

Images between Images:
Cinematic Inventions of the Everyday

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INTRODUCTION

The temporality of everyday life is marked by an irony which is its own creation, for this temporality is held to be ongoing and nonreversible and, at the same time, characterized by repetition and predictability. The pages falling off the calendar, the notches marked in a tree that no longer stands—these are the signs of the everyday, the effort to articulate difference through counting. Yet it is precisely this counting that reduces differences to similarities, that is designed to be ‘lost track of.’ Such ‘counting,’ such signifying, is drowned out by the silence of the ordinary.

—Stewart 14

This dissertation is motivated by a fascination with the ambiguous notion of the “everyday,” its contradictory temporality, and why it is that some people can be said to belong more to the everyday than others. Its overarching argument is that the everyday was and continues to be an “invention” of modernity and modern technologies of representation, and that cinema is one of the key technologies involved in the invention of a modern sense of the everyday. This dissertation’s use of the phrase, “invention of the everyday,” is borrowed from Rita Felski, who recently noted the growing number of recent intellectual inquiries interested in the subject of the everyday. A central term for cultural studies and feminism, the term “everyday” or “everyday life” is frequently invoked by scholars interested in what Felski calls “micro-analysis” and “history from below,” but rarely is it ever explicitly defined (75). Similarly, the everyday is invoked frequently in cinema studies, but rarely is it the focus of sustained theoretical exegeses. It is as if this reticence on the part of scholars echoes the vernacular or commonsensical understanding of the everyday as a level of experience so mundane and commonsensical

that it goes without explanation. Felski, on the other hand, argues that the everyday can indeed be defined as a concept invented by twentieth-century intellectual discourse, in addition to being a distinct phenomenon of capitalist modernity. Building on the notion that the everyday became increasingly visible as an object of representation under modernity, my own argument will delineate the ways in which cinema contributed to and helped to define this process.

While the “inventedness” of the everyday is a major assumption of this dissertation, it is not for the sake of proving that the concept is solely a product of discursive determinations. Rather, my thesis makes recourse to an intellectual tradition (which is discussed in more detail in Chapter One) that looks upon the everyday as both a category of the social imaginary and as that which exceeds or is not entirely attributable to cultural codification. The proponents of this tradition can be said to favor a negative definition of the everyday, aligning it with phenomena that are customarily overlooked or considered unworthy of representation.¹ Maurice Blanchot typifies this critical approach in his characterization of the everyday as “what is most difficult to discover.” For him, the everyday should not be located in the statistical “average” of a given society, but rather in its “hidden present”—its more oblique and less self-evident movements (13). Thus, in a culture ruled by the desire to keep “abreast of everything that takes place at the very instant that it passes and comes to pass” and represents the everyday to itself as a constant stream of things that “happen,” the everyday also resides in what “escapes” such representations and “belongs to insignificance” (Blanchot 14). Even more so than the

¹ Key critics in this largely Francophone tradition include Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Michel de Certeau, and Henri Lefebvre. Michael Sheringham traces this history to the sixties and discusses how it evolved into the eighties in his book, *Everyday Life: Theories and Histories from Surrealism to the Present*. I engage with this critical work in more detail in Chapters One and Two.

continuous stream of events offered up by our ever prolix media culture, as Blanchot argued, it is “platitude,” encompassing “what lags and falls back, the residual life with which our trash cans and cemeteries are filled: scrap and refuse,” that contains the hidden significance of the everyday (13).

This characterization of the everyday as the “hidden present” is particularly germane to cinema’s double nature as both a contingent and a synthetic mode of representation. My thesis argues that this double nature gives cinema a special “affinity” for what Blanchot called platitude and residual life, which is different from saying that film has a transparent relationship to a preexisting reality. Rather, I argue that cinema’s affinity to the everyday is tied to its ability to record *and* reveal portions of the referential world²; that is, cinema does not so much function as a window onto a preordained world as it facilitates unfamiliar configurations of and new ways of perceiving that world. This dissertation engages centrally with an under-examined and much misunderstood idea: Siegfried Kracauer’s theory of everyday life as an “inherent affinity” of cinema. In dialogue with recent reevaluations of Kracauer’s writings, as well as debates in cinema studies on indexicality, my thesis shows the pivotal importance of indexical contingency in his conception of cinema’s affinity with the everyday. Instead of reading indexical contingency in terms of a fixed relation between photochemical image and external referent, I consider its status as an agent for aesthetic and epistemological discovery. In this regard, cinema discloses the everyday, not in a realist or positivist sense, but in a radically non-anthropocentric guise comprised of habitually unheeded and culturally

² I am indebted to Miriam Hansen for this insight into cinema’s dual recording and revelatory capacity, which she argued is crucial to Kracauer’s theory of film’s distinct identity (“Introduction” xxv).

marginalized phenomena. Such images of the everyday insist on the intractable materiality of things and promote subjective reorientations to familiar objects, actions, and environments. Akin to the mute testimony of fossils, the photographic image retains the trace of a prior existence that confronts human intentionality with what Miriam Hansen called an “alien physis” (“Introduction” xxix), the prospect of encountering the material world without the habitual veneer of anthropocentrism. Part of my aim, therefore, is to examine how the cinematic invention of the everyday involved a mixture of continuity and rupture, new and old.

This dissertation’s title, “Images between Images,” is intended as an acknowledgment of the status of all images as mediated realities, even as it suggests a distinct revelatory capacity for the film image. “Images between images” is also the phrase used by Ivone Margulies to describe the work of postwar neorealist cinema, as well as the films of Andy Warhol and Chantal Akerman. For Margulies, these disparate films have in common the desire to beget an “expansion of cinema” by way of quotidian subject matter usually deemed too mundane for mainstream cinema (22). Influenced by Margulies’ analysis of the articulation of the everyday by these culturally disparate cinema practices, each chapter in this thesis examines a specific film or body of cinema practice that evinces this type of affinity for the everyday: early actualities and local films; second-wave feminism, Akerman’s film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, and films concerning women’s domesticity in the 1970s; and contemporary global art cinema. Although each of these chapters deals with a different set of historical discourses and practices, collectively they all engage with films that depict seemingly banal, aesthetically marginalized, and otherwise underrepresented

aspects of modern experience. By analyzing cinema practices from different sociohistorical contexts, this dissertation endeavors to show the flexibility and open-endedness of cinema's affinity for the everyday, without treating it prescriptively as a transhistorical entity.

Chapter One is structured around the figure of the wind in the trees, which I argue plays an important role in theories of cinema's relation to the everyday. I trace a genealogy of this figure from early "pre-cinematic" writings on the camera obscura to classical film theory and eventually to contemporary theories of film vis-à-vis digital media. One of the key theorists examined by this chapter is Siegfried Kracauer, whose writings embrace the uncanny marriage of nature and technology represented by cinematic images like foliage rustling in the wind. Though Kracauer's theory of film's "inherent affinities" with physical reality have previously been denigrated by some critics for espousing a naïve realism, I illustrate how his conception of film as an "instrument which would capture the slightest incidents of the world about us" (Kracauer, *Theory* 27) is actually indicative of a materialist aesthetics of cinema. Through examining the evolution of the figure of the wind in the trees, this chapter reconsiders the narrative-centered histories and theories of film that have come to dominate the field of cinema studies since the 1970s, and suggests how the everyday can act as a basis for a less monolithic approach to cinema as an object of study.

Chapter Two focuses on the early actuality film as a genre that, though frequently mentioned in conjunction with the everyday, is rarely accompanied by further elaboration. Engaging with critical writings on the archival properties of film, as well as recent critiques of archival reason, this chapter investigates the paradoxical notion of an

archive of the everyday. Implying a means of recording phenomena which are by definition recurrent and non-singular, the concept of an archive of the everyday epitomizes the ironic temporality of everyday life in modern, industrialized societies. Standardized clocks and calendars, for instance, are emblematic instances of such archives of the everyday, engaged as they are in the ironic project of “articulat[ing] difference through counting” (Stewart 14). This chapter contends that one particular subset of the actuality genre, the local film, acted as an archive of the everyday in the early twentieth century, but in a very different way from standardized devices for marking time. Through a comparison with the ways in which national newsreels deployed actualities to create a public sense of the everyday, my argument shows how local films appealed to the experiences of social groups that belonged neither to the private sphere nor the abstract category of a national public. In so doing, I advance the idea that the local film genre was capable of providing an alternate sense of the everyday that was more responsive to the collective knowledges and experiences associated with particular groups and places.

Chapter Three is concerned with feminist approaches to the problematic of the everyday and the ways in which this problematic played out in women’s films during the seventies. Widely known as the period in which “second-wave feminism” burgeoned in Europe and America, the seventies saw a number of remarkable films made by women about women’s experiences of everyday life. With Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* as a central and exemplary text, this chapter shows how experimental women’s films of this period dealt with a key issue of second-wave feminist polemics: domestic routine. In addition to *Jeanne Dielman*’s connection

with feminism, I demonstrate how the film's aesthetic treatment of domestic routine intervenes in cinema's historical repression of routine experience. I show that Akerman's film not only takes the marginalized arena of women's domestic routine as subject matter, but also as the very basis of its exacting aesthetic. Rather than affirming women's domestic experience as a site of different values—i.e. of nurture, creaturely comfort, and reproduction versus the masculine world of capital and achievement—*Jeanne Dielman* instead effects a radical estrangement of the temporality, gestures, and objects that make up the titular character's daily rounds. I argue that the film's status as a touchstone for feminist film theory has to do with its hyperbolization of cinema's indexicality and automaticity—key factors in cinema's affinity for the everyday.

While hinted at in previous chapters, the question of cinema's specificity as a medium vis-à-vis the contemporary multiplication of screening formats is addressed more explicitly in Chapter Four. This is a question that bears directly on the issues of how the everyday is continuing to be invented in contemporary culture and the viability of revelation as a distinctive property of cinematic representation. My argument addresses these issues through an examination of the “open image,” an approach to and state of the film image that is often found in what Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover call “global art cinema.” At a time when the image is frequently aligned with the abstractions of commodified spectacle and postmodern culture, this chapter contends that the open image functions as a site of irreducible particularity. I demonstrate how the open image works through readings of two recent global art films: *Le Quattro Volte* (2010) and *Syndromes and a Century* (2006). Though respectively depicting a small village in Calabria and various hospital settings in Thailand, *Le Quattro Volte* and *Syndromes and a Century*

both emphasize the revelatory properties of the cinematic image and its ability to disclose unfamiliar aspects of the profilmic world. Through these readings, I argue that the open image acts as a kind of transcultural aesthetic currency capable of engaging simultaneously with global notions of artfulness and locally-specific experiences of the everyday.

Running through all the chapters of this dissertation is the suggestion that the everyday involves hidden dimensions which cinema is distinctly capable of revealing. While attempting to avoid a prescriptive description of cinema's specificity as a medium, my work nonetheless maintains that material contingency is a necessary component in cinema's traffic with realities that are not entirely of our own making. Thus this dissertation is guided by the notion of cinema's bond with worlds which are not fully accessible at the level of conscious experience. This is a bond that, as my dissertation seeks to prove, is capable of troubling the ideas of presence and visibility that dominate how the everyday is created and understood within modern media cultures.

CHAPTER 1

Leaves Trembling in the Wind: Wonder, Cinema, and the Everyday

Two sets of images, or rather image-sequences, seem to me to epitomize the intersection of film and everyday life in the history of cinema. In the first, the Lumière Brothers' *Baby's Dinner* (*Le Repas de Bébé*) depicts an alfresco meal being enjoyed by a couple and a baby. Set with a silver tea service, the table, along with the clothing of the adults—the man in shirt sleeves, waistcoat and tie, the woman in a striped dress adorned with lace and puff sleeves—display what at the time were conventional trappings of bourgeois family life. This brief, forty-second-long actuality, happens to be filled with thematic juxtapositions that continue to play key roles in theories of cinema: nature and culture, narrative and indeterminacy, time and motion. The baby, doted upon by the adults, is ostensibly the central focus of the film, but interestingly, she forms only a side-note in an anecdote involving one of the film's spectators: Georges Méliès, an attendant at one of the first Lumière screenings at the Salon Indien of the Grand Café in Paris, was reportedly more fascinated by the detail of the moving leaves in the background than the baby's repast (Baumbach 373). Méliès's fascination echoed news reports of the 1895 screenings: spectators tended to be more interested in the minor details and incidental movements depicted in the films than their supposed main attractions.³

³ Georges Sadoul discussed these reports in the first volume of *Histoire générale du cinéma* (1946): pp. 291, 294.

Over 100 years later, after having reviewed the deceased Timothy Treadwell's footage of his Alaskan expeditions as a self-proclaimed grizzly bear protector, Werner Herzog selected several sequences, which he felt revealed "something like the inexplicable magic of cinema," to include in his documentary, *Grizzly Man* (2005). Included among these is a forty-second shot of wind swaying the plants and trees lining a dirt foot trail. Treadwell is pictured for several seconds at the beginning of the shot, explaining in his characteristically direct, frontal address to the camera that he is going to get water at a creek. He then jogs along the trail and exits the frame with another camcorder, allowing the onscreen shot to run on its own. Over the ensuing image of greenery swaying in the breeze, Herzog narrates: "In his action-movie mode, Treadwell probably did not realize that seemingly empty moments had a strange, secret beauty. Sometimes images themselves develop their own life, their own mysterious stardom."

The image of the wind in the trees runs like an Ariadne's thread throughout these two very different films (that I revisit later in this chapter), which span a time period encompassing the very beginnings of cinema to contemporary digital film. I venture that the recurrence of this image throughout cinema history bespeaks an enduring fascination with film as an "instrument which would capture the slightest incidents of the world about us" (Kracauer, *Theory* 27). As Siegfried Kracauer pointed out in his *Theory of Film*, leaves are a "familiar photographic leitmotif," akin to "undulating waves, moving clouds, and changing facial expressions," all of which answer to the longing, born at least as early as the invention of photography, for the ability to capture the minutiae of

everyday life (27). Quoting Henry Cook and Gaetano Bonelli's⁴ yearning circa 1860 for a "a complete revolution of photographic art," Kracauer noted their use of the wind in the trees as a trope for the cinematic even before the invention of cinema itself: "We will see [...] landscapes in which the trees bow to the whims of the wind, the leaves ripple and glitter in the rays of the sun" (*Theory* 27). This simple and beautiful image of rustling, glittering leaves, lying at the root of moving picture prophecies, was for Kracauer a symbol of all the "marvels of everyday life"⁵ with which cinema has "inherent affinities."

In tracing the recurrent motif of rustling leaves in cinema history and theory, this chapter attempts to unpack a theme that has been under-explored in cinema studies: the affinity of the medium of film for everyday life. Though there exists no systematic account of the everyday as it is theorized in relation to cinema, a notion called the "everyday" or "everyday life" appears throughout the work of what has come to be known as the "realist" or "classical" film theorists, such as Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin. While the work of these theorists has seen a resurgence of interest in cinema studies within the last twenty odd years, partly in response to disparaging critical assessments in the sixties and seventies, the significance of the everyday in their theories has thus far rarely been directly addressed. To some degree, this lack of scholarly attention has to do with the conflation of the everyday with a mixture of positivism and realism in the theoretical writings of the 1970s. As Paula Amad argues, "the negative reading of realist film theory that characterized 1970s *Screen*-related apparatus theory" advanced the idea of an "implicitly conservative conspiracy of sorts between the

⁴ Cook and Bonelli were inventors of a device called the "photobioscope" around 1867.

⁵ In the preface to his *Theory of Film*, Kracauer recalls that one of his earliest literary endeavors, inspired by his first film screening, was entitled "Film as the Discoverer of the Marvels of Everyday Life" (li).

everyday and realism” (Amad 13). To quote one influential proponent of this line of thought, Stephen Heath held that the “reality-truth of the photograph” and its purported ability to “reproduce life itself” underlie the bourgeois ideology of cinema’s “birth” as a representational medium (“From Brecht” 36-37). For Heath, this conception of film as the “reproduction of reality” paralleled the bourgeois acceptance of appearances that prevented a critical engagement with the very notion of “life itself.” Another commonly-held position in seventies film theory was the linkage of cinema to literary realism. For instance, as Judith Mayne argued, what nineteenth-century literary realism shares with dominant film practices is an “attitude of realism,” wherein the operative assumption is that “the techniques of an art directly relate in either an existential or analogous way to events and objects in the real world” (“S/Z”). This prevailing attitude of realism thereby naturalizes the various social processes that make up a film, divesting them of their anchorage in history. Influenced by Barthes’ reading of Honoré de Balzac’s *Sarrasine* in *S/Z*, Mayne took issue with realism’s analogical aspiration, believing it to be the “ideology proper” of all realist texts, whether in literary or cinematic form (“S/Z”). The conventions of everyday life, as she added, work via a similar manner of self-legitimation by linking themselves to “natural, rather than self-consciously social impulses” (Mayne “S/Z”). Regrettably, according to Amad, readings such as these consigned the everyday to the “hangover of collective false consciousness—a state we should all want to get over quietly, rather than explore for its own ideological complexities and political possibilities” (13).

Scholarship within the past twenty years on cinema culture, however, has contributed much to the creation of a richer and more dynamic picture of both cinema

spectatorship and the everyday. For instance, much of the work regarding the early years of cinema conceive of film spectatorship in close connection with the historically specific circumstances of everyday life in modernity. Conceived in this way, cinema is interpreted with respect to a range of cultural factors, including urban development and the rise of other spectacular forms of publicity.⁶ Accordingly, everyday life is viewed as more than just a site of false consciousness, but also as a dynamic ensemble of vernacular practices and negotiations of modernity.

This chapter, however, is specifically interested in reexamining the older and arguably more controversial claim that cinema has a *material* connection with the everyday. Among others, this position has often been espoused in the writings of Kracauer, who, in his *Theory of Film*, counted “everyday life” as one of cinema’s “inherent affinities” (*Theory* 71-72). Instead of denouncing Kracauer’s film theory as naïve, as Anglo-American critics were wont to do in the seventies, this chapter aims to reexamine some of its ostensibly old ideas. In particular, this chapter will investigate Kracauer’s notion that film has intrinsic properties that allow for a revelatory relationship with what he called “everyday life.” My investigation ultimately aims to disinter a genealogy of the everyday that shows the term to be something besides an accomplice to realism and positivism. Without dispensing altogether with ideas of the everyday’s ideological import, I will examine the concept with respect to an alternate set of intellectual discourses that discusses cinema as an agent of a new kind of aesthetic experience with a distinct bearing on modernity.

⁶ Anne Friedberg described this line of inquiry as “widening the focus of social and psychic accounts of cinematic spectatorship to include advertising, illustrated print journalism, fashion, and other modes of ‘screen practice’: in short, the everyday” (*Window 7*). For a synopsis of this type of work as practiced by Friedberg, Giuliana Bruno, and Miriam Hansen, see Russell “Parallax.”

This chapter begins by tracing the everyday's emergence in the context of the discourses of wonder that characterized the early public reception of cinema. In so doing, it is indebted to the rich body of scholarship on the implications of curiosity and astonishment in early cinema spectatorship.⁷ This tradition of scholarship has done much to revise longstanding conceptions of early cinema and early spectators as primitive and gullible, as evinced in its reinterpretation of one of cinema's famous "primal scenes": the apocryphal flight of early spectators from the oncoming train in the Lumières' *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (*L'arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat*). As Tom Gunning puts it, the flight of early audiences does not so much indicate a wholesale deception as it does a historically specific and canny "vacillation between belief and incredulity": "The audience's sense of shock comes less from a naïve belief that they are threatened by an actual locomotive than from an unbelievable visual transformation occurring before their eyes, parallel to the greatest wonders of the magic theater" ("An Aesthetic" 119). Instead of the shock of an onrushing train, however, my own argument focuses on a less sensational kind of primal scene: early spectators' fascination with the incidental details of films, such as the rustling foliage in *Baby's Dinner*. Remarks Nico Baumbach, in contrast to the approaching train that constitutes the archetypal image of Gunning's cinema of attractions, "[s]moke, waves, and the wind in the trees seem to provide a rather different sense of the viewing habits of early spectators, albeit a sense just as unavailable to us today" (374). Per Baumbach, this chapter seeks to elucidate the nature of this form of modern spectatorship that counts such prosaic phenomena as smoke, waves, and

⁷ See, in particular, Tom Gunning's article, "In Your Face: Physiognomy, Photography, and the Gnostic Mission of Early Film" for a discussion of the meanings of curiosity in the early twentieth century. Related arguments that have been especially influential for early cinema studies can be found in his "The Cinema of Attractions" and "An Aesthetic of Astonishment."

rustling trees among the wondrous visual transformations made possible by cinema. My argument diverges from Baumbach's, however, in its assertion that this form of spectatorship is still available in a contemporary context, but to a different degree and with different implications.

Before launching into the specifics of my argument, however, I will first delineate some recent directions in the humanities that constitute a broader intellectual context for the concept of the everyday. The last fifteen odd years has witnessed a spate of publications explicitly naming the everyday as an object of study, especially in literary, cultural and media studies. For instance, in the areas of cultural theory and literary studies, Laurie Langbauer's *Novels of Everyday Life: The Series in English Fiction, 1850-1930*, Kristin Ross's *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Bryony Randall's *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life*, and Liesl Olson's *Modernism and the Ordinary* all find some notion of the everyday to be a central preoccupation of literature dating from the nineteenth century. Similarly, in cinema and media studies, Ivone Margulies' *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, Paula Amad's *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète*, and John Robert's *Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography, and the Everyday*, explore the everyday as it is defined alongside or through specific media. Common to all of these works is the idea of the everyday as something that is, at least in part, invented in and through modern representational media. In other words, the everyday in these studies is articulated as a function of representational forms specific to Western modernity.

While the aforementioned studies all discuss the everyday with respect to one or several specific forms of representational media, several “ground-clearing” works have attempted to survey the everyday as something that cuts across multiple disciplines. Ben Highmore’s work has been particularly useful in this respect, taking stock of a wide array of theoretical approaches.⁸ One of his main points is that the recent resurgence of intellectual work on the topic does not equal a distinct intervention, but is better viewed as “a way of consolidating a number of symptomatic shifts in subject matter and focus that have been underway during the 1990s” (Highmore, *The Everyday Life Reader* 29). In light of the contemporary “academic boom in everyday life,” as demonstrated by the number of journals and monographs that are explicitly devoted to the topic, Highmore is interested in asking, why the term “everyday” and why now? (*The Everyday Life Reader* 28) He ventures that the recent revival of academic interest in everyday life, particularly within cultural studies, is continuous with work that he groups loosely under the heading “the return of the real” (*The Everyday Life Reader* 29).⁹ Citing recent scholarship on “new historicism” and “the body” as examples of such work, he defines their shared interest as “an attempt to ground the study of culture more emphatically in concrete phenomena” (*The Everyday Life Reader* 29). By casting the everyday as a kind of “corrective” to the “abstract and textual orientation” of much of post-structuralism and postmodernism, Highmore attributes the recent revival of interest in “something we can call the everyday” to a sign of the times: a return of the “real” to academic scholarship

⁸ Highmore’s two major ground-clearing books, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* and *The Everyday Life Reader* bring together a wide range of theories spanning the nineteenth century to the turn of the twenty-first, multiple academic disciplines, and geographic regions.

⁹ Although not cited by Highmore, Hal Foster’s *The Return of the Real* discusses the turn to the materiality of bodies and social structures in contemporary art with respect to the preoccupations of earlier artistic movements with art-as-text and art-as-simulacrum.

vis-à-vis the dematerializing tendencies of contemporary culture. He is nonetheless careful to point out that this recent work on the everyday does not refer to it as something existing outside of representation, but rather as that which poses a problem to representation. For him, everyday life in the contemporary intellectual context is “not simply the name that is given to a reality readily available for scrutiny; it is also the name for aspects of life that lie hidden” (Highmore, *The Everyday Life Reader* 1). The work of what he calls making “the invisible visible” is key to contemporary critical approaches to everyday life, wherein the everyday does not so much name a fixed referent as it points to a “heuristic approach to social life that does not start out with predesignated outcomes,” a questioning stance that invites “theoretical articulation” of an “intractable object” (*The Everyday Life Reader* 3).

Another such ground-clearing work, Michael Sheringham’s *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*, believes the present interest in the everyday to be an outgrowth of a French intellectual tradition that took shape in the specific period from 1960 to 1980.¹⁰ As Sheringham writes: “we are dealing here with a real tradition rooted in cultural and intellectual history, where the period of 1960 to 1980 is a phase of active, if often invisible, invention, and the specific period from 1980 to 2000 (and beyond) a phase of practice, variation and dissemination” (6). Critics belonging to the first wave from 1960 to 1980 often wrote about post-war Europe and America as marked by an unprecedented scrutiny of and control over private consumption, domestic economy, and personal hygiene—or, as Henri Lefebvre put it,

¹⁰ In addition to its precursors in Surrealist thought, Sheringham argues that four main thinkers exemplify the intellectual tradition of investigating the everyday in the period 1960-80: Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, Georges Perec, and Michel de Certeau.

“the colonization of everyday life.” According to this first wave of theorists, the increased privatization and bureaucratization of previously less-regulated areas of practice was accomplished less through coercion than through the imaginary seductions of what Guy Debord called “spectacle.” It was therefore fitting for this first wave to emphasize the impoverishment of subjective experience, but as Sheringham is keen to point out, they also exhibited a “long-lived fascination with the everyday” that involved “finding ways of teasing out the complex imbrication of the positive and the negative, alienation and freedom, within the weave of everyday life itself” (11-12). Thus the shape of the formative years of an intellectual tradition eventually emerged, one which not only involved the elucidation of how everyday life was made visible through new regimes of scrutiny and control, but also how those same regimes incited remarkable artistic and intellectual reactions against the colonization of the everyday.

Sheringham thus identifies a genealogy of thinking about the everyday that is less concerned with realism than it is with the notion of a register of experience that eludes social control. One of the key thinkers in this intellectual genealogy is Maurice Blanchot, whose article “Everyday Speech”¹¹ identified “indeterminacy” as central to the everyday’s “energizing capacity to subvert intellectual and institutional authority” (Sheringham 17). As Blanchot put it, the everyday is a “level of experience” that is always oblique and elusive—it “escapes, it belongs to insignificance” (14). Although such a definition implies that the everyday is resistant to representation, Blanchot nonetheless associates the everyday with specific forms and contexts, such as casual speech and idle chatter, scrap and refuse, as well as that key figure of modernity: the city

¹¹ First published in 1962 under the title “*L’Homme de la rue*,” Blanchot’s article was prompted by Lefebvre’s book, *The Critique of Everyday Life*, published in 1961.

street. Indeed, the exemplary “who” or the subject of the everyday, for Blanchot, is the anonymous person of the street. This is not exactly the famous *flâneur* of modernity, but a less self-styled figure whose individual selfhood is dissolved, passively caught up in the patterns and rhythms, the physiognomy of the crowd. Precisely because these “informal” forms escape our conscious attention, they embody the ontology of the everyday, that is, its mode of existence as a mundane, insignificant backdrop for objects and events that are deemed socially important and therefore worthy of representation. As such, the everyday for Blanchot is a source of remarkable, yet largely untapped, potential: “The everyday is platitude [...] but this banality is also what is most important, if it brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived—in the moment when, lived, it escapes every speculative formulation, perhaps all coherence, all regularity” (13). Here Blanchot exemplifies a characteristic project of French theorists of the everyday: the revaluation of the banality of quotidian experience, and the exploration of its potential to act as a vast reserve of subjective freedom, utopian desire, and aesthetic innovation.

While this chapter is more concerned with the everyday as an aesthetic category than it is with the reception of the concept by empirical audiences, it treats the body of theories that are examined herein as part of an aesthetic history or history of aesthetic practices and dispositions. Specifically, in light of the intellectual directions I have just outlined, I consider the everyday in relation to some recent directions in cinema studies, especially insofar as they take up the notion of experiences that elude social control. At the same time, I regard such experiences not as transhistorical modes of resistance or “outsides” to ideology, but rather as byproducts of capitalist modernity. This dissertation overall, therefore, attempts to tease out the “complex imbrication of the positive and the

negative” that makes up modern understandings and practices of the everyday. The “intractable object” of this particular chapter can be described as the mutual determination of cinema and an “aesthetics of the everyday” centered on a specific type of wonder. Here, by “aesthetics” I mean not just the history, evaluation, and production of artworks, but also its classical origins as a philosophical project directed towards the senses and perceptible things. I will be analyzing the everyday, therefore, with respect to a history of aesthetic conventions, as well as perceptual configurations. I do so through an analysis of the motif of the wind in the trees, whose prosaic wondrousness, I argue, encapsulates a modern aesthetics of the everyday. Although this particular figure was invoked more frequently in early twentieth century cinematic practices and discourses, this chapter traces its evolution through to our contemporary era of spectacular computer-generated special effects. I will end, accordingly, by investigating how the persistence of this image in both theory and practice speaks to cinema’s transformation from a medium with an indexical relation to the world to an increasingly hybrid digital mix without the same referential guarantees. Despite its chronological organization, the genealogy that follows is by no means intended as an exhaustive history of all the ways in which the everyday has been invoked in relation to cinema. Rather, its aim is more specific: to analyze the ways in which the wind in the trees has come to, and still figures a cinematic experience of quotidian wonder.

The Roots of an Aesthetic Motif

Although this chapter’s main aim is to trace the motif of the wind in the trees in relation to cinema, I think it productive to start even earlier than the first public

screenings of photographically-based moving images. One of these starting points can be the discourses concerning the camera obscura, a technology of representation that is still widely believed to be a precursor to both photography and cinema. One of the main uses of the camera obscura was as an optical aid for rendering perspectively accurate images of three-dimensional spaces onto a two-dimensional surface. The use of this technology for artificial linear perspective played a central role in how film came to be theorized in the apparatus theory of the seventies. As two of its major proponents, Jean-Louis Baudry and Jean-Louis Comolli, have famously argued, the camera obscura image is premised upon an “ideology of the visible,” which lies at the root of Western Enlightenment thought and its conception of the rational, transcendental subject. As Baudry put it, the effect of the cinematographic apparatus is analogous to that of the camera obscura in that for both, the “world is no longer an ‘open and indeterminate horizon.’ Limited by the framing, lined up, put at the proper distance, the world offers up an object endowed with meaning, an intentional object, implied by and implying the action of the ‘subject’ that sights it” (“Ideological” 292). According to Baudry, the optical apparatus of the cinema works like the camera obscura to enable a view created via artificial perspective, which, in turn, effects a “phenomenological reduction” of the world whereby “natural existence” is made secondary to the “domain of the transcendental” (292).

More recently, Jonathan Crary not only denounced the use of the camera obscura as a central paradigm for a broadly-conceived Western scopic order, but also its ubiquitous comparisons with photography and cinema (*Techniques* 26-27). As he writes:

If, later in the nineteenth century, cinema or photography seemed to invite formal comparisons with the camera obscura, it is within a social, cultural, and scientific milieu where there had already been a profound break with the conditions of vision presupposed by this device. (*Techniques* 27)

Opposed to models of historical continuity that assume the same relations between observer and world obtain in different historical contexts, Crary argues for a collapse of the rationalist model of vision embodied by the camera obscura in the 1820s and 1830s, and the emergence of photography and cinema under a revised visual regime in the late nineteenth century. While I do not contest Crary's argument here for historical discontinuity, I nonetheless wish to point to what I see as evidence of a kind of rhetorical *resemblance* between eighteenth-century commentary on the camera obscura and nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century discourses on cinema: their shared fascination with the wind in the trees as shown by their respective devices. Crary himself draws attention to this motif in accounts of eighteenth-century observers on the camera obscura: "Observers frequently spoke with astonishment of the flickering images within the camera of pedestrians in motion or branches moving in the wind as more lifelike than the original objects" (*Techniques* 34). Whereas Crary interprets this response largely as a fascination with movement, I believe that it is also possible to read this type of fascination as a not-entirely-conventional aesthetic experience, i.e. one not fully commensurate with the transcendentalist visual order of the eighteenth century. This is not to contest Crary's assertion that the dominant conception of the camera obscura image in the eighteenth century was as "a unified space of order, unmodified by his or her physiological apparatus" (*Techniques* 55). I do find it significant, however, that eighteenth-century observers were surprised by rustling branches and pedestrian traffic, phenomena that would have typically figured only as small details within the era's pictorial schema. Even if such phenomena were comprehended at the time as not much

more than fragments of a larger, unified order of things, I venture to say that the astonishment of observers may also have been connected to an unprecedented encounter with a world external to the mental realm. At least in its state as a flickering projection of the camera obscura prior to inscription, I see the wind in the trees as prefiguring a material relation to pictorial representation that could not be encompassed entirely by, and was later to threaten, an enlightenment worldview.

There are, of course, other occurrences of the motif of the wind in the trees that are closer, historically speaking, to the cinematic debut of this phenomenon. For instance, as Nico Baumbach points out, in the history of Romantic literature and poetry of the nineteenth century, this particular motif stood for the generic Romantic tropes of “interiority, melancholic longing and temporal dislocation” (379). Especially in the form of lyric, the particular aesthetic appeal of this motif lay in its subjective associations, that is, the way in which it could act as an external counterpart to intense internal experiences, especially as they pertained to the transient nature of existence. At one point in the early nineteenth century, the Romantic motif of rustling leaves had become so clichéd it began to function as a signifier of the materiality of poetic language itself, as if prefiguring the modernist preoccupation with form (Baumbach 379). G.W.F. Hegel was evidently so irritated by the motif’s cliché status that he listed in his *Encyclopedia* the word “*Rauschen*,” or rustling, “as an example of the kind of word in the German language mistakenly thought to have profound implications because it evokes what is ‘sensuous and insignificant’” (qtd. in Baumbach 379).

Although there are significant differences between German Romanticism and Impressionist painting, Baumbach finds commonality in their similar use of moving

foliage and other transient natural phenomena to figure subjective experience.¹² In his 1878 study, “The Impressionist Painters,” Theodore Duret wrote that Claude Monet

has succeeded in setting down the fleeting impressions which his predecessors had neglected or considered impossible to render with a brush. The thousand nuances that the water of the sea and rivers take on, the play of light in the clouds, the vibrant coloring in the flowers and the checkered reflections of the foliage in the rays of the burning sun that have been seized by him in all their truth. (Qtd. in Nochlin 30)

Motivated by a quest to depict the world as pure, transient optical appearance, Monet’s paintings (often considered exemplary of the Impressionist movement as a whole), typically depicted fugitive natural phenomena, especially the effect of light on variegated surfaces.¹³ According to Impressionist principles, a complete and coherent image no longer had to serve as allegories of a larger divine plan or depict important historical events. Indeed, the sensuous shapes, colors and textures of the physical world, especially those of the natural environment, were considered aesthetic ends in themselves. As Baumbach notes, this new aesthetic orientation indicated an appreciation of “nature in its diurnal or ordinary manifestation; to use the terms adopted by Deleuze in his *Cinema* books, nature was to be conceived as ‘any-instant-whatever’ rather than a transcendent pose” (Baumbach 377). At the same time, Impressionist pictures were understood to be expressive not just of the external appearance of the physical world, but also of a highly refined sensibility capable of transforming ordinary phenomena into extraordinary art. In

¹² At its height in the late nineteenth century, after photography but before the public advent of cinema, Impressionism presented a radical break from both eighteenth-century Neoclassicism and the carefully rendered, sublime landscapes of mid-nineteenth century French landscapes.

¹³ Though considered heretical by official academies of art at the time, Monet’s turn to the ephemeral phenomena and sensuous surfaces of the natural world, which was characteristic of Impressionism as a whole, eventually came to modify Western definitions of aesthetic experience.

Impressionism, therefore, transient natural phenomena were ultimately considered to be expressive of the degree of skill and perceptual acuity possessed by individual artists.

Impressionism's preoccupation with capturing "diurnal or ordinary" natural phenomena can be interpreted as part of a broader turn to contingent experience in what Peter Galassi calls the "pictorial order" governing Western aesthetic practice and evaluation. According to Galassi, changes within the genre of landscape painting in the first few decades of the nineteenth century posed the greatest challenge to the classicism that had previously dominated official academies of art. As opposed to the "timeless perfection" of Neoclassical forms, these landscapes are marked by seemingly arbitrary, asymmetrical compositions in which objects appear as fragments, at times obscuring an overall, synthetic sense of spatial logic. For Galassi, such formal and stylistic deviations from tradition evince a radically different way of conceiving of the picture plane in relation to the external world: "In the opposite conception of the perspective system, the world is accepted first as an uninterrupted field of potential pictures" (16). Commenting on the differences between the paintings that embodied this new pictorial order and a typical Renaissance picture, Galassi writes that "[w]e stand outside of the Italian view" whereas later landscape paintings addressed viewers as "participants in the contingent experience of everyday life" (14).¹⁴

¹⁴ The greater part of Galassi's essay is on landscape painting in the nineteenth century, but in this instance, he is specifically referring to the differences between Piero della Francesca's *Ideal Townscape* (c. 1470) and the Dutch artist Emanuel de Witte's *Protestant Gothic Church* (c. 1669). Although the latter painting by de Witte is nearly two centuries older than Galassi's nineteenth century landscapes, scholars have proposed that Dutch and Flemish painting was subject to a separate pictorial order than that of linear perspective, which anticipated the formal experimentations of the nineteenth century (see Jay and Yeazell).

The turn to contingent experience in this new pictorial order was also motivated by the revaluation of persons, objects and events that were considered humble or otherwise too trivial by official academic standards. Since landscape belonged to the lower genres of the classical pictorial hierarchy,¹⁵ it was not surprising to Galassi that some of the most radical aesthetic innovations in Western imaging can be traced to this particular genre. The rise of what he calls more “realistic landscape painting” coincided with the idea of the sketch, which was used to quickly transcribe the appearance of things from nature to use as models for formal painting. Regarded as merely a preparatory, and largely private form, the sketch was “a loophole in the traditional definition of artistic practice, which allowed a generally unacknowledged but formidable shift in artistic values to develop”: the emergence around 1800 of “a tentative but profoundly original sense of pictorial order, based on a heretical concern for the visual aspect of the most humble things” (Galassi 21).¹⁶ Accordingly, for Galassi, photography represented not so much a radical break with prior pictorial modes as it was an extension of an “environment that increasingly valued the mundane, the fragmentary, the seemingly uncomposed—that found in the contingent qualities of perception a standard of artistic, and moral, authenticity” (Galassi 28).

The connection between this new pictorial order and nineteenth-century technologies of representation is developed even further within cinema studies proper by James Lastra. According to Lastra, the new “alternative mode of picturing” which emphasized fragmentation, ordinary subjects, and overabundance of detail was one to

¹⁵ This hierarchy roughly consists of history painting (classical, religious, mythological, and literary subjects) at top, followed by portraiture, still-life, and landscape.

¹⁶ To this revaluation of humble things, Gustave Courbet, whose work is often treated as a precursor to Impressionism, added an even more radical political inflection through his representations of the daily life of rural peasants.

which photography and film “were especially well-suited” (263). More than any other pictorial medium, he argues that what photography and film made possible was the idea of the “utter secondariness” of the subject to the process of image-making, so that the effect of the image is one in which the depicted world appears to have been “caught” or happened upon in a random or contingent moment of being. Even if, as was often the case, the depicted scene was staged, contingency was still central to how the photographic image was conceived in the nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries. Recounting the famous anecdote of early spectators being more interested in the “trembling of leaves in the background” of *Baby’s Dinner* than the “baby eating a *petit gâteau* in the foreground” (273), Lastra argues that “films in which clouds and random motion proliferated in unprecedented abundance represented a quantum leap in pictorial specificity and instantaneity, forever changing the notion of pictorial immediacy” (272). Along with this revaluation of indeterminate phenomena grew an appreciation for the aesthetic significance of the banal, provided it “dramatized an experience of seeing”

(Lastra 274):

although experience is best understood as transitory, as fluid, each instant can be understood as an organized image. Its uniqueness is a property of the fact that it exists in flux, which is beyond our power to arrest, yet it is recognizable *as* unique and as significant precisely through its being seen attentively, being *recognized* as a complete image. The exercise of keen vision transforms the banal into the significant or beautiful. (Lastra 279)

Instead of affirming the stability of the Neoclassicist viewpoint, the traffic of the photographically-based image was believed to be with a world of constant and often indeterminate flux. The very act of framing was thus considered a significant aesthetic

act insofar as each instance could be interpreted as a particular, contingent delimitation of a world whose appearance no longer corresponded to a timeless order of things.

In summation, photography and film coincided with an artistic climate that was increasingly valuing fragmentation, contingency, and the mundane. According to Galassi, this was evidence that photography was not a “bastard left by science on the doorstep of art, but a legitimate child of the Western pictorial tradition” (12); while, for Lastra, film was similarly coextensive with changes in the field of the picture as a “cultural category”—an “*alternative mode of picturing* to which the two media were especially well suited, but to which they did not belong in any ontological or essential way” (263). Accordingly, Lastra attributes spectators’ fascination with the rustling foliage in *Baby’s Dinner* to the extraordinary degree of visual detail included within the field of the image relative to that of photography and the traditional arts: “[w]hat seemed remarkable was not so much the fact of movement, which they [early spectators] had undoubtedly experienced with the zoetrope and phenakistoscope, but its quantity and seemingly arbitrary character” (273).

While it seems to me that there is not much to argue over in Lastra’s and Galassi’s positions on the aesthetic lineage of photographic images, I believe that they nonetheless skirt some key issues regarding the changed material qualities, or to use a more controversial term—ontology—of contingency instated by such images. For however much cultural and aesthetic precedents may have prepared the way for, or to borrow Galassi’s words, “catalyzed” the “syntax” of photography and film, these new technologies of representation also inaugurated a shift in the materiality of the image.

This shift, as I will show, has been more adequately addressed in Kracauer's work, and is particularly germane to his articulation of film's affinity for the everyday.

Kracauer's Redemption

Some fifty years after the first screenings of Lumière films at the Grand Café, the film historian Georges Sadoul commented on the repeated references to incidental details reported in news accounts of the screenings. This fascination with random phenomena such as smoke, waves, and "the trembling of leaves through the action of the wind" (qtd. in Baumbach 374) was, for Sadoul, no longer tenable in his time, since the striking impression that such phenomena made on early spectators was tied to the novelty of cinema at a particular point in history. Around the same time D.W. Griffith lamented: "What the modern movie lacks is beauty—the beauty of the moving wind in the trees [...] they have forgotten entirely—the moving picture is beautiful; the moving of wind on beautiful trees is more beautiful than a painting" (qtd. in Goodman 19). For both Sadoul and Griffith, then, the wind in the trees was evidently a privileged figure in the history of cinema, but why was this figure in particular used to describe an obsolescent cinematic experience of wonder? To address this question, I find it useful at this point to turn to Kracauer's writings on film, in which this specific motif plays a particularly prominent role.

Though not without reservations, Kracauer's work shows a strong investment in the power of film's specific connection to the physical world—a relation that is especially well illustrated through the medium's "inherent affinities" for transitory and contingent phenomena. Like his Frankfurt School colleague, Walter Benjamin, Kracauer

believed that modern technologies of representation such as photography and film could rescue aesthetic representation from its longstanding alliance with cultish rituals and idealist epistemologies. In addition to underscoring the technical features of these media, both Benjamin and Kracauer understood photography and film in connection with the increasingly secular beliefs and fragmented experiences of a modern industrial age. Their theories of these media not only involved the idea of a break from idealism, but also that of complicity with more modern strains of rationality, such as scientific positivism, as well as the affirmative culture of mass entertainment. Indeed, both critics' stances towards photography and film have been described as "redemptive" insofar as they emphasize the utopian potential of technologies whose primary purpose, historically speaking, has been to confirm and consolidate dominant interests and modes of thought.

Despite their similarities, Kracauer's work on cinema (particularly his later work *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*), more so than Benjamin's, has been subject to much negative criticism, especially from the 1960s through the early eighties. Most damaging perhaps to Kracauer's reputation was Adorno's 1964 radio talk entitled "The Curious Realist," in which he criticized Kracauer for espousing an epistemology, based upon the "primacy of the optical," that was "more intuition than thought" (163). Additional examples of likeminded criticism include a 1962 review of *Theory of Film* in which Pauline Kael criticized the tiresome German pedantry of Kracauer's ideas; Dudley Andrew's characterization of Kracauer as a proponent of "naïve realism"; and related arguments in the sixties and seventies that criticized his later concept of physical reality

for abandoning its anchorage in politics and history.¹⁷ Kracauer's work is important for the purposes of this chapter partly because of this history of critical rejection and its more recent redemptive treatment within cinema studies, a trajectory which I believe intersects with the vexed intellectual history of the everyday. Examples of later scholarly reevaluations of Kracauer's work include Miriam Hansen's article, "With Skin and Hair: Kracauer's *Theory of Film*, Marseille 1940," which specifically takes issue with charges about the text's transparency and reductiveness—its reputed status as "a huge homogeneous block of realist theory."¹⁸ Published in 1993, Hansen's article was part of the larger project of what she called "historicizing film theory" with respect to "theories of film, cinema, and mass culture that are no longer current yet are somehow expected to refer to the same phenomena in our time" (Hansen, "With Skin" 442). For Hansen, the importance of such a project has to do with its ability to "give us a sense of the diverse and diverging possibilities once associated with the new medium [of film], of roads not taken, of virtual histories that may hibernate into the present" ("With Skin" 442).

In light of Hansen's argument, I am interested in the virtual histories latent within Kracauer's notion of film's inherent affinity with what he termed "everyday life." In a section called "Moments of everyday life" in *Theory of Film*, Kracauer argues that the

small random moments which concern things common to you and me and the rest of mankind can indeed be said to constitute the dimension of everyday life, this matrix of all other modes of reality [...] Products of habit and microscopic interaction, they form a resilient texture which changes slowly and survives wars, epidemics, earthquakes, and revolutions. Films tend to explore this texture of everyday life. (304)

¹⁷ For a summary of the history of negative criticism on Kracauer, see Hansen, "With Skin and Hair." Also see Kael and Andrew.

¹⁸ This quote comes from Andrew's *The Major Film Theories*, p. 106.

Common as these everyday moments are, according to Kracauer, they are also beyond “articulate beliefs, ideological objectives, special undertakings, and the like” (*Theory* 304). A curious combination of ubiquity and elusiveness, everyday life is understood to be the common ground of subjective experience, even as it appears to lie just beyond the threshold of signification itself. As such, the everyday functions in Kracauer’s theory as a rich reserve of aesthetic invention—and it is cinema, more than any other form of representation that, for him, is capable of mining this reserve.

Trees rippling in the wind can be read as an exemplary phenomenon in Kracauer’s resilient “texture of everyday life.” Sprinkled throughout *Theory of Film*, the motif of leaves stirred by wind acts as a metonym for the endless “flow of life” that defines physical existence.¹⁹ With their indeterminate configurations and indexing of the vicissitudes of the wind, rustling leaves embody the contingencies that he believed are specific to the medium of film. It was no wonder to him, then, that leaves were “among the favorite motifs of the camera” for nineteenth-century commentators, for they “cannot be ‘staged’ but occur in endless quantities” (Kracauer, *Theory* 20). As Janet Harbord points out, rustling leaves were also a favorite motif for Kracauer, for they “gesture to the excessive nature of physical reality” (102):

Leaves, like crowds, are indifferent to management and administration. In the first chapter [of *Theory of Film*] Kracauer had already drawn attention to this particularly detailed image to elucidate the analogy between science and photography. In both disciplines, he observes, physical reality is broken down into its smallest unit yet both are defeated by the endlessness of matter. The paradoxical project of science and the cinematic camera, Kracauer asserts, is to examine “an inexhaustible universe whose entirety forever eludes us.” (Harbord 96-97)

¹⁹ Janet Harbord notes that the motif of leaves is mentioned at least fourteen times in *Theory of Film* (Harbord 96).

Moreover, in the context of the work of the Frankfurt School, Kracauer's predilection for the motif of moving leaves also suggests a difference between his overall approach to cinema and that of his contemporaries.²⁰ Unlike Benjamin, for instance, whose writings on film tend to emphasize the shock potential of montage and distortions of ordinary perception via strategies like close-ups and slow-motion, Kracauer's *Theory of Film* focuses on the medium's propensity for the physical minutiae and banal moments that make up everyday experience. For instance, an oft-cited passage of Benjamin's exemplifies his privileging of the decisive "flash" or shocking instant afforded by cinema:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of a tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. (*Illuminations* 236)

Compared to Benjamin's images of detonation and urban debris, the image of leaves stirred by wind appears relatively tame and decidedly un-extraordinary, and yet, was taken by Kracauer to be emblematic of the "excessive nature of physical reality." As I read it, then, Kracauer's mobilization of this figure involves the curious union of banality and indeterminacy that characterized the everyday for Blanchot and others within the French intellectual tradition named by Sheringham; and, furthermore, is indicative of a specifically cinematic experience of wonder.

²⁰ Christian Sieg differentiates what he calls "Kracauer's phenomenological focus on the quotidian" (100) from the "epistemological" preoccupations of Adorno and Benjamin. He argues that to interpret Kracauer's work primarily in the context of his Frankfurt School contemporaries, as scholars have recently done, is to obfuscate the "central strand of Kracauer's thought: his affirmation of the ordinary" (99).

I argue that the figure of the wind in the trees stands for a materialist notion of “physical reality”—a central, though much-maligned, concept in *Theory of Film*. As Kracauer defined it somewhat vaguely, “Physical reality will also be called ‘material reality,’ or ‘physical existence,’ or ‘actuality,’ or loosely just ‘nature.’ Another fitting term might be ‘camera-reality’” (*Theory* 28). While he acknowledged the existence of various “visible worlds,” such as staged performances and paintings, Kracauer nonetheless posited that the photographic basis of film is partial to “actually existing physical reality—the transitory world we live in” (*Theory* 28). Some critics have taken this to mean that Kracauer’s theory of cinema devalues certain practices over others (e.g. documentary over fictional narrative, found over staged content, Lumière over Méliès), in addition to privileging the medium’s photochemical properties over its secondary “technical properties” (e.g. editing, close-ups, slow or fast-motion, optical effects). As Hansen pointed out, this line of criticism has led to the further charge of a normative and prescriptive ontology of film based on the assumption of a “transparent, iconically motivated relation between sign and referent” (“With Skin” 446). As we will see, though, such charges are based on a misreading of Kracauer’s idea of physical reality.

Indeed, Kracauer’s conception of physical reality is closely tied to his idea of nature as a dynamic entity that is irreducible to rationalization and abstraction. Cinema, for him, has a revelatory relation to nature insofar as it confronts the spectator with the concrete materiality of an “inexhaustible universe.” Film, therefore, is not just a tool for the reproduction of social relations, but exists in a relationship of discovery to a physical reality that is habitually not perceived by the modern subject. The incommensurability of Kracauer’s conception of physical reality here and that of some later Anglo-American

critics can be illustrated through a comparison of their respective readings of the same object: the Lumières' actualities. These short films figured prominently in the notorious section of *Theory of Film* that lays out the differences between film's "realistic" and "formative tendencies." As Kracauer wrote, "Lumière's films contained a true innovation" in that "they pictured everyday life after the manner of photographs" (*Theory* 30). Through the example of the Lumières, Kracauer showed his preference for the "realistic tendency," which he believed to be "the true domain of cinema":

The novel, the theater, suffice for the study of the human heart. The cinema is the dynamism of life, of nature and its manifestations, of the crowd and its eddies. All that asserts itself through movement depends on it. Its lens opens on the world. (*Theory* 31)

Here, his reading of the Lumières, as I will discuss shortly, indicate a materialist conception of physical reality that is incommensurate with the sense in which it was used by some later film critics.

To take one such critic, Stephen Heath, in an article for *Screen*, provides a reading of the Lumières' actualities premised upon an ideological critique of the concept of reality. As he argues, the presupposition that photography, and by extension cinema, has a natural relationship to the physical world is little more than the "sublimation of film in the luminous reality-truth of the photograph, a sublimation which is, as it were, the very ideology of the 'birth' of cinema ('*nature caught in the act*,' commented one of the first spectators at the Grand Café)" [my emphasis, "From Brecht" 36]. Here, Heath isolates the phrase "nature caught in the act" as emblematic of the "immanent immediacy" fundamental to what Heath calls "the literary religion of the bourgeoisie" ("From Brecht" 35). For him, the perfect transparency between nature and art implied by Louis Lumière's

claim to “reproduce life itself”²¹ consisted of nothing more than “the glorification of industry, the workers leaving the factory, and family, mother and Lumière baby in a laughing domestic scene” (“From Brecht” 37).

In a slightly later reading, Charles Musser points out that Lumière’s choice of subjects and settings, however unstaged and spontaneous they may seem, also facilitated the early public perception of cinema as a more “proper,” i.e. middle-class, form of entertainment (33). From the domestic scene of *Baby’s Dinner* to *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* [*La Sortie des usines Lumière à Lyon*] to the Lumières’ later films of symbolic public places (e.g. the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, Hyde Park in London), Musser detects a pattern wherein “family, nation and state were among the most prominent features” (23). Thus, Lumière’s professed interest in capturing “life itself,” as he argues, was also a vested interest in depicting “an orderly, contented world where bourgeois values have triumphed and are made permanent as representations” (23). Accordingly, it can be said that the Lumières’ claim to “life itself” replicates the capitalist logic of naturalization insofar as it equates images of bourgeois self-representation with an objective state of nature. In other words, the seeming naturalness of quotidian life in the Lumière actualities is not much more than a reproduction of conventional practices, many of which were associated with the bourgeois private sphere. These brief actualities that purport to present life “as is,” then, are for Musser and Heath, iterations of the process whereby “capitalist rationality perpetuates society as mere nature and thus reverts into myth” (Hansen, “Mass” 65).

²¹ This phrase is taken from a longer quote made by Louis Lumière, which is as follows: “the subjects of the films I chose are the proof that my aim was to reproduce life itself” (qtd. in Heath, “From Brecht” 36).

To take one of the examples described at the start of this chapter, *Baby's Dinner* illustrates well the process by which bourgeois notions of free or leisure time are presented as mere nature. Shot outdoors as were most of Lumière's actualities, *Baby's Dinner* depicts a family trio (incidentally Louis's brother, Auguste Lumière along with his wife and their baby daughter) engaged in a favorite leisure activity of the Euro-American bourgeoisie: taking an outdoor meal or picnicking. As Angela Miller noted in another context, picnic imagery figured prominently in the nineteenth-century aesthetic imagination: "More than any other landscape subject, picnic scenes provided the confirmation urban audiences needed that their own standards—commodiousness, use value, and taming, through domestication and domesticity, of potentially disruptive natural and human energies—were as much a part of the natural order of things as the change of seasons or the cycle of generations" (134). Speaking of the subgenre of European landscape painting called "pastorals" in which human figures are depicted picnicking, strolling, or otherwise taking their leisure in natural settings, Miller argues that such imagery was not simply responding to nostalgia for an uncorrupted pre-modern nature, but was also a way of "reconciling change and continuity" (125). Thus, in the context of the expansive capitalism and urbanization of the nineteenth century, pastorals showing natural settings harmoniously populated and domesticated by humans can be interpreted in terms of a dual sublimation and instrumentalization of nature.²² Even as nature was mined as a resource for the instrumental purposes of a modern technological age, its "naturalness" was being invested with almost spiritual powers of rejuvenation.

²² According to Miller, the cordoning of nature preserves, parks, and gardens, were developments related to the perceived need of the emerging metropolitan middle classes for a therapeutic resource, or escape from the stresses of urban life.

Consequently, and particularly in the case of pastoral picnics, as Miller argues, nature ceased to be “its own subject,” but was “reduced to a scenic element that objectified and reflected the human action” (114).

In showing the Lumière clan picnicking in their garden, *Baby's Dinner* effected a similar conflation of nature and culture back to its audiences. Here the nuclear family unit appears to be as naturally occurring as the plants in the garden, the baby's movements as spontaneous as those of the leaves in the background. What is more, this idyllic view of family life takes on further meaning in juxtaposition with another actuality that was shown as part of the same program: *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*. With its intimate setting and individuated figures, *Baby's Dinner* appears to be an ideal counterpoint to the anonymous throng of workers spilling out from the factory gates in the *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*. In Musser's estimation, the latter film was set in the “transitional space” between work and leisure so as to avoid showing the conditions of factory work, and to display the esprit of the employees, recipients of the “beneficence of Lumière paternalism” (18). Thus situated, the camera's position in *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* marked a literal and figurative distance between the industrialist and his employees. As Heath and Musser might agree, audiences of Lumières' films never did get much of a closer view of the life of the working classes. What we get, instead, are pictures delimited by a specifically bourgeois perceptual orientation towards the world.

It can feasibly be objected that the Lumières chose to depict small moments of spontaneous experience, albeit from within the limited framework of capitalist modernity. A marked predilection can be detected in their actualities for what can be called non-

utilitarian motion, i.e., bodies engaged in various forms of play and comedic gags, as well as the antics of babies and animals.²³ With the exception of *Blacksmiths* and *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, scenes of leisure, play, and urban streets predominate, as if comprising a visual catalogue of modern social pleasures. Noticeably absent from the Lumière films, of course, are the inner workings of the industrial workplace, which was then developing a carefully regulated utilization of energy and time. As Henri Lefebvre might have remarked, these early examples of cinema stand as testaments to the fragmented nature of everyday life in modern capitalist societies. The striking feature of such societies, according to Lefebvre, is the growth of a concept of leisure as an absolute “break” from work, or indeed from any productive activity that resembles work: “Leisure is a remarkable example of a new social need with a spontaneous character [...] In response to such new needs, our civilization creates techniques which nevertheless have an ‘extra-technical’ meaning and character. It produces ‘leisure machines’ (radio, television, etc.)” [“Work” 228].²⁴ This line of thought, in which leisure is posited as a type of capitalist training, also formed a key part of the writings of Adorno and Guy Debord, who held similar views on mass culture.²⁵ In keeping with this cultural logic of

²³ Such films include *Horse Trick Riders*, *Fishing for Goldfish*, *The Sprinkler Sprinkled*, *Jumping Onto the Blanket*, *Bathing in the Sea*, *Babies Quarrel*, and *Snowball Fight*. Some of these undoubtedly contain elements of the slapstick comedy that was so important for Kracauer’s theory of film’s potentially subversive ability to play with the alienating effects of industrial capitalism (see *Theory* 62, 108-09).

²⁴ These extracts are from Lefebvre’s 1958 foreword to Volume One of his three-volume work, *The Critique of Everyday Life*. Like Benjamin and Kracauer, Lefebvre was interested in the increasing emphasis on leisure as “distraction,” and lists “images and films” as exemplary “leisure machines” (“Work” 229). However, Lefebvre’s work did not elaborate further on this claim with respect to image-making media. Despite his critical stance towards leisure, his main point nonetheless was that its various forms “contain within themselves their own spontaneous critique of the everyday. [...] They can thus hold a real content, correspond to a real need, yet still retain an illusory form and a deceptive appearance” (234).

²⁵ Before they parted ways, Debord joined Lefebvre in attempts to theorize and critique the subject of everyday life. See, for an exemplary instance, Debord’s 1961 presentation, “Perspectives for Conscious

leisure, cinema's greatest source of value, as the Lumière actualities seem to suggest, is that of a "leisure machine," which in addition to concealing its own technical nature, stops just short of entering the factory gates. Instead of subjective freedom, then, the "spontaneous character" of the Lumière films can be interpreted as part and parcel of the highly regulated manufacture of leisure time and separation of spheres in capitalist societies.

Whereas Heath and Musser read the Lumière films in connection with the ideologies of modern industry and bourgeois domesticity, the responses of early spectators, though, frequently isolated the "non-human" or asocial aspects of scenes ostensibly focused on human activity. As Dai Vaughan writes:

We need look no further than Sadoul's *Histoire général [du cinema]* for ample evidence of the fact that what most impressed the early audiences were what would now be considered the incidentals of scenes: smoke from a forge, steam from a locomotive, brick dust from a demolished wall. Georges Méliès, a guest at the first Paris performance [...] made particular mention of the rustling of the leaves in the background of *Le Dejeuner de bébé*. [...] The movements of the photographed people were accepted without demur because they were perceived as performance, as simply a new mode of self-projection; but that the inanimate should participate in self-projection was astonishing. (64-65)

Vaughan's account suggests a mode of spectatorship fascinated by contingent phenomena that run counter to intentional representation. Tellingly, in his account, it is the motion of inanimate objects that most astonished early audiences, who were already more or less accustomed to animated images of themselves. While Heath and Musser, among others, engage largely in ideological critiques of the Lumières' conformance to bourgeois

Alterations in Everyday Life," which was given at a conference organized by Lefebvre for the Group for Research on Everyday Life.

conventions,²⁶ it is Vaughan's non-anthropocentric reading here that more closely approximates the tenor of Kracauer's own. Both critics seize upon the background detail of rustling leaves in *Baby's Dinner* as a prime example of the heterogeneous field of the cinematic image and its ability to encompass multiple registers of signification. Here, moving foliage neither stands for the subjective interiority of Romanticism, nor the alacrity and skill of the Impressionist painter. Rather, this phenomenon is read by both Kracauer and Vaughan as a point of rupture in the film's diegetic world, a sign of the radical exteriority of nature amidst a highly conventional scene of human activity. The "nature" evoked by such details has little to do with "naturalization," which implies a cover-up or deception: the passing of the cultural for the natural, second nature for first nature. Rather, the nature that is "caught in the act" via such incidental phenomena as rustling leaves refers to a brute materiality and objective movement that Kracauer characterized as devoid of human reason. Film's ability to reveal this alien order of materiality forms the crux of what Hansen called Kracauer's "politicophilosophical investment" in the medium. As she put it, his theory of film is intimately bound up with "a critique of the bourgeois subject on the basis of film's affinity with a world alienated from intention"²⁷ ("With Skin" 445).

Accordingly, Kracauer was less interested in the bourgeois underpinnings of the Lumière actualities than he was in their unprecedented aesthetic receptivity to the

²⁶ See also Armes and Williams.

²⁷ In "'With Skin and Hair,'" Hansen agrees with Kracauer's critics that his *Theory of Film* (written after his exile to the United States) is less radical than his earlier work conducted in Germany, perhaps attesting to a longstanding tendency to cooperate with the status quo that was exacerbated by his exilic status. Unlike other critics, though, she argues for a greater complexity to the work, and that its significance "can only be grasped in the tension between the early drafts and the later book" (439).

contingent, undiscovered, and unnoticed aspects of the physical world. Indeed, in *Theory of Film*, it is the contingent nature of the cinematic sign that supercedes idealist aesthetics and facilitates a materialist approach to the world. Harbord even ventures that contingency is “arguably the most significant concept in Kracauer’s *Theory of Film*” (90). In this context, the term contingency does not only imply unexpected or chance events. Also, and unlike the terms spontaneity, indeterminacy, and the accidental, contingency implies a relation of contiguity and dependency—that is, specific conditions that must be in place for something to happen. As such, contingency is a defining feature of the index, a type of sign that cinema scholars have recently revisited in regards to the notion of medium specificity.²⁸ In Charles Peirce’s classification of signs, the index is “physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair,” but unlike the symbol and the icon, “the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except remarking it, after it is established” (Peirce). The index therefore refers to a non-arbitrary, existential relation to an object, a physical trace of a necessarily haptic encounter between physical object and film. Film, of course, involves all three types of signification—icon, symbol, and index—but it is indexicality that differentiates the medium from the traditional arts for Kracauer, and confers upon it the status of a natural cause, much like the fossil and the footprint.

²⁸ The history of the index within film theory can be traced back to Peter Wollen, who in his *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969), discussed film in relation to Peirce’s classification of signs. Wollen was also one of the first to make the connection between Peirce’s definition of the indexical sign and Bazin’s emphasis on the special ontology of the photographic image with respect to the other arts. After 1968 and through the seventies, Anglo-American film critics tended to overlook the temporal and material implications of indexicality in favor of an ideological reading of verisimilitude. Recently, however, the indexicality of cinema has been reexamined vis-à-vis discourses of digital imaging, new media, and the death of cinema. See, for instance, Rosen *Change* and Doane “The Indexical.”

Although the term “index” is not named as such in Kracauer’s *Theory of Film*, I concur with Hansen that, in stressing the photochemical basis of film, Kracauer “emphasizes the indexical dimension of film,” which she defined as “the trace of a material bond with the world represented” (“Introduction,” *Theory* viii). This stress on material contingency, as opposed to resemblance and analogy, is what differentiates *Theory of Film* from more semiotically-inflected approaches to film. As Hansen pointed out, for Kracauer, the crucial difference of the filmic image “is not one between minimal units within an oppositional system of signs (the realm of semiotics), but one between discourse and the realm of material contingency” (“Introduction,” *Theory* xxvii).

Recently, Mary Ann Doane has further drawn attention to a frequently neglected nuance in Peirce’s definition of the index: its dual function as deixis and trace. As Doane points out, the status of the index as a pointing finger is “frequently forgotten in the drive to ground the photochemical image as trace” (“The Indexical” 136). Indeed, she argues that deixis is the most pure form of the index for Peirce, since the “this” of the pointing finger is fundamentally without content—an empty signifier: “The word ‘this’ can only be defined, can only achieve its referent, in relation to a specific and unique situation of discourse, the here and now of speech” (“The Indexical” 136).

It is Bazin, and not Kracauer, however, whose work has been more closely associated with indexicality by cinema scholars. Yet, it would certainly be feasible, at least with respect to indexicality, to draw similarities between Bazin and Kracauer insofar as both critics privilege the photochemical trace in their theories of film. Their

differences, though, are more revealing.²⁹ Bazin's take on the indexical trace, as Philip Rosen argues, is closely linked to his "mummy complex," a type of "subjective obsession" with and "desire to defeat death" that he believed to be true of all human societies (Rosen, "History" 51). By contrast, Hansen believed that, instead of a timeless desire for a preservative defense against death, Kracauer's investment in film's indexicality is linked to its capacity to effect a dissolution of the human ego ("Introduction," *Theory* xxi) and a concomitant "porousness" with the flow of "environmental life" ("Introduction," *Theory* xxxiii). His particular insight into the cinematic index is, therefore, not so much concerned with the preservative trace that defies death as it is about the uncanny and open-ended "thisness" of indexical contingency. As Hansen eloquently put it, Kracauer's theory of film is preoccupied with the "differential" moment, the "blind spot of mechanical recording that unsettles and defies our habitual modes of seeing, or rather, not-seeing" ("Introduction," *Theory* xxv).

Kracauer also believed, though, that cinematic contingency is an ambiguous relation, since for him nature as revealed by film is devoid of reason and without reference to human consciousness. In an essay written early in his career on photography, Kracauer is simultaneously troubled by and hopeful for the irrational nature of the photographic image:

One can well imagine a society that has succumbed to mute nature that has no meaning no matter how abstract its silence. [...] Were it to last, the consequence of the emancipation of consciousness would be its own eradication; nature that consciousness failed to penetrate would sit down at the very table that consciousness had abandoned. Were this society not to prevail, however, then

²⁹While Bazin's emphasis on film's indexical trace was much criticized in the seventies, particularly with respect to his conception of realism and the "ontology" of the photographic image, more recent scholarship has treated Bazin's notion of film's indexicality as a complex and historical formulation. See Rosen "History").

liberated consciousness would be given an incomparable opportunity. Less enmeshed in the natural bonds than ever before, it can prove its power in dealing with them. The turn to photography is the *go-for-broke game* of history. (“Photography” 434-35)

Instead of being celebrated for its fundamental irrationality here, mute nature was not rational *enough* for the early Kracauer, but this view of nature also served as the grounds for his investment in what Thomas Levin calls the “radical superficiality” of photographic and cinematic indexicality.³⁰ Indeed, especially for the later Kracauer of *Theory of Film*, the intrinsic meaninglessness of indexical contingency is linked to an epistemological openness to the heterogeneous flow of life, or what Hansen termed the “gnoseophilic dimension of film,” its capacity to facilitate the experience of wonder accompanying the discovery of new knowledge (“With Skin” 448).³¹ Thus, much of *Theory of Film* is devoted to detailing the surprising provisional configurations and new sensuous encounters that can be afforded by the indiscriminate nature of film’s recording function.

It could even be argued that what mattered more to Kracauer than the deictic function of cinematic indexicality was its revelatory potential—its intrinsic capacity to induce alien sensuous encounters. Whether it be quivering leaves or an errant wave for Kracauer, it is often the incidental occurrence within an otherwise conventional scene

³⁰ Hansen has charted the vicissitudes of Kracauer’s attitude towards photography and film in a number of articles, including “With Skin and Hair,” which traces the intellectual trajectory of *Theory of Film* from Kracauer’s early unpublished drafts (from his Marseille notebooks) to the final published work. Mary Ann Doane has also commented on the ambivalence of indexicality in Kracauer’s thought, writing that though he was suspicious of the photochemical image’s “potential for a positivist historicism, it nevertheless bore within it, and produced for its spectator, a respect for the resistances and thereness of historicity, for that which leaks out and cannot be contained within the notion of semiosis” (“The Indexical” 147-48).

³¹ In her article “With Skin and Hair,” Hansen noted that a certain strand Kracauer’s early work in the twenties was influenced by Jewish gnosticism and can be set off from his ideological critiques from the same period (443).

that potentially leads to the rupturing of “the web of intimacy, memory, and interpretation” (Hansen, "With Skin" 455) surrounding our habitual modes of sensing, and making sense, of the world. Film thus trains the human sensorium in what he deemed the suspension of “every habitual relationship among the elements of nature” (“Photography” 63) in order to experience, as if anew, things stripped of their familiar meanings and restored to their concrete particularity. Kracauer’s partiality to the Lumières’ films of everyday life was therefore premised on their profusion of stray phenomena and the “fringe of indeterminacy” that surrounds them (*Theory* 95). It was a partiality for material contingency and not the semblance of chance; for the leaves and not the little family enjoying their picnic.

In summation, in *Theory of Film*, the automaticity and indiscrimination of the photochemical image is able to create a field of visual equivalences usually unnoticed by the unaided eye, and therein directs attention to the “small random moments” and “products of habit and microscopic interaction” that form the “texture of everyday life” (*Theory* 304). What is important to note here is Kracauer’s use of the word “texture,” which is defined in *The Oxford American Dictionary* as “the feel, appearance, or consistency of a surface or substance.” The word thus implicates not just vision, the most privileged sensory faculty in modernity, but touch; surface as well as substance. The texture of the everyday, then, does not refer to an idealist order of things, but neither is it solely a figment of subjective imagination. Rather, it is based in the interactive borderland between inner experience and outer world, or what Kracauer called the “psychophysical correspondences” that involve the mutual determination of mind and matter. It was therefore no coincidence for him that film displays an affinity for the

“accidental agglomerations” of things in motion, such as leaves and crowds; for these are subjects not amenable to the traditional arts and their respective periods of efflorescence.³² He believed that cinema is distinctly suited to the experience of capitalist modernity and commodity culture, where objects take on life and humans become objects. For instance, the throng of people in *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* references the quintessentially modern figure of the urban crowd, with its constantly changing and chance configurations. Although the course of this particular crowd is clearly directed by the opening and closing of the factory gates, Kracauer’s predilection for crowds in general has to do with their unpredictable dynamism, their tendency for disorder. Resembling the excessive physicality of moving foliage, the crowds of film take on alien textures and indeterminate cross-currents, thereby revealing the “provisional status of all given configurations”—which for Kracauer is crucial to cinema’s gnostic and critical potential. For this critic who never gave up on the prospect of enlightenment, it was crucial that cinema’s revelation of disorder be linked to the critique, and not just the reproduction, of the scattered debris of everyday life.

The Contemporary Fate of Contingency

Interestingly, Kracauer’s ideas concerning cinematic contingency have regained currency in contemporary media scholarship, but are often couched in elegiac terms.

With the proliferation of digital media, according to some, the referential guarantee of photochemical film is in danger of being rendered obsolete. Potentially unmoored from

³² Akin to the animated eroticism of the Tiller Girls, Kracauer’s famous example of the “mass ornament” (the aesthetic reflex of mass culture), the frenetic activity of crowds is unsuitable for the stable, contemplative spectator of traditional artworks, instead having more in common with popular amusements (e.g. fairs, panoramas, nickelodeons). See *The Mass Ornament*.

any localized physical context, the digital image is always subject to a hermeneutics of suspicion, its material reference to an anterior existence cast constantly into doubt. Moreover, as Harbord argues, the anarchic and liberatory potential of contingency only makes sense within a framework of rationalist order, but in the contemporary climate of irrational management, chance—now construed as “risk”—is endemic to the capitalist system; it has become an “integral accident,” a “calculated component of capitalism’s deregulated operations” (101). Where once contingency was “a defining feature of modernity, a hinge between the standardization of an increasingly mechanised life and an excessive energy or force that defies rational forms of control” (Harbord 90), it has now been “relocated from the domain that is external to capital’s rational operations, to the centre of what has become irrational government and a de-territorialized capitalism” (100). Besides its detachment from a specific kind of corporal-image relation, according to Harbord, contingency no longer wields the same critical potential that it once had for someone like Kracauer, for whom the term necessarily designated material interrelations. Citing Paul Virilio, whose work on cinema and war argues that film—and screen-based media in general—enable the proliferation of spectacular images across vast terrains, Harbord agrees with him that an “aesthetic modality of the spectacular” resonates better with contemporary concerns over the digital image than the concept of indexical contingency (Harbord 100). For Virilio, cinema’s prior medium specificity—its photochemical relation to an anterior existence—is lost today to an abundance of screens which hold out the promise of liveness, the prospect of a perpetual present instantiated by the spectacular image; but, as he warns, “a society which privileges the present—real time—to the detriment of both the past and the future also privileges the accident”

(*Original* 23). Notwithstanding the sweeping, apocalyptic nature of Virilio's claim here, Harbord believes nonetheless that "its application to present anxieties concerning image production resonates convincingly" (101). Especially with the possibilities of digital postproduction, the site of indeterminacy is relocated from the realm of indexical contingency to the relation "between the image and the viewer, but in a context of suspicion: the image may never have existed as material reality" (Harbord 101).

In Herzog's *Grizzly Man*, these issues are brought to bear in ways that, I propose, show the continuing relevance of cinematic contingency, even in an age where both cinema and contingency are considered by some to have an unstable relationship with materiality. Where wind moving through leaves was as an incidental background detail in the Lumières' *Baby's Dinner*, the waving foliage in *Grizzly Man*, described at the start of this chapter, is foregrounded in the shot, forming the focus of the scene. Evoking the old notion of cinema as "nature caught in the act," the shot of moving foliage can be said to harbor the pathos of what some would call the "death" of cinema, or less sweepingly, the demise of a particular experience of contingency and its attendant affect: wonder. At least from the Lumière actualities onwards, this image has been referenced in connection with decline, whether by Griffiths in his lament for the loss of cinematic beauty, or by Sadoul in his association of the figure with the amazement of early audiences at the novelty of cinema. Kracauer, too, took up this theme in his remarks on the ephemeral mass appeal of the Lumières' films (*Theory* 32).

At the outer limits of the commercial mainstream cinema, however, the wondrous appeal of the wind in the trees appears to have endured, as in Henwar Rodakiewicz's *Portrait of a Young Man in Three Movements* (1931), Jean-Luc Godard's *2 or 3 Things I*

Know About Her (1967), Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) and David Claerbout's *Kindergarten Antonio Sant'Elia, 1932* (1998). These films and videos, all of which are variously linked to the realms of art cinema and art institutions, allow moving foliage to take precedence either within the space of the shot or the world of the diegesis. While often mobilized to illustrate broad, philosophical points, moving foliage also functions within these films as objects of a type of wonder associated with the experience of cinematic contingency. It is almost as if the emphasis on leaves in these films is evidence of a cinematic experience of wonder that, while not equivalent to that of early audiences, still refuses to die in the face of newer technologies and spectacular practices.

The wind in the trees can also be found, of course, in mainstream cinema as well, but usually as a small part of what is commonly called the "setting" for diegetic scenarios and human actors, as opposed to a subject in its own accord. This is not to say that moving foliage in these films is necessarily viewed as insignificant background detail. Indeed, classical narrative cinema in particular has been a favorite object of cinephiles, whose idiosyncratic viewing practices are deliberately centered on phenomena marginal to the main course of the plot. As an exemplary figure of this kind of marginalia, the wind in the trees has also been, as Christian Keathley shows, a recurrent motif of cinephilic discourses throughout the twentieth century.³³ However, whereas early- and mid-twentieth-century discourses of cinephilia tended to cast the isolation of errant phenomena in films as highly individual experiences, the last two decades has witnessed a revival of the term in connection with anxieties over the displacement of the

³³ The title of Keathley's book on cinephilia is aptly titled *Cinephilia and History, or, the Wind in the Trees*. His book does not, however, discuss this particular motif in any great detail, but rather analyzes the significance of marginal details in cinephile discourses.

photochemical image by digital media.³⁴ Insofar as the wind in the trees still serves as a cathexis of cinephilia today, I posit that it is in reference to a contemporary version of the experience that looks upon cinema itself as a vanishing object, and it is in this respect that the image figures in *Grizzly Man*.

Arguably more of an example of portraiture than an art film,³⁵ *Grizzly Man* employs the wind in the trees in a sequence that I argue serves as a fertile example of contemporary cinephilia. The sequence in question was taken from Treadwell's own camcorder footage of his last five expeditions to Alaska's Katmai National Park before he was killed by a bear in 2003. The film as a whole is mostly made up of sequences selected from more than 85 hours of Treadwell's unedited footage, supplemented by Herzog's voiceover commentary and interviews with friends, relatives, park officials, and local naturalists. A self-proclaimed protector of bears, Treadwell is portrayed by this weave of voices and images as a well-intentioned, if somewhat quixotic grizzly whisperer, who was perhaps as preoccupied with his own image as he was with the bears' welfare. Reportedly having done as many as fifteen takes of a single ostensibly spontaneous scene, Treadwell is frequently situated in the foreground of his shots giving his own loquacious interpretations of the events happening around him. Prone to meandering monologues, sentimental confessionals, and vindictive rants, these snippets of Treadwell's dialogue work to complicate his self-professed altruistic motivations. A

³⁴ An early example of cinephilic discourse can be found in Jean Epstein's article, "On Certain Characteristics of Photogénie," and Keathley's *Cinephilia and History, or, the Wind in the Trees* discusses a mid-twentieth century nexus in *Cahiers du Cinéma*. For discussions of contemporary cinephilia, see Mulvey "Some Reflections," Ng "The Myth," Sontag "The Decay," Willemen "Through a Glass."

³⁵ Paul Arthur believes portraiture to be an under-theorized "film-critical category" that began as a self-conscious filmmaking practice in the sixties and today continues to be a widespread form in television and popular entertainment (Arthur 94).

portrait of a troubled man emerges, inducing questions about Treadwell's own psyche. Besides educating people about and protecting grizzlies in their natural habitat, it is unclear whether his expeditions were not also some kind of misguided attempt to garner fame after thwarted dreams of becoming an actor, a means for exploring personal demons, a way for him to prove his detractors wrong, or perhaps all of the above.³⁶

In any case, what comes through in the footage alongside Treadwell's troubled self-dramatizations is what the reviewer David Denby called "stunning incidental beauties" ("Loners"), as evinced in his footage of a fox family replete with cubs leaping across a field, dancing shadows of small fox paws on the top of a tent, and a mother bear giving birth to cubs. As what is perhaps the epitome of what it is like to escape civilization, at least for Western urban audiences, the film depicts Treadwell in remarkable encounters with wildlife, perhaps most impressively, coming inches away from the fearsome animals he has given pet names to, like Mister Chocolate and Aunt Melissa. Interestingly, amidst footage that seems constantly attuned to the drama of self-performance and risky encounters, Treadwell's camcorder still at times managed to capture what Herzog calls "something like the inexplicable magic of cinema." Herzog counts as an example of this magic the aforementioned footage of swaying foliage, which his voiceover commentary highlights from the rest of Treadwell's footage. For less than a minute, the time between Treadwell's exit and reentry into the frame and roughly as long as one of Lumière's first actualities, the shot holds on the wind blowing gently through

³⁶ As reviewer David Denby put it colorfully, Treadwell was "a college athlete from Long Island who dropped out of school after an injury, failed as an actor, and became a California surfer who drank too much. He was a routine product of American dislocation—a washout, even" ("Loners"). Earlier in his life, Treadwell was second to Woody Harrelson to play the character of Woody Boyd in the popular TV show *Cheers*.

the plant life surrounding the path, emitting a soft, undulating sound.³⁷ We will, of course, never know what Treadwell's intentions were for this particular moment in his footage, but Herzog's voiceover suggests that the "action-movie"-oriented Treadwell would probably not have realized its "strange, secret beauty." A provocative disjuncture of filmmaking sensibilities and performative modes is thus brought into play here, as the cinephile director with a penchant for the wind in the trees one-ups the self-professed wildlife conservator, ostensibly with something even more wild than the latter's bear encounters. As Seung-Hoon Jeong and Dudley Andrew put it well: "Between the grizzly in the background and the grizzly man in the foreground lies the gap between animal and human, nature and civilization. Filling that gap with endless chatter, Treadwell weaves a verbal mesh to protect himself from what is wild" (5).

A host of intriguing things can be said about *Grizzly Man*, as evinced by the articles that have already been written about the film's relation to cinema theory, death, documentary, and animals,³⁸ and so I will refrain from rehashing these arguments. Specifically, I am interested in how this film can be read as an allegory of contingency's place vis-à-vis contemporary image culture. If Harbord and Virilio are right in their assessments of contingency's displacement by a late capitalist logic of the "integral accident," then Treadwell's obsession with grizzlies can be construed as a desire for an environment where contingency matters differently. Accordingly, the cordoned

³⁷ Such a sequence, however brief, would likely have been, in accordance with standard filmmaking protocol, edited out of a finished film. The sound of wind, in particular, is generally considered to be incidental noise that interferes with dialogue and other synchronized sounds deemed necessary for the events occurring on the image track. So too, Treadwell, whom Herzog believes was a careful filmmaker, normally composed his shots so that his own dialogue is clearly audible over any incidental sounds like wind gusts.

³⁸ See for instance, Jeong and Andrew, Sheehan.

wilderness of the Katmai grizzly sanctuary provided a suitable environment for Treadwell's quest, and video, linked by some critics to presence and narcissism,³⁹ was a more than apropos medium for acting it out. In my view, however, what makes *Grizzly Man* so compelling is not so much Treadwell's constant flirtation with danger and death, which depends to a large degree on his performative stagings of presence and chance. Rather, it is the counter-current of indexical contingency in Treadwell's raw footage that most interests me: the brief shot of waving reeds signifying Kracauer's differential moment, or blind spot of mechanical recording. Although Treadwell's footage was recorded by camcorders and not via photochemical means, the image's contiguity with a specific spatiotemporal conjuncture still inheres: camcorder technology continues to involve the traffic of light rays between a material referent and a reactive substrate. In this regard, Treadwell's footage is both indexical trace and deixis, materiality and historicity, and is primarily read as such, even if it is stored in the "nowhere" of digital information.

Herzog's attachment to the image of waving reeds is, then, akin to Kracauer's partiality towards the open-ended possibilities of film's "realistic tendency." While undoubtedly speaking from different historical circumstances and in reference to disparate media, both filmmaker and critic consider indexical contingency not just to be a referential guarantee, but as a facilitator of wondrous perceptual experiences. Cinematic contingency is allied, therefore, not with fixity, but rather with a "fringe of indeterminate visible meanings" that defy intention (Kracauer, *Theory* 303). As Hansen explained this strand of Kracauer's thought, the same mechanisms in film that guarantee referentiality

³⁹ See, for instance, Jameson "Video" and Krauss "Video."

are also what enable the medium's affinity for the "heterogeneous, heteronomous, open-ended flow of life" ("Introduction," *Theory* xxxi). Notwithstanding these similarities between Kracauer and Herzog, the latter's fascination with moving foliage needs to be interpreted vis-à-vis the necrophiliac bent of contemporary cinephilia.⁴⁰ Historically, as we have seen, the wind in the trees has stood for the very essence of the "cinematic," for all that is indeterminate, fleeting, and marginal. Consequently, akin to the cliché of rustling leaves in German Romanticism, the image of the wind in the trees can be said to have acquired something of a self-referential significance in cinema history: it refers in various art films and cinephilic discourses to the materiality of the film medium, which now in the wake of digitalization, is undoubtedly in question. But insofar as the cinematic is identified by contemporary cinephilic discourses as dying, i.e. as the demise of the photochemical image, then it cannot countenance the changing conditions of image production. However, if, like Herzog, we can look upon moving leaves as indices not just of an obsolescent experience of photochemical film, but as a counter-tendency within a spectacle-oriented culture, then it is possible still to retain the critical energies of contingency. In this regard, *Grizzly Man* shows that the power of cinematic contingency is not dying, but dormant. To borrow Hansen's felicitous phrase, a "virtual history" of cinema lives on, unredeemed, in the fugitive natural phenomena lining Treadwell's footage.

⁴⁰ Paul Willemsen discusses the relation between cinephilia and necrophilia in "Through the Glass Darkly."

CHAPTER 2

Archive of the Everyday: Imagining Contemporaneity through the Local Actuality Film

It is well known that the decades surrounding the turn of the last century have been at the center of a large-scale revision of cinema historiography since the late 1970s. Of special interest for my purposes about this period in cinema history is a common assumption among scholars that a large portion of this era's films have a distinct preoccupation with the everyday. In some cases, the term "everyday" or "everyday life" is invoked in connection with the first few decades of cinema without further elaboration, as if it were a self-evident, common point of reference for cinema scholars.⁴¹ In general, classifications of early cinema run the gamut of views of faraway places and exotic cultures (i.e., travelogues, ethnographies); events deemed socially significant or visually spectacular (i.e. processions, political ceremonies, religious rituals, "attractions," etc.); magic or trick films; adaptations of fictional stories and reenactments of famous events; and of something called "everyday life." Compared to the former categories, "everyday life" often remains a relatively under-theorized, almost throwaway category. In early

⁴¹ For instance, using the example of *What Happened on 23rd Street, New York City* (1901), Judith Mayne describes one of the central pleasures of early film as located on the "boundary line [...] between a real street, bustling with the activity of everyday life, and the voyeur's position suggested in *Trapeze Disrobing Act*" (*Woman* 161). Catherine Russell refers to the "everyday" or "everyday life" throughout her book, *Experimental Ethnography*, mostly in discussions of the early actuality film, but it is not systematically theorized. Much of Tom Gunning's work on early cinema touches upon the everyday, in some instances as explicit objects of inquiry. Recently, his essay on local films indicates that they have a kind of special access to the everyday ("Pictures" 53), while another article on the Lumières' instantaneous photography business theorizes something he calls the "everyday body" ("New Thresholds").

cinema scholarship, it is often unclear what the everyday is a category *of*, whether it refers to specific subject matter, or a particular genre or style of filmmaking.

It is only within the last ten years or so that the everyday has emerged as an explicit object of theoretical and historical inquiry in cinema studies. Paula Amad's recently published study, *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète*, for instance, provides one of the heretofore most sustained accounts of what the everyday meant in early film culture. Although Amad's study is specifically focused on the films comprising the Kahn Archives and how they intersect with the first wave of French film theory and practice, it also makes a broader claim that I am interested in investigating: "the archive and the everyday were key categories of film criticism, practice, and history of the first three decades of cinema in general and nonfiction film in particular" (6). This claim, as I will go on to argue with respect to a somewhat different set of cinematic practices, not only suggests a significant supplement to the influential "attractions"-based models of early cinema historiography, but also supplies an entry point for specifying what the everyday might have meant in the context of cinema's first few decades.

As I mentioned in Chapter One, I have decided to use the term "everyday" as opposed to the more familiar "real" or "realism" because the former does not come with the same disciplinary burden of meaning as the latter. Unlike realism, which has a history of being closely tied to false consciousness in seventies film theory, the everyday is not as subject to the same set of negative connotations.⁴² Moreover, while realism has often

⁴² This is not to say that the everyday is not related to realism, for there are indeed numerous points of similarity. One of these is the appeal to a widely held or common frame of reference. Both work to establish powerful fictions of social normativity and commonality; both thus refer to human constructs

been associated with the linear perspectivalism of Western Renaissance art, the everyday tends to be defined in less spatial than temporal terms. In this chapter, I will be arguing that the everyday is both a spatial and temporal orientation that involves a significant imaginary component, and it is this particular combination of features, which, in my view, is just as, if not more important, than a spatially conceived reality effect for issues of cinematic spectatorship and subjectivity.⁴³

It may be prudent at this point to address why I am invoking the archive in conjunction with the everyday. Would not the term “archive” seem contradictory or counter-productive when used in juxtaposition with the way in which I have been describing cinema’s formative engagement with the everyday? In previous chapters, I have attempted to demonstrate how cinema both inherited and transformed an emergent pictorial aesthetics of the everyday by way of its mechanical image-making process. To review, I have attempted to show how Kracauer’s theory of film’s affinity with everyday life is premised on cinema’s indexical relationship to material referents. Contingent phenomena, I argued, served as signifiers of cinema’s unprecedented ability to capture what Kracauer believed to be a non-anthropocentric physical reality. Accordingly, given the emphasis on cinematic contingency so far in this dissertation, the archival paradigm, with its connotations of rational order and exhaustiveness, may seem rather out of place

which exert considerable influence over modern social formations. The real and the everyday are mutually reinforcing: the organization of daily activities for a given society produces its common ground of reality. Even in our supposedly postmodern present, the real and the everyday appear in public discourse as platforms, often for political conservatives, upon which to mount arguments on the basis of some shared sense of norms or normative values (e.g. national, behavioral, familial). For an argument on the meanings of the everyday in politics and the public sphere, see Moran 13-17.

⁴³ I am indebted to Philip Rosen’s “Subject, Ontology, and Historicity in Bazin” for the insight that recent work on spatial perspective and cinema usually involves the temporal assumption of the cinematic image’s indexical pastness (*Change* 14-16).

within the terms of my argument. I propose that, on the contrary, the archive needs to be thought together with the everyday in order to more fully grasp the productive tensions underpinning early film culture. Towards this end, the specific trope animating this chapter is that of cinema as an “archive of the everyday.”

We can begin with a definition of the archive. Stemming from the Greek *arkheia* (public records) and *arkhe* (government), the word “archive” also means a “place where records are kept.”⁴⁴ With origins in state administration, archives have historically tended to privilege documents with in-built guarantors of sociocultural significance, such as connections with recognized political personages and events. Thus, we might say that there exists a general idea of archivable material as that which has intrinsic significance for the archive’s intended public. Ideally, according to Thomas Osborne, the archive is governed by what he calls the principles of “publicity” and “singularity,” in that it is oriented towards a future public (even if the given archive is not actually publicly accessible) and premised on a notion of unique or individual events. Therefore, the notion of an archive of the everyday appears to be something of an oxymoron, for the etymology of the word “everyday” derives from the Latin “diurnal,” an astronomical term meaning “of or resulting from the daily rotation of the earth.” Thus one of the major principles of everydayness is cyclicity—that which repeats itself indefinitely. Fundamentally non-singular, the unit of the day has always been marked by industrialized societies in some fashion, but in a way that highlights its repetitiveness in the context of homogeneous, empty time. As Susan Stewart so eloquently puts it:

The temporality of everyday life is marked by an irony which is its own creation, for this temporality is held to be ongoing and nonreversible and, at the same time,

⁴⁴ All definitions in this chapter are from *The Oxford American Dictionary*, 2nd. ed.

characterized by repetition and predictability. The pages falling off the calendar, the notches marked in a tree that no longer stands—these are the signs of the everyday, the effort to articulate difference through counting. Yet it is precisely this counting that reduces difference to similarities, that is designed to be “lost track of.” Such “counting,” such signifying, is drowned out by the silence of the ordinary. (14)

The ways in which the everyday is inscribed and made to signify are thereby consigned to the oblivion of endless repetition.

Still, it would not be completely accurate to say that the archive and the everyday are incompatible concepts. Indeed, for Osborne, the third principle of archival reason is precisely “the commonplace dimension of everyday life” (51). This principle of the archive is coincident with an influential style of modern historiography which assumes that “the everyday is a particularly revealing level on which to pose the question of memory” (Osborne 59). Rather than locate the primary sources of cultural memory in what Osborne calls “transhistorical laws” or the “pronouncements of the powerful,” the everyday principle of the archive enjoins that significance be located in the ordinary workings of power and the seemingly banal details of quotidian life. Guided by this principle, then, the modern historian looks for meaning in the interstices of official documents, shifting emphasis to the seemingly mundane detail, which might yield the “tell” to the secrets of a lost past. In so doing, the historian is never merely an “archivist,” but rather a “virtuoso” of the archive; someone possessed with a refined sensibility through which the artifacts of ordinary existence take on extraordinary unities of meaning (Osborne 62).

By embodying this third principle centered on the everyday, the modern archive can be said to have invented a “style of memory”⁴⁵ whereby the small and the ordinary might attain new levels of visibility. In this manner, the archive can be said to promote an aesthetic oriented towards the everyday, akin to the emergent pictorial order that I described in Chapter One. I have been calling this pictorial order, which turned contingency into a legitimate form and subject of major forms of image-making in the Western world, an “aesthetics of the everyday.” I argued that photography and cinema both inherited this pictorial aesthetic and transfigured it by virtue of their particular indexical properties. The specific kinds of pictures produced by these technologies of representation not only intensified the quantity of contingent detail within an image, but also the quality of its referential claims: the photographic image was thenceforth viewed as an indexical trace of an anterior moment and a prior referent with which it once had direct physical contact. By the late nineteenth century, the archival model, too, had had its indexical turn, so to speak, as it had theoretically expanded to encompass any kind of social artifact, however mundane, unofficial, or unrelated to state affairs.⁴⁶ Under this model, the major criteria for archival inclusion were that the artifact must have been generated during or near the given historical period and that it have survived materially into the present. Thus, the indexical trace, defined by its prior physical co-presence with and survival beyond a past referent, qualified as an exemplary type of archival record.

⁴⁵ The phrase “style of memory” belongs to Osborne (59).

⁴⁶ One of the main advocates of this broader definition of archival evidence was the historian Frederick Jackson Turner in his field-defining essay “The Significance of History,” written at the end of the nineteenth century.

In summation, the archival paradigm is based on evidence with some kind of referential claim, with a prioritization of the indexical trace, but it also harbors a significant imaginary component that is not commonly acknowledged. The archival model is based on the implicit assumption that a temporal split exists between the trace and the actual referent, a necessary divide that serves as the preconditions for what Derrida calls “archive fever.” Encapsulated in Freud’s account of the archaeologist obsessed with finding the footprint of Gradiva, a woman who once lived in ancient Pompeii, archive fever is defined by Derrida as a passion for bridging the gap between the trace and the referent, for the exact instant when the footprint and Gradiva herself coincide. This is a passion that, for Derrida, is also a *delusion* of impossible presence and a moment of originary perception. Abiding by this definition, we might say that archive fever is a passion for instantaneity, which was also a distinct sociocultural preoccupation of the late nineteenth century. For instance, increases in the speed of transportation and telecommunications, can all conceivably be classed within this broad drive for instantaneity.

So too, it can be argued that the nineteenth-century imagination of and passion for instantaneity formed a crucial dimension in the conceptualization of photography. Besides photochemical indexicality and optical accuracy, a concept of instantaneity was also necessary for the legitimation of photography as a proper species of archival record.⁴⁷ As we may sometimes forget nowadays, the speed of photography prior to the mid-nineteenth century was far from the instantaneity of our current conception of the

⁴⁷ As Allan Sekula noted in his important article, “The Body and the Archive,” photography’s optical precision qualified it for use in multiple positivist disciplines, as in scientific management and criminology, which were largely built on the principles of archival reason.

snapshot. (Likewise, it may be illuminating to note that physiology, scientific management and criminology gained credence partly as a result of the emergence of instantaneous photography.) Although, as Thierry De Duve has pointed out, the difference between a snapshot and longer time exposures are arbitrary (124-25), it is nonetheless significant that a concept of instantaneous representation was summoned to define the snapshot. In the snapshot, signs of instantaneity were believed to be discernible in figural clarity, especially with respect to the registration of the sharp contours of moving forms.⁴⁸ Considered an improvement over the blurriness of time exposures, the snapshot rendered instantaneity representable as singular focal points: visual signs of the arrest of time.⁴⁹ Moreover, contemporaneous discourses tended to couch the snapshot in the rhetoric of presence and animated life. For instance, Lake Price praised instantaneous photography in his 1858 photography manual for its ability to capture the presence of life: “Views in distant and picturesque cities will not seem plague-stricken, by the deserted aspect of their streets and squares, but will appear alive with the busy throng of their motley population” (qtd. in Newhall 40). The snapshot was thus thought to register an instant defined by vitality and presence, however ephemeral, wherein referent and representation were contemporaneous.

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Beaumont Newhall’s discussion of how instantaneous photography was received in the nineteenth century in “Photography and the Development of Kinetic Visualization.”

⁴⁹ Mary Ann Doane discusses the historical and discursive contexts within which time was made representable as singular points in her chapter “Temporality, Storage, Legibility” (in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*). She shows that the depiction of time as linear points was a key representational strategy of Etienne-Jules Marey and motion studies in general. Thierry De Duve provocatively claims that the photographic point is “aphasic,” as a moment without language that can only be experienced as “trauma” (119). Gunning demonstrates that instantaneous photography was valued by both scientists and amateur photographers for its ability to previously unseen dimensions of things, which, in turn, was considered in terms of the suspension of time, as “the mastery of a minute, previously imperceptible, increment of time [that] transformed photography and provided a vision of the world as yet unexperienced by the naked eye” (“New Thresholds” 74).

The rhetoric surrounding instantaneous photography seems to me to be of the flavor of the fantastical discourse of archive fever, which imagines the body and its imprint at their precise instant of encounter—Gradiva (re)united with her footprint. What made this particular brand of fantasy so powerful, though, was that it was not acknowledged as such. Rather, instantaneous photography was embraced for its veracity, its usefulness as an epistemological tool, and its facility in various archival applications. As the examples of scientific motion study, criminology, and other nineteenth-century positivist disciplines show, instantaneous photography had a remarkably authoritative epistemological and evidentiary status. Accordingly, it was not archive fever but a kind of archival credence that defined instantaneous photography. It is this type of positivist rhetoric surrounding photography that Kracauer was responding to in his essay on photography.⁵⁰ He was particularly skeptical in this essay of his society's investment in photography's archival capabilities, especially with respect to its relation to historical time. He pointed to the common practice of believing that we see an image of time in a photograph through the example of grandchildren viewing a photograph of their grandmother at age twenty-four. In the old-fashioned details of the grandmother's bodily ornamentation—the tightly corseted dress and stiff crinoline, the chignon—the grandchildren believe that they “glimpse a moment of time past, a time that passes without return” (“Photography” 49). According to Kracauer, instead of time, what this photograph had actually succeeded in capturing was the spatial configuration of an instant from which the grandmother has disappeared. Nothing of the life history of the

⁵⁰ I am referring to the essay entitled “Photography” which Kracauer wrote in the early part of his career as a film and literature critic in the 1920s (later published in the English-language version of *The Mass Ornament*).

grandmother, the “truth content of the original,” has been preserved in the photograph, which merely “stockpiles” the contingent physical elements. “The photographic archive assembles in effigy the last elements of a nature alienated from meaning” (Kracauer “Photography,” 62).⁵¹ Before this uncanny image of grandmother, the children respond with a laugh, but they also shudder. Photography is, therefore, not the image of time, but its meaning is “a function of the flow of time” and “change[s] depending upon whether it belongs to the domain of the present or to some phase of the past” (“Photography” 54). When put to the test of time, what the photographic image reveals is not the history of the referent, but merely a spatial conjuncture whose relation to the time of the original has been emptied of meaning.

Interestingly, one of Kracauer’s central examples in this photography essay is that of the family album. Archival reason, as we know though, encompasses a principle of publicity, for which family photographs are of little relevance. Photographs oriented towards a public are usually surrounded by the discourses of archival reason, whose primary project is to imbue the images with historical meaning. Especially when an image is endowed with public significance, archival reason manifests itself in the discourse of experts, professionals, intelligentsia, and particularly historians. Hence, in the public realm, the historically variable and potentially disruptive properties of the photographic image are frequently tempered by archival discourses interested in stabilizing subjective encounters with the image. In Kracauer’s essay, the mass media’s equivalent of archival reason would arguably be the press photograph. Accordingly, his other main example is that of the “demonic diva,” the film celebrity whose iconic

⁵¹ Kracauer furthermore likened the photographic archive to the misguided project of historicism, which he characterized as the “photography of time” (49-50).

countenance has been made famous by mass reproduction and dissemination. Viewers of the star's photograph at age twenty-four recognize her from the photograph's caption as well as her films as the demonic diva, even though the actress herself is no longer young. As Kracauer remarked on the difference between the public and the private photograph: "If one can no longer encounter the grandmother in the photograph, the image taken from the family album necessarily disintegrates into its particulars. In the case of the diva, one's gaze may wander from her bangs to her demonic quality; from the nothingness of the grandmother, the gaze is thrown back onto the chignons" (55). To borrow Barthes' terms, the gaze of the family album is drawn towards the contingent, which resides "outside of meaning," whereas that of the press photograph must make meaning of contingency by "assuming a mask" of "generality" (*Camera* 34).

Moreover, since archives in general are theoretically always directed towards a future public for whom they are intended, they are also constantly involved in the generation of archival credibility, which, as Osborne writes, is of an "epistemological" and "ethical" type: "*epistemological* credibility because the archive is a site for particular kinds of knowledge, particular styles of reasoning that are associated with it; and *ethical* credibility because knowledge of the archive is a sign of status, of authority, of a certain right to speak, a certain kind of author-function" (Osborne 53-54). As Osborne further argues, this archival credibility is a credibility of "providence": "Indeed it would confer a sort of expertise of providence, the right to make statements about the past, about history, about change, about fate and, by extension, if in a deliberately delimited way, about the future" (54). The prestige of those disciplines which rely on archival credibility, especially professional history, has indeed been closely tied to the public's faith in the

right of such disciplines to make providential statements about the past, present and future. Accordingly, the ability and authority to make such statements, as we may sometimes need to be reminded, can be extraordinarily powerful instruments of collective and public imagination, as well as of social power.⁵²

For Kracauer, one of the main sources of archival credibility for the “ruling society” is photography, which was generally understood to be a supreme kind of indexical evidence. Epitomized by what he called “illustrated” magazines and newspapers, the “blizzard of photographs” presented to the public constitutes an organized “strike against understanding” (“Photography” 58). By his account, the sheer quantity of press photographs, combined with their mass circulation, has succeeded in presenting to the public an archive of the world as a “photographable present” that has been “entirely eternalized” (“Photography” 59). As a result, Kracauer wrote, “Never before has a period known so little about itself” (58). Nonetheless, in the space of the same essay, he also pointed to the advantages of photography’s indiscriminate stockpiling of spatial elements: if the original meaning of these elements is no longer apparent in the photographic image, then it becomes open to “consciousness to deal with it as it pleases” (62). What he calls a “liberated consciousness” would be able to recognize, through the detritus of elements in the photographic image, that all such configurations are provisional and are therefore also capable of being rearranged. This is where Kracauer places his hope for a radical re-imagination of the “ruling society’s” stranglehold on the present. Within his photography essay, at least, the bulk of this hope was not invested in

⁵² As Osborne posits: “As a principle of credibility the archive does need to exist as a real place, but, more than this, it functions as a sort of bottom-line resource in the carving-out of claims to disciplinarity” (53).

photography, but rather film montage, which he described as the ability to “scramble” parts and segments to create “strange constructs” (62-63).⁵³

The key point I wish to make here about Kracauer’s essay is its emphasis on the powerful role of both photography and film for a public imaginary. Both media stimulate the public to imagine their contemporary historical circumstances in specific ways, but with the crucial difference that photography is customarily used to generate a sense of the present as an objective phenomenon without a subjective dimension. At least with film, according to Kracauer, the ordering and disordering capabilities of montage contain an intrinsically imaginary dimension in that editing necessitates a subjective organizational consciousness. The principle of montage, therefore, stages the possibility of a more flexible way of relating to the world than that of an inventory of objective spatialized instants. Kracauer was, of course, not describing the actual state of the film industry during his time, but rather a utopian wish that cinema might at some point facilitate the overturning of prevailing forms of archival reason. The other major point of Kracauer’s essay is that mass media, particularly the illustrated press, disseminates an influential image of the historical present as documentable, photographable space. As a result, the public comes to substitute a mass-mediated version of the world for other ways of knowing. Since the mass media acts primarily as an instrument of the capitalist culture industry for Kracauer, the critical issues are precisely the concentration of archival credibility in the hands of the ruling social strata, the dominance of particular styles of knowledge over others, and who has the authority to make historical statements.

⁵³ As I have stated in Chapter One, Kracauer’s faith in film’s redemptive potential shifted throughout his career, so that his investment in montage was expanded to include the indexical photographic image, or the instant single photogram.

It seems to me that these points made by Kracauer may even anticipate some aspects of our contemporary theories of the postmodern. His essay on photography appears to be characterizing his era as one wherein a mass-mediated archive of images has succeeded in substituting for historical knowledge, which is also one of the central tenets of postmodern theory.⁵⁴ Their key point of difference, though, is Kracauer's insistence on an "original" referent and its "true history," which for him, rests in the "memory image" as opposed to the photographic version. Moreover, he never doubted the status of the photographic image as an indexical record of a material referent at a particular point in time. For him, it is the "history" or "memory image" of that referent which is not recorded by photography, since this order of meaning is necessarily subjective. As he remarked, "An individual retains memories because they are personally significant" ("Photography" 52). There are, nonetheless, forms of representation which he believed were capable of depicting the referent's true history, particularly the "artwork" wherein, in contradistinction to the photographic image, "the *meaning* of the object takes on spatial appearance" (my emphasis, "Photography" 52). By aiming beyond the representation of the natural appearance of objects, the artwork "approaches the transparency of the final memory image, in which the features of 'history' converge" (Kracauer "Photography," 52). Here Kracauer's use of the rhetoric of transparency is not in the service of a "naïve realism," which he has sometimes been accused of espousing, but rather the affirmation of a conscious principle of aesthetic selection. A transparent representation retains only those signs which are part of the referent's "monogram," which his essay defines as "a single graphic figure which is meaningful as an ornament"

⁵⁴ For instance, this is a key claim made by Jean Baudrillard's seminal work of postmodern theory, *Simulations*.

(“Photography” 51). A distillation of essential traits, the monogram is designed to identify an object to a public, which is to say it does not merely involve private, personal memory images. It is not the memory images belonging to a single individual which are recorded by the great artwork, but the “final memory image,” in which only the “elements that touch upon what has been recognized as true” are preserved (51). As Kracauer put it suggestively, “[a]ll memory images are bound to be reduced to this type of image, which may rightly be called the last image, since it alone preserves the unforgettable. The last image of a person is that person’s actual *history*” (51).

Kracauer’s insistence on the veracity of the final memory image indicates that his theory of representation is neither based on a naïve realism, nor does it resemble some of the more extreme postmodern claims of the demise of such Enlightenment categories as reality and history. As I read it, the final memory image is imaginary, but it is not a postmodern simulation in which signs float free of their referents; rather, it is an imaginative form that derives from the true history of the original object. This version of the “truth,” as I read it, is not an intrinsic feature of either the subject or the object, but is somewhere in between: it is at once a function of subjective memory and of those elements of the original which have been “recognized as true.” It implies, therefore, a collective or public consciousness that is capable of discerning and distilling this truth content—the actual history of the referent. Older representational forms such as painting, legends and fairy tales at least strive to preserve this actual history; the greatest works of these respective genres are those whose versions of history have been recognized as true by some collective principle of determination (“Photography” 51). The difference in

modern society, for Kracauer, is that the public no longer looks to these older forms for historical truths; that role has instead been appropriated by archives and photography.

I have discussed archival credibility and Kracauer's theory of the memory-image in such length up to this point because they constitute two contrasting epistemological models through which the social significance of indexical media can be understood. Furthermore, I believe that these concepts are still relevant today, despite claims that a different set of epistemological terms are needed for our postmodern age. Arguing on behalf of these older, "modern" concepts is also a way of positioning my own work in a larger trajectory of scholarship on indexical media's relation to cultural epistemology. Counter to some of the more extreme postmodern pronouncements, such as the end of history and grand narratives, along with the substitution of the real with simulations, I am asserting our era's continuing investment in the archival credibility of indexical media. Although my main object of investigation in this chapter is cinema in the early part of the twentieth century, I wish also to situate my argument in the context of certain contemporary disciplinary debates: namely, the resurgence of the archival model as a touchstone for media studies. To briefly summarize a burgeoning body of complex theoretical discussions, the rise of digital media in the latter part of the twentieth century has prompted a large-scale reconceptualization of what is sometimes called the "new media's" relation to archives and archival credibility. The abstract mathematical make-up of digital information has formed the basis for a line of thought which theorizes that cinema has been irrevocably transformed by digitalization.⁵⁵ Moreover, the ease of

⁵⁵ It is now a common stance in cinema scholarship to discuss film from the perspective of a contemporary age that is dominated by digital media. For a range of analyses on how photochemical film

manipulability of digital data has led some scholars to forecast a wholesale shift in the credence of all images such that the primary orientation of the public to the image will be one of skepticism.⁵⁶ In light of these theories of the digital, which represent some of the more extreme positions in recent “new media” debates, I wish to use the example of how archival credibility fared in early film culture to suggest some possible parallels for our own time.

In *Counter-Archive*, Amad proposes that the origins of our contemporary debates on the archive lie in the critical discourses on indexical media during the decades surrounding the beginning of the twentieth century. As she argues, cinema in this era played a central role in the “reinvention” of archival logic, even though it has rarely been discussed in this respect in contemporary theoretical debates. Most of the recent analyses of the emergence of the modern archive have largely been “abstract and generalist,” according to Amad, and even at their most historically specific, have tended to focus on the history of photography and historical methodology (*Counter-Archive* 21). Her work proposes that cinema in its first three decades, however unwittingly, did indeed “reinvent” the archival paradigm in a way that differed from that of photography, and that film accomplished this through its greater nascent affinity to the “everyday.”

In the following section, I will investigate Amad’s claim that film’s particular qualities led towards an unprecedented reinvention of the archival concept. Henceforth, my discussion will focus on a subset of early cinema that was the dominant genre of the early twentieth century and which I believe has a direct bearing on contemporary archival

differs from digital information, see Willemen “Reflections,” Vaughan “From Today,” Doane “The Indexical,” Manovich, Mitchell *Reconfigured*, Robins “The Virtual” and “Will Images,” Usai.

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Harbord 101 and Robins “Will Images,” 150)

debates: the actuality. I am particularly interested in this nexus of issues as it pertains to the actuality, which has a history of disciplinary marginalization in cinema studies. Many of the seminal discussions involving ideology and spectatorship in cinema studies have been inclined towards analyses of fictional genres, particularly those generated by industrial cinema systems.⁵⁷ Although the past three decades have seen the balance shift towards more analyses of nonfiction forms, these have to a large extent been studies of Griersonian and post-Griersonian documentary. By focusing on the early actuality, I intend to focus on a genre that has been discussed mostly with respect to the historical transition to narrative, and less of its own accord.

It may be productive to begin with a brief gloss of what I see as the main lines of inquiry in early cinema studies in recent years. From a prevailing notion of early cinema as a “primitive” form of a full-fledged classical narrative cinema, scholars since the late seventies have come to understand early films as belonging to another order of sociocultural practice. So too, the subjective implications of early cinema have been interpreted in relation to a number of non-narrative-based forms of leisure and entertainment. Consequently, today, the prevailing understanding of early cinema is one of alterity as opposed to teleology. For instance, Tom Gunning’s influential “cinema of attractions” model has imbued early cinema with a *modus operandi* separate from that of

⁵⁷ Admittedly, there has been a historical reason for the disciplinary emphasis on fiction over nonfiction: namely, the fact of the industrially-produced feature film’s extraordinary economic dominance for much of the twentieth century. Moreover, at present, there is a general consensus among scholars that films, and images in general, have a highly mediated relationship to referentiality, and therefore, cannot serve as a pure archival record. As a result, films are often considered “historical” only insofar as they can be read symptomatically, as emblematic of specific sociocultural beliefs and values. Especially with respect to fictional genres, films are regarded as having an indirect relation to the historical archive, which is to say that they are not viewed as having much archival credibility. See Richard Maltby’s introduction to the recently published anthology, *New Cinema History*, for more on the last point.

later practices.⁵⁸ Central to the attractions model is the notion of an “exciting spectacle—a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself” (Gunning “The Cinema of Attractions,” 58). Such spectacles could include “gags, vaudeville numbers or recreations of shocking or curious incidents (executions, current events)”, many of which involved the “direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe” (58-59). Audiences were, in turn, attracted to such spectacles for their ability to produce intense, and often brief bursts of sensory stimulation. Since narrative is inherently based in internal sequenciation, the attraction can be characterized as an antithetical genre built upon the discontinuous instant. Moreover, in addition to its non-conformance to bourgeois forms of leisure, the cinema of attractions was characterized in reformist rhetoric as being potentially harmful to spectators by replicating the nervous conditions of urban spaces. With audiences mostly made up of the working classes and ethnic immigrants, cinema was further considered a potentially dangerous and socially disruptive site.⁵⁹

While the attractions model undoubtedly encompassed major modes of cinematic textuality and spectatorship in cinema’s early period, I believe that some of these early film practices were at the same time, as Amad puts it, archivally “inflected.” This is not to say that Gunning’s influential attractions model is incorrect, but rather that the

⁵⁸ The attractions model has been able to encompass a great variety of early films and is built upon archival research on the early historical conditions of spectatorship. This research has shown that early films were exhibited in remarkably heterogeneous contexts, ranging from fairgrounds and variety shows to more exclusively theatrical sites.

⁵⁹ These are points that have served as the bases for the notion that early cinema was more socially heterogeneous than the more middle-class-oriented classical cinema. See for instance Hansen’s *Babel and Babylon*, which synthesizes a number of historical factors into a theory of early cinema as an “alternative public sphere.” This last point is something I will turn to later in this chapter.

sensations offered by the early cinema were also subject to external discourses of archival reason. For Amad, some of the more archivally-inflected examples of early cinema were nonfictional and scientific, as in the Kahn Archives, or studies of physiognomy and motion (7). These were evidence of practices which arguably relied not so much on attractions as on existing discourses of archival credibility, especially those concerned with indexical media. While I agree with Amad, I wish to additionally stress the special social credibility of such archivally-inflected practices, which helped to differentiate them from the more purely sensational forms of early cinema.

Before launching into any further particulars, I must mention that the last decade has produced some scholarship that also plays a formative role in the present discussion. This work has argued for the continuing significance of indexicality for cinema theory and spectatorship. Moreover, instead of a focus on attractions as the representative model of early cinema's alterity, this work has tended to emphasize the actuality genre as the "*ur-form*" of early cinema (Amad 198).⁶⁰ According to this body of scholarship, the shift in the first decade of the twentieth century from the actuality as the most popular cinematic genre to that of fictional narrative marked a major representational shift in cinema history. Frequently filmed in one take without post-production editing, actualities are said to exemplify the preclassical era of indeterminacy, when the principles of narrative rationalization, including the subordination of all profilmic elements to a narrative economy, were not yet fully in place.⁶¹ One of the major points of difference

⁶⁰ As examples of this emphasis on the actuality, Amad cites the recent work of Doane, Rosen, and Vaughan.

⁶¹ As Doane writes, "the short-lived genre of the actuality provides a particularly fertile field of investigation, since it harbors the contradictory dream of re-presenting the contingent" (*Emergence* 144). For similar discussions on the historical distinctiveness of the actuality, see Russell and Vaughan "Let

between the actuality and fictional narrative is the former's particular articulation of cinematic time, one which relies heavily on "external" factors—extra-diegetic events and phenomena with which the camera exists in a relation of pure recording (Doane *Emergence*, 161). To quote Doane's suggestive formulation, the actuality acts as an "archive of the present," since it generates a sense of immersion in the present and temporal duration for the spectator. Accordingly, the actuality is theoretically experienced by the spectator as a peculiar kind of present tense as opposed to the past tense of the photographic image.

By reexamining the distinct evidentiary status of the actuality mode in early film culture, this recent scholarship on actualities in some respects revisits a selection of Kracauer's ideas on the actuality in general. As I have previously related, in his later work, *Theory of Film*, Kracauer posited that cinema's affinity for the everyday is manifested most clearly when the camera exists in a relation of pure recording to external factors—a defining feature of the actuality. This is the mode in which cinema's "radical naturalism," its predilection for a non-anthropocentric materiality, is most evident. The actuality is also the genre he invested with significant redemptive and revelatory powers: namely, the ability to prepare the way for radical consciousness by way of film's non-anthropocentric depiction of the world—a view of "raw nature" shorn of established epistemological categories.⁶² This implies a potentially asocial mode of spectatorship, i.e.

There." Rosen makes the point that the actuality is too "pure as document; machines of indexical representation, even when used by the most amateurish, can indeed produce a seeming infinity of such documents" (*Change* 245).

⁶² I am indebted to the work of Hansen and Thomas Levin for these insights on Kracauer's later approach to film. See Hansen's introduction to the latest edition of *Theory of Film* in addition to her articles, "Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing" and "With Skin and Hair." See also Levin's introduction to *The Mass Ornament*.

a way of relating to the image that is not based in any type of social codification. Making a similar point, but with respect to preclassical actualities in particular, recent scholarship also theorizes that the actuality, since it is premised purely on the act of recording with no additional attempt at structuration, is prone to what Rosen calls a “decentralized, potentially free-floating spectatorship” (*Change* 244). Thus, this cluster of scholarship positions the preclassical actuality at the lower end of a spectrum representing various degrees of the social management of cinematic indexicality and contingency. As Rosen argues, the cinema in general can be conceived “as a kind of juncture of indexicality and rationalization, a crossroads within the emphasis on temporality that developed throughout industrializing culture” (*Change* 100). This understanding of the actuality and of cinema in general as involving a range of various degrees of rationalization is key to my reading of film’s relation to the archive and the everyday.

As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, the everyday has frequently been invoked in cinema criticism in conjunction with early cinema, but there are few sustained theoretical exegeses on what the term means. There is, though, what I believe to be a discernible pattern to such invocations with respect to the preclassical actuality in particular, especially concerning film’s archival properties. This pattern can be traced as far back as the turn of the last century. For instance, in 1898, the Polish cameraman Boleslas Matuszewski discussed film’s propensity for “anecdotal History” as a function of its indiscriminate recording of phenomena. According to his pamphlet, “A New Source of History,” even though film has an affinity for recording “actions and spectacles of a documentary interest” with “an authenticity, exactitude, and precision that belongs to it

alone,” the medium is also liable to “slip into” the terrain of the “anecdotal side of History” (qtd. in Amad 3). This “anecdotal side” is encapsulated well by a newspaper respondent to Matuszewski’s pamphlet: “it’s the death of legend, this flower of history [the cinematograph]. It is the great man captured in his petty details and small moments; there will be no more great men for the cinematograph, no more so than their manservants” (qtd. in Amad 185). Matuszewski’s faith in the archival capabilities of film was thus qualified by a recognition of its simultaneous drawbacks: film’s unprecedented precision came at the price of *excessive* documentation—what Amad describes as a “challenge to the traditional definition of the historical event by invoking this different type of unreliable, anonymous, unofficial, and uneventful history” (4).

Others, such as Albert Kahn with the establishment of his Archives de la Planète,⁶³ attempted to take the archival capabilities of film to their logical conclusion by using the medium to build an actual archive of world cultures, a kind of storehouse of the global present. What is so striking about the grand, if perhaps quixotic, aspirations of the Kahn Archives for Amad was that they embraced rather than rejected film’s affinity for anecdotal history. Indeed, it was precisely film’s affinity for recording minor and non-eventful phenomena, in conjunction with more officially recognized historical events and cultural rituals, that qualified it as the Kahn Archives’ primary archival medium (Amad

⁶³ Consisting of color autochromes as well as raw film footage, the Kahn Archive aspired to be a geographically exhaustive, encyclopedic archive of the various cultural practices of the early twentieth century. Film was regarded by Albert Kahn as particularly amenable to the documentation of things which “take time”: behavior and comportment, ritual processes, and the rhythms of daily practices. According to Amad, the Kahn Archives represented a novel use of film as an “archive of the everyday,” i.e. a “living” history of the present as opposed to the traditional conception of the archive as written documents of the past.

8). Although the Kahn Archives was intended as a positivist archival enterprise,⁶⁴ it was also unwittingly caught up in what Amad calls the “manifest counter-archival tendencies” of the actuality film. Comprised mostly of reels of raw film footage, the Kahn Archives can be viewed as a rather overwhelming multitude of examples of the actuality’s “propensity for capturing excessive detail, inciting unmanageable curiosity, suspending habitual modes of memory and perception, and most importantly, collecting that which was usually overlooked or suppressed in the official archive” (Amad 164). In relying so thoroughly on the unedited actuality, the Kahn Archives ended up thwarting its own archival aspirations. As Amad puts it, the Archives are as much counter-archives of noise as they are archives of world cultures.

Amad thereby reads the everyday as a function of anecdotal history, but this interpretation derives mostly from the Kahn Archives and contemporaneous intellectual developments in historiography.⁶⁵ Moreover, the Kahn Archives was and to some extent still is a collection of films intended for elites and intellectuals. The prevailing theoretical assumption was that there would not be much social overlap between the films’ subjects and their spectators, akin to the relationship between ethnographer and native. The everyday in Amad’s account therefore applies to a set of highly restricted, specialized uses of the actuality. The object of this chapter, on the other hand, is a more widespread and public set of practices involving the actuality. I will pay particular attention to one specific body of practice that involved significant overlaps between empirical audiences

⁶⁴ Amad discusses its affiliation with the encyclopedic aspirations and utopian experiments of the early twentieth century.

⁶⁵ For Amad, Kahn’s perception of film’s particular affinity for and challenge to history is related to the major shift in French historiography brought about by the Annales School in the interwar years.

and profilmic subjects: the local actuality film. The genre of the local film, as I will go on to explain, is more like a kind of autoethnography in which the everyday refers to a different sense of history. In the following section, I will demonstrate how one such practice of the local film—that of the British filmmakers Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon—was also attracted to the everyday; only, in this context, the everyday was not defined in relation to a binary conception of anecdotal versus official history. Rather, the everyday of Mitchell and Kenyon’s local films, as I will show, refers to a collective form of knowledge that is affiliated with the “memory image,” an order of historical representation that the early Kracauer believed was in danger of extinction.

Mitchell and Kenyon’s Quotidian Spectacles

A tracking shot gradually reveals what looks to be the busy streets of a city at the turn of the last century. The film appears to be done in the style of the “phantom rides” of the early cinema period, a type of actuality featuring a mobile view of the environment usually from the perspective of a camera mounted atop a moving vehicle. In such films, audiences were treated to the novel impression of virtual travel through a three-dimensional screen space. With the camera positioned at a diagonal to the sidewalk, this film seems to be taking us on a ride by way of the “z-axis,” the much-vaunted “depth” perspective that distinguished *plein air* actualities from the flattened spaces of studio productions. After passing several bicyclists and horse-drawn carts, we are presented with four well-dressed women standing abreast on the sidewalk adjacent to the camera. A few seconds pass before the women are summarily ushered back farther from the camera by a suited man. A jump cut is followed by the same four women walking from further

back along the sidewalk towards and eventually past the camera's purview. Shortly thereafter, two suited men are shown walking briskly just ahead of the camera, gesticulating to the pedestrians. The shot traverses the street in similar fashion for about eight minutes before ending, passing by various vehicles and pedestrians, some of whom stop to stare, as if struck immobile by the camera's gaze.

The street belongs to the industrial municipality of Bradford, England in 1902, and the suited individuals have been revealed by Vanessa Toulmin to be members of the film's production team, involved in encouraging passersby to engage with the camera.⁶⁶ Entitled *Electric Tram Rides from Forster Square to Park Gates, Bankfoot to Market Street* (hereinafter referred to as *Electric Tram Rides*), this film is one of a collection of actualities made by the production team of Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon. Producers of a number of nonfiction films, Mitchell and Kenyon traveled to regions throughout England to make films of local subjects, including "factory gate films, school exits, processions and calendar customs, sporting events, transport films and phantom rides, public entertainment and leisure, plus the appearances and activities of personalities of the day" (Neal, Toulmin and Vick 7). Although the two men were heads of a successful filmmaking enterprise, operative from the late 1890s to 1913, that offered fictional titles as well, their nonfiction films exceeded their fictional subjects by a ration of at least 10:1 and constituted their "stock in trade" (Neal, Toulmin and Vick 7). Their traveling filmmaking practice was comprised mostly of footage of the aforementioned local

⁶⁶ Vanessa Toulmin provides a running voiceover narration for this film in the DVD compilation of Mitchell and Kenyon's films, *Electric Edwardians*.

subjects that were then advertised locally and exhibited (mostly in unedited form or with minimal in-camera edits) in local fairgrounds, town halls, or other public venues.⁶⁷

Aside from the inclusion of the production team's staging efforts with the pedestrians, *Electric Tram Rides* appears to be an unexceptional example of the early actualities prevalent in cinema's first decade. Like the contemporaneous Lumière actualities, Mitchell and Kenyon's film evinces a style that is both staged and improvisational, composed and casual. The overall effect of this style in *Electric Tram Rides* is that of an organized contingency: a group of smartly-dressed women are very deliberately told to stroll past the camera in order to showcase their attire, while at the same time, other pedestrians seem surprised to have been caught in a candid moment by the moving camera.

By most appearances, therefore, *Electric Tram Rides* conformed to preclassical actuality conventions; there seems to be nothing extraordinary with respect to both form and content in its view of Bradford. But, while *Electric Tram Rides* may appear to resemble the nonfiction films of the Lumières, it contains some differentiating features. For instance, the inclusion of the production team's interaction with the pedestrians is unusual; the Lumières' actualities did not depict this type of interaction as part of their standard practice.⁶⁸ Indeed, the inclusion of this type of interaction in *Electric Tram*

⁶⁷ I am indebted to the research articles in the BFI anthology, *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon*, for the historical background relayed in this chapter about Mitchell and Kenyon's local filmmaking enterprise.

⁶⁸ According to Gunning, in his article on Mitchell and Kenyon's "crowd" films in *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon*, the subjects of the Lumières rarely acknowledged the presence of the camera in contradistinction to the frequent direct interactions of local films. This suggests that the relations between crowd and camera, as well as audience and film, might have been different for the local films of Mitchell and Kenyon than for the Lumière actualities ("Pictures" 50-51).

Rides is more typical of a subset of the actuality called “local films.”⁶⁹ Until recently a blind spot in cinema historiography, local films are defined as “the production and exhibition of films which were shot in a given community and shown to local people who constituted the first (and perhaps only) audience for the film” (Fullerton “Introduction,” 3).⁷⁰ Mitchell and Kenyon’s local film practice, as I will go on to show, complicates cinema historiography, by acting as an example of actuality filmmaking that extended into cinema’s transitional period.⁷¹

At this point, I wish to acknowledge that, for a contemporary spectator, a film like *Electric Tram Rides* may seem neither ordinary nor parochial; that, on the contrary, its view of Edwardian Bradford may instead be regarded as an extraordinary relic of a bygone world. My own response to and interest in the film, as in others like it, partly has to do with their haunted quality—what I perceive to be the mysteriousness of imagery whose full significance is no longer available in a contemporary context. Today the depicted street scene may likely signify a general sense of the passage of time, along with the ephemerality of individual lives and the memories attached to certain places, but at least for a contemporary lay or non-specialist spectator, the full significance of the people

⁶⁹ Mitchell and Kenyon’s local film practice was not atypical for British filmmakers; other local film enterprises included the Warwick and Hepworth companies (Bottomore 36). In America, examples of local film enterprises include the Edison Company, along with a number of other smaller traveling exhibitors throughout the US. Evidence of local film practices exists in a number of other countries as well, such as Algeria, France, Mexico, and Luxembourg. See Bottomore; Aronson; Johnson; Fullerton “Local Views”; Braun “Local Films.” Some local films were also produced and exhibited by local movie theater owners.

⁷⁰ Stephen Bottomore also defines a film as “local” only if “there is considerable overlap between the people appearing in the film and those who watch it or are intended to watch it” (“From the Factory” 33). By this definition, he also includes the “local drama,” usually replicas of fictional stories acted by local persons. In this chapter, though, I am referring to local films in their nonfiction or actuality mode.

⁷¹ Much of early cinema scholarship understands 1906 more or less to be the point after which actuality production and popularity declined significantly. Bottomore, however, notes that in Britain the local film was popular until the First World War (34); while Michael Aronson claims that local films continued to be made in various parts of the US until as late as the 1950s.

and places depicted in the film are inaccessible. Teeming as it is with profilmic detail—women’s and men’s fashions and comportment, road conditions, the shapes of bicycles and horse-drawn carts, the rhythms of vehicular and pedestrian traffic, an errant dog running across the tram tracks, individual faces and reactions to the camera—*Electric Tram Rides* is full of physiognomic particulars, but its primary meaning for us is likely that of a more generalized sense of the film as an historical artifact. In other words, we as contemporary spectators understand the film’s historicity as a function of the muteness or opacity of its proliferation of recorded detail. Once perhaps full of significance as a document of their contemporary circumstances for local Bradford audiences, the phantom ride of *Electric Tram Rides* now signifies in another sense: it takes us on a phantom ride through a world of effigies whose originals have long since disappeared.

While temporal and semiotic *disorientation* may be how we now view an actuality like *Electric Tram Rides*, it is worth noting that orientation was arguably a more important function of the actuality genre in general for early audiences. As Vanessa Schwartz points out, the actuality designates not only an early film genre, but also a specific trope of the late nineteenth century in which “real life was packaged, labeled as ‘current events’ and narrated and incessantly represented in a variety of forms, including film” (*Spectacular* 192).⁷² Together these forms worked to invent a sense of modern, urban everyday life as something that “could be transformed into the spectacular and the sensational” (*Spectacular* 16). Per Schwartz, I consider one of the key functions of the

⁷² Schwartz’s book, *Spectacular Realities*, is a study of late nineteenth-century visuality in Paris, but she also understands this era of Parisian culture to be a quintessential example of European modern urban culture.

preclassical actuality to be the orientation of urban publics to their *contemporary* circumstances via spectacular means.

It is important to note at this point that the word “spectacle” is invoked by Schwartz in a sense that differs from that of Debord, who conceived it as a primary vehicle of the capitalist culture industry. In his account, the spectacle is saturated by capital and reproduces its abstract relations, but as Schwartz rebuts, Debord’s analysis cannot explain why certain spectacles were more appealing than others to a public whose support was necessary for their success (*Spectacular* 44). She proposes that the spectacularization of reality constituted new means of imagining collectivity for urban inhabitants around the turn of the last century. The cinema in her argument is likened to the illustrated mass press, panoramas, guidebooks, and wax museums as a medium for sensationalizing contemporary reality (*Spectacular* 39). These were spectacles which were actively involved in “the invention of an “everyday” which “offered the means through which a new collectivity was constituted—one that was distinctly urban and quintessentially ‘modern’” (*Spectacular* 15-16). By her estimation, such spectacles may indeed have been saturated by capital, but they also allowed the rapidly changing urban environment to be rendered sensible as well as sensational for a new kind of public. Thus, it was the imaginary collective component of these spectacles that made them so valuable for urban inhabitants; at a time when traditional measures of space and time were being transformed, spectacularized versions of reality allowed people to collectively imagine the contours of their contemporary environment, to orient themselves to a kind of phenomenological map of the present.

A subset of the early actuality, the local film genre has also been discussed in terms of orientation and spectacle. Mark Aronson characterizes the local film in general as a practice of “quotidian spectacle,” which he invokes in opposition to Gunning’s seminal “attractions” model for early cinema, since the former is not centered on the presentation of “an exciting spectacle” (9). Consisting of local subjects and shown to audiences comprised of members of the local community, local films, according to Aronson, provided views of familiar, quotidian activities occurring in what the audience considered their immediate or nearby surroundings. The other major draw of such films was the inclusion of local persons, many of whom attended exhibitions for the precise purpose of seeing themselves and others of their community onscreen. The emphasis of these films on the near and the familiar therefore poses a challenge to an attractions-based model of early cinema: how to account for the popular appeal of a nonfiction genre that seems not to conform to the criteria of the erotic, exotic, faraway, and sensational.

Indeed, the local film was a largely neglected genre in cinema studies until the last decade or so, inspired by the discovery and restoration of some previously unknown collections.⁷³ Since the mid-nineties, the discovery of the Mitchell and Kenyon Collection in particular has produced over 800 films (consisting mostly of local films, of which *Electric Tram Rides* is but one example) testifying to the existence of local film as an economically viable popular practice for the partnership up until 1913. Stored for many years in negative form in metal barrels, the films were serendipitously found in the

⁷³ Bottomore writes: “due to a growth in regional archives and an interest in ‘orphan films,’ we are rediscovering local films from throughout the silent era, in strange varieties” (“From the Factory Gate” 34).

cellar of what had once been Sagar Mitchell's photography shop.⁷⁴ Their sole survival as original nitrate negatives (as opposed to print copies) not only yielded extraordinarily clear and vivid prints, but also suggests a different economic model than that of industrial-commercial cinema, which depended on the circulation of a large number of copies of a single film. In addition to their original short-lived, itinerant exhibition contexts, local films in general were deemed at the time to have little or no interest for wider audiences, which likely explains their survival as negatives versus prints.⁷⁵ The negatives' less than ideal storage conditions also suggest that there may have been some hesitation regarding their archival value. It is somewhat surprising therefore that, as if in ironic counterpoint to the films' original ephemerality, the recent discovery of Mitchell and Kenyon negatives has spawned a large-scale restoration effort by the British Film Institute and the University of Sheffield, an anthology of research articles to accompany the DVD release of 35 restored films in the Collection (*The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon*), and evaluations of the Collection's status as a "treasure" of British film heritage (Toulmin, Russell and Popple 3-5).

Evidence of Mitchell and Kenyon's traveling cinema business shows that the partnership made local films at least 1913, a remarkably late date for the actuality genre. Scholars have typically traced the decline of the actuality as a popular cinematic genre to the first decade of the twentieth century, and despite some disagreement over the exact year in which the balance shifted towards narrative film, the general consensus is that of the actuality's steady decline as a dominant cinematic form. The reasons behind this

⁷⁴ These circumstances of discovery are relayed by the written account of Peter Worden, the collection's donor (qtd. in Toulmin et al., *The Lost World* 3)

⁷⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the original economics of local films, see Bottomore 35-38.

decline have also been a matter of debate: it has variously been attributed to the loss of interest in the actuality on the part of audiences, or the result of economic incentives for greater standardization of the film product by an industry in the process of vertical integration. In any case, the sheer volume and geographic range of the Mitchell and Kenyon films are evidence of the persistence of the local actuality as a viable entertainment practice in Britain even during a time of increasing narrative dominance and industrial consolidation. Moreover, as Aronson points out, the relative longevity of local film practice attests to “a labor model [that] ran counter to the more dominant institutional rhetoric of the 1910s and 1920s, which focused on the increasing Taylorism of the tripartite industrial system wherein ““as in any manufacturing industry, the manufacturer of motion-picture films for exhibition in a modern factory has its division of labor, and a film picture is the joint product of the various departments and specialists who in turn take it and perfect it with their skill”” (15). In some cases, local films were even produced by local movie theater owners, thereby further collapsing the standard tripartite system.⁷⁶ The Mitchell and Kenyon Collection indicates that there was indeed a perceived market for the actuality that extended beyond the first decade of the twentieth century; and that this market was more geographically specific than the homogeneous “mass” version of the industrial studio system.

What was it that made Mitchell and Kenyon’s local film enterprise viable at a time when the actuality itself was reportedly in decline? Currently prevailing ideas of the preclassical actuality derive from Gunning’s “aesthetic of the view,” which “mime[s] the

⁷⁶ See Aronson’s discussion of Charlie Silveus, an American theater owner and local filmmaker, in his article “Charlie Silveus Makes a Quotidian Spectacle.”

act of looking and observing” (“Before Documentary” 60). Thus defined, the “view aesthetic” can certainly apply to the local film genre in general; however, the former’s subject matter is supposed to involve touristic sights of faraway places and exotic cultures.⁷⁷ This type of view acted as a “surrogate” vision for spectators who otherwise would not have been able to behold such sights, or physically travel to the depicted locations. As Aronson argues, the pleasure involved in “the generic form of the (nonlocal) view is in large part predicated on seeing something new and unknown, something to which direct optic access is difficult or impossible” (9).⁷⁸ Particularly in travelogue form, what such surrogate views also made possible was the generation of a sense of the “global,” i.e. of a diversity of sociocultural formations existing concurrently in a sort of planetary present. A precursor of this would of course be the newspaper, which as Benedict Anderson has argued, was a major contributor to the invention of the secular sense of “meanwhile,” wherein all social formations subscribe to the same calendar, and worldwide events are understood to occur separately in space yet simultaneously in time. What cinema arguably contributed to this sense of the global was the “spectacularization” of diverse social formations, that is, a bringing-into-view of various cultural practices and geographic locations with unprecedented phenomenological detail. While such cinematic spectacles may very likely have furthered

⁷⁷ Gunning recently revised this definition of the view aesthetic to accommodate the types of views provided by Mitchell and Kenyon’s local films. Here he describes early cinema as “marked by the era of local cinema” (“Pictures” 52).

⁷⁸ Aronson counts a number of nonfiction genres as ascribing to this nonlocal view: “Whether travelogue, ethnography, industrial film, or even a national newsreel, the assumption is that the spectator is seeing a film made somewhere else about someone or something else” (9).

the exoticization and eroticization of foreign cultures, they also enabled many more people to imagine themselves with respect to a contemporary global vision of the world.

By comparison, Aronson posits that the local film genre was engaged in the related, though very different endeavor of producing a “local view.” Instead of being based in a surrogate view of faraway places, the local view was involved in what was almost an antithetical endeavor: the seemingly redundant task of depicting things which the audience had already seen and with which it likely had a high level of familiarity. By contrast, the attraction of the surrogate view was commonly attributed to exotic and inaccessible locales—to sights unseen—the same cannot be said of local films. As Benjamin famously wrote, the modern masses desire to bring things closer, but does this same desire apply to the already near and familiar? I propose that Mitchell and Kenyon’s local film business is a pertinent site for investigating these questions. I further venture that the appeal of Mitchell and Kenyon’s local films for early audiences can be attributed to their status as quotidian spectacle, Aronson’s name for the productive tension in the local film genre between ordinariness and extraordinariness. As he writes, quotidian spectacle involves the interplay of the exhibitionist mode of early cinema with “the prosaic and the quotidian” (Aronson 9). Indeed, Aronson considers the conjuncture of a “poetics of unextraordinariness” and cinematic spectacle to be the organizing principle of the local view (3): the “gratification and power of these [local] films was derived, at least in part, from the pleasure of looking at the familiar in an unfamiliar way” (9). At the same time, according to Aronson, the quotidian spectacle was also actively engaged in the production of the very concept of the local instead of simply reflecting a pre-given spatial entity (10). In what follows, I will discuss this concept of quotidian spectacle in

regards to Mitchell and Kenyon's local film practice and what scholars claim about the local film genre in general, and will therefore deal mostly with broad conceptual issues concerning the archive, the everyday, and the local.⁷⁹

The specific case of *Electric Tram Rides* is a good example of quotidian spectacle. As part of the subset of actualities called "transport films" and "phantom rides," *Electric Tram Rides* is formally typical of Mitchell and Kenyon's local film output concerning this topic.⁸⁰ As the transport historian Ian Yearsley writes, the importance of Mitchell and Kenyon's transport films "lies in the depiction of British daily life in a period of great change" (181). The municipality of Bradford, a portion of which is shown in *Electric Tram Rides*, was indeed a site of great change in the 1900s. Prior to the nineteenth century, Bradford consisted of a small community built upon cottage and village industries, but was thereafter transformed into a vital and populous center centered on the industrial manufacture of wool.⁸¹ By 1902, Bradford was home to a burgeoning population and a relatively new infrastructure, the product of a century of massive and rapid structural changes. Such changes, of course, were not just local, but exemplary of broader modernization efforts in Europe and America at the turn of the last century, encompassing expansive urbanization and industrialization, as well as their attendant demographic shifts. This was a period in Britain, then, when the traditional coordinates of the local were subject to the irrevocable, exciting, and disorienting

⁷⁹ To be true to the particularity of local films, my analysis would ideally take into account questions of specific nationalities, race, gender, class, and other sociocultural factors such as consumerism. An account like this, however, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

⁸⁰ See Yearsley "On the Move" for a survey of Mitchell and Kenyon's transport films, in which he discusses *Electric Tram Rides*.

⁸¹ This information is found under the heading "Bradford" in Wikipedia.

changes often associated with the term “modernity.” In this regard, the production of collective conceptions of the local would have been particularly important as a means of subjective orientation; and as Schwartz argues, orientation was a primary function of the early actuality for modern urban audiences.

It could therefore be argued, contra Aronson, that residents of Bradford in 1902, especially recent immigrants, rural transplants and relocated workers, were not exactly familiar with their urban surroundings. The level of familiarity that someone feels for a particular set of circumstances is relative; it refers to subjective experience and not an objective measure. But this is precisely Aronson’s point: local films actively produce, and do not just reflect, the boundaries of the local. Accordingly, I propose that insofar as *Electric Tram Rides* was perceived as a quotidian spectacle, this was largely due to the specific type of spectatorial experience that it promoted. Standard practice within local filmmaking consisted of a circular process whereby “people first appeared in front of the camera and then some of those same people paid to sit in front of the screen” (Bottomore 36). Bottomore points out that the city of Bradford was one in which the vogue for seeing oneself in local films was so strong that people would reportedly say to one another: “Do you know that you are on the curtain at St George’s Hall” (34). Recognition of familiar faces was therefore a significant part of the local film experience for Bradford audiences; and while this desire for self-recognition certainly carries narcissistic implications, it is important to note here that one’s self image was typically seen in tandem with a host of

other faces, both onscreen and in the audience.⁸² As I will show, this was an articulation of self as neither private nor national, but as part of the fluctuating category of the local.

Local Imaginaries and Everyday Archives

The “localness” of the local film genre needs to be understood with respect to a larger phenomenological map or cultural imaginary of modern experience, especially vis-à-vis other nonfiction media with an interest in representing the contemporary world for a paying public. These media were pivotal for the emergence and establishment of new forms of publicity, all of which necessitated a reconceptualization of the parameters of the local. By situating the local film genre in a genealogy of emergent, evolving, and at times competing forms of publicity, I will venture some further hypotheses for the appeal of its particular species of quotidian spectacle.

First, I believe it worthwhile to examine one of the local film’s roughly contemporaneous nonfiction genres: the national newsreel. (It should also be noted that the newsreel was another major popular cinematic genre in which the actuality persisted beyond the 1910s.) Distributed to theatrical cinema venues on a regular weekly (and sometimes bi-weekly) basis, newsreels were conventionally shown as preludes to industrially-produced, feature-length fiction films (Althaus 197-98). Considered a form of “illustrated news” or the equivalent of a visual newspaper, national newsreels served much the same function as the printed news: both ascribed to and produced the sense of a social organism engaged in what Anderson called the “steady, anonymous, simultaneous

⁸² For an analysis of the significance of recognition in local film spectatorship, see Toulmin “Is It You?”

activity” through calendrical time (26). The “extraordinary mass ceremony” that, for Anderson, occurs each time the newspaper is read—the ritual performance of a “community in anonymity” of contemporaneous readers—is an especially vivid figure for societies based in a “secular, historically clocked” sense of time (35). Anderson’s major point was that, in addition to its figuration of modern historical time, the newspaper was also a key facilitator of an imagined *national* community. Newspapers “laid the bases for national consciousness” by consolidating a “monoglot reading public” of “print-languages,” which allowed for “unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars” (Anderson 44).⁸³ The requisite for comprehending such print-languages was, of course, literacy, and this particular skill emerged as the province of the educated bourgeoisie. Moreover, print-languages are based on an ideal of silent, individual reading, and thus their imagined publics consist of a virtual community of similar, yet physically separate acts. Unlike older types of social rituals based on physical contiguity, this type of activity enabled a more geographically dispersed style of imagining social cohesion.

To return to the national newsreel, then, it functioned much like the national newspaper regarding its public address.⁸⁴ A popular cinematic genre in Europe and America from the teens through the fifties, the newsreel dovetailed with the era of mainstream narrative dominance, a period marked by the vertical integration of

⁸³ Anderson is here referring to print-capitalism as a whole, including literary forms like the novel. Newspapers for him are particularly important examples of what he calls “one-day bestselling novels” which are read at the same time by large literate groups. The simple act of seeing others in the vicinity reading the same newspaper as oneself provides a remarkable confirmation of a shared sense of everyday life (35-36).

⁸⁴ Here, in the interest of space, I am smoothing over a number of differences between newsreels and newspapers. For a discussion of some of the key differences, see Althaus 200-01.

industrial-commercial cinema. During this period, by many accounts, the large-scale replacement of the diverse exhibition venues of early cinema with dedicated movie theaters marked the end of the cinema's heterogeneous preclassical phase. Although the newsreel genre obviously differed in form and content from the narrative feature, it was nonetheless also a product of vertical integration and can be said to address the audience in a similar fashion, i.e. as a community of anonymous, private observers whose only commonality lay in the simultaneous, silent reception of a standardized film product in a theatrical setting.⁸⁵

Yet still, despite its more genteel theatrical setting, the national newsreel appeared to have retained some key features of cinema's early period. For instance, the newsreel was typically comprised of a series of brief actualities, with the camera mimicking the act of witnessing the profilmic event (Althaus 198). Moreover, the genre combined the exhibitionist modality of early cinema with the ideal of silent individual reception established by classical cinema. The major distinguishing factor, though, between the newsreel and the preclassical actuality was the former's possession of an internal unifying consciousness. Although newsreels typically consisted of a series of disjunctive actualities, these were unified by an overarching narrational discourse. In the case of the national weekly newsreel, this ordering consciousness was generated at the production level, in the form of intertitles or voiceovers. Any discursive statements made by these forms of narration were substantiated by the audience's belief in the veracity of the actuality. While it was commonly believed that the newsreel simply conveys the "facts"

⁸⁵ For a good summary of the consolidation of the newsreel industry into a few large multinational companies, see Althaus 205-07.

behind the actuality footage (i.e. dates, times, names, locations), it was nonetheless a very particular, modern sense of history that formed the foundation of the news genre as a whole. Like its print cousins, the newsreel industry was engaged in the business of generating news and manufacturing a sense of a common history comprised of an infinitely renewable succession of “new” and “newsworthy” events. Since the film actuality was essentially defined by a rhetoric of untrammelled recording and localized contingency, it lent itself particularly well to the newsreel’s aspirations to “live” coverage of newsworthy events; each complemented the other in order to produce a remarkably credible account of the present for audiences. What is more, since each newsreel installment was targeted at the largest possible (ideally nationwide) audience, the combined package of word and image, to borrow Barthes’ terminology, was compelled to assume a mask of generalized social meaning—a “studium”—in order to tame the potentially excessive morass of contingent detail present in the actuality.

It seems therefore that the “national” consciousness embodied by the newsreel was targeted at more of an abstracted citizen-subject than an empirical local audience. Conversely, an argument can be made for a different species of the local: that is, not as an autonomous measure of locality, but rather as an imaginary byproduct of mass-oriented media. As Hansen has argued with respect to early cinema, its much-discussed heterogeneous reception practices emerged as byproducts of an industrial-commercial cinema aimed at the largest possible audience; and thus, they cannot be regarded as autonomous or indigenous cultural processes.⁸⁶ But, Hansen also argued that the *local*

⁸⁶ Hansen wrote: “Whatever autonomous formations emerged in the cinema in the following [first three] decades [of the twentieth century], they did so as a historical by-product of retrospectively more systematic processes—in the seams and fissures of institutional development” (*Babel* 93).

variability of early exhibition practices served as the structural conditions for potentially alternative modes of spectatorship, for “relatively *unpredictable*, aleatory” reception processes (*Babel* 94). She characterized the early mixture of mass-produced films and more plebeian exhibition practices such as variety shows and fairgrounds as “nonsynchronous” and “syncretic,” a developmentally uneven set of practices that was fundamentally unstable. According to her argument, the potential for this nonsynchronous mixture to generate an “alternative public sphere” hinged upon the clash of more traditional “live” elements (e.g. musicians, variety acts, lecturers, audience noise and interaction) with a range of emergent entertainment forms such as film. Since this diverse combination of reception practices was not wholly controlled by what she called “industrial-commercial” forms of publicity, it was fundamentally more open to local variation. Hence, the structural conditions of possibility briefly existed for audiences normally excluded from mainstream culture to draw from their specific experiences of alienation and displacement in the process of cinema spectatorship (Hansen *Babel*, 94).

Although far from constituting an alternative public sphere, the newsreel can also be characterized as a nonsynchronous mixture involving the preclassical actuality and a variant of the abstracted narrative consciousness of the later classical system. Indeed, even though I have been discussing the unifying power of the newsreel’s national discourse over the potentially disjunctive contingencies of the actuality, I wish to point out that the newsreel industry also relied heavily upon “local” actuality footage. Faced with stiff competition and the constant pressure to cover “newsworthy” events, the various newsreel companies were engaged in the unpredictable and risky business of a

kind of regularized representation of contingency. One of the strategies of the newsreel industry was therefore to solicit footage from local freelance cameramen, many of which were “stringers,” motion picture “newshounds” paid by the foot for their raw footage (Aronson 17). Additionally, exhibitors involved in the production of local films were encouraged by the national trade press to contribute to the weekly newsreel with footage of events occurring in their local communities.⁸⁷ The onus of continuously generating new subjects was thereby partially shifted from centralized industrial forms of production to the more circumscribed production practices of the local actuality film. In this manner, the newsreel industry both exploited the local film as part of its panoptic aspirations while also defining it as a privileged locus of contingency; that is, it at once borrowed the spontaneous and live rhetoric of the actuality while narrowing down the field of unpredictable aleatory responses from local audiences. Any potential instabilities that might have come from the nonsynchronicity of local actualities, local reception conditions, and the industry’s deployment of a unifying narrational consciousness were therefore defused. The newsreel industry thereby made some concessions to the relatively unpredictable, decentralized and heterogeneous practices of the local actuality film even as it sought to incorporate them within a more standardized institutional framework.

Despite the industry’s solicitation of freelancers, most local film subjects were judged to be unassimilable by national newsreels precisely because they relied almost entirely upon external knowledge of the people and places shown in the footage. In addition to encouraging local filmmakers to contribute their footage to the weekly

⁸⁷ A regular column in *Motion Picture News* (a national trade paper) advised local exhibitors to “put himself in the way of making extra money by becoming a contributor to the weekly news film” (qtd. in Aronson 17).

newsreel, the national motion picture trade press specifically cautioned against the submission of subjects whose comprehension depended too much on extra-diegetic, contingent forms of knowledge. These included “parades, county fairs, fires, amateur sporting events,” subjects of most interest to the local film genre, but which held little “news value” for national newsreel editors and outside audiences (Aronson 17-18). Such local events were also often deemed of little news value because of their non-singularity; since they occurred on a cyclical or habitual basis, they were neither new nor unique enough to warrant the attention of the national press. Yet still, despite the non-singularity of their profilmic subjects, local films held a singular attraction for local audiences because of the appeal of self-recognition. As a local Harrisburg, Pennsylvania press writer commented in response to a local film screening: “It will be a strange and novel sight for our townsmen to see themselves pictured the same as in everyday life and many a well-known personage will be easily recognized” (qtd. in Bottomore 34).

Indeed, it was not only a dissimilar definition of singularity that distinguished the local film from the newsreel, but also a different standard of archival reason. The local film placed especial emphasis on the “everyday” principle of archival reason, since the genre was not motivated by the constant generation of the new and newsworthy. Often the criteria for a local view was more akin to an ethnographic approach, since they were directed towards cyclical events, routines, and rituals.⁸⁸ That is to say, the local film sought to capture something like the characteristic cultural features of a given locale through its most common and commonplace activities, thereby constituting a practice

⁸⁸ Aronson makes a connection between a theater owner’s local film enterprise with what he calls “a form of commercial ‘autoethnography,’ assembling single-reel actuality films that focus on the people, places, and events of his own community” (5). This suggests a possible difference between the relation of traveling exhibitors and local exhibitors to their audiences.

which I call “archiving the everyday.” Comparative archives of the everyday include calendars, clocks, and of course, newspapers and newsreels, which are all engaged in the ironic project, as Stewart put it, of “articulat[ing] difference through counting,” of conferring meaning upon linear, irreversible time. Thus one of the most important functions of such archives of the everyday is that they provide a common frame of reference through which social formations can imagine their progression through historical time. Local films also functioned like these more standard archives of the everyday, as evinced by their frequent depiction of “calendar customs,” such as festivals, parades, holidays and processions.⁸⁹ In Britain, the value of calendar customs, according to John Widdowson, was to bring together people of different classes and backgrounds in “communal enjoyment on the few occasions in the year when the annual round of work paused briefly to allow everyone to relax and celebrate” (147). By his account, the communal practice of these annual customs in the early twentieth century evinced a traditional community orientation that is much less evident today (147). In any case, however much Widdowson’s conclusions can be disputed, it is evident that British calendar customs contributed an older cultural form of marking time to the relative novelty of the local film spectacle.

Unlike the standardized modern clock and calendar, though, the local film was a resolutely non-abstract and contingent practice. To borrow Kracauer’s terms, local films can be said to function like memory images for their corresponding audiences, since, by definition, they require the diachronic interplay of locally-contingent knowledges and

⁸⁹ John Widdowson writes that “calendar customs lie at the heart of our [Britain’s] sense of local, regional and national identity and alliance” (137). The Mitchell and Kenyon Collection, in his view, provides an excellent historical picture of how these customs were practiced in various localities.

experiences with cinema spectatorship. Moreover, since it was a public as opposed to a private archival form, the subject matter of the local film could not be as narrowly circumscribed as the family album or the amateur home movie. Rather, the places, objects, and people typically depicted in local films appealed to social groups which fell between the narrow compass of the family and the abstract parameters of the anonymous masses. In the Mitchell and Kenyon Collection, these subjects include factory workers, churchgoers, schoolchildren, festival parades and processions, crowds on holiday, audiences at sporting events, local street views and phantom rides.⁹⁰ While categorizing Mitchell and Kenyon's pictures in this fashion might give the impression of a generalized topicality, their highly particular titles suggest otherwise, for they almost always name a specific locale, grouping, and/or event. Particularities notwithstanding, one commonality shared by many of these films is the depiction of a crowd of some sort. This was no accident as local film economics depended on large audiences and short runs; a business model that worked well in metropolitan centers teeming with street crowds, factory crowds, leisure crowds, etc.⁹¹ Through the spectacle of the local film, these crowds were able to recognize and behold themselves as such under circumstances no longer based in interpersonal familiarity and traditional measures of proximity.

It is crucial to note, though, that these were not the anonymous urban crowds of which Benjamin, Kracauer, and other theorists of modernity were so fond. Rather, the crowds of local film were designed for audiences to be able to match faces with names;

⁹⁰ Bottomore provides a summary of the range of groups and topics typically covered by the local film.

⁹¹ Crowds in Mitchell and Kenyon's films are the central subject of Gunning's essay, "Pictures of Crowd Splendor."

and in so doing, the local film promoted a form of spectatorship that was even more decentered than that of other practices involving the actuality. It was one of the few film genres in the early twentieth century that exploited the actuality's distinctive fusion of indexicality and contingency to perhaps its fullest extent, displaying therein the actuality's limits and its potential as a nonfiction form. In insisting on extra-diegetic, local knowledges, the local film also conceived of its own textuality as a process that is unfinished without the subjective investment and memories of the audience.

Accordingly, it can be argued that this practice of text-as-process is nonsynchronous insofar as it stages an encounter between the collective "memory images" of a given social group with the time of cinematic reception. Likewise, nonsynchronicity can be said to apply to the way in which the local film fosters interactions between the archival credibility of film as a form of modern indexical documentation and an open archival process wherein memory and imagination are paramount.

I do not wish it to seem, though, that I am advocating for the local film as a self-consciously alternative form motivated by an oppositional set of sociopolitical values. Indeed, as Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and other theorists of Western modernity have argued, institutional formations like churches, schools, and factories have been potent sites for social discipline and the reproduction of dominant relations; and these types of formations also figure prominently in the Mitchell and Kenyon Collection. Rather, I am suggesting, following Hansen, that the local film genre consisted of nonsynchronous, indeterminate, and potentially volatile admixtures of old and new, archival credibility and local imaginaries, standardized time and contingent experience. The local film is a rare example of an economically viable, commercial practice centered on the actuality that

was almost entirely dependent on external, localized knowledges and the presence of specific empirical audiences. As such, it occupies a liminal position between Kracauer's two examples of a grandmother's photograph in the private family album and a public press photo of a movie star. In my view, local films collectively stood to act as an alternative public sphere, at least in the first couple decades of the twentieth century, wherein such seemingly commonplace notions as the local and the everyday were still being actively produced.

To return to the example of *Electric Tram Rides from Forster Square to Park Gates, Bankfoot to Market Street*, the pleasure and pathos of this aptly-named film for contemporary spectators likely has to do with its status as a partial object, i.e. a remnant of a once living set of relations between audience and film. Today the likelihood is great that those of us who watch *Electric Tram Rides* on DVD, television, or streaming web video, in private and in classrooms, cannot identify the depicted persons and places by their proper names, much less engage with the film in the fashion of its original empirical audiences. Instead, to use Kracauer's terms, we may think we see an image of history in the surface physiognomies of the film: the old-fashioned attire, vehicles which no longer travel our streets, and perhaps even for some, relatives long-since deceased. We might even experience the movement of the film as a kind of time travel, a phantom ride of sorts into history. In any case, what contemporary spectators perceive is necessarily a function of historical difference, but as I have attempted to show, these films also played a valuable role in creating a decentered and subjective sense of the local and the everyday

vis-à-vis more nationally-oriented cinematic practices.⁹² Of course, the decentered cannot be equated with the oppositional, but in the quotidian spectacle of local film, it at least refers to the interpenetration of local imaginaries and cinematic images. Like Kracauer's grandchildren, we may likely greet such images of local pasts with a laugh and a shudder, but we can only guess at the rich multiplicity of meanings that the original spectators might have found in these archives of the everyday.

⁹² By comparison, it would be interesting to examine the emergence of local broadcast news, as well as contemporary digital video practices, such as YouTube diaries and vlogging.

CHAPTER 3

Routine Representations: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* and Feminist “Domestic” Cinema in the 1970s

Framed in a medium long shot, a neatly coiffed woman dressed in a housecoat stands at a kitchen sink washing dishes. With her back to the camera, her precise hand motions are out of view, but the activity and the setting—the scene—are familiar. The only sounds are of the task at hand: running water, the clanking of plates and utensils, the woman’s heels clicking across the tile floor. The shot, unvarying in its point of view, lasts approximately three minutes, with the time of the action corresponding exactly to the screen time, the definition of what in film parlance counts as “real time.” There is something at once too much and not enough about the scene: too much time, too much celluloid, too little happening.

This scene occurs about one hour into Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (hereinafter referred to as *Jeanne Dielman*), a 201-minute film released in 1975. It is characteristic of the “real time” aesthetic of the film wherein, as Ivone Margulies puts it concisely, “nothing happens.” In the years since, it has become a more or less canonical text of feminist film criticism, frequently discussed with respect to its attempt to represent the female body differently than that of mainstream narrative cinema.⁹³ These differences are manifested in its protracted length and mundane content: three hours and twenty minutes encompassing three days in the life

⁹³ See, for instance, Bergstrom, Doane *Femme*, Jayamanne, Margulies *Nothing*, Perlmutter, Rich.

of a woman in a working-class district of Brussels as she goes about the work of keeping house and caring for her son. The “plot” of the film is otherwise hard to describe, since it is structured primarily by the performance of domestic tasks. Janus Films’ promotional blurb for its 35-mm print sums it up well: “In a small apartment in Brussels lives Jeanne Dielman (Delphine Seyrig), a middle-aged widow, mother, homemaker, and prostitute whose existence is dominated by routine – the preparation of meals, the running of errands, visits from her clients, and evenings with her teenage son Sylvain (Jan Decorte) – until the cracks start to show.” While a number of films in the seventies depicted women performing housework, *Jeanne Dielman* was exceptional regarding the excruciating detail and formal austerity with which that work is represented. Even today, the film stands as a distinct example of the many representational experiments that emerged during the seventies and the heyday of what is often called the Euro-American women’s liberation movement, or second-wave feminism.

In 2009, the Criterion Collection, the self-professed distributor of “important classic and contemporary films,” gave its stamp of approval to *Jeanne Dielman* by including it in its catalog of “defining moments in cinema.” Some thirty-five years after the film’s original release in 1975, Criterion’s launch of its DVD transfer thus opened the possibility of larger audiences and newfound discovery by generations born well after the heyday of the Euro-American feminist movements of the seventies. Attempting to tap into the demographic of social media or “Web 2.0” users for the DVD release of the film, Criterion announced via its Web blog a YouTube cooking video contest to pay homage to the cooking segments in *Jeanne Dielman*:

There's more to cooking on camera than *Top Chef*, and despite films like *Big Night* or *Julie and Julia* that have inspired foodies across the country to run out and prepare elaborate meals, it's rare that we get a cinematic look at how ordinary folks cook every day. It might not be the first thing that comes up when people talk about Chantal Akerman's masterpiece *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, but one of the features that make this film so strangely compelling is the attention it pays to the simple routines of cooking. Without moving her camera, Akerman follows her heroine's every move as she prepares meat loaf, breads cutlets, and peels potatoes. (2009, August 31)

Divided into three categories—potatoes, cutlets and meat loaf—the contest encouraged videomakers to show what it looks like “when *you* cook on camera.” With over fifty entries, the competition yielded a diverse bunch, ranging from video mash-ups to stop motion animation of meat loaf “making itself” to faithful reenactments of the real time aesthetic of Jeanne's cooking scenes; and in keeping with YouTube's length restrictions, few entries run longer than ten minutes. In turns ironic, slapstick, and bizarre, most of the homages do not replicate the static long takes and austere tone of the original, which was originally filmed in 35mm and screened in theatrical settings and film festivals. In sponsoring this contest, Criterion somewhat bucked its reputation as an art cinema stalwart and distributor of “quality” films by utilizing YouTube, a popular video-sharing Internet website, as a promotional platform for Akerman's film. Unlike photographic film, digital video's relative inexpensiveness and ease of use, combined with the public availability of YouTube, lends itself more to the creations of amateurs, the distributor's target audience. Here, embedded in the blog entry's juxtaposition of Akerman's film to the elaborately staged television cooking show *Top Chef*, the big budget Hollywood movies *Big Night* and *Julie and Julia*, as well as with the user-generated content of YouTube, are inklings of how much the stakes might have changed for the everyday as a subject of representation from the seventies to the present day.

Even more interesting, at least in my judgment, is the line of continuity assumed here between Criterion's contest entrants and a film made over three decades ago: audiences in 2009 were still not accustomed to depictions of "ordinary folks" performing the "simple routines of cooking," despite the multitude of spectacles and screens devoted to the subject of cooking. Numerous political movements and cultural trends may have come and gone in the space of these three decades, but as Criterion seems to think, the place of daily routine remains much the same in contemporary audiovisual culture: unheeded, marginalized, and underrepresented. Indeed, I would venture to say that even today, in 2011, *Jeanne Dielman* still stands as a singularly compelling attempt to make routine sensible through cinema.

This dissertation overall attempts to demonstrate that the notion of the everyday, as self-evident as it may seem, is indeed an historically contingent entity, an "invention" deeply imbricated with the evolution of modernity and cinema. More specifically, this chapter analyzes *Jeanne Dielman* with respect to the emergence of a "women's everyday" as a key concept in second-wave feminist discourses, women's films about domesticity in the seventies, and in Akerman's film itself. Much has indeed already been said and written of *Jeanne Dielman*'s relation to feminism in cinema studies proper, but in this chapter I will be positioning the film in relation to several different, though interrelated, discursive constellations: the emergence of the "everyday" as a rationalized and observable entity in twentieth-century Western conceptions of domesticity; and the appropriation and re-invention of the everyday by feminist films of the seventies. In so doing, I will analyze the film with respect to discourses that fall somewhat outside the main line of feminist film theory and cinema studies. Accordingly, my interpretation of

the film may likely appear idiosyncratic and yet, I hope, productive in bringing forward certain key features of the film's treatment of domestic routine.

Jeanne Dielman is described by Margulies as a film that represents the “images between images”—i.e., that which is not represented or left on the cutting room floor in mainstream narrative cinema.⁹⁴ As such, according to Margulies, it participates in a style of “realist” cinema wherein a notion of “everyday life” or the “everyday” is the central focus of representation. In her analysis, the everyday took on political import after World War II, in cinema practices such as Italian neorealism, French New Wave, and feminist films of the seventies. “That the quotidian generally resists direct representation in conventional cinema,” Margulies writes, “allows it to promise a ‘reserve’ available to the realistic impulse” (*Nothing* 24). One of the major ways in which this everyday “reserve” has been mined politically, particularly by post-war neorealist filmmakers, was to represent socially marginalized groups, such as “women and ethnic or other minority groups” (Margulies, *Nothing* 22). In addition to the opening up of what Margulies calls a “spatio-temporal” reserve through formal devices like the long take and real time, the everyday also refers to a “moral expansion of cinema” (22). Interestingly, such a formulation skirts the vexed issue of verisimilitude—a criticism often leveled at various realist forms—and suggests a mode of representation with a more complex relation to referentiality. Here the everyday refers to the remainder of signification; it is, in Maurice Blanchot's words, what “escapes” and “belongs to insignificance” (14). This is not to

⁹⁴ This phrase is used by Ivone Margulies to describe realist filmmaking: “if conventional cinema contains too few positive images of women and ethnic or other minority groups, it becomes the realist filmmaker's task to represent these groups. The inclusion of such ‘images between images’ begets a spatio-temporal, as well as moral expansion of cinema” (*Nothing* 22). Marsha Kinder discusses the film with respect to its cultivation of the “unseen” and “unheard” (5, 7) and Claire Johnston has argued that the absence of the shot/reverse shot structure in the film effects the “opening up of what suture attempts to fill” (58).

advocate for the everyday as an “outside” of signification, but rather to suggest that it is intertwined with Henri Lefebvre’s “critique of everyday life,” a process whereby the very concept of the everyday is radically transformed. As Blanchot describes the “remarkable change in point of view” that Lefebvre’s formulation enables: “The everyday is no longer the average, statistically established existence of a given society at a given moment; it is a category, a utopia and an Idea, without which one would not know how to get at either the hidden present, or the discoverable future of manifest beings” (13). In light of the realist impulse to mine an untapped reserve of subjects, as well as the French intellectual tradition represented by Blanchot and Lefebvre, my argument will approach the everyday points as a dynamic and open-ended category of the social imaginary.

Second-wave feminism, or what is more commonly known in America as “women’s liberation,” is a particularly fertile site for re-imaginings of the everyday. There were, of course, competing interpretations of the everyday and women’s relation to it in second-wave feminism (a term which is itself a controversial umbrella category for various feminisms active at the time, e.g. radical, socialist and liberal feminism), the explication of which is beyond the scope of this chapter.⁹⁵ Taken collectively, however, several patterns are detectable regarding the everyday. Contemporary feminist (i.e. second-wave and thereafter) inventions of the everyday, as Felski notes, draws from a “tradition of thought that has viewed the everyday as both the most authentic and the most inauthentic of spheres” (94). The phrase itself—inventing the everyday—sounds paradoxical since it seemingly refers to the most self-evident, mundane and routine aspects of human experience, that which is furthest from “the reach of invention,

⁹⁵ I am also referring in this chapter to a geographically limited conception of second-wave feminism, i.e. as a movement active in Europe and America in the sixties and seventies.

abstraction, and theory” (94), but the ways in which the everyday is invoked in some second-wave feminist discourses indicate an active theorization of the politically freighted nature of the term, a way of looking that, in the feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith’s phrase, renders the “everyday world as problematic.”⁹⁶ One of the major ways in which feminism at this time conceived of itself was as a politics of everyday life that advocated for an “hermeneutics of suspicion” towards all that was considered mundane, commonsensical, and commonplace. “Second-wave feminism,” as Ben Highmore writes, “struggles to name an everydayness that was all too readily seen at the time as both unproblematic and to a large degree simply invisible” (*The Everyday Life Reader* 2). Indeed, the many feminist struggles to name and make visible the everyday, at the levels of political, theoretical, and aesthetic representation, show a recognition of the concept as a contested field and a seat of deeply entrenched ideologies. The growing number of feminist writers, artists, and filmmakers in the seventies concerned with representing the everyday, with making it perceptible, also evinces a movement directed towards a reinvention of this concept as a phenomenological or experiential category. As Felski is careful to point out, however, feminist representations of the everyday do not entail sociopolitical critique; for certain strands of feminism celebrate the everyday as a distinctly feminine sphere and source of value instead of analyzing it as a site of false consciousness, (94). According to this line of thought, the “fact that women traditionally cook, clean, change diapers, raise children, and do much of the routine work of family reproduction is perceived by some feminists as a source of strength. [...] Here everyday

⁹⁶ Smith’s *The Everyday World as Problematic* (1987) addresses the epistemological problems inherent in the relationship between the sociologist and her often working-class female subjects. For Smith, everyday life is structured by social differences (especially gender and class) and the sociologist should incorporate her position of privilege as an integral part of her work. These differences nonetheless form the shared ground of everyday life for both sociologist and subject.

life is not a ruse of patriarchy but rather a sign of women's grounding in the practical world" (Felski 94).⁹⁷ Thus, two major perspectives on the everyday can be discerned in second-wave feminism: 1) as comprised of apparent relations and dominant ideologies in need of critique, and 2) as a field of collective practice, memory, and tradition.

While it may appear obvious that *Jeanne Dielman* is an example of a critical second-wave feminist stance towards the everyday, the film has also been lauded for its aesthetically compelling depiction of a "woman's quotidian." I therefore read *Jeanne Dielman* to be an exemplary instance of a film that brings together formal experimentation with second-wave feminist polemics. As Judith Mayne notes, two points have been raised repeatedly in the extensive body of criticism that has grown up around *Jeanne Dielman* that indicate why the film has become both a feminist and an art cinema classic: 1) "The film develops an aesthetic form equal to the task of the examination of women and the cinema undertaken by feminist film theorists," and 2) It "can be read as a meditation on the very nature of cinema" (*Woman* 203). The film has thus frequently been read as both an encapsulation of the concerns of seventies feminism and an allegory of the kinds of inquiries that were being directed at the time towards the nature of cinema itself. What is more, several critics have commented on the "ambivalence" of the film towards domesticity, the character and actions of Jeanne, and the vexed issues of cinematic identification, spectacle and pleasure (Mayne, *Woman* 203).⁹⁸ Most of these

⁹⁷ For an oft-cited example this affirmative line of thought, see Aptheker's *Tapestries of Life*.

⁹⁸ Janet Bergstrom, for instance, has noted the split in the film between two versions of femininity, that of the character opposite the director: "the feminine *manquée*, acculturated under patriarchy, and the feminist who is actively looking at the objective conditions of her oppression—her place in the family" (117). The film's ambivalence has been interpreted in a number of ways by feminist critics. For instance, Danièle Dubroux reads the film with respect to the Freudian uncanny, wherein women's place is made to appear both familiar and strange (qtd. in Mayne, *Woman* 204); while Laleen Jayamanne notes the film's

readings go on to suggest that an emergent feminine, if not always feminist, aesthetic is instantiated by the film, and make some kind of connection between this aesthetic and the exacting attention paid to Jeanne's domestic work. I contend that the film is both feminist and feminine: it at once inhabits the structures associated with femininity while insisting on an estranged perspective on them. It does so, I will show, by forging an ambivalent aesthetics of routine that neither condemns nor celebrates women's traditional associations with domesticity.

Several critics have made the point that *Jeanne Dielman's* protracted depiction of a woman's housework accords well with second-wave feminism's concern with politicizing women's domestic situations, but have tended to bypass, or minimize, the strange aesthetic appeal of the way housework is performed in the film.⁹⁹ For instance, as Ivone Margulies, one of the foremost scholars of Akerman's films and their connection to the everyday, remarks:

In *Jeanne Dielman*, the impulse to record the minutiae of everyday life, the recovering of "images between images," accords perfectly with a feminist sensibility. [...] For what finally places Akerman's work in a productive relation with feminist politics is less the recording of repressed images of women's movements than it is the way in which, by redesigning our attention to these movements and reshaping the gestures themselves, she questions an essentialist view of woman. (*Nothing* 143)

While I certainly concur with Margulies' point here that the film's redesigned attentiveness to everyday movements aligns it with feminist concerns, I also wish to posit that this attention constitutes more than just a challenge to essentialism. I argue that the

"loving acknowledgment" of women's domestic tasks, which are, nonetheless, "lovingly viewed at a distance because they also signify woman's absence; they are beautiful and lethal because they help her transcend her situation" (107).

⁹⁹ For discussions on the film's relation to contemporary feminism, see Bergstrom, Jayamanne, Loader, Margulies, and Mayne.

film's exacting attention to Jeanne's domestic activities bespeaks a fascination with the rigorous formal and experiential qualities of routine. Routine, as Highmore and Felski have argued, is usually addressed in a negative fashion in philosophic and aesthetic discourses, i.e. as something that needs to be deconstructed and overcome; or, as not belonging to the realm of the aesthetic.¹⁰⁰ For this reason, and due to routine's important role in modern rationalist administration, they advocate for a reevaluation of the term in connection with both everyday life and aesthetic experience. In what follows, I attempt to take up Highmore and Felski's challenge through analysis of the significance of routine in *Jeanne Dielman's* treatment of the everyday. Whereas Margulies has drawn insightful comparisons between *Jeanne Dielman's* representation of the everyday and that of post-war neorealism, European modernist and North American structural films, and seventies "micro-politics," my own argument positions Akerman's film in relation to Frank and Lillian Gilbreth's conception of time and motion study and the related field of "domestic engineering," both of which figured prominently in the first two odd decades of the twentieth century. By staging an encounter between two historically disparate yet formally similar cinematic practices—the Gilbreth's time and motion studies and Akerman's film—I will illustrate how their uncanny resemblances are actually indicative of very different approaches to female subjectivity vis-à-vis domestic routine.

The Female Spectator in Theories of Everyday Practice

Before launching into a further analysis of *Jeanne Dielman*, I will first discuss the theories of Michel de Certeau on the practice of everyday life. Although Certeau does not

¹⁰⁰ See Highmore "Homework" and Felski 81-93.

address routine explicitly, his theory of everyday practice is forged vis-à-vis the abstraction, discipline, and standardization of modern consumer culture. In so doing, it offers an incipient alternative to models of modern experience that are centered on vision and visuality. It is perhaps Certeau's avoidance of visual frameworks that has contributed to his marginality of his major work, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, in cinema scholarship.¹⁰¹ Indeed, the theory of everyday practice presented by this text advances a notion of subjective experience as more haptic than visual. Having begun in 1974 as a collaborative research project on the everyday practices of the French people for France's Department of Research at the State Office for Cultural Affairs, *The Practice of Everyday Life* lays out the foundation for a theory of everyday life that emphasizes the "ways of operating" of "users whose status as the dominated element in society [...] is concealed by the euphemistic term 'consumers'" (Certeau 1: xii). For Certeau, who headed the research team, this project required a new methodology in place of the standard sociological practice of collecting and interpreting statistical data, which for him could not possibly capture the inventiveness of users and their multiple "ways of operating."¹⁰² As he put it, statistics "grasps the material of these practices, but not their *form*; it determines the elements used, but not the phrasing produced by the *bricolage* (the artisan-like inventiveness) and the discursiveness that combines these elements [...]. Statistical inquiry [...] 'finds' only the homogeneous. It reproduces the system to which it belongs" (Certeau 1: xviii). Instead, he advocates the incorporation of a "*theory of everyday practices* in order to bring out of their murmuring the 'ways of operating' that,

¹⁰¹ His work has, however, been very influential in television and cultural studies. See for instance, Henry Jenkins' work on TV fanfiction and textual "poaching," and Dick Hebdige's *Subculture*.

¹⁰² Certeau's antipathy to statistical research in the project is described in detail in Giard's introduction to volume 2 of *The Practice of Everyday Life* (xix-xx).

as a majority in social life, often only figure as ‘resistances’ or as apathies in relation to the development of sociocultural production” (1: xx).

One of Certeau’s main examples of such ways of operating is that of a pedestrian walking the streets of a city. Conceived in opposition to the voyeuristic vantage point of the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, pedestrians are “ordinary practitioners” of the city who live “down below,” and by extension, “below the thresholds at which visibility begins” (93). By walking the city, pedestrians “actualize” and “enunciate” the abstract, geographical concept of a city, analogous to the relation between *parole* and *langue* (95-96). As opposed to the unobstructed, geometric view from a skyscraper, which is consonant with knowledge and power, pedestrians’ knowledge of space is “blind,” “shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces” (93). As he describes this “blind” practice of space:

Escaping the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself the visible. Within this ensemble, I shall try to locate the practices that are foreign to the ‘geometrical’ or ‘geographical’ space of visual, panoptic or theoretical constructions. These practices of space refer to a specific form of *operations* (“ways of operating”), to “another spatiality.” (93)

Here the everyday, as a space of operations, is not exactly visible, but neither is it invisible; rather, it marks another kind of spatiality—a phenomenological space associated with the subjective practice of everyday life. For Certeau, the myriad paths and practices that make up this other spatiality are indeed knowable, but it is a “blind” sort of knowledge that is afforded and enacted through proprioception. Here, the space of everyday practice is traversible, but not legible in the manner of a visual map; instead it designates a non-ocularcentric space of “tactile apprehension” and “kinesthetic appropriation” (Certeau 97), where “ordinary” people have room to defy the rationalized

grids of modern life.

Certeau's example of the urban pedestrian has much in common with the figure of the nineteenth-century *flâneur*, whose urban meanderings and kaleidoscopic perception have often been taken as emblematic of the subjective freedoms of modernity. Feminist scholarship of the last three decades, though, has challenged the masculinist underpinnings of such theories of the *flâneur*.¹⁰³ For instance, it has been widely noted that Charles Baudelaire's famous description of the modern *flâneur*, and the numerous paeans to the activity of "botanizing on the asphalt" that it has inspired, were based on the newfound urban freedoms available to men.¹⁰⁴ Likewise, Certeau's description of the urban pedestrian seems also to presume a kind of sexless "ground-level" mobility. While I see the value of Certeau's trope of the ordinary pedestrian, I also believe that its emphasis on the creative, indeterminate, and idiosyncratic uses—the "turns" and "detours"—of urban space is too resonant of the apotheosis of male *flânerie* that has characterized so many of the foundational theories of Western modernity. I believe that the spatial mobility of Certeau's urban pedestrian deemphasizes the other sense of "pedestrian," i.e. the mundane and routine practices of the everyday, particularly those not based in public urban spaces. As Felski points out, the French intellectual tradition of

¹⁰³ See Pollock, Russell, Wilson, and Wolff.

¹⁰⁴ In recent years, however, especially regarding consumerism, there has been a tide of scholarship on incipient forms of female spectatorship and subcultures, some of which discuss cinema as a major locus of female fantasy, virtual travel, and *flânerie*. See for instance Russell, Friedberg, Bruno, Peiss, and Balides "Making." Many of these discussions center on the figure of the urban bachelor girl, whose increased public visibility in the work world, as well as shopping centers and movie venues, presented a new form of modern female subjectivity that was less domestically centered and more directed towards the new possibilities afforded by "modes of perception and experience associated with movement" (Balides, "Making" 167). The figure of the bachelor girl thereby constituted a threat insofar as she competed directly for jobs with male labor, while also using the city as a pleasure ground much like the male *flâneur*, transforming consumption into an end in itself.

theorizing the everyday (in which Certeau figures prominently) privileges creativity and subversion to the detriment of the more routine and habitual aspects of everyday practice. Such an “avant-gardist framework,” she argues, “loses sight of the mundane, taken-for-granted, routine qualities which seem so central to its definition—the everydayness of the everyday” (“The Invention” 18). For an account within this same intellectual tradition that is more attentive to “everydayness,” I now turn to Luce Giard, whose work explicitly addresses issues of female subjectivity, domesticity, and aesthetics.

A co-author with Certeau of the second volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Giard contributed several essays and interviews grouped together under the heading “Doing-Cooking.”¹⁰⁵ This section begins with a tribute of sorts to *Jeanne Dielman* in which Giard quotes several interview segments with Akerman:

I wanted to show the right value of women’s everyday life [in *Jeanne Dielman*]. I find it more fascinating to see a woman—who could represent all women—making her bed for three minutes than a car chase that lasts twenty.

[W]ith regard to my cinema, it seems to me that the most appropriate word for it is phenomenological: it is always a sequence of events, of tiny actions described in a precise way. And what interests me precisely is this relationship with the immediate glance, the way one looks at those tiny actions that are going on. It is also a relationship with strangeness. Everything is strange to me; everything that does not surface is strange. It is a strangeness linked to a knowledge, linked to something that you have always seen,

¹⁰⁵ In line with Certeau’s goal of finding ways to represent the “ways of operating” of ordinary people, Giard combined personal reminiscence with oral interviews of various women about their daily culinary practices.

which is always around you. This is what produces a certain meaning. (Qted. in Giard 155)

“These sharp-edged sentences and effective images of Chantal Akerman translate almost too well the intention of this study,” Giard responds. “In this voice, in its gentleness and violence, I recognized the same necessity of returning to triviality in order to break through the entrapment” (155). Inspired by the unsparing attentiveness of *Jeanne Dielman* to the minutiae of a woman’s domestic work, Giard’s work in this volume on women’s everyday culinary practices attempts the difficult task of giving such “practices the status of a theoretical object” (xxiii). Like Akerman, Giard is of the belief that the very ordinariness of the everyday—that “something that you have always seen, which is always around you”—contains its own order of meaning that escapes the grip of specialized, disciplinary modes of knowledge production. Having conducted this work in the seventies during what she calls the “time of feminist awareness,” Giard acknowledges the influence of Euro-American second-wave feminism, and yet, curiously, she was also one of the few feminist critics at the time writing about women and domestic work in more positive terms, i.e. the inventiveness and inimitable “savoir faire” of women’s everyday cooking practices. Translated from the French, *savoir faire* means “know-how” or knowing what to do, a kind of ineffable, embodied knowledge that is contingent upon the given circumstances, much like Certeau’s “ways of operating.” Since *savoir faire* is a contingent, fleet-footed kind of knowledge, its parameters are difficult to delimit and document systematically; its particularity renders it resistant to abstraction and quantification. For Giard, this is a type of knowledge that is intimately bound up with bodily gestures and the skill that comes only with practice, which, in turn, is associated

with experience—a relation to space and time that is by definition subjective. When put to use, the “skill at adapting the gesture to the conditions of execution and the quality of the obtained result constitute the test for putting a particular *savoir faire* into practice and foregrounding it” (Giard 202).

The everyday practice of cooking, and its attendant *savoir faire*, was nonetheless rejected by Giard while she was growing up. She saw it as symbolic of the fate to which her mother and other women of her generation had been confined, but one which she herself studiously avoided through the pursuit of a life of the mind. What was surprising to her, after she had left home and begun to cook for herself, was the way in which this “woman’s knowledge” had somehow slipped past her mind’s surveillance:

I thought that I had never learned or absorbed anything, having obstinately wanted to escape from the contagion of a young girl’s education [...] Yet, my childhood gaze had seen and memorized certain gestures, and my sense memory had kept track of certain tastes, smells, and colors [...] A recipe or an inductive word sufficed to arouse a strange anamnesis whereby ancient knowledge and primitive experiences were reactivated in fragments of which I was the heiress and guardian without wanting to be [...] Thus, surreptitiously and without suspecting it, I had been invested with the secret, tenacious pleasure of *doing-cooking*. (Giard 152-53)

“Doing-cooking,” for Giard, designates both the set of gestures associated with women’s culinary practices, as well as the type of writing that attempts to theoretically delineate such everyday practices without recourse to established epistemological categories. As she describes it, this mode of writing would “involve ‘the cultural operations [that] are movements’ and whose ‘trajectories that are not indeterminate but that are unsuspected’” (xvii). Throughout “Doing-Cooking,” Giard likens what she calls the pleasure associated with the “writing of gestures,” the aleatory and tactile *savoir faire* of cooking, with that of the “pleasure of the text” and her own profession, the writing of words, in the hopes of

retaining a “living and true memory” of the many “women bereft of writing” who came before her. Despite Giard’s impressive efforts, “Doing-Cooking” is suffused with a sense of loss for a particular kind of *savoir faire* that is closely connected to oral culture, kinship ties, and manual or craft-based labor. Her idea of a women’s practice of the everyday is based in a remembered and lost realm of intimate relationships, inter-generational memory, and traditional communities of practice. In Giard’s account, women’s culinary practices are handed down and passed on by the repeated gestures of multiple generations of women, as if through a kind of palimpsestic body writing. Characterized as anonymous and selfless, this is a quotidian doing-writing that she seeks to emulate and commemorate in her own work. Nonetheless, the division between her elegantly wrought writing and the “ordinary intelligence” of the women it celebrates cannot be fully brooked; longstanding epistemic hierarchies still inhere—public words destined for official archives versus the private gestures of the domestic realm, designed to leave no trace.

That Giard represented women’s culinary practices in this manner is particularly curious—even anachronistic—given the context in which she was writing. France in the mid-seventies had already undergone several decades worth of the changes widely associated with post-war “Americanization”: the penetration of the European market by American industrial products, the spread of advertising and consumer culture, the rise of the automobile, and the “modernization” of homes via the incorporation of various electric and gas appliances.¹⁰⁶ As part of a state-sponsored research project, the essays

¹⁰⁶ These changes, which began in the immediate post-war era, are described in detail by Kristin Ross in her *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*.

and interviews that make up “Doing-Cooking” were initially intended as further contributions to an already existing, vast statistical study of the cultural consumption and leisure practices of the French.¹⁰⁷ The state’s support of the research of Certeau and his circle thus came at a time when an American-style consumerist aesthetic of everyday life was seen as a considerable cultural force, a generator of a “myth of the popular” that went hand-in-hand with increased privatization.¹⁰⁸

Nonetheless, though the state’s official line was pro-modernization, when it came to cuisine, matters of the taste, tradition, and artisanship that made up what Roland Barthes called the “myth of French cooking” were seen as expressive of a distinctively French identity and, thus, as especially worthy of preservation from outside influences. “Food techniques,” particularly the preparation and cooking methods of an idealized pre-modern, rural way of life, enabled contemporary French people to “partake each day of the national past” and experience a sense of historical, national continuity (Barthes, “Toward” 24). In light of these discourses, the nostalgic bent of “Doing-Cooking” can thus be understood as part of a wider reaction to the foreign consumer technologies that infiltrated the French market in the post-war era: the refrigerators, appliances and electric appliances—“*les amis de la femme*”—that were supposed to lighten the burden of women’s domestic work. When Giard does mention these technologies, it is in a privative sense; they become the manifestations of cultural decline: “In the past, the cook applied her *savoir faire* each time, she could perfect her dexterity, and display her ingenuity. At

¹⁰⁷ This contextual information is provided by Giard in her introduction to Volume 2 of *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

¹⁰⁸ For an analysis of the intersections between consumerism, domesticity, and privatization in France, see Ross, *Fast* 71-122.

present, just about anyone can use an industrial object as well as her, and so she has become an *unskilled spectator* who watches the machine function in her place” [emphasis in original] (212).

Here Giard’s vision of legions of unskilled female spectators watching machines usurp their *savoir faire* is a particularly dystopian way of characterizing women’s relation to the post-war modernization of the domestic realm. In the immediate post-war years, the widespread adoption of household technologies, along with contemporaneous “domestic science” directives for rationalizing the home, had the effect of “simultaneously elevating the woman and infantilizing her: on the one hand, her Sisyphean task was a science, requiring logical expertise, but on the other, she was newly dependent on authorities outside the home” (Ross, *Fast* 102). Caught thus within a double bind, wherein to participate in cultural narratives of modernization was also to lose the “memory of how one’s grandmother performed a task” (Ross, *Fast* 102), the housewife was purportedly in danger of losing her *savoir faire*—the knowing through doing that formed the crux of Giard’s female community of everyday practice.

Certainly, Giard’s association of women with somatic forms of knowledge risks duplicating the old logic whereby women are equated with immanence and incapable of transcendence—to confine women once again to the lower orders of the Western epistemic hierarchy. Moreover, her fantasy of the unmediated “writing” of cooking, where there is no split between mind and body, no intervention by machines, pits women’s specific skills and forms of sociality as virtually pre-modern, opposed to an increasingly mechanized modern world. She was, of course, also articulating a kind of feminine aesthetic that revalued the very terms of that epistemic hierarchy, one in which

the faculties of smell, taste, touch and sound are not necessarily “lower” than the masculine-coded realms of writing, vision and technology. The problem is that Giard, by associating women with a special closeness to these senses, cannot imagine women’s relation to modern technology in terms of any other narrative than one of loss and bereavement.

As I mentioned in Chapter One of this dissertation, Michael Sheringham made the claim that an intellectual tradition of theorizing the everyday emerged in the 1960s with critics such as Barthes, Lefebvre, Perec, and Certeau. This tradition not only involved the elucidation of how everyday life was made visible in the post-war period through intensified bureaucratic regimes of scrutiny and control, but also how those regimes instigated multiple artistic and intellectual reactions against the terms of the everyday’s newfound sociocultural visibility. Situated within this intellectual tradition, Giard’s work can further be understood as a reaction against the ways in which formerly less officially scrutinized areas of everyday life, such as domestic cooking, were rendered newly intelligible via post-war modernization efforts. Giard’s intervention, though, was not so much addressed to the absence of women from theories of the everyday as it was to the presence of a particular conception of female spectatorship in the work of her male counterparts. Indeed, women figured prominently in the writings of Giard’s colleagues, but primarily via analyses of what Lefebvre called “the domesticated sublime of the world of women’s magazines” (2: 84-91). According to Kristin Ross, the post-war emphasis on “controlling *domesticity*, a new concentration on the political economy of the household” was disseminated on a mass scale in women’s magazines like *Elle* and *Marie-Claire* [emphasis in original] (Ross, *Fast* 78), provoking Lefebvre, Morin, and

Barthes to “devote pages of often speculative prose to the phenomenon” (81). For instance, as Barthes wrote in his essay “Ornamental Cookery,” the prevailing aesthetic of *Elle* (which he noted was targeted to working-class women at the time) was one of a kind of smooth glaze, made especially evident in its photographs of food, which for him constituted a dream-like “cuisine of advertisement” meant “for the eye alone” (*Mythologies* 78-80). Similarly, Lefebvre attributed his turn to the topic of everyday life to an anecdote he was fond of recounting: upon returning home one day after shopping, his wife held up a box of laundry soap and exclaimed, “*This* is an excellent product” (qtd. in Ross, *Art* 21-22). Indeed, he even presumed a special bond between women and the everyday: “Everyday life weighs heaviest on women. Some are bogged down by its peculiar cloying substance, while others escape into make-believe. [...] They are the subject of everyday life and its victims” (*Everyday Life* 73). In these writings, the female spectator is particularly vulnerable to the seductions of mass imagery and never able to understand the terms of their own victimization. Ross characterizes this style of analysis well in her own reading of the era’s advertisements. As she describes a 1950s print advertisement, in which a woman looks at her own reflection mirrored in an immaculately polished stove top, accompanied by the caption: “*Et voilà, j’ai fini mon dessus de cuisinière! Tout s’y reflète*” (“And voila! I’ve finished my stove top! Everything is reflected there”) [Ross, *Fast* 84-85]:

[T]he shining but unyielding stove-top surface reflects back to the woman the image of accomplishment; there is no give to the surfaces, no tactile dimension, even an imagined one—just smooth shine. [...] The completion of a household task completes the woman—everything is reflected there: woman defined midway between the twin poles of domestic science and object fetishism.” (*Fast* 86)

Here, caught within this closed-circuit of narcissistic looks, is an image of the ideal new female spectator of post-war consumer culture who is the subject and object of her own gaze.¹⁰⁹

By contrast, instead of shine, the prevailing aesthetic quality of Giard's "Doing-Cooking" is texture, a non-ocularcentric and synesthetic quality of objects. Texture corresponds to an idea of everyday practice as a way of being in the world that persists in the subtly inflected gesture, a distinctive style of operating that somehow manages to elude the double bind of rational administration and commodity fetishism. This "other" way of being can even be said to resemble what E.P. Thompson called the "task orientation" of pre-industrial, agrarian societies. Referring to the different "time-sense" of "village and domestic industries," task-orientation is premised on the more "natural," cyclical rhythms of seasonal harvests, as opposed to the abstract "time-discipline" of the clock (Thompson 60). As Thompson wrote, communities governed by task-orientation "appear to show least demarcation between 'work' and 'life.' Social intercourse and labour are intermingled—the working day lengthens or contracts according to the task—and there is no great sense of conflict between labour and 'passing the time of day'" (60). Additionally, he noted the special closeness of women's domestic work to the pre-industrial time-sense of task-orientation: "the rhythms of women's work in the home are not wholly attuned to the measurement of the clock" (79).

Task-orientation is, of course, more of a pre-industrial sensibility, and can be better described as a cyclical and seasonal time-sense, as opposed to the standardized

¹⁰⁹ Hygiene standards in post-war France, according to Ross, were modeled after what was then seen as the superior cleanliness of Americans. A favorite emblem for this in women's magazines was the American woman who washes her hair every day (*Fast* 79). Conforming to these standards required a new set of behaviors and routines, which were disseminated not only by women's magazines, but also through domestic science textbooks (86-87).

routines of modern industrialized societies. Likewise, Giard's doing-cooking is not so much a body of routine practices as it is a community structured around affect-laden rituals. This conception of female subjectivity, like the "blind" knowledge of Certeau's pedestrian, leaves little room for an active relationship with modern image technologies. The alternative model proffered by Lefebvre and Barthes of the female consumer is just as prescriptive: women are characterized as the primary subjects and signifiers of consumer advertising, especially insofar as they fetishize household products and images of the "domestic sublime." By contrast, the domestic engineering discourses of the first several decades of the twentieth century addressed women as rational subjects and, although much less examined than consumerism in cinema studies, also supplied a historically distinct conception of cinema as a means of training women to be rational spectators. Instead of spectacle, however, domestic engineering envisaged cinema in connection with the routine work of "home-making."

As I will demonstrate shortly, *Jeanne Dielman* evokes certain features of domestic engineering. The film embodies an aesthetic that is not based on the model of a *flâneuse* virtually traveling through filmic space, but rather one which stays closer to the more mundane compass of domestic life. Indeed it is the emphasis on the repetitive motions and precise timing of domestic routines, which I find most striking in Akerman's film, but which are downplayed in Giard's tribute to *Jeanne Dielman*. Unlike cooking, washing dishes, which Jeanne does multiple times throughout the film, has little if any creativity or savoir faire involved—its "doing" is a matter of rote repetition. This aspect of routine is what Giard's "Doing-Cooking" glosses over: the drudgery of women's domestic work, the Sisyphean effort of repeating the same tasks on a daily basis in the

same way, with no discernible result, save for the reproduction of the same.

The dishwashing scenes in Akerman's film also curiously recall the work of Lillian Gilbreth, an American scientist whose work after her husband Frank's death was focused precisely on improving the efficiency of the middle-class, female "home-maker." An industrial psychologist and academic, Lillian Gilbreth also looked upon her home-making duties as a science, contributing to the new field of "domestic engineering" and authoring several books on the subject from the 1920s through the 50s. In one of these books appears an almost absurdly earnest passage on dishwashing:

If a film were taken...of you washing dishes, you could see yourself doing the work at the actual speed at which you did it and thus notice what rhythm and ease you had developed, or you could see yourself making the same motions very slowly, detect your slightest awkwardness, and find out just why you succeeded or failed at the work. (*The Home-maker* 114-16)

Of course, Gilbreth's words and Akerman's film issue from different sociohistorical circumstances (this passage of Gilbreth's comes from a book published in 1927 for an American middle-class female readership), but I believe that something can be gained through their comparison. In this regard, I read the dishwashing scene in *Jeanne Dielman* as a kind of absurdist answer to Gilbreth's conditional suggestion. Though Gilbreth herself had reportedly never been behind a camera, this passage advocates that women imagine themselves as objects of a self-authored motion study, in order, in this case, to better understand the work of dishwashing. In the scene from *Jeanne Dielman* described at the start of this chapter, the depiction of the entire task of dishwashing in real time; the static, consistent framing of the subject; the decentering of the face, privileged locus of subjectivity; even the gridded wall tiles and the grid pattern on Jeanne's housecoat—all answer to the requirements of a typical Gilbreth motion study. And yet, the clip of Jeanne

washing dishes would make for a shockingly illegible study since we are presented with Jeanne's back, perhaps better used as a study in stillness as her hands move largely outside of our field of vision. The scene is, in a way of speaking, a time and motion study gone wrong.

In the following section, I explore some affinities between *Jeanne Dielman* and domestic engineering, a body of discourses that was specifically directed towards the ways in which female home-makers imagined themselves. As one of domestic engineering's prime advocates, Lillian Gilbreth was intent on changing what she saw as the tradition-bound and reactionary world of the domestic sphere; for her, women's "ways of operating" were woefully behind the progress made by science and industry. In her writing, cinema was figured as a means of bringing the "pre-industrial" realm of the domestic into alignment with the rationalized arena of modern industrial work, and more importantly for the purposes of this chapter, as a technique whereby women could routine their minds to calibrate their actions to abstract measures of progress and efficiency. In the following section, I will first elaborate on the significance of routine in both Frank and Lillian Gilbreth's work on motion study, before then circling back to its possible affinities with *Jeanne Dielman*.

Routine Motions

One of the defining features of modern everyday life can be said to be routine; its ordering of the body with respect to meaningful action functions as a way of relating to the object world. Originating in the seventeenth-century French "route" (denoting "road"), routine is defined in a several senses in the Oxford American Dictionary: 1) a

sequence of actions regularly followed; 2) a fixed program; 3) a set sequence in a performance such as a dance or comedy act; 4) performed as part of a regular procedure rather than for a special reason; and 5) monotonous or tedious. By definition, then, routine can refer to the forms, actions, and affects pertaining to regularization, a crucial component of modern industrial capitalism and mass culture. Routine is also a key rhythmic element of Lefebvre's theory of the "everydayness" of modern life, which he defines as "not only a mode of production but also a modality of administering society. In both instances it refers to the predominance of the repetitive, of repetition in time" ("Toward" 80). As Highmore points out, in Lefebvre's account, the "everydayness" of the everyday, synonymous with routine, habit, and the work-a-day world, is "marked indelibly with the stamp of capitalist reason" ("Homework" 320). The history of cinema can also be linked to the proliferation of standardized routines in industrialized societies, both with respect to the rise of a set of standard features common to classical narrative cinema, as well as non-fictional attempts to document and gain "objective" knowledge about various phenomena.

One of the primary sites for the latter was the motion study, which was deployed in physiology and industrial management in the decades surrounding the turn of the last century. This form of motion study was particularly important as a means of representing and understanding the human body within the terms of thermodynamics and engineering; to depict the human body as, in the words of Anson Rabinbach, a "human motor." As Lisa Cartwright asserts, the film motion study's "greatest importance is its function as an intertext between popular and professional representations of the human body as the site of human life and subjectivity" (4). Following Cartwright, I will attempt for the

remainder of this chapter to make my own analysis of cinema more “routine,” that is, to discuss the use of film as a means of routinizing human actions. In so doing, I aim to show that by reading *Jeanne Dielman* with respect to the Gilbreths’ conception of motion study, the discursive field for making sense of the film can be expanded beyond realist and avant-garde cinema.

Lillian and Frank Gilbreth’s time and motion studies functioned as intertexts between the realms of academic science and capitalist industry in the early twentieth century. Their experiments with filmed motion study were conducted during the first quarter of the twentieth century, a period of burgeoning interest in the emergent field of scientific management, whose most famous pioneer, Frederick Winslow Taylor, bequeathed his own eponymous science of human work to industrial capitalism. Self-professed supporters of Taylorism, the Gilbreths made the claim that photography and cinema were especially well-suited for the purposes of scientific management, which they defined as “simply management that is based upon actual measurement” (*Applied 3*). Widely believed to have “invented” the use of film for the purposes of scientific management, the Gilbreths asserted that the observation of various tasks through photography and cinema would yield the “one best way”—that is, the most efficient and productive way of performing any given task. Their claim was based on a belief in the special capacity of cinema to document objective reality, free of the biases of human subjectivity, but with the proviso that that reality must be translated through abstract measures such as clock time and production units in order to be comprehensible. Accordingly, the Gilbreths’ conception of motion study hinges on the notion of cinema as prosthesis, as a technology that supplements unaided human perception and “corrects”

subjective bias.

For the Gilbreths, cinematic motion study was most productive as an observational and measuring tool for scientific management, particularly with respect to the rationalization of human action. Building upon Taylor's conception of industrial time and motion study, the couple extolled the deployment of film for illustrating the most efficient way to perform a given task. This entailed a multi-step process: recording workers in action, watching the resulting footage, measuring and comparing the time and output of different workers, identifying areas for improvement, and devising more efficient task procedures. In so doing, the Gilbreths presented "a new way for scientific managers to understand the relationship between visibility and the working body" (Brown 73). Through these techniques for calibrating human action against standardized abstract measures, the worker's body was rendered an observable object, subsequently routinized, and turned into a mechanical instrument of capital. Needless to say, time and motion study became a significant source of antagonism between management and labor. In the narrative of work generated by Taylor, the Gilbreths and other advocates of scientific management, the invisible and the undocumented was synonymous with inefficiency, which for them was one of the greatest social ills afflicting modern industrial nations.¹¹⁰ The Gilbreths' motion studies can thus be understood as part of the overall disciplining of bodies and production of knowledge that Weber, Foucault and others have extensively and compellingly shown to be characteristic of Western modernity.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ For the Gilbreths' view on efficiency as a national problem, see Chapter 1 of *Applied Motion Study*, "What Scientific Management Means to America's Industrial Position" (3-20).

¹¹¹ Discipline and knowledge are Foucaultian terms, but I wish to note that before him, others such as Max Weber and Georg Lukács, contemporaries of Taylor and the Gilbreths, have referred to similar processes in terms of the rationalization and reification characteristic of capitalism.

Of special interest for the present purposes was the next stage in the Gilbreths' research. After the death of Frank, Lillian Gilbreth continued to extol the benefits of motion study for the scientific management of work through two books aimed at a popular female audience: *The Home-maker and Her Job* and *Living with Our Children*. These marked a crucial shift in focus for Lillian: the camera was therein turned inward towards the domestic sphere, which the burgeoning field of "domestic engineering" saw as technologically backwards and in need of change.¹¹² In her view, when used for the purposes of motion study, the moving image would be able to cast an objective gaze on a set of women's housekeeping practices, that from the perspective of domestic science, was still cloaked in the obscurity and sentimentality of tradition and beholden to pre-industrial forms of knowledge transmission.¹¹³ According to Gilbreth, as it was for other proponents of domestic engineering such as Christine Frederick, the ways in which knowledge pertaining to practical domestic matters was passed down between generations of women was unscientific and often idiosyncratic. As Frederick opined, women "relied far too much on custom and their emotions" and "love to see things *as they prefer to see them*, rather than as they are" [emphasis in original] (187-91). In turn, she argued that house and home, historically the province of women, should be "less and

¹¹² Studies of and treatises on domesticity and housekeeping existed as least as far back as the Victorian era, but the beginning of the twentieth century saw a new emphasis on a scientific approach to housekeeping on the part of female writers such as Christine Frederick, Lillian Gilbreth, and Mary Pattison (McHugh 61). Directly influenced by Taylor's scientific management principles, this group of women were pioneers of what was then called "domestic science," "domestic engineering," or "household management." As McHugh writes, domestic engineers promoted the objective authority of science, of the expert, and of rational calculated housekeeping methods that guaranteed results for all" (61).

¹¹³ As McHugh details in *American Domesticity*, domestic engineering sought to transform the private sphere from the locus of the "expertise of tradition" by opening it up to the discourses of the "public scientific experts" (64). "The depreciation of housekeepers and domestic traditions was a seemingly unavoidable effect of the development of home economics" (McHugh 65).

less a place where you can teach the things every woman should know” (230). To remedy what it considered a tendency towards irrationality that was native to the female sex, domestic engineering promoted programs of institutional learning for young women where presumably the most efficient and scientifically ratified ways of performing household tasks were taught.¹¹⁴ Regarded in this context, Lillian Gilbreth’s motion studies of housework can be read as a means of casting the clear light of a “scientific” gaze on what in domestic engineering was considered a benighted area of feminine practice.

Knowing that actual cinematic motion study was likely impossible for most of her audience, Gilbreth suggested instead that the home-maker *imagine* herself and her work as the subject of a self-made film. As her passage on dishwashing cited earlier shows, these hypothetical female spectators were encouraged to pinpoint the flaws, awkwardnesses and idiosyncrasies in their own motions and to calibrate them against a preexisting schema of efficiency. Women were thus asked to take up what Nicholas Sammond calls an “inherently masochistic identification with the male and the scientific” (116), to be in the dual position of subject and object of a cinematic gaze in which the female body is always lacking with respect to an ideal of maximum, streamlined efficiency. Internalizing this gaze with respect to one’s own work routines was key to becoming what Gilbreth termed “motion-minded.” As Lauren Graham explains, Gilbreth’s notion of “[b]ecoming ‘motion minded’ while engaged in repetitive tasks

¹¹⁴ Such programs often went by the name of “home economics,” which though separate from domestic science, was influenced by its scientific approach to housekeeping: “The discipline of home economics established its authority in opposition to the housekeeper’s traditional skills. To justify their profession, home economists asserted the ineptitude and inefficiency of untrained amateur housekeepers, who needed to learn their craft from educated domestic professionals” (McHugh 65).

would require women to study the arrangement of work space and their own motions, select appropriate tools for simplifying their work, and focus their attention on devising even more efficient ways to execute the routine” (Graham 654). For Gilbreth, all women should want to take an interest in the scientific study of one’s own motions, for motion-mindedness was ideally its own antidote to the monotony of domestic work.¹¹⁵

What is more, along with the contemporaneous apotheosis of homemaking by the field of home economics, domestic engineering discourses associated the work of housewives, “long discounted as unproductive” (Graham 657), with the ostensibly more noble goals of nation-building and industrial progress.¹¹⁶ Therefore, without having to espouse more politically radical alternatives to the scientific management of the private sphere,¹¹⁷ domestic engineering and Gilbreth’s imaginary domestic cinema invited women to imagine their own actions within the home as part of a larger civic narrative.

Jeanne Dielman was obviously made in a different set of circumstances, but I imagine it here as a kind of “real” motion study of an extremely “motion-minded” homemaker—a response to the question of just what a domestic motion study of the kind that Lillian Gilbreth only wrote about in conditional terms might actually look like. For

¹¹⁵ Moreover, her writing sometimes suggests that homemaking is potentially even more fulfilling than waged work: “there is as much monotony in the office or plant as in the home, and as much pleasure, but there probably is less variety of work and opportunity” (*Home-maker* 111).

¹¹⁶ Graham details the portrayal of the nationalist and civic “spirit of homemaking” in women’s magazines and the work of home economists (657).

¹¹⁷ Gilbreth intervened in this realm as a “Progressive Era technocrat. In her view, science and technology offered solutions that would render obsolete both the Marxist and the feminist agendas” (Graham 636). As Graham notes, “In the absence of more radical changes in the way housework was distributed and organized, women of the middle class remained as busy as ever caring for their homes and families” (634). Whereas earlier turn-of-the-century feminists did advocate for such radical changes, most notably through the socialization of domestic work, such as communal laundries and kitchens, publicly funded day-care centers and cooperative housework agencies, by the 1920s though, popular sentiment had turned away from socialization and towards the moral character of the individual homemaker.

instance, there are various formal similarities between the Gilbreths' industrial motion studies and Akerman's film. Without mentioning motion study by name, the booklet accompanying the Criterion Collection DVD includes a sequential grid of stills dividing the scene of Jeanne peeling potatoes into minute increments of motion. So too, in picturing a variety of labor practices such as bricklaying, product and machine assembly, and clerical work, the Gilbreths' films all have a similar set-up of static camera compositions, long takes of the task at hand, and a deprivileging of the human face. What is more, while the couple's films are ostensibly invested in the idea of meaningful time as a function of efficient productive labor, i.e. routines of human action opposed to "wasteful" motion of all kinds, what they also ironically bring into view is the alterity of cinematic "real time." The repetitive motions that are shown in their motion studies, such as stooping and rising to lay bricks, polishing the edges of soap, and walking up and down planks to move rocks to higher ground, embody the limits of what classical narrative deemed meaningful.¹¹⁸ Even when considered in its proper context—a tool in the furtherance of industrial efficiency—the Gilbreths' footage of various rote tasks seems to defy stable meaning. As Sharon Corwin points out, the Gilbreths' repertoire of visual aids, their "pictures of efficiency," sometimes came with unintended effects: "The pursuit of a new language of minimal effort, quantification, and simplification often took on an obsessive and ultimately counterfactual quality; for in both art and the factory, looking efficient did not always mean being efficient" (140).¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ These tasks are shown in a compilation of some of the Gilbreths' motion study films from 1910-1924, entitled *The Original Films of Frank B. Gilbreth*, edited by James Perkins.

¹¹⁹ Indeed, and with good reason, Frank rarely allowed his motion study images to be shown without some kind of narrative accompaniment, whether it was as part of one his lectures, or a series of captioned stills (see Brown). That is to say, on their own and without narration, his film studies could be

By contemporary standards, the intentions of the Gilbreths' motion studies might seem fantastical, almost absurd in their confidence in film's objectivity and the powers of modern observational technology in general. Perhaps equally as absurd and hard to comprehend today is Lillian Gilbreth's invitation to women to imagine the domestic by way of a scientific gaze, but as we have seen, such a curious amalgamation was at one time considered viable and rational. The first several decades of the last century provided a brief historical window wherein it was not unfeasible for women to believe in domestic management as a civic duty, and within which it was possible to construe the fantasy of Gilbreth's domestic cinema as science.

In the seventies, the very different sensibility, yet hauntingly resonant form of *Jeanne Dielman*, points to the influence of second-wave feminism, as well as a growing skepticism towards the positivist claims of modern imaging technologies. Among the various feminist aesthetic experiments of this era was a growing body of work interested in interrogating the taxonomic functions of modern technologies of representation.¹²⁰ Much of the work of Martha Rosler, for instance, involved parodies of scientific documentation and its modes of observation. Her most famous video of the era, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, was like *Jeanne Dielman*, made circa 1975. Framed to mimic the pedagogical setup of televised cooking shows, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* enacts a kind of

subject to a variety of readings. For instance, in a moment that stood out to me during a study of a woman polishing soap bars, she glances directly into the camera with what looks to me like bewilderment, overwhelmed perhaps by the rote nature of her task, or by the surveillant eye of the camera, trained on her every move. The glance, lasting but a brief moment, seems to be accidental, and as such functions like a stray detail, a rare moment punctuating the flow of work and foregrounding the frailty of the human body as it is made to take on the routines of mass production.

¹²⁰ See for instance Rosler's body of work, especially her video *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* and her photomontage, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*. For a good cross-section of such kinds of work, see the dossier in *Framing Feminism*.

feminist slapstick in which ordinary activities and objects take on unintended, comic and sinister effects. In it, a woman played by Rosler herself “shows and tells” various cooking gestures and kitchen utensils to the order of the English alphabet. Here the be-apronned figure of Rosler stands in a kitchen facing the camera not unlike Jeanne, but her disposition is one of barely restrained hostility. Intersecting with the high point of semiotics and structuralism, Rosler’s video spells out second-wave feminism’s and feminist film theory’s invention of everyday life as an arena of deeply sedimented, habitual and ideologically loaded practices operating at the level of motion itself. Rosler’s jerky motions denaturalize routine movements deployed with eminent ease on popular cooking shows—e.g. the arc of a ladle as it scoops and pours, the rhythmic repetitiousness of chopping, grating, beating and rolling—movements which might have been, in another context, been lovingly construed by Giard as doing-cooking. Instead, taken out of a culinary context and stripped of their conventional functions, the various kitchen instruments and movements in the video approach the strangeness of pure form, foregrounding themselves as routine social techniques of female subjectivity.

The formal qualities and attentiveness to motion in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* also recall the observational mode of motion study. Here, though, the observational mode, far from serving the ends of scientific positivism, is indicative of an ironic relationship to the image, a sensibility characteristic of an emerging feminist aesthetic in the seventies. By contrast, *Jeanne Dielman* does not so much employ irony so much as it does a distinctive kind of ambivalence. The film joins the detached observation of motion study with the “familiar” routines of female domesticity in order to produce what Akerman has called a “strangeness linked to a knowledge, linked to something you have always seen, which is

always around you” (qted. in Giard 155). Echoing some of the formal features of both the exhibitionist films of early cinema and industrial motion study, *Jeanne Dielman* yields an extraordinary emphasis on the content and duration of a single static shot, soliciting a kind of fascinated observational orientation towards each image. What this particular approach also foregrounds is the semiotic instability of the cinematic image, the way in which even something as ostensibly straightforward as real time representation of a routine task can produce a surplus effect. As B. Ruby Rich suggestively pointed out: “Akerman scorns the realistic speeded-up tempo of movieland, opting instead for the artificiality of real-time pacing [...] The style is minimalist, stripped of all distractions, concentrating on the most basic and mysterious component of cinema as a medium: the passage of time” (51). The film’s studied avoidance of conventional analytical editing and extended long takes are imbued with what Pier Paolo Pasolini calls “the meaningless of lived reality,” the temporality of a present which is “infinite, unstable, and uncertain, and thus linguistically undecipherable” (“Observations” 5). Marrying the unstable present tense of the long take with the semiotically loaded figure of the female home-maker, Akerman succeeds in making domestic work perceptible in a new and unsettling fashion.

It seems to me, however, that unlike the explicit satire of *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, *Jeanne Dielman*’s fascinated mode of observation, its attentiveness to the mystery of cinematic time, seeks to recover, and not just debunk, images of women’s domestic routine as the basis of a feminist film aesthetic. At a time when prevailing feminist narratives of women’s liberation “drew on a familiar trope of modernity in which the modern self leaves behind the banality or everydayness of home life to become such a self” (Johnson and Lloyd 15), *Jeanne Dielman* can be seen as a deliberate attempt to

accentuate everydayness and domesticity as key features of a political economy that cannot simply be transcended. For Akerman, rather, the banality of domestic life can serve as the basis for a powerful form of critique, a rich reserve of the everyday available not only for aesthetic but also political invention.¹²¹ In this respect, I believe that the film's quotation of early film form constitutes an attempt to excavate the "everydayness" of early cinema, to build upon a set of practices that had not yet been streamlined and standardized by a classical economy of looks. As Noël Burch has pointed out, *Jeanne Dielman*'s mimicry of early static tableaux framing—what he calls its "primitive stare"—has the effect of "positioning the spectator once again in his or her seat, hardly able because hardly enabled to embark upon that imaginary journey through diegetic space-time to which we are so accustomed, obliged ultimately to reflect on what is seen rather than merely experience it" ("Primitivism" 504). This effect is experienced as excessive with respect to the unconventional demands that are placed on the spectator, as well as the kind of excess that for Heath results from a disturbance of a self-enclosed narrative world.¹²² I wish to propose that the film's excess is historical as well in that, akin to early cinema's mode of address, it opens out towards extra-textual frames of reference. That is to say, the film's pronounced focus on Jeanne's routine gestures, though ostensibly intended to redirect spectatorial attention to the mysteries of the static long take, also refers to second-wave feminist struggles to envisage political economy at the level of routine domestic experience. As Sandy Flitterman-Lewis remarks, one of the most

¹²¹ Many of Akerman's other films are also concerned with exploring the everyday as a form of cinematic representation.

¹²² Heath does not give an explicit definition of excess; rather he defines the concept negatively, as those formal arrangements and diegetic turns that interrupt the "homogeneity of the narrative economy" ("Narrative" 383).

important elements of the *Jeanne Dielman*'s feminism is the way in which "its meaning is intrinsically bound up with each viewer's subjectivity [...] But this is not simply any kind of gender-neutral viewing presence; one's knowledge of (or interest in) women's experience, whether directly lived or only imagined, necessarily comes into play with each interpretation" (34).

Thus, I venture that, at least for some women, *Jeanne Dielman* might have resonated in the seventies as both "beautiful and lethal," part memory image of their mothers and part feminist treatise in which domesticity is rendered increasingly visible as a highly problematic set of routine techniques for the disciplining of female subjectivity. Judith Mayne characterized this aesthetic well when she wrote that the representation of Jeanne's gestures, like those of early cinema, "attach themselves to the devices of narrative closure only with great awkwardness and difficulty. In *Jeanne Dielman*, female narration is built precisely on that 'difficulty,' understood not as a lack, but as a difference" (*Woman* 207). I concur with Mayne that the film's unremitting focus on the routine gestures, spaces, and temporalities of domestic life—the "images between images" of post-war European consumer culture—constitutes an aesthetics of female difference. The beautiful difficulty of the film, I wish to suggest, is bound as well to a different aesthetics of domestic routine, which neither celebrates nor condemns, but asks us to take another look.

CHAPTER 4

Open Images and Undiscovered Worlds: Re-inventing the Everyday in *Le Quattro Volte* and *Syndromes and a Century*

I have thus far in this dissertation characterized the everyday as both the product and the remainder of modern capitalist societies. In both cases, the everyday functions as an imaginary construct whereby a community makes sense of itself through a shared sense of historical progress and cyclical rhythms. Despite the hegemonic status of certain kinds of imagined communities and conceptions of the everyday, I have suggested that alternative manifestations of the everyday survive in local practices and forms of sociality. I have also implied that certain modalities of cinema have operated more in tandem with such alternative forms of the everyday than others; and that these cinematic practices thereby fostered unique opportunities for generating alternative public spheres. Our contemporary circumstances, though, call for a redefinition of the local. As many critics today claim, the local cannot be understood without reference to the heterogeneous movements of people, goods, and capital.¹²³ If the local is thereby undergoing substantial change, then the association of the everyday with local social imaginaries also requires revision, as does cinema's potential for creating alternative public spheres.

¹²³ See, for instance, Appadurai, Mattelart, and the anthology *Global/Local* edited by Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake.

I will approach these issues by way of addressing the question of if and how the everyday intersects with contemporary cinema. It appears that cinema, at least in its theatrical form, is no longer in a position to “invent” the everyday for its audiences as actualities and newsreels once did in the early twentieth century; this power arguably lies more now with television, internet, and mobile devices with their rhetoric of “liveness” and interactivity. These latter technologies have often been discussed in relation to a decontextualized “present” in contradistinction to the relatively more stable historicity of photochemical cinema.¹²⁴ It has been argued that the very notion of cinema that dominated the twentieth century needs redefinition in the twenty-first, given its protean ability to inhabit multiple screening formats and locations.¹²⁵ To avoid speaking of cinema as a monolithic entity, some critics have advocated that the definition be expanded to include all forms of screen media involving moving images. At the same time, others have begun to mourn the decline and imminent death of cinema as a medium based on the indexical, photographic image.¹²⁶

Given these changed and changing contexts, should we revise Barthes’ definition of cinema as the medium of presence, the “here-now” to photography’s “that-has-been” (*Camera 77*)? Indeed, as some scholars have recently pointed out, cinema is not bound to the theatrical situation as it once was, and is able to be appropriated by spectators in

¹²⁴ See, for instance, Virilio *The Original* and Harbord.

¹²⁵ See Timothy Corrigan’s *A Cinema without Walls* and Anne Friedberg’s *Window Shopping* for early examples of this line of argument. More recent examples include Elsaesser “The New Film History,” Manovich, Zielinski, and the articles in the In Focus issue of *Cinema Journal* on “What is Cinema, What is *Cinema Journal*?”

¹²⁶ The mourning of cinema tends to cluster around the concept of cinephilia. Examples include Mulvey “Some Reflections,” Ng “The Myth,” Sontag “The Decay,” Willemen “Through a Glass.”

highly personal ways, as in digital files that can be played back in the spectator's own time.¹²⁷ In the meantime, according to David Company, a type of "late photography" has recently carved out its own temporal niche, specializing in the "aftermath of events, a kind of memorial testament to events that have already occurred and been documented by the press (186). The "tense" of this late photography can be said to be even more "past" than the "that-has-been" of Barthes' conception of the photographic image. In light of these developments, can an argument still be made for cinema's role in the invention of the everyday? By way of an answer, I trace in this chapter a particular type of indexical moving image that involves a reconceptualization of the indexical image as it has been customarily understood. This is a modality of the image, or to borrow Raymond Bellour's apt term, "image state," that, as I argue, speaks to a specific way of thinking the everyday.¹²⁸

Some critical writings published in the latter half of the twentieth century illustrate the specific concept of the everyday that I have in mind. Ben Highmore sums up this line of critical thought as one which takes the everyday as a non-self-evident entity, i.e. as what is not "readily available to scrutiny" (Highmore, *The Everyday Life Reader* 1).¹²⁹ Instead of assuming the everyday to be a transparent object (as he argues social

¹²⁷ Laura Mulvey argues for a "possessive" spectator who, through the temporal manipulation enabled by various playback technologies, are able to create highly subjective relationships with films. She views this as a form of agency: "The possessive spectator commits an act of violence against the cohesion of a story, the aesthetic integrity that holds it together, and the vision of its creator" (*Death* 171). For similar positions, see Raymond Bellour's "The Pensive Spectator" and Victor Burgin's "Possessive, Pensive, and Possessed."

¹²⁸ Bellour coined "image state" as a way of discussing the various spatiotemporal configurations that have emerged in image-based installation work, and in order to account for moving images that have moved out of the theatrical setting ("Concerning" 261-62).

¹²⁹ For early examples, see Lefebvre *The Critique of Everyday Life* and Blanchot. I discuss recent directions in the study of the everyday in more detail in Chapter One.

historians have tended to do), Highmore advocates that we view it as an “intractable object” whose features are not fixed (*The Everyday Life Reader* 3). The advantage of this type of approach to the everyday is that it is “heuristic” and “does not start out with predesignated outcomes” (Highmore, *The Everyday Life Reader* 3). This approach therefore searches for the everyday not in what *is*, but rather in that which is without a name, hidden, and unwritten. Debord, for instance, delineated the parameters of the everyday as those subjective experiences within modern industrialized societies that are “bereft of language or concept” (*Society* 114). By this schema, the everyday consequently points to what is customarily marginalized, forgotten, or overlooked by official histories. The everyday therein will always be the remainder, what for Debord lags behind the modern timeline of progress, as long as there exist divisions of labor and repressive political regimes.

To call attention to or represent this level of the everyday is therefore to make decisions about how to express and externalize experiences which are rarely, if ever, made public. But, as Debord has argued extensively in his theory of spectacle, such experiences tend to remain unrepresented in societies saturated with images of “pseudo-cyclical time,” a “consumable time” designed to “maintain the backwardness of everyday life” through the manufacture of “artificially distinct moments” (*Society* 110). Since these moments graft themselves onto the cyclical time of pre-industrial societies (e.g. weekdays, vacations), pseudo-cyclical time takes on the disguise of a natural order (*Society* 110-11). The customary experience of this time is thus as an unchanging continuum. As C. Nadia Seremetakis explains:

[E]veryday experience is organized around the reproduction of inattention, and therefore the extent to which a good deal of historical experience is relegated to forgetfulness. The senses as the bearers and record-keepers of involuntary and pervasive material experience, and therefore as potential sources of alternative memory and temporality are precisely that which is frequently subjected to social forgetfulness and thereby constitute the sphere of hidden historical otherness. (*Senses* 20)

According to Seremetakis, our very perceptual capacities have been habituated under modernity to experience everyday life as a mundane continuum against which “sensational” events happen. Since this continuum is also understood to be natural and inevitable, it is rarely the object of conscious attempts at alteration. Representing alternate versions of this modern everyday time would therefore require intervening in this continuum and drawing attention to what lies hidden behind our habits of perception. Ideally such representations would involve a redirection of culturally dominant ideologies and patterns of sensory perception in order to bring normally hidden dimensions of everyday experience into view.

There is a certain type of cinema that seems to me to pertain especially to this project of representing the everyday. It is characterized by a non-self-evident rendering of the indexical film image; that is, a practice of the indexical image whereby it not only designates the trace of a material referent, i.e. the record of a prior existence, but also points to the potentially hidden dimensions of that existence. I find that this image has been given several names in recent cinema scholarship, such as the “arrested image” and the “open image.”¹³⁰ For the purposes of this chapter, I am particularly interested in Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn’s notion of the open image. Chaudhuri and Finn turn to Pasolini’s conception of the “cinema of poetry” to clarify some of the

¹³⁰ See, respectively, Klinger; and Chaudhuri and Finn.

characteristic features of the open image.¹³¹ They liken the open image to Pasolini's "free indirect point-of-view shot," which corresponds to a viewpoint on the profilmic world that is neither entirely objective (indirect discourse), nor entirely subjective (direct discourse), but is rather one which is freed of both.¹³² Neither subjective nor subjectless, then, the free indirect viewpoint is one which emphasizes "the otherness of images as objects, as intrusions of the real" (Chaudhuri and Finn 40). This is not the "real" of Italian neorealism, as Chaudhuri and Finn take care to point out, but rather that of what they call "poetic neorealism" (39). The images of poetic neorealist cinema open up their profilmic worlds to indeterminacy and multiple meanings, as opposed to "the overdetermined narrative image-sign system of the cinema of prose" (Chaudhuri and Finn 40). The other key feature of poetic neorealism is that its images "retain their reality, but they are no longer situations that disclose actions as they would in traditional realism," but instead "open onto thought, dream, memory and feelings of *déjà-vu* (43). As they put it suggestively, these are images which involve "the fracturing of the everyday by something 'other'" (41).

What interests me especially about the open image is its recurrence across a variety of historical film movements. Although they claim that it initially emerged in postwar Europe, Chaudhuri and Finn argue that the open image can be found in abundance as well in French New Wave films and in the films associated with "New Iranian Cinema" (47). Indeed, they argue that New Iranian Cinema has adopted the open

¹³¹ Their conception of the open image also draws from Deleuze's theory of the "time-image" and "crystal image," and Paul Sharits' theory of the transcendental image.

¹³² In "The 'Cinema of Poetry,'" Pasolini discusses the distinctions between direct, indirect, and free indirect discourse in literature and their approximate correlations in cinema (*Heretical* 167-86).

image as its central aesthetic strategy for circumventing a repressive political regime and cultural censorship conditions that are specific to Iran (57). Building on their argument, I propose that the open image acts as a transcultural aesthetic currency that, though frequently found in global art cinema, is also capable of engaging local experiences of the everyday. Before analyzing specific examples of how this image works, I will outline some more generalized theories of the contemporary cinematic image vis-à-vis nostalgia and memory. This will provide the discursive grounding for my own discussion of the open image in some recent global art films.

Nostalgia, Cinema, and Prosthetic Memory

Rey Chow's discussion of contemporary Chinese films illustrates well some of the key issues at stake in the global commodification of images. Chow discusses a deployment of "everyday phenomena, including banal human relationships, familiar locations, and mundane objects" as a means of signification in recent (i.e. late 1990s) Chinese cinema ("Sentimental" 639). This trend is especially evident for Chow in films which attempt to evoke a past era in Chinese history through the depiction of concrete "cultural particulars," such as clothing fashions, the rituals surrounding the preparation and eating of food, and the various objects and other sundries that fill a domestic environment ("Sentimental" 651). The "ready visibility" of these cultural objects lends Chinese films "that pre-grammatical intensity" that characterizes "the obligatory social life of the everyday we perceive with our senses before it is organized (by a particular auteur) into a particular audiovisual filmic composition" ("Sentimental" 651).

Drawing from Pasolini's theory of cinematic signification, Chow understands the effect of "pre-grammatical intensity" to be an essential component of the cinematic image in general. In Pasolini, the "language" of cinema takes as its minimal unit the phenomenal objects and actions of the world—what he called "kinemes"—its signifiers are bound to the irreducible literalness of the referent, even as they are also capable of extreme subjective styling. This extreme objectivity combined with a tendency towards the "subjective" (the symbolic, artistic, and lyrical dimensions of things) comprise what Pasolini called cinema's "double nature," which, he wants to make clear in the context of 1960s theoretical debates, is distinct from the double articulation of verbal language.¹³³ While cinema's objective dimension is in practice inseparable from its subjective counterpart, Pasolini's theory also allows for fluctuations in the degree to which one dimension can dominate within and between individual film texts. This fluctuation accounts for stylistic and generic differences between films, but the definitive feature of cinematic language in general for Pasolini is still its objectivity, its "brute" literalness with respect to formal verbal languages. The effect of this double nature is such that "cinema will not be able to 'reproduce' (write) a tree: it will reproduce a pear tree, an apple tree, an elder tree, a cactus—but not a tree" (Pasolini, *Heretical* 231-32).

The value of Pasolini's theory for Chow lies in its recognition of reality itself as a language that exists prior to cinematic representation. Cinema's literalness or objectivity is not conceived by Pasolini as simply a naturalistic reality, but rather as a dialogue with collective experience. As he wrote:

¹³³ As Pasolini defines cinema's "double nature": "it is both extremely subjective and extremely objective (to such an extent that it reaches an unsurpassable and awkward naturalistic fate). The two moments of the above-mentioned nature are closely intertwined and are not separable even in the laboratory" (*Heretical* 173).

[T]he intended audience of the cinematographic product is also accustomed to 'read' reality visually, that is, to have an instrumental conversation with the surrounding reality inasmuch as it is the environment of a collectivity, which also expresses itself with the pure and simple optical presence of its actions and habits. (*Heretical* 168)

Being always already part of a collective conversation, but one that does not belong to a formal linguistics, the various objects and actions that make up empirical reality express themselves in "images" that "appear charged with multiple meanings and thus 'speak' brutally with their very presence" (Pasolini, *Heretical* 168). Cinema is, for Pasolini, the "written language" of this living empirical reality. Following Pasolini's theory, Chow implies that cinematic representations of the everyday can be correlated with the pre-cinematic "brute speech" of reality. Contemporary Chinese films like Zhang Yimou's *The Road Home* and Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love* use extraordinary audiovisual effects to recreate the brute speech of the ordinary environments in which their respective stories are staged ("Sentimental" 642). What Chow calls "the problematic of the everyday" in contemporary Chinese cinema can be located in the "interplay, in the medium of film (with its literal, obvious modes of signification, its ready visuality), between this empirical 'always already' and its contemporary screen cathexes" ("Sentimental" 641).

In the contemporary context of global commodity exchange and multiple portable media playback technologies, the problematic of the everyday is further complicated by issues of cultural translation. As Chow writes, in a global market, even the most "locally specific everyday elements" can be divested of their sociohistorical specificity and interpreted by spectators in terms of highly generalized scenarios, such as "universal human drama" and "romance" ("Sentimental" 651). Contrary to Pasolini, for whom the

cinematic image must always yield a specific reality, Chow reads contemporary Chinese films as susceptible to the homogenizing force of global commodification. As she puts it, for contemporary spectators accustomed to scanning spectacles without necessarily knowing anything about their historical references, “[i]nstead of a pear tree, apple tree, elder tree, or cactus, they will, most likely, simply understand ‘tree’” (“Sentimental” 651). Accordingly, the idea of “Chineseness” that Wong and Zhang’s films evoke does not stem from audiences’ familiarity with China’s particular fraught history and its attendant structures of feeling; but rather, as Chow writes, designates an “anonymous, hence globally interchangeable, part object, whose defining character is no longer history but image, artifice, and commodity” (“Sentimental” 652-53).

As Chow seems to be suggesting, technically sophisticated and highly stylized cinematic representations of the everyday further promote, rather than provide an alternative to what she calls a “postmodern reification of ethnic culture,” turning “the most locally specific everyday elements simultaneously into the most fabulous, because infinitely transmissible, phantasmagorias” (“Sentimental” 651). Expanding her argument to contemporary screen media in general, she argues that the global traffic of images has created an ironic situation whereby even the most dedicated attempts by filmmakers to capture the “concrete particulars” of a collective historical experience can be turned into ahistorical spectacle. Instead of local specificity, nostalgia and other forms of sentimentalism are more globally transmissible vehicles of ethnic representation, especially for audiences accustomed to a cursory “scanning” of spectacles without necessarily having any knowledge of their sociohistorical background (“Sentimental” 651). As Chow concludes, today it is increasingly the abstraction of the reified spectacle

“which allows for transmissibility and enables ‘communication’ at the transcultural level” (“Sentimental” 651).

Chow’s indictment of contemporary image culture echoes Fredric Jameson’s influential position on postmodernism, especially with respect to what he called “nostalgia films” in the 1970s. For Jameson here, the imitation of “dead styles”—or what he calls “pastiche”—that characterizes nostalgia films is the aesthetic expression of a thoroughly commodified culture only capable of seeking the historical past through its own “pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach” (“Postmodernism” 198). A society primarily mediated by these images is one with a pathology that is uniquely telling of the present state of late capitalism: what Jameson calls a “historical amnesia,” or the loss of a society’s “capacity to retain its own past” (“Postmodernism” 205). For Jameson, nostalgia is the characteristic attitude of a contemporary “monadic subject” who cannot look beyond its own prison-world of “mental images” and out at “the real world for its referent” (“Postmodernism” 198).

Here Jameson’s and Chow’s arguments exemplify an overall critical approach that is highly skeptical of the image in its current commodified manifestations. Amnesia, nostalgia, loss of referentiality, and a general inability to reckon with the present are more or less emblematic for them of contemporary cinema culture.¹³⁴ Representing a more optimistic assessment of commodified images, Alison Landsberg’s argument for “prosthetic memory” is waged partially in response to critics who are dismissive of the intersubjective potential of mass cultural images and narratives. She singles out

¹³⁴ Jameson has in some instances made an exception for cultural products from third world nations. See his “Reification and Utopia” and *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*.

Jameson's conception of nostalgia films as an exemplary instance of this dismissive critical attitude and accuses his influential line of reasoning of itself harboring nostalgia for outmoded forms of cultural transmission and ideas of authenticity (e.g. ethnicity, pre-capitalist cultural production) (Location 499). In so doing, according to Landsberg, this type of criticism preemptively discounts the possibilities of mass cultural forms for generating new public spheres and forms of political identification.

Landsberg's own argument instead highlights the conservatism of many traditional or pre-industrial forms of memory transmission, which she claims tend to work through repetition and rituals that reinforce a homogeneous sense of group identity.¹³⁵ The prosthetic memory of commodity culture, on the other hand, is premised on portability and is transferable to any consumer regardless of social affiliation. As she defines it, prosthetic memory "emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or museum" (Location 49). Instead of the loaded term "nostalgia," Landsberg mobilizes the more neutral word "memory" in conjunction with "prosthetic" to describe the ways in which any consumer of modern mass culture can access "memories of events through which she did not live but which she will take on as her own" (Location 32). Indeed, a vast portion of what she calls American "public" memory is comprised of cinema images and narratives, and she argues that the fact that most of these are circulated as commodities does not mean that they are any less authentic than more traditional forms of personal and collective memory. Moreover, in her estimation, cinema engages the senses in a way that

¹³⁵ Her examples of this type of memory transmission include the Jewish Passover Seder (Location 403) and European sacred art of the Middle Ages (Location 82).

is akin to the sensory plenitude of lived experience, and therefore qualifies as its own domain of subjective experience and memory-making. Even more importantly, for Landsberg, cinematic prosthetic memories can act as occasions for empathetic experiences across existing social stratifications, such as race, ethnicity and class, thereby enabling unique forms of political thought and action. As she writes, prosthetic memories are “transportable and therefore challenge more traditional forms of memory that are premised on claims of authenticity, ‘heritage,’ and ownership” (Location 60). If cinema experience can thereby be conceived not with respect to “authentic” history, but rather as an “act of prosthesis, of prosthetically appropriating memories of a cultural or collective past,” then we are all “equally alienated” from these memories (Location 515). The implications for cinema spectatorship of prosthetic memory are thus considerable: unmoored from the notion of organic experience, Landsberg claims that memories can consequently be “worn” and taken off much like prosthetic limbs (Location 304).

I believe that there is much that is valid in each of the preceding positions, but it seems to me that Landsberg’s prosthetic memory is a more flexible concept than nostalgia or spectacle for discussing the transcultural potential of contemporary cinema. I agree with Landsberg that the fascination that commodified images hold for spectators needs to be acknowledged, not just as a site of false consciousness or ersatz culture, but also as a potentially rich source of new social experiences. This is not to argue against Chow’s point that the particularities of collective experience are liable to be lost as part of the global circulation of cultural commodities (which to me seems indisputable). Rather, I am asserting that the model of prosthetic memory is productive for conceptualizing cross-cultural communication and cinema spectatorship. Here, in

addition to Landsberg's definition, I understand prosthetic memory to be a constitutive feature of cinematic practices that are premised on the indexical image. That is to say, prosthetic memory in film refers not only to images *about* the past, but also to the indexical image as a non-human form of memory. In the latter sense, film's "memory" is fundamentally prosthetic, for it refers to the indexical trace made by a mechanical process, and as such, is fundamentally alien to human memory.

While the lack of human intentionality in film's mechanical memory was the grounds for Kracauer's criticism of the medium, this fundamental difference was also a key factor in his belief in cinema's radical potential—its redeeming ability to circumvent the abstract thought patterns of an increasingly rationalized society (*Theory* 237-39).¹³⁶ The fissure in the image that Kracauer believed to have been inaugurated by indexical imaging technologies is, as Miriam Hansen put it, one between "psyche and physis [...] between the implied horizon of our 'habits of seeing,' structured by language, narrative, identification, and intentionality, and that which perpetually eludes and confounds such structuring" ("Introduction" xxvii). Moreover, for Kracauer, this difference between psyche and physis is not overcome or sublated in the photographic image, but rather sustained in the style of the palimpsest: the social coexisting with what is alien to it (*History* 83; 92). Writing in a similar vein, Benjamin commented on the photographic image's unique capacity to depict an unconsciously permeated space or "optical unconscious," which can lead to a "salutary estrangement" for the viewer ("A Small" 243). It is the inorganic nature of film memory that not only allows its images and

¹³⁶ I discuss Kracauer's ambivalence towards cinema in more detail in Chapters One and Three. I am indebted to Miriam Hansen's introduction to Kracauer's *Theory of Film* for these insights.

narratives to cross social stratifications and move between human bodies, but also introduces a not-quite-human dimension to the field of the image.

The open image, I argue, is particularly effective at foregrounding the palimpsestic qualities of cinema's prosthetic memory, the ways in which it can reveal undiscovered and unconscious dimensions of worlds with which we think we are familiar. This palimpsestic quality has a special bearing on the representation of the everyday in that it prompts spectators to encounter profilmic reality in the form of a dialectical movement between habitual perception and the irreducible alterity of a mechanical camera consciousness. As was mentioned earlier, I have found this open image most often in global art films, but this should not serve as the grounds for dismissing its political and intersubjective potential. As Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover remark in the introduction to their anthology, *Global Art Cinema*, art cinema has been dismissed by some as an elitist and Eurocentric rubric that places undue emphasis on formal experimentation (31-32). This dismissive characterization of art cinema, though, cannot account for the dynamic films throughout the world that are continuing to emerge as part of a self-conscious practice of cinema as art. But, as Galt and Schoonover propose, if we consider art cinema to be an inherently "impure" and "hybrid" ensemble of discourses and practices, and the idea of art to have an international and transcultural address, then the term "global art cinema" can be a vital and productive optic for exploring how formally adventurous films can matter apart from Eurocentric notions of modernism (32-33). Informed by this definition of global art cinema as an impure category, the specific film readings that follow will attempt to elucidate some

ways in which the open image can engage with both global notions of artfulness and local experiences of the everyday.

The Open Images of *Le Quattro Volte*

Wisps of smoke emerge from small holes punctuating the side of an enigmatic, grayish-brown mound. An elderly goatherd rests in a field as an ant traverses the folds of his weathered face. A kid goat lost from its herd finds shelter under a majestic fir tree. The branches of the same tree sigh in the strong winds preceding a blizzard. These are just a few of the remarkably sensuous images which make up the virtually wordless film, *Le Quattro Volte* (2010).¹³⁷ Billed as a docu-drama and directed by the Italian film professor and video artist, Michelangelo Frammartino, the film depicts a remote, mountainous region in Calabria, a province in Southern Italy which was also home to the director's ancestors.¹³⁸ Titled after Pythagoras's belief in the four states of being that comprise all earthly life (human, animal, vegetable, and mineral), *Le Quattro Volte* gives equal screen time to each of the four states, taking care to allow the profilmic events to unfold via extended, static long takes, or what I call open images. Through a succession of such long takes divided into four segments, the film examines the intertwining life cycles of a goatherd, goats, a fir tree, and the aforementioned smoke with a formal austerity and unhurried timing that seem to befit the rural surroundings and village life of the region.

¹³⁷ There are snippets of dialogue in the film, but they are mostly unintelligible and are unaccompanied by subtitles.

¹³⁸ This information about the director's ancestors is extra-diegetic and can be found in various interviews with Frammartino, press reviews, and other publicity materials; the film itself does not divulge this information. Calabria was also reportedly home to the ancient Greek philosopher, Pythagoras.

Much of the film's aesthetic beauty, it seems to me, derives from the particular qualities of its open images. Each sustained shot in the film beckons us to contemplate the formal properties of the image at hand (especially the *mise-en-scène* and cinematography) in combination with the sensuousness of the profilmic content. For instance, the first quarter of the film features three days in the life of a local goatherd, providing a detailed portrait of the material compass of his rituals and routines. Static long takes render almost palpable the time and effort it takes this elderly goatherd to move about the hilly region with his goats. The only sounds in these scenes are diegetic: clanking goat bells, the goatherd's throaty herding call, and the barking of his dog. Together these sounds create an ambient sonic landscape that unifies the film's images and creates the sense of a singular place. A laconic presence, the goatherd rarely speaks, instead supplying clues about himself via his slow gait, persistent cough, and well-worn attire. His limited social rounds include a daily trip to the village church where he exchanges goat cheese for a packet of the church's floor sweepings, which he imbibes mixed in a glass of water each night before bed (presumably as medicine for his cough). Later on, as he crouches down in a field to relieve himself, a close-up reveals an ant crawling along the wrinkled surface of his face. Several long seconds pass before he finally slaps the ant away, rises, and departs. The ensuing shot shows his daily packet of sweepings lying on the ground, swarmed by ants. That same night, after realizing that the packet is missing, the goatherd rushes to the church for another, only to find it closed. Implying a sudden turn for the worse, he is shown the next morning bedridden, surrounded by several of his goats (which have accidentally been let loose from their pen). Subsequent scenes show a line of people carrying a coffin away from his residence.

A few seconds of black leader then follow, marking an end to the earthly transit of the goatherd, and if we are to go by the Pythagorean notion of metempsychosis, the commencement of another cycle and stage of life. The next shot opens suddenly onto a baby goat dropping with a sharp cry from its mother's womb.

Here my ekphrastic efforts can hardly capture the full audiovisual richness of this segment of *Le Quattro Volte*. It is as if the syntagmatic structure of verbal language is inadequate to the task of communicating the scope of a film whose storyline is perhaps better described in terms of cyclicity, or a kind of movement in stasis. What "happened" in the scenes involving the goatherd is just as much about what does *not* happen as it is about a linear chain of events, since they deal above all in the quotidian cycles of the goatherd's life. As *New York Times* critic A.O. Scott commented on his own attempt to review the film: "the nervous reviewer's convention of posting 'spoiler alerts' has rarely seemed so irrelevant. Would I ruin tomorrow by telling you the sun is going to rise? Will your life be spoiled if I divulge that it will end in your death" ("Eternal")?

How, then, can we come to terms with a film that appears to concern itself with things as banal and narratively unfitting as the diurnal rhythms of the sun rising and setting? According to David Bordwell, *Le Quattro Volte* is a prime example of a film that attempts to purge itself as much as possible of the conventional ingredients of narrative suspense, which arise from "[c]reating expectations about an upcoming event, sharpening them, and delaying their fulfillment" ("Arthouse"). Since the film's time span is more cosmic than human, the linear logic of suspense is somewhat confounded for Bordwell; any expectations we may harbor for new plot developments must be revised in a film about "the inevitable transmutations that govern plants, animals, and men" ("Arthouse").

Still, despite the film's cyclical structure, Bordwell takes care to point out that things do change in and between scenes; they are just experienced less as singular dramatic events than as "the sheer successiveness of things, the fact that life is one damned, or placid, moment after another" ("Arthouse"). In so doing, the film succeeds in recreating the experience of suspense at what Bordwell calls more "micro-levels," generating expectation and delaying fulfillment not through character interaction or rapid action sequences, but rather by asking us to draw inferences within and between scenes. Thus we might infer from the succession of scenes involving the goatherd that his death was related to his mysterious cough and was likely precipitated by the absence of his nightly draft; and that his goats, his main companions in life, perhaps due to a strange stroke of coincidence and prescience, arrived at his bedside in time to see him off to his death. It can be argued therefore that suspense here is generated via the interplay of succession and inference, but I would say that it is nonetheless suspense of a different or lessened quality, since, as Scott put it, recounting the film's storyline does not "spoil" the film for the spectator.

And yet suspense is a fundamental resource of all films, according to Bordwell, since cinema, being a diachronic medium, always entails the delay and fulfillment of answers related to the question, "what next?" This is certainly true of *Le Quattro Volte* as well. By the end of the film, we learn the answer to what is perhaps its central enigma: the identity of the mysterious smoldering mound that opened the film. Through its successive episodes, the film gradually discloses that the mound is a kiln made up of compacted straw and ash for baking wood harvested from local trees. A series of shots in the last quarter of the film patiently linger on the exterior of the kiln as it smolders. After

this period of gestation, several men arrive to open the kiln and bundle the dense black lumps that have formed within before distributing them to the village residences. The final scene of the film frames a chimney among the rooftops of the village from which puffs of smoke escape and disperse. This image of a smoking chimney is one that recurs throughout the film, but whose full significance is not revealed until this final iteration. In this last image, the overarching mystery of the film is ostensibly solved: the production of coal through such a process provides a key source of fuel for the villagers.

Denouement, though, is only part of the function of this last scene. The last image of emanating smoke and closely bunched, irregular rooftops acts as an ending, but also signals the continuation of an ongoing cycle of transubstantiation. More than a resolution to the driving, teleological tension of suspense, this last scene, functions in the manner of an open image, or to borrow Tom Conley's words, a "hieroglyphic," or "spatial writing" which "falls into the storyline and knots up its structure of relations and its visual properties" (xliv). For Conley, cinematic hieroglyphs interrupt the seamless course of continuity editing by condensing the entire duration of the film into its constituent elements (xliv-xlv). Likewise, the conjoined physiognomy of rooftops, chimney, sky, and smoke, condense in a single graphic configuration the various interrelations of *Le Quattro Volte*, generating meaning through something other than unidirectional narrative.

While *Le Quattro Volte* is made up almost entirely of a succession of similarly hieroglyphic scenes, it would be imprecise to say that it is altogether non-narrative. As Bordwell notes, Frammartino manages to make "sheer consecutiveness" interesting through "careful framing, evocative sound, and crisp storytelling" ("Arthouse"). It seems to me as well that much of the film's narrative significance is conveyed within the field

of the image, or in more medium-specific terms, the shot. Each of the film's shots make the effect of their careful formal composition acutely felt, as if to underscore their status as a series of singular, framed pictures. Indeed, each shot appears so "picture-like" that I would venture to say that they are "picturesque," or at least evince some key features of picturesque aesthetics. Accordingly, I wish to put forward the notion that the picturesque serves as a crucial aesthetic frame of reference for how *Le Quattro Volte* unfolds its story through the open image. Though the film does not employ conventional narrative devices for suturing the spectator, I will show how its appeal to the spectator involves the interplay of picturesque aesthetics and the open image of the everyday.

Although the body of discourses and practices that make up the picturesque has rarely been invoked in cinema studies proper, several scholars have recently argued for the usefulness of the term as an intermedial concept, i.e. as a set of pictorial conventions that spans various media practices, including cinema.¹³⁹ Although some of these scholars have argued specifically for the relevance of the picturesque for situating early cinema within a genealogy of older aesthetic traditions, it is my contention here that it continues to be influential today in the domain of commodified imagery. At least within Europe and North America, the picturesque still informs the imaging practices of the commercial travel and tourism industries, as well as more "popular" forms of ethnography (e.g. *National Geographic*). While *Le Quattro Volte* has been circulated as a global art film, and ostensibly cannot be grouped together with tourism and ethnography, it nevertheless does partake of many of the characteristic tropes and features of picturesque aesthetics.

¹³⁹ See Armstrong, Bruno, Bertellini, Gunning "Landscape," Tobing Rony.

Although the history of picturesque aesthetics extends as far back as the eighteenth century (whose various iterations up to the present are beyond the scope of this chapter), I wish to provide a brief sketch of the crucial features of this concept that may be relevant to modern images in general and *Le Quattro Volte* in particular. First, the picturesque derives from attempts to forge an aesthetic theory capable of accounting for images that did not fit within established Western categories of narrative, historical, and religious painting.¹⁴⁰ These were typically of the landscape variety, or similarly contingent “views” of a world contemporaneous with its viewers. These were also images that eschewed the grandeur of preexisting narratives of the past in favor of content without such associations, which in the eighteenth century often meant natural environments and non-aristocratic subjects. In sum, the picturesque began as a theory for appreciating the material world, as well as images of it, for their sensuous values. As Rosalind Krauss put it, the picturesque is a “beautifully circular” theory of mimetic representation: a set of instructions for how to see the phenomenal world as having the qualities of a picture and, in turn, how to translate that world into aesthetically pleasing pictures (163).

The picturesque was not just a theory of aesthetically pleasing pictures, but also evolved to become a widely disseminated set of ideas for how to read such pictures with respect to subjectivity. As critics have pointed out, the picturesque was particularly influential as a way of managing unfamiliar images for the Western, bourgeois subject of

¹⁴⁰ William Gilpin, considered one of the first to coin this term in a series of essays written in 1792 on picturesque beauty, claimed that the picturesque illustrates “one species of beauty more” than Edmund Burke’s conceptions of the beautiful and the sublime. Nancy Armstrong provides an overview of the significance of Gilpin’s notion of picturesque for eighteenth-century aesthetics, describing it as one of the first theories for evaluating objects primarily by the quality of visual information they were able to yield (*Fiction* 43-44).

expansive capitalism.¹⁴¹ By translating non-Western cultures into the visual schema of the picturesque, the threat of alterity could be tamed and made sense of by familiar Western aesthetic standards. In other words, the picturesque supplied a framework for turning the world into a picture, but a domesticated picture made to the measure of a modern, Eurocentric gaze. As Sara Suleri writes, “The picturesque becomes synonymous with a desire to transfix a dynamic cultural confrontation into a still life, converting a pictorial imperative into a gesture of self-protection that allows the colonial gaze a license to convert its ability to see into studiously visual representations” (76). This self-protective gesture helped to situate Western colonizers in a relation of superiority to their colonized subjects whose cultures were visually codified as charmingly primitive or quaint.

As a discourse of seeing and representing the world, the picturesque was disseminated on a mass scale in the nineteenth century by the illustrated press, photography, and cinema.¹⁴² Its pervasiveness in the Western world, according to Giorgio Bertellini, was a result of the increased transatlantic movement of goods and people, as well as technologies of representation such as photography and film (47-92). The picturesque is therefore significant as a concept that accompanied the rise of mass culture and international commodity exchange. As Nancy Armstrong points out with respect to Victorian England, the influence of the picturesque grew even further through

¹⁴¹ See Armstrong, Suleri, Tobing Rony.

¹⁴² Armstrong argues that the picturesque had by 1850 become the “master category” of English aesthetics, a standard of taste that had “saturate[d] every domain of cultural production,” including landscape gardening, travel rhetoric, landscape and urban photography (*Fiction* 56-106). Bertellini provides an account of the picturesque as an intermedial aesthetic currency that traveled extensively between Europe and North America in the first two chapters of *Italy in Early American Cinema*.

photography, which not only expanded the quantity and range of subject matter available to the ordinary observer, but also dictated *how* this subject matter was to be viewed (*Fiction 77*). In turn, she argues that the positivism that dominated cultural conceptions of the photographic image further reinforced the influence of picturesque aesthetics. I understand the picturesque, then, as a Western visual standard for making sense of what might otherwise have been a bewilderingly diverse quantity of sights—both familiar and unfamiliar—that became even more widespread by way of indexical imaging technologies. It thereby provided a set of conventions for managing the creation and reception of indexical images in a way that tames and streamlines their meanings according to a Western symbolic economy.

At the start of the twenty-first century, the picturesque arguably no longer enjoys the prestige it once had in Western culture. Indeed, to call something picturesque nowadays is sometimes interpreted as a kind of veiled insult, a euphemism for the cloying, quaint, and impossibly idyllic (Macarthur 1). It might be argued that contemporary media-saturated societies and its jaded spectators are likely to have more of an ironic relationship to such images than their nineteenth-century predecessors, in which case the picturesque is liable to be viewed as but one more “dead style” among the many available for postmodern pastiche. Moreover, in light of the aesthetic sophistication of art cinema and contemporary associations of the picturesque with middlebrow taste and commodified sentiment, it appears unlikely that there can be anything but an ironic usage of picturesque aesthetics by an art film. I argue, however, that the picturesque is not so easily cast off as a visual standard, even in the domain of art cinema. Due to the “beautifully circular” nature of its aesthetic philosophy, the picturesque functions like a

kind of prosthetic *aesthetic* memory; that is, as a public standard of image evaluation that is based on the memory of other images. At least for contemporary Western societies, picturesque imagery has been circulated widely enough for it to become part of a mass cultural pictorial currency; and *Le Quattro Volte*, as I will show, is an example of a global art film that invokes this pictorial currency as part of its overall aesthetic strategy.

While *Le Quattro Volte* has circulated largely as a global art film,¹⁴³ it also exhibits some features that are characteristic of picturesque imagery: a remote rural setting relatively free of the telltale incursions of modernity, aesthetically striking and variegated landscapes staged in recessive space, an aged man with a pre-modern profession, and carefully composed images akin to a series of tableaux. Press critics in some instances have also called the film “picturesque,” and largely in a pejorative sense. For instance, Jay Weissberg’s review of the film in *Variety* describes it as an “an overly intellectualized attempt to fetishize remnant semi-pagan traditions in a picturesque corner of Italy’s Calabrian province” (“*Le Quattro*”). Similarly, Richard Brody’s scathing review in *The New Yorker* deems the film a “calmly picturesque unfolding” of Pythagorean transmigration that is “accomplished with loving care, clever technique, and a brain-jamming overlay of schmaltz” (“*Le Quattro*”). According to Brody, the film captures none of the social complexities of the region, preferring instead to strip out the “social tissue of conversation and organization [...] to emphasize the miniscule, the timeless, and the universal. The complexities of ordinary life don’t fit into Frammartino’s picture-postcard pieties; his sincere but diffuse spirituality is the cinematic equivalent of

¹⁴³ This is based on its release record, which is mostly made up of international film festivals (“*Le Quattro*,” IMDb.com), and its theatrical and DVD distributors, many of which specialize in art cinema.

New Age music.” Here the picturesque is a charge leveled on the grounds of an over-idealization of life in this particular region, which succeeds only in the isolation of its aesthetically pleasing features for a global consumer market.

Le Quattro Volte's visual aesthetic is further complicated for Italian audiences given Bertellini's observation that the picturesque has historically been one of the primary aesthetic modalities for representing Southern Italy (where Calabria is located) and its inhabitants for much of the nineteenth century. Bertellini points out that the picturesque tradition also complemented the cluster of racially essentialist discourses he calls “Southernism,” which cast the inhabitants of Southern Italy as inherently “irredeemable subjects” (69). Since the mid-nineteenth century, Southernism and the picturesque have worked together to create widely disseminated images of racial and cultural difference.¹⁴⁴ Found throughout illustrated magazines, photography, and films of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such images were known for their depiction of the places and people of Southern Italy as charmingly atavistic, closer to nature, and prone to superstitions and unusual rituals. The picturesque may have coded Southern Italy as charmingly quaint for the purposes of visual “delectation,” but as Bertellini adds, Southernism was also a way of representing the region as abnormal with respect to reigning ideals of modern European nationality (72).

Given *Le Quattro Volte*'s use of the picturesque tropes of rural life, it could be conceivable, therefore, to read the film as an exemplary work of Southernism.¹⁴⁵ And yet,

¹⁴⁴ Bertellini provides a detailed discussion of “Southernism” and its areas of overlap with the picturesque (69-75).

¹⁴⁵ It may be interesting to compare *Le Quattro Volte*'s usage of picturesque and Southernist tropes with Luis Buñuel's *Land without Bread*, which uses ethnographic rhetoric to absurdist effect.

this type of reading seems to me to fall somewhat short of the overall tone of the film.

The press critic J. Hoberman provides what I believe to be a more nuanced account, casting Frammartino as Jacques Tati meets Michelangelo Antonioni, and the film as both “casually mystical and doggedly materialist, visually sophisticated and knowingly archaic (“Celebrating”). I concur with Hoberman here that the film is “knowing” in regards to its archaic subject matter, but would add that this knowingness is not ironic or tongue-in-cheek. It seems to me, rather, that *Le Quattro Volte* deploys the rhetoric of the picturesque neither with complete earnestness nor irony. Instead, the characteristic trappings of the picturesque are endowed by the film with a curious dignity and material particularity that seems to resist Southernist stereotypes. This overall effect, as I will show, is achieved through the palimpsestic open image, which works to transfigure the picturesque while at the same time using its formal strategies.

In one regard, *Le Quattro Volte* can be said to quote the picturesque in a process similar to postmodern pastiche, but not in the sense of imitating a “dead style.” Rather, I argue that the picturesque is made to occupy the ambiguous space of the open image. *Le Quattro Volte* does this by emphasizing one particular feature of picturesque aesthetics: the sensuousness of material objects and physical environments. In particular, the film borrows the visual style of the picturesque image, but not its devices for generating meaning from visual form. As Fatimah Tobing Rony has remarked, picturesque photography and films of the early twentieth century usually involved some way of “wresting narrative out of potentially disturbing images” through intertitles or captions

(80).¹⁴⁶ So too, Bertellini's reading of picturesque imagery in early cinema depends to some extent on the image's position within narrative structures. Employing neither conventional narrative devices nor verbal narration, *Le Quattro Volte* relies primarily on the field of the image along with ambient sound. The effect is like that of a picturesque photogram that has been stripped of the *studium*—its weave of cultural meanings—and made to reveal itself in a changed aspect.

Frammartino himself frames the film's aesthetic in terms of a remodeling of anthropocentric perception. As he stated in an interview:

It is a film about the bond between man and nature. Cinema is one of those tools through which man is placed at the centre. So cinema must leave man less alone. We tried to bring out that which usually comprises the background of cinema and culture: animals, plant, objects [sic]. (Frammartino "A Political")

The film aims at decentering humanity's perspective on the physical world by minimizing human protagonists and dialogue, with the result being a reversal of the relations between foreground and background that usually inhere in mainstream narrative cinema. Normally centered on and scaled to the human body in a mainstream narrative economy, the unit of the shot in *Le Quattro Volte* instead tends to focus more on what is conventionally referred to in mainstream cinema as "setting." Long shots of the natural and built environment take precedence over medium shots of human actors and close-ups of the human face.¹⁴⁷ Additionally, these shots are almost always static, as if mimicking

¹⁴⁶ Tobing Rony argues that ethnographic photography and film customarily drew from the picturesque tradition in order to evoke a sense of primitivism. This was especially true of the subgenre of "salvage ethnography" (a well-known example of which is *Nanook of the North*), which she claims was more interested in conveying "elegiac and aesthetically beautiful" images of indigenous cultures than they were in contributing to anthropological knowledge (91).

¹⁴⁷ There are close-ups of the goatherd's face, but these are not motivated by his psychology; they are not expressive of his emotional state. Rather, these close-ups function more like landscapes of the human body, more reflective of its physiognomy than internal states.

the tableau structure of landscape painting, and rarely involve reframing to follow the actions of characters. Accompanied by a near absence of verbal dialogue, the film's visual style is part of an overall non-anthropocentric approach to the material world and to cinema in general. As Frammartino relayed in a statement of intent, removing humans from the center of cinematic attention "would reveal the presumptuousness of humans in believing that they are a privileged species and that their needs should somehow supercede those of all others. This is of course a matter of culture. Consequently, though, it is also a matter for cinema" (Frammartino, "The Four"). The film's non-anthropocentric perspective, according to him, is part of a broader ecological outlook that aims to look at humanity in relation to a network of other organisms and elements within the physical environment.

Le Quattro Volte's non-anthropocentric approach also appears to draw much from what Scott MacDonald calls "ecocinema," a tradition of experimental films and videos that strives to redirect attention to the physical environment.¹⁴⁸ Describing the creators of ecocinema as the modern day heirs to Thoreau, MacDonald sees these films and videos as offering an alternative to "conventional media spectatorship" via a "retraining of perception" (109). As a form of reaction against the rapid and extravagant consumption of media images (i.e. rate of images consumed as well as editing speed), commodities, and natural resources, ecocinema aims to provide "an 'Edenic' respite from conventional consumerism within the *machine* of modern life, as modern life is embodied by the apparatus of media" (MacDonald 109). A common strategy of ecocinema has thus been

¹⁴⁸ MacDonald includes mostly small-gauge filmmakers and video artists as part of this tradition, such as James Benning, Diane Kitchen, and Andrej Zdravic. Having worked in video art before directing *Le Quattro Volte*, it is conceivable that Frammartino was at least aware of ecocinema.

the use of extended shot duration to focus attention on natural phenomena and to show that they are, indeed, deserving of sustained contemplation—that there is “more than what meets the eye and ear” (MacDonald 113). Representing a departure from picturesque imaging, which aims to behold the “world as picture” for the acquisitive human subject, ecocinema encourages a less instrumental and more respectful attitude towards the natural environment.

The model of ecocinema also suggests some ways in which to account for the aesthetic pleasure, or what MacDonald simply calls “beauty,” of landscape and nature imagery. As MacDonald argues, beautiful imagery “can model fundamental changes in perception not only in terms of what we see in movie theaters, on television, or on-line, but how we function in the ‘real world.’ And it can do so without announcing any polemical goal” (112-13). As many commentators have pointed out, one of the most pronounced features of *Le Quattro Volte* is the aesthetic beauty of its images; even its detractors have begrudgingly acknowledged this beauty, often couching it in terms of the picturesque.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, a large part of what makes the film’s polemics so difficult to read comes from the beauty of its imagery. Insofar as ecocinema aims to reverse culturally dominant perceptual patterns, it does still overlap with more explicitly polemical representational strategies. For instance, the three days in the life of the goatherd can be imagined as a rural counterpart to the three days of the housewife in Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman*. While the latter film’s hyperrealistic portrayal of domestic routine is closely associated with seventies feminism, the goatherd’s sequence can be read as an attempt to redirect attention towards the underrepresented everyday experiences of

¹⁴⁹ See, for instance, Brody, Schenker, Uhlich, Weissberg.

remote rural life. As Debord might have said, this is the type of everyday experience that is conspicuously absent from official historical chronicles, which represent the “impersonal memory” of state power and social administration (*Society* 95-96). The historical chronicle, as he wrote, primarily serves to legitimate the “event-oriented succession of powers” (96), creating the domain of history as something “separated from the common reality” (96). At least in regards to the goatherd’s sequence, it is plausible to read *Le Quattro Volte* as engaged in chronicling underrepresented forms of subjective experience.

Taken as a whole, though, it would be more fitting to say that the film aims to convey an even less chronicled layer of time: what the *Annales* School of History coined the “*longue durée*.” Defined as the “long term,” the *longue durée* refers to a historical dimension in which change is so gradual that it is nearly imperceptible on an empirical level; it is history that occurs apart from the time of “events, politics, and people.”¹⁵⁰ Among the factors studied by proponents of the *longue durée* was the natural environment, which as Vidal de la Blache wrote, forms “an imperceptible and complex interference, the results of which slowly accumulate” (qtd. in Febvre 24).¹⁵¹ Influenced by Vidal, Fernand Braudel bemoaned the geographical introduction that is standard practice in so many historical accounts, but end up figuring to little purpose, with “its descriptions of the mineral deposits, types of agriculture, and typical flora, briefly listed and never mentioned again, as if the flowers did not come back every spring, the flocks

¹⁵⁰ “Events, politics, and people” are the subjects of Fernand Braudel’s theory of “histoire événementielle,” the short-term events that form the basis of political and diplomatic histories. See Volume 2, Part Three of his *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*.

¹⁵¹ In the fifth chapter of *Counter-Archive*, Amad argues for the correlation between the historical approach of the *Annales* School and cinema’s potential as “a source of new history.”

of sheep migrate every year, or the ships sail on a real sea that changes with the seasons” (20). Braudel instead advocated for the importance of what he called “geographical history,” defined as “a history whose passage is almost imperceptible, that of man in his relationship to the environment, a history in which all change is slow, a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles [...] [an] almost timeless history, the story of man’s contact with the inanimate” (20).¹⁵²

Le Quattro Volte appears to have taken up Braudel’s challenge by way of its non-anthropocentrism, but as Paula Amad has pointed out, the *Annalistes* were suspicious towards the historiographic capacities of modern technologies of representation such as film and photography, which they associated with the positivist tendencies of historicism (169). Amad herself, however, finds film to be the foundation of a source of *new* history as opposed to a new source of history, since the medium’s propensity for recording “anecdotal” detail gives it the status of what Marc Bloch called “the evidence of witnesses in spite of themselves” (Bloch 61). Accordingly, she suggests that nonfiction film projects like the Albert Kahn Archives which are based on documentation of “the undramatic stuff of anonymous daily life provide the potential documents for the sort of history Braudel narrated according to the calming, patient continuum of the *longue durée*” (178). The mechanical nature of film memory makes it possible for spectators to perceive aspects of the material world on film to which they otherwise might not have been privy, such as the minute changes that occur as part of the unheeded interactions between humans and their physical environment, with its “mineral deposits,” “types of

¹⁵² As Braudel claimed, historical time can be divided into three rates of movement: geographical, social, and individual; with the geographical level, encompassing the interactions between humans and the physical environment, being the slowest and most imperceptible of the three (20).

agriculture,” flowers that come back every spring, and “flocks of sheep that migrate every year” (Braudel 20).

The problem, though, with the concept of the *longue durée*, as Seremetakis contends, is its tendency towards naturalized explanations of historical continuity and implication of an “amorphous determinism” beyond the reach of conscious human agency (20). Seremetakis’s objection here suggests another line of criticism for *Le Quattro Volte*. Indeed, as some critics have remarked, the film’s cosmic perspective isolates the region it depicts from broader social and geopolitical complexities.¹⁵³ Similarly, the placid beauty of its images can be interpreted as symptomatic of a nostalgia for pre-industrial ways of life that tends to afflict mostly urban inhabitants of late capitalist societies. In this regard, ecology and environmentalism can also be imagined as tainted with the privilege of Western societies accustomed to the various comforts afforded by modern industrialized economies.

While I agree that *Le Quattro Volte* does not acknowledge the full range of social complexities within the region, I do not view the film as apolitical or nostalgic. The film is indeed more interested in the normally imperceptible and slowly accumulative interactions that characterize village rhythms and the local ecosystem, but does not impose upon these the value judgments that usually accompany nostalgia and other modes of sublimation. Instead, it traces an ambiguous movement whereby its images defy abstraction while at the same time evoking the mysterious, oneiric quality of the brute speech of things. A prime example of this can be found in the film’s treatment of charcoal smoke. As if in a final show of formal symmetry, the last scene of chimney

¹⁵³ See Brody, Schenker, Uhlich, Weissberg.

smoke echoes the image of smoke that opened the film; with the difference being that the concluding shot gives us the answer to the mystery of the opening scene. We now know the origins of and practices related to this smoke—the entire cycle of charcoal production that sustains the cyclical life of the village. But, this knowledge notwithstanding, the static, sustained long shot of the closing scene renders its smoke as gnostic as that of the opening scene. The mystery of cause and effect is solved, but the closing image of smoke issuing from a single chimney seems still to embody a kind of “veiled secret,” or a “residual photographic aura”—key features of the open image (Chaudhuri and Finn 49). This strangely reticent image, along with many others throughout the course of *Le Quattro Volte*, might have been named cinematic “ideograms” by Kracauer, whose enigmatic definition of the term seems a fitting description for the film as a whole: “Snatched from transient life, they [ideograms] not only challenge the spectator to penetrate their secret but, perhaps even more insistently, request him to preserve them as the irreplaceable images they are” (*Theory* 257). For Kracauer, film’s indexicality infuses such ideograms with an inimitable contingency, a material intractability that defeats idealism and abstraction. It is this irreducible materialism, instead of nostalgia, that constitutes the film’s governing ethos.

Memories of the Present: *Syndromes and a Century*

The film *Syndromes and a Century* (2006) (hereinafter referred to as *Syndromes*) also employs the open image as a primary means of signification. Characterized by a remarkably sensuous style and an abundance of deep focus long takes, the film depicts the undramatic course and mundane phenomena of everyday life in two different areas of

Thailand: a hospital in the countryside and another in an urban center (set in Bangkok).

The film's director, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, is a critically acclaimed filmmaker and video artist who has been dubbed "Thailand's master of the everyday sublime"

(Weerasethakul, *Time Out*) and hailed as "more in tune with the rhythms of daily life than just about any filmmaker currently working" (Reichert). While *Syndromes* also demonstrates a pronounced emphasis on formal arrangements within the field of the image, it does not, like *Le Quattro Volte*, use the tropes of the picturesque. Rather, *Syndromes* presents its open images through the framework of subjective memory.

Inspired by his parents' courtship, Weerasethakul's own memories of growing up in hospital settings in Thailand, and those of his cast and crew, the film's elliptical storyline resembles less of a narrative film than one of Chris Marker's essayistic meditations on memory.¹⁵⁴ And yet, *Syndromes* also has the semblance of a narrative with a recurring cast of characters and settings. An opening sequence illustrates the film's curious blend of narrative storytelling and subjective memory. A female doctor is shown leaving her office with a male companion. Once outside of the door, the camera pans past the two as they continue walking, stopping to hold a long, wide-angle shot of the building's well-groomed grounds. Snippets of conversation play out on the soundtrack. There is a pub behind the hospital, says a male voice. A female voice answers in surprise, she did not know the pub was there. This same long shot of the grounds holds static, accompanied by the sound of footsteps and casual chitchat, presumably coming from the doctor and her friend. Title credits appear, superimposed on the wide green expanse of

¹⁵⁴ Weerasethakul has discussed his inspirations for the film in various interviews and statements. See Weerasethakul, "Memories"; "A Conversation"; "Filmmaker's Note."

the hospital grounds. The conversation continues for several minutes, meandering among various topics, touching at some point on acting. As J. Hoberman wrote of this scene, at one point in this conversation, he was struck by “the strange realization that, at this moment, the actors, who are mainly non-professional, are talking as themselves” (“(Non)Sense”). This opening sequence serves as a microcosm of the film’s palimpsestic blend of multiple registers of performance, temporality, and subjectivity.¹⁵⁵

The doctor and her companion of the opening sequence reappear throughout the film, but it is unclear if there are any main characters at all, or where the film’s sequencing of images and scenes is leading. Although reportedly inspired by Weerasethakul’s parents’ (both medical doctors) courtship before his birth, the more conventional narrative trappings of romance, the play of unrequited erotic tension and fulfillment, are absent. Instead, young male and female doctors are more often shown engaged in the routine activities of medical offices, or lost in silent bouts of reverie. Combined with prosaic subject matter and a lack of dramatic suspense, the film’s open images further add to its elliptical quality. Unlike *Le Quattro Volte*, however, *Syndromes*’ images are colored by a Proustian love of the ineffable sensory experiences recovered through memory. Self-professedly preoccupied with memory, Weerasethakul has remarked that his films are constantly in pursuit of the elusive “happiness” associated with remembering the past (Chaiworapom). As he stated, *Syndromes* explores “how we remember, how our sense of happiness can be triggered by seemingly insignificant things” (“Filmmaker’s”). Instead of narrative, then, *Syndromes*’ episodic structure is

¹⁵⁵ Jihoon Kim analyzes the disjunction between visual and audio tracks in this segment with respect to Michel Chion’s non-linear theory of sound in *Audio-Vision* (157).

better described as unified by the tenuous and not-always-linear thread of a specific “mood” or “atmosphere.”

One of the ways in which this particular happiness is expressed is through *Syndromes*' exceptional use of light. The images in the first half, which are set in the countryside, are often slightly over-exposed, giving their profilmic content a not-quite-realistic cast, at least not in terms of conventional filmic “realism.” Casting glistening reflections upon windows, or dappled under a forest canopy, this is decidedly not lighting that aims strictly for verisimilitude. The lighting in the second half, set in an urban hospital, is more diffuse, coming mostly from the omnipresent fluorescent bulbs of urban office buildings, endowing these scenes with a different tone. The film also demonstrates a fondness for frontal shots of sunlit windows from darkened interiors that appear unrelated to the performative space of diegetic characters. The Thai title for the film, *Sang Sattawat*, means “light of a century,” suggesting that the lighting is linked as much to the director's subjective memories as it is to the collective sensory memories of a particular time and place.

As Landsberg has noted, the intersubjective potential of film as prosthetic memory comes from its ability to represent the narratives of marginalized social groups through experiential and affective means. What, then, are the possibilities for a film like *Syndromes* as prosthetic memory? Here I think Laura Marks's conception of “sense memory” may be useful for addressing this question. Drawing from Seremetakis's theory of the bodily senses as “the bearers and record-keepers of involuntary and pervasive material experience” (Seremetakis 20), Marks argues that sense memories are particularly important as repositories of cultural memory for “intercultural” people. Sense memories

are frequently located in the “proximal” senses such as smell and taste, in addition to vision, which has historically been privileged in Western cultures. Marks uses the term “intercultural” to describe persons and groups that have been displaced in some way from one cultural space to another, as in diaspora, exile, or inter-generational differences, and are thereby caught in between two or more cultures. Often the new locations of intercultural persons are ones in which their old cultures are in the minority. Occupying, therefore, a position of cultural “poverty,” intercultural people sometimes only have their sense memories in the absence of official written histories, and look for ways in which to recreate and share specific sensory configurations. Intercultural filmmakers, as Marks argues, strive to represent sense memories through highly subjective approaches to the audiovisual possibilities of film and video.¹⁵⁶

Marks’s notion of intercultural cinema suggests to me a model for how to make sense of *Syndromes* as prosthetic memory. The film’s exceptional sensuousness can be imagined as appeals to specific intercultural communities of sense memory, as in Thai immigrants in America, for instance. What complicates the situation, though, are the circumstances of the film’s distribution and exhibition. *Syndromes* has primarily been exhibited in international film festivals, and was picked up by distributors with specializations in art cinema.¹⁵⁷ Marks, however, distinguishes between intercultural cinema (which tend to be relatively small, low-budget productions) and films such as “arthouse imports” that are more interested in giving exotic sense experiences to privileged spectators with recourse to a wealth of other cultural resources (Location

¹⁵⁶ For a similar line of argument, see Naficy.

¹⁵⁷ This information is from the release and distribution record provided by IMDb.com.

2920). As she argues, intercultural filmmakers are often ambivalent towards the representation of sense memories for fear of their commodification and use by privileged spectators for a kind of sensory tourism. While this may very well be the case with many global art films, I contend that *Syndromes* is an example of a film that blurs the distinction Marks makes between arthouse imports and intercultural cinema.

This is not to say that *Syndromes* is immune to charges of sensory tourism. Its highly sensuous images can, for instance, be compared to *In the Mood for Love*, another film that has been described as preoccupied with memory and atmosphere. As Chow pointed out, *In the Mood for Love* is likely to appeal to spectators for its highly stylized effect of retrospection and beautiful elusiveness—the generalized sense of “pastness” Jameson attributes to nostalgia films. The retrospective effect of *Syndromes* is similar, achieved through such things as a certain quality of light, the soft swishing sound of trees moving about in the wind, or a haunting guitar refrain. Singularly beautiful, such audiovisual arrangements evoke the sensation of things lost and remembered, much like *In the Mood for Love*. Since *Syndromes* is full of such aesthetically exquisite images, it might be conceivable to see how it can function for the purposes of sensory tourism in a global art cinema context. Here I would interject, though, that the film’s aesthetic beauty can also act as a way of attracting attention to commonly overlooked phenomena, and furthermore, per MacDonald’s notion of the beautiful image, “remodel” ossified perceptual habits. As Weerasethakul has stated, his films attempt to fill in what is left out of most of the films produced by the commercial film industry in Thailand by representing the memories of “ordinary” people:

The majority of our historical documents mainly portray royal lifestyle, rarely the commoners. If we are to be able to look back to the past, there should have been

historical films about ordinary people. I think it's a matter of politics.
(Chaiworapom)

Syndromes depicts things that are commonly afforded little screen time in the Thai film industry: prosaic settings such as medical offices, hospital corridors, construction sites, city parks, and the faces of a cast of mostly nonprofessional actors; and, moreover, these are all endowed with the singular sensuousness of the film's open images. Not only is this not the typical content of a touristic foray into another culture, but it also does not quite add up to the sentimentalism of nostalgia, for although the film is filtered through memory, it is also emphatically about the present. In other words, instead of a retrospective look at the past, as I will explain, *Syndromes* creates the uncanny effect of a memory of the present.

An image of the present as it might appear in memory marks Weerasethakul's palimpsestic approach to the cinematic image. It is an effect achieved by the combination of a free indirect point-of-view shot with a simultaneous emphasis on cinema's objective nature. In this manner, both the subjective and the objective dimensions of the indexical film image are heightened, thereby producing the ambiguous style of the open image: "the fracturing of the everyday by something 'other'" (Chaudhuri and Finn 41). In the case of *Syndromes*, the open image evokes the subjectivity of human memory without going beyond a certain threshold of verisimilitude or iconic resemblance. The overall effect is therefore a heightening of the oneiric quality of the profilmic world without having to cross over to full-fledged surrealism—what Chaudhuri and Finn might have called poetic neorealism. *Syndromes* not only utilizes the open image to elicit "other" ways of perceiving the spatial and visual aspects of its profilmic world, but also as a

means of layering temporal registers that are usually considered separate. Specifically, its open images depict contemporary settings and people, but as if from the perspective of remembrance.

This palimpsestic layering of the present and memory describes an approach to the cinematic image that is capable of revealing its profilmic content in new and surprising ways to local, intercultural, and global audiences. For instance, instead of the retrospective look at the past that for Chow is so easily mappable onto nostalgic sentimentalism in a global context, *Syndromes* casts a similar look onto the world of contemporary Thailand. The effect of this palimpsestic structure, though Proustian in tone, is not quite in the domain of nostalgia, but rather more like a collapse of linear time. As Weerasethakul remarked of the film's sense of time: "Time is collapsed to mimic a pattern of remembering and to manifest my belief in the idea of reincarnation" ("Filmmaker's"). While it is certainly conceivable that that this layering of time be interpreted by art cinema denizens as not much more than modernist formal play, I nonetheless maintain that it is a strategy for articulating what Seremetakis calls forms of "alternative memory and temporality" and spheres of "hidden historical otherness" that are not in accordance with the linear, homogeneous time of Western modernity.¹⁵⁸

While perhaps not readily evident to a Western spectator, there are significant political stakes involved in the representation of alternative memories and temporalities in Thailand. For instance, though reviews of the film by the Western press have tended to highlight its calm and mesmeric quality, *Syndromes* was banned from release by the Thai

¹⁵⁸ Reincarnation, for instance, is a main tenet of Buddhism, reportedly the primary religion of Thailand, and is a recurrent theme in Weerasethakul's films.

Board of Censors, the government entity that reviews all films produced in the country. The Board called for the removal of four scenes on the grounds of immorality: a monk playing guitar, a hospital worker drinking alcohol, a doctor with a clothed erection, and a monk flying a remote-controlled UFO toy.¹⁵⁹ Weerasethakul refused to remove the censored scenes and thus *Syndromes* was banned from showing in Thailand in 2006.¹⁶⁰ The film itself, therefore, became an intercultural entity, exiled from its own country while playing to critical acclaim on the global art cinema circuit. So too, Weerasethakul, who does not strictly fit Marks's definition of an intercultural filmmaker, was compelled under these circumstances to take the position of an exile to the culture industry of his own country.¹⁶¹ To the Thai government, *Syndromes* represented an unacceptable image of contemporary Thailand. The state-censored scenes show people engaged in syncretic practices that mix tradition and modernity, expressing sexual lust, and violating work standards. Surprised himself by the ban of a film which to him seems very "PG," Weerasethakul has stated that his motivation for the film was not so much political as it was tied to a personal sense of loss:

My parents were doctors who raised us kids in a house provided by the small-town hospital where they worked. [...] Recently I went back to the hospital and found myself lost. Everything had changed and the familiar spaces were gone. As a film-maker, I have been fascinated by the spaces of a small town and its landscape. But I had never really looked at the place where my family lived. Now, with my hometown changing rapidly and becoming more like Bangkok, my memories of the lost spaces seem even more distant. With the waves of

¹⁵⁹ Weerasethakul has issued a number of statements on the Board of Censors' ban of the film. For a good synopsis of the situation along with his response, see Weerasethakul's interview in *The Guardian*.
¹⁶⁰ The film had a limited release in Bangkok in 2008, but in its censored form. As a gesture of protest by Weerasethakul, *Syndromes* was exhibited with black leader inserted in place of the censored scenes (*Wikipedia.com*).

¹⁶¹ Born and raised in Bangkok, Weerasethakul earned a graduate degree in filmmaking at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He currently resides in Thailand (*Wikipedia.com*).

globalization affecting the way we live and how we make films, my desire to make a real personal recollection has become more intense. (“Filmmaker’s”)

From Weerasethakul’s perspective, *Syndromes* attempts to depict the highly subjective experience of change, and the ways in which past memories can coexist in the same space with the present. What the Thai government’s ban of the film shows is that, under certain circumstances, the seemingly personal act of representing subjective experience can be a political act in itself. Particularly in countries where cultural production and public forms of memory are policed, the very notion of subjective experience, of different versions of the present and the past, can be viewed as a threat to official conceptions of nation and nationality.¹⁶²

A comparison between public and subjective memory is illustrated in *Syndromes* by several circular panning shots of public monuments of historical and religious figures. Accompanied on the soundtrack by a low synthesized hum, these panning shots appear strangely detached from the rest of the film. Without the atmosphere of happiness that permeates many of the film’s other scenes, these shots evoke Debord’s description of the impersonal memory of official historical chronicles, or what Pierre Nora called *lieux de mémoire*: sites of an impoverished modern memory based on official historical monuments and archives. Originating from the archival logic of professional history and located in its sanctioned documents, *lieux de mémoire*, or “sites of memory,” are forever detached from “*milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory (7). While Nora’s language here flirts with essentialism, I do think it productive to conceive of different registers of memory and qualities of subjective experience. I read *Syndromes* as making a

¹⁶² Chaudhuri and Finn make a similar point regarding the significance of New Iranian Cinema’s embrace of the ambiguous open image vis-à-vis a repressive political regime (56-57).

similar type of point in that its panning shots of public monuments are rendered via an audiovisual arrangement different from much of the rest of the film.

Since *Syndromes* depicts everyday sense memories that are rarely externalized in public form in Thailand, it is especially significant as a kind of prosthetic memory. It revises official Thai history by treating cinema as a vehicle of the palimpsestic nature of memory, as neither archival document nor narrative fiction. The differences between cinema-as-memory and cinema-as-document or fiction are evident in one of the most eccentric features of *Syndromes*: its division into two halves, both depicting a similar set of events and cast of characters, but in two different settings—a country hospital and an urban hospital. An adaptation of the non-linear strategies used in Weerasethakul’s multi-channel video installations, the device of bisection works not only to challenge the notion of the self-contained feature film diegesis, but also to illustrate the flexibility, infirmity, and invented nature of memory.¹⁶³ Moreover, the “inventedness” of memory is even more pertinent to that common object of curiosity for children: the story of how their parents met. The unreliability of these oral histories is often demonstrated through the various versions that are given by each parent, or at different times, marked by shifting plot points and forgotten details. The child’s imagination of this time before her own birth can only be a composite of these various fragments of prosthetic memory. Engaged in a similar endeavor, the two halves of *Syndromes* show essentially the same sequence of events, with some variations, but each managing to convey a distinct mood. It remains

¹⁶³ Jihoon Kim analyzes the mutual influence of Weerasethakul’s video installations and his feature films, and discusses the doubling structure of his feature films with respect to his multi-channel video work (158-64).

unclear which half is closer to what really happened, but objectivity is not the point in these memories, which are always already prosthetic and revisionist in nature.

As my readings of *Syndromes and a Century* and *Le Quattro Volte* have attempted to show, the open image names an ensemble, approach to, or state of cinema practice that continues to invent the everyday as something that is *reinventable* and discoverable in surprising and unfamiliar ways. The open image's palimpsestic facility for superimposing, or maintaining a delicate balance between multiple temporal and subjective strata gives it a distinct position vis-à-vis other image states and modes of representing everyday time. As neither entirely documentary, nor entirely fictional, I wish to suggest that the open image is uniquely qualified for the kinds of revisionist, materialist, and dialectical histories that are being and may yet be written. Moreover, the affinity of the open image for the arena of global art cinema, as I have argued, should be an indication not of its political irrelevance, but rather of its appeal to a dynamic and transcultural idea of art. I have also implied that this image's ability to interface with highly specific, local, and collective everyday experiences is premised on the indexicality of film as it is currently understood. Insofar as this version of indexicality is retained for cinema, images may move us still with the fascination and alterity of material contingency. This may also mean that, perhaps, in a future dominated by digital and computer-generated imagery, we may yet have to reinvent new aesthetic horizons for the everyday that bear little resemblance to the open image as I have described it. I would hope, though, that this remains a distant prospect, as long as there are worlds that not of our own making, waiting to be discovered.

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