying adventures in a Technicolor world of racism made manifest. In “The Cave of the Flaming Tar Babies” (65-70) she encounters dark dwarfish Licorice Men taunting and beating a captured Doughboy, one of the “pale spherical fellows pictured on the cylindrical packages located in the supermarket’s frozen food department” (67), who is then cooked by a flaming tar baby (69). Bubbles unceremoniously throws a lit match into the cavern, where the Licorice Men have been farting so much that “their asses flare in jets of blue flame” (70). She escapes into the “Church of Uncle H. Rap Remus” (73), where Remus preaches to a “mob of Leopard Men” about, for example, how the Whyte Man has a death wish because his head is full not of brains but of turds, and how he, the Whyte Man, was created by Idi Amin Dada “*so Black People could take advantage of [him]*” (77). Then Remus and the Leopard Men perform a kind of baptism on Bubbles, whom they mistake for one of their own since Bubble’s skin is coated in dark pigments. Remus says, slipping for the first time into southern dialect, “We gwine wash dis wayward chile! We gwine slap d’whyte man’s stains from her soul! An’ den she be ready for Dada!” (81). Remus dunks her into a pool and smacks her hard three times on the head, and with each smack a “WORM—fat, black, and flat-headed—arcs from her mouth” and “wiggles across the water” (82). But, of course, this washes away the paint on her skin. As the mob prepares to violently gang-fist her, Bubbles begins to vomit worms “in great cresting waves” (84). Ostensibly, Remus has deeply underestimated the extent to which the whyte man has stained Bubble’s soul. The worms attack Remus with “gnashing, nightmare teeth” and chew through his eyes, eventually leaving only “a writhing chalk-white skeleton” (85), during which the stage directions offer, “SFX: The wet, thrusting sound of a vigorous cock

slish-sloshing a bubbling cunt filtered through an electronic wind tunnel” (85). But Bubbles does not seem to have totally expelled the dark worms within her. After Remus is defeated, and even as the worms devour the Leopard Men, pustules appear all over Bubbles’ body out of which emerge “Big-lipped, cotton-topped, and broad-nostriled HEADS.” Two of these “BURRHEADS” replace her nipples and tell each other a racist joke. Then “Bubbles’ wounds mysteriously heal. And her color returns to normal” (86).

In this section, James uses the particular formal potentialities of the closet film to systematically confuse the line between character and image, between individual and stereotype. Before we get any direct references to present characters (signified in screenplays by all-caps), we get a lengthy set descriptions that culminate in “An enormous poster of a bug-eyed black man in a stovepipe hat and star-spangled red, white, and blue striped suit” (73) that hangs above the stage. The poster, which reads, “UNCLE SAMBO WANTS YOU!” figures the caricature offering his exposed, pantless buttocks in a “coquettish pose.” Then we get the following stage direction: “Below the poster, UNCLE H. RAP REMUS, an arthritic old Negro dressed in green paramilitary fatigues, with gnarled gray dreads flopping on each side of his otherwise bald head, holds a luger P.08 to Uncle Sambo’s wooly skill” (73). At this point, no doubt, there is some confusion about what is supposed to be going on, but the clear implication is that Remus is aiming his gun at the poster. Unlike Uncle Sambo, or his poster, Remus’s character is introduced in typical screenplay format: his name in capital letters accompanied by a brief visual description. But only a few moments later, “Uncle H. Rap Remus pulls the Luger’s trigger and Uncle Sambo’s head explodes in a geyser of blood, bone, and burr. His corpse flops to the floor and is kicked from the stage” (74). At this point, it becomes clear we are to understand Uncle Sambo as having been physically present in at least the same way Uncle H. Rap Remus is. But

the line between understanding the physical presence and materiality of characters and their two-dimensional representations is considerably blurred. Taking the ambiguity of the previous section one step further—in which cartoon characters depicted on the packaging of frozen food items are manifested as fully present characters—here the line between racist propagandistic political posters and the characters populating Bubbles’ bizarre wonderland is eclipsed entirely in ambiguity. It is never clear exactly what level of reality we are in, and not just because Bubbles is hallucinating. Quite literally the number of *dimensions* at play here is set on shifting terrain, and characters that seem to be fleshed out along with ones that are clearly animated mingle seamlessly with stereotypes and abstract concepts.

The next section of the novel involves a film within the closet film. Bubbles makes her way into the sewers and into the 42nd Street Multiplex Grindhouse in Times Square, where she watches “The Rock-Horror-Negro Show” (88-112). The movie, a tortured parody of racist Disney films and Nazi propaganda, replete with a showstopping number of Walt himself orating a racist invective parody of Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous ‘I Have a Dream’ speech (“I wished upon a star / That one day the contents of this nation would be judged by its lack of characters of color,” etc.). This entire section is extremely shocking, offensive, and in very poor taste. Walt Disney’s speech is preceded, for example, by the rotting corpse of Malcolm X appearing in the flesh to give a prologue discouraging the consumption of pork (89-91). Then Zombie Elvis gives an extremely gross and graphic blowjob to the Zombie Master (101-103), and from there we cut to The Disney Magic Hall, where representations of Mickey Mouse as variously Big Brother, Hitler, and Christ preside over a parade that includes “MECHANICAL ZOOT-SUITED CROWS,” a “YARMULKED MYNAH BIRD,” and “festive crowds of crucifix-worshipping, corn-dog-chewing, CAUCASIANS who look and act like an extended family of inbred

Appalachian mutants gathered for a Fourth of July Picnic” (106-107). A “surfer-blond JESUS with plastic, flickering eyes” shows up and “swaps jokes with the HOLY GHOST” (107). But a giant nose on the side of Sleeping Beauty Castle controlled by the Zombie Master’s voodoo powers (104-105) covers the entire scene in green slimy snot, and then the zombies attack and kill Jesus and everyone else (108-109). The Zombie Master declares, “It is time to end Disney’s reign of whyte-supremacist terror!” (110). He and Zombie Elvis try to kill Disney with a stake to the heart, but they are stunned to see Disney is actually animatronic himself. The Zombie Master: “He just’ a puppet in his own mad design!” (110). The film ends with Elvis Zombie doing a rock-and-roll number that sends his limbs flying “straight into the lens of the camera” (112).

Back in the Grindhouse, with the film over Bubbles tries to sneak out when she overhears two fried-chicken-eating Black Muppets (“BUPPETS”) discussing plans to “beam up on the rock, go to Central Park, *an’ rape us some whyte women!*” (113), filming this and thereby winning the Palm D’Or (114-115), and then getting shot by a “SHADOW” they panhandle to, in the manner of Bernhard Goetz (115-116), and then the SHADOW starts shooting Buppets indiscriminately, and it turns into a musical number, and he sings and dances about white supremacy on their corpses, and the text here becomes oddly punctuated with excerpts that a footnote tells us are from “The videotaped confession of a noted subway gunman,” ostensibly Goetz, and then he blows himself and the whole theater up with dynamite (117-119). Bubbles escapes the carnage (120-121) only to be eaten by “A FIVE-HUNDRED-FOOT-TALL CYBORG” that is ejaculating all over Times Square (122). Inside, Bubbles encounters TALKING DREADS, an alien controlling the cyborg who has her read the story of “Lil’ Black Zambo,” (123-124), which we get the complete text of (124-130). This is the misunderstood



representation of the alien's first attempt to communicate with our world. It is basically Little Black Sambo with heavy parodic emphasis on black stereotyping. For example:

Zambo's pappy, Tambo, who liked to drink cheap coconut wine, ran off long before Zambo was born, so Zambo and his mammy were very, very poor. They didn't give out welfare checks in the Jungle. The Jungle was uncivilized. Or at least that's what Zambo's mammy, Mambo, said. 'When we gwine git civilized so I can git on d'welfare?' (125).

Etc. Now TALKING DREADS wants to take over our world, and he reveals his "ULTIMATE PLAN FOR THE DEGENERATE WHYTE MAN" (125), which leads to an extended depiction of the Norman Rockwell-esque town of Garvey's Corner, which it is then revealed is actually "a mock town where blacks are trained to *look*, *act*, and *think* like ordinary law-abiding white citizens in order to undermine all the rights and freedoms American society has to offer the white race without the slightest detection!" (139). Talking Dreads explains that blacks impersonating whites become invisible, and "As invisibles, our work becomes the subliminal work of sorcerers. We must steal into the last sanctuary, the sanctuary of dreams, and attack that portion of the brain that understands not words, but images. We must burrow into the blind spots of personality, chanting the black incantations of our otherworldly ancestors, and change the signposts of slumber..." (141-142). In other words, an ironic parody of this novel itself.

We cut to inside Bubble's brain, where it gets a little more abstract. There is "an ovoid HEAD" in there, and a "jodhpured JOCKEY" who then leads an "ARMY OF COON-FACED LAWN ORNAMENTS" down a street (142). At this point a bizarre exterior document is inserted, a parodic pamphlet about civil defense, in which white people are cautioned against exploding negroes (143-144). It vaguely recalls the other weird total narrative interruption on page seventy-two where we get a snippet of *The Untold Tales of Uncle Remus* in which Miss Sally walks in on Remus sodomizing her grandson.

Then we go back into Bubbles' Brain again. In a voice over, she tells us, "I sank deeper and deeper into the maelstrom of my own mind, whirling in a vortex of improbable visions until, finally, I was transported to the scene of a forgotten childhood game" (148). Inside the "circle of revolving NEGRO FACES" we get "a nymphetic NINE-YEAR-OLD, nude, with dusty peach-colored skin, demonic lynxlike eyes, and a froth of dazzling blond curls. She lounges in blissful languor on a rumple of blankets spread across a heart-shaped bed" (148). As if playing with how far the text can transgress the line into (legal) unfilmability, James goes on: "The Nymphet's crimson-tipped fingers furiously flick the rose-tinted crease of her hairless, hymen-sealed pudenda" (149). This transports Bubbles, in memory, to "Times Square movie houses" where as a kid she would sneak out to watch Blaxploitation films (150-155), and she comes to the realization: "Laughing at niggers is our first great national pastime" (155), and that this must have lead to her blackface masturbation orgies.

At this point the stage is set for the final climax of the film, which pushes the boundaries of "shock literature" even further than Burroughs, and constitutes the single most profane scene in the novel, one which likely could not be legally represented in any visual medium.

INT.--Upper Westside Brownstone--Living Room--Day.

A naked, SHIRLEY TEMPLE-CURLED LITTLE GIRL in blackface shouts to a group of naked, blackface PREPUBESCENTS.

SHIRLEY TEMPLE-CURLED LITTLE GIRL  
*Hey everybody!* Throw yo' *ass* in the air like  
you don't care! And do THE UNCLE REMUS!

The LITTLE GIRLS' wiry black limbs (sic) twitch in a spastic combination of camp sixties dance steps, as they bump behinds with a lewd, rude, and crude attitude. (155-156)

In voice over, Bubbles explains that though they were the ones physically doing these things, "in our minds, we weren't the culprits...It was those *black children* from the welfare projects! They

did it! ... *They* smoked the reefer! *They* stole the booze! It was *niggers*! Not us! *Niggers*! It was niggers poking their greasy, fried-chicken-pickin' fingers into our *wet, underaged pussies*! Not us! *Niggers*!" (157). Then:

The Shirley Temple-Curled Little Girl straddles the Scarlet Nymphet and rubs the glistening halves of her painted black ass in the Scarlet Nymphet's ecstatic face. Her rectum dilates... And a moist, corn-studded turd spills from her ruffled hole. The turd slides into the Scarlet Nymphet's puckered mouth, smearing across her lips soft and fudgy. James Brown grins and sweats on the TV set (157-158).

End scene. Bubbles regains consciousness in the Cyborg's Image chamber, where she pukes up a Vomitoid monster: "A swell of VOMIT cascades from her mouth in a fan of Day-Glo fluorescence. It scuttles into a corner—green and crab-legged with round, tentacled eyes" (159). Though we should note that just before that she was masturbating to this fantasy: "Bubbles rubs her clitoris in agitation as she regains consciousness" (159). The Cyborg vanishes and drops Bubbles into the Harlem River, where she has to flee the CORPSE OF A PIMP, then the CORPSE OF A WELFARE MOTHER, the undead sewage-watery graveyard of black stereotypes: CHEFS, CRACKHEADS, B-BOYS, etc. (160-162), and finally "A pork-bellied WHITE MAN in traditional Quaker wear" that she has to escape from (162-163). But as the Quaker foams and dissolves into the water, leaving only a pair of eyes, Bubbles recognizes them: "Familiar psychotic eyes in a familiar black face. The familiar black face of the family Maid" (163).

Back in her Brownstone, Bubbles is absorbed by her mirror and burrowed into by a snake and excreted; she becomes disembodied (165-168). At dawn, Bubbles sees herself in a United Colors of Benetton ad in Vogue, but the face in the mirror is "cinnamon-colored" (169). The CREAM OF WHEAT CHEF appears and offers her a bowl: "Close-up on Bubbles' face. There is no face. It's been replaced by a silken mesh of shadows. Freeze-frame Cream of Wheat Chef.

As the credits roll over the freeze-framed image, offscreen sounds are heard. A crowd roars in an outdoor stadium.” (170). An announcer announces Louis Armstrong to toot out the national anthem. He starts, but then stops, resentful of a lifetime of being denied this honor and then being forced to do it in death. “The Cream of Wheat Chef’s mouth forms Louis Armstrong’s last words” which are of course, “*French-kiss my black New Orleans Ass. DEEP.*” (171). Finally: “The camera pulls back. The Cream of Wheat Chef turns around, bends over, and drops his trousers. His ashen black ass is whitewashed with the words: ‘THE END’ ” (171).

This open-ended ending can of course be understood as refusing to engage in a reductive identity politics, as a gesture towards the dialectical suspension of all questions regarding the novel’s place in late capitalism, etc., as Murray suggests. But the one thing this does not fully account for is the insistence of the cinematic metaphor to the very end, the dogged determination of the closet film form even as anything approaching character and plot unravel. The disruption of Bubble’s teleological arc—or any other novelistic narrative measure—leaves us with the pure signification of cinematic joke. The final sequence involves the total enmeshment of the representation of historical figures (Armstrong) with animated caricature (Cream of Wheat Chef), the latter ventriloquizing the former in an ambiguous manner than continues the novel’s relentless imbrication of various ontological levels of representation. Perhaps what is most notably dialectically suspended here, in other words, is not so much the novel’s politics of racial representation (though it certainly is), so much as the novel’s representational mode altogether at the level of its very signification, the way we see what we read and read here what we see. This more profound open-endedness, a formal open-endedness, helps to contextualize the novel’s potential for success along the axis of James’s own stated intention: a satire which will make us laugh and puke. Does it succeed, in other words, as a kind of curse analogous to a Voodoo spell,

that produces tangible effects in us, or is *Negrophobia*'s gesture towards this end merely another ironic joke akin to the injunction to "kiss my black ass" that ends the film?

Rather than engage the problematics of reader response and reception history that necessarily dog a definite answer to such a question, I want to close this chapter by gesturing merely to a few points about the implications simply of the question itself. For one thing, we could not even begin to raise this question, to ask about the way the novel's specific form invokes film-worlds, without first locating this text within the closet film subgenre of the novel. A developed reading novel-as-spell in the specific context of *Negrophobia*, in other words, relies on our reading its uniquely screenplay properties, since the worlds it conjures straddle the boundaries between filmic, literary, and televisual. If we want to grapple with the most generative questions this novel raises, we must therefore conceive of it as closet film first. And these are indeed provocative questions, because James's closet-film-as-Voodoo-curse offers a potential, if unlikely, model of how subversive literature might do real political work: satire plus tangible effect. It is this effect, which we might dub the gross-out quotient of the novel, that we cannot even begin to measure until we theorize the closet film. Once we do so, we can understand this novel as playfully unworking—a la Agamben's *désœuvrement*—of not only cinema but of racism itself.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### BADASS LITERATURE & THE GOLDEN AGE OF CLOSET FILM?

At this point it should be quite clear that the canon of closet films proper is rather limited in comparison to Quimby Melton's much more general and inclusive category, "closet screenplay." The screenplay, nobody disputes, has not gained the kind of popular attraction or literary acknowledgment as the playscript, and writers have largely not felt compelled to utilize this form in the same way that poets have appropriated dramatic form. Indeed, Darius James' *Negrophobia* (see Chapter Three) is potentially the only *fully* realized instance of this genre. When I met with James at a bar in New Haven and asked him about it, he could not think of many other specific examples, except possibly William Burroughs' *Last Words of Dutch Schultz* and a few stories by Terry Southern (from *Red Dirt Marijuana*—there are some very dramatic short stories in there, but nothing in screenplay formatting). James expressed that he himself was simply trying to push boundaries and play with questions of genre and media, but that the publishing industry more-or-less keeps that sort of formal experimentation in check—it is too risky, economically. Nevertheless, many novels (*Infinite Jest*, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, *The Raw Shark Texts*) appear at the genre's fringes, partaking of the closet film—exploring its energies and potentialities, testing the limits of visual and cinematic referentiality within the confines of the literary text. But finally, in the last two decades, several novels have been published by a new generation of authors that can be described as "partial closet films." These are novels which contain sections written in closet film format. This chapter will look at three such partial closet films. Adam Thorpe's first novel *Ulverton* (1992) is comprised of a series of individual sections connected only by a geographic thread: they take

place in the fictional small town of *Ulverton*, but each chapter takes a different literary genre, casts a different set of characters, and is set in a different historical period. Most notably for our purposes, the final section of the novel appears in the form of a post-production script for a television documentary shot in the town. David Flusfeder's *A Film By Spencer Ludwig* (2010) contains several scenes in which screenplay formatting is interspersed throughout the otherwise prose fiction narrative. Though there is less of a focus on the closet film form than in Thorpe's work, the narrative itself focuses throughout on films and the production of films. The diegetic world of the whole novel is thus saturated with filmic metaphor, and the intrusion of scriptic formatting, though it only occurs in a few instances, is correspondingly more meaningful for the novel as a whole than in Thorpe's text, where the screenplay forms a historiographic coda that does little more than offer a cynical afterthought about the ways contemporary media erase and trivialize the past. Finally, the chapter will turn to a longer and more focused unpacking of Mark Leyner's *The Tetherballs of Bougainville* (1998), a novel broken into two sections, the first a prose fiction description of a young man with one day to write a screenplay for a prestigious award his literary agent has already secured for him, and the second the screenplay itself, a vastly unfilmable script that in a very loose sense picks up where the chronology of events in the first section left off.

### **Ulverton: *The Partial Closet (Post-Production) Script***

Not much has been written about *Ulverton*, and less about the closet film component in its final chapter. Martin Puchner, however, mentions the novel in an article focusing on new conceptions of ekphrasis in contemporary literature. He analyzes Thorpe as well as Samuel Beckett as producing examples of what he calls “Textual Cinema and Cinematic Text.” But perhaps the very vagueness of this title bespeaks precisely the idiosyncratic formal device of the closet film that Puchner’s article expressly overlooks. *Ulverton*, he says,

...participates in the tradition of the cinematic novel, however, not by trying to introduce the camera and its visuality into forms of narrative representation, but by using the film’s own textual apparatus as a literary form: the last chapter is written entirely as a shooting script for a film, and includes dialogue, camera angles, frames, and sound track. This chapter thus does not attempt to replicate the experience of watching a film, but recycles the textual surplus of the cinema, otherwise seen only as the textual means to a cinematic end, to become a proper literary form (np).

Puchner is correct to eloquently describe this chapter as a recycling of “the textual surplus of cinema.” But he is right for the wrong reasons. One pivotal detail that Puchner has completely missed is that Thorpe does not in fact present the chapter as a “shooting script,” but rather a “post-production script.” Though the difference does not amount to much at first glance on the page, it certainly bespeaks a different relationship between the text and the material production of the potential film in question. A shooting script is, indeed, a “textual means to a cinematic end,” but a post-production script is a textual rendering of a pre-existing film, used here in the service of a documentary, possibly for editing, sound-mixing, and other post-production requirements. It is not a blueprint for a dramatic film, but specifically a textual rendering of the whole film *as it has been produced*. It is thus a different kind of “textual surplus,” one drawn not from the surplus of discarded materials that went into a (fictional) cinematic production, but a more radical surplus—an excess even—in which the cinematic thing has been translated after



the fact into a readable thing. In overlooking the specificity of the form of closet film Thorpe utilizes here, Puchner effectively writes off the whole potential of a closet film form, cementing the genre's position as a kind of quirk in the world of all texts vaguely cinematic and all films vaguely textual. Turning his attention instead to Thorpe's second novel, *Still*, Puchner asserts, "Unlike the dramatic form, the film script has not achieved the degree of canonization that would allow for a corresponding closet screenplay, or film text." Ironically, what Puchner eclipses here is precisely his own role in rendering the screenplay uncanonizable by overlooking the specific details which would make it interesting enough to do so.

There is, to be fair, an additional reason why I suspect Puchner might have overlooked *Ulverton* and move on to Thorpe's other works, which contain thematic and contextual filmic elements but which are not rendered formally as screenplays. *Ulverton* is, to put it bluntly, fairly boring. Puchner makes a poor formal excuse for overlooking it, but I suspect he might simply have not gotten through it. He may have had little to say about it, that is, less because of the failure of previous critics to recognize the screenplay as a literary form, than because the novel simply is not very compelling. We might thus add to our growing list of reasons why there are not more closet films that those few which do exist are sometimes long, experimental, and even arguably pretentious. We shall see more of the same with David Flusfeder's *A Film By Spencer Ludwig*. But, on the other hand, the closet films by Darius James and Mark Leyner are so manically absurdist and referentially hyperbolic that they are apt to lose audiences for the opposite reason. One fundamentally odd question about the closet film then, is why the form has seemed to lend itself to one of two mutually exclusive camps: on the one hand there are closet films that seek to wildly and outrageously push the boundaries of the filmable and stretch the ontological flexibility of literary form. On the other hand, there are closet films whose very

mundanity raises questions about the redundancy of scriptic form in literature we always already read as cinematic anyway.

And that is also the first crucial reason why it matters that Thorpe's text presents itself as a post-production script instead of a shooting script. It is not just a surplus: it is a radically superfluous excess. And it has to be: the point is that this fictional documentary is itself boring and redundant. Ultimately, the satirical bent here is that contemporary culture disregards history, and that our historical television documentaries duplicate this disregard by being boring—so that, finally, Thorpe's final chapter can duplicate this procedure again. A logic of redundant reduplication pervades the whole novel, as cycles of history repeat themselves in new forms, culminating in a literary form that is itself an excessive reduplication of a tedious historical documentary. It is no coincidence then, that this final of twelve chapters, running from pages 309-382, is by far the longest in the novel, a needlessly stretched-out and self-exhausting chronicle of "A YEAR IN THE LIFE" of an altogether boring real estate developer. Here, at the end of a novel which experiments with eleven other literary forms (epistolary, journal, sermon, monologue, etc.), is the end of literary experimentation, literature replicating the very medium that has effectively replaced it.

This leads to the *second* crucial reason why it matters that this is a "post-production" script: it is full of completely inane technical details. Unlike a regular script, which is often designed to entice and titillate producers and executives who have the power to control whether the thing actually gets made, the post-production script has no such burden of having to be enjoyable to read. Thorpe's document is correspondingly unenjoyably saturated with minutiae explicating the details of literally every individual shot of the film, whether a "close-up" or "mid-s" or "long-s," every "wipe," "pan," and "pickup," every music cue, fade in and out, etc. And

yet, there is literally none of the evocative tonal context supplied in the stage directions of a shooting script. Furthermore, the layout, in which setting, dialogue, and extradiegetic sound are listed in three parallel columns, does not lend itself to ease of reading. While a shooting script can be effectively read, just like a playscript, this document is clearly not designed to be read through like a literary text, but rather consulted for information relating to specific scenes. To use a popular analogy from new media theory, its aesthetic is more *database* than it is *narrative*. Beginning from the initial description of the film's opening, narrative readability is minimized while descriptive technical information is foregrounded:

GENERIC TITLE SEQUENCE

TITLE ON SCREEN:

'A YEAR IN THE LIFE'

EXT. DAY:

DAWN CHORUS

WIDE-SHOT TUMULUS WITH SUN

RISING BEHIND IT

LONG-SHOT ROOKS CIRCLING

TREES

WIPE

LONG-S ROAD THRU DOWNS:

DISTANT CAR APPROACHING

MID-S THRU SIDE WINDOW:

POP MUSIC –

TRACKING ON PASSING

CAR RADIO

COUNTRYSIDE (311)

And that is about as literary as it gets, the idyllic pastoral and nostalgic scenery of *Ulverton* evoked in the sentimental opening sequence. What quickly transpires for the reader is likely—it was in my case at least—that s/he will begin to ignore all of the technical details and sift through for the literary content. But this gets frustrating as early as the next page, when we meet the protagonist, the subject of the documentary here, Clive:

MID-S CAR APPROACHING DOWN

FARM TRACK

CLOSE-UP CLIVE IN CAR  
PULLING ON HAND-BRAKE  
MID-S CLIVE GETTING OUT  
OF CAR  
PULL BACK TO LONG-S AS CLIVE  
WALKS TO FIELD SITE: FARM,  
HILLS ETC. IN BACKGROUND (312).

MUSIC FAINT

It is as if, in satirizing boring BBC documentaries that portray boring and unlikeable philistines like Clive, Thorpe has focused on pointing out that the experience of working in the post-production offices of the project was almost certainly even more boring than just watching the thing.

Each of the novel's chapters take place in Ulverton during a different time period, starting in 1650 and advancing a few decades or so each chapter, moving slowly through history to the present. The final chapter, titled "HERE" and dated 1988, clearly presents itself as the terminus where the movement of this history-dredging novel has finally arrived: this is *us*, this is where we are now: *here*. The documentary itself mostly involves the bureaucracy of zoning rights in rural England, and is, we must imagine, considerably boring. It is not until about halfway through (357-359) that the main obstacle presents itself: the body of an unknown soldier is discovered at Clive's construction site. Unsympathetic Clive has no care about the body or its historical import and only worries about his development investment. It is immediately clear to us from specific details (the body dates from Cromwell's time, he was killed by a spade to the head, etc.) that this is the body of the soldier killed in the novel's first chapter, though this is of course lost on the current chapter's characters, more than three centuries later. Adam Thorpe himself makes a cameo appearance amongst a group of fascinated locals (360). Eventually, the deal falls apart, Clive loses a lot of money, and Thorpe decides to write a collection of stories about shepherds, which, ostensibly, might be the initial seed of the very novel we are reading.

The narrative is thus relatively pedestrian and boring. But, at the same time, Thorpe's inventive appropriation of post-production screenplay form serves as a unique satirical apparatus.

### **A Film By Spencer Ludwig: *A (Partial) Closet Film* by David Flusfeder**

David Flusfeder's *A Film By Spencer Ludwig* (2010) is a novel very much about the (im)potentiality of cinema. Spencer is a washed up avant-garde filmmaker who, amidst a life and career in steep decay, has to take care of his dying senile father. The two end up on an unlikely road trip to a film festival in Atlantic City. All the while Spencer muses about *this* narrative being a film: he constantly cinematizes the world around him. Consequently, *A Film By Spencer Ludwig* is first and foremost a novel *about* film production, or, in this case, the lack thereof. But secondarily, it itself a kind of literary representation or translation of a doubly impotential film: the film of the title of the novel, the one that does not, even in the fictive world of the novel, exist as an actual movie. Rather, it is evoked constantly as a changing nebulous thing in the protagonist's mind. It is a film, we might suggest, in between the lines of this novel. This is potential cinema at its most ephemeral and intriguing (formally speaking). And occasionally, this inchoate film emerges in the narrative—or, we might say, penetrates *into* the narrative, in the form of the intrusion of screenplay formatting.

But the novel references cinema in multiple ways. Each chapter has an image at the top of the first page. Chapter Six, for example, has an image with blacked out bars that clearly make it seem like a widescreen film still. And the novel announces its own cinematic referentiality in its opening line: "Spencer Ludwig, film-maker, arrives at his father's apartment somewhat out of sorts" (1). The present tense here evokes the language of film treatments and screenplays, and

details are literally framed as hypothetical stage directions: “If he had a camera with him, he would use it—extreme close-up: the carpet, his sneakers, the apartment door” (1). Thus, while the format is not itself rendered as a screenplay, the language not only of film but specifically the language of the screenplay itself is referenced within the literary narrative. As the novel continues, Spencer’s *if-this-were-a-film* musings increase in frequency, and the space between the imagined diegetic world of the novel and Spencer’s imagined film version of those events threatens to collapse. The result is a kind of indirect closet film, a closet film collapsed into a novel. In a move of almost vertiginous spectrality, Flusfeder with this novel seems to reference and build off a literary subgenre that does not, in practical terms, exist.

The first mode in which film exerts itself as the leitmotif of the novel is through the body of imaginary films referenced as having been made by its protagonist. Spencer Ludwig’s oeuvre is thus very much akin, modally, to that of James Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*: it is a body of film works which do not exist. Spencer references one of his own films, going to the Short Beach Film Festival, called *Robert W’s Last Walk* (10). Oddly, though both the festival and film appear to be fictitious, a six-minute clip of the film seems to exist on YouTube, of uncertain origin. The extent to which potential films can be actually made outside of their original (literary) context is an excellent question (see Introduction). Later in the novel we get a list of Spencer’s films that have won awards at festivals: “*Trudy Tuesday, History of the Tango, The Late George Reid, The Captain’s Grief, Sonata for Piano and Violence, Robert W’s Last Walk*” (60). While thus clearly not as developed as the filmography of James Incandenza, the same sort of ontological and media-related questions are raised here. What are we to make of these films? Spencer meanwhile is more preoccupied with his *next* film: “Recently, between jobs... he has been gathering autobiographical footage to use in a speculative future film, in which he supposes that

images ripped away from context (physical, emotional) will be montaged with stock footage, crowd scenes, moments of intimacy or war” (14). In some sense, this “speculative” and “autobiographical” future film is fulfilled by the novel itself.

At least, hypothetically. Because throughout *A Film by Spencer Ludwig*, Spencer ruminates about the potentiality of the events of the novel *as if they were* themselves this next film of his. For example: “If this were an independent film, the sort that juries on competitions favour (and even Spencer’s own difficult slow movements of anguish and observation have been rewarded with prizes), then it would turn into a road movie, father and son driving down an American highway with the sound of the radio and his father’s oxygen tank for company” (25). Which is exactly what the film does, for a while at least, fulfilling many of the generic conceits of the “road movie,” Spencer and his father in increasingly absurd situations and misunderstandings as they travel to and involve themselves in the Short Beach Film Festival. Once they get on the road, Spencer muses, “If he were to make this journey into a film, Spencer would resist the too-obvious irony of the self-professed Garden State being a jumble of pylons and factory chimneys and desperate stunted occasional trees trying to make their leafless lives between iron bridges and parks” (39-40). Later, finding something in “real life” pretentious, he suggests, “This would be edited straight out of the movie. Spencer’s films have been accused of many things, but pomposity is not one of them” (60). And finally, about halfway through the book, Spencer realizes this narrative has seemed to become the very “road movie” he predicted it would be *if* it were an “independent film.”

Spencer has been wondering how this might end. If it were a comedy, then it should end up with marriage, he and his father hook up with two hookers, find a wedding chapel, one of these casinos must have one, trying to ape Las Vegas as a destination resort, walk up the aisle, giving each other away, to blushing brides innocent again. If it were a tragedy, then death is the only solution. But this is neither, and both. It is, he supposes, a road movie. (118)

Throughout the novel, and especially in Chapter Eight (141-159), the *if-this-were-a-film* motif reflexively underscores how much this narrative is indeed actually *like* a movie, though that similarity is mostly in a vague way, having to do more with genre conceits than with actual filmic form.

Even some of the instances of actual closet film operate in this indirect and vague way that undermines their very closet-film-ness. As early as page two, we seem to get dialogue in script format:

HUNTER  
I guess that's pretty lame. (2)

However, this is not a rendering of dialogue spoken in the novel. It is a representation of a screenplay that exists within that diegetic (literary) world. Spencer, avoiding his visit to his father's apartment, has gone to a café, where he sees a young lady working on a screenplay on her laptop. But for the most part, the novel does not depart from standard prose formatting. But much later in the novel, without any warning or context, Chapter Seven opens in a kind of screenplay format:

EXT. ATLANTIC CITY BOARDWALK—DAY

SPENCER LUDWIG stands on the beach. JIMMY LUDWIG sits huddled in an electric wheelchair.

SPENCER turns and walks back towards his father. JIMMY presses a button and whizzes forward, just before his son gets to him.

JIMMY LUDWIG  
Move it, Charlie.

Again, SPENCER is about to reach his father, when JIMMY again goes forward.

SPENCER stands. He lifts his arms and lets them fall again.

In the sky, SEAGULLS swoop and caw and rise.

Extreme close-up: JIMMY LUDWIG'S face, gleeful.



SPENCER takes a step forward. JIMMY spurts forward again.  
SPENCER stops. JIMMY stops. (129)

This is a fascinating approximation of screenplay form that differs from other examples of the form we've seen appearing in literature. I've never personally encountered a screenplay in which the slug line was centered, for example. Here, it seems to have been appropriated as a kind of chapter sub-heading. There are a number of other eccentricities that mark this text as departing from more typical screenplay formatting. In the first paragraph the Ludwigs' names appear as full names, suggesting we have not yet met these characters. At the same time, that would typically suggest we should expect character descriptions (i.e., early forties, squat, disheveled), which are absent. Each new paragraph is indented, like in prose fiction, not double-spaced, like in a script. At the same time, writing out "Extreme close-up" instead of the typical script abbreviation, "ECU," marks this as an appropriation of screenplay form explicitly for an audience unfamiliar with screenplay conceits. This places us in us an ambiguous space. Flusfeder has borrowed basically a screenplay format here, but has not transitioned wholesale into a situation *as if* this were a screenplay itself.

However, all in all, though the novel continues in pseudo-screenplay formatting for another two pages (129-130), there isn't much notable here except for the very fact of this oddity itself. Unlike Darius James' *Negrophobia*, Flusfeder's text does not go out of its way to capitalize, play with, or build on the unique possibilities of the closet film form. Rather, the insertion of this brief segue into screenplay formatting simply serves to close the distance between the novel and Spencer's imagined film within that novel. At the level of formal play, nothing particularly remarkable is happening other than the very fact of partial screenplay inclusion. There is another small section in Chapter Nine, where Spencer goes to a cheque-

cashing business and cashes the cheque his father wrote him for too much money, at which point the text goes into screenplay format for another two pages (166-168). But ultimately, while the text is loudly calling attention to its own scriptedness, it is not doing much besides that stark referentiality. *A Film by Spencer Ludwig* is potentially an intriguing novel as a moving father-son narrative, but its mobilization of the closet film form is little more than an eccentric quirk. Part of the reason for this, I suspect, is the absence of a true field of reference. Closet Film here seems like a move this text can execute simply because it is so rarely done. This novel seems to ask: *why not* have scriptic form intrude? It does not ask, as *Negrophobia* does so thoroughly: what *can be* done with scriptic form in the novel?

### ***The Screenplay Within/As the Novel:***

One recent novel that comes much closer to James' work in terms of its thorough exploration of the possibilities of the closet film form is Mark Leyner's *The Tetherballs of Bougainville* (1997). The novel, which is divided into two parts, one prose, the other a screenplay written by the protagonist of the first prose section, explores in a series of increasingly absurd ways the limits of the textual representation of cinema. By pushing every conceivable boundary to farcical extremes, *Tetherballs* goes about as far as any novel has in terms of establishing the limits of closet film. Part One, titled "The Vivisection of Mighty Mouse," is a satirical romp through an alternate reality New Jersey penal system via a manic pop cultural referentiality, sort of Jonathan Swift meets Bret Easton Ellis except way, way more tongue-in-cheek. The narrative takes place over just a few hours. Impossibly precocious

thirteen-year-old Mark Leyner is attending the execution by lethal injection of his father, Joel Leyner, when he gets a phone call from his ICM agent that he has won a prestigious screenwriting award for a script he subsequently needs to write by tomorrow. Mark is anxious for the lengthy execution procedures to be over with so he can write the script, and meanwhile muses and waxes poetic on everything from tetherball to a video game called *Gianni Isotope* to his growing sexual desire for the prison warden in charge of the execution. But unfortunately, due probably to his father's incredibly well-built-up tolerance to drugs, the lethal injection fails and his father is "resentenced to State Discretionary Execution" (69). This means, explains the warden, that his father will be free to go, but that at any time for the rest of his life the state of New Jersey reserves the right to execute him in any way that might like, at any time, in any place, with total leeway for possible collateral damage and civilian casualties (69-70). The rabbi on hand suggests, " 'It's a very postmodern sentencing structure' " (71), but Mark himself thinks it "seems like normal life... isn't everyone basically sentenced to New Jersey State Discretionary Execution from, like, the moment he's born?" (71).<sup>14</sup> We then get the full text of a lengthy prison pamphlet about NJSDE, outlining the randomization system, what to expect in terms of being ostracized from your community, etc. (71-90), the second half of which is a tangential segue concerning "renowned signage copyrighter Leonard Gutman" (84), who after being sentenced to NJSDE, coincidentally had a heart attack on the same day his ticket came up for his execution. His family then filed a wrong death lawsuit against the hospital, "claiming that it was [his real doctor] Cuzzo's genuine gross negligence and not the feigned gross negligence of the

---

<sup>14</sup> It is certainly worth mentioning that Mark's father's sentence is strikingly similar to the situation of the *homo sacer*, the figure from ancient Roman law that is not executed, but who can be killed by other citizens freely with no charges being brought against them. This figure is of course the subject of Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, as a paradigmatic figure of modern sovereignty and the normalization of the state of exception. Though both Leyner's novel and Agamben's philosophical study focus on the counter-intuitive ontological status of such a figure, my current project emphasizes the specific *formal* conceits of the Leyner's closet film. Suffice it to say that such

NJSDE agents that resulted in Gutman's death" (88). So you get an idea of the flavor of the zany satire here.

Mark "is beginning to feel really pressed time-wise" (92), which is understandable given the temporal oddities of this novel, including passages like this:

'You like Arnold Schoenberg's *Suite for Piano*, opus 25?' the rabbi asks my father.  
'How's it go?'  
The rabbi hums the entire fourteen-minute composition.  
'Nuh-uh,' Dad says. (98)

Whether we imagine this to be character-Mark's hyperbole or author-Mark's wry humor, the conceit of anti-realism begins to prepare us for what we find in Mark's award-winning screenplay in Part Two: The Vivisection of Mighty Mouse Jr., in which he takes the warden's advice on what to write. At the end of Part One, while Mark performs cunnilingus on the warden at great length, she suggests he simply "'write down everything that happened and just put it in screenplay form'" (108). The section ends with Mark musing ontologically that "at the moment we die... we become screenwriters, which is why your life flashes before your eyes in the form of a storyboard" (108), followed by a rant about the eccentricities of the SkriptMentor screenplay-formatting software program he's going to use to write his script, such as detailed series of prompts asking for penis size and specifications every time a male character is involved in a sex scene, and prompting the writer "every two pages or five minutes" about the "requisite Springsteen dirge?" (109-111).

The Vivisection of Mighty Mouse Jr. is an odd screenplay. On one hand it is partly contextualized as a work *within* the diegetic world of the novel as portrayed in Part One. However, its inclusion as an equal and separate part, as well as its length (it is the longer of the

---

philosophically relevant connections between closet films and Agambenian thought offer fertile ground for further study.

two sections in terms of page-count), render it a sort of semi-autonomy from the previous prose section that calls into question our default assumption that a script as a chapter of a novel must be a textual element from within that novel. It is doubly confirmed by the way that the screenplay distinctly seems to *continue* the narrative begun in the first section of the novel, rather than to, as Mark suggested he would do after the warden came up with the idea, simply reproduce in screenplay form what had already transpired. Part Two picks up more-or-less linearly where the plot of Part One left off. It is almost as if the warden suggests that Mark imagine the formal idiosyncrasy of the closet film as nothing more than a different way of saying the same thing (different form, say essential content), but Mark (both character and author) seems to go in a different direction, exploring the way the form itself constructs that content. Which is to say that the form itself of *The Vivisection of Mighty Mouse Jr.* is very peculiar. Even more so than was the case in James' *Negrophobia*, where the text's primary unfilmability was driven by the politically charged nature of its content and technical difficulties were secondary, Leyner pushes formal elements so that this script approaches the boundaries of what is conceivably and technically filmable, rather than merely politically or legally filmable.

A number of elements render *The Vivisection of Mighty Mouse Jr.* impractical as an actual shooting script, which is what it purports to be (unlike the conceit of the post-production script in *Ulverton*, the unexplained scriptic inclusions within the prose in *A Film by Spencer Ludwig*, or even the way that *Negrophobia* announces itself as a novel, an urban parable, etc.). For example, there are no scene numbers, a pointed choice given that early practitioners of the form marked their works as closet filmic most notably by means of numbered sections (see Chapters One and Two, especially for discussion of works by Akutagawa and Fondane respectively). While some descriptions are painfully over-detailed and the screenplay contains

vast explanatory notes (see, for example, the two-page description of the drug known as “gravy”, 120-1), others are astonishingly vague: “A SERIES OF ANGLES” (115) on the first page being a good example. But more often there are “unnecessary” details and explanations that serve more as (literary) witty asides than as production notes for any “actual” film version of this text. In a half-page long parenthetical detailing the manner in which the WARDEN is supposed to deliver the line, “Hmmm... I think we can do a little better than that” (117), Mark notes, “*It’s worth doing hundreds of takes to achieve the finely nuanced delivery that this line requires*” (117). Later, Mark includes a “CASTING NOTE: If that actor playing the role of MARK is incapable of achieving some of the foregoing ophthalmic effects, a stuntman may be required for this particular shot” (121). After Mark details a “PULL-BACK SHOT—using fiberoptic endoscope” (138) that tracks through the WARDEN’s esophagus and out her mouth, he includes a page of parentheticals detailing how to achieve such a shot by using diazepam to relax the actress, derailing into a tangent about Michele Pfeiffer’s duodenum double on *My Angel’s Bitter Kiss* and finally suggesting that “If, in the course of the pull-back shot, any polyps are found, they might as well be removed, since you’re in there anyway” (138), followed by a description of methods for removing polyps.

The Vivisection of Mighty Mouse Jr. also contains a number of unthinkable long, boring, and/or repetitive shots. When the WARDEN asks MARK to choose between what’s in her left hand and right, MARK’s eyes dart between her two clenched fists and the “oscillating pan continues for seven minutes” (116). When they move from the WARDEN’s office into an adjacent locked room (a space of five feet), while listening to Donna Summer’s “MacArthur Park” (dance mix), the stage directions dictate that the tracking shot “should be slowed down as much as possible to accommodate the FULL LENGTH of the SONG” (118), followed by the

commentary: “In addition to super slow motion, intercut long shots, detail shots, retracking dolly shots, high angles, wide angles, reverse angles, freeze frames, canted frames—whatever is necessary to stretch this five-second walk into an eight-and-a-half-minute shot coextensive with the sound track” (118). As MARK begins to trip on the “gravy” superdrug, we get an impossibly long voice-over, including suggestions on the “coolest videos to watch when you’re high,” Mark’s “idea for a television series about a wandering samurai-errant-like tetherball player,” and being in a Kenneth Cole commercial where he and a group of diplomats negotiate a hostage release of Michael Eisner and Joe Roth from “Amish fanatics who are trying to stop Disney from producing a Paul Verhoeven-Joe Eszterhas erotic thriller about ‘bundling.’ ” (122-128), all ostensibly over a silent moment on Mark’s face as the drugs kick in. This seemingly too-long voice-over harkens back to the closet drama form, in which one of the frequent conceits is long monologues, inappropriate for the stage and derived more out of epic poetry (see, perhaps most notably, Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*).

But this is taken to a much greater extreme in the section featuring Mark reading a film review he wrote for a previous film of his he never made. Mark tells the Warden, “It’s not an imaginary movie review. It’s a review of an imaginary movie” (180), and he explains that while he likes film and theory, “the actual screenwriting seems so tedious, so superfluous. I’m not into praxis. I’m more a dialectician of absence. Writing per se always struck me as terribly vulgar. To actually commit an idea to paper is a desecration of that idea, a corruption of the mind. It’s not laziness. Heavens no. It’s simply that I’m loathe to violate the Mallarméan purity of the blank page” (181). This, we might posit, surmises the entire theory of *potential cinema*: writing a screenplay that collapses in on itself in a *dialectic of absence* in which cinema itself is a signifier that is both everywhere and nowhere. Then, over a dissolve to a “SOFT-FOCUS

MEDIUM-SHOT of MARK at the window” (183) which Mark suggests should be “*definitely* THE SHOT to use for commercials, print ads, billboards, posters, Web site, and licensed merchandise” (184), Mark reads the *entire* length of the review (184-237). About half of the screenplay or a quarter of the whole novel (in terms of page count), is taken up by this single shot with Mark’s lengthy review of an imaginary film. The name of the film is *The Tetherballs of Bougainville*. The title of the novel itself thus takes its name from the imaginary film referenced at length within the screenplay (“The Vivisection of Mighty Mouse Jr.”) that forms half its narrative.<sup>15</sup>

It is hard to say, in a novel where the thirteen-year old protagonist carves an impossible litany of Satanic aphorisms into his arm with a shard of broken glass (165), which scene pushes the limits of plausibility the most. And can we really emphasize the unfilmability of certain scenes in a novel where the prose section itself contained a scene in which a rabbi hums continuous for fourteen minutes? In other words, is Leyner’s playful send-up of what can be potentially filmed complicated by its status *within* a distinctly unrealistic novel? If this screenplay exists in an absurdist satirical world, does that undermine its ability to satirize realistic technical film constraints? On the one hand, insofar as the whole thing seems so groan-inducingly silly, yes. But on the other hand, Leyner pulls off doing some very interesting things with form here, and he’s working in a genre (closet film) that did not, until now, exist. Before turning to *Tetherballs*’ eponymous film review of an imaginary film within a screenplay within a novel, I want to look very closely at a scene that plays absurdly with the formal possibilities of scriptic form within the literary. It begins when Mark and the Warden, tripping on gravy, finally get matter-of-factly down to it: “Now the notorious and achingly beautiful CUNNILINGUS

---

<sup>15</sup> The Vivesection of Mighty Mouse Jr. is also, throughout, hyperallusive of other films, extant or not, besides *The Tetherballs of Bougainville* (123-6, 161, 176, 185, 188-189, 196, 211).



SCENE” (171). I should pause here to point out something that might seem obvious: the use of all-caps. Typically, all-caps are used in scripts to draw different production entities’ eyes towards key characters, props or actions that require planning and forethought to execute. You need to know what characters and what props you need in a scene. You need to know what sort of complicated camera moves might be necessitated by different kinds of actions. Not all screenplays use all-caps, and certainly not for the same reasons, but they are not commonly used for emphasis, and certainly not for humor. Leyner’s appropriation of screenplay format here in the context of a novel thus capitalizes on the familiar all-caps technique but recontextualized in the literary. At the microformal level, a specific and original kind of comedy is achieved by appropriating and recontextualizing one genre’s specific technical elements into another.

The line is of course also funny because of the absurdity of describing this grotesque scene as “achingly beautiful,” a phrase derived from the discourse of film reviews. There are multiple levels of irony at play, the foremost being that the script seems to presume the *actual* existence of the *potential* film for which it ostensibly serves as a production document. But on a metafictional level, there is an irony regarding the future-notoriety of this particular scene in the novel. In other words, there is an ironic play on the extent to which it is character Mark Leyner or author Mark Leyner claiming this scene as “notorious.” Mark explains, “The scene is notorious because of its extraordinary length—over three and a half hours” (171), and “The scene’s aching beauty derives primarily from the fact that for over three and a half hours, MARK’s face never leaves the vulva of the WARDEN, no matter what she is doing” (172). The descriptions of what this looks like, the Warden doing paperwork and dealing with a prison riot all while Mark continues with varying levels of inexperienced success to perform cunnilingus, grow increasingly absurd, reaching a point where Mark “actually dons her in-line skates so his

feet can roll across the floor, an arm around each of her thighs, his mouth pinioned to her genitals” (172).

Mark defends the artful tone of the scene at length, but then in a perhaps surprising turn of events, he offers a “Pledge of Integrity” (173), suggesting he will “remove the scene in its entirety” if it’s the only thing keeping the award-selection committee from granting him the prize, and following this up with a long series of suggestions on financing the project, possibility reserving the cunnilingus scene as an exclusive for the “deluxe letterbox director’s-cut laser disc” and/or a *Hard-Core Mix*, which would be *just* the CUNNILINGUS SCENE” (174). The context of this scene is thus somewhat ambiguous, and we are asked as readers to imagine several film versions of the script in multiple media formats and cuts, expanding our options about how we think about what we’re reading in a way I think would be fair to call refreshingly innovative. Because it is a script, we can imagine the *production* of the film just as readily as we can imagine the many potential films itself. How would you film this? How would you cast it? What would it be like to be a part of that film crew? And what would it be like to watch this at a theater versus at home, as part of a longer cut or as part of the *Hard-Core Mix*? And yet, simultaneously, we also read this *as a novel*, and there are specifically literary moves at work here as well. Mark writes, “There are only two substantive exchanges of dialogue in the CUNNILINGUS SCENE” (175). The first is a very quick rehash of the longer scene from Part One (107-108): “In one, after MARK peeks at his Tag Heuer and whines about how he won’t be able to get to the library in time to plagiarize a screenplay, the WARDEN advises him to concoct a script ‘out of this,’ suggesting that, as soon as he gets home, he type out everything that happened—i.e., everything that’s transpired between the two of them in the WARDEN’s office—and simply reformat it into a screenplay” (175). Mark then offers a lengthy explanation

which plunges us into a Möbius-strip spiral of self-reflexivity:

I've decided not to incorporate this dialogue into the screenplay. This colloquy between the WARDEN and MARK in which they discuss how to turn their encounter into a screenplay is essentially an ad hoc story conference and putting a story conference into this movie just seems to 'inside Hollywood,' too 'fashionably self-reflexive,' for me. (175)

This passage brings into full focus the depth of metafictional and ironic layering that Leyner deploys in this screenplay. Aside from the obvious preterition of “not” including the story conference by saying he is “not” going to do so, because it would, self-reflexively, be too “self-reflexive,” this dialogue *has already been* included in the novel itself, in the earlier prose section which pointed out—as this scene reiterates—could be simply reformatted into a screenplay, which of course it could not, since Leyner is in this very passage using specifically screenplay-derived devices to achieve a related but separate series of literary effects. The other exchange of dialogue in the cunnilingus scene is basically a long monologue of the Warden's in which she expostulates on fitness tapes (176-179).

One of the elements set up here, that will take full form in the film review that follows, is the ontological instability of the matryoshka -doll structure of the multiple frames of narration here. Ultimately, this instability comes to a fore in the several moments where information or events ostensibly occurring in the main narrative or screenplay appear in the film review, which by all reasonable estimation must have been written long before. If Mark is reading his film review of *The Tetherballs of Bougainville* to the Warden (in the screenplay “The Vivisection of Mighty Mouse JR.”), which Mark wrote immediately following the events in the main prose narrative, then that film review should *not* be able to include information such as, “*The Tetherballs of Bougainville* was written, directed, and edited by 13-year-old Mark Leyner, whose only previous credit is as musical director of a video of the abortive execution attempt of his

father, entitled ‘I feel shitty.’” (184-185). In fact, the plot of *Tetherballs* is “an autobiographical account of the year that follows the sentencing of Leyner’s father, Joel, to New Jersey State Discretionary Execution (NJSDE)” (185). That is an impossible plot for an imaginary film Mark ostensibly came up with and wrote a fifty-page review about *prior* to the autobiographical events it dramatizes. In case this “impossibility” does not trip up the casual reader, Leyner takes it even further when the film review itself quickly details the plot of the entire novel from the very beginning all the way through to the actual event of Mark reading the review out loud to the Warden:

‘Then he [my father] had to tell me this whole long story about turning a brunette without a cranium into a blonde, and then they tried to execute him and then he didn’t die, and then I had to go talk to the prison doctor, and then he was resentenced to NJSDE, and then they had to explain what NJSDE was, and then we had to pick a song to go with the video, and then we had to say good-bye all over again, and then I got high with the warden, and then I had sex with the warden, then I read my talismanic movie review to the warden. It was just one thing after another.’ (191)

This impossible structure turns the whole thing inside out. One immediate effect is that the conceit of the realism of each textual artifact existing in one diegetic reality is rendered irrelevant, freeing us to treat the screenplay, for example, as we probably already have, as an individual text free of the constraints of being part of or within a novel. “The Vivisection of Mighty Mouse Jr.” is its own unique thing: a closet film.

A second interesting point here is Leyner’s description of the movie review as “talismanic,” as if it were a kind of engraved object meant to ward off evil or produce some magical effect in the world. It is my contention that it is this gesture towards magical creation that links Leyner’s closet film most directly to James’ *Negrophobia*, more so than the obvious similarities in style and motif: grotesquery, hallucinatory drug trips, hysterical absurdism, shocking sex and violence, etc. In both texts, the *thing* the closet film does is gesture (in some

kind of almost magical way) *outside* the text, aimed at generating some kind of occult effect in the real world. The unworking of the actual film text, to return to Agambenian terminology, offers a playful prophanation of film form within the literary. But where for James that effect concerned using the invocation of the cinematic unconscious as a mechanism for dealing with the ingrained cartoonish stereotypes of internalized racist discourse, for Leyner the object of critique is much more vague, something more like the absurd hyperconsumerist capitalist system that produces such insane and self-contradicting social structures and political entities that something like the New Jersey State Discretionary Execution only barely reads as satire at all. Closet film form offers a unique and powerful way to *summon* multiple modes of reading multiple ontological structures at once.

Ironically, perhaps the best metafictional metaphor for this phenomenon comes not from a closet film at all, but from the work of Thomas Pynchon. That is to say, Pynchon has, across several works, developed a theory of the way fiction itself can and should operate to create an effect outside itself that is perhaps describable as precisely “*talismanic*.” This metaphor for literature-as-talisman is perhaps most fully developed in *Mason & Dixon* (1997), a historical novel about the astronomers Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon who drew what would later come to be known as the Mason-Dixon line. The novel, which is in some ways a madcap romp through a history of mid-eighteenth-century science (and pseudo-science), delves deeply into the minor histories of major figures and the asides of technological progression. One of these, principally, is the early form of the modern electric battery, described as a series of stacked plates of alternating electrical charge, which appears notably in Benjamin Franklin’s Leyden-Jar (294), and also describes the body of Felipe, the possibly-sentient Surinamese Electric Eel (431-2). As Dixon reminds us, ““alternating Layers of different Substances are ever a Sign of the

intention to Accumulate Force,— not necessarily Electrical, neither,—” (599). The accumulation and amplification of thermodynamic force as a metaphor for socio-political action has been important to Pynchon since at least 1984, when he published a brief essay titled, “Is it OK to be a Luddite?” in which he argues that Ned Ludd, the romanticized leader of an eighteenth century movement of British weavers, was likely not the “technophobic crazy” he has been made out to be, but rather a “dedicated Badass” (43). He asserts,

There is a long folk history of this figure, the Badass. He is usually male, and while sometime earning the quizzical tolerance of women, is almost universally admired by men for two basic virtues: he is Bad, and he is Big. Bad meaning not morally evil, necessarily, more like able to work mischief on a large scale. What is important here is the amplifying of scale, the multiplication of effect. (43-44)

This amplification of force, which is accomplished by Badasses such as “the djinn, the golem, the hulk, the superhero” (44), is also realized, Pynchon argues, by novels, which have a “Luddite value” inasmuch as they operate “through literary means which are nocturnal and deal in disguise, to *deny the machine*” (45). *Mason & Dixon*’s depiction of the early form of the modern battery as a stack of inversely charged plates precisely models how something like a work of literature might be able to amplify its scale, multiply its effect.

Felipe, the electrical eel (also known as a torpedo), is an excellent figure for what we might call an element of “Badass Literature,” or literature with a high “Luddite value.” Gershom, George Washington’s black Jewish slave, explains that

‘the Torpedo, five-sixths of whose Length is taken up with these Electrical Plates, the Principle of all these structures,— which is, that you must stack a great many of them, one immediately upon the next, if you wish to produce any effect large enough to be useful in, let alone noticed by, the World.— Aye, Dixon, well might you wag your Head,— wag away, may it circulate some sense. For what possible use a single plate, Lead or Gold, buried in the Earth, is, is beyond me.’ (286)

Dixon responds, “‘Why may not these Plates collectively form a Tellurick Leyden-Pile? If not for storing quantities of simple Electrick Force, then to hold smaller charges, easily shap’d into

invisible symbols” (286). Later, Professor Voam says of Felipe: “of particular interest being those of the Disks which are Stack’d lengthwise along most of his over-all length, each Disk being a kind of Electrickal Plate, whose summ’d Effect is to charge his Head in a Positive, as his Tail in a Negative Sense” (432). *Mason & Dixon* is itself structured in just this way. For as much as its narrative tunnels wormlike through established boundaries of Enlightenment ideology, it is also a thoroughly orthogonal and binary novel. In addition to the inevitable characteristics—the black ink on white pages, the stacking of facing sheets, etc.—the novel is structured not only around two main characters who variously double and mirror each other, but also by a ferociously ordered principle of regular chapter-lengths. Each is about ten pages long, with very few digressing from this scheme: the book’s 78 chapters are constituted by 773 pages. Moreover, the novel follows two fairly stable characters across a more-or-less linear story whose plot structure parallels *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*—the ultimate proponent of all things right-angled and binary—in that both texts focus on the mid-eighteenth-century until the 1760s, from the perspective of the 1780s, while the 1770s, the period of the American revolution, are simply elided altogether. The novel’s historiography is thus not only tangled and nebulous, but also orthogonal, and at no individual point are these terms ever fully reconciled. *Mason & Dixon*’s historiography thus always resides in the space between orthogonal and wormlike. It is therefore perhaps Felipe who most accurately presents a sort of total mise en abyme microcosm of *Mason & Dixon* itself, a novel inclined towards both the subterranean and wormlike on the one hand, and the orthogonal and binary stacking that amplifies force on the other. The shape of historiography imagined in this novel, in other words, is *both* the “great disorderly Tangle of Lines” suggested by the image of the worm and of the “Terrestrial Sign of Draco,” but also the grid-like sandwiching and stacking of plates in the

proto-battery—just like an electric eel.

With Felipe, and by extension *Mason & Dixon* itself, Pynchon articulates a talismanic conception of the novel that gestures towards the kind of thinking that Darius James and Mark Leyner are able to capitalize upon and do even more thoroughly by using closet film form. In both *Tetherballs* and *Negrophobia*, closet film form quite literally “amplifies the effect” of the literary text by pointing outside itself towards not only the imaginary filmic product but also the imaginary production of that filmic end-product. The end goal, in both cases, is a kind of “Luddite value” insofar as both texts are attempting very clearly to “deny the machine.” Ultimately, then, what closet film *does* is, in Pynchon’s terms, “Badass,” working through martial and nocturnal means to effect mischief on a large scale. Or, to put it another way, closet film is uniquely capable of effects outside of the text itself through its virtuosic playfulness, in Agamben’s sense, the extent to which the cinematic machine is held at bay and denied by the strategic closetedness that nocturnally disguises its extra-textual political amplification.



## CONCLUSION

### REALISM AS POTENTIAL CINEMA

I now would like to offer something a bit different that demonstrates the way that potential cinema *already* informs the way we read novels. By analyzing the somewhat fallacious formulation, typical in literary criticism, that positions a given piece of literature on a continuum between Realism on the one hand, and something like metafiction, antirealism, or anti-illusionism on the other, we can see that what we might call a *mimetic imperative* eclipses the actual phenomenological processes that we typically undergo while reading. In other words, when we attempt “Realist” readings, we are really doing something *else*. It is my contention that what we are actually doing, given the shift in not only the novel itself but in the way we read the novel in the age of cinema, when the structural machinations of film and video media have determined a kind of imaginary cinema of the mind,—what we are actually doing when we say we are reading realistically is *reading potential cinema*.

The first essential point to establish then is that no matter how we think and talk and theorize about how we read fiction, we tend to implicitly privilege a very old model of Realism as the default, the norm. Some critics have been outspoken about this being a good thing, and others have been quick to say it’s a bad thing, but the latter have not been very persuasive in arguing against the position that it is a real thing in the first place. For example, Dan Schwarz, in his essay, “A Humanistic Ethics of Reading” (2001), celebrates what he perceives as a revival of humanistic hermeneutics now that “the high tide of rhetorical deconstruction [has] receded” (3). Schwarz outlines several key premises shared by this new wave of critics, among which he argues “A literary text imitates a world that precedes the text, and the critic should recapture that

world primarily by formal analysis of the text, although knowledge of the historical context and author is often important” (3). Clearly for Schwarz a simplistic model of Literary Realism is to be privileged above all else. And he makes an excellent point about the potential universality of this thinking: “Who among us would be teaching and studying literature had we not learned to read mimetically?” (13). I think that latter point is probably right, but I would place extra stress where Schwarz does not: on the *learned* aspect of that mode of reading. What Schwarz makes a strong case here for is the extent to which the default impulse to read mimetically is shared by a larger number of academics than only the self-described proponents of humanist hermeneutics. For even if those against whom Schwarz polemicizes are quite critical of a superficial mode of literary analysis which favors author-centric criticism and ignores almost across the board the developments in literary theory since the New Critics, surely even they must admit that we have all been taught at one point or another to read that way, and that moreover we *like* to read that way even after being re-taught to reject that kind of reading. One essential problem that we are still grappling with, in other words, is that despite a widespread rejection of the kind of literary criticism that Schwarz values, whether from deconstructionist camps or those (as we shall see shortly) that favor antirealist, metafictional-privileging readings, we cannot seem to shake humanistic Realism as the essential default norm of how we read in the first place. We can be for it, or against it, but it remains.

This becomes most clear when we look at the best theorists talking about instances in which Realism is challenged or punctured by metafiction, anti-illusionism, or self-reflexivity, etc. Even in these cases, critics tend to explicitly or implicitly value Realism as the primary mode of reading, and think of metafiction as a secondary function of what constitutes narrative. In other words, the metafictional (or anti-illusionistic, or self-reflexive) is almost always defined

*against* something. It is no coincidence that every term for it bears some sort of prefix that designates its *special* or *exceptional* relationship to a more ordinary norm. *Metafiction*, or *anti-illusionistic fiction*, is specifically defined against a conception of *just plain old* fiction. But the “just plain old” euphemism here isn’t innocent. *Realist* fiction, in the *implicit* understanding of more literary theory than it may at first appear obviously, is taken as *simply* fiction. Monika Fludernik, for example, in her *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* (1996), arguably one of the most important works of narratology in the last fifteen years, more-or-less explicitly upholds the primacy of Realism over what she calls “anti-illusionistic techniques” (273), and she lists four categories “in which narratives disrupt their *expected* realistic frames” (273, my emphasis). But, she argues, even in the most extreme cases of narratives that go out of their way to disrupt “expected realistic frames,” such as Christine Brooke-Rose’s experiment novels *Out* (1964) and *Such* (1966), Realism remains the dominant paradigm for reading: “Yet even these radical texts do not completely disrupt the process of narrativization; they merely dilute constants of mimetic conceptualization to the point where realist frames become tenuous and are reduced to the notions of malleable or inconstant character, setting and event outlines” (273). And she echoes James Phelan’s injunction (more on him below) to “preserve mimeticism” when she argues, “By recuperating such texts, by narrativizing them, readers enforce a minimal holistic (cognitive) story shape on what is threatening to become unreadable, unshapeable textual fluidity” (274). If the Realism end of the spectrum asymptotically approaches the Real, then the metafictional literally approaches, in Fludernik’s term, the “unreadable.” This model, in which texts simply exist somewhere between reality and unreadability, is precisely what I can’t quite get behind. It is quite a jarring claim, actually, that suggests the sheer readability of a text should be pinioned onto an axis determined by the mimeticism of that text, as if metafictional works were somehow

less communicative, less *readable* than realistic ones, as if mimetic narrative story were the only criterion for legibility.

In Fludernik's more recent work that takes up questions specifically related to metafiction, "Metanarrative and Metafictional Commentary: From Metadiscursivity to Metanarration and Metafiction" (2003), Fludernik at first appears more accepting of a model that attempts to put metafiction on equal footing with Realism, as equally constitutive components of fiction, rather than one in which metafiction is simply halfway towards literal unreadability. She praises Ansgar Nunning's

flexible scalar model according to which narrative mimesis can tend either towards the pole of narrational or towards the pole of diegetic (plot) illusionism. In other words, the realistic illusionism produced by the (traditional) novel can consist in the evocation of a communicational scenario (a narrator talking to the narratee), in the portrayal of a fictional world, or in the combination of both types of illusion (as, for instance, in the authorial novel; compare Fielding's *Tom Jones*). (3)

Certain devices that we might call metafictional<sup>16</sup> are more aptly considered as themselves functions of illusionism, albeit of a different mode than the diegetic source. But the actual effect here, it seems to me, is again (like in Fludernik's earlier work) to render metanarration, if not metafiction, as merely a subset of realism. The emphasis, in each case, is on how the mimesis and illusionism are constitutive of fiction, and that rather than understanding ways this is broken or disrupted, we should imagine ways something else (such as the relationship between the author and the reader) is itself represented mimetically.

If the privileging of the mimetic mode of reading is more-or-less explicit in Fludernik, it is often *implicit* in works that *purport* to uphold metafiction as somehow more important,

---

<sup>16</sup> Both Nunning and Fludernik are interested in redefining such terms. Fludernik suggests that "the term *metafiction* has been used rather loosely and randomly in English critical prose to refer to all sorts of techniques that explicitly or implicitly 'break' what is called the mimetic illusion generated by fictional narrative. Metafiction, in short, frequently includes anti-realistic devices, parody, *mise-en-abyme*, just anything that is not 'realist' (in the caricature sense of a verisimilar fictional representation of a fictional world that looks much like our real world)" (11).

dominant, or constitutive than realism, such as another foundational text: Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984), which has set the tone for much of the theorizing on the term ("metafiction") for the last several decades. At first, Waugh seems to privilege metafiction as the definitional or constitutive element of the novel: "What I hope to establish during the course of this book is that metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels... By studying metafiction, one is, in effect, studying that which gives the novel its identity" (4, italics Waugh's). Later in the introduction, she expands and clarifies this definition: "Metafiction is not so much a sub-genre of the novel as a tendency *within* the novel which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion" (14, italics Waugh's). The suggestion that metafiction "gives the novel its identity" is a compelling one, but it is already undercut by the language Waugh uses to describe it: metafiction is a *tendency within* the novel which functions through the *exaggeration* of something *already within* the novel, the tensions and oppositions *inherent* in them, which are more originary than metafiction, which we can only understand as a mechanism of manipulating, *exaggerating*, what is *already there*. Waugh thus provocatively suggests that metafiction might be the very thing of the novel, that which "gives the novel its identity," but simultaneously seems to implicitly understand metafiction as a secondary function of (Realist) fiction.

Something similar happens in Wenche Ommundsen's work, which sets out from the get-go ostensibly to critique exactly the false opposition I'm talking about here:

Throughout this book it will be argued that the perceived and to my view misleading opposition between reflexivity and reality, or between metafiction and realism, may have come about through the construction of metafiction itself as a genre or category seemingly distinct from 'ordinary' fiction. Reflexivity, I will suggest, is best understood as a dimension present in all literary texts and central to all literary analysis; a function which by analysing literary processes enables us

to understand the processes by which we read the world as a text. (4)

I am of course on board with Ommundsen's critique of the "misleading" opposition between realism and metafiction, but she is still defining "metafiction" as "a dimension" of fiction, which leaves room to conceptualize realism as the other dimension. This, implicitly, seems to be the case when she argues, "The violation of narrative levels—variously referred to as 'metalepsis', 'tangled hierarchies' or 'strange loops' (see Genette, 1980; McHale, 1987; Hofstadter, 1980) — works to destabilise the fictional illusion, calling attention to its fabricated nature" (8-9). But to understand metafiction as fiction "calling attention to" itself presumes we have already assumed that fiction is a thing, outside of and prior to metafiction, that can be called attention to, and that that thing that fiction is one in which *metalepsis should not* occur. To make this much clearer: Ommundsen says metafiction *destabilizes* fictional illusion, which suggests that it was precisely fictional illusion (or mimesis or Realism or whatever you want to call it) that was there in the first place, the originary truth of the text just waiting to be acted upon (in this case "destabilized") by metafiction. In other words, her specific language obscures the implicit set of assumptions that undergird it: that fiction is naturally realistic and that metafiction is something that breaks or disrupts mimetic illusionism. The fact that Ommundsen suggests metafiction is "present" in all literature, but only "central" in "literary analysis," is, I think, telling of this implicit privileging: it is as if metafiction is always there, but it is only a function of a *certain mode* of literary analysis that it can be read. Ommundsen does, however, go farther than most in her suggestion that "a purely mimetic reading of fiction [is] an impossibility: the one thing a literary reading of fiction *cannot* do is imitate or reflect the world through a mirror-like, self-effacing medium" (24, italics Ommundsen's). It remains unclear to what extent, however, Ommundsen thinks that "a purely mimetic reading" is impossible only because it needs *also* (and

potentially *secondarily*) metafictional readings, or whether, in her model, metafictional readings might really be prior to or trump mimetic ones.

Let us now turn in more detail to one particular case of how this kind of privileging of the mimetic imperative plays itself out in a very good piece of narratological theory: James Phelan's *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (2005). I do this to show how an excellent work of criticism necessarily encounters significant limitations by accepting (in this case explicitly, but most do implicitly) that Realism is, always has been, and should continue to be the default way we first approach a text. Phelan posits as a given our "default interest in preserving the mimetic" (26), on the grounds that of "other readers," "many" tend to want to exhibit an "impulse to preserve the mimetic" in their attempts to find "a plausible, naturalistic rationale" for the synthetic components of narration (25). But simply accepting the essential and unchanging truth of the mimetic imperative, rather than questioning the political, philosophical, and aesthetic grounds that have determined this mode of reading over hundreds of years, limits Phelan's readings in a few problematic ways. His focus at this particular moment in the book, for example, is on Sandra Cisneros' short story "Barbie-Q," and the way that readers tend to want to preserve the mimetic by explaining (rationally, naturalistically) what he calls this story's synthetic component of "redundant telling." That is, the story appears to be narrated by one character to another character who ostensibly already *should know* it all. The whole narrative, which is in some sense clearly *also* being told for our benefit as readers, is therefore "redundant." But understanding the story as an instance of "redundant telling" only makes sense if you have already assumed it *should* be mimetic. It is not redundant at all if we first understand it as a narrative being told to us, if we privilege, that is, the relationship between reader and text instead of narrator and narratee. Only if we first imagine that what we're doing here is eavesdropping

on a mimetic world does a problem of redundancy arise at all.

This problematic is reflected throughout *Living to Tell about It* in what I read as Phelan's *anxiety about narrative sloppiness*. That is, in pointing out narrative inconsistencies (which are of course only inconsistencies if you presuppose that the narrative *should* be consistent in a realistic, naturalistic sense), Phelan is often careful to defensively assert that artistic craftsmanship, and not contrived sloppiness, accounts for narratives' complicated things that need to be explained. Phelan calls these inconsistencies "curious phenomena" and opens his book with a list of them (2-4). A prime example comes from Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day*, where often much of the structure of the narration does not seem to rationally add up. For example, at one point Phelan points out: "What is curious here is that this present-tense justification does not jibe with Stevens' later admission that he had very personal motives for his inquiry, yet the discrepancy does not mark Stevens as a deliberately deceptive narrator or Ishiguro as a sloppy craftsman" (3). But why *not*? What would be the *difference* between sloppy contrivance and this sort of discrepancy or "curious phenomena"? Is it just that we don't want to admit that this sort of *sloppiness* might itself be formally constitutive of character narration? What if narrative is constituted (in a more fundamental way than it is by mimeticism) by paradox, sloppiness, irrationality, and messiness?

Quite simply, the narrative structure of *The Remains of the Day* doesn't make sense. Not in the naturalistic, realistic sense that Phelan (and many, many others) want it to. One conceit we are apparently supposed to entertain in reading the novel is that Stevens, as both character and narrator, is not entirely aware of his being emotionally closed-off. In other words, he is reliably unreliable: part of the process of reading this novel is to identify the cracks in his narration and read between the lines in order to glimpse the characters' true interiority. That is, *if* we read



maintaining our default impulse to preserve the mimetic. But when we do this, we get irreconcilable inconsistencies: “curious phenomena,” in Phelan’s terms. Some of these are safely reconciled by complicated rationalizations. Others not so much. Take, for example, this scene between Stevens and Mr. Cardinal (a minor character), in which what we are clearly to glean is that Stevens is more upset than he will himself admit, having just now learned that his father has had a stroke:

‘When I was young, I used to keep all sorts of tropical fish in a tank. Quite a little aquarium it was. I say, Stevens, are you all right?’  
I smiled again. ‘Quite all right, thank you, sir.’  
‘As you so rightly pointed out, I really should come back here in the spring. Darlington Hall must be rather lovely then. The last time I was here, I think it was winter then too. I say, Stevens, are you sure you’re all right there?’  
‘Perfectly all right, thank you, sir.’  
‘Not feeling unwell, are you?’  
‘Not at all, sir. Please excuse me.’ (105)

Here Stevens-as-character is only partially aware of the extent of his emotional anguish, and Stevens-as-narrator is somehow more aware, if ambiguously so. Stevens never tells us: “I was really upset, but because of my professional duty as a butler in a great house I could not express it.” Instead, we piece this together obliquely, by the injunctions of what others say to him. This narrative strategy is most obvious when a moment later Lord Darlington himself confronts Stevens:

I felt something touch my elbow and turned to find Lord Darlington.  
‘Stevens, are you all right?’  
‘Yes, sir. Perfectly.’  
‘You look as though you’re crying.’  
I laughed and taking out a handkerchief, quickly wiped my face. ‘I’m very sorry, sir. The strains of a hard day.’  
‘Yes, it’s been hard work.’ (105)

Now then, it seems *pretty* clear here that despite character-Stevens not being able to express his inner suffering, someone, whether narrator-Stevens or Ishiguro himself, seems hell-bent on us

understanding that Stevens is, indeed, crying. But to imagine that narrator-Stevens has decided to inform us, his readers, in this somewhat oblique way seems inconsistent with what we know about him as a character. Indeed, who *does* that? It does not seem realistically plausible that a person telling something to someone would do so by means of reporting dialogue in which their interior emotional condition is revealed by what is said *to him by others despite himself*. To imagine the revelation of Stevens' pain here as a function of his intention as narrator thus greatly strains plausibility. Now here is the real kicker: this feature of understanding a character's emotional interiority by means of reading between the lines is a specific conceit of narrative textual fiction, in particular the novel. It does not then make sense to imagine Stevens as a naturalistic representation of a real human being here. What is happening in this scene is clearly textual, and, frankly, too obvious. This moment is clearly *contrived*, and no entity within the text (not character-Stevens nor narrator-Stevens) is able to account for it. What recourse do we have here except to say that clearly Ishiguro himself is responsible for this apparent sloppiness? This contrivance? But, we should remind ourselves, *it's only sloppy and contrived if we presume we should be reading mimetically*. If we try to read this as Realism, it does not, simply put, make coherent logical sense. Which explains Phelan's problem here: he wants to read mimetically, but he also wants it to make sense, because he *likes* this novel and does not want to admit it might be sloppy, its moves clunky and contrived. His inability to have both explains his defensive posturing in his assertion that such "curious phenomena" do "not mark Stevens as a deliberately deceptive narrator or Ishiguro as a sloppy craftsman" (3). And it is this same problematic which leads him to make the similarly anxious claim about Cisneros: "In sum, it is not possible to account adequately for the redundant telling as a mimetic strategy, but that impossibility is a sign not of Cisneros's flawed construction but of her ingenuity" (29). Phelan's problem then is not so

much that he takes the mimetic imperative for granted, but that there is a mimetic imperative *at all*.

This problem—trying to read texts as Realistic (because that’s the default/normal/only way to do it) when that is not necessarily the best way to read them—is most apparent in Phelan’s reading of Nabokov’s *Lolita* in one of the book’s later chapters. Phelan makes the claim that in *Lolita*, the “parody, satire, and metafiction” as well as the “intertextuality” are layers that “support rather than undermine the realist layer, serving largely to characterize Humbert and his situation. Consequently,” Phelan asserts, “in this chapter, I will attend primarily to the realist layer because that is where the relation between technique and ethics is most vexed” (99). I think it is safe to say that what we might call the “mimetic default” becomes something more like a “mimetic *imperative*” when a novel like *Lolita* is read as an example of plainly Realist fiction.<sup>17</sup> Here, metafiction is relegated to a set of trappings, clever tricks that are seen in relation to the primarily Realist nature of the narrative itself. Indeed, the metafictional elements of the novel are, for Phelan, contained within Humbert’s own intentionality: they *characterize* him. In Phelan’s reading, Humbert becomes another character-narrator, who, just like Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, is reliable in his own unreliability. *Lolita* becomes “the story of Humbert’s struggle to tell” the “story of his relationship with Dolores” (101), which we as readers are able to glean much from because his “control over the effects of his narration has significant limits” (107). In other words, we know much more than Humbert, and we are supposed to see in the gaps of his narration the true story beneath.

For example, Phelan says, “Humbert is totally oblivious to the way his narration of his marriage to Valeria makes her look like a long-suffering saint and him like a cruel egotist” (107).

But *does* it? And even if it does, how do we know Humbert doesn't *know* that? We do not, and we can not, know that. Narrator-Humbert has, after all, explicitly told us, from his position at the end of the events that transpire in the course of the novel to character-Humbert, that he has been explicitly reconstructing an image of his former self for our benefit: "Fortunately, my story has reached a point where I can cease insulting poor Charlotte for the sake of retrospective verisimilitude" (71). It is this "retrospective verisimilitude" that Phelan entirely overlooks in his central thesis regarding the novel, that "Humbert, *through the very act of telling his story, the effort of perceiving and re-perceiving himself and Dolores*, is changing his relation to the story as well as to himself, to Dolores, and to his audience" (120, italics Phelan's), and that "[w]hile he started out self-absorbed and focused on his own defense, he ends up far more concerned about Dolores than himself" (129). Though attractive in some sense, this reading is ultimately overconfident in its appraisal of Humbert's lack of control over his own narrative—that is, in its framing of Humbert as precisely the sort of reliably unreliable narrator as Ishiguro's Stevens. In the end, this reading seems more motivated by Phelan's own desire to show the potential benefits of telling and narrating, and of solidifying his theoretical narratological framework than it does a careful analysis of the tremendous complications in the narrative slipperiness of Nabokov's most puzzling text.

How then, do we get ourselves out of this bind? It may at first seem frivolous and too-easy, but one answer might be to simply posit potential cinema as a replacement for the anterior reality that Schwarz claims is *de facto* referenced by all texts as the essential, imperative Realism at their core. Instead of the Real, instead of the mind of the author, what works mime in their mimesis is a film that exists *potentially* in the mind of the reader. This is, in other words, a

---

<sup>17</sup> We should note that Phelan is by no means alone in this. Leland de la Durantaye's recent eloquent defense of *Lolita's* ethics, *Style is Matter: the Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (2007) relies entirely on reading the novel as

clever way of weaving together humanist Realism with Reader Response theory while excusing ourselves from the poststructuralist critiques of both. And it presents, in a more sweeping sense, another form of potential cinema than the ones I've laid out through this dissertation (closet film) and in its Introduction (cinematic notional ekphrasis and weirdly filmic novels). It is therefore fitting that we conclude with a fourth mode of potential cinema. Let's take, as our case study, the same short passage of Ishiguro's discussed above:

‘When I was young, I used to keep all sorts of tropical fish in a tank. Quite a little aquarium it was. I say, Stevens, are you all right?’  
I smiled again. ‘Quite all right, thank you, sir.’  
‘As you so rightly pointed out, I really should come back here in the spring. Darlington Hall must be rather lovely then. The last time I was here, I think it was winter then too. I say, Stevens, are you sure you're all right there?’  
‘Perfectly all right, thank you, sir.’  
‘Not feeling unwell, are you?’  
‘Not at all, sir. Please excuse me.’ (105)

If we are driven (by impulse, by default, or by imperative) to read this mimetically, then it collapses into sloppy contrivance (which, by a certain thinking, would make Ishiguro a bad writer, which I don't think he is). If we read it purely as metafictional, it doesn't seem to offer up much. But if we read this as if it were a kind of potential film, if we let the narrational “I” here slip away from Stevens-as-character and transform into the hypothetically interiorized camera we all have in our minds as a function of the growth and dominance of visual media in the late-twentieth-century infoscape, then the scene plays beautifully. “I” *see* Stevens crying, and maybe I even identify with him, and feel his pain. If we let the film play, we avoid all the problems with Realism not making sense. The next question then, is how we begin to do literary critical studies of the potential film evoked by this novel, rather than the novel itself.

---

plain-and-simple Realism with a capital ‘R.’

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abel, Richard. "Exploring the Discursive Field of the Surrealist Film Scenario Text," *Dada/Surrealism* 15 (1986): 58-71.
- Adorno, Theodor Wisengrund, and Bloch, Ernst. "Etwas fehlt: Über die Widersprüche der utopischen Sehnsucht." In Ernst Bloch, *Tendenz, Latenz, Utopie: Werkausgabe Ergänzungsband* (350-68). Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985.
- Agamben, Giorgio. "Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films' (1995). In T. McDonough, ed., *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.
- . *Homo Sacer*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995.
- . *The Idea of Prose*. Trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt. Albany: SUNY Press, 1985.
- . "La potenza del pensiero." Trans. Kevin Attell. Handout distributed at the Symposium on Giorgio Agamben. Cornell University. 4 April 2009.
- . *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*. trans. Karen E. Pinkus. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- . *Man Without Content*. trans. Georgia Albert. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- . "Notes on Gesture" (1992). in *Means Without End*. trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- . *Potentialities*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999.
- . *Profanations*. Trans. Jeff Fort. New York: Zone Books, 2007.
- . *The Time That Remains*. trans. Patricia Dailey. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Akutagawa, Ryunosuke. "Asakusa Park." trans. Seiji M. Lippit. NYC Big City Lit: [www.nycbigcitylit.com](http://www.nycbigcitylit.com), Feb 2004. [originally published as Asakusa Koen, 1927).
- Akutagawa, Ryunosuke, "Kage." In Ryunosuke Akutagawa and Osamu Dazai. *Akutagawa and Dazai: Instances of Literary Adaptation*. Trans. James O'Brien. Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University Center of Asian Studies, 1988.

- . *Rashōmon and Seventeen Other Stories*. trans. Jay Rubin with an introduction by Haruki Murakami. London: Penguin, 2006.
- Amitrano, Giorgio. *The New Japanese Novel: Popular Culture and Literary Tradition in the Work of Murakami Haruki and Yoshimoto Banana*. Kyoto: Publications of the Italian School of East Asian Studies (ISEAS), 1996.
- Angles, Jeffrey. "Review of *Rashomon and 17 Other Stories*, by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, Trans. Jay Rubin." *Translation Review*. Accessed through *Academia.edu*. 2006. <[http://www.academia.edu/2334968/Review\\_of\\_Rashomon\\_and\\_17\\_Other\\_Stories\\_Ryunosuke\\_Akutagawa\\_translation\\_by\\_Jay\\_Rubin\\_](http://www.academia.edu/2334968/Review_of_Rashomon_and_17_Other_Stories_Ryunosuke_Akutagawa_translation_by_Jay_Rubin_)>
- Appel, Alfred. *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*. New York: Oxford UP, 1974.
- Aragon, Louis. *Paris Peasant*. Trans. Simon Watson Taylor. Boston: Exact Change, 1994.
- Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred. London: Penguin, 1998.
- . *Poetics*. ed. and trans. James Hutton. New York: Norton, 1982.
- Artaud, Antonin. *Collected Works*. Trans. Alastair Hamilton. London: Calder & Boyars, 1972.
- . *Theatre and its Double*. Trans. Victor Corti. London: Calder & Boyars, 1970.
- Attell, Kevin. "Agamben's Artaud." In *Giorgio Agamben: Legal, Political and Philosophical Perspectives*. Ed. Tom Frost. London: Routledge, 2013. 175-188.
- . "Notes on Potentiality." Symposium on the Work of Giorgio Agamben. Cornell University. 4 April 2009.
- . "Potentiality, Actuality, Constituent Power." *Diacritics* 39.3 (Fall 2009), 35-53.
- . "Potentiality/Impotentiality." *The Agamben Dictionary*. Eds. Alex Murray and Jessica Whyte. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011.
- Baldwin, James. *No Name in the Street*. New York: Dial Press, 1972.
- . *One Day When I was Lost: A Scenario Based on Alex Haley's The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Laurel, 1972.
- Bazin, Andre. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." *Film Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009.
- Bermel, Albert. *Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty*. New York: Taplinger, 1977.

- Bernhart, Walter. "Functions of Description in Poetry." in *Description in Literature and Other Media*. Eds. Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007.
- Bersani, Leo. *The Culture of Redemption*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Work of Fire*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Ficciones*. London: Bristol Classics Press, 1999.
- Boon, Kevin A. *Script Culture and the American Screenplay*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008.
- . "Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)." *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 1969.
- Brooker-Bowers, Nancy. *The Hollywood Novel and Other Novels About Film, 1912-1982: An Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1985.
- Burroughs, Catherine. "The Persistence of Closet Drama." In *The Performing Century: Nineteenth-Century Theatre's History*. Eds. Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 215-235.
- Burroughs, William S. *Blade Runner (a movie)*. Berkeley: Blue Wind Press, 1979.
- . *The Last Words of Dutch Schultz*. London: Cape Goliard Press, 1970.
- Céline, Louis-Ferdinand. *Secrets dans l' île*. Illustrated by Bruno Bressolin. Rodez: Éditions du Rouerge, 2003.
- Cohan, Keith. *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1979.
- Cohen, Ralph. "Introduction." *Theorizing Genres I. NLH* 34, no. 2 (2003): v.
- Colebrook, Claire. "Agamben: Aesthetics, Potentiality, and Life." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107.1 (Winter 2008): 107-120.
- Culler, Jonathan. "Lyric, History, and Genre." *New Literary History*, 40.4 (Autumn 2009): 879-899.
- . "Why Lyric?" *PMLA* 123.1 (January 2008): 201-206.
- Currie, Mark. *Postmodern Narrative Theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.



- De la Durantaye, Leland. *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.
- . *Style is Matter: the Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2007.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- . *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge, 1994.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Bernard Stiegler. *Echographies of Television. Filmed Interviews*. trans. Jennifer Bajorek. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2002.
- Dulac, Germaine. "The Seashell and the Clergyman." *Cahiers de Belgique*. no. 8. October 1928.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. "Beyond the Shot [The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram]". *Film Theory and Criticism*. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009.
- . "Dickens, Griffith and Ourselves [Dickens, Griffith and Film Today]." in *Film Theory and Criticism*. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. [first published in 1942]
- . *Eisenstein on Disney*. Ed. Jay Leyda. Trans. Alan Upchurch. Calcutta: Seagull, 1986.
- Elliott, Kamilla. *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Esslin, Martin. *Antonin Artaud*. New York: Penguin, 1977.
- Erikson, Steve. *Zeroville*. New York: Europa, 2007.
- Flusfeder, David. *A Film By Spencer Ludwig*. London: Fourth Estate, 2010.
- Fondane, Benjamin. *Trois scénarii: cinépoemes*. Paris: Robert Baze, 1928.
- Gerow, A. A. "The Self Seen As Other: Akutagawa and Film." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 23.3 (1995): 197-203.
- Goldman, William. *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting*. New York: Warner Books, 1982.
- Harper, Graeme, and Rob Stone, eds. *The Unsilvered Screen: Surrealism on Film*.

- London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2007.
- Heffernan, James. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Horak, Jan-Christopher, ed. *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919-1945*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- . *The Politics of Postmodernism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Ivry, Benjamin. "A Romanian Jewish Writer Rediscovered: Benjamin Fondane as Poet, Critic and Filmmaker." *The Jewish Daily Forward*. 23 December 2009. <<http://forward.com/articles/121660/a-romanian-jewish-writer-rediscovered/>>
- James, Darius. "The Darius James Interview." *Matterland* (website), n.d.. <[http://users.rcn.com/scrypt/Darius\\_James\\_Int.html](http://users.rcn.com/scrypt/Darius_James_Int.html)>. [originally published in *Cups Magazine* and *Nobodaddies*, Feb 1994]
- . *Negrophobia: An Urban Parable*. New York: Citadel, 1992.
- . *That's Blaxploitation: Roots of the Baadasssss 'Tude (Rated X by an All-Whyte Jury)*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995.
- James, Darius, and Christian Haye. "Interview." *BOMB*, No. 40 (Summer, 1992), pp. 12-14.
- Jamieson, Lee. *Antonin Artaud: From Theory to Practice*. London: Greenwhich Exchange, 2007.
- . "The Lost Prophet of Cinema: The Film Theory of Antonin Artaud." *Senses of Cinema* 44 (27 August 2007).
- Jodorowsky, Alejandro. "The Film You Will Never See. *Unseen Dune* (website) (n.d). <<http://www.duneinfo.com/unseen/jodorowsky/>>
- Judy, Ronald A. T. "Irony and the Asymptotes of the Hyperbola." *Boundary 2*, 25:1, 1998, 161-190.
- Keener, John F. "The Last Words of Dutch Schultz: Deathbed Autobiography and Postmodern Gangster Fiction." *Arizona Quarterly* 54:2 (Summer 1998): 135-63.
- Kluitenberg, Eric, ed. *Book of Imaginary Media: Excavating the Dream of the Ultimate Communication Medium*. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2006.

- Knapp, Bettina L. *Antonin Artaud: Man of Vision*. New York: David Lewis, 1969.
- Kovács, Steven. *From Enchantment to Rage: The Story of Surrealist Cinema*. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson, 1980.
- Kroeber, Karl. *Make Believe in Film and Fiction: Visual vs. Verbal Storytelling*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Kuenzli, Rudolph E., ed. *Dada and Surrealist Film*. New York: Willis Locker & Owens, 1987.
- Laferriere, Dany. "The Black 'American Psycho': *Negrophobia*, by Darius James." Trans. Annette Aronowicz. *The Los Angeles Times*. 27 December 1992.
- Leeming, David. *James Baldwin: A Biography*. New York: Penguin, 1994.
- Lippit, Seigi M. "The Disintegrating Machinery of the Modern: Akutagawa Ryunosuke's Late Writings." *Journal of Asian Studies* 58.1 (February 1999): 27-50.
- Magny, Claude-Edmonde. *The Age of the American Novel: The Film Aesthetic of Fiction Between the Two Wars*. Trans. Eleanor Hochman. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972.
- Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002.
- Matthews, J.H. *Surrealism and Film*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1971.
- Mazierska, Ewa. *Nabokov's Cinematic Afterlife*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011.
- Mayne, Judith. *Private Novels, Public Films*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988.
- McGinn, Colin. *The Power of Movies: How Screen and Mind Interact*. New York: Pantheon, 2005.
- McHale, Brian. *Constructing Postmodernism*. London and NY: Routledge, 1992.
- . *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen, 1987.
- McClellan, William. "'Ful Pale Face': Agamben's Biopolitical Theory and the Sovereign Subject in Chaucer's Clerk's Tale." *Exemplaria* 17.1 (Spring 2005): 103-134.
- Melton, Quimby. "Ghidorah Attacks! Modern Narrative's Three-Headed Monster." *Bright Lights Film Journal* 65 [August 2009].  
<<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/65/65ghidorah.php>>

- . "Production's Dubious Advantage: Lesescenarios, Closet Drama, and the (Screen)writer's Riposte." *Script* 1.1 (January 2010).
- Meltzer, Francoise. *Salomé and the Dance of Writing: Portraits of Mimesis in Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Metz, Christian. *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*. trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti. London: Macmillan, 1982.
- Mills, Catherine. *The Philosophy of Agamben*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008.
- Morrisette, Bruce. *Novel and Film: Essays in Two Genres*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- Moses, Gavriel. *The Nickel Was for the Movies: Film in the Novel from Pirandello to Puig*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Murphet, Julian, and Lydia Rainford, Eds. *Literature and Visual Technologies: Writing After Cinema*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Rolland Murray. "Black Crisis Shuffle: Fiction, Race, and Simulation." *African American Review* 42.2 (Summer 2008): 215-233.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita*. Ed. Alfred Appel Jr. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970.
- . *Lectures on Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980.
- Nesbet, Anne. "Inanimations: 'Snow White' and 'Ivan the Terrible.'" *Film Quarterly* 50.4 (Summer 1997), 20-31.
- Maurice Nadeau, *History of Surrealism* (Macmillan, 1965; reprinted by Harvard UP, 1989).
- Noys, Benjamin. "Gestural Cinema?: Giorgio Agamben on Film." *Salon* 8.22 (July 2004).
- Norman, Brian. "Reading a 'Closet Screenplay': Hollywood, James Baldwin's *Malcolms* and the Threat of Historical Irrelevance." *African American Review* 39.1/2 (Spring-Summer 2005): 103-118.
- Parker, David. *Ethics, Theory and the Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.

- Parkinson, David, ed. *Mornings in the Dark: The Graham Greene Film Reader*. Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press, 1993.
- Patterson, Frances Taylor. *Cinema Craftsmanship: A Book for Photoplaywrights*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Howe, 1920.
- Phelan, James. *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2005.
- . *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 1996.
- Pinkus, Karen. *The Montesi Scandal: The Death of Wilma Montesi and the Birth of the Paparazzi in Fellini's Rome*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Puchner, Martin. *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.
- . "Textual Cinema and Cinematic Text: The Ekphrasis of Movement in Adam Thorpe and Samuel Beckett." *Erfurt Electronic Studies in English* (1999).
- Pynchon, Thomas. "Is it OK to be a Luddite?" *The New Romanticism: A Collection of Critical Essays*. ed. Alsen Aberhard. NY: Garland, 2000. 41-49.
- . *Mason & Dixon*. New York: Picador Press, 1997.
- Queneau, Raymond. *The Flight of Icarus*. Trans. Barbara Wright. New York: New Directions, 1973.
- Reed, Rebecca and Maria Monk. *A Veil of Fear: Nineteenth-Century Convent Tales*. Ed. Nancy Lusignam Schultz. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 1999.
- Richardson, Robert. *Literature and Film*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1969.
- Rosen, Philip. *Change Mummified*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- Ross, Harris. *Film as Literature, Literature as Film: An Introduction to and Bibliography of Film's Relationship to Literature*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.
- Salvato, Nick. *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010.
- Scheer, Edward, Ed. *Antonin Artaud: A Critical Reader*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Sedgwick, Eve. *Touching Feeling*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

- Shklovsky, Viktor. *Theory of Prose*. Trans. Benjamin Sher. Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990.
- Slide, Anthony. *The Hollywood Novel: A Critical Guide to Over 1200 Works*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1995.
- Southern, Terry. *Red-Dirt Marijuana, and Other Tastes*. New York: New American Library, 1967.
- Spatz, Jonas. *Hollywood in Fiction: Some Versions of the American Myth*. The Hague: Mouton, 1969.
- Suter, Rebecca. *The Japanization of Modernity: Murakami Haruki between Japan and the United States*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008.
- Hall, Steve. *Official Website of Steven Hall*. <<http://steven-hall.org/>>
- Thorpe, Adam. *Ulverton*. London: Minerva, 1993.
- . *Still*. London: Minerva, 1995.
- Usai, Paolo. *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age*. London: BFI, 2001.
- Virmaux, Alain and Odette Virmaux. *Le Ciné-roman: un genre nouveau*. Paris: Edilig, 1983.
- . *Les Surréalistes et le cinéma*. Paris: Seghers, 1976.
- Walker, Tim. "The Film that Defeated Kubrick: Spielberg to turn Napoleon, the Greatest Movie Never Made, into a TV Mini-Series." *The Independent*, 4 March 2013. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/the-film-that-defeated-kubrick-spielberg-to-turn-napoleon-the-greatest-movie-never-made-into-a-tv-miniseries-8519485.html>>
- Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. Boston: Back Bay Books, 1996.
- Watkin, William. *The Literary Agamben: Adventures in Logopoiesis*. London: Continuum, 2010.
- Webb, Ruth. *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*. Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2009.
- Weber, Samuel. *Theatricality as Medium*. New York: Fordham UP, 2004.
- Webster, Patrick. *Love and Death in Kubrick: A Critical Study of the Films from Lolita*

- Through Eyes Wide Shut*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011.
- Welch, Jeffrey Egan. *Literature and Film: An Annotated Bibliography, 1909-1977*. New York and London: Garland, 1981.
- Wettlaufer, Alexandra K. *In the Mind's Eye: The Visual Impulse in Diderot, Baudelaire and Ruskin*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003.
- Williams, Linda. *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1981.
- Wilson, Robert Anton. *Reality Is What You Can Get Away With*. Tempe, Arizona: New Falcon, 1996.
- . *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: Un Film de Robert Anton Wilson*. Tempe, Arizona: New Falcon, 1997.
- Wyllie, Barbara. *Nabokov at the Movies: Film Perspectives in Fiction*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2003.
- Yamagata, Hiroo. Interview with Quimby Melton. *Studio Hyperset*.  
<<http://scriptjr.nl/issues/1.2/hiroo-yamagata-interview-1-2.php>>
- Zizek, Slavoj. *Slavoj Zizek: The Reality of the Virtual*. Dir. Ben Wright. 2004.