

**Late Cinema:
Avantgarde, Medium, Capital**

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“Art: industrial products projected into the past.” –Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

“Film is probably a high technology. It is, of course, a deeply hybridized, bastard technology as well, as rickety a collection of electromechanical devices as a Model T Ford, of which anyone who engages in film practice has available at any given moment only a very constricted segment.” –Hollis Frampton, “The Invention Without a Future”

“...the economy is determinant, but *in the last instance*...” –Louis Althusser, *For Marx*

Chapter One: The Uneven Development of Film and Modernity

In a Round Table dedicated to the topic of “The Projected Image in Contemporary Art” published in *October* in 2003, George Baker speculated: “We might not be witnessing a long death of cinema so much as a fragmented history of moments when cinema is revived at times of crisis.”¹ This tentative proposal is seeking to come to terms with transformations in the technology of film and cinema across the spaces of the gallery, the multiplex, and whatever lies between as it has been expressed by the practices of the medium itself. The conflicting temporalities that Baker proposes for the medium of cinema are either a slow decline into ruination, as new technologies and viewing habits gradually displace the once dominant practice of celluloid projection for large audiences on a large screen, or a more disjointed account that is made up of numerous instances where practices, technologies, images, or materials, once thought obsolete are again deployed, reactivating them in reaction to instances of cinematic instability. Baker’s speculation suggests that these moments of reactivation, of reimagination, occur at times of crisis, and the present moment of the digital, as emphasized by the round table, is such a crisis in the sense that it is forcing a reconsideration of cinema’s ontology. In other words, Baker is seeking to situate the experimental practices of the present as part of a genealogy of cinematic explorations that appear at moments when the medium appears threatened or damaged. This recurrent trend of cinematic experimentation can be figured along numerous trajectories but the specific practices that Baker is gesturing towards seem to concern the cinematic medium as a problematic, as something that needs to be reconsidered and reimagined in the light of its crisis. These practices of reimagining cinematic ontology in times of crisis might be termed “late cinema.”

¹ Malcolm Turvey et al., “Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art,” *October* 104 (Spring 2003):

The term “late cinema” captures the repetition of these crises across the history of cinema but also the fundamentally temporal character of the crises themselves. Late cinema figures the crisis of cinematic ontology as one that is concerned with the medium’s relation to its own history and historicity. Late cinema gestures towards the potential termination of the cinematic medium, but without a definitive burial, holding out the possibility of cinema’s survival or reemergence. However, late cinema also maintains an insistence that cinema, and the specific practices that it signifies, exists in and through a history that is marred by fragmentation, that is not reducible to a singularity of experience. Finally, in addition to being a cinema that acknowledges its precipitous situation, and signifies the medium’s reimagination after its own demise, late cinema is also a cinema of the present, of the most present—the *latest* cinema—even as it passes into historical artifact. Thus, late cinema exists within a complex temporal structure that is deeply embedded within a past, present, and future that it holds apart in suspension. It is through this complex and multiple temporality that late cinema reimagines the medium’s materiality and ontology.

This project will build on Baker’s speculation, working to develop a theory of how these crises are manifested in cinematic practice and theory. I will propose that “lateness” is a key form of these crises, both in and beyond cinema, and that a theorization of lateness is one of the central imperatives of a theory of the present. Lateness and cinema are key instances through which modernity and postmodernity can be historicized as cultural forms and so alongside the theoretical argument I will develop a historical narrative of late cinema. This historical account will run through the avantgardes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and emphasize the crisis of the medium as a crucial mode in which to understand this history. The cinemas of the avantgarde are the sight of the medium’s most direct encounters with its materiality. Cinema is key to the crisis of the medium, both as a causal

factor in the general crisis of the medium in art and as an instance of its own crisis. Thus, cinema will provide the specific medium through which this history will be framed. However, due to the argument that I am advancing concerning the internal tensions of the medium, it will be a version of cinema that is impure, that is in dialogue with and often trespassed upon by other mediums—painting, sculpture, literature, and especially photography. The aim of this dissertation is to think the history of the cinematic avantgarde from the context of its own late moment, its recurrent crisis as a medium—its immanent potential passing. In other words, this project will be an attempt to theorize the relation between lateness and cinema from the context of the present.

In the spring of 2012 the EYE Film Institute reopened in a newly constructed space on the north bank of the river IJ, across from the central train station, in the center of Amsterdam. Its reopening both reconfirmed the centrality of cinema in contemporary culture but also offered a unique example of the conflicting temporalities of cinema in this moment. In the centrality of its placement along the river the EYE is highly visible to all who enter Amsterdam by way of the train or cross through its central transit hub; in the manner of much contemporary museum and gallery construction, the EYE consciously cultivates its own spectacular location and form. But the EYE thematizes its spectacle more self-consciously than most. From the central train station, its most likely vantage point, it resembles an immense singular eye surveying the city, always reflecting back to passing onlookers' its own imagined visual response.



The EYE Film Institute (Image from Eye Film Institute)

The resemblance of the EYE to a physical eye thematizes the institute's focus on cinema as a medium dominated by its visual component. However, more significant than this thematization of cinema as visual, as what is watched and what watches, for discerning contemporary trends in cinema, and specifically experimental cinemas, is the apparent tension exemplified by the first exhibition in the EYE as it exists alongside the permanent features of the museum. Contained in the juxtaposition of the first exhibition and the central component of the museum's permanent public exhibition is a crucial feature of the contemporary instance of the recurrent crisis of cinema that Baker proposed. The permanent collection of the museum is most prominently represented for the public by a small, darkened room in the basement, called the "Panorama." This space was contrasted with and thrown into relief by the inaugural exhibition, "Found Footage: Cinema Exposed." In the first, cinema is presented as a vast array of images, available for immediate viewing at the swipe of a screen. Meanwhile, in the latter, cinema is something precious, rare, that which must be sought out by the cinephile, unavailable without effort and intent.



The Panorama (Image from Eye Film Institute)

The Panorama, located on the ground floor of the EYE, functions as a space that provides easy and immediate access to portions of the archival wealth of the institute. It provides a vantage point onto a selection of the institute's collection in a visually immersive, digitally mediated, interactive environment. Calling this space the Panorama not only situates it within a history of immersive visual representation but also associates its cinematic archive with a locality that is premised on its own totalizing ambitions.² To produce its encompassing archive of cinematic images the Panorama is fitted with seven hanging projectors directed towards the exterior walls of the room such that the images create an almost seamless amalgam of cinematic history, surrounding the subject with a constantly changing and dizzying assortment of representative instances of the medium. Placed underneath each of the seven digital projectors, at a distance of about six feet from the wall, is a touch-screen panel that allows the user to activate their own control over the output of that projector. Each of the stations has a different thematic focus, highlighting different

² Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium* (New York: Zone, 1997); Tom Gunning, "The World as Object Lesson: Cinema Audiences, Visual Culture and the St. Louis World's Fair, 1904," *Film History* 6 (1994): 422-444.

aspects of the history of cinema and portions of the institute's collection that are particularly expansive: "Discovery of the World," "Film Stars," "Colour," "The Netherlands," "Slapstick," and "Battle." Each of the stations offers an array of cinematic instances organized around their particular theme, such that the user can explore a predesigned history of the cinema. The subject steps to the console and touches the screen to activate it and is then provided with a menu of different viewing options. The options consisted of roughly a dozen selections per console, each segment being approximately four minutes in length. This expansive archive is made possible by the mediation of cinema's history, a history that is largely identified with the technology of celluloid projection, through the digital. In other words, a history of filmic cinema, as emphasized by the resting state of the projectors' output of images of rows upon rows of celluloid strips, is presented through the immediacy, easy availability, and exchangeability of the digital. Although referenced through the projectors' moments of rest, the affective resonance of celluloid for cinema was only obliquely recalled in the space of the Panorama, while its full articulation awaited in the "Found Footage" exhibition.



“Found Footage: Cinema Exposed” exhibition (Image from Eye Film Institute)

“Found Footage: Cinema Exposed” was the inaugural exhibition in the EYE’s 12,000 square foot special exhibition space. Featuring artists and filmmakers such as Bruce Conner, Douglas Gordon, Bill Morrison, David Claerbout, Wolf Vostell, and Matthias Müller and Christoph Girardet, among others, “Found Footage” highlighted works that used archival film footage as raw artistic material, transforming it and in the process offering a reimagination and revivification of cinematic history in the present. The darkened space of the expansive gallery recreated an element of the cinematic setting of the darkened theater while screens appeared throughout to capture the multiple projections gliding through the shared space, disrupting the theater’s singularity and immobility of the cinematic spectator. As the title implies, it was an exhibition organized around the idea of archival reconnaissance and recovery, mining the resources of film history for its artistic material. In this sense,

“Found Footage” acted as a fitting compliment to the Panorama. In both, the history and historicity of cinema is highlighted, but that history is located differently between “Found Footage” and the Panorama. In “Found Footage” the historicity of cinema is heavily identified with the concrete physicality of film and the referentiality and even iconicity of the image, reveling in the textural, the minute, and the singular as instances of an extensive cinematic history that is always obscured, always just out of reach. The negation of this rarity would extinguish the intention and affect of the exhibit. In contrast, the historical dimension of the Panorama resides in its appearance of range and depth, of extension, and of availability and access. The Panorama’s figuration of cinematic history moved from an appearance of complete historical coverage and absolute archival access to the specificity of an individual film through a topical index while the reverse was true for “Found Footage,” where history moved from the particular to the universal, from the single film, image, or even frame to the generality of the historicity of cinema. To return to a different moment in the round table mentioned at the outset, the split between these spaces of cinematic exhibition represents, in a slight variation, Hal Foster’s characterization of two broad trends in the use of the projected image in contemporary art. “There are usually two dynamics at these new technological moments. There are artists who want to push the futuristic freedoms of new media, and others who want to look at what this apparent leap forward opens up in the past, the obsolete.”³ In their interrelation and contrast these paired exhibitions, offered for the opening of a new cultural institute dedicated to the culture of cinema and the moving image, demonstrated a tension in the contemporary ontology of the cinema similar to that proposed by Foster. While the Panorama employs the digital as a mediating factor in order to promote ease of accessibility and exchangeability “Found

³ Turvey et al., “The Projected Image in Contemporary Art,” 73.

Footage” invests in the mystery of the undiscovered and the contingency of the unnoticed. But there is also temporal character to the dichotomy presented by these paired exhibitions. The Panorama seeks to push the history of cinema into the future, bringing its archive into the present as something that is promised for the future. It makes history readily available within an infinite present that never reaches into a future because it is already claimed for the present. Meanwhile, “Found Footage” rests in the historical past of cinema, hoping to provide a more stable grounding, in history and the materiality of celluloid, than is possible in the digital, and imagining the future as running insistently through the past. In both instances the futural possibility of cinema is obscured in the interest of either historical remembrance or present stasis, providing little space within either for the excess of futural possibility.

As figured by the juxtaposition contained within the EYE, cinema’s ontology is caught between a filmic and photographic technological tradition that it is not yet prepared to abandon or forget, and yet at the same time it is being lured ever further into the realm of the digital. In other words, cinema is caught between a past that seems abandoned by the present and a future that is simply a flattened extension of an unmoving present. Cinema’s lateness is the excess of these closed determinations, its potential differential, its possibility of multiple temporal registers. This project seeks to theorize late cinema as a cinematic ontology that is premised upon asynchronous and uneven temporalities of development, caught between its past, present, and future, and figured through its essential non-identity as a medium. Specifically, late cinema concerns the shift of the materiality of the cinematic image in modern and contemporary art; late cinema is immanent to the role of cinema in the social and ontological transformation of the art object over the course of the twentieth century. This project will theorize the manner in which those changes have been expressed

within the practices of experimental cinema. Experimental cinemas are the sight of the medium's—in the general and specific senses of that term—most explicit engagements with its material ontology, pushing at the boundaries of the medium's fragile self-identity.

Although cinema will be the focus, I will argue that the theory of lateness is an essential task for an understanding of the present situation and that while it is not identical to the theory of late cinema, it must travel through cinema. In other words, I will propose a theory of lateness that is necessarily tied to cinema but distinct from the specificity of the theory of late cinema. Lateness can be understood in three valences, each with its own temporal specificity. First, lateness refers to a time lag, as though something has arrived after it was meant to, something out of time, out of history, unbent by the force of progress. Second, lateness denotes a phenomenon that has survived beyond its purpose, beyond its intention, like something undead, or something spoken about after it has passed, a zombie or vampire. Finally, the late, or latest, is the most recent, the most immediate instance of a recurrent series, as in fashion or the news, it is that which is most immediately related to the time of the present, that which is most present to the now. Late cinema exists across each of these valences, and it signals a fundamental transformation of the ontology of the cinematic object, but a discussion of late cinema might begin with a symptomatic moment in the latest version of Baker's recurrent crisis of cinema as seen in that which his suggestion seeks to contest: cinema's untimely (or overdue) death. And as would seem to buttress Baker's argument, the fascination with death is also recurrent throughout the history of cinema.

The Contemporary Rehearsal of the Recurrent Death of Cinema

David Rodowick poses the question bluntly: "The twentieth century was unquestionably the century of cinema, but is cinema's time now over?"⁴ The history of cinema is the history of

⁴ D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.

cinema's death, or more properly, its deaths. Following on from the spectral associations of photography and the telegraph, cinema is a medium that transmits instances of the past into the present through a necessary time delay, revivifying dead material, and reanimating what is gone.⁵ What may be particular to cinema is the manner in which film theory has itself hovered over this issue, unable to turn away from the possible deaths inscribed in it.

Two examples from the canon of classical film theory demonstrate this spectrality well. In the epilogue to his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Siegfried Kracauer argues for the urgency of the filmic medium as an evidentiary necessity, recording moments that might be forgotten for the posterity of historical justice. "In acquainting us with the world we live in, the cinema exhibits phenomena whose appearance in the witness stand is of particular consequence. It brings us face to face with the things we dread. And it often challenges us to confront the real-life events it shows with the ideas we commonly entertain about them."⁶ The obvious echoes of the issue of testimony and witnessing in the wake of the holocaust are not simply addressed obliquely but claimed as a specific interest for film by Kracauer. However, Miriam Bratu Hansen offers a reminder in her introduction that the connection between death and cinema for Kracauer preceded this book and the catastrophe of National Socialism. "The eschatological urgency of his early essays gives way to a different temporality: film is no longer the medium of a self-reflecting, self-sublating, self-destructing

⁵ For an account of the spectral in relation to telegraphy see Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 21-58. And on the spectral associations of photography see Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 204-216.

⁶ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 304-305.

modernity as the vanishing point of history but rather figures as the episteme of a postmodern, postmetaphysical, postanthropocentric universe of death.”⁷

The second example is André Bazin, whose canonical essays, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” and “The Myth of Total Cinema” are both saturated by concerns of death, spectrality, and the death drive,⁸ but Bazin’s most direct address of the relation of cinema and death comes in his short essay, “Death Every Afternoon.” Proclaiming that cinema holds the potential to violate the ontological uniqueness of the moment of death, its existence as a moment that does not repeat, that is the end of the repetition of moments. In this potential repetition lies an act of obscenity against time. “Before cinema there was only the profanation of corpses and the desecration of tombs. Thanks to film, nowadays we can desecrate and show at will the only one of our possessions that is temporally inalienable: dead without a requiem, the eternal dead-again of the cinema!”⁹ In both Bazin and Kracauer cinema is intrinsically linked to death, as either its obscene affront to temporality or as its political imperative. But what is more important in both is a sense of the fragility of the medium itself, its own potential death (before its full emergence in Bazin’s case). Thus, the ontology of film is not certain for either Kracauer or Bazin but something that must be constructed in theory and practice.

The fragility and lack of cohesion of the medium itself has become the site of much anxiety recently, due in part to the digital challenge to previously analog components of the cinematic apparatus, such that the analog and industrial components of cinema have become

⁷ Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Introduction” in Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), xvi.

⁸ André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume One*, edited and translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 9-22.

⁹ André Bazin, “Death Every Afternoon” in Ivone Margulies, ed. *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 31.

deeply invested with a historicity, an association with the past that necessarily identifies them as in various stages of ruin or decay. In this sense, cinema becomes both an old and a new medium simultaneously, stretched between its nostalgia for an analog past and its frenzied excitement for a promised digital future. In a sense, this is the reply that Rodowick gives to his own blunt question. “As ‘film’ disappears in the successive substitutions of the digital for the analog, what persists is *cinema* as a narrative form and a psychological experience—a certain modality of articulating visibility, signification, and desire through space, movement, and time.”¹⁰ Cinema lives on as a form of narrative visibility even as it sheds its strong association with film. Rodowick makes this claim for the death of film in the interest of saving film theory as an essential mode of inquiry for the humanities in general and for media studies especially. According to him, unlike film at its outset, digital practices are equipped with a mature theoretical vocabulary in the form of film theory that can be resuscitated for thinking these new media. While this division of the medium into what is alive and dead is reassuring it feels somewhat too easy to simply sever film from cinema. The prominence of cinema and film in contemporary art practice, as though in one of Baker’s proposed moments of crisis, suggests that there is a deeper connection than the one that Rodowick seems to settle on. Indeed, if cinema lives on at the expense of film, could it be that something close to a specter of film lives on in cinema—dead film in the live corpus of cinema—as a reminder of its past linkage, as that factor that always pulls the *new* cinema back towards its agedness, its oldness, its *lateness*?

In fact, film theory appears unprepared to abandon its namesake entirely either and move towards media or visual studies. It seems as though film is not simply one component in a long history of cinema that will be replaced with little alteration to the identity of the

¹⁰ Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 184-185.

medium itself. Paolo Cherchi Usai offers an account of why this may be, describing the dialectical relation of film history (and I think we can include theory with it) to film as one that necessarily proceeds towards the impossibility of any historical accounting. According to Usai, for the wish of film history to be realized would mean its own destruction. “The subject of film history being the destruction of the moving image, its primary goal is to recapture the experience of its first viewers, an empirical impossibility. If put into practice such reconstruction would lead to the obliteration of film history. Its objectives are thus as abstract as any political utopia: neither would have any interest whatsoever if their goals were realized.”¹¹ In other words, accounts of film are necessarily striving towards an ideal object of filmic origin or completion. However, Usai does not specify why this anxiety is particular to film and its history. Rather, it seems to be the dilemma of the archive, such that historical reconstruction offers a partial account that would be obsolete in the face of the full accessibility of the archive, if what is lost to history were readily available. But perhaps this archival anxiety is specific to film and to cinema, particular to the empirical reality of the filmic apparatus, even exacerbated by its material existence. As film is shown it is in a constant process of loss, not simply through the necessary telos of the movement from one end of the celluloid to the other, whether narrativized or not, but as the gradual disintegration and degradation of the celluloid itself. Usai claims that this fragility of celluloid film is something that the viewer is always subjected to in each screening and thus the viewer of film is always watching the ruin of the medium.

Given the physical and chemical phenomena at the heart of the process of decay...a process that can be contained or decelerated but not altogether avoided, the viewer is an unconscious (sometimes resigned, in any case impotent) witness to the extinction

¹¹ Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 25.

of moving images that nobody cares to preserve, either because they are deemed unworthy...or unsuitable for the purposes of further commercial exploitation.¹²

Thus, Usai positions film history in an impossible bind (and film theory possibly even more so), between an object that is constantly in danger of disappearing and the possibility of an ideal archive that would make the practice of history not only superfluous but also impossible in its inclusion of everything.

Hollis Frampton's (*nostalgia*) enacts this tension as its thematic content, its repetitive dynamic, compulsively returning to the still image as a moment of certainty that is then disrupted through its ongoing destruction, the image only put into motion through that destruction, even as the spoken aloud memory of that photo has been prescribed ahead of time. As is well known, the repetition, the multiple repetitions of (*nostalgia*) are the trademark of the death drive, but in this instance movement is returned to the stasis of the photographs through their destruction, thus upending the temporality of the death drive, but pushing ever more insistently towards the complicity of film in the history of cinema as more than a passing technological accompaniment.

The compulsion to repeat cinema's death in the stillness of the image is theorized by Laura Mulvey as a remnant of death as an acknowledgment of time's passing that is buried in the filmic apparatus itself. "For human and all organic life, time marks the movement along a path to death, that is, to the stillness that represents the transformation of the animate into the inanimate. In cinema, the blending of movement and stillness touches on this point of uncertainty so that, buried in the cinema's materiality, lies a reminder of the difficulty of understanding passing time and, ultimately, of understanding death."¹³ Returning to George Baker's proposition, that perhaps the current "death of cinema" is in fact a repetition of

¹² Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema*, 17.

¹³ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24X a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 31-32.

something that has happened before under different conditions, can help us to understand cinema's current ontological predicament.

A potential history of these instances of crisis might highlight two others beyond the current confrontation with the digital. First, the introduction of sound, or the introduction of sound that immediately coincided with the pro-filmic content of the image, threatened a medium that had been predominantly identified with the visual. Second, the emergence of television as a competing mass medium of the moving image challenged the authority of the cinema, as well as signaling other cultural shifts towards a more privatized and less public life in the aftermath of World War II. If we are to sketch overly broad generalizations about the theoretical analogies to these two moments we might highlight first the instances of classical film theory, from Eisenstein to Bazin to Kracauer to Benjamin to explicit discussions of the question by Rudolph Arnheim and Béla Balázs.¹⁴ This is not to suggest that these theorists responded directly to the alteration of sound but they represent early attempts to develop an account of cinema as a formal practice in a socio-historical frame. The second instance would be what is often referred to as "Screen theory," and the adoption of Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis for an ambitious theoretical project to develop an ideological analysis of the cinematic apparatus. While not exact, these moments of theoretical energy might be mapped on to a similar history to that of the technological innovations of sound and television. These histories of cinematic technological crisis and theoretical innovation are important but I want to propose a different one for my own investigation of cinematic ontology that is informed by the general direction of this broad

¹⁴ Rudolph Arnheim, *Film Essays and Criticism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 29-51; Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film (Character and Growth of a New Art)*, trans. Edith Bone (London: Dennis Dobson, 1952), 194-220.

historical account but is more invested in a reading of cinema in the context of the social history of art.

Thus, rather than closely tracking the historical development of cinema in moments of technological change I will follow a more art historical narrative of the history of the avantgarde in the twentieth century as it has been imagined in and inflected by cinema. Broadly, these moments can be thought as the era of the historical avantgarde and its experiments with cinematic techniques and materials for its own investigations of non-art, anti-art, and the everyday. The neo-avantgarde recapitulates many of these themes in a changed historical, cultural, and technological moment, especially as cinema is forced to begin to confront its own role in the transformations of the art object. If the moment of the neo-avantgarde can be seen as the first glimmering of what we have since been calling postmodernism then the next instance is what we might think of as the end of postmodernism, as cinema must once again begin to contend with its own ontological definition in a culture now dominated by historical stasis—the end of history—and the image. Finally, the moment of the present, or the contemporary, must be examined, with the fast emergence and dissemination of the digital as a replacement for numerous components of the cinematic apparatus previously dominated by filmic and analog technologies. Cinema, and especially its potential lateness, must be considered in a broader cultural and historical frame, beyond an immaterial conception of cinematic ontology that easily divorces the medium from its filmic associations. Late cinema will be the demonstration that what lives on in cinema as the specter of film is precisely death, the death of film and the death that film imported into the medium in the first place. This is the excess of film that cannot be exorcised from the body of cinema; cinema must continue to live with death as a part of itself and as a constant presence in its contemporary practice. In its transformations of the

cinematic and art object late cinema is closely intertwined with the history of the avantgarde in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Late cinema's reimagination of cinematic ontology must be theorized in concert with the art object across its radical transformation in the avantgardes of the past century. Late cinema must be theorized through its relation to modernity and capitalism.

The Aporia of the Historical Modern

Cinema has been claimed to have a privileged relation to modernity, its vibrancy and vitality but also its rigid ordering, its affinity for the everyday and the masses, its potential for revolutionary transformation and fascist spectacle. Over thirty years ago Marshall Berman famously appropriated Marx to characterize the world of modernity as one in which, "all that is solid melts into air." For Berman, modernity was characterized by an intensity of experience, a cacophonous change that united the world in disunity, exhilarating yet domineering. "[Modernity] pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish."¹⁵ The echoes of cinema are striking in Berman's account of modernity given that it does not explicitly mention the medium. However, other authors have made the connection explicit. Leo Charney argues that the cinema bears a resemblance to the structure of the modern subject's experience of time.

The experience of cinema mirrored the wider epistemological experience of modernity. Modern subjects (re)discovered their place as buffers between past and future by (re)experiencing this condition as film-viewers. Past and future clashed not in a hypothetical zone but on the terrain of the body. This alienation both grounded

¹⁵ Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 15. For other canonical accounts of modernity see Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1977).

and arose out of the modern aspiration to seize fleeting moments of sensation as a hedge against their inexorable evisceration.¹⁶

In other words, cinema, with its tenuous occupation of the present, is similar to the subject's own experience of the moment as a break between past and future. Mary Ann Doane argues that modernity's "...epistemology of contingency which took shape in the nineteenth century was crucial to the emergence and development of the cinema as a central representational form of the twentieth century."¹⁷ The experience of constant change that characterized modernity for Berman is, in cinema contained within a representational medium, such that fleeting moments, fragments of a broken reality, may be captured in order that they might be retained or even reordered.

This reordering of reality is one way to define modernism, a response to the chaotic alterations and simultaneous technocratic orderings of modernity. Hansen locates cinema as a component of a "vernacular modernism," a way of bridging modernism's supposed elitism and autonomy with the cinema and other everyday practices through their common relation to modernity. Seeking to broaden the definition of modernism beyond the realm of autonomous art, and in fact make the division between "high" and "low" the problematic of modernity and modernism once again, Hansen writes, "...modernism encompasses a whole range of cultural and artistic practices that register, respond to, and reflect upon processes of modernization and the experience of modernity, including a paradigmatic transformation of the conditions under which art is produced, transmitted, and consumed." Citing Benjamin's claims about the monumental shifts in the art object precipitated by technological

¹⁶ Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, Eds. *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 292-293.

¹⁷ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 19.

reproduction,¹⁸ Hansen argues that this expanded definition of modernism allows us to see both “high” and “low” forms as attempting to come to terms with the radical social and cultural upheaval of modernity. “I take the study of modernist aesthetics to encompass cultural practices that both articulated and mediated the experience of modernity, such as the mass-produced and mass-consumed phenomena of fashion, design, advertising, architecture and urban environment, of photography, radio, and cinema.”¹⁹ In all of these accounts, cinema acts as either a model of modern subjectivity or an opportunity for the subject to act either within or against the complex and powerful flows of modernity. But what then of the fate of modernity? Is modernity dying a slow death as Rodowick claims for cinema? Or has it already past?

To an extent this problematic frames my dissertation. It is an attempt to offer a history of the end of modernity, or of the beginning and ending of postmodernity, which seems to have expired before modernity has fully expired. T.J. Clark confirms the continued survival of modernity after postmodernity in the unrecognizability of modernism now, “Modernism is unintelligible now because it had truck with a modernity not yet fully in place. Post-modernism mistakes the ruins of those previous representations, or the fact that from where we stand they seem ruinous, for the ruin of modernity itself—not seeing that what we are living through is modernity’s triumph.”²⁰ Modernism’s coincidence to modernity is and always was fractured; it is not that modernism preceded modernity in life or death as that modernism became obsolete before modernity was ready to expire, and because of the continuing development of modernity. Or perhaps the aesthetic realm of modernism

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility [First Version],” *Grey Room* 39 (Spring 2010): 11-37.

¹⁹ Miriam Bratu Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 6.2 (April 1999): 59.

²⁰ T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 3.

transformed more quickly than the mode of production, to the extent that modernity can be thought as coincident with capitalism, as I think is appropriate.

Fredric Jameson has also argued for the continued resonance of the modern after the existence and passing of postmodernity, and it is precisely through its relation to exchange and commodification. For Jameson, if modernity has always been associated with progress then the contemporary ideologies of progress, of free markets and technological and technocratic utopias, necessarily fall back on a language of the “modern,” but where modernism and modernity used to be associated, at least in some versions of the narrative, with Marxism and the project of socialism these must now be classified as pre-modern or anti-modern. In other words, what was once thought to be a goal of modernity has now been redefined as modernity’s opposite. What remains constant is the futural aspect of modernity, only now the possibility of a non-capitalist future is more distant, actually existing socialism no longer exists, not as a model but as the opening for something other than capitalism. In other words, modernity lives on as neoliberalism because of its own impossible transcendence, its own inability to age or die.

The temporality of modernity is of always being coincident to itself, but once a particular historical period appears that is defined as “modern” or as “modernity,” as something that must necessarily become a past, then there is a break in the telos of modern progress. Peter Osborne argues that modernity constitutes not simply hostility to the classical or medieval era but to tradition and the past themselves. Modernity, as it passes between its status as a particular historical period and its meaning as a temporal self-presence of immediacy, is constantly in danger of surpassing itself; thus the modern is a necessarily mobile and expansive category, until it becomes a specifically defined historical period. According to this formulation, postmodernity is the supplemental excess that is necessitated

as the modern reaches its own internal limitations. But now that that supplement has been destroyed the modern returns in full force. “The central problem faced by all theories of modernity, in any substantive socio-historical sense, is not that they cannot think decline, but, rather, the reverse: the fact that modernity/modernities *grow old*.”²¹ Thus, modernity returns because it cannot conceive its own aging, its own lateness, and once the excess capacity of postmodernity is reached there is nowhere to go but back towards modernity.

However, this demonstrates the essential link between modernity and lateness as well. It is modernity’s insistent and blind push towards the future even as it demolishes that future, absorbing the debris into itself, forcing the destruction of what was previously modern to become pre-modern, that produces the excess of temporality that is lateness. The impossible temporal totality of modernity is precisely where lateness resides, in the excesses of temporality that it pushes into the future without incorporating them into its own narratives, those instances that are autonomous of progress and history, and also what pushes most intimately through the present into the potential of the future. Lateness is the excess time of modernity’s historical totalization and blindness towards its own historicity. It is also in its excess of time that modernity is related to cinema.

All of the theories of the relation between cinema and modernity mentioned above—Charney, Doane, and Hansen—despite their differences, highlight the potential excess of cinema in relation to the modern. Modernity produces its own temporal excess as the cinema seeks to order and contain its excess. But while cinema maintains an allegiance to modernity in their shared production of an excess a new term has come to stand in for modernity that leaves no opening for an excess, no movement to produce the futural possibility of modernity, even as that possibility must be contained. This is the

²¹ Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (New York: Verso, 2011), 20.

“contemporary” and it is gaining in prominence as a term to be used in place of modernity or postmodernity, especially in the realm of art.

Whereas the modern must constantly shift forward through its futural impulse, casting off its previous shell and expanding, losing elements along the way—modernism—the contemporary is always already in its present, never having to reconfigure itself, never producing an excess of time, never allowing anything to escape because it does not move, it only collects more in its outward growth. This is the result of the contradiction of the modern itself and its attachment to art. “Modern art is (or, rather, was) directed towards the future. Being modern means to live in a project, to practice a work in progress. Because of this permanent movement towards the future modern art tends to overlook, to forget the present, to reduce it to a permanently self-effacing moment of transition from past to future.”²² But if modern art negates its own present through its commitment to the future then the contemporary simply adopts the future into its uncertain and undefined present. Contemporaneity is the ideology of our moment, insistently manufacturing a uniformity of the present while disallowing any engagement with the future. Stretching indefinitely on in an impossibility of historicity, “...the only potentially permanent thing about this state of affairs is that its impermanence may last forever.”²³ This haze of contemporaneity is both anti-political and anti-utopian in its resolute disavowal of any meaningful future difference.

This is the political import of lateness, of defining cinema as late, as an excess that remains autonomous from the contemporary, that exists through an asynchronous historical and futural dimension that eschews the permanent impermanence of the contemporary. As

²² Quoted in Terry Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 34, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 701. See also Boris Groys, “Topology of Contemporary Art,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 71-80.

²³ Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” 704.

Osborne writes, “The concept of the contemporary involves a disavowal—a disavowal of its own futural, anticipatory or speculative basis—to the extent to which it projects into existence an *actual* total conjunction of times. This is a disavowal of the futurity of the present by its very presentness; essentially, it is a disavowal of politics.”²⁴ It is a disavowal of politics through the absence of a future difference. Unlike the utopian dimension of modernity, contemporaneity manages its futural component through a self-identical virtuality, such that the future is always wrapped into the permanence of the present: “[T]he contemporary involves a kind of internal retreat of the modern to the present.”²⁵ The contemporary manages to hold the present and inoculate itself against the possibility of the future without turning towards that future, as modernity did. Osborne continues, “If modernity projects a present of permanent transition, forever reaching beyond itself, the contemporary fixes or enfolds such transitoriness within the duration of a conjuncture, or at its most extreme, the stasis of a present moment.”²⁶ The cinema, through its excess of time and representation disrupts the atemporality of the contemporary, contaminating its manufactured permanence with temporalities of the past and future. Late cinema actively works to break the stasis of the present, of contemporaneity. Lateness, with its excess and asynchronicity, its time lag and autonomy from progress, opens on to a futural possibility, not as preconceived but simply as a difference, as the possibility that a future does exist and that in its existence it is not a component to be wrapped into the enforced unity of the present.

Lateness is the ruination of modernity upon history—its own invention—and what remains after the destruction of the present by its own persistence; it is modernity’s excess,

²⁴ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (New York: Verso, 2013), 23.

²⁵ Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 24.

²⁶ Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 24.

the time that is left behind and is always seeking an escape into the future through the blockage of the contemporary. The promise of late cinema is that it will model and produce the asynchronous temporalities that will force the contemporary to confront history and the future. In other words, the political function of lateness is as an opening onto utopian thinking. No thinker of the twentieth century is more rightly associated with the concept of utopia than Ernst Bloch. For Bloch utopia is located in the possibilities of futural difference.

Where the prospective horizon is continuously kept in sight, reality appears there as what it is concretely: as a network of paths (*Wegegeflecht*) of dialectical processes that take place in an unfinished world, in a world that would be totally unchangeable without the enormous future, the real possibilities within it. This includes the totality, which does not represent the isolated entirety of each part of a process, but which represents the entirety of the matter that is pending in the process in general.²⁷

For Bloch the future is crucial as that which opens on to difference, to possibility. In this sense, utopian thinking is a practice of holding open the possibilities of historical change at every instant, insisting on their inherent difference. Utopia is built upon the excesses of temporality that are not contained by historical isolation or the permanence of the contemporary. Utopia is a practice of lateness, of developing the possibilities of temporality unreconstructed. In other words, the more autonomous time, the more utopian possibility. Late cinema produces moments of temporal autonomy and thus possibilities for thinking and producing the concrete utopia as Bloch understood it. “*The concrete utopia stands at the horizon of every reality; the real possibility encloses the open dialectical tendency-latency until the very last moment.*”²⁸

Late Cinema

This project will theorize the category of late cinema through four chapters, each organized around a conceptual problematic that is constellated around the question of late

²⁷ Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 155.

²⁸ Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, 155.

cinema. Chapter Two, “The Late Work of Cinematic Excess,” develops the concept of the “late work,” especially as deployed by Theodor Adorno. Through an account of Adorno’s writing on lateness I will reconsider his purported hostility and dismissal of cinema and the avantgarde in his allegiance to high modernism. This reconsideration of Adorno’s theory of the late work will be performed through a close reading of Marcel Duchamp’s *Anemic Cinema* and its disavowal of the indexical functions of the cinematic medium. Chapter Three, “The Ends of the Avantgarde,” directly addresses the concept of the “avantgarde” through close readings of works by Robert Smithson and Michael Snow and a theorization of lateness in the context of the neo-avantgarde’s repetition of the historical avantgarde. Chapter Four, “Obsolescence and the Motor (City) of History,” theorizes the concept of the medium through recent attempts to depict Detroit. This chapter seeks to reconsider the concept of the medium through photography’s mediation of a cinematic ideality. Finally, it works through the relation of the city and cinema in the contemporary melancholia for a lost moment of industrial capitalism as a space of stability. Chapter Five, “Late Capitalism Redux, or, The Representational Crisis of Financialization,” focuses on the concept of “late capitalism” as it has been prominently used to describe the period of stability and growth that characterized the decades following world war two. This chapter develops the complex temporalities of what we describe as late capitalism and seeks to reground the term in a theorization of the excess of temporality—lateness—in finance capital, a central feature of the present configuration of capitalism. The lateness of finance capital is theorized as its purchase of the future, extending capitalism, as a subsidiary of the contemporary (or is it the reverse?) to purchase the future and guarantee the continuation of capitalism, indefinitely delaying its end beyond the horizon of the possible. Alongside this theory of capital I will examine a recent installation by Ryoji Ikeda at the Park Avenue Armory in Manhattan. This

digital installation will provide the model for what I want to call late cinema as it is expressed in the present moment, as an attempt to produce excesses of asynchronous temporality that force themselves into the space between the present and the future, shattering the stasis of the contemporary.

The chapters do not follow a developmental logic in the sense that one builds upon the conceptual work of the previous and so on. Rather they are organized, à la Benjamin and Adorno, as constellated problematics around late cinema. And while they do progress in a logic of historical linearity, this should not be read as suggesting a historical progression of late cinema. Late cinema will be theorized relationally against the late work, the avantgarde, the medium, and late capital.

Chapter Two: The Late Work of Cinematic Excess

Lateness exists at the edges of temporality—the aftermath of history—unaffected by the momentum of progress. Lateness is a symptom of modernity confronting its own obsolescence; it appears where modernity provokes its own objectification of time, and one of the modes by which modernity sought this objectification was cinema. Cinema’s segmentation and representation of time locates it at the center of a modern paradigm deeply concerned with the contours and limits of its own movement within history. Mary Ann Doane locates the cinema in a cultural imaginary grappling with the contingency of the everyday in the midst of an increasingly rationalized and commodified order. Cinema is central to this cultural imaginary as a medium that sanctions its own ordering of time through its capture of the indeterminate, that which escapes order. Doane writes, “The indexicality of the cinematic sign appears as the guarantee of its status as a record of a temporality outside itself—a pure time or duration which would not be that of its own functioning. This is what imbues cinematic time with historicity.”¹ In other words, it is the very thing that escapes cinema’s ordering of time that provides cinema’s guarantee of figuring history as representable; cinema becomes a means by which the present can be captured and archived, by which the present can become a future past. If the index is that which both escapes and sanctions the ordering of the cinema, lateness is that which troubles and orders history. As Doane emphasizes, those instances of cinema that proved most cinematic were the contingencies, the accidents—excesses. As an indexical medium filmic cinema contains an excess of material, an excess of temporality that resides at its margins,

¹ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 23.

even as it permeates the image. This excess of surplus time is what constitutes cinema's lateness.

This chapter offers an account of the cinema of the historical avantgarde, and particularly Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma*, as a privileged location from which to understand cinematic lateness. Duchamp's foray into the cinematic medium seeks to isolate and expose its excesses, to objectify those instances of the cinema that escape objectification. Duchamp's construction depicts an absence of filmic expression by testing film's immanent limitations through a negation of figural imagery and a challenge to the dimensional form of the filmic image; the boundaries of the still new medium were tested in order to prove the limits of its own ability to produce meaning.

As an artwork that problematizes its own ability to produce meaning, *Anémic Cinéma* will be theorized as a "late work," an artwork that protests against its own social existence—an ambition often attributed to the avantgarde.² According to Adorno, the late work attends to a crisis of expression, historicized in the context of the tumult of bourgeois society in the mid-nineteenth century. In Adorno's key example, the mature Beethoven signals the ambition and promise of an ascendant bourgeoisie while the late Beethoven marks the decline of that same class. But rather than expressing that decline as a part of its "content" or "meaning," it is effected through the effacement of subjective mediation in the work—vacating the subject's own function of authorial control over and meaning production in the assembled material. Through an accounting of this subjective erosion, the late work becomes a way of historicizing the waning of meaning in the development of art in modernity. The late work accomplishes this destruction through a negation of the mastery and originality of the individual subject as determinate creator while depending upon the autonomy offered by

² This claim is made most prominently in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Bürger will be discussed in detail below.

its subjective associations for its continued existence as art. In other words, Adorno characterizes Beethoven's late works as bereft of the synthetic mastery achieved in his earlier, mature works; musical tropes and allusions are compiled but left unaltered and inert, only transformed in their very assemblage.

There is an excess of expressive possibilities in the late work that are left undeveloped by the mediating function of the subject while remaining under its hollow but protective domain. This absence of the producing subject as a creative mediator does not mean that the late work is more immediate or more intimately defined by the consuming subject, but that the absence of construction is itself constituted as an instance of mediation. The late work's expression of subjective absence is a mediation that incorporates the artistic subject as an objective component of its construction; it historicizes the practice of the autonomous artist producing purposeless objects through the reification of this practice. In its apparent absence of production, the late work specifically signals the contradictory social status of all artworks, existing within but apart from empirical reality and critiquing it through its abandonment—related through absence, social through dissociation.

This contradictory sociality of the artwork—part of art's identity but the specific concern of the late work—is expressed in two associated features of the late work: its negation of its own subjective mediation, its lack of production, which reveals it as something produced, something unnatural; and its tenuous attachment to art's protected, autonomous sociality because of this lack of subjective intervention, its appearance as something other than art—anti-art. Both of these features demonstrate the importance of thinking the late work in relation to cinema. The concept of the late work is essential to an understanding of the cinema of the historical avantgarde and also offers hints at recent questions of cinema's medium-specificity and its current crisis. The identity or ontology of

the cinematic medium is often framed in the context of its historical association with indexicality,³ tied in both imagination and reality to an order of signification that always exists as a potential contingency, an excess of representation, an element that exists in the work but is not developed or even recognized by the artist—a shred of empirical reality in the autonomous totality of the artwork. Through this interrelation of indexicality and lateness, the films of the avantgarde will be theorized as exposing the temporally disjunctive excesses and contradictions of the filmic art object.

In discussing these excesses, this chapter will argue that echoes of the concerns theorized in the concept of the late work can be detected in sections of Adorno's writing that are principally concerned with cinema and the avantgarde. In this sense, the late work will be sought as an absence as much as a concept that is explicitly theorized by Adorno. Miriam Bratu Hansen has argued that while an aesthetics of cinema is not specifically articulated by Adorno, hints of a gestural interest in the medium can be seen in other writings by him: "For Adorno, the aesthetic possibilities of and for film have to be gleaned from elsewhere, from his writings on art in general and music in particular."⁴ This chapter will follow Hansen's recommendation in regard to cinema but broaden it to the concept of the late work, both articulated through their intimate relations to the avantgarde. The importance of the late work is in the manner that it expresses the temporal ruptures in the art-object and its non-identity to the concept of art, specifying their locations in the historical contradictions of modernity. Cinema and the avantgarde represent instances through which these contradictions can be examined. To borrow a favored method of

³ As examples of recent work on the index and its place in current film theory see Daniel Morgan, "Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 32 (Spring 2006): 443-481; and Tom Gunning, "Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality," *differences* vol. 18, no. 1 (2007): 29-52.

⁴ Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 250.

Adorno, this chapter seeks to construct a constellation between the conceptions of the late work, cinema, and the avantgarde as they appear in Adorno's writings and consider this constellation through an analysis of the cinema of the historical avantgarde and especially *Anémic Cinéma*, Duchamp's attempt to capture and cultivate cinematic excess.

Anemic Excess

At the beginning of a short essay on Duchamp, Thierry de Duve writes, "In the whole of the twentieth century, there is no less utopian an artist than Marcel Duchamp. And there is no artist—with the exception of Matisse, whom Duchamp greatly admired—who suffered less from the failing of utopias."⁵ This quality of seeming political indifference that de Duve identifies initially seems peculiar in the context of an artist whose production is so intimately linked to an appraisal of the impact of commodity fetishism and mass production on the spheres of art and culture. The peculiarity of de Duve's claim can be answered by locating an updated version of the late style that Adorno attributes to Beethoven in Duchamp's lack of utopian ambition; the late work is the ruin of the bourgeoisie's utopian ideal of an aesthetic object, whether in Beethoven's uncomposed compositions or Duchamp's anti-art objects. In direct contestation of the myth of the artistic genius virtuoso, Duchamp self-consciously performs as an anti-authorial mediating function, merely relaying mass-produced objects through his personal brand—his very signature—in order to mark them as art (the readymades being the most obvious example), even as they stand resolutely against that status through their lack of subjective transformation and intention. Within Duchamp's anti-utopianism resides the failure of bourgeois ambition and the end of modernist progress; Duchamp's anti-utopianism is his politics. This can be seen in *Anémic Cinéma* in its apprehension about the production of filmic meaning, functioning as a

⁵ Thierry de Duve, *Sewn in the Sweatshops of Marx: Beuys, Warhol, Klein, Duchamp*, trans. Rosalind Krauss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 59.

testament to the immanent failures of the cinematic medium to live up to ambitions of mimetic perfection. *Anémic Cinéma* is an artwork that flees its autonomous existence through the reality-saturated medium of film but also a cinematic construction that negates its status as cinema through a calculated management of the very thing that violates its sanctified status as art—its filmic excess—its indexicality.

Duchamp's film exists in the canon of what is considered Dada cinema. However, the classification is a problematic and fleeting one, given both the scarcity of examples that might fall under that category, but also because of Dada's own apprehensions about the possibilities of the new medium. Thomas Elsaesser suggests a definition of Dada cinema that would encompass Hans Richter's films such as, *Rhythm 21*, *Rhythm 23*, *Ghosts before Breakfast*, and *Two-Penny Magic*, Viking Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony*, Man Ray's *Retour à la raison*, Rene Claire's *Entr'acte*, Fernand Leger's *Ballet Mecanique*, and Duchamp's filmic experiments as constituting the limits of a possible canon, with the caveat that many of these are dubiously categorized as properly Dada. Much of what complicates these films' relation to Dada is their date of creation. Many, if not most, appear after the period that is usually considered to constitute the Dadaist moment.⁶ In other words, those instances of Dada cinema that exist arrive after Dada—late. However limited a Dada cinema might be, as Elsaesser notes, cinema itself—the technology, the experience—was adopted by Dada: “What was Dada in regard to cinema was not a specific film, but the performance, not a

⁶ Hans Richter proposes the Dadaist period as occurring in the years between 1916 and 1922: “Looked at in retrospect, Dada has a definite, inevitable and even foreseeable place in the historical development of art. Dada is an even which took place between 1916 and 1922. It belongs with the framework of the great movements to which it constituted a reaction, Expressionism, Cubism and Futurism, and the movement which followed it, and to which it passed on powerful impulses in its turn, Surrealism.” Hans Richter, *Dada: art and anti-art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 216.

specific set of techniques or textual organization, but the spectacle.”⁷ Cinema represented for Dada a possibility of representing the dynamic character of modernity, its frenetic motion mimicking and representing the pace of modern life. Despite the problematic relation of Dada and cinema, *Anémic Cinéma* is understood as a part of the loose Dada lineage due to its anti-aesthetic and anti-art positions and goals.

One of the most recognizable tropes within the relatively limited canon of Dada cinema is that of rotation, a paradoxical movement that remains in the same place, a motion grounded by an immobile center. Instances of rotation, whether in the repeated instance of the clock face in *Ghosts Before Breakfast*, the spinning machines of *Ballet Mécanique*, the bearded ballerina of *Entr’acte*, appear throughout the cinema of Dada. This rotation can be understood as an allegorical reenactment of the spectacle of modernity and of Dada’s interest in that spectacle. Richter’s *Ghosts before Breakfast* is an instance where rotation is particularly prominent throughout. Richter’s 1927 film is a playful attempt to use cinema’s representational potential against its function as a medium of verisimilitude, depicting objects moving about as though carried or worn by specters. This ghostly, irrational activity of the inert objects is contrasted to the regulated motion of the clock face, which reappears throughout the film. The most obvious contrast of the expected rotation of the clock comes in the form of a hose that unfurls itself, levitates hats and other objects, and then returns itself to its ordered status, reversing its rotational motion back onto its resting place. Duchamp’s *Anémic Cinéma* employs rotation in a different manner, not adopting the playful figuration of *Ghosts Before Breakfast* nor simply eschewing figural realism through its absence (as in *Rhythmus 21*, *Rhythmus 23*, or *Diagonal Symphony*) but actively negating it through a rigid control of its limited presence.

⁷ Thomas Elsaesser, “Dada/Cinema?” in *Dada and Surrealist Film*, ed. Rudolf E. Kuenzli (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 19.

Duchamp made *Anémic Cinéma* in 1926 with Man Ray and Marc Allègre as a part of his ongoing experiments with optics. It is comprised entirely of a series of rotating disks filmed at a close distance with a static camera. All of the motion within the film comes from the movement of these disks, their rotation mimicking that of the cinematic apparatus itself. The disks alternate between spiraling patterns that produce the illusion of depth, the rotorescences (a recurrent feature of Duchamp's production), and nine verbal puns, each spelled out in a spiraling pattern that emanates from the center, the movement of which follows that of the rotorescences. The verbal puns play on double meanings of words often involving sexual innuendo (and are thus difficult to translate from French successfully), while the rotorescences appear to extend out from the screen and deepen it in alternating instants; one moment the spiral appears to be emanating from the screen and threatening to approach the spectator, and the next moment it is retreating into itself, threatening to swallow the spectator into its expanding, seemingly bottomless, depth. The effect of this is that while the image is static in remaining fixed on the disks, these same disks move constantly, negating the stasis and certainty of the frame and emphasizing the movement captured within its stillness. In other words, the excess of this film is fully contained within its frame; the frame becomes the point at which its excess is activated. It is an excess of depth within two dimensions, an excess that does not exceed—an anemic excess.

Anémic Cinéma functions from its center and extends outward, but rather than being contained by its borders it pulls away from them, whether by extending outward or inward; the motion of the image takes place entirely away from the edge of the frame. Dalia Judovitz emphasizes the depth of the image achieved in the rotorescences' use of spirographic illusion in her interpretation of the film. Judovitz reads the film as a critique of perspectivalism's reinforcement of the ideology of sexual difference through the pleasure of the (male)

spectator's identification with the camera: "In *Anémic Cinéma* Duchamp pursues the traditional interrogation of the sexual difference as the expression of the structures of vision, as the retinal euphoria that constitutes the desire of the spectator."⁸ According to Judovitz, the patriarchal, historical identification of visuality and regimes of sexual difference is disrupted through Duchamp's refusal of figural realism in the cinema, instead introducing abstract representations, whether pictorial or linguistic. This is a cinema that seeks to diminish vision—that wants to refute the erotic fullness of the image. Instead, Judovitz argues, Duchamp presents the aesthetics of the readymade in *Anémic Cinéma* by stripping the medium of its figural illusionism:

Duchamp's experiments with rotoreliefs, which he called 'kinetic paintings,' were assembled and filmed in *Anémic Cinéma*. They were mounted and rotated on a wheel, recalling another readymade. Thus the referent and material basis or support of *Anémic Cinéma* are themselves a combination of different readymades—the juxtaposition of optical graphic research and the readymade. The literal overlay of these two constitutive elements defines the graphic and kinetic structure of the movie. Rather than functioning as a transparent medium reflecting some external reality, the referent of the film is the visual character of esthetic perception.⁹

Thus, the film's integration of the rotorelief and the readymade is the key to understanding its critique of retinal vision. Judovitz sees echoes of other readymades in the images of the film and in the way that language appears in the film, strewn about without communicative purpose and without proper lexical directional coordinates. Instead, what appear are the visual elements of language—writing composed as other than communicative instrument—and the somatic, non-formalized character of vision.

Rosalind Krauss also discusses the imbrication of vision and carnality in comments on Duchamp's Precision Optics, of which *Anémic Cinéma* is considered a part:

⁸ Dalia Judovitz, "Anemic Vision in Duchamp: Cinema as Readymade," in *Dada and Surrealist Film*, ed. Rudolf E. Kuenzli (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 48.

⁹ Judovitz, "Anemic Vision in Duchamp," 50.

The rhythm of the turning disks is the rhythm of substitution as, at an iconic level, various organs replace one another in an utterly circular associative chain. First there is the disk as eye; then it appears as breast; this then gives way to the fictive presence of a uterine cavity and the implications of sexual penetration. And within this pulse, as it carries one from part-object to part-object, advancing and receding through the illusion of this three-dimensional space, there is also a hint of the persecutory threat that the object poses for the viewer, a threat carried by the very metamorphic rhythm itself, as its constant thrusting of the form into a state of dissolve brings on the experience of formlessness, seeming to overwhelm the once-bounded object with the condition of the *informe*.¹⁰

Krauss's emphasis on the somatic character of Duchamp's cinematic experiments demonstrates the extent to which vision's limits can be thought in the context of a crisis of subjectivity, a crisis that is central to the late work as theorized by Adorno. Working within a specifically psychoanalytic tradition in this passage, Krauss's characterization of Duchamp's works as testing the limits of the object should not be confined to the psychoanalytic. Instead, the boundedness, singularity, and reification of the art-object as object is precisely what is challenged in the late work and the potential dissociation of the subject/viewer that Krauss describes here is the corollary. What Krauss describes is a breakdown in the viewing subject's ability to identify with the cinematic image, as the boundaries of its frame fail to contain its force, pushing into the realm of the viewer and disrupting the sanctified autonomy of the subject. In this reading of the Precision Optics as it might be applied to *Anémic Cinéma*, Duchamp's work bears the characteristics of the late work by exceeding the limits of cinematic imaging and the art object, and disrupting the possibility of imagistic identification in retinal vision.

Krauss's reading of the Precision Optics emphasizes Duchamp's interest in disrupting the limits of subjective identification and his rejection of a utopic realm of organic unity for the artwork. But whereas Krauss interprets this impulse in the context of the potential formlessness of the subject, I want to emphasize the importance for Duchamp of

¹⁰ Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 137.

staging cinema as a challenge to the boundedness of the art-object as a necessary corollary to the deterioration of the mastery of the subject. *Anémic Cinéma* seeks to reveal the limits of cinematic expression through its own representational excess, the manner in which the image seems to contract toward and extend out from the center while eschewing the edge of the frame, presenting language that is barely discernible as such, and forcing a confrontation with the filmic cinema's own ability to dismantle the assumed predominance of figural realism and verisimilitude; Duchamp's cinema is something other than a means of representational veracity. This final confrontation was more specifically pushed in earlier versions of *Anémic Cinéma* made by Duchamp, where a glass plate in front of a metallic material would take the place of the screen—so that the image would catch in the glass plate and then be reflected back through the glass again and onto the audience, effectively reversing the directionality of the cinema as it is usually articulated. In this design, the opacity of filmic cinema that Judovitz argues for would be even more apparent, allegorizing the assumed transparency of the image in the replacement of the screen by a glass plate that would fail to catch the image, only serving to refract it back toward its origin without ever meeting it. In this earlier version of *Anémic Cinéma*, the cinematic technology is refracted in its abstraction and dispersion as itself unrepresentable and unbounded.

Anémic Cinéma articulates cinematic excess through its own limited expression. Filmic cinema's excess of visual information is part of its allegiance to and lineage from photography's indexical structure. Indexicality has seen renewed interest in film theory recently, as cinema is threatened with a newly articulated version of its repeated death in the digital its theorization seeks to define itself in something tangible, something physical—to regain the imagined fullness and boundedness of bodily identification. The index is an obvious route for the cinema to travel in this regard, as the index is that order of

signification that is determined through physical means. But the interest in cinematic indexicality is also historically grounded. Since at least André Bazin cinema has been characterized as an imprint of nature.¹¹ According to Peter Wollen, Bazin argued that through “...natural optical and photochemical processes, the being of the pro-filmic event (the objects within the camera’s field of vision) was transferred to the being of the film itself, the image sequence registered and subsequently projected. Bazin saw the destiny of cinema as the recreation of the world in its own direct image.”¹² In addition to this valorization of figural realism, Bazin’s account of the cinema emphasized the extent to which the subject has been subtracted from the processes of artistic production; cinema’s indexicality marked it as an art radically detached from the creative labor of the subject. This change offered revolutionary potential for Walter Benjamin, who saw the possibility of a new mode of art that would abandon the bourgeois principles of originality, autonomy, and concentration. What Benjamin saw in film and photography was the possibility of a new mass subject that would be complemented by a new art defined by distraction rather than attention; cinema was to be an art of the everyday. As the trace of the physical, of the contingent, of that which is not created, the index represents the promise and the danger of an art that abandons its autonomy of construction in favor of the capture of the everyday. In a different essay, Krauss argues that Duchamp is the first artist to make the connection between the photographic image and the index explicit. According to Krauss, the index is an active category in much of Duchamp’s work, in both its guise as a material trace in the photographic image and in its role as a deictic linguistic sign—trace and deixis. Duchamp is

¹¹ André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume One* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 9-16.

¹² Peter Wollen, *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 189-190.

constantly working between these definitions, pushing them into one another such that the contradictions of each definition of the index would cast the other in a different light.

It is in the link that Duchamp draws between the readymade and the photograph that Krauss sees the most advanced function of the index. Here, the index becomes a route by which shards of the everyday may enter the closed realm of the art-object without invalidating the predetermined distinction. Krauss writes,

The readymade's parallel with the photograph is established by its process of production. It is about the physical transposition of an object from the continuum of reality into the fixed condition of the art-image by a moment of isolation, or selection. And in this process, it also recalls the function of the shifter. It is a sign which is inherently 'empty,' its signification a function of only this one instance, guaranteed by the existential presence of just this object. It is meaningless meaning that is instituted through the terms of the index.¹³

For Krauss, the photograph translates the impurity of reality into the closed realm of the art object, radically transforming the art-object in the process. Echoing Benjamin's argument about the decaying aura, Krauss claims that in the case of Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma* these changed conditions of artistic production evokes the very thing that seems to exist as the barrier between the image and the "continuum of reality," the frame itself.

Building on Krauss's argument within the specificity of cinema, Mary Ann Doane claims that cinema articulates the index as dialectic of trace and deixis. For Doane the frame is that feature of the cinema where the deictic and trace features of the index meet: "What is being indicated, indexed, brought to our attention is the frame itself, as the border between everything and nothing, as the cinematic equivalent of the 'this.'"¹⁴ The frame offers Doane a mode for understanding cinematic specificity within the dialectic of the index's related but distinct meanings. Unlike a footprint (trace), linguistic shifter (deixis), or other indexical signs

¹³ Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 206.

¹⁴ Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity" *differences* vol. 18 no. 1 (2007), p. 140.

that are easily understood as either trace or deixis, the cinematic image functions as both trace and deixis. The frame is the element that produces and mediates this dialectic. Doane writes,

...the pertinence of the photographic and cinematographic frame, in contrast to the frame of a painting, is that it coordinates and necessitates the dialectic of Pierce's two, seemingly incompatible, definitions of the index, as trace and deixis. The frame directs the spectator to look here, now, while the trace reconfirms that something exists to be looked at. There are two temporalities at work here. While the index as imprint, as trace (as photographic image) endures, the 'this' exhausts itself in its own present.¹⁵

Doane locates this dialectic of trace and deixis in both the photographic and cinematic image. However, the function of the frame is different across the two media. While the photograph also activates the dialectic of trace and deixis through the frame, the cinema's dialectic is constantly in motion, changing the conditions of what is to be looked at, always reactivating the problematic of the frame. Although the photograph is always defined by what is contained within and what is beyond its frame, the cinema's definition of these categories is constantly *shifting*. Beyond the added problematic of motion in the deictic function is its alteration in the function of the trace, where the image is made to seem more present, less absolutely caught in the past than the stillness of the photograph. The cinematic image more immediately than the photograph insists upon its own actuality. As Doane writes, "In a way that Pierce did not anticipate, the two understandings of the index collude to buttress an almost theological faith or certitude in the image." The issue of movement within the frame is not merely an aside about the distinction between the indexical dialectic in the photographic and cinematographic image. The movement within the frame and its limitations constitutes the central problematic in *Anémic Cinéma*.

¹⁵ Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," 140.

The accounts of the index given by Krauss and Doane might appear contradictory in how they locate the deixis in the photographic and cinematic image, but, read in the context of the late work and *Anémic Cinéma*, it is possible to regard them as complementary. Krauss situates the deictic function of the photographic image in a generalized meaninglessness of its own function, as a non-mediating medium, only carrying the figuration of that which it captures, articulating itself as absent. Doane specifies the deictic function of the cinema in the frame of the image, indicating that which is to be seen. Duchamp's construction demonstrates Krauss's argument through its attempt to articulate a meaningless meaning in the rotating movement of its rotoreliefs and its non-communicative language, specifically negating different means of producing meaning. Meanwhile, Doane's specification of the deictic function of the index in the frame of the cinematic image is both recognized and challenged in *Anémic Cinéma* by the manner in which the image both pulls away from the frame, contracting into itself, and pushes outward from the image—but not through the frame, beyond the range of its control, from the center of the image itself and towards the spectator. In other words, both authors' definitions of the index are articulated in negation in *Anémic Cinéma*.

The rotating disks of *Anémic Cinéma*, both the rotoreliefs and the verbal puns, contain their own framing device that fits within the larger frame of the cinematic image while abstaining from its dimensional properties. Through this secondary framing the film pulls away from its primary framing, denying that which marks it as cinema. In resisting the dimensions of the frame, its deictic function, in creating a spatial void between the edges of the rotating disks and the rectangular frame, and the frame's function in containing the representation of three dimensional space, *Anémic Cinéma* positions itself against its own cinematic identity. But the movement of the film, the rotation, also articulates Krauss's claim

for the meaningless meaning of the index. The language that communicates nothing and the roto-reliefs that resemble pre-cinematic optical instruments seem to simply redouble the continuous motion of the cinema that also produces an illusion of movement. In *Anémic Cinéma* the frame is redoubled within the image as a negation of the cinematic deixis through its own limited cinematic trace. That which remains of the trace in *Anémic Cinéma* disrupts the necessity of the deixis through a calculated retreat. Through its challenge to cinematic meaning through cinematic means, a film that denies and defers its cinematic specificity, Duchamp's film articulates a late cinema.

Anémic Cinéma poses itself as a challenge to cinema's function as a medium of representational verisimilitude, attempting to produce a late cinema that challenges both the possibility of art through the cinematic infusions of empirical reality and the possibility of cinema through its calculated disruption of cinema's specific structures of meaning production. *Anémic Cinéma* negates art through the terms of cinematic indexicality while retreating from the dangers of empirical reality represented by the trace through a capture and negation of cinematic indexicality. In other words, the dialectic of the cinematic index is activated in *Anémic Cinéma* as a negation of art, but in the process it destabilizes its existence as cinema as well.

This resistance to its own identity is what defines *Anémic Cinéma* as a late work. According to Doane, cinema's medium-specificity relies on its dialectical articulation of indexicality, as both trace and deixis, and *Anémic Cinéma* works to undermine both of these functions in its own operation while also employing cinema as a means to articulate an anti-art. The title of the film hints at its own logic; it shrinks from its cinematic existence even as it works to identify itself as such. *Anémic Cinéma* is a cinematic construction that withers within the concept of cinema; it shrinks from the borders of its medium-specificity by

forcing the construction of the art-object to fail to meet its own conceptual limits. This is a late cinema, a cinema that stands outside and after artistic autonomy, but relies on that very autonomy. While cinema's specificity is defined through its articulation of the dialectic of indexicality, *Anémic Cinéma* works to undo the possibility of its own indexical functions, offering a minimal trace of an object that might exist beyond itself and pulling back from the deictic function of cinema, negating the rectilinear shape of the cinematic frame in favor of circular materials that offer the illusion of pulling still further away from the edge, from that which focuses the attention of the spectator, as though the image were trying to escape into itself, retreating from itself in an implosion of indexical negation.

Beethoven's Late Style and The Late Work

Adorno's essay, "Late Style in Beethoven," presents a brief theory of the late work, defining it against its conventional understanding in aesthetic philosophy as a psychologism of the artist approaching death.¹⁶ Adorno complicates the concept by making the late work a concern of form rather than biography, of history rather than unmediated subjectivity. According to Adorno, the late work appears within the history of aesthetics at that moment when form becomes not just a means of art's expression but its content as well—modernity. Adorno's theorization does not abandon the category of the subject and move to the object in isolation, but, rather, insists on the objectivity of the subject itself. According to Adorno, this objectivity of the subject is expressed in the late work—this is what distinguishes it. It is not that the subject disappears from the late work but that the subject remains present through a mediated expression of its own absence. Rather than existing as a force that forms and alters the aesthetic materials, the subject of the late work seeks to diminish and obscure its own presence and activity.

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, "Late Style in Beethoven," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 564-568.

The subject of the late work endeavors to be a non-presence. This quality of the late work explains Adorno's choice of Beethoven as his favored example, but it is often confused by the composer's supposed social isolation as a result of his hearing loss rather than a historical necessity mediated through that subjectivity. Beethoven's final works represented for Adorno a significant moment in the history of the sociality of art. Rose Rosengard Subotnik argues that Beethoven's final compositions "...signify for Adorno the irreversible bypassing of individual freedom as a possibility in concrete historical reality..."¹⁷ Beethoven represented for Adorno a last gasp of the revolutionary potential of the bourgeois class before it began to descend irreversibly into disaster. "Implicit in Beethoven's late style, as Adorno analyzes it," Subotnik writes, "is the eventual dissolution of all the values that made bourgeois humanism the hope of a human civilization."¹⁸ In Beethoven's last compositions Adorno recognized early signs of the failing of an artistic realm oriented towards the achievement of humanistic goals and, in response to this failure, advanced art turned inward, seeking solace within its protected realm while also dooming itself to the impossibility of intervening on behalf of the human suffering that it expresses.¹⁹

According to Adorno, what is discernible in Beethoven's mature period is the possibility, though not necessarily the actuality, the imaginability within art, of a reconciliation of universal and particular—the emergence of a universal subject-object.²⁰ What Adorno calls Beethoven's late style signals a move from a social situation wherein the

¹⁷ Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 17.

¹⁸ Subotnik, *Developing Variations*, 17.

¹⁹ A differently articulated version of this dialectic can be seen in the first excursus of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 35-62.

²⁰ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), 149-209.

possibility of reconciliation, even if momentary, is thinkable, to one where the central feature of sociality is the contradiction between the universal and the particular. In this situation of social contradiction, Beethoven's final compositions retain truth content through their maintenance of formal contradiction. Subotnik writes, "To retain their status as authentic art, the works of Beethoven's late style had to replace synthesis as their formal content with the impossibility of synthesis; their aesthetic content had to become the impossibility of aesthetic wholeness and harmony."²¹ Beethoven's art maintains its concern for a reconciled social reality through an artistic form that specifically refuses formal reconciliation, and through this formal dissonance it constructs its social relation through a retreat from sociality. Described here in the specificity of Beethoven's late style is the central dialectic of Adorno's aesthetic theory.

Adorno argues that art maintains its allegiance to social reality through a retreat into its own precariously maintained social autonomy. Art as an institution relies on the social relations of class society, depending on the division of labor for its continuation. Despite its reliance on the divisions of exchange society, art is critical of bourgeois social relations through determinate negation of that which maintains it, not in direct confrontations against particular injustices of that reality.²² Art's self-acknowledgment of this predicament is what Adorno calls the "guilt of art": art's desire to express suffering but its inability to directly engage with the social reality of that suffering without endangering its own existence. Fredric Jameson argues that this crucial feature of Adorno's aesthetics appears in the contradictions between the concretion of the individual works and the generality of art as a concept. In other words, the social aporia of art appears in the non-identity of individual works and the

²¹ Subotnik, *Developing Variations*, 25.

²² Theodor Adorno, et al. *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 2007).

universal concept of art. It is in the necessary distance between these poles that art's guilt is articulated, revealing itself to social reality as the individual work, existing within the realm of the concrete, and then retreating into the conceptual abstraction of art as an escape hatch. This internally generated transit is a constant process executed by each work and it is difficult to locate instances where a work is more resolutely engaged in either its universal or its particular manifestation as the work is a network of relations among these elements. But as Jameson details, this formal non-identity of the artwork is also its social relation: "What [the individual works] 'work on' in the artistic process, is to engage this universal sense of guilt, to address it with lacerating acuity, to bring it to consciousness in the form of an unresolvable contradiction...the guilt with which all works of art are suffused will be one of the mediations by which the otherwise monadic work is profoundly and internally related to the otherwise external social order..."²³ Jameson is situating art's guilt as its primary relation to social reality. In Adorno's account of modernity, art relates to social reality through a necessary retreat, expressing the suffering of what is ultimately beyond its reach, beyond its power to fix; art is forced to contemplate the damages done in the name of its own continued existence without intervening on behalf of that which it mourns.²⁴ Art exists as an autonomous institution of bourgeois society that expresses the suffering of the social relations that maintain it. It is the manner in which film relates to social reality, its saturation

²³ Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 1990), 130. Subotnik also addresses this issue in the context of the "wound" of art rather than its guilt but specifically in the context of lateness. "In fact, these works exhibit what Adorno calls the 'wound' of all art: the appearance of contributing, by virtue of merely existing, to the perpetuation of false consciousness, that is, to a lasting rupture between critical essence and affirmative or ideological appearance in art" (Subotnik, *Developing Variations*, 31).

²⁴ I do not think it is a coincidence that this posture that Adorno assigns to art so closely resembles that which Benjamin accords to the angel of history as depicted in Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*. It does not seem far-fetched to understand Adorno's aesthetics as a response to this figure, transposing Benjamin's theory of historical progress into his own theory of art's social position. See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 257.

by empirical reality, which makes it crucial in considering both the late work and Adorno's aesthetics more generally.

Film is dangerous but also crucial for Adorno precisely because it presents the possibility of introducing social reality into the autonomous space of art without abandoning that autonomy. Filmic cinema's indexicality represents a transfusion of empirical reality into the realm of art, disallowing the purity of its carefully maintained autonomy in favor of a confrontation with the social. I want to read against the misconception of Adorno as resolutely hostile to film and instead highlight the manner in which art that employs film in its construction stages the contradictions of the late work in a way that helps to understand the historical contradiction of art in modernity and after. This is what I am calling the late work of cinematic excess: the bleeding of the empirical world into the artwork through filmic cinema's indexicality. Music is often Adorno's favored medium because of its self-referentiality, its closedness to any reality beyond itself. Cinema can be seen as existing at the other pole of art from music, always infused by elements that are not its own, that only appear as shadows within it but require an acknowledgement of the social reality beyond art at every instant. Thus, filmic cinema is infused by the constant reminder of the guilt of art, always forced to confront the social while attempting to maintain a dwindling autonomy.

Art's guilt is the recognition of its own reliance on the social relations of class society, depending on the division of labor for its continuation. In a section of *Aesthetic Theory* on "Guilt," Adorno writes, "Artworks are, a priori, socially culpable, and each one that deserves its name seeks to expiate this guilt. Their strategy of surviving requires that their straining toward synthesis develop in the form of their irreconcilability."²⁵ For Adorno, artworks are by their very existence guilty, and deal with this guilt through a formal refusal of

²⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 234.

reconciliation, but in this refusal they also turn against the reality that the refusal was taken in the name of. Art's irreconcilable existence in class society is key to understanding the late work. Beethoven's late style represents for Adorno one of the first examples of art beginning to flee from the social in an attempt at self-preservation. Late works represent a sort of exile from the world, still existing as part of that world but forced to turn away. Beethoven's compositions, as music—perhaps the most hermetic and self-referential art—demonstrate this through the progressive breakdown in the works' internal cohesion. While Beethoven's mature compositions exhibit a mastery of the material, his final compositions appear as accumulations of material, unformed, unmediated by the labor of the subject; Beethoven's late works demonstrate a lack of synthesis. This irreconcilability acquires a different appearance and prominence in filmic cinema, posing synthesis as an impossibility in the face of the ever present sociality of the index's relation to empirical reality. Cinema contains an excess of non-art, of reality, elements that reside as exiles within the work itself, but which also pull the work into the position of an exile in relation to empirical reality—related to the social through exclusion, whether forced or self-imposed.

Edward Said's account of Adorno's writing on late style highlights the importance of exile.²⁶ According to Said, Beethoven's late compositions constitute "...a moment when the artist who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it. His late works constitute a form of exile."²⁷ Said notes that other

²⁶ T.J. Demos has argued for the centrality of exile in thinking about the work of Duchamp: "...Duchamp employed an art of mobile objects and disjunctive spaces, constructing experimental installations and mixed-media assemblages that were extremely sensitive to matters of location, framing, and (de)contextualization. These works not only express the experiential anguish of geopolitical displacement, but put that force of displacement to their own radical ends, modeling new modes of being released from the rigid structuring of identity." T.J. Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 1-2.

²⁷ Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage, 2006), 8.

accounts of Beethoven speak of this developing alienation with reference to the biographical, to Beethoven's loss of hearing and impending death. But Adorno is concerned less with reading the artwork through the artist's biography than with an accounting of the alienation and exile that is apparent in the formal development of the artwork itself, with the subject as a mediating but not determinate factor, and as an indicator of the subject's own distance from the developing social world of capitalism. The subject's alienation is a function of the social totality within which it is formed and exists rather than a reflection of a particular mode of the subject's own biographical circumstance. Against the orthodoxy of bourgeois aesthetics, in Adorno's account of art the subject is not an autonomous creator of a monadic work, toiling in isolation as a singular genius. Instead, Adorno's interest in late works is in how they move away from the universal concept of art while still remaining under its law within the particularity of the art-object. As Said observes, "Late style is what happens if art does not abdicate its rights in favor of reality."²⁸ Said is referring to the dialectic of autonomy that is central to Adorno's theory of art, where the artwork retains a semblance of autonomy, obeying its own internal laws of organization, its own inherent purpose, while still existing within a world dominated by the laws of exchange and utility. A late work is distinguished as one that raises this contradiction to the level of its formal construction.

Said focuses on late style over late work, a decision that draws out the issue of the subject's function in a way that is not addressed by Said directly; the absence of the late work in Said's account highlights its centrality for Adorno and addresses the dialectic of individual work and universal concept that Jameson discusses.²⁹ Said's interpretation focuses heavily on the figure of Beethoven which has both strengths and weaknesses as an approach to the

²⁸ Said, *On Late Style*, 9.

²⁹ Said, *On Late Style*, viii.

essay. In a manner characteristic of Adorno's writing, his essay moves between the specificity of its example of Beethoven to broader statements on art. However, for Adorno it is not a question of separating off particular from universal but of emphasizing their relationality, their imperfect union, uneven and unequal; it is this dynamic and contradictory relation that late style expresses. Said writes, "Beethoven's late works remain unreconciled, uncoopted by a higher synthesis: they do not fit any scheme, and they cannot be reconciled or resolved, since their irresolution and unsynthesized fragmentariness are constitutive, neither ornamental nor symbolic of something else."³⁰ Adorno's account of the late work is defined through its ruptures, in the moments where it appears incomplete. Its essential character is its impurity, its openness to the contamination of empirical reality—the indexical trace—against its autonomy. Cinema stages a particularly precarious relation of art and empirical reality but this problematic appears in all art and in each medium. Adorno's example is the more resolutely autonomous medium of music, arguing that music appears particularly asocial where it resists formal synthesis, as in the final compositions of Beethoven or the atonal compositions of Arnold Schoenberg.³¹ In literature, Adorno would likely identify favored examples such as Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, or especially Samuel Beckett. Adorno's account of the interrogation of meaning in Beckett's *Endgame* bears a strong resemblance to his descriptions of the late work, but without the memory of a moment of utopian hope still contaminating the now very real confrontation of art with world-historical catastrophe. Adorno writes,

The less events can be presumed to be inherently meaningful, the more the idea of aesthetic substance as the unity of what appears and what was intended becomes an illusion. Beckett rids himself of this illusion by coupling the two moments in their disparity. Thought becomes both a means to produce meaning in the work, a

³⁰ Said, *On Late Style*, 13.

³¹ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 27-102.

meaning which cannot be rendered directly in tangible form, and a means to express the absence of meaning.³²

As Said notes, the fact that the late works confront this “lost totality” defines their catastrophic character; even as all works are necessarily imperfect or incomplete in the face of a contradictory reality, they are shielded by their autonomy, but the late work is less protected, more vulnerable to the incursions of reality against its monadic totality, fleeing into exilic solitude.³³

Implicit in the theory of the late work is Adorno’s critique of the Hegelian system, the negative dialectic that restlessly moves against its own constructed totalities and refuses the narrative of historical progress, as both an epistemological fallacy and an utter impossibility in the wake of Auschwitz (although the essay on Beethoven is written in 1937, Adorno’s critique of Hegel was relatively constant from his earliest essays to his final works³⁴). In this essay, that tension is brought about not by a direct critique of Hegel’s system but through an analysis of Beethoven, whose mature compositions are sometimes compared to Hegel’s systematic philosophy.³⁵ Said notes this link: “In Beethoven’s middle-period opera *Fidelio*—the quintessential middle-period work—the idea of humanity is manifest throughout, and with it an idea of a better world. Similarly for Hegel, irreconcilable

³² Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature: Volume One* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 242.

³³ We might locate a different but complementary version of this account of the relation of the art to concrete reality in Roland Barthes’s essay, “The Reality Effect.” Barthes concludes, “The disintegration of the sign—which seems indeed to be modernity’s grand affair—is of course present in the realistic enterprise, but in a somewhat regressive manner, since it occurs in the name of a referential plenitude, whereas the goal today is to empty the sign and infinitely to postpone its object so as to challenge, in a radical fashion, the age-old aesthetic of ‘representation.’” Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 148.

³⁴ As an example of this continuity compare the critique of totality in the early essay “The Actuality of Philosophy” and *Negative Dialectics*. Theodor W. Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy, *Telos* 31 (1977): 120-133. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973).

³⁵ For an example of Adorno’s own contribution to this comparison, see Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Contemporary Relationship of Philosophy and Music” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 135-161.

opposites were resolvable by means of the dialectic, with a reconciliation of opposites, a *grand* synthesis, at the end.”³⁶ In other words, if Beethoven’s mature mastery and synthesis of the material is the corollary of the Hegelian *aufhebung* then the late work is more approximate to Adorno’s version of the dialectic, a relentless but specific negativity that never remains secure in its totalities, always subjecting them to a further critique, a deepened negativity. Subotnik argues a version of this as well, writing, “...beginning with Beethoven’s third period, authentic music had to become in effect a ‘double negation.’”³⁷ Like Adorno’s dialectic, the late work’s hallmark is its negativity, its oppositionality to its own existence, its highlighting of its own constructedness, standing fast as defiantly unnatural in a world dominated by second nature—the fantastic illusion of a world without history.

Like the negative dialectic, the negativity of the late work is not chaotic or random. It is a negativity that specifies its targets, that moves carefully within its own defined boundaries, diminishing its own meanings and positions in its self-definition. In other words, the negativity of the late work more closely resembles the determinate negation of the negative dialectic than a Dionysian or anarchic rage against everything existing. And this determination is precisely what makes the negativity of the late work compelling; a wholly negative work would be unable to maintain its status as art, while the late work maintains that status as a protest against and critique of the social existence of the artwork that maintains itself through the continuation of actual suffering.

Said argues that lateness exists for Adorno as a quintessence of the negative dialectic, existing outside of any synthesis, but containing scars from the failed attempts that have preceded it. Lateness signifies a movement of history that has abandoned the pretensions of

³⁶ Said, *On Late Style*, 13.

³⁷ Subotnik, *Developing Variations*, 25.

progress, existing as an exile against its ravages: “For Adorno, lateness is the idea of surviving beyond what is acceptable and normal...There is no transcendence or unity.”³⁸ This is a dialectic from which progress and synthesis have been banished. Instead, it insistently recycles itself, preserving the preservative function of the *aufhebung* without ever seeming to fully embrace its transcendence. Most importantly, the negative dialectic is a historical dialectic; standing in contrast to Hegel’s abstract epistemological system, Adorno’s dialectic functions through failure precisely because Hegel’s dialectic failed to live up to its own promise of historical synthesis.

But if there appears a similarity of structure between both mature Beethoven and the Hegelian dialectic and late Beethoven and the negative dialectic it must be remembered that neither proves anything beyond its own appearance; the similarity of structure does not certify the truth of either the late work or the negative dialectic, nor the falsity of the mature work or the Hegelian dialectic. Adorno reads the rise of both the dialectic in Hegel and the mastery of the musical material in Beethoven to be historic phenomena that coincided with the rise of the bourgeoisie in the first half of the nineteenth century. And if these are expressive of the bourgeoisie as a triumphant and still progressive class formation, then late Beethoven expresses the first hints of this unraveling, the expiration of its historical promise. As Said notes, “...late-style Beethoven presides over music’s rejection of the new bourgeois order and forecasts the totally authentic and *novel* art of Schoenberg...”³⁹ In other words, Beethoven’s late style is a precursor of the modern music that would appear in the twentieth century. It was a phenomenon that appeared out of its own moment, alienated from its historical situation because of its inability to master the material into a cohesive musical

³⁸ Said, *On Late Style*, 13.

³⁹ Said, *On Late Style*, 13.

totality. Beethoven's late-style appeared both behind and ahead of its time, reflecting its past in the unreconstructed musical tropes that were now presented without subjective intervention while at the same time serving as the vanguard of determinate fragmentation in the new music that was yet to appear. As Said argues, "...late-style Beethoven, remorselessly alienated and obscure, becomes the prototypical modern aesthetic form, and by virtue of its distance from and rejection of bourgeois society and even a quiet death, it acquires an even greater significance and defiance for that very reason."⁴⁰

It is the late work's exilic sociality and alienation that defines its relation to its historical moment; the late work belongs to modernity by defining its outer limits, by existing at the far reaches of art's self-definition. It is this quality of the late work that hints at its allegiance to both cinema and the avantgarde. Cinema's indexical quality—its contamination by empirical reality, its anti-art lack of construction, its close relation to the everyday—presents a challenge to the traditions of autonomy in modern aesthetics.⁴¹ The avantgarde presents a challenge to the aesthetics of autonomy through the incorporation of commodities, photographs, and other everyday objects into its art, insisting upon the demise of aesthetic autonomy, even while relying on the shelter of that autonomy for its continued existence. The avantgarde and cinema provide key instances in which the issues of the late work are tested, and as mentioned above, both are central to Adorno's theory of art, even if usually underappreciated as such. Like the late work, late cinema, as exemplified in *Anemic Cinema*, exists as something ahead of its moment, as a precursor of what is to come but also as a melancholic trace of the past, an object that does not acquiesce to being forgotten and abandoned by the onward rush of progress.

⁴⁰ Said, *On Late Style*, 14.

⁴¹ As already mentioned, this destruction of autonomy is celebrated in Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility."

As Said emphasizes, lateness for Adorno is a form of exile, a distance that always marks itself through its break and through its continued, strained belonging. Said's interpretation of Adorno's essay correctly emphasizes the extent to which the appearance of late style in Beethoven marks a sort of caesura within modernity that signifies the termination of the possibility of projecting utopian hope as more than a negative term in its attendant aesthetic forms. Rather than emphasizing the "late work" Said mostly discusses a "late style" that is sometimes expressed in the former. Said's choice of emphasis allows the category of lateness to more easily remain within the realm of the subject, whereas a discussion of the late work necessarily involves an interrogation of the limits of the subject's domain of influence.

This distinction is significant because the category of the work is one of the prime targets of critique by the historical avantgarde and is implicit within the problematic of lateness that Adorno is developing.⁴² While "style" easily moves between the specificity of the subject and the generality of a historical period, the "work" forces identification with the subject as a mediating function of a singular and delimited construction while forcing an acknowledgment of the constructedness of the art-object. "Style" goes beyond authorial specificity even as it retains this appearance while "work" forces the delimitation and violence of specificity. Thus, the very concept of the late work is internally unstable in a way that late style is not. Late style describes a set of undefined features as exhibiting qualities of lateness, diluting its critical force, while the late work protests against its own social viability.

⁴² Jochen Schulte-Sasse emphasizes this element of Bürger's account of the avantgarde in his foreword to *Theory of the Avant-Garde*: "[Bürger] profoundly highlights the importance of the avant-garde's attack on the institution of art. What is most important in Bürger is the way he uses this attack to gain a perspective for seeing the way in which art and society must always be mediated in some way. He is able to show that understanding this mediation will allow us to see that there is a historically specific institutionalization of aesthetic praxis in every era. He shows that this level of mediation is not something external to the concept of the work of art. It is essential, as it historicizes and makes relative the concept of the work of art itself." Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde," in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxxvii.

The concept of the artwork seeks to define an autonomous object, something self-contained and internally coherent against which lateness stands; style is more malleable, less definite, characterizing whole periods of an artist's oeuvre or a tendency common across a series of artists within a particular historical moment or even across several. Style is at once too universal and not universal enough. Thus, Said's focus on late style is misdirected as a way to understand the full context and contradictions of lateness as Adorno defines it, and, in fact, the concept of the late work appears more often throughout Adorno's essay on Beethoven.

For Adorno, late works are characterized by a sparsity of subjective mediation, an abundance of conventions left undeveloped by the work of the subject. The signifier of the subject in these works is located in the extent to which it extinguishes traces of its own activity as a mediating factor; the late work is concerned with the manner in which subjectivity and objectivity are mediated through the formal construction of the artwork.⁴³ The division of subject and object is one of the defining problematics in Adorno's thought. Late works are those that appear least like the organic unity towards which the idealism of bourgeois aesthetics points: a premature and false reconciliation. This distinction appears in the differing forms of lateness in Adorno's essay itself.

While Adorno's essay is addressed to the topic of Beethoven's late style, it points throughout to a broader category of the late work as it might be imagined in extension from these reflections, and, as already mentioned, the concept of the late work predominates over late style in the essay. Those instances that discuss late style are largely concerned with examples from Beethoven while discussion of the late work seeks to push beyond this

⁴³ This particular form of the mediation of subjectivity and objectivity is the defining feature of the late work according to Shierry Weber NicholSEN. She writes, "Adorno formulates the essential feature of the late work as the disjunction of subjectivity and objectivity, so that as work becomes late it becomes increasingly inorganic. In this sense, late work characterizes the direction the arts take as modernism advances within the context of 'late capitalism'..." Shierry Weber NicholSEN, *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 8.

specificity into a broader category. And a certain progression within the fragmentary parataxis of the essay is apparent, moving from the concrete specificity of Beethoven's compositions to speculations about the art-historical category of the late work. The tension between style and work, or between individual work and concept as Jameson poses the issue, is apparent throughout. This structure of tension is built into Adorno's own sentences. Take for example the following sentence, which contains this tension within its own two halves, dividing itself between a consideration of the compositions of late Beethoven and the subsequent consideration of the late work, related but distinct from the specificity of the example: "Die Zäsuren aber, das jähe Abbrechen, das mehr als alles andere den letzten Beethoven bezeichnet, sind jene Augenblicke des Ausbruchs; das Werk schweigt, wenn es verlassen wird, und kehrt seine Höhlung nach außen."⁴⁴ Susan Gillespie translates this passage as the following, "The caesuras, the sudden discontinuities that more than anything else characterize the very late Beethoven, are those moments of breaking away; the work is silent at the instant when it is left behind, and turns its emptiness outward."⁴⁵ As Gillespie's translation shows, the sentence is divided at its midsection by a semicolon, marking the ambiguous relationality of the sections, and Adorno begins the second half with the mention of a work, presumably referencing back to the unspecified works of the late Beethoven that are mentioned in the first half of the sentence even as none is specified in either location. But in the second half Beethoven is no longer mentioned, leaving his presence ambiguous. Instead, what appears in the second half of the sentence is a consideration of the formal development of the late work that empties itself of content in the process of forcing its own

⁴⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 17* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997), 16-17.

⁴⁵ Adorno, "Late Style in Beethoven," 567. Gillespie's translation maintains the ambiguity in "das Werk"/"the work" that is present in the original. The phrase can be read straightforwardly as referring to the ambiguous Beethoven works referenced in the first half, but Adorno's choice of the general "das" (the) over a more restrictive "jenes" (that) or "dieses" (this) leaves room for the passage to be read as referring to the category of the artwork rather than any specific work by Beethoven.

appearance, emptying itself of the content that the subject as author/artist would provide just as that same figure has been excised by Adorno.

In the first half of the sentence is a discussion of the particularity of Beethoven's late compositions; it characterizes something that runs across multiple individual works, all of which incorporate similar formal characteristics. Meanwhile, the second half of the sentence specifies the activity of an individual work without naming it. Thus, while the first half of the sentence comes closer to naming a specific set of works that are identified with Beethoven it pulls back from designating any singular composition, remaining at a level of generality within the specificity of the composer's oeuvre and without articulating the behavior of the late work, the second half of the sentence specifies the movements of the late work, presumably within the works of Beethoven but without any explicit linkage beyond its placement following that which preceded it. The specified universality of the second half of the sentence is set up by the non-specific particularity of the first half; each component could exist in isolation but finds its specific negation within the terms of the other half.

In a manner characteristic of Adorno's own style, the two halves of this sentence stand in tension, working toward an inherent movement that never settles into agreement. As two halves that exist as less than a whole their meaning suggests that the instances of Beethoven that appear unincorporated, unformed are the location where the late work detaches from the social order, where they enter the asociality of artistic autonomy but also escape into art's constructedness, its inorganic character, something made and not living, something fundamentally unnatural. The late work is the province of the remains of art, undeveloped by the innovations of artistic endeavor, but not abandoned; it is the place where subjectivity infiltrates the artwork through its explicit appearance as an incomplete and inorganic construction. The late work is the moment in art when subjectivity enters into

the work as an objective appearance that makes its mediating function into the meaning of art as the negation of the meaning imparted by the subject; lateness is where meaning becomes as fragmentary and unnatural as the subject itself.

“Late Style in Beethoven” links the crisis of subjectivity that inheres in the late work to an objective problematic of the subject’s relation to art. This problematic is expressed in the work’s attempts to break out of its existence as art, insisting upon its historicity and constructedness. Adorno writes, “The power of subjectivity in the late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves. It breaks their bonds, not in order to express itself, but in order, expressionless, to cast off the appearance of art.”⁴⁶ While Beethoven’s late style may have signaled an early example of this type of art, it came to predominance at a later moment when art was forced into a confrontation with its own function and location in class society, as a function of the division of labor, when art became its own object.

The late work is about the status of the artwork in moments of historical crisis, or perhaps the articulation of the particularity of crisis in artworks at each historical moment. Adorno’s aesthetics insistently posits the crisis of both art and aesthetics. Late works are the extreme example of this: “...late works are relegated to the outer reaches of art, in the vicinity of document.”⁴⁷ The late work, in abandoning the appearance of subjective creation, seems to abandon the possibility of existing as a work, as something that has been transformed, while existing as a construction despite this appearance: this is the paradox of the late work. The problematics articulated by the late work are not isolated to this essay on

⁴⁶ Adorno, “Late Style in Beethoven,” 566.

⁴⁷ Adorno, “Late Style in Beethoven,” 564.

Beethoven, even if it is the place where they are organized around that term most specifically in Adorno.

Crisis forms the backdrop of Adorno's most significant, if unfinished, statement on art and aesthetics, *Aesthetic Theory*. Adorno makes clear from the outset of his own late work that he is responding to the problematic of art's existence as it was raised by the historical avantgarde in the early twentieth century, which he characterizes as an expansion of the realm of artistic possibility, an expansion that for him is also a contraction:

It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist. The forfeiture of what could be done spontaneously or unproblematically has not been compensated for by the open infinitude of new possibilities that reflection confronts. In many regards, expansion appears as contraction. The sea of the formerly inconceivable, on which around 1910 revolutionary art movements set out, did not bestow the promised happiness of adventure.⁴⁸

Adorno's allusion to the "revolutionary art movements" of the early-twentieth century is recognizably a nod to the historical avantgarde (Dada, Futurism, Constructivism, Surrealism, etc.).⁴⁹ What Adorno is saying about the avantgarde is that its utopian ambitions of artistic freedom coupled with its self-acknowledgment of its position within class society comes at a cost. Adorno is identifying the historical avantgarde as that moment when art begins to turn against its own possibility, even its very concept. As Adorno notes, as art tries to escape its own purpose—purposelessness—and its own internal boundaries, it finds itself confronted with a problematic more daunting. In other words, as art pushes beyond its own autonomy, its own bounded and partial totality, it is forced to confront the contradictions of the world beyond; it must confront the reality that absolute freedom is impossible in a world ruled by exchange and that art, by casting off its own precarious autonomy, only exposes itself to

⁴⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1.

⁴⁹ Adorno addresses surrealism specifically in the essay, "Looking Back on Surrealism" in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature, Volume One* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 87.

greater strictures, expressed in the art of the historical avantgarde as a refusal to adhere to historical precedents. Continuing from the previous passage, Adorno writes:

...the process that was unleashed consumed the categories in the name of that for which it was undertaken. More was constantly pulled into the vortex of the newly taboo; everywhere artists rejoiced less over the newly won realm of freedom than that they immediately sought once again after ostensible yet scarcely adequate order. For absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into contradiction with the perennial unfreedom of the whole.⁵⁰

Adorno is setting the terms for his theory of aesthetics and grounding that theory in the artistic practice of the historical avantgarde and the contradictions in which it existed.

Adorno's aesthetics represent an attempt to maintain a role for autonomy as the means by which the artwork expresses its sociality while simultaneously demonstrating the untenability of its social position. The late work represents an attempt by Adorno to define a category of art that not only contains this contradiction but transforms it into its very content. And the manner in which this occurs is through the diremption of subject and object in the work that appears as the subjective synthesis of the artwork transformed into a fragmentation of objective content, of which the constructive activity of the subject is now but one component.

The late work describes art objects that resist their own internal identity, that find their own movement in the attempt to disassemble their own constructedness as art. They are works that push their identity into crisis. This is demonstrated in the final line of "Late Style in Beethoven": "In the history of art late works are the catastrophes."⁵¹ Adorno means that late works are figurations of the crisis of the bourgeois subject in capitalist society, a crisis that is expressed through art's negation, but that negation is only expressed in the social relation that art helps to maintain and through the means of art itself. Art is necessarily

⁵⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1.

⁵¹ Adorno, "Late Style in Beethoven," 567.

mediated by a subject, usually identified as a single individual, at least for Adorno, and in the late work it appears as though the subject has altered nothing. The historical materials that have been inherited from artistic convention appear but are left unformed, unmastered by the creative labor of the subject; the late work appears as less than art—reified—readymade.

For Adorno, the subject retains its place in the work through the manner in which the mediating function of the subject works to appear absent. The labor of the subject consists of the assembly of the work's material as a function of an objective situation; this is a subject that is less sure, less triumphal, less eager, and less able to make a mark for itself. The problem appears in the definition of art in the age of the bourgeoisie, as a creation of an individual genius, a demonstration of subjective freedom, of humanity's progress and promise. It is this contradictory status of the late work, the art work's protest against its status as art, as a coherent and autonomous work, that suggests a link with both film and the avantgarde; it is no coincidence that the practice that Adorno describes as late so closely resembles a practice that is important to both film and the avantgarde, that of montage—a meeting point.

Autonomy and Antinomy of the Avantgarde

Despite the centrality of the avantgarde to his theory of art and aesthetics, Adorno is often characterized as hostile to its politically committed art.⁵² The most prominent such critique is offered by Peter Bürger, whose *Theory of the Avant-Garde* argues that the avantgarde represents a radical rejection of the bourgeois conventions of art, a consequence of art's confrontation with its own positionality within a capitalist mode of production. According to

⁵² The key text on the question of political commitment in art by Adorno is written as a critique of the positions laid out by Jean-Paul Sartre, Bertolt Brecht, and, to a lesser extent, Georg Lukacs. See Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment," in Adorno, et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, 177-195. This problematic is also a central concern in the debate between Adorno and Benjamin. Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 125-142, 280-342.

this account, the avantgarde (in its “heroic” period) protests against its own social premise, its own existence, and the class relations that provide for its continuation, by insisting upon and staging the integration of art with life. The avantgarde sought to abolish the autonomy that art had enjoyed in bourgeois society, which had insulated art from political commitment and allowed it to remain engaged in illusion when it should be forced to (or act as the impetus to) confront reality. Bürger’s thesis is built in no small part on a critique of Adorno’s aesthetics; it takes for granted the premise that political commitment in art is transparently understood as such and that the identification of purely political or purely autonomous art is easily achieved and desirable.

Bürger argues that Adorno’s aesthetics is hostile to the avantgarde in its allegiance to and defense of a modernism that the avantgarde set itself against. Bürger’s argument is premised against a full-scale rejection of Adorno’s aesthetics that claims it is fatally flawed in its conception—through some mixture of latent theological commitments, a reduction of art to the expression of negativity, and its overly exclusionary canon that is coincident with high modernism (Schoenberg, Beckett, Mann, Kafka, Joyce, Proust, etc.). Instead Bürger proposes a historical reading of Adorno’s aesthetics that asserts its outdatedness, its *lateness*, in the changed circumstances of the present.⁵³ In other words, Bürger is attempting a sympathetic reading of Adorno, a determinate negation of his aesthetics in order to reclaim the possibility of its continued relevance. Bürger argues that Adorno’s aesthetics is outdated because of its claim that “there can be only one artistic material which is most advanced.”⁵⁴ This idea is particularly problematic for Bürger because his account of the avantgarde is

⁵³ Bürger’s claim seems premised on the idea that Adorno’s aesthetics is outdated in its own moment, rather than that they have failed to keep up with the historical development of art and aesthetics, at least to the extent that Adorno’s aesthetics is identified with the *Aesthetic Theory*, published in 1970, only four years prior to Bürger’s text, although Bürger has revisited and revised his initial claims in more recent writings.

⁵⁴ Peter Bürger, “Adorno’s Anti-Avant-Gardism,” *Telos* 86 (1990): 50.

premised on the idea that the avantgarde's principle advance was the end of the prohibition against non-artistic materials in a given artwork by the determinations of history and tradition. The achievement of the avantgarde was the prohibition against art's previous historical prohibitions; it was a movement premised upon artistic (and subjective?) freedom from historical necessity. The avantgarde was the advance of the new against the old; it was a militancy within art that sought to abolish the premises of art. It sought to advance modernism's commitment to the new against the tradition of modernism itself. Adorno's insistence upon historical truth residing in a single material is problematic for Bürger because it limits the potential for art's absolute expression of its own falsity. Adorno prohibits the self-critique of art by insisting upon the value and historicity of the category of the individual work, the conventional materials of the distinct media, the social formation of art—Bürger desires an art without guilt—and their shared determination of future constructions. But Adorno's insistence upon these categories is not an unqualified validation of their political or ontological truth, but an acknowledgement of their continued importance within the actuality of artistic production, even in the anti-art negations of the avantgarde.

Bürger's critique of Adorno attempts to specify the relation between modernism and the avantgarde—art and anti-art. According to Bürger, modernism is premised on the notion of the self-enclosed and autonomous “work,” and the related concept of the “genius” that produced it, while the avantgarde seeks the destruction of those same concepts through such techniques as montage and *écriture automatique*, modes of artistic production that aim to remove or diminish the subject from its supposedly determinate role in modernism. Much of Bürger's argument is premised on a reductive reading of Adorno's exchanges with Walter Benjamin wherein Benjamin becomes the theorist of the avantgarde with his approving nods to Dada and Surrealism in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”

and elsewhere, and Adorno, the champion of Mann, Beckett, and Schoenberg, stands as the theorist of modernism par excellence. Benjamin's complex mediations of aura are reduced in Bürger to a rejection of the "work" in favor of an avantgardist practice of "inserting leftover everyday life fragments in the art work."⁵⁵ Bürger indicts Adorno's aesthetics as regressive in their attempt to hold back the progressive development that he claims is being advanced by the avantgarde, integrating art and life: "The avant-gardist attack on the autonomy of art was Benjamin's starting point for his thesis concerning the loss of aura. In Adorno's view, this can only be a false sublation of aesthetic semblance, never the historical point of reversal whence to grasp the contradictions of art in bourgeois society. This is the core of Adorno's anti-avant-gardism."⁵⁶ But Bürger misrecognizes Adorno's dialectical approach to the avantgarde and anti-art as an abstract rejection. Where Adorno recognizes the potential danger in the avantgarde's premise of abolishing the autonomy of art, Bürger sees only a triumphal progress and an affirming teleology. Bürger's invocation of Benjamin highlights by neglect the potential dangers of the integration of art and everyday life in Benjamin's closing line on fascism's aestheticization of politics. Leaving aside Benjamin's own considerable disagreements with Adorno, Benjamin recognized the dangers of integrating art and the everyday in the abstract and understood its revolutionary potential in the specificities.

Bürger's critique argues that Adorno makes no distinctions between the historical avantgarde and the neo-avantgarde or other subsequent anti-art developments. Despite Bürger's insistence upon the ahistoricism of Adorno's aesthetics, it is, in fact, Bürger who romanticizes the historical avantgarde against subsequent developments, disallowing the possibility for both critique of the originary moment or a non-prescriptive engagement with

⁵⁵ Bürger, "Adorno's Anti-Avant-Gardism," 54.

⁵⁶ Bürger, "Adorno's Anti-Avant-Gardism," 56.

later developments. Contrary to Bürger's reading of Adorno's aesthetics as an abstract rejection of the avantgarde because of the latter's commitment to aesthetic autonomy, it is possible to read Adorno's commitment to autonomy as a dialectical position that is instead developed through an engagement with the anti-art of the avantgarde. Stewart Martin summarizes this position: "...it is the seminal quality of Adorno's dialectically constructed concept of art's autonomy that it is deeply mediated by the claim to anti-art in its various forms; not merely as an external consideration defining what is outside the limits of art's autonomy, but as integral to the constitution of that autonomy itself."⁵⁷ Instead of rejecting the anti-art claims of the avantgarde, Adorno considers them as constitutive of the problematic of art in modernity, activating the question of art's relation to itself as it confronts its own institutional actuality in the context of capitalist social relations. The anti-art constructions of the avantgarde situate the problematic of art's autonomy within the realm of art's own impossible social externality. Hans Richter, in his account of Dada, acknowledges that the project of anti-art was constructed in the name of advancing art: "Dada's propaganda for a total repudiation of art was in itself a factor in the advance of art."⁵⁸ Adorno's version of Richter's claim argues that anti-art is necessary for the maintenance of art's autonomy if it is to base that autonomy in something other than its own tradition, which would already be its negation and regression. Thus, the avantgarde turned against autonomy as a rescue effort for the possibility of art, but this rescue was undertaken through a means that threatened the possibility of art's ultimate disappearance. Even allowing for Bürger's delineation of an avantgarde that is clearly discernible from modernism, he misses this crucial dialectic at work in Adorno's aesthetics. Adorno does not dismiss the

⁵⁷ Stewart Martin, "Autonomy and Anti-Art: Adorno's Concept of Avant-Garde Art," *Constellations*, vol. 7 no. 2 (2000), 197.

⁵⁸ Richter, *Dada*, 50.

anti-art of the avantgarde but instead seeks to confront it on its own terrain but without submitting to it as a self-evidently true or revolutionary mode of artistic production. Rather, the historical avantgarde represents an attempt to reconfigure the terms of art within the changed social relations of an increasingly rationalized and commodified reality; the avantgarde is not without guilt, nor can its development be understood as wholly progressive, a fact that Adorno understood well in his theorization of a culture industry that integrated art ever deeper into the realms of commodity fetishism.

Adorno's aesthetics propose an essential dialectic between autonomy and anti-art, insisting upon their mutually constitutive relation, such that their opposition allows a reading of Adorno that locates the avantgarde as foundational for the particular historical crisis that he is describing rather than a blatant rejection of it. Autonomy represents the hope for art to maintain its non-instrumentality and its ability to critique the existing conditions of empirical reality. But Adorno is not promoting an aestheticism or social rejectionism; he is insisting upon art's maintenance of its own enigmatic quality and uselessness as signifiers of its autonomy in a world ruled by instrumentality and exchange. In this sense, autonomy must only be considered partial, as a shield against the dictates of the market while still maintaining its essential relation to history and the social, and thus the market. Autonomy is not absolute in this sense but a deeply mediated form of relationality; it is no retreat from the world but a necessary condition for the existence of art. Anti-art is the acknowledgement of this aporia without abandoning its necessary theoretical and constructive labor; anti-art is an inherent and historically situated recognition of and critique of art's exploitative existence. Rather than existing as an art free from guilt, anti-art is a direct expression of the guilt of art—its existence in class society, its inability to end suffering, and its reliance upon the division of labor for its own social existence.

Adorno maintains the necessity of autonomy for art's continuation by incorporating anti-art into his concept of autonomy. Adorno reads the avantgarde's challenge to autonomy in the context of the rise of bourgeois society that freed art from its religious and cultic purposes. Through this historically informed account, Adorno shifts autonomy away from bourgeois aestheticism into a means for theorizing the social and political contexts of art in capitalism. According to Adorno, it is through autonomy, through art's maintenance of a distance from the social, that it constructs its politics. An abstract defense of the autonomy of art would necessarily descend into a claim for the status quo while a similar defense of anti-art as a destruction of art might risk devolving the limit between art and commodity through a disintegration of its monad-like structure in bourgeois society. Thus, not only is autonomy transformed in anti-art, its problematic is first articulated there. Martin writes, "...for Adorno autonomous art has not merely been rendered delusory by the claim of anti-art; it has been qualitatively transformed. Rather than abstractly negating art's autonomy, anti-art's rejection of its consolatory function actually converges with the critical emancipation from authority that is the original impulse of art's autonomy."⁵⁹ Martin highlights the historical circumstances of Adorno's position on autonomy and how that shifts according to the social situation of art. The autonomy of art is posited in modernity as a move away from art's function in pre-bourgeois eras—in this instance, religious or cultic. Art in the age of the rise of the bourgeoisie becomes a sectarian religion, a demonstration of the promise of humanity, its potential for progress, and the presence of individual genius; art was a celebration of the subject, and the autonomy of art confirmed the autonomy and mastery of the bourgeois subject.

⁵⁹ Martin, "Autonomy and Anti-Art," 203.

Adorno's account of the autonomy of art can be read against the same history of the bourgeois subject that informs the concept of the late work. The autonomy that exchange society offered to art was progressive as it pushed it from its religious functionalism towards a bourgeois aestheticism, but as it reached this apex of ideological affirmation it began to rot from within and expose its own untruth. The avantgarde's radical challenge to this bourgeois autonomy sets the stage for a new more radical form of autonomy that will survive the death of the bourgeoisie, as Benjamin hoped. But as Adorno loses hope in the possibility of that always deferred death, he maintains the necessity for aesthetic autonomy as a semblance of hope against the growing contradictions of capitalism. The late work represents the possibility of this new autonomy, one in which the subject abdicates its own authority over the work, confronting its own obsolescence and endangerment in the suffocation of the expanding rule of the commodity form.

This structure of contradiction is discernible in *Anémic Cinéma* with its fluctuation between the aesthetic autonomy represented in its carefully constructed formal abstraction and the presence of reality in its existence as cinema, as the dialectical articulation of Pierce's bifurcated index. *Anémic Cinéma* confirms Adorno's concept of autonomy while forcing it to confront the specificity of cinema. Cinema, constructed from the fragments of the empirical reality against which art must maintain its distance, is always precariously figured as art for Adorno. But like the mistaken characterization as hostile to the avantgarde, Adorno's consideration of cinema is far more complex than he is often given credit for. However, unlike the avantgarde, his engagements with the medium are limited. But despite this scarcity of attention it is essential that Adorno be made to confront the cinema, because if, as Said contended, he is the theorist of lateness it is only appropriate that he be considered in relation to cinema, the late medium.

The Meaning of Montage

One of Adorno's most extensive discussions of cinema comes in the essay, "Transparencies on Film." Miriam Hansen credits "Transparencies..." with moving beyond Adorno's more totalizing rejection of cinema in essays devoted to the culture industry, noting that here Adorno "...not only grants film an equal, if exceptional, status among the arts but also attributes to it a leading role in modern art's rebellion against its very status as art."⁶⁰ The extent to which Adorno positions film as key to determining the current historical ontology of art establishes the bounds within which we can think the relation of film to the concept of the late work. In "Transparencies..." montage offers Adorno a reconstructive mode of cinema that neither abandons the medium's basis in empirical reality nor is entirely ruled by its laws. Adorno writes, "Film is faced with the dilemma of finding a procedure which neither lapses into arts-and-crafts nor slips into mere documentary mode. The obvious answer today, as forty years ago, is that of montage which does not interfere with things but rather arranges them in a constellation akin to that of writing."⁶¹ According to Adorno, film is always at risk of slipping into either escapist illusion or a fantasy of immediacy ("arts-and-crafts" versus "documentary mode"). Montage offers a way to escape both of these fates through a formal process that accounts for the diminished role of the subject in assembling and constructing the aesthetic materials in the cinematic art object.

Implicit in Adorno's claim for the importance of montage is his rejection of cinema that seeks a purely abstract retreat from its attachment to empirical reality. For Adorno, a cinema that seeks refuge in pure abstraction retreats from cinema's commitment to empirical reality. Hansen addresses this issue, "Abstract film's experimental play with purely geometric

⁶⁰ Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 218.

⁶¹ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 182.

figures thus merely sidesteps the crisis of semblance that modern art must confront; in Adorno's view, it risks regressing into harmlessness." Hansen continues, "Seeking to translate modernist norms into the medium of film, abstract film ends up disavowing the (photographic) character of its material and the immanent aesthetic principles that might be derived from it."⁶² This description of abstract film recalls certain of the films addressed here, particularly Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony* and Richter's *Rhythm 21* and *Rhythm 23*, each existing as variations of an animated abstraction, where the forms shift their size, shape, and relationality. These films include minimal material from what Adorno terms "empirical reality"; the material in these films is largely self-referential, bounded within the artwork. Adorno valorizes this type of self-referentiality to an extent, but in film it appears a disavowal of the social, rather than an exilic sociality. Film has a unique responsibility with regard to the social.

We might also relate these descriptions of abstract film to *Anémic Cinéma*'s own abstracted visual ploys. It would seem easy to identify Duchamp's construction with the practice of disavowal that Hansen claims Adorno is criticizing. However, it is premature to dismiss *Anémic Cinéma* as a retreat from its filmic specificity. Instead, Duchamp's film is a determinate negation of those qualities that Adorno identifies as cinematic through an excessive articulation of them. *Anémic Cinéma* can be understood as montage, not in its juxtaposition of images, but as the collision between image and empirical reality at the border of cinema's self-definition.

Montage offers Adorno the reconstruction of the fragments of reality residing in film while respecting their allegiances to extra-aesthetic or anti-art interests, recognizing their attachment to a reality beyond the specific representational language of the artwork.

⁶² Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 217.

Differentiating the forms of mediation in film and literature, Adorno argues that film necessarily adopts a more intimate relation to empirical reality; it is possible to translate this issue of empirical reality into the photographic mixture of indexicality and iconicity. Hansen confirms this problematic, suggesting that, for Adorno, the excess of representation in film prohibits the possibility of the fantasy of subjective creation, the basis of aesthetic autonomy. Hansen writes, “The heart of the problem that Adorno confronts for a film aesthetics appears to be that the photographic basis of the moving image privileges the representational object over aesthetically autonomous procedures.”⁶³ In other words, the indexical and iconic function of cinema’s photographic lineage forces it to exist on the margins of art because it risks abolishing the creative function of the subject. Adorno writes:

The photographic process of film, primarily representational, places a higher intrinsic significance on the object, as foreign to subjectivity, than aesthetically autonomous techniques; this is the retarding aspect of film in the historical process of art. Even where film dissolves and modifies its objects as much as it can, the disintegration is never complete. Consequently, it does not permit absolute construction: its elements, however abstract, always retain something representational; they are never purely aesthetic values.⁶⁴

Adorno does not use Pierce’s language of icon and index, but he is working within the context of the photographic image’s association with these concepts. Adorno’s claims for the prominence of the “object” and the “representational” quality of film links it to both the indexical and the iconic functions of photography that Pierce identifies. Film’s iconicity derives from its indexical base but the indexical trace is not necessarily “representational,” though its allegiance to the primacy of the object could be argued.⁶⁵ But it is the indexicality and related iconicity of film that forces it to confront the social more directly than other

⁶³ Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 220.

⁶⁴ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 181-182.

⁶⁵ Peter Wollen, “‘Ontology’ and ‘Materialism’ in Film,” *Readings and Writing: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 189-207.

media, suggesting an intrinsic political commitment, but understood in the terms of Adorno's politics of autonomy articulated through anti-art.

Film is political for Adorno in its very existence as an art that incorporates non-art elements into its structure, not where it narrates issues or represents events of political import. Rather, film's ontology insists upon its commitment to the social. Adorno writes, "That which is irreducible about the objects in film is itself a mark of society, prior to the aesthetic realization of an intention. By virtue of this relationship to the object, the aesthetics of film is thus inherently concerned with society."⁶⁶ Sociality is the constitutive character of film for Adorno, from its indexical/iconic character to its mediation of maker and consumer as one subject, joined in the process of film as in the industrial processes of which film is a part. In a passage that sounds heavily inflected by Benjamin's urgings, Adorno writes, "It would not be incorrect to describe the constitutive subject of film as a 'we' in which the aesthetic and sociological aspects of the medium converge."⁶⁷ In other words, cinema is an art of the masses rather than the individual, an art of impurity, and thus its politics is different from that of the other mediums. But Adorno is not envisioning film as a proletarian art that will abolish the autonomy of bourgeois art. Instead, Adorno is positing film's necessary imbrication in the social. Film expresses the crisis of autonomy in modern art by existing as an art that necessarily maintains some semblance of remove while being composed of the ruins of reality, broken apart but nevertheless carrying a trace of that which they depict. As in Krauss's suggestion about the similarity of the photograph and the readymade, the cinema institutes a meaning that is already a lack. It is this character of film,

⁶⁶ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 182.

⁶⁷ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 183.

residing at the edge of art, at its limit, that most deeply marks it as late, incorporated but apart—its meaning is its construction as meaningless.

There is an extended discussion of montage and film in *Aesthetic Theory* in a paragraph designated as discussing “The Crisis of Meaning,” which is in a longer section on “Coherence and Meaning.” Hansen argues that for Adorno montage is an essential expression of the crisis of meaning in modern art: “Montage, Adorno argues, acknowledges the fissure and refunctions it for aesthetic effect. By doing so, art seeks to admit its powerlessness vis-a-vis late-capitalist totality so as to initiate the latter’s abolition.”⁶⁸ Montage is for Adorno a demonstration of art’s capitulation to the impossibility of reconciling the aesthetic semblance of the world with its actuality. But this diremption is not peaceably maintained and is a constant problematic for art; in Adorno’s view, art that harbors the hope of reconciliation but refuses its false possibility must acknowledge its helplessness, its guilt. This is what film accomplishes in the reconstruction of reality in montage: it acknowledges its relation to the social while maintaining its distance from a complete capitulation to the appearance of the reality with which it is associated.

This dialectic is expressed in the disappearance of meaning in the artwork, which can be thought in relation with the late work through the positing of the subject as central to the historical development of art’s meaning. Adorno writes, “The more the emancipation of the subject demolished every idea of a preestablished order conferring meaning, the more dubious the concept of meaning became as the refuge of a fading theology. Even prior to Auschwitz it was an affirmative lie, given historical experience, to ascribe any positive meaning to existence.”⁶⁹ Meaning is a remnant of cultic instrumentality and so begins to

⁶⁸ Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 222.

⁶⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 152.

dissolve in art as that instrumental function begins to wane in the era of the bourgeois subject—the subject that produces art with the purpose of expressing purposelessness. But as the subject comes to master the world, to shape it increasingly into a reflection of itself, the artwork becomes a repository of subjective expression, of the demonstration of its autonomy, its freedom from history and convention. The endpoint of this ideology is aestheticism and the quasi-theological fetishism of art as a secular religion. This is not simply a matter of false consciousness, but a true expression of the historical movement of the subject's domination and subsequent decline. This is the sense in which Beethoven's mature compositions remain true, as expressions of an ascendant bourgeois subject. However, it is precisely the freedom won by the emancipation of the subject that is felt in the desolation of artistic meaning. The hollow shell of the subject is what appears in the late work, not ready to abdicate its reign yet unable to muster its former power. The meanings of the mature Beethoven's compositions are constituted as a humanity with seemingly infinite possibility, of a promise of progress deemed endless. Beethoven's late style shows the breakdown of that infinite hope, that the teleology was not unending, that meaning could only be maintained so long as the subject was held inviolable, and in this sense meaning has always been tenuous at best. Adorno writes, "When artworks have nothing external to themselves to which they can cling without ideology, what they have lost cannot be restored by any subjective act. It was wiped out by their tendency toward subjectivization, which was no cultural-historical accident but conforms rather with the true state of things."⁷⁰ The loss of meaning follows the emancipation of the modern subject, and it is not strong enough to maintain meaning in the face of the subject's actual disappearance; those artworks that attempt to recreate meaning are consigned to the status of unrepentant ideology. Thus, the

⁷⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 153.

loss of meaning becomes the meaning of modern works, locating the meaning of non-meaning in a world that is being rendered universally exchangeable by the advance of capital—meaning is rendered meaningless when quantity replaces quality, when a given quantity of every thing is exchangeable with every other.⁷¹

The disappearance of meaning is not a moment of unimpeded freedom for Adorno, concerned as he is at the outset of *Aesthetic Theory* about the avantgarde's venture away from the determinations of historical precedent. Meaning's disappearance is not an opening for art to embark upon previously impossible routes but the actuality of art faced with the possibility of its own end. In the face of this crisis of meaning, advanced art takes up the absence as the focus of its construction; art's continued possibility and justification without meaning becomes the foundation for its meaning in the present. Adorno writes, "Artwork that rigorously negates meaning is by this very rigor bound to the same density and unity that was once requisite to the presence of meaning. Artworks become nexuses of meaning, even against their will, to the extent that they negate meaning."⁷² The absence of meaning in art becomes a stand-in for that meaning through its negation. For Adorno, the measure of an artwork's truth content does not lie in the degree to which it annihilates meaning but the extent to which it names the crisis of meaning within its own construction, as an element that is negated within the confines of the work. This same structure is discernible in Adorno's descriptions of the late work, where the absence of the subject, meaning being complementary to the emancipatory participation of the subject in the work, becomes the meaning of the work through a mediated demonstration of its own absence. The late work becomes late through the casting off of the vestiges of active truth that meaning allowed to

⁷¹ Karl Marx, *Capital, a Critique of Political Economy: volume one* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 125-177.

⁷² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 154.

remain within the autonomous realm of art; the truth content of contemporary works is only apparent in the negative, through that which is articulated as unsaid—silent.

But there is also a way to mistake Adorno's descriptions of the late work for what he condemns as "resigned art" in this section. Adorno differentiates between this form and those works that carefully produce meaning through its ruthless negation. He writes,

The dividing line between authentic art that takes on itself the crisis of meaning and a resigned art consisting literally and figuratively of protocol sentences is that in significant works the negation of meaning is stubbornly and positively replicated. Everything depends on this: whether meaning inheres in the negation of meaning in the artwork or if the negation conforms to the status quo; whether the crisis of meaning is reflected in the works or whether it remains immediate and therefore alien to the subject.⁷³

Similar to characterizations of late works, what Adorno terms "resigned" works here consist "literally and figuratively of protocol sentences," or, materials left undeveloped into the meaning of non-meaning—anti-meaning. Resigned art resembles the fragmentation and lack of development of historically necessary material in the late work, but in late works this fragmentation is the means by which non-meaning is expressed rather than the false appearance of a subjectivity misrecognized as immediate. The role of the subject is crucial in defining the crisis of meaning and the late work. In a sense, the disappearance of the subject in the late work is the evaporation of meaning. The subject was the organizing principle of the artwork, what provided its synthesis and its meaning. The late work is the instantiation of the absence of that which previously supplied the synthesis of the work which was its meaning. The meaning—anti-meaning—of the late work is the disappearance of the synthesis of meaning as the contradictions of art in bourgeois society begin to splinter. In non-meaning the subject remains in the late work as a ruin of itself, still present, still felt, but no longer actively pursuing its ambitious project, no longer seeking synthesis, more closely

⁷³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 154.

resembling an object; the subject is a specter, outliving its purpose in producing purposelessness—late.

According to Adorno, montage is a staging site for the production of non-meaning out of the remnants of the crisis of meaning. In montage there is the semblance of meaning through the assemblage of material, even as their construction does not allow for a final unified synthesis. Montage maintains its own unity through the force of its refusal to mask the lack of formal development of those remainders of empirical reality that exist in the work. Adorno writes, "...Ultimately, art is semblance in that, in the midst of meaninglessness, it is unable to escape the suggestion of meaning. Artworks, however, that negate meaning must also necessarily be disrupted in their unity; this is the function of montage, which disavows unity through the emerging disparateness of the parts at the same time that, as a principle of form, it reaffirms unity."⁷⁴ In other words, meaning adheres in the work as a non-identical component of its assembled material, through the specificity of the assemblage. Montage is a disruption of the unity of meaning through its allowance of extra-aesthetic content into the artwork, negating the possibility of a unified monad, perfected and content solely in its reclusive posture; montage negates the possibility of an inner unity of the artwork, perfectly formed such that it only refers to itself.

Along with its insistence upon the confrontation of art with empirical reality, montage also leads Adorno in this section of *Aesthetic Theory* to a consideration of film's relation to other media. Adorno specifies film's difference from photography in a way that returns us to *Anémic Cinéma*: "...montage goes beyond photography immanently without infiltrating it with a facile sorcery, but also without sanctioning as a norm its status as a thing: It is photography's self-correction." There are two crucial claims in this sentence. First, that

⁷⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 154.

montage allows for the sublation of photography without investing the image with a theological or spiritual content. Montage adopts the photograph as its material but in a way that reconfigures its relation to reality, as something more than its representational content but grounded in its alteration of the terms of the appearance of what is represented. Second is the claim that montage resists photography's reification, its hypostatization as something essential. The technical specificity of filmic cinema offers a version of what Adorno is suggesting. While photography's process of production is dispersed, it ultimately culminates in a recognizable, tangible object, something material that can be held, stored, and possessed. Film is different; its production is similarly dispersed and arguably as hidden as that of the photograph, but film never resolves itself into a single material object or thing. Film exists across a span of time, dislocated between the time of the past represented, the present of projection, and a past future of anticipated viewing. Even as celluloid it is not cinema until it is projected, but then it exists as moving shadows on a blank screen that ceases to exist in its absence. Filmic cinema never comes together but is dispersed in space and time, always late, projecting what has already occurred and reconciling itself through its reality effect—the index—a fabricated presentness.

The index is what sanctions cinema's ordering of time, what guarantees its actuality. But it manages this element through its own chaotic and contingent presence. Montage is a manner of aesthetic construction that recognizes the contingency of cinema's indexicality while also denying any illusion of its own reincorporation or immediacy to the social totality. To contextualize the importance of montage we can look at how Adorno posits it as a protest against the later instances of impressionism, which, according to him, had relapsed into romanticism. Impressionist painting is often associated with capturing the speed and chaos of modern life through the abandonment of lines and strict figuration in favor of the

address of the eye at the level of color and shape through minute and visible brush strokes. In other words, impressionism sought to incorporate into painting what is often characterized as essential to film and photography—the fleeting moments and contingencies that occur in time.⁷⁵ According to Adorno, montage is a corrective to the illusion of incorporation and reconciliation embedded in impressionism. “Impressionism dissolved objects—drawn primarily from the sphere of technical civilization or its amalgams with nature—into their smallest elements in order to synthesize them gaplessly into the dynamic continuum. It wanted aesthetically to redeem the alienated and heterogeneous in the replica.”⁷⁶ According to this account, impressionism sought a premature reconciliation with a reified world, attempting to mask the real diremption of subject and object, promising the possibility of an immediacy that is not achievable and alien to painting. Montage responds to this by showing the fragments of the world but without any attempt to reincorporate them as natural instances of immediacy; it works to alienate representation from reality through its objectification. This objectification is the task of any art worth its name for Adorno, and in this passage montage becomes the favored technique for achieving it under the present conditions of capitalism. Adorno writes:

The semblance provided by art, that through the fashioning of the heterogeneously empirical it was reconciled with it, was to be broken by the work admitting into itself literal, illusionless ruins of empirical reality, thereby acknowledging the fissure and transforming it for purposes of aesthetic effect. Art wants to admit its powerlessness vis-à-vis late capitalist totality and to initiate its abrogation. Montage is the inner-aesthetic capitulation of art to what stands heterogeneously opposed to it. The negation of synthesis becomes a principle of form.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ See T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁷⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 155.

⁷⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 155.

Montage, and with it film, are central to Adorno's theorization of the desolation of meaning in bourgeois society. All autonomous modern art can be understood as montage for Adorno in the manner that it attempts to express its contradictory relation to the reality of capitalist totality; rather than existing as a neglected or dismissed object, film is central to Adorno's theorization of modern art and aesthetics.

Montage achieves in its formal specificity the dialectic of the *fait social* and autonomy that all art strives towards without sanctioning itself as an essential truth; montage is not inherently true but, rather, a formal practice that becomes a model for Adorno, and, as with all concepts in Adorno, it strives to maintain its non-identity, refusing the status of essential truth. Adorno writes, "The artwork wants to make the facts eloquent by letting them speak for themselves. Art thereby begins the process of destroying the artwork as a nexus of meaning. For the first time in the development of art, affixed debris cleaves visible scars in the work's meaning."⁷⁸ In montage, the scars, the indexes of its guilt, appear as its organizing principle. Like the late work, montage resists its self-identical existence as art. Montage begins from the prospect of immediacy but abandons this principle through its own development by alienating these fragments from themselves, producing a space of mediation in the attempt to express its absence. This is the aporia of art in modernity for Adorno, wishing to appear expressionless, silent, but always forced to exhibit its wounds; art's history—the expression of suffering—cannot be made silent, or it risks falling into that against which it protests. Montage is not an ahistorical truth of art; its ruination is its history. Adorno writes,

The idea of montage and that of technological construction, which is inseparable from it, becomes irreconcilable with the idea of the radical, fully formed artwork with which it was once recognized as being identical. The principle of montage was conceived as an act against a surreptitiously achieved organic unity; it was meant to

⁷⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 155.

shock. Once this shock is neutralized, the assemblage once more becomes merely indifferent material; the technique no longer suffices to trigger communication between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic, and its interest dwindles to a cultural-historical curiosity.⁷⁹

The historical truth content of montage is neither immutable nor infinite. What is crucial is the centrality of cinema for thinking the modern crisis of meaning as a dialectical development of art between autonomy and engagement through its manicured relation to empirical reality. In fact, the obsolescence of montage would seem to confirm both the idea of a privileged relation between cinema and modernity and the *lateness* of that previously revolutionary, modern, and avowedly guilty anti-art—the avantgarde.

The Premature Ends of the Avantgarde

While Adorno is clearly not abstractly dismissive of film or its function as art, the association of Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma* with the concept of the late work might appear questionable given Adorno's critique of abstract film noted above. *Anémic Cinéma* appears to diminish the existence of fragmentary instances of empirical reality through its deliberate control of its own content, banishing anything beyond the series of rotating disks from its visual field and abandoning the communicative function of language where it appears. However, it is precisely this formal prohibition that defines Duchamp's film as a late work. Through its definitive control of its visual content *Anémic Cinéma* signals the tension between its differential indexical functions and the manner in which it is attempting to locate and quarantine each in the interest of producing the meaning of filmic cinema's meaninglessness. As already discussed, *Anémic Cinéma* functions between its center and its frame. Looking back to Doane's claim about the differential temporalities of the index's two functions, there is a manner in which the late work becomes articulated in this division. Doane, again, "There are two temporalities at work here. While the index as imprint, as trace (as photographic

⁷⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 155-6.

image) endures, the ‘this’ exhausts itself in its own present.” *Anémic Cinéma* reverses this dynamic in its calibration of cinematic meaning. By making the frame the constant within the film, its temporality is expanded while the excesses of the visual material, both the rotoreliefs and the linguistic vortexes, function as extreme examples of contingency, disappearing in the instance of their articulation through the optical illusion and the non-communication of the language. Thus, what remains is the deixis, constantly repeating its meaningless meaning through the grinding of the rotating disks against the void that acts as a shield between the disks and the frame—the boundary of the artwork and its externality. *Anémic Cinéma* reveals the late work as a function of the contingency of presentness that it works so hard to contain in the name of producing cinema’s non-meaning. But it is not merely an articulation of the deixis through the frame but a function of the cinematic apparatus at large, as that which indicates, that which asks us to look. The deictic index returns throughout Duchamp’s work in the expression of the apparatus in the rotating rotoreliefs’ allegorical spinning, shifting the emphasis of cinema from the past to the fleeting present, the present that is always disappearing, always arriving late to itself. In this sense, it is not merely empirical reality that is imported into the artwork through the indexical function of the cinema but the actuality of history, its constant presence through its disappearance. Thus, read through *Anémic Cinéma* the late work becomes an instance of the index as trace and deixis—both as the incorporation of empirical reality and as the constant non-identity to the historical present that it is always articulating.

Duchamp’s *Anémic Cinéma* is crucial in theorizing the late work because of its existence as an instance of the excess temporality of the cinematic index. *Anémic Cinéma* is a late work through its impossible definition as neither film nor art where each serves as the negation of the other and where each only gains its own presence in the work through the

negation of that which it opposes. *Anémic Cinéma* exposes the temporal disjunctures of filmic cinema through its spatiality, seeming to stop in time—pause—and extend beyond the limits of cinema's two-dimensional visual space of the screen into the larger space of the theater, emphasizing cinema's existence beyond the screen, in the projector and the celluloid, and finally in the camera itself. Filmic cinema never exists at once; it is a process that exists outside of the time that it represents by separating that time from both its recording and its projection. This is how *Anémic Cinéma* articulates itself as late, emphasizing the disjunctive spatiality of the cinema in its illusionistic extension beyond the screen while remaining within the autonomous temporality of the projection. Late cinema, as articulated by *Anémic Cinéma*, both deepens its temporal commitment to the moment while also insisting upon its essential otherness, its infiltration by other time, by the excess of temporality at play in filmic cinema. This excess temporality, the repeating present of the rotating machine, returns again in the return of the avantgarde, but it returns to a different place than where it first departed from—*nachträglich*.

Chapter Three: The Ends of the Avantgarde

The end of the avantgarde rotates back to its beginning, but a different beginning, and a different avantgarde. The rotations of Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* return in altered forms in the cinema of the neo-avantgarde, as the cinema's ability to produce meaning is once again negated through its excessive articulation. The return of the rotational figure in the neo-avantgarde adopts the central visual element of Duchamp's film but also the importance of its associations with the motion of modernity and cinema that it signified throughout Dada cinema, as discussed in the previous chapter. These rotational cinematic figures are instances of what Hal Foster has called the deferred action of the neo-avantgarde, returns that refigure the original event, the initial trauma, as a part of itself, as that instance in which the original trauma is articulated and understood for the first time. According to Foster, the neo-avantgarde offers a rearticulation of the problematics introduced by the historical avantgarde decades earlier, and this rearticulation has a specific temporal structure. Foster writes, "...the neo-avant-garde acts on the historical avant-garde as it is acted on by it; it is less *neo* than *nachträglich*; and the avant-garde project in general develops in deferred action. Once repressed in part, the avant-garde did return, and it continues to return, but *it returns from the future*: such is its paradoxical temporality."¹ According to Foster, it is precisely the traumatic function of the avantgarde that prevents it from being recognized or received in its own moment—the temporality of deferral is, to a degree, inherent to the project of the avantgarde. This deferred effect might also be understood as an excess that the avantgarde produces but which it is unable to immediately incorporate, which must be deferred to a later historical moment when it can then be readopted as though it appeared from the future

¹ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 29.

rather than as a return of the past. It is in this sense that the avantgarde can be understood as late; the avantgarde ends in order to return itself to a place and time in the future, moving towards a future that is expanding and contracting, articulated through an insistent negation of a past that must be constantly reaffirmed as such.

This chapter will theorize the lateness of the avantgarde through cinematic constructions associated with the neo-avantgarde that demonstrate this insistent production of history through its projection of itself into a not yet arrived future. The neo-avantgarde encounters its historical predecessor as though it arrives from the future—this is the logic of the *nachträglich*-avantgarde that Foster posits. The avantgarde, figured in two asynchronous historical moments (the historical avantgarde is usually dated from about 1910-1930 and the neo-avantgarde from about 1955-1970), is variously defined as a break or rupture with modernity, a radicalized or politicized component of it, or simply a moment within the larger designation, a singular style within a broader periodization. Modernism, dated as beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century and running until the middle of the twentieth century, seems to envelop the first instance of the avantgarde, whatever their relation, and the neo-avantgarde stands at what is usually identified as the transition between modernism and postmodernism. Thus, whether the historical avantgarde is figured as a part of modernism or simply historically coincident with it, the avantgarde is not readily identified with either modernism or postmodernism: it exists beyond this periodization because its *nachträglich* temporal structure—its lateness—disrupts the very logic of periodization. The avantgarde represents an accretion of crisis within the temporal logic of modernity itself.

While the previous chapter discussed specific instances of the historical avantgarde and its politics of anti-art in the context of that chapter's focus on the late work, in this chapter I move to a consideration of the neo-avantgarde and a more direct engagement with

the specific temporality of the avantgarde as an example of lateness. In theorizing the avantgarde, I will consider Robert Smithson's *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* and Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale*. As will become clear, even though I have already discussed Duchamp, Richter, and the historical avantgarde, this more abstract engagement with the concept of the "avantgarde" is only possible in relation to a consideration that includes both historical moments: this is partially suggested by the fact that the most influential and systematic definitions of the avantgarde are concerned primarily with the historical avantgarde but appear in the historical context of the neo-avantgarde.² The cinema of the neo-avantgarde will be theorized as a transitional practice, relaying moments or expressions of crisis in the possibility of periodization.

The temporal excess of lateness is characterized by crisis: that of the bourgeois subject specifically and the related bourgeois institution of art in the previous chapter and that of cinema and its medium-specific frame as expressed in a renewed revolt against art's institutional existence. The neo-avantgarde of the 1960s and 1970s, rearticulating its predecessor's critique of autonomy, turned its attention from the task of attempting to force art into a position opposed to its own status as art to one of disassembling the autonomy of the particular mediums against the generality of the concept of art; the avantgarde's institutional critique often took the form of an attack on modernist conceptions of medium-specificity.³ But while this may seem to contradict the usage of cinema as the mode through which a discussion of the neo-avantgarde takes place, it is precisely the tension within those cinematic instances of the neo-avantgarde that best exemplify its problematic relation to its

² Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) initially appeared in 1974 at the very end of the period associated with the neo-avantgarde while Renato Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981) was first published in 1962, in the midst of the neo-avantgarde's activity.

³ See Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961). Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

own concept and to attempts at periodization. It is this tension, between a physical and technical medium-specificity and a conceptual and discursive problematic, that defines the neo-avantgarde's particular negotiation of art and anti-art.

Cinema and the avantgarde converge as instances within modernity that trouble its periodized self-definition, seeming both to exist as paradigmatic instances of modernity and yet to define it from an external position. I will consider the ways that the neo-avantgarde, as a reimagining of the historical avantgarde's project in the midst of a moment in which capital has adopted for itself many of the avantgarde's self-proclaimed ambitions of an integration of art and life in the culture industry, functions as both an end and a completion of the project of the avantgarde—as the ends of the avantgarde. This aporia is not merely the result of the historical moment in which the neo-avantgarde arrives, but is constitutive of the avantgarde as a concept generally. Like cinema, the avantgarde presents the imagination and periodization of modernity with a dilemma that informs and grounds the concept itself. As witnessed in the example of *Anemic Cinema* in the previous chapter, it is in the cinematic practice of the avantgarde that the conceptual and discursive problematic of cinema begins to disassociate from the specific material and technical practices of film recording and projection. The cinema of the neo-avantgarde is both filmic practice pushed to the limits of cinematic expression and figural assemblage for a variety of ends; the rotational enigmas of the cinema are in this case employed as a means to imagine endings rather than to trouble boundaries.

The avantgarde is late in its non-contemporaneity to itself, always coming after its own occurrence while at the same time appearing at the forefront of its own cultural moment, even if it is at the leading edge of announcing an end. While it appears to arrive after its own moment it is also conceived as being advanced, ahead of its own time. It is the vanguard, the

first line of attack.⁴ This existence between past and present is built into the concept itself, as that which is most historically advanced, ahead of its own context and also guarding what has been, attempting to hold on to what exists through its aggressive advance and clearing the way for progress. The avantgarde, and especially those instances in the neo-avantgarde that are concerned with cinema, appear both ahead of their moment and after it. It is this peculiar temporality of the avantgarde, as a series of endings that never seem to arrive that characterizes its lateness.

Endings

Fittingly, we begin at an end, or, rather, a series of possibly encoded endings: the avantgarde, modernity, cinema, art, and history itself. This uneven millenarian series is thematized as such in the accumulating catastrophe of entropic dissolution that appears as figural enigma at the conclusion of Robert Smithson's *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*⁵, published in *ArtForum* in 1967. *Tour* poses cinema as antidote to, cause, and victim of the both violent and banal endings that it poses as the consequence of the building dissolution of indeterminate velocity; cinema's actual ending is the only one specifically imagined through the material dissolution of the celluloid, but this dissolution figures the others, necessitates them, and fails to reverse them, finally succumbing to the ending that it has recorded but failed to prevent. Smithson concludes his travel narrative from Manhattan to and around Passaic by imagining a scenario that would demonstrate the entropic destruction of history's passing:

I should now like to prove the irreversibility of eternity by using a *jejeune* experiment for proving entropy. Picture in your mind's eye the sand box divided in half with

⁴ For an analysis of the genealogy of the term "avantgarde" and its associations with military strategy and revolutionary politics before adopting its figural meaning see Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 95-125.

⁵ Abbreviated as *Tour* from here.

black sand on one side and white sand on the other. We take a child and have him run hundreds of times clockwise in the box until the sand gets mixed and begins to turn grey; after that we have him run anti-clockwise, but the result will not be a restoration of the original division but a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy.⁶

Smithson suggests that filming this event could provide the possibility that is absent from the situation itself: the reversal of the disturbance of the cleanly divided sand so that the initially separate elements may return to their original condition by running the film backwards. In other words, it would be a way to reverse the ruination of historical progress. This reversal might provide the means by which the passage of history towards an ominously figured end could be prevented or forestalled. The film would show not only the black and white sands before and the grey sand after as two subsequently captured photographs might—picturing history as irreversible in its fragmentation—but it could reverse the process of dissolution itself, showing the reconstruction of the past through a disintegration of the present into an inverted future—maintaining the totality of history as dissolution, even if that dissolution is being reversed. However, immediately upon raising this possible antidote to the force of modernist progress it is dismissed because of cinema's submission to this very force in its own materiality, its own ephemeral nature, necessarily degrading over time and only proving all the more convincingly the inevitability of the movement toward some tragically imaginable end.

The ultimate tragedy imagined in Smithson's text is not that these endings might occur but that they might be more mundane than spectacular, that these endings could go unremarked and unremembered. Cinema, as a—perhaps the—medium of modern spectacle, becomes paramount in this figuration. Smithson's text demonstrates the problematic that

⁶ *Tour*, 74.

cinema presents to the periodizations of modernity, as a key instance of simultaneous determination and rupture.

The imagination of cinema in Smithson's text signifies a rupture beyond just the experimental cinema of the neo-avantgarde; instead, cinema is identified with a modern form of mass culture, the value of which increases as it becomes a key mediating form of the melancholy attachment to modernity in its apparent passing. This is the case in Smithson's text, which concludes: "The false immortality of the film gives the viewer an illusion of control over eternity—but 'the superstars' are fading."⁷ The reference to mass culture in 'the superstars' is coupled with the failure of the medium itself and the more cosmic intonations. While film was able to represent the reversal of the entropic spiral of the sandbox, its stability as a guard against the passage of time is questioned by its own dissolution; it is the materiality of film that makes it unsuitable as an antidote to the progression of time. Film is imagined as an answer in its immediacy, but that which certifies this historicity brushes away any possible salvation in its disintegration. Celluloid, camera, projector, and screen are figured as elements of a dispersed medium of cinema, confused with the subject throughout the essay, but the celluloid becomes the signifier of the medium in these final moments precisely because it is the most delicate component of the apparatus, most ready to present its own dissolution even as it continues to otherwise function. And the constant, obsessive, running of the film—backwards or forwards—in order to prove the reversal of entropy and a mastery of history only hastens the chaotic dissolution of the celluloid's representational content. These final paragraphs of *Tour* seem to pose cinema's physicality as insufficient for fully defining it, and yet unable to escape this condition.

⁷ *Tour*, 74.

The insufficiency of cinema's physical permanence is coupled with the historical decline of a specific form of cinematic production. The reference to 'the superstars' in the final line recalls not just an abstract concept of the cinematic medium but a certain type, the one that is perhaps most associated with American modernity—Hollywood. The reference to 'the superstars' combines Smithson's millenarian cosmic musings with the cinema of Hollywood, of starlets and stars, of a distinctly American mode of cinematic mass production that is imagined as the medium's apex, its moment of glory from which it is now in decline. This particular cinema is one of the ends within Smithson's broader figuration of cinema's end as a medium. *Tour* situates its endings within a particularly American frame of reference, the age of American cultural, political, and economic power being one of the very things that is implicated in the endings that Smithson projects. Smithson desires a cinema where the superstars would not fade but would extinguish themselves in a final apocalyptic event.

Smithson's text is an instance in the history of conceptual art that defined a central strand of what has come to be termed the neo-avantgarde. The neo-avantgarde is generally associated with those movements in the 1950s, 1960s, and early-1970s that sought a differentiation from what was perceived to be an institutionalized and co-opted modernism (usually associated with Abstract Expressionist and color field painting and the defense of these practices by critics, most famously Clement Greenberg and later Michael Fried in a sort of rearguard defense). Although it had important European manifestations, the neo-avantgarde was primarily an American phenomenon that saw mass culture taking up one of the challenges of the historical avantgarde by aestheticizing everyday life, one of the central

imperatives of the avantgarde project.⁸ Whereas the historical avantgarde imagined itself standing against the autonomy and aestheticism of bourgeois art, the neo-avantgarde sought a more direct engagement with the status of the institutions within which the formal conventions—the target of the earlier avantgarde—existed, and with this came a different conceptualization of the place of art in relation to capitalism and commodification.⁹

The Returns of the Avantgarde

The relation of the neo-avantgarde to its predecessor, the historical avantgarde, is key to understanding the temporalities of the cinematic works of the former as they readopt key figures and forms from the latter. As discussed in the previous chapter, Peter Bürger's privileging of the historical avantgarde over what he sees as the repetition and failure of the neo-avantgarde is partially determined through a misreading of Adorno's theorization of art in modernity. In fact, Bürger's inability to recognize Adorno's articulation of the dialectic of autonomy and commitment in the avantgarde's own testing of the relation of art and anti-art is very much the same blindness that forces him to dismiss the practice of the neo-avantgarde as derivative repetition. The historical avantgarde represents, in Bürger's telling, a radical attempt to undermine the autonomous position of art by its own means. It is a break with the modernism that came both before and after it; it is not a rejection of modernism's formalism, but a radicalization of the temporal ruptures registered within the art object itself through a formalism that separated form from content in order to end the ability to distinguish their difference. This rupture occurs on one level in the tension between the individual art objects and the general institution and concept of art that the avantgarde wants

⁸ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 3-15.

⁹ Beyond Foster, this post-Bürger account of the neo-avantgarde is associated with the work of Benjamin Buchloh. See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

to precipitate but also within the individual works. Bürger's discussion of the divisions and abandonments of artistic means activates a dialectic of universal and particular that accumulates around the tensions associated with attempting to escape autonomy through practices developed in and reliant upon the autonomous sphere of art.

The historical critique of form that Bürger attributes to the avantgarde is conceived as a development of art's nonsynchronism within the bourgeois society that sustains it. Bürger's theory of society insists upon the conscious mediation of the social subsystems through one another as a totality. In this autonomous sociality, if art is to turn against itself then it must also recognize its own displacement from the other subsystems of bourgeois society. It is this very displacement, this inherent autonomy that allows art to reflect upon both itself and society:

...the nonsynchronism in the development of individual subsystems must be insisted on; which means that the history of bourgeois society can be written only as the synthesis of the nonsynchronisms in the development of the various subsystems. The difficulties that beset such an undertaking are manifest. They are alluded to simply to make clear why the subsystem 'art' is seen here as having a history of its own.¹⁰

Art's autonomy is both posited and problematized in this formulation. It is at one moment a subsystem of the capitalist totality and at another a nonsynchronous instant that stands apart from the structure in which it participates; the peculiarity of the subsystem of art is due to its reliance on and cultivation of autonomy from the larger structure that is only maintained by the form of that structure. Bürger's theory posits the historical present and the act of theorization (which are closely identified for him) as instances of synthesis. This synthesis would not be problematic if it was subsequently negated, but Bürger holds the moment of the historical avantgarde apart from the history of the autonomous realm of art

¹⁰ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 24.

that it attacks, forcing the synthesis into a dehistoricized and romanticized conception of the originary moment—failed but heroic in its failure.

But it is the temporal metaphor that Bürger employs to characterize this aporia that is so striking in relation to a theorization of the lateness of the avantgarde, which is indelibly saturated by concerns and figures of temporality, especially as it is conceived in relation to modernity.¹¹ Bürger argues that the development of the different subsystems in relation to one another is characterized in terms of a temporal lapse, an uneven development among the subsystems that is only subsequently synthesized in historical and theoretical reconstruction. Bürger does not specify the temporal relations of these different subsystems to one another in their development, but it seems implicit that, even though the development is uneven among all of the subsystems, art is a *late* development in two contradictory senses: it follows behind as it is required that it reflect on itself in relation to the other systems in order to maintain its autonomous status, meanwhile it is also the most advanced, proceeding ahead of the other social subsystems, as the advance guard of the new, as the herald of the immediacy of temporal presence—the *latest*. However it is positioned temporally in relation to the other social subsystems, its externality and autonomy is essential for its critical/self-critical operation; it is only when art separates itself from social necessity that it is able to take itself as its own object, as its own content. Bürger writes, “At the moment it has shed all that is alien to it, art necessarily becomes problematic for itself. As institution and content coincide, social ineffectuality stands revealed as the essence of art in bourgeois society, and thus provokes the self-criticism of art.”¹² In other words, it is at that

¹¹ While the term “avantgarde” initially appears as a military term to describe an advance attack, it has taken on figurative meanings, especially in relation to its advanced position with regards to history, existing ahead of the present level of historic progress, jumping ahead of the rest of societal development, see Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 95-111.

¹² Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 27.

moment when art effects its break from functionality as relationality that it assumes the task of attempting to reintegrate itself into the totality of social life, but this time on its own terms. The avantgarde is a deferral of synthesis framed in temporal terms that should be understood in relation to the broader context of modernity and its particular form of historicity.

Modernity is a category riven with contradiction, especially to the extent that it is considered in concert with the massive social, political, and economic disruptions of a developing industrial capitalism. Marshall Berman describes the experience of modernity in terms of contradiction, as, "...a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air.'"¹³ Nowhere is this aporia of the modern more apparent than in the concept itself. The modern is a necessarily mobile and expansive category, identified with an articulation of the self-presence of the present, until it becomes a specifically defined historical period.¹⁴ As modernity passes from its status as a temporal self-presence, an immediacy of the present time of now, to being a periodizing concept, identified with a particular historical period, it is in constant danger of surpassing itself. In other words, modernity as a term of historical periodization builds into itself the means for its own obsolescence. According to Peter Osborne, "The central problem faced by all theories of modernity, in any substantive socio-historical sense, is not that they cannot think decline, but,

¹³ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 15.

¹⁴ See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

rather, the reverse: the fact that modernity/modernities *grow old*.”¹⁵ Modernity’s inherent drive towards obsolescence is crucial to understanding the avantgarde and its particular form of temporality.

The concept of the avantgarde needs to be understood beyond its status within the confines of art-historical discourse, or its associations with revolutionary political parties and movements.¹⁶ Instead, the avantgarde is a crucial instance within the history of modernity’s temporal self-conception; it is a crisis of modernity’s historical logic, precipitated in part by the radical transformations of capital. According to Andrew Hewitt, “The avant-garde emerges as the product of a kind of free-market aesthetics.”¹⁷ This appears for Hewitt in the avantgarde’s anarchic political and aesthetic tendencies, demonstrating similar activity in the market itself: “the avant-garde is constituted as a historical moment in which capitalism confronts its own anarchic impulses.”¹⁸ According to Hewitt, the connection between the avantgarde and capitalism is apparent in the former’s transformation of artistic practice from the representational modes of modernism into the avantgardiste valorization of production. The avantgarde is a series of instances of artistic practice that foreground their own productivity to radically reject the aesthetic autonomy and distantiating of representation associated with modernism. The avantgarde ‘work’ functions as “...a process of production existing within reality, rather than as a signifying system situated outside reality by virtue of the very distantiating inherent in representation.”¹⁹ Through this emphasis on the

¹⁵ Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (New York: Verso, 1995), 20.

¹⁶ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 4.

¹⁷ Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 29.

¹⁸ Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism*, 30.

¹⁹ Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism*, 33.

productivity of the text over its representational mode, Hewitt theorizes the avantgarde as a rupture in the temporality of modernity that follows from the radical developments in capital, especially in relation to instances of capitalist crisis.²⁰ In other words, where crises of capital occur at instances of rupture within the flows and movements of capital, the avantgarde is a rupture within the progression of modern temporality. The avantgarde is an instance of temporal overaccumulation, a fissure that follows from the inherent tendencies towards crisis within modernity, comparable but not identical to the necessity of crisis to the functioning of capitalism.²¹

Bürger's conception of the avantgarde is too unidirectional, too determined by the avantgarde's own rhetoric, and too concerned with a strict delimitation of avantgarde from modernism to recognize its radical implications for modern historicity itself. In Bürger's formulation the avantgarde builds its radical rupture upon a break that modernism had already effected, its own radicalism achieved in the turning of the results of this break against the conventions of art itself. The avantgarde adopts modernism's aesthetic autonomism but deems it untenable in the present, seeking to adopt that autonomy for its own anti-art ends. This is seen most clearly in the attack on tradition in the universal availability of material, the prohibition on stylistic limitation.

The totality of the artistic means only become fully available in the avantgarde because it abandons historical style, so while all of the various means were technically available and individually articulable prior, it is only in the avantgarde that they come into a dialogue with one another over the more general consideration of art itself. Bürger writes, "But during the dominance of a style, the category 'artistic means' as a general one cannot be

²⁰ According to Hewitt, all theories of the avantgarde are premised on crisis, see Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism*, 20.

²¹ I will return to the issue of crisis and capital specifically in the final chapter. For an example of this line of thinking see David Harvey, *The Limits of Capital* (New York: Verso, 1999).

seen for what it is because, *realiter*, it occurs only as a particular one. It is, on the other hand, a distinguishing feature of the historical avant-garde movements that they did not develop a style.”²² But it is not simply that they did not happen to develop into a cohesive style but that they were necessarily opposed to the notion of style: “What did happen was that these movements liquidated the possibility of a period style when they raised to a principle the availability of the artistic means of past periods. Not until there is universal availability does the category of artistic means become a general one.”²³ For Bürger, the avantgarde’s transition from the strictures of historical style to the apparent freedom in the full panoply of artistic means is about a transition from particular to universal, but it is a universal that is expressed through the negation of the particular signified by the category of historical style. The specificity of the avantgarde is its attack on the particularity of historical style and the manner in which this particularity represents the autonomy of art in bourgeois society. In its place, the avantgarde seeks to replace a universality of access to style in the interest of representing the universal unfreedom of bourgeois culture. This holds as an account of the historical avantgarde but Bürger hypostatizes the concept of the avantgarde into a generality, even an ideal, which can be seen in his romanticization of the historical avantgarde and his rejection of the neo-avantgarde as mere repetition, and worse: an institutionalization of the radical ambitions of the original moment.

Bürger conceives of the historical avantgarde as a heroic attempt to demonstrate the contradictions of bourgeois aestheticism that held art as a realm separate from everyday existence, attempting but failing to destroy this autonomy in the process. Its failure and its division from its own more militant and explicitly political manifestations is viewed by

²² Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 18.

²³ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 18.

Bürger as both tragic and heroic, an apex of twentieth-century art that is both the culmination and synthesis of the history preceding it but also a self-evident and easily delimited moment that must not be disturbed. It is an instant of the past that, unlike its own adoption and transformation of the various historical styles, is off limits to future art practices, which it not only failed to fully revolutionize, but to which it was later subjected and institutionalized.

Bürger's complaints about repetition in the neo-avantgarde are particularly problematic because they reintroduce and reinforce the bourgeois aesthetic values of originality and creativity that are the object of critique by both the historical avantgarde and Bürger. Originality and authenticity are the very concepts that uphold the regime of artistic autonomy that is supposedly under attack by the avantgarde. Foster proposes an alternative way to understand the relationship of the neo-avantgarde to the historical avantgarde, not outside of the repetition that Bürger diagnoses but without the pathologization or dismissal of that repetition as simple derivation. Foster adopts Bürger's argument about the role and development of the avantgarde in relation to the history of capitalism without the ahistorical hypostatization of the avantgarde that mars Bürger's own attempt, adopting repetition as a critical term to understand the avantgarde within the particularity of modernity's form of historicity.

The repetition that Bürger accuses the neo-avantgarde of perpetrating against the historical avantgarde is actually necessitated in the understanding of the avantgarde itself. According to Foster, the neo-avantgarde is a belated manifestation of the historical avantgarde; the neo-avantgarde is a deferred action that activates the earlier traumatic event of the historical avantgarde. Because Bürger takes the avantgarde at its own word in wanting to destroy the autonomy of bourgeois art, Foster argues, he was destined to see the

avantgarde as a failed project, missing the formal ruptures within the works that exist within the history of art, within the history of form and style that the avantgarde has supposedly done away with. Against Bürger's reading of the avantgarde's rhetoric as self-evident truth, Foster argues that it is formally radical in the ruptures that it introduces and expresses: "For the most acute avant-garde artists such as Duchamp, the aim is neither an abstract negation of art nor a romantic reconciliation with life but a perpetual testing of the conventions of both. Thus, rather than false, circular, and otherwise affirmative, avant-garde practice at its best is contradictory, mobile, and otherwise diabolical."²⁴ The project of the historical avantgarde is only recognized in the neo-avantgarde; the ambitions of the first instance are rearticulated by the neo-avantgarde as the moment in which those ambitions are understood. But the neo-avantgarde also responds to the extension of the insights of the historical avantgarde to their logical conclusion—to their *end*: the integration of art and everyday life in the culture industry.

In Foster's account, the repetition of the neo-avantgarde is not simply acceptable but necessary in order to come close to answering the task that Bürger sets for the avantgarde. Contrasting the projects of Aleksander Rodchenko and Marcel Duchamp with those of Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and others, Foster argues that while the historical avantgarde began to confront the institution of art in the formal conventions of the individual mediums, it ultimately left it undisturbed and unaltered. Thus, the task that Bürger sees as the project of the historical avantgarde only begins in its repetition, so that artists of the neo-avantgarde, "...develop the critique of the conventions of the traditional mediums, as performed by dada, constructivism, and other historical avant-gardes, into an investigation

²⁴ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 16.

of the institution of art, its perceptual and cognitive, structural and discursive parameters.”²⁵

Foster introduces the Freudian concept of deferred action (*nachträglichkeit*) in order to reframe Bürger’s discussion of the neo-avantgarde as an insufficient and failed repetition, readopting Bürger’s notion of the avantgarde as nonsynchronous in a different register: “it is structured as a relay of anticipations and reconstructions of traumatic events.” This complex temporality helps Foster to explain the rhythm of the avantgarde’s uneven development and appearance but also the necessity of the neo-avantgarde in understanding the historical avantgarde:

One event is only registered through another that recodes it; we come to be who we are only in deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*). It is this analogy that I want to enlist for modernist studies at the end of the century: *historical and neo-avant-gardes are constituted in a similar way, as a continual process of protension and retension, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts—in short, in a deferred action that throws over any simple scheme of before and after, cause and effect, origin and repetition.*²⁶

According to Foster, the temporality that Freud describes for the subject’s trauma appears in the avantgarde, so that it is always both before and after itself, never temporally coincident to its own manifestation.

Foster’s final word on the temporality of the avantgarde seeks to redefine the very terms of the debate and it begins to acknowledge the generality of the avantgarde as a crucial event in the self-understanding of modern temporality: “it is less *neo* than *nachträglich*; and the avant-garde project in general develops in deferred action. Once repressed in part, the avant-garde did return, and it continues to return, but *it returns from the future*: such is its paradoxical temporality.”²⁷ But Foster’s account remains too segmented within a strictly art historical discourse that does not extend the radical implications of his theory of the temporality of the

²⁵ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 29.

²⁶ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 29.

²⁷ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 29.

avantgarde to its unique position within the historicity of modernity. The avantgarde signals the necessary return of modernity to itself and its overaccumulation of temporal presence. This return can be seen in the reappearing revolutions of Duchamp and the historical avantgarde, the rotational homecoming to the cinema in the neo-avantgarde, once again challenging the distinction between the concept of art and the individual work, and between autonomy and sociality.

Centering Cinema

Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971) is an instance of the neo-avantgarde that is characterized primarily by rotational motion. Snow's work portrays a filmic lateness, a temporal non-identity, that exhibits itself in a wrenching apart of cinema from itself, a shattering of the tenuous identity of physical existence and conceptual abstraction through a return to central figures and problematics of the historical avantgarde—rotation and the frame. Snow's film is a belated enactment of the problematics introduced in *Anemic Cinema* in a form that both radicalizes and reformulates the problematics of the earlier film. *La Région Centrale* is constructed as a series of shots taken by a specially designed robotic arm, which is able to move itself in all directions from its base with varying speeds possible, placed on a mountain in northern Quebec and preprogrammed never to make the same movement twice across the span of its extended, five-day shooting period. Over the course of its three hours, Snow's film moves between abstracted and blurred images resulting from the motion of the mechanical arm outpacing the representational possibility of the medium to segments of almost imperceptible movement only detectable at the edges of the frame as the image simultaneously falls away and constitutes itself, maintaining its rectangular dimensions.

La Région Centrale, like other instances of structural film, allegorizes or problematizes film's ontology through a specific physical characteristic of film.²⁸ For example, in what is often offered as the paradigmatic example of structural film, Snow's earlier *Wavelength* (1967), the zoom becomes the essential element as it is blown up into the content of the film, the forward motion of the image becoming its singular motivation. In another canonical instance, Hollis Frampton's (*nostalgia*) is entirely comprised of a series of his own photographs, identifying film with the medium of photography and the image as its means of producing meaning; but (*nostalgia*) undermines this essentialist identification through the destruction of the photographs on a hotplate and a temporal disjuncture between its images and their voice-over description. Like *Wavelength*, (*nostalgia*), and other films, from figures such as Ernie Gehr, George Landow, and Tony Conrad, *La Région Centrale* continues this model of allegorizing its conceptual problematic through a physical characteristic of the medium. Whereas movement was constrained within an ever shrinking space by the frame in *Wavelength*, a relentless zoom that never reverses itself, magnifying the visibility of the contracting profilmic event while also minimizing it; in *La Région Centrale* movement is no longer confined by the unidirectional motion of the zoom but by the static, invisible center of its own motion. In *La Région Centrale* the camera's movement is constrained by the limiting potential of that which offers it its definitional full range of motion. Unlike the shrinking world of *Wavelength* or the grinding of the rotoscope against the deictic function of

²⁸ Peter Wollen, juxtaposing structural film against the practice of Godard, Straub and Huillet, and others, argues that the former represents a displacement of concerns of the art world into film. Wollen claims that structural film represents an ontologization of film: "...the impact of avant-garde ideas from the world of visual arts has ended up pushing film-makers into a position of extreme 'purism' or 'essentialism'." Peter Wollen, *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 97. David James argues from an opposing perspective that structural film, which he discusses in a chapter titled "Pure Film," represents a practice of metacinematic theorizing: "That structural film for the beginning should have been besieged by semantic and ontological disputes is in retrospect splendidly ironic, for the practice it designated subjected film language itself to a radical scrutiny of the kind that structuralism had brought to play upon language in general." David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 237.

the frame in *Anemic Cinema*, the frame in *La Région Centrale* does not present a limiting principle as its range is consistently enlarged and altered by the rotations of the mechanical arm, almost to the point where every conceivable angle available has been filmed. But while the camera is able to film in all directions and from all angles, they all emanate from the same static point. The camera in *La Région Centrale* is a celestial object caught in a perpetual orbit from which it is unable to escape—centering cinema in an unseen but determinate point, allegorizing the cinematic apparatus itself as a machine that produces an illusion of motion through the mechanical propulsion of what is ultimately still.

The return of Duchamp's rotational motion, adopted but also transformed in Snow's film, is precisely the deferred action of the neo-avantgarde that Foster identifies as its relation to the historical avantgarde. As a belated return, a return from a different place than it departed, it is a reinterpretation of Duchamp, an articulation of the filmic excess produced and cultivated in *Anemic Cinema*, the excess time located in the specific tension produced in the motion of Duchamp's film itself. The aporia between temporality and spatiality appears in many of Snow's films, which often emphasize a strictly determined and controlled movement within the temporal conditions of cinema. The tension between temporality and spatiality is a key narrative in the neo-avantgarde's repeated rejection of the modernism represented by abstract expressionism. Snow's artistic production developed, according to Annette Michelson, in a context in which "...the interpenetration of painting, theater, and dance, the flowering of happenings and performance were intensive."²⁹ In other words, for Michelson, Snow's work exists within the tradition of work that descends from the historical avantgarde:

The consequent displacements and redefinitions were not to be accommodated by the decorum of pictorial modernism; these men drew upon the synthetic tradition of

²⁹ Annette Michelson, "About Snow," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 111.

pictorial, sculptural, theatrical, and poetic enterprise—the cinema of the Bauhaus, the theater of constructivism, the objects of surrealism, the festivities of dada, preserved, partially and precariously, through the emigration of European artists driven to this continent by fascism.³⁰

This reprisal of the historical avantgarde in the neo-avantgarde highlights the specific intermedial concerns of both avantgardes, critiquing the strict delimitation of the individual mediums as a part of the broader problematic of autonomy. The frame, most often associated with painting, which in this context could be understood as assumedly conservative in its modernist associations, is a particularly important figural concern for the problematization of the institution of art, holding separate the artwork from social reality. Michelson claims that Snow's project specifically follows in the wake of Duchamp's own constructions that problematize the frame, especially *The Large Glass* (completed three years prior to *Anemic Cinema*), which understood the frame as both a physical and technical characteristic or limitation and a conceptual problematic that shifted from painting to the cinema.³¹ Snow's work pushed the frame further into this doubled existence, revising Duchamp's work. Michelson writes, "The frame, empty and infinitely mobile, directed literally and metaphorically towards the world itself, proved an implacable generator of forms."³² This doubling of the frame as both literal and figural presence is advanced by Snow into cinema itself, making it a figural or conceptual problematic through which to understand the physicality of the medium, and vice versa.³³ The obvious example of Snow's interest in the doubling into conceptual and physical presence appears in the use of the

³⁰ Michelson, "About Snow," 111-112.

³¹ See the previous chapter for an extended discussion of the frame in Duchamp.

³² Michelson, "About Snow," 112.

³³ Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999). This text will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

frame in *Wavelength*, which “...takes as its central statement the framing process itself, organized as an extended spatiotemporal strategy of complex resonance.”³⁴

This concern with the dialectical mediations implicit in the splitting of the conceptual abstraction from the specificity of the physical continues into other of Snow’s films, returning to the frame again in a film such as *Atlantic*. Snow himself notes the importance of the frame to his filmmaking practice, specifying its place in *La Région Centrale*:

The single rectangle can contain a lot. In *Région* the frame is very important as the image is continually flowing through it. The frame is eyelids. It can seem sad that in order to exist a form must have bounds, limits, set, and setting. The rectangle’s content can be precisely that. In *La Région Centrale* the frame emphasizes the cosmic continuity which is beautiful, but tragic: it just goes on without us.³⁵

As Snow notes, the frame in *La Région Centrale* is crucial for its production of meaning, defining the limits of what is visible and what lays beyond. As important as what the frame allows to be seen is what it prohibits from being seen and the reminder that it continues beyond our own brief and limited appraisal. In *La Région Centrale* the frame refuses the possibility of looking back at the mechanical apparatus, insisting that its presence be signified through other means, that its presence be marked most explicitly through its carefully maintained absence.

The concept of cinema that appears in *La Région Centrale* is one of constant movement, unconstrained by the zoom of the lens, but nevertheless limited by its ultimate immobility—its center. It is a reprisal of the rotational motion in Duchamp’s *Anemic Cinema*, a form of motion that remains in place, grounded in a static center, but here the static center is made into the absent determining factor rather than that which troubles the cinema’s illusion of two dimensionality—simultaneously deepening and extending the image—and its

³⁴ Michelson, “About Snow,” 112-113.

³⁵ Quoted in P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 359.

relation to the world. P. Adams Sitney highlights the importance of the form of motion in his description of the film, and its relation to the work's title:

The central region of the title is a nearly barren plateau, void of people or any signs of their existence, and this region is also the sky above it, which the camera sweeps in 360-degree circles, explores in expanding or contracting spirals, and crosses in zig-zagging pans, focusing on the ground around its base in flowing close-ups and the distant horizon in zooming telephoto shots; but it is also the invisible spherical space which the camera, despite its ingenious equatorial mount which can mechanically perform more motions than the subtlest of film-makers holding his camera by hand, cannot see because it is itself. The whole visible scene, the hemisphere of the sky and the ground extending from the camera mount (whose shadow is visible) to the horizon, becomes the inner circumference of a sphere whose center is the other central region: the camera and the space of its 'self.'³⁶

As imagined by *La Région Centrale*, the central imperative of cinema is movement; it is a medium that is constitutionally unable to remain still, relying upon movement to construct the illusion of cinematic motion, so that even still images are composed of still images in motion. But it is also a motion that is constantly circling itself without acknowledging this proximity. Filmic cinema, composed of still images in motion and moving images composed to represent stillness, is allegorized in Snow's film as in Duchamp's. But whereas *Anemic Cinema* defined itself through a probing of cinema's articulation of the indexical dialectic of cinema at the juncture of the frame, *La Région Centrale* is less stable, its wild swings and range of imagistic appearances suggesting a more apocalyptic and dire articulation of the medium than Duchamp's calculated negation. *La Région Centrale*'s motion recapitulates the rotation of *Anemic Cinema* but in a less controlled manner, increasing the appearance of materials outside of the specificity of the film's articulation by shooting in a vast and open landscape, but this content is still strictly controlled through its extensive exploration, its singularity, such that nothing captured by the mechanical swings of the camera is outside of the film's careful composition—there is no excess visual material even within the vastness of the landscape.

³⁶Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 358.

Instead, the excess of *La Région Centrale*, its lateness, is the manner in which it articulates its center through negation, through the overproduction of that which is its meaning. As the title implies, the center of the film is its meaning, but that meaning arrives only by way of its specific absence.

La Région Centrale adopts the cinematic illusion of motion as its foundational allegory, rotating around a center that it articulates in absence. This absent center assumes the role of the subject in Adorno's theory of the late work. Like the subject in Beethoven's final compositions, which expresses itself through its own denial, the center of Snow's film actively works to diminish its own activity, ensuring its presence all the more definitively. This association with the late work is also highlighted by the film's negation of the subject through the use of the robotic arm, diminishing its role as determinate master once again. And yet, *La Région Centrale* demonstrates cinema's ability to free the eye, to open up to the inert spectator a vast and seemingly endless array of possibilities, whether geographically, temporally, or perceptually unavailable.

In fact, the relation of cinema to the subject is paramount in Snow's film. Michelson details this relation: "The camera of *La Région Centrale*, instructed and controlled by the machine, turns in a wild and isolated Canadian landscape in a series of circular variations whose multiplicity—of speed, direction, focus—is the function of a 'liberated' eye."³⁷ Michelson associates the variability of Snow's camera with a disembodied eye, a transcendental subject, that she, following from Jean-Louis Baudry, argues is foundational for both the cinema and the ideology of a centered subjectivity that in cinema equates vision with the subject—the eye-subject. For Michelson, it is this eye-subject, equated with the cinematic medium, that Snow makes the center of his film. But as she notes, it is an

³⁷ Michelson, "About Snow," 118.

allegorical centering as the film is also desubjectivized, deprived of any relation to the human body as a subject or an operator. It is a cinema that seems to move almost seamlessly from camera to spectator with minimal human interference with the sanctity of the image—unmediated. Situating Snow’s film in the context of the recently completed Apollo mission and its implications for a new framing of the subject’s relation to the world as image, Michelson writes, “Snow’s infinitely mobile framing, his mimesis of and gloss upon spatial exploration offer, most importantly, a fusion of primary scopophilic and epistemophilic impulses in the cinematic rendering of the grand metaphor of the transcendental subject. *La Région Centrale* gives new meaning to the notion of science fiction.”³⁸ For Michelson, *La Région Centrale* presents a cinematic allegory of the subject as center of a universe that is becoming increasingly uncertain. The unearthly landscape within which the film takes place, the lack of human subjects, all contribute to the sense that this film is a transmission sent back from some tragic interstellar mission, relaying a chaotic but also searching curiosity about the surrounding expanse that it helplessly attempts to move into and master. Instead, the film captures and sees the entirety of its limited space from every conceivable angle and at numerous speeds, but it is a mastery that is constantly reminded of its limitations by the ever presence and importance, as directional compass, of the horizon. The subject as portrayed by *La Région Centrale* rules over a domain of its own creation that is necessarily limited in maintaining its illusion of mastery.

For Baudry, the inherence of movement within cinema is intimately linked to its ideological function, signifying the expanse and variability of the subject’s domain. Baudry reads the development of movement within the cinema as a process that moves from motion grounded in stillness imposed by the medium’s allegiance to a lineage of framed

³⁸ Michelson, “About Snow,” 123.

precursors; the initial stillness of the image in early cinema, framing static spaces within which movement occurred, making the progression towards increased movement into an assumption about its implicit place within the medium. This movement of the image is interpreted as a developmental logic of the subject itself, enacting a search for meaning that is already contained within the depth of the subject, waiting to be discovered and unfolded.

Baudry writes,

[The camera's] mechanical nature not only permits the shooting of differential images as rapidly as desired but also destines it to change position, to move. Film history shows that as a result of the combined inertia of painting, theater, and photography, it took a certain time to notice the inherent mobility of the cinematic mechanism. The ability to reconstitute movement is after all only a partial, elementary aspect of a more general capability. To seize movement is to become movement, to follow trajectory is to become trajectory, to choose a direction is to have the possibility of choosing one, to determine a meaning is to give oneself a meaning. In this way the eye-subject, the invisible base of artificial perspective (which in fact only represents a larger effort to produce an ordering, a regulated transcendence) becomes absorbed in, 'elevated' to a vaster function, proportional to the movement which it can perform.³⁹

This explanation of the ideological function of the camera in centering the subject as the producer of meaning effectively makes the meaning of cinema produced through motion coterminous with its production of a self. As Baudry states, "The ideology of representation (as a principal axis orienting the notion of aesthetic 'creation') and specularization (which organizes the *mise-en-scène* required to constitute the transcendental function) form a singularly coherent system in the cinema."⁴⁰ According to this, the production of cinematic meaning is identical to its articulation of space for the subject, a space that is knowable and able to be mastered. Thus, the camera, identified with, if not identical to the position of the subject, enlarges its space of influence through movement; cinematic stasis is deathly—late

³⁹ Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Apparatus," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 291-292.

⁴⁰ Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Apparatus," 295.

cinema. This is the specter that resides at the back of Snow's film, the subject as the ghost of the cinema.

Baudry's claims of an identity of the cinematic medium and the transcendental subject presents the possibility that Snow's extreme cinematic machine, radically divorced from any apparent subjective interference in the process of shooting, threatens its own existence. The medium itself, beyond its allegorization of transcendental subjectivity, appears to rest on a precipice in *La Région Centrale*, constantly in danger of falling away from its status as cinema, a repetition of *Anemic Cinema*'s own construction as a negation of its own possibility of cinematic meaning production. The images of *La Région Centrale* fluctuate between those that move almost imperceptibly, slowly tracking along a face of rock, an expansive blue sky, or almost complete darkness, and those that move so fast that the image is nothing but abstract fluctuations of light and dark. It is as though the camera always rests in an uncomfortable balance between being dropped in the absence of sufficient momentum or cast out by the force of the machine's frantic gyrations; there is no comfortable speed for the machine.

The film is a series of wild gyrations between visibility and invisibility, figuration and abstraction. Michelson is correct to see the film as an allegory of Baudry's eye-subject, but this transcendental subject of vision and knowledge is not simply present through its purported association with the cinematic technology. The allegory of *La Région Centrale* is principally concerned with the status of the cinematic medium, and the transcendental subject through its association with vision and cinema's position in regards to the scopophilic regime that Michelson and Baudry highlight. In other words, Snow's film sits at a further remove from Baudry's ideology of epistemological and visual mastery than Michelson allows. The movement of the film is contradictory in that it purports to represent

complete freedom of movement while relying upon fixity, a stasis from which it constantly and failingly flees. The subject that is allegorized by *La Région Centrale* more closely resembles the absent subject of Adorno's late work, rather than the confident and assured creative mastery of the transcendental subject (as in Beethoven's mature compositions), identified with an ascendant bourgeoisie.

Movement—rotation—comprises the content of the film itself; the entire visual material of the film remains the same mountaintop wilderness, only altering in time of day. The image fluctuates between the sky and the ground, the horizon providing the breaking point between the two, and mediating the directionality of the film in moments of abstraction, providing the only basis for determining some sense of the camera's current orientation or angle. In line with Baudry and Michelson, the movement of the camera is the means by which the work produces its meaning, making the necessity of movement in the celluloid during both recording and projection into the key characteristic of a cinema that relies on static movement—rotation—in its own production. But because the insistence upon movement becomes the sole means through which the film's momentum is maintained it also becomes its primary threat. Even as the camera sits in the same space, on the same mountain, fully static, it presents the illusion of motion produced through a static series in a different mode from the cinematic apparatus itself, but drawing on the same dialectic between motion and stasis that grounds cinematic motion. The images of movement emanate from a static center, producing the illusion of constant change within an environment where permanence is presumed, though always moving in the sphere of the cosmic measure within which Michelson locates it. The abstract images stand in for the rolls of celluloid that first break movement into delimited cells so that it may be recreated through a different motion to produce the illusion of movement at a later time. The excess

temporality, the lateness, of *La Région Centrale* resides in its mediation of stasis and motion, and the manner in which this mediation cleaves an abyss within the work between its visual imagery and its ideational content. This transformation of the temporally saturated lateness of Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* to the spatial non-identity at issue here could be read in the context of the shift from the modern to the postmodern, at least as recounted by Fredric Jameson, situating structural film and the neo-avantgarde as instances of the cultural logic of late capitalism.⁴¹ Instead, I want to emphasize the extent to which the ideology of the subject as master that is negated in the anti-art of the avantgarde and theorized by Adorno is once again confronted by Snow.

The conception of cinema that is offered by *La Région Centrale* is stretched between extremes of stasis and motion, visibility and invisibility. But it is the very attempt to construct an allegorized model of the medium within itself that allows this work to be considered late; it becomes late at the moment that it brings the concept of cinema into conflict with its own cinematic expression. *La Région Centrale*'s centering of cinema through the extensive exploration of space surrounding it is articulated through the absence of its center, which is both associated with the centered subject and displaced through this association. As *La Région Centrale* models a version of cinema within its own practice its particular concept of the cinema begins to necessarily misidentify with the form that that expression takes. This epistemological distance is not particular to *La Région Centrale*, but it is part of its specific concern. It is this attention to motion as a key factor in cinema that

⁴¹ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984), 53-92. Jonathan Walley has recently noted the contradictory impulses of "expanded cinema." On the one hand, it rushes towards the post-medium condition precipitated by Conceptual art, dematerializing itself, disassociating itself from the specificity of the medium. On the other hand, figures such as Snow and Frampton, along with Ken Jacobs, Paul Sharits, and others, produced a cinema that radically insisted upon the ontological centrality of the medium. In other words, cinema seems undecided between an embrace of modernist medium-specificity and postmodern dissolution. See Jonathan Walley, "Identity Crisis: Experimental Film and Artistic Expansion," *October* 137 (Summer 2011): 23-50.

comprises the conceptual material of *La Région Centrale* and the seeming identity of this conceptual material with the representational experience of the work heightens their actual non-identity.

La Région Centrale is about motion and the ways that motion is central to the cinematic medium and the subject. But the concept of motion, heavily identified with the subject as a concept, necessarily stills a set of active components into a more definite configuration, a configuration that is not precisely fitted to the object with which it is associated. In other words, the concept of motion invites a consideration of the inherent non-identity of all conceptual thought. Concepts, more specifically subjective than objective, necessarily abstract a range of particular instances, events, or objects under a singular identity; concepts freeze a range of vital and mobile phenomena into an abstract universal that imposes a momentary stasis upon its own content. Thus, the inherent contradiction of the concept of motion highlights this particular form of epistemological non-identity and thus offers a challenge to the mastery of the subject. This non-identity is not unique to *La Région Centrale*, but it becomes its point of emphasis and its central problematic. The film, split between the motion depicted in the images, as the camera moves between earth and sky, blur and clarity, light and dark, and the motion of the film itself, necessary for the recreation of the depicted motion, or lack thereof, comes to stand against the idea of motion as absently figured in the mechanical apparatus. The rotational motion of *La Région Centrale* troubles the mastery of the transcendental subject that Michelson locates by demonstrating the limits of its mastery, both to the extent that it cannot move beyond its own horizons of vision and, more importantly, the extent to which it is constructed around a denial of itself as a part of a reality which it does not create, and of the limiting necessity of conceptual

knowledge. The limits of cinema, and its associational attachments to the subject, are taken up again in the rotational figures with which we began.

Cinematic Entropy

Figures of rotation are prominent throughout the work of Robert Smithson, including his most famous artwork, *Spiral Jetty*.⁴² Smithson is most often associated with earth art and site-specificity, but the quality of his work that I want to emphasize is the particular manner in which he uses cinema to figure rotation and centers. Throughout Smithson's work rotation and centering appear both in cinema and through the use of cinema as a conceptual object that allows for an imagination of a center. These rotations and centers are always unstable in Smithson, always displaced. As Craig Owens suggests, "Whenever Smithson invokes the notion of the center...it is to describe its loss."⁴³ The centers in Smithson's work are consistently negated, pointing beyond themselves, as though the rotation that moves around the particular center has moved onto a different center, but without abandoning the original center, existing with both and neither. Owens details the means by which this decentering occurs in Smithson through the abstraction of language, "...the concept of a center can occur only within language; at the same time, language, which proposes the potentially infinite substitution of elements *at the center*, destroys all possibility of securely locating any center whatsoever."⁴⁴ Given the concern of this chapter, I am less invested in the similarity of Owens's description of Smithson's practice to Derrida's critique of structuralism⁴⁵ than the manner in which Smithson's imagined centers are consistently

⁴² Jack Flam, Ed. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 143-153.

⁴³ Craig Owens, "Earthwords," *October* 10 (Autumn 1979): 122.

⁴⁴ Owens, "Earthwords," 122.

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278-293.

mediated through an ideational and figural cinema, a cinema that is no longer physical, and which is heavily associated with the end of cinema—late cinema.

Language is a key material in Smithson's artistic production. It displaces the location of the work from the concrete physical location or object, becoming what Owens labels allegorical: "Smithson thus accomplishes a radical dislocation of the notion of point-of-view, which is no longer a function of physical position, but of the *mode* (photographic, cinematic, textual) of confrontation with the work of art. The work is henceforth defined by the position it occupies in a potentially infinite chain extending from the site itself and the associations it provokes..."⁴⁶ As this passage suggests, the disassociation of the ideational material from the physical material of the art object is radically staged in Smithson, through its explosion of the work itself, once again attempting to deny the artwork its coveted autonomy. This is performed in Smithson through the promiscuity with which different media interact with one another, specifically through and in language. This association of Smithson's work with language as a mediating factor associates it with conceptual art's supposed dematerialization of the art object.⁴⁷

However, Smithson's dislocation of art's identity problematized the relation between art and life more radically than conceptual art, which sought to specify the definition of art against the particularity of the discrete mediums⁴⁸; Smithson's practice is located in the tradition of the avantgarde that is the focus of this chapter. Blake Stimson argues the uniqueness of Smithson's critique of the sociality of art: "If conceptualism sought to give

⁴⁶ Owens, "Earthwords," 128.

⁴⁷ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁴⁸ See Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" and "Sentences on Conceptual Art," and Joseph Kosuth's "Art After Philosophy" in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, Eds. *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 12-17, 106-109, 158-177.

local definition to art and in the process further delineate the role of the artist by granting that role more professional turf and therefore greater autonomy, Smithson sought to sully the moral boundary between art and life, to further implicate the artwork in the sordid world around it, to dissolve its distinctiveness and in so doing dissolve the residual idealism still surviving in a post-idealist world.”⁴⁹ Whereas previous practices of the avantgarde staged their interventions in the name of preserving art, sublating it into a new form, with Smithson the imagination of endings (including beyond art itself) is more important. Rather than focusing on the preservative function possible in art’s negation, Smithson seems more concerned with grander ends that might be imagined through the end of art. Smithson’s imagination of dissolution is achieved through an artistic practice of intermedial promiscuity, and the crucial medium of cinema occupied a place of pride in Smithson’s assemblage, appearing as both the self-identical medium that shows *Spiral Jetty* and the non-identical imaginary that becomes a part of that work, providing a means of describing the loss of successive centers.

Smithson’s *Tour* is a thoroughly intermedial art object. Staged as a photo-essay, it holds together an uneasy amalgam, with the seemingly simple excuse that Smithson is returning to his place of birth in order to document its history and culture as sedimented in its built structure and landscape. However, as becomes clear, it represents for Smithson an attempt to construct a history out of a space that seems to possess none. *Tour* is comprised of text, six photographs, a reproduction of an image from the *New York Times*, and a surveyor’s map of the area. The photographs and other visual material are placed throughout, alongside the text, breaking its flow, its progression, decentering its authority.

⁴⁹ Blake Stimson, “Conceptual Work and Conceptual Waste,” *Discourse*, vol. 24, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 139.

The text itself provides a high level of detail, locating Smithson within specific temporal and spatial coordinates that suggest a photographic capture of extraneous detail beyond the immediate objects of interest, beyond Smithson's narrative. It begins as a detailed recounting of the exact manner of travel, how it was arranged and purchased, and what Smithson read while travelling. The text moves beyond narrative necessity and towards a photographic or cinematic excess of imagistic representation, such that the text only recounts the forward progression of narrative in small bursts, fighting to be noticed among the weight of descriptive adornment. Smithson writes,

On Saturday, September 30, 1967, I went to the Port Authority Building on 41st Street and 8th Avenue. I bought a copy of the New York Times and a Signet paperback called *Earthworks* by Brian W. Aldiss. Next I went to ticket booth 21 and purchased a one-way ticket to Passaic. After that I went up to the upper bus level (platform 173) and boarded the number 30 bus of the Inter-City Transportation Co.⁵⁰

This does not describe an instant but a series of actions, a scene that unfolds in time, but with the level of extraneous photographic detail that exceeds the narrative that Smithson is recounting. In other words, Smithson's text is not photographic so much as it is cinematic, capturing a series of extraneous details that seem to exist only tangentially to the supposed progression of action that is Smithson's departure for Passaic from Manhattan. There is no interiority, nothing beyond plain description. But this cinematic composition gives way to a more literary one as the bus begins to move, as Smithson sits mobile and the space around him shifts. Newsprint, the novel, painting, and photography are all variously described as being already apparent within the landscape that Smithson moves through, but cinema is the medium that Smithson will eventually identify with, the medium that becomes an allegory for Smithson's own experience, and the medium that eventually comes to stand as both the already lost hope of the future and the failure of the present.

⁵⁰ *Tour*, 68.

With Smithson's arrival in Passaic, the monuments that he has come to explore are revealed to be common objects and sites. The monuments of Passaic are ruins without history, instead serving as monuments to the ruin of history, the latent ruin of the future that is apparent in places like Passaic. Ron Graziani specifies this aspect of Smithson's *Tour*: "The ruins he chose at Passaic offered qualities and materials associated with the classical ruins of Rome, but, unlike classical ruins, the monuments at Passaic lacked a history into which the observer could nostalgically project her or himself."⁵¹ The monuments of Passaic are monuments to the myth of modernist progress and its promise of historical continuity. They do not resemble monuments or ruins but hold the promise of their own future entropy within themselves, the historicity of the ruin existing in a future that is otherwise absent.

Smithson passes over the first monument, a bridge over the Passaic River, while still on the bus. The photographs of the work are meant to coincide with the monuments, but perhaps not in the way intended. What appears in the photographs is a barren, industrial, and uninhabited landscape. These are the monuments that Smithson identifies for his tour: a bridge over the Passaic River, concrete abutments, and a sandbox. As Smithson begins to describe his movements around Passaic, he notes the extent to which the landscape that he is photographing seems pre-framed, or even already photographic, as though the space in which he moved were itself a reproduction of another space, a reproduction of an already set image. This is his description of the bridge monument,

Noon-day sunshine cinema-ized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an over exposed *picture*. Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. The sun became a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detached series of 'stills' through my instamatic into my eye. When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of

⁵¹ Ron Graziani, "Robert Smithson's Picturable Situation: Blasted Landscapes from the 1960s," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 431.

wood and steel, and underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank.⁵²

Smithson's description of the landscape as already photographic, as though he is himself moving about within a photograph, displaces the concrete materiality of photography into Smithson's experience of the world. Those static elements of the environment are characterized as all-enveloping photographs while the movement of the river is identified with the dynamism of film. But Smithson's engagement with the photographic landscape seems to awaken it, stringing the images together into a sequence, transforming his subjectivity into the organizing element of the cinematic apparatus—its totality. His presence, as part of the cinematic apparatus, illuminates the detached images into the ordered structure of a film that is recorded, not by his camera, but in his own experience of the space. The camera is merely one part of the apparatus that is reconstructed, projecting the images of the celluloid world onto the screen of Smithson's subjectivity. Cinema has moved from influencing the structure of the textual description to being both a metaphorical figure and an ontological condition. Rather than existing as the physical or technical substrate of Smithson's work, cinema exists as its organizing figuration, the metaphor that activates the various other materials in Smithson's assemblage.

While any agency for Smithson would seem to be radically absent from this scene, it is, in fact, only displaced from his body and onto the cinematic technology—anthropomorphizing the apparatus while still holding the different elements of the apparatus as distinct instances. Thus, the control moves from his seeming inability to escape from a pre-written film script to a forced identity with film itself. This confusion of Smithson with different components of the apparatus continues throughout the text. For example,

⁵² *Tour*, 70.

Smithson writes, “I began to run out of film, and I was getting hungry.”⁵³ And further, “At the Golden Coach Diner (11 Central Avenue) I had my lunch, and loaded my instamatic.”⁵⁴ Smithson’s identification with the camera suggests both his own mediation of the space within which he is moving, but also the lack of emphasis upon the content of the photographs themselves, as in cinema’s own dispensation of the individual frame in favor of the reel. Smithson’s cinematic movement, his activation of the static images, impoverishes the content of the photographs, or even photography itself, in its submersion as a component in Smithson’s subjective cinematic medium. Smithson’s own photographs resemble their descriptions less and less as Smithson details the monuments depicted more and more. The photograph of the bridge monument seems still and grey against the dynamism of the scene described by Smithson, and yet the exercise is repeated for each of the monuments.

The photographs included in *Tour* as representations of the monuments that Smithson describes are reified; the physicality of the photographs is forgotten in their transformation into experiential components of Smithson’s subjective perception. But they are reified as instances in Smithson’s own allegorical assembly of the pieces of his cinematic apparatus. In other words, the photographs exist not to show the scenes that Smithson is describing, though they do bear resemblance to what he describes, or instances of a cinematic medium in which they serve a larger project, but, rather, they are partial examples of the medium that is itself heavily relied upon as a metaphorical trope within the force of the narrative. The photographs do not exist to show the monuments of Passaic but the existence of the experiential objects that Smithson describes and the experiential object of

⁵³ *Tour*, 72.

⁵⁴ *Tour*, 72-73.

photography itself. They are monuments to photography as a subsumed part of film rather than photographic representations of monuments, and they contain the latent promise of film's ruination within them, as the monuments contain their own futural ruin.

Film is both the means and object of the monumental ruin envisioned by *Tour*. Stimson highlights the importance of the ruin to Smithson's prescription of historical decline and destruction: "The monuments Smithson had in mind, however, would not be monuments to progress, to a future utopia but the reverse. They would be monuments to decay, monuments to the failure of the modernist project that had always already been inevitable, monuments to Smithson's own version of the big truth...Smithson summoned a heretofore-closeted primary urge: the death drive of history, the second law of thermodynamics."⁵⁵ The entropy that Smithson describes actually occurs on two levels, in the representational content of the medium's and as the material existence of the individual mediums. Thus, the focus on the signifying potential of the medium induces the very ruin that Smithson is asking it to address.

While Smithson's musings upon the landscape traversed, with these references and allusions to visibility and visual media, explicitly suggest a variety of endings and foreclosures, they are at the same time deeply melancholic, wishing to hold on to and retain what exists. Smithson seems to regret that the world could end before it is able to demonstrate its own destructive ambition. Smithson writes, "Actually, the landscape was no landscape, but "a particular kind of heliotypy" (Nabokov), a kind of self-destroying postcard world of failed immortality and oppressive grandeur. I had been wandering in a moving picture that I couldn't quite picture [...]"⁵⁶ Smithson's freedom of movement within this already

⁵⁵ Stimson, "Conceptual Work and Conceptual Waste," 138.

⁵⁶ *Tour*, 72.

photographic world is reduced to an inability to envision the totality of the space in which he moves because his own subjectivity is the mediating point of this imperfectly ideal world, articulating a different version of the decentering of cinema in *La Région Centrale*. Smithson's inability to perceive the interaction of the different pictures is caused by a specular structure that haunts both Smithson's subjectivity and the world around him, which in this case are identical, refusing the possibility of historical difference. The suburban landscape that Smithson describes is imagined as a simulacrum of its own imagistic creation. The landscape is a copy of a Polaroid that is in a constant process of entropic decay even before the image has fully appeared. And contained in this melancholic entropy there is a sort of restrained fervor for the ruin of the landscape to run its course—the aesthetic recreation of capitalism's destruction.

Hints of this violence are evinced in Smithson's vision of the future in the spaces of the suburbs, already lost before it has the opportunity to arrive. It is a future that is without prophecy or plan but which moves upon the physical ruins and against their permanence. He writes, "I am convinced that the future is lost somewhere in the dumps of the non-historical past; it is in yesterday's newspapers, in the *jejune* advertisements of science-fiction movies, in the false mirror of our rejected dreams. Time turns metaphors into *things*, and stacks them up in cold rooms, or places them in the celestial playgrounds of the suburbs."⁵⁷ History arrives for Smithson by way of the future, as though it were appearing anew, when in fact it is saturated by the past, and nowhere more so than in the figure of the medium. The medium that undergirds Smithson's piece is not singularly reducible into anything previously defined, but the content of it is constantly cataloging the imminent decay of the world, the inevitable ruin of an existence that is now captured and conceived as cinema—possessing all of its

⁵⁷ *Tour*, 74.

impermanence and futural ruin. The duplication of the medium of cinema in Smithson's piece, as in *La Région Centrale*, as a mode of representation and as a mode of being, grind against one another such that any medium-specificity is displaced into cinema's abstracted ontology. This displacement in Smithson, however, has the effect of dematerializing cinema, while simultaneously noting its transitory physicality: it is a melancholy attachment to a medium that only ever existed for the purpose of projecting modernity's future beyond its own end.

This futural melancholia leads Smithson to propose the demonstration of the sand box—the irreversible ruin of the present through the dissolution of the future:

I should now like to prove the irreversibility of eternity by using a *jeune* experiment for proving entropy. Picture in your mind's eye the sand box divided in half with black sand on one side and white sand on the other. We take a child and have him run hundreds of times clockwise in the box until the sand gets mixed and begins to turn grey; after that we have him run anti-clockwise, but the result will not be a restoration of the original division but a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy.⁵⁸

This scene can be read as a simple allegory of the increasingly indeterminate character of art as it seeks its release from the constraints and false permanence of the physical materiality of medium-specificity in favor of a transitory and unstable identity with its own concept. The break with medium-specificity appears permanent; there is no return to the innocence of specificity and materiality, not because materiality is illusive or imagined, but because the materiality that was sought as the savior of modernist practice was itself in the process of declaring its own material foundation universal: its fault, as diagnosed by minimalism, conceptualism, and other instances of the neo-avantgarde, was that it was able to answer its own unanswerable question. In other words, the medium became the answer to the question asked by the problematic presented by the medium. Thus, for Smithson, an emphasis on the

⁵⁸ *Tour*, 74.

physicality of the medium of cinema would simply invite the ruin that is destined to befall all of physical existence, crushing the world into a post-objectivity where materiality would exist only as a fully totalized, amalgamated existence that is neither penetrable nor thinkable.

But as we have seen, Smithson turns back to a direct consideration of the medium in his final paragraph. Cinema, offered as a possible method to reverse the course of entropy, could reconstruct the black and white sand as they were before their combinatory disruption. Cinema regains its physical materiality against its earlier unmediated form of experiencing reality, as a dynamic form of the already photographic world. Here, cinema is considered in the context of its own impossible paradox, as a material record of time that is subject to the destruction wrought on all things material by the passage of time. Smithson writes,

Of course, if we filmed such an experiment we could prove the reversibility of eternity by showing the film backwards, but then sooner or later the film itself would crumble or get lost and enter the state of irreversibility. Somehow this suggests that the cinema offers an illusive or temporary escape from physical dissolution. The false immortality of the film gives the viewer an illusion of control over eternity—but “the superstars” are fading.⁵⁹

In this return, the ability of film to capture and retain images appears as the first step towards its eventual decay. The process of dissolution is highlighted; it is cinema’s ability to record an apparently uninterrupted process of contamination of black sand with white sand that is important. Two subsequent photographs could also represent the original division of white and black sand and their eventual breakdown into grey and even return the mixed state of the sand to a representation of its original purity. However, the photographs would show neither the passage of time nor the possibility of its representational reversal. Photography would not present the spectacle of dissolution itself. It is this possibility of reversing the course of events that is held out as hopeful in cinema, but the recourse to this material

⁵⁹ *Tour*, 74.

possibility of cinema is undercut specifically by the materiality of the medium, its impermanence and imperfection, its existence in history.

Smithson's *Tour* presents an image of sublime destruction and futural melancholy that reaffirms the conception of the avantgarde's *nachträglich* temporality. The avantgarde consistently comes up against a material division between physical and ideational material that is manifested in the formally deferred temporality of its practice. The avantgarde's division along these lines manifests itself in the conventional physical and technical constraints that we have come to associate with the medium. The problematic against which the avantgarde crashes is the medium, dialectically divided between its physical and abstract ideational material. It is in the avantgarde that this problematic is most apparent, but its prominence is most successfully approached from the future—that is, as a historical object. Whereas this chapter examined a series of endings in process or imminent, the next chapter will examine these endings as past events in what Jameson terms the inverted millenarianism of postmodernism.

Chapter Four: Obsolescence, Violence, and the Motor (City) of History

From the rotations of the avantgarde and the neo-avantgarde, we move on to more recent pasts as they look back on those more distant. This gaze towards stilled past will be located in the related concepts of the post-medium condition and postmodernism. The post-medium condition is introduced by Rosalind Krauss to account for the preeminent position of multi-media installation within the practice of recent art. According to Krauss, it is precisely the non-specificity of multi-media installation that marks it as radically divorced from the historicity that the medium previously provided. Postmodernism, at least the version dealt with here, is heavily identified with Fredric Jameson, for whom it is the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” characterized by a lack of depth, an emphasis upon surfaces, and a weakened sense of historicity. These related *posts* will be explored through an examination of the imagination of a place that has acquired its own sense of pastness, its own location within the series of endings that Jameson describes. This place is Detroit, which has become synonymous with the crisis of post-Fordist capitalism and a source of recent attempts to represent that crisis as image(s). Specifically, I will look at Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre’s *The Ruins of Detroit* and Julia Reyes Taubman’s *Detroit: 138 Square Miles* as instances of imagistic obsolescence, modes for figuring the loss of historicity historically.

Detroit, itself a symbol of obsolescence and redemption, is ideal for discussing the contemporary representations of technology that become instances of reflecting back upon the technologies of representation in their moment of crisis. This chapter will address the distinction between the technical and physical character of a medium and its conceptual and discursive articulation as dialectically related instances that mediate one another in any practice or theorization of the medium. This chapter will consider the *late medium* as one that is never present to itself—mediated in its internal divisions—and riven by an

insurmountable division between technical and conceptual materials. This division will be examined in the elegiac images of Detroit that reflect back a mournful gaze on their own means of representation. This chapter will consider the historicity of the medium, its capacity to catalog and forestall the entropic movement of the present and disrupt the ever more unpredictable stops and starts of history—all from the vantage point of the Motor City.

Krauss's theory of the medium betrays an elegiac belief that what once amounted to the common conventions of different modes of expression have been lost. Here, the inflection of lateness suggests something very simple initially—the deceased carapace of the medium living on as a relic of its former solidity and prominence: an undead medium, no longer able to exert its former centrality or signify historical difference. The late medium is one that has no history to deliver to its absent future, only a past that is slipping away as the technologies and materialities that formerly constituted cinema, photography, or painting are cast aside in favor of newer and less specifically identifiable modes of representation or aesthetic expression. But this melancholic simplicity is complicated by claims for the redemptive power of the medium's obsolescence, that it must become late as a specter before it can become late as an actuality that signifies the temporal difference of historicity, as an articulation of the present that is of its moment by being out of sync with it. In other words, the late medium takes as its task the demonstration of the historical coordinates of the very historicity that its initial loss foretold.

Hinted at in the loss of historicity is the close relation between the post-medium condition and postmodernism. It is with the figure of the ending, the multiple ending as imagined in Smithson perhaps, that Jameson begins his account of postmodernism:

The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the 'crisis' of

Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism.¹

The move away from the centrality of the medium in artistic practice can be understood as one of the endings that Jameson includes in his diagnosis of postmodernism's inverted millenarianism. In other words, the crisis/crises of the medium/s is part of a broader cultural crisis that accompanies the reorganization of capital in the aftermath of World War Two. While the relation between the crisis of the medium and postmodernism is implicit in Jameson's account of the latter, Krauss specifies this relation at the conclusion of her account of the post-medium. According to Krauss, Jameson understands postmodernity as, "...the total saturation of the cultural space by the image, whether at the hands of advertising, communications media, or cyberspace. This complete image-permeation of social and daily life means, he says, that aesthetic experience is now everywhere, in an expansion of culture that has not only made the notion of an individual work of art wholly problematic, but has also emptied out the very concept of aesthetic autonomy."² According to Krauss, this near total integration of the aesthetic as image into the everyday in the service of capital is sanctioned by the present art fashion of unspecified material construction and experiential immersion in multimedia installation art, where "...art essentially finds itself complicit with a globalization of the image in the service of capital."³ For Krauss, the loss of the historicity contained in the medium of modernism has not been supplemented elsewhere, and so much of contemporary art easily conforms to the integrated spectacle of global capitalism.

¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 1.

² Rosalind Krauss, *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 56.

³ Krauss, *"A Voyage on the North Sea"*, 56.

The crisis of the medium is historicized by Krauss as coinciding with what is often identified as the temporal and spatial beginnings of postmodernity—North America and, to a lesser extent, Western Europe of the post-World War Two period. In fact, its origins appear specifically in the varied practices of the neo-avantgarde, especially minimalism and conceptual art. But while the crisis of the medium is located beyond the causation of technological changes, its symptomatic expression is often concentrated in technology, or, rather, the representation or exhibition of specific technologies, especially those that are no longer in use—obsolescence is its temporal character. Current shifts in the medium are often registered through a melancholy representational preoccupation with mechanical technologies—the type that Hollis Frampton calls “high technology” in the epigraph—allegorically invested with modernity itself. Erika Balsom has theorized the manner in which the mechanics of the obsolete representational technologies become themselves a focus of art works and exhibitions as seen in the prominence of film projection—and the projector itself: “Within the pristine and sanctified spaces of art, 16 mm film is employed as a precious remnant of a cinema in ruins, with the film print elevated to the status of a collectible objet d’art.”⁴ For Balsom, cinema’s contemporary prominence in the gallery is both a marker of its felt absence as a part of mass culture and its rehabilitation within the value structures of the art market. Film, revealing itself as more than an invisible and transparent mode of representation, regains the bourgeois aesthetic values that it once was claimed to dismantle by Benjamin. This rehabilitation of aesthetic value in the autonomy of the gallery that consecrates its status as ruined; the cinema’s ruin portends its associations with historicity and materiality.

⁴ Erika Balsom, “A Cinema in the Gallery, A Cinema in Ruins,” *Screen* 50: 4 (Winter 2009): 414.

A similar concern is expressed in art that highlights technologies that are now obsolete, or felt as such, as points of representational focus. In these works, the obsolescence of the technologies represented are allegorically refracted and mediated through and on to the technologies of representation themselves. This can be seen in practices of visual art that linger over the leftover structures and products of modernity: factories, assembly lines, movie palaces, office buildings, etc. Those machines and spaces that once went unnoticed as commodity production ran its course have now become the objects of melancholic cathexis—the reemergence of modernity’s disavowals. This other practice raises another Benjaminian motif: the theory of historical progress—the dialectical image.

It is not so simple as claiming that images of industrial ruin are instances of Benjamin’s enigmatic category. The dialectical image is meant to be an epistemological category, wherein the image is figural rather than literal. In other words, you cannot point to any existing image as an instance of what Benjamin imagined. Rather, it is a mode of conceptual representation that does not seek to cover over the failure to complete its own impossible task—the presentation of a totality. The dialectical image is Benjamin’s name for his method of historical materialism, his own apostate Marxism; it imagines the figure of an image as partial in its engagement with the world but also arresting in the manner that it recalls the past, like a photograph, as an instant of the past that appears in the present. In other words, the directionality in Benjamin does not move from abstract concept to material object but in the reverse, from object to concept, from particular to universal. The photograph is the figural model for Benjamin’s concept, but the concept cannot be run back into the photograph, except perhaps as the instance of photography itself, carrying with it a whole history of economic and social relations that extend beyond the instance of any single

photograph and what it depicts. Benjamin writes, “The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast—as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability. The rescue that is carried out by these means—and only by these—can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost.”⁵ The dialectical image refracts historical meaning through the urgency of the present, never settling into a determinate stasis—the result of an identification of a photographic image as a dialectical image; it is an epistemology of obsolescence, an attempted retrieval of things and thoughts that appeared lost but that reveal themselves in the light and immediacy of the historical present, illuminating the possibility of a future. For Benjamin, truth inheres in objects cast aside, unaccounted for in their own time and reappraised in the present. And while the dialectical image may be modeled on the photograph, its relevance to that technology here is due to their shared concern with obsolescence rather than any simple identity. In this sense, Benjamin’s concept is not only relevant to the issues of obsolescence but also that of lateness; the dialectical image is late in two senses—as a rescue of something long thought irrelevant and as an importation of that something into the radical present, the latest instance of history as it pushes towards futural difference.

Part of Benjamin’s task in theorizing the dialectical image is a critique of faith in progress as an inevitability, moving against both liberals and their faith in historical progress or the Marxian belief in the revolutionary potential of the proletariat to overthrow and abolish exchange relations. Benjamin is proposing a version of Marxism that is no longer confident in the revolutionary potential of this class, of its ability to push capitalism toward its own inevitable end. In a striking passage from the notes to the “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” Benjamin argues against a sense of history that he associates with

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 473.

Marx: “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotives of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake.”⁶ In both Benjamin and Jameson’s accounts there is a slowing or stilling of the former movement of history, whether progressive or rotational. Postmodernity advances over modernity through the end of history, an end to the forward movement toward a utopian future. Similarly, Benjamin suggest that rather than revolutions being the means by which history advances, instead they should be understood as desperate attempts to reverse or slow the movement of historical progress. Jameson’s account of the move from modernist movement to postmodern stasis differs from Benjamin’s in its lack of judgment on the value of the movement, but the diagnosis remains strikingly similar.

According to Krauss, the obsolescence of the medium is both its crisis and the means by which it might reenter critical art practices. Like Benjamin’s insistence upon an epistemological obsolescence that often uses objects as its point of ignition, Krauss’s argument for the centrality of obsolescence locates a redemptive quality in the obsolescence of the medium and a means by which it might be once again relevant. I will look at the centrality of Detroit in art practices, especially those that employ obsolete media to represent historical ruin, which I understand both in the sense of the continuing ruin of historical progress but also the ruin of history itself. Here, Detroit and cinema will be considered as cross-mediating signifiers of modernity that inflects the photographic images. As Krauss’s argument makes clear, the reemergence of the medium is not a simple identity of technical features and discursive practices but a more complex mediation between the features of each

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’” in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, eds. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 402.

such that their independent determinations become clear. In other words, the technical features of one medium can be employed to express the discursive features or conceptual concerns of another medium.⁷

Images of a Disaster in Progress

The image is flat, taken from a moderate distance but not so far that the structure allows itself to be framed by its surroundings, forcing the photograph itself and its own limitations to determine its endings, except at the bottom where a thin slice of ground is visible. Despite this hermetic framing, the immensity of the building is apparent, especially if you closely inspect the bottom for fire hydrants or other objects to provide scale. The structure is old but appears solid, even as its windows are mostly missing and the copper roof over the atrium that serves as its entrance is discolored with rust—settled under its own historical and architectural weight. There is some barely discernible graffiti on the upper floors, but it is not obtrusive or distracting—it merely serves to emphasize the unkempt and abandoned character of the building rather than becoming a distraction as the photograph's point of interest. While the ground provides the only external limitations to the buildings extension, it functions more as a distancing device than an external limit, bleeding into the building and obscuring the historicity of the structure, pulling it back into nature. The building appears divided into a lower component with grand entryways and neo-classical styling—arches above the doors that hold large windows with heavy steel frames—and upper floors that are less stylized but still betray minute ornamentation, the details of which are indiscernible at the photograph's carefully composed distance. Because of the photograph's framing, the roof of the building is out of view but hints of its proximity are just visible, with the windows at the top moving to a curved design from the uniformity of

⁷ For an example of this issue as discussed in media studies, see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

rectangles below, and further ornamentation and supports appear in part. The obstruction of the photographic frame is less immediately daunting at the sides, but the edges of the building are still elided, emphasizing the building's own architectural dimensions that include towers at the edges, intended to offset the large entryways. The effect of all of this is that the building recreates its own frame within the claustrophobia of the photographic frame that seems to hover just in from the edges of the building, not seeming to actually leave anything out while also hinting at a world that is inaccessible beyond. This framing of the photograph emphasizes the building's framing of itself as a point of focus. What it frames is an abandoned, though likely not uninhabited, train station built in the early-Twentieth Century.



Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *Michigan Central Station*

Represented in this photograph is the Michigan Central Station in Detroit, Michigan. It is the cover image of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's *The Ruins of Detroit*. This image, transformed through the texture of the cloth cover in the hardcover edition into something

less harsh, introduces the book, acting as an imagined portal into the ruins that it claims to portray within, readopting as image the status that the station itself had for years as a first point of entry into Detroit, an entryway for a mode of transport that is itself closely identified with modernity⁸. Now, this building's image is produced and reproduced as one of the most recognizable symbols of Detroit's long decline, and the insistence with which its reproduction—along with many others—is carried out suggests something important about the prominence that Detroit has acquired in thinking the relation of the present to the history of the twentieth century—the American century. This is a century that one scholar has designated Detroit as the capital of in a formulation borrowed from Benjamin's own ascription of that status to Paris for the nineteenth century.⁹ The particular implications of Detroit's centrality to both America and the twentieth century are, of course, inseparable. And it is one of the reasons that Detroit has assumed a unique status among cities at this moment, whether it is called upon to frame discussions of the 2008 economic crisis, racial division, or the weakening of industrial capital in the face of cheaper labor markets abroad, the increase of mechanized production practices, municipal financial mismanagement, and finance capital. Detroit is the capital of the twentieth century and of American ruin—the symbol of a specifically American obsolescence.

Michigan Central Station often appears like a monolith on the Detroit skyline in its common portrayal. It sits apart from the concentration of buildings that comprise the city's skyline, just off of Michigan Avenue, a little less than a mile from downtown. Since its final closure in 1988 it has become one of the most prominent symbols of Detroit's decline from

⁸ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

⁹ Peter Wollen's talk, "Detroit: Capital of the Twentieth Century," is cited in Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* 109 (Summer 2004): 3.

the Arsenal of Democracy, the birthplace of the middle class, and the home of the American Dream in the immediate aftermath of World War Two to the decades of abandonment by its white population, some of the worst riots in the country in 1967, the symbol of urban dysfunction in the 1980s, and finally its current status as both the clue that will reveal the cause of capitalism's current crisis and fertile ground for investment and laissez-faire aesthetics in the ruins—creative destruction and the free-market fantasy of a government subservient to capital realized in the appointment of an emergency manager in the wake of the city's recent historic bankruptcy. Contemporary Detroit is a representative example of the history of the Twentieth Century and a city of intense contradiction. The Michigan Central Station, as one of the most recognizable symbols of Detroit's ruination (along with the immense abandoned Packard Plant), is one of the most popular sites for the so-called "ruin porn" that has become one of the most prevalent ways in which many people experience and imagine Detroit. Many have criticized this genre as exploitative because it aestheticizes others' despair while offering little or no context, no sense of the social, economic, and historical conditions that created what is being represented in the images.¹⁰ The other main objection is that the images do not acknowledge the wealth of creative and productive—or creatively productive—activities that are happening in Detroit, veiled by a desire to wallow in a historical past that is not determinate or representative.¹¹

The first objection is correct on some level, if reductive in its more crude articulations, arguing that each photograph ought to represent a full historical context for what it depicts, but the second is more problematic and actually works against the first

¹⁰ Eli Rosenberg, "Motown or Ghostown? Ruin Porn in Detroit," *The Wire*, January 20, 2011, accessed on April 27, 2014, <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/entertainment/2011/01/motown-or-ghostown-ruin-porn-in-detroit/21443/>

¹¹ Matthew Newton, "Last Exit Detroit: Christian Burkert's View of Motor City," *Thought Catalog*, December 1, 2010, accessed on April 27 2014, <http://thoughtcatalog.com/matthew-newton/2010/12/last-exit-detroit-christian-burkerts-view-of-motor-city/>

objection that it is often made alongside and in assumed sympathy. This second objection takes umbrage not at the idea that Detroit is being misrepresented, or only partially represented, but at the idea that this space might not offer opportunities for investment and creative innovation, that it is forever lost and beyond redemption—reinvestment. While the first objection works to put people back into the representations of the city, the second objection takes their absence, or disenfranchisement, as its basis and its opportunity. In this imagined reality, Detroit is an empty slate, a landscape without history, without barriers, where the remnants and ruins exist solely for the creative reproductions of a new class of occupants and new possibilities for profit. It is virgin territory, ready for exploration and settlement—a truly American space. This objection reveals Detroit as a dream of capital investment, remaking in the wake of industrial capital's disempowerment, the new imperatives of finance capital and creative labor. Detroit, as a city exemplary of the contradictions of multinational capitalism is, as Jerry Herron has argued, “postmodernism ground zero.”

On some level, Fredric Jameson's essay on postmodernism can be thought of as an argument about the city, a concern that can be seen in his own emphasis on the place of real estate development in capital's multinational phase but also the importance of John Portman's Westin Bonaventure Hotel in describing the new downtown in postmodernism, a disconnected collection of self-enclosed and self-reliant worlds, and in the transformation of space in postmodernism—hyperspace. While this is more or less implicit in Jameson's essay on postmodernism, it is made more explicit in his related essay, written in the same period, “Cognitive Mapping.”¹² In this essay, Jameson argues that the transition from market capitalism to monopoly capitalism, and the cultural transformations that go along with it,

¹² Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 347-360.

index the transitions to an urban society that accompanied this shift, and these geographic displacements signaled their importance in modernism's formal disjunctures and abstractions. According to Jameson, the emergence of multinational capitalism brings with it a further abstraction that is marked by the loss of any anterior space from which to stand against the dominant position of capital. Thus, the imperative in multinational capitalism is to begin to map the abstract spaces of capitalism, making the subject's place in the flows of labor and investments of capital more clearly navigable and more open to resistance. One of the texts that Jameson chooses to illustrate cognitive mapping is Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin's *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, an account of radical African-American labor struggles in Detroit during the 1960s.¹³ Further, existing as an almost mirror image of Portman's construction in Los Angeles, is his Renaissance Center in downtown Detroit (now the world headquarters of General Motors), existing as an almost structural apotheosis of Michigan Central Station, in the midst of the skyline and yet apart, its postmodern glass shell standing in stark contrast to the pre-war art deco building, its dispersal into its numerous towers contrasting Michigan Central's structural singularity, and its impermeability emphasizing the station's openness, a feature all the more starkly demonstrated by its emptiness when viewed from a distance. Thus, even if it is not explicitly stated as such for Jameson, Detroit is a key location in the struggle to map a space of resistance in the complexities of multinational capitalism. It is this sense in which we can borrow Wollen's formulation and imagine Detroit as the capital of the twentieth century, a symbolic center of a world that is in the process of losing the possibility of maintaining such notions of centeredness.

If the connection between Detroit and postmodernism is implicit in Jameson, Herron makes it explicit, arguing that postmodernism is uniquely sited and emblematically

¹³ Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1998).

existent in Detroit. For Herron, Detroit represents a compressed version of the history that Jameson is drawing on to argue for the transition in culture that attends the shift from monopoly to multinational capitalism. Herron writes, “Detroit is America’s first postmodernist city...If one is to understand postmodernism, then, it is essential to understand Detroit, and in order to do that, one must begin downtown, with the movies at the Grand Circus Park.”¹⁴ Thus, not only is Detroit central to an understanding of postmodernism but cinema appears as a key mediating factor in understanding both. Detroit demonstrates in extreme form the contradictions and conflicts of the history of the twentieth century, from Henry Ford’s rationalization of industrial production and the subsequent democratization of automobile ownership to the eventual use of those same vehicles to evacuate the city that the automobile had built—the Motor City—for the promise of the suburbs.¹⁵ The architectural structures of the former movie palaces, emblematic as they are of a passed modernity, signify the centrality of cinema to modernity and their memorialization is particularly evocative in reflecting back on that history.

The site of the former Michigan Theater, which occupies the site where Henry Ford built his first car, and itself spectacularly reproduced as cinematic object in Curtis Hanson’s *8 Mile*, is particularly emblematic of this architectural signification of cinema’s past in Detroit. The building has since been transformed into an office building and parking garage, but traces of the original structure live on, as Herron details:

...[T]he theater itself is gone, or almost so; only the surrounding office tower remains. The vaulted auditorium has now been converted into a parking garage, so that the cars sit where audiences once did, beneath the rococo ornaments that some architectural ironist has left in place. It’s as if the machines, no less than their cynical

¹⁴ Jerry Herron, “Postmodernism Ground Zero, or Going to the Movies at the Grand Circus Park,” *Social Text* 18 (Winter 1987-1988): 61.

¹⁵ See Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

inventor, saw through the bunk of representation; now they have taken their revenge, appropriately enough, on the place where representation used to get publicly and powerfully coded—the movie theater...it stands for something else, the something else being the emergent *absence* of postmodernism, this absence becoming nowhere more articulate than in the movie palaces of Detroit.”¹⁶

The structure’s absence is cinema, as cinema is the melancholic object of postmodernism, nostalgically recalled but never present as an actualized form; cinema is always structuring postmodernism, but its structures and materials and institutions are denied, insistently declared obsolete.

Movie palaces are a favorite object of representation in *The Ruins of Detroit*. They are provided with their own introductory paragraph, which highlights the importance of the cinema as a frame for this particular cultural imaginary of obsolescence:

In the twenties, the dominant music halls and theaters started fading away with the arrival of a new type of leisure, a new experience of moving image: cinema. Old independent theaters were slowly taken over and converted by entertainment businessmen who funded the film studios. Hundreds of new theaters—some extravagant in style and size—were built around the country...Gradually most old theaters, too numerous and in outdated neighborhoods, were converted into concert halls, night clubs, churches or adult cinemas before lying abandoned.¹⁷

According to this history, the cinema is not just another instance of urban ruin but a highly meaningful instance of modernity’s spectacular resistance to its own ending. And cinema does not appear as a lost origin: its own role in replacing previous institutions is acknowledged. The continued structuring absence of cinema is apparent in this account.

Pride of place is given to the Michigan Theater in both Herron and Marchand and Meffre, signifying in both the prominence of cinematic absence. The Michigan Theater is afforded its own introductory paragraph in the section dedicated to theaters more generally. The circularity of the space’s history is emphasized, moving from the site of Ford’s first

¹⁶ Herron, “Postmodernism Ground Zero,” 64.

¹⁷ Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *The Ruins of Detroit* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2010), 76.

workshop to cinema and back to a space dedicated to the automobile. But also significant is the history that it tells about the theater's decline, dated as beginning in the 1960s, the same era that Krauss identifies with the crisis of the medium. It is also the decade that is most heavily associated with the beginning of the end for the city of Detroit, the riots in 1967 being the symbolic beginning to a process that was well underway and would continue on¹⁸. But perhaps what is most significant about the Michigan Theater is that it brings together two objects, two institutions that are heavily identified with modernity—cinema and the automobile. This linkage is demonstrated by the three photographs of the Michigan Theater in *The Ruins of Detroit*. These photographs move as a progression through different imaginations of cinema, moving from shot to shot and from one vantage point to the next.

The first photograph is a wide shot, above the floor but not a top-down or aerial perspective. The image is jarring because of the disconnect between its top half and its bottom half. The lower section of the image shows an enclosed parking garage with a single mini-van in the lower center of the image. The walls of the garage are mostly red brick, but there is a scattering of concrete and other materials suggesting the piecemeal and ongoing reconstruction of the building. The image is slightly offset so that the camera is placed slightly to the left of center along one of the short sides of the rectangular space. But it is the upper half of the image that marks it as something of interest; the top portion of the image seems to be cut from a different material. An ornate but ruined ceiling dominates the upper portions of the image, seeming to hang above the lower portion, suspended by some invisible infrastructure that keeps it apart from the building itself, as though it were some cloud that hung over this space—weightless. The ceiling is a remnant of the building's time as a theater, harkening back not only to cinema but also to a very specific cinema—the

¹⁸ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

heavily stylized movie palaces of the first half of the twentieth century and the prominence and importance that these structures held. However, the ceiling is not the only thing in the image that suggests the cinematic lineage of the space. The organization of the image itself seems to approximate an indoor drive-in theater, marking an extreme condensation of cinematic, urban, and automotive tropes; the space is represented as a vantage on a theater, encompassing the whole of the cinematic space and the apparatus in motion—from projector to screen to spectator. On the far right, at what would be the back of the theater is a bright light, the only visible artificial light in the image—the projector. It is located directly above the pedestrian access to the space and is clearly produced by a single bulb. Opposite this light, in the lower left corner of the image, is another light, this coming from what appears to be the outside, but larger than the light at the left and spread across a plane rather than emanating from a single point—a screen. In the organization of the image, it appears that this window is a screen catching the light from the projector. And in between these is the single minivan, with its attention directed towards the screen, sitting by itself as the sole member of an imagined audience—the spectator. In this image there are the beginnings of the reflectivity that these photographs provide for the medium of photography and the abstract medium itself—offering back to it the ruin depicted in the image. But it is not photography that returns the gaze in this instance, but the idea of cinema as mediated by photography.



Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *Michigan Theater*

This reflectivity is again emphasized in the next photograph from the Michigan Theater. If these images are considered as a series, then there occurs here a cut from an establishing shot to a point of view shot, giving the approximation of a cinematic spectator's position in this structure's remains; it shows what spectators see from their own vantage point, including the screen and the surrounding architecture. The image is taken from a perch above a smaller and more confined space than that in the previous photograph. The photograph is centered within the space thereby emphasizing its depth; there is a framed doorway that provides an internal frame to the image, much like the image of the Michigan Central Station that redoubled its own photographic framing, and within that frame is a long passage that extends out from the framing device. The cutout that contains the camera's

vantage point is roughly a half-floor above the floor that is visible below, suggesting a box seat or balcony from which the spectator views both the screen but also the space of the theater. Along the ceiling is more battered but ornate decoration, but it is in better condition than what appears in the previous image, with more of the original structure seeming to incorporate and support it.



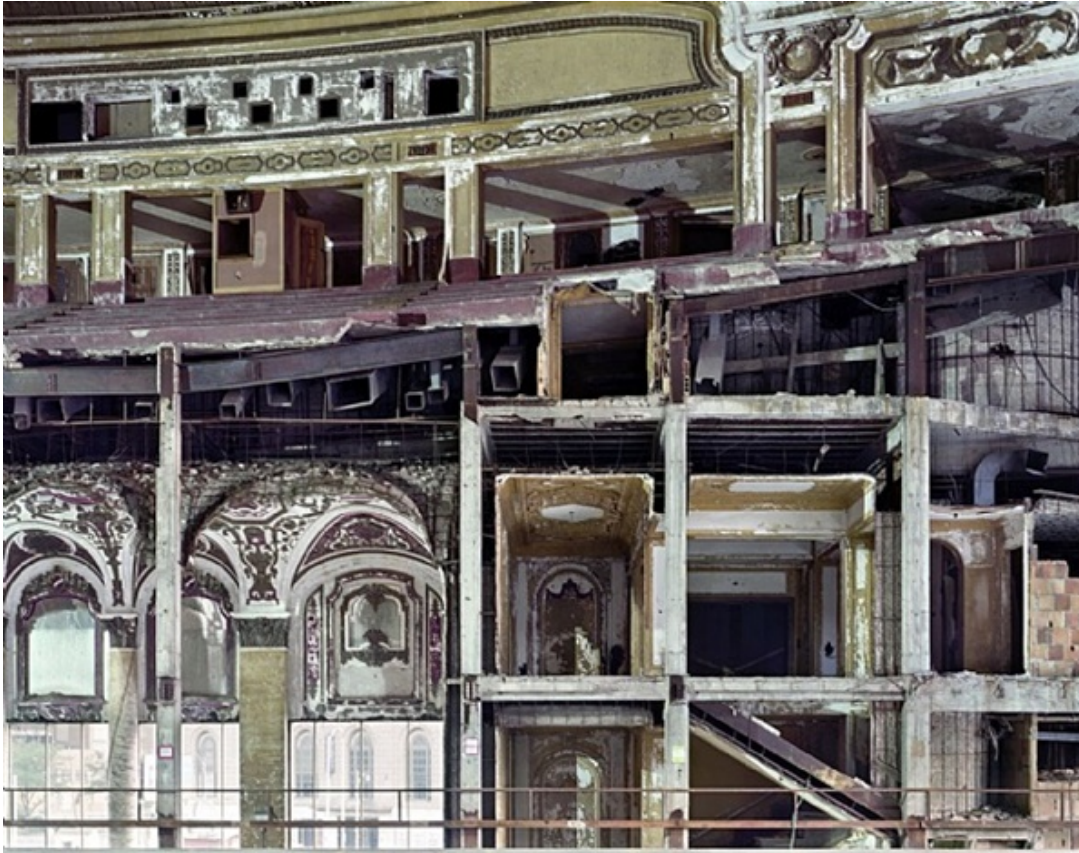
Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *Old Lobby Michigan Theater*

There are two cars parked at angles away from the camera along the ground below. Along the right side of the image is a series of large windows separated by decorative rococo columns. Along the left side the wall is mostly open, showing the characteristic offset half-floors of a parking garage. This division seems to suggest the complicated history of the space, as a place dedicated to entertainment on the one hand and a place focused on the

automobile on the other. As in the previous image, the sense of a theater is again emphasized, but this time the viewer of the image is placed in the position of the spectator looking off to the screen at the other end of the passage, with a differentiation maintained from what is shown on the screen. While the first image depicts a bare cinematic approximation, showing the entirety of the space, this photograph emphasizes the experience of spectatorship, the importance of looking, from the centering of the image to the internal frame to the decoration of the ceiling to the depth of the space, everything is pulling the viewer into the image, insisting upon the allure of looking that is so central to cinema.

The final image of the Michigan Theater succumbs to this allure of the image; it departs from the first two in that it is no longer showing the externality of the cinematic space or the experience of the cinematic viewer, but its focus remains cinema. Here, the photographic image has left the space of allegory for mimicry; there is no distance between what the photographic image shows and what the imagined cinematic image might show. The photograph shows a cross cut of the building, its internal structure and organization, from a vantage point that should seemingly not be available to the viewer. It shows the violence done to the building in its transition from movie palace to parking garage in a way that recreates the sort of uninhibited access and visibility that cinema provides, a slightly altered version of what Benjamin called the “optical unconscious.” This shot provides the sort of impossible visibility that might show what is happening in multiple floors or rooms of a building simultaneously without crosscutting, without artificially dividing the temporal structure of film, which is of course absent in its present photographic actuality. Instead, the spatial accessibility is opened to compensate for its temporal stasis. Thus, it deemphasizes the cinematic possibility of the cut, moving from one image to the next, in its actual visual

depiction, but it recuperates the cut through its own focus on the architectural cut of the building. But instead of dwelling on the seeming impossibility of a photographic depiction of cinematic cross cutting, the image instead focuses on a different cinematic trope that is within its purview—the portrayal of non-contiguous space simultaneously through artificial sets. Thus, the narrativity or fantasy of cinema is emphasized over the documentary or reality of the photograph. The image shows what might be the ceiling from the previous photo in the lower right half of the image. The outside that was intimated but inaccessible through the windows that were on the right in the previous image is now directly visible. Cutting across the photograph horizontally is a single uneven line, rising from left to right, suggesting the remnants of the theater's sloped ceiling. Above this are a series of rooms with deteriorating plaster and paint on the walls. Below this line there are a series of air vents that have been cut and then what appear to be storage spaces that figure the sloped line into the upper border of a trapezoid, leveling the architectural frame of the structure. In the lower right of the image are a series of rooms whose specific purpose is unclear. It is roughly divided into six rooms or spaces—two floors with three rooms on each floor. There appears to be the remnants of a staircase or elevator that spans across the two floors of the building. But unlike the upper portion of the image, it is clear that the building has been cut away here, as the rooms are clearly disrupted; the external beams are not painted but appear as bare concrete, and the internal and usually unseen components of the building are on display. Thus, with this image, the series completes itself in the space of the cinematic image itself, in the abstraction of a ruined and misused building, seeming to attempt to cut between different spaces within its own temporal instant but ontologically unable without the violence displayed here.



Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *Structure Cut*

With these three photographs, Marchand and Meffre place cinema at the center of their elegy for American modernity, specifically linking the history of cinema to that of Detroit and the automobile. Herron has argued that Detroit is a city that is heavily invested in cinema, and the changes to the cinema are considered of a piece with the changes that have gone on in Detroit. Herron writes, “As the maps suggest, there is (or was) perhaps nowhere else so representatively centered a city: centered economically, geographically, and popularly around the movies. Nor is there, now, a city more central to what people imagine to have gone wrong with urban, industrial American, which is what lends Detroit its special relevance. It is this place, or this kind of place, that becomes the object, more than any other, of postmodernism’s anxious erasure.”¹⁹ Detroit is “postmodernism ground zero” because it

¹⁹ Herron, “Postmodernism Ground Zero,” 69.

indexes the lost markers of modernity whose absence structures postmodernity, specifically cinema and the city itself in this case. In their place is left a spectacle of decline that solidifies Detroit's status as the capital of the twentieth century. The images of Marchand and Meffre demonstrate the allure of this spectacle that cannot be easily dismissed as ahistorical or decontextualized.

A more recent essay by Herron quotes Guy Debord in order to frame Detroit in the context of spectacle: "The Spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images."²⁰ Spectacle provides a way for Herron to argue that imagistic portrayal of Detroit becomes a means by which its history of disaster is reified—naturalized, commodified and dehistoricized. As a natural disaster the ruin of Detroit requires no guilt for its history and no action for its present—Detroit is merely following its entropic course of development into ruin. But the implications of the naturalization of Detroit extend beyond its immediate geographical bounds. As Wollen's title implies the crucial role of Detroit in understanding the history of the twentieth century, Herron argues for its centrality to the understanding of the nation itself and specifically the myths of American exceptionalism. Detroit becomes an instance of a process that is itself emblematic of America and its century.

Herron notes the uniqueness of Detroit as both an actuality and as a point of representational imagination: "Detroit is the longest-running disaster story in American history...the disaster here has been so spread out over time that it begins to look not like a disaster at all but something else, something natural, as if this condition were to be

²⁰ Jerry Herron, "Detroit: Disaster Deferred, Disaster in Progress," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106: 4 (Fall 2007): 664.

expected.”²¹ This naturalization is essential to the process of forgetting that the spectacle of Detroit represents. Detroit is an important node in the current imagining of the nation and its place in the world; it has become central to attempts to explain and reckon with the 2008 economic crisis and its aftermath, but it is also a sort of exceptional model of the American city, a unique version of inverted American exceptionalism that provokes the varied instances of representational spectacularization. The dialectic of modernity, the production of its own means of destruction, is highly visible in Detroit. It is the birthplace of the automobile—a city whose very design is modeled upon a wheel—and a city that has suffered more visibly than any other both the effects of its wealthier white population utilizing the new mobility offered by the automobile to flee the city for the suburbs and the decline of the American auto industry. Detroit’s status among cities, then, is unique in its position at the extremes; it is no longer producing its own destruction but is instead an archive of a more general destruction, a place where the reifications of modernity have finally stopped functioning and now exist only as testaments to the truth of historical progress—destruction. Inevitably, the productivity of modernity would eventually turn upon itself, consuming its own promise. Detroit then becomes a means for imagining both the past and the future from a present that is detached from both—the detached and static temporality of the contemporary.

The ruins of Detroit are not without their historical specificity; they recall an era of American prosperity and commonality associated with the New Deal, Fordist industrial models, and welfare state liberalism. But these structures seem out of step with the new designs of Detroit, and so their representational value as ruins is cherished more than the space that they could provide otherwise. What the images of Detroit reveal is a breakdown

²¹ Herron, “Detroit,” 665.

in the nostalgia for the loss of a historical imaginary that envisions futures, whether utopian or dystopian. The contemporary historical moment—that of the contemporary—is a broken and abandoned motor, no longer functioning but serving as a constant reminder of the loss of historical movement: it is the static motor of history that is depicted in the images of Detroit's abandoned spaces. These are images that index not only the progression of disaster, documenting the layers of ruin in such structures as the Michigan Theater, but also a disaster in progress itself, in the very possibility of imagining utopian futures. The motor of history insists upon the specificity of the representation that is offered by these machines—as machines of representation—upon the historicity of the machines themselves, and the implications for representation itself as represented in the images of ruin.

The Motor of History

The claim here is that the images of Detroit are inherently specific to the technologies of representation upon which they rest, carrying their own medium based historicity within them. The images' depiction of historical ruin is inseparable from their own obsolescence as technologies of representation; the motor of history is the convergence of history's collapse with that of its representation. The motor of history figures the violent end of the mediating function of representation itself, beyond just the level of the image, in the breakdown of representation and history themselves. The motor of history is an understanding of the representation of history as both static and chaotic in its motion, like the rotational motion of previous chapters but working in fits and starts, continuing to develop without any progression but unevenly. It is the manner in which history moves in the era of multinational capitalism. If the insistently turning cinematic machines of Duchamp, Snow, or Smithson (or Eisenstein or Vertov for that matter) were quintessentially modern, then the motionless photographs of abandoned and decaying machines and spaces formerly

occupied by machines is postmodern in the sense offered by Jameson. Detroit is the place that is perhaps most closely identified with images of this sort. This (non)movement of history is also apparent in the recent recuperative accounts and theorizations of the medium in art. In Krauss's account, the technologies of film and photography belong to an era that has passed and now exist only by their own internal momentum; they are remnants of what Frampton termed "high" technologies existing in a late age. Frampton is comparing film to the automobile, and specifically Henry Ford's Model T (an overdetermined instance in the present context).²² The comparison emphasizes the extent to which both technologies are loosely compiled amalgamations of other technologies. The extent to which these technologies appear incomplete is emphasized in the light of contemporary technologies, whether the more streamlined automobiles from the American auto industry—heavily identified with Detroit—or the changes in moving image culture, from filmic cinema's divide between projection source and surface to the internally motivated images of video and digital technologies. The motor of history brings together the issues of the medium and representation, technology and image.

In "*A Voyage on the North Sea*": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* Krauss argues that we are now living in an era in which the previous importance of the medium for advanced art in modernism is in decline, challenged by the neo-avantgarde and its aftermath in recent multi-media installation art. According to Krauss, conceptual art, minimalism, and other instances of the neo-avantgarde mark a significant shift in art from a focus on the specific problematics and characteristics of a particular medium (painting, sculpture, photography, film, etc.) to a focus on the problematic of art itself. Joseph Kosuth offers a paradigmatic statement on this issue: "Being an artist now means to question the nature of

²² See Hollis Frampton, "The Invention Without a Future," in *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters*, ed. Bruce Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 176.

art,' he stated. 'If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. That's because the word *art* is general and the word *painting* is specific.'"²³ For Krauss, conceptual art definitively shifts the problematic of art from an engagement with a specific medium to one with the general institution of art through a mediation in language. This generality and intangibility is initially posed as a critique of the reified objects of modernism—exemplified by abstract expressionism as a painting that approaches identity with itself in its attempts to define the essence of painting—by the neo-avantgarde. This essential quality of the work maintained the pretense of autonomy that was cherished by modernism, holding out its impenetrability and formalism as a guard against the commodity structure. Conceptual art sought its critique of art's relation to capital in a different manner, not by sinking further back from exchange, but by submitting to it even more explicitly (pop art obviously follows a similar route in a different manner). Krauss writes, "By abandoning this pretense to artistic autonomy, and by willingly assuming various forms and sites—the mass-distributed printed book, for example, or the public billboard—Conceptual art saw itself securing a higher purity for Art, so that in flowing through the channels of commodity distribution it would not only adopt any form it needed but would, by a kind of homeopathic defense, escape the effects of the market itself."²⁴ While Krauss is sympathetic to the critique of modernism by conceptual art, what follows from its destruction of modernist autonomy and the medium is highly problematic. According to Krauss, if conceptual art holds out a protest against a willing submission to reification in its intricate critique of abstract expressionism and other manifestations of modernist essentialism, what

²³ Quoted in Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, 10. See also Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 158-177.

²⁴ Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea", 11.

follows in its wake almost completely submits to the demands of multinational capitalism in the form of installation art that "...finds itself complicit with a globalization of the image in the service of capital."²⁵ Critical art, art that is less immediately in service to capital, in the present is embodied for Krauss in figures that seek not the newfound freedoms afforded by the death of the medium but a redemption of the medium by other means as a way to more precisely hold out a historicity against the instantaneity and depthlessness of multinational capital.

Although photography is largely absent from the essay on the post-medium condition, in "Reinventing the Medium" it is paramount as the medium that precipitates the crisis of the medium and the one that holds out the possibility for a salvage of the medium as a category. According to Krauss, photography's contemporary obsolescence raises the prospect of a lost utopian ambition and possibility in the medium of photography and in its ability to redeem the idea of the medium itself. In becoming obsolete in the face of the digital and of the global triumph of the image in multinational capitalism, photography's relation to aesthetic production is transformed. Krauss writes, "...photography functions against the grain of its earlier destruction of the medium, becoming, under precisely the guise of its own obsolescence, a means of what has to be called an act of reinventing the medium."²⁶ The passing of the medium as an object of mass use precipitates this repurposing of it. It was photography's initial status as unique, standing above the other mediums, that precipitated its abstraction into a conceptual problematic by modernism, it is also as distinct that it reintroduces the idea of the medium—that concept that had been the distinguishing factor in delineating the individual mediums. Krauss's reinvention of the

²⁵ Krauss, "*A Voyage on the North Sea*", 56.

²⁶ Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium," 296.

medium bought with photography's obsolescence is not a nostalgic attempt to salvage the medium in its already lost guise but, rather, the redemption of the medium through its reinvention—the medium's sublation into a new form. For Krauss, the medium freed by photography's obsolescence "...concerns the idea of a medium as such, a medium as a set of conventions derived from (but not identical with) the material conditions of a given technical support, conventions out of which to develop a form of expressiveness that can be both projective and mnemonic."²⁷ Thus, it is not the medium as an identical unity that is being redeemed in this reinvention but, rather, a divided medium, a medium that is neither solely an abstract concept of its ideal possibility nor simply a collection of technical practices, conventions, and technologies. According to Krauss's argument, the medium is not obsolete but continues to exist as both concept and material in contemporary work. It is no longer taken for granted but is instead now the terrain upon which the definition of art is contested.

These essays, both published in 1999, and holding an obvious similarity of concern, form a complementary symbiosis, such that, the essay on the post-medium condition provides the historical narrative that is missing in "Reinventing the Medium" while also laying out the critique of installation art. Meanwhile, "Reinventing the Medium" specifies the importance of photography to the problematic of the post-medium condition, while photography is almost entirely unmentioned in the essay dedicated to that problematic. But perhaps more interesting than this symbiosis is the differential commitment to cinema and photography in these essays such that Krauss fails to recognize the extent of the shift that has occurred in the reinvention of the medium that she is proposing, and the violence inherent in the implicit shift in representation.

²⁷ Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium," 296.

In Krauss's discussion of *A Voyage on the North Sea* she argues that fiction is the central medium for Broodthaers, allowing him to point to the divergence between the identity promised by the modernist medium, an identity which is never delivered: "Broodthaers's recourse to fiction tells of the impossibility of this story in the enactment of a kind of layering that can itself stand for, or allegorize, the self-differential condition of mediums themselves."²⁸ While Krauss begins her discussion of the film with an acknowledgement of the importance of photography in this and in Benjamin's theory of redemptive obsolescence, which her own model is heavily indebted to, the importance of photography in the work itself is absent; the significance of the presence of the photographic in the film is missed. As Broodthaers's film approaches the limits of cinematic representation—stillness—and end of filmic specificity, it begins to break down as a machine of representation. As filmic cinema approaches its end its precarious unity as a medium is challenged; it begins to come apart, fracturing at each break in its constitutive make-up. Photography is the most obvious instance of representative possibility for this fracturing because of its role as a constitutive part of cinema and their partially shared technical properties. Thus, as a medium at a similarly precarious instant, photography becomes the place where the expression of cinematic rupture and limitation is most readily expressed. The matter is different though similar in "Reinventing the Medium."

For Krauss, James Coleman reinvents and redeems the medium through his translation of photography into the slide projector. As in the previous example, it is not that Krauss is unaware of the presence of cinema as a factor in Coleman's work, but that she plays down its importance in favor of a different medium, in this case the photonovel. Once again, the issue of motion and stasis is figured as crucial by Krauss, but she declines to note

²⁸ Krauss, "*A Voyage on the North Sea*", 53.

the obvious implications of this for the photography/cinema dialectic at work. However, most problematic for Krauss's identification of Coleman's work as drawing primarily from photography rather than cinema, is the insistence upon the ways in which the images break the rules of continuity-editing in narrative cinema rather than on the matter of the prominence of projection in Coleman's work, a definitively cinematic feature. In other words, Krauss seems to prioritize content over form in identifying Coleman's work as photographic rather than cinematic. This passage on Coleman's reinvention of the medium highlights the issue:

Rather, the medium Coleman seems to be elaborating is just this paradoxical collision between stillness and movement that the static slide provokes right at the interstice of its changes, which, since Coleman insists that the projection equipment be placed in the same space as the viewer of his work, is underscored by the click of the carousel's rotation and the new slide's falling into place or by the mechanical whirl of the double projectors' zoom lenses changing focus to create the effect of a dissolve.²⁹

The medium that Krauss is laying out here is one that is in process, which has no settled instance of an image, and no object to which you can point to as the image. Filmic cinema is a radically dispersed medium, not only in the insurmountable gap between the time of recording and the time of exhibition, a feature that differentiates it from video, but also in the act of exhibition itself. Filmic exhibition is spatially, temporally, and materially divided. Photography is divided as well, in the distance between the time at which a shot is taken and when it is developed, between the film itself and the material on which the image is printed, but, unlike cinema, photography has a finished product, an object that can be held and identified more readily as the photograph. Cinema has no similarly recognizable object.

Krauss's theory of the self-differential medium insists that it is both a feature of recent art by figures like Coleman, but also present in modernist works as well. It is, of

²⁹ Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium," 297.

course, defensible to suggest that modernist works are no more self-identical than contemporary works, but there is a difference that Krauss misses. While Krauss's reinvented medium seeks a return to a form of historicity that was previously found in modernism, expressed now in a different register, the late medium is one where there has been a more critical fracture within the medium such that a salvage is only possible at certain points, at certain moments, as with Benjamin's dialectical image, and those moments or instants appear precisely at the points where the technical matter of the medium comes into contradiction with the conceptual in a single work. This is seen in the Marchand and Meffre photographs where they adopt an elegiac vision for a cinema that is no longer present through an allegorized cinematic form. This is late cinema read through the motor of history. In contrast to Krauss's insistence upon a reinvention of the medium through an adoption of a new medium in Coleman or its premonition in Broodthaers, this one is built specifically from the debris of the medium that is never present to itself, the medium that can only ever be late—cinema.

The City and the Medium Utopia

Friedrich Kittler offers a different conception of the medium in his essay, "The City Is a Medium." Kittler argues that the contemporary transformations of the medium, the essential character of the individual media and their interrelation through that commonality, are modeled on changes and innovations in urban form that are, in fact, premised upon biological and corporeal foundations. Kittler, in a characteristically frenetic and seemingly tangential manner, understands the contemporary city as both highly ordered by innumerable networks carrying endless amounts of information and chaotic image-based interpretations of that information. "What Strikes the eye of the passerby as a growth or

entropy is technology, that is, information.”³⁰ For Kittler media are primarily understood as modes for the transmission of information, translated by numbers from one form to another, so that the transmission itself is far more ordered than the information that they move from one location to the next. Because the highly ordered information moves instantly while its interpretation into information occurs in real time, it has a conflicting relation to the shape of the city. Thus, the velocity of transmission in contemporary media only emphasizes the stasis of those way stations that used to be necessary for the maintenance of a functional city and are now simply outmoded and empty. For Kittler, media serve to scale the city, shrinking it by enabling and simplifying the flows of information. Kittler writes, “The technologic media miniaturize the city, while magnifying the entropy of megalopolis. Not only have the technological traffic modules of modernity, such as parking garages and airports, rendered obsolescent the age-old module ‘life-sized,’ indeed, it seems to me that modulization itself has been rendered obsolescent.”³¹ Again, obsolescence is raised, but in this context it is the obsolescence of the city, and the mediums within the space of the city. For Kittler, the technologies of media seem to exist without history; no discernible difference exists on the scale of the transition between modernity and postmodernity, aside from mode and speed. The essential character of media is unchanged in history, existing simply as modes of information processing.

Julia Reyes Taubman’s *Detroit: 138 Square Miles* brings together the thematics of the city and the medium of photography as parallel concerns more explicitly than Marchand and Meffre, and it is instructive to compare their respective tactics in the depiction of Detroit as ruin and the breakdown in progress and representation that they signal. They are in many

³⁰ Friedrich A. Kittler, “The City Is a Medium,” *New Literary History*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Autumn 1996): 718.

³¹ Kittler, “The City Is a Medium,” 721.

respects very similar; many photographs from each could easily be mistaken as belonging to the other, and the projects both seek to develop a sense of the geography of Detroit through a collective assemblage of photographic images. However, Taubman does not frame Detroit in a context of decline, at least not immediately or solely, but as space, specific and delimited. There is a shift from the temporal frame of ruination in Marchand and Meffre to the spatial frame of the specificity of the city in Taubmann. Taubman represents Detroit as an existing city, not uninhabited, but as a space and a population that is still very much alive and vibrant. It is nearly impossible to locate a single living human in any of the images in *The Ruins of Detroit*, but they are featured throughout Taubman's photography. Further, nearly all of the photographs by Marchand and Meffre emphasize the disrepair of the city; it is not apparent that people currently live in this place. This is not the case for Taubmann, where many of her sites, even those that do not include humans within them, suggest the presence of life, the immediacy of a care for the space represented. But while Taubman deemphasizes the significance of ruination in her figuration of Detroit, at least compared to that of Marchand and Meffre, *Detroit: 138 Square Miles* goes further in attempting to use photography for cartographic endeavors. The title itself suggests this spatial emphasis, noting the sprawling extent of Detroit, a space that is objectively large by American urban standards, partially due to the rapid expansion of the city in its rise to house a fast-growing middle class, mostly in single-family houses. However if Taubman less explicitly emphasizes ruination, her focus on the expansiveness of the city also emphasizes the emptiness of large parts of the city that she represents as well, shrinking in population from its peak of over two million in the middle of the Twentieth Century to just over 700,000 in the most recent census. This emptiness is actually emphasized by the presence of people in Taubman's photography: a sense that people do live in this city makes the images of ruin all the more distressing as compared to

Marchand and Meffre's subjectless images that could be mistaken for a place long abandoned, with nobody around for years or miles.

Taubman's book is divided into three sections that correspond to directional coordinates—quadrants—within the city: East, Central, and West, and the photographs depicting the respective areas are placed under these headings. Beyond these divisions the book has a further partition between contextual and non-contextual versions of the photographs; the latter appear in the body of the text with an appendix that supplies the specific locations of the photographs that are usually grouped together by locations, and sometimes reprinted in a smaller format. In other words, many of the pictures appear twice, and those that do not actually reappear are referred to a second time. However, beyond the broad section headings, the photographs in the body of the text appear entirely free of citation or caption, existing only as image, reproduced on a large scale, though without a uniformity of size or shape that seems more determined by the subject matter than any predetermined decision. The captions are then available only in the appendix, even as a select portion of the photographs appear there. Thus, the appendix offers an abstract contextuality to the photographs even as it works to further delimit their specificity as a medium. The appendix serves as a sort of virtual map of the city—a map by other means—that retroactively locates the images in relation to the city and in relation to each other. And it is this cartographic concern that shapes the representational strategies of Taubman. In contrast to the tightly framed and highly decontextualized images of Marchand and Meffre, Taubman's photographs often display an interest in displaying them in a fuller context, situating them within the city and showing the contradictions within the geographies of Detroit, not just the monumentality of the individual ruin but the complexity of a more engulfing ruination in the midst of a major American city with a large population.

This complex representational method is demonstrated in Taubman's series of photographs on the site of the former Packard plant on the city's east side. Along with Michigan Central and the Michigan Theater, the Packard plant is one of the most recognizable symbols of Detroit. Opened in 1903, the plant is three and a half million square feet and it occupies over forty acres along East Grand Boulevard. Designed by Albert Kahn and once considered to be one of the most modern factories of its time, the Packard plant stretches across the east side of the city, permanently marking its traffic flows and neighborhood compositions. An expansive photograph of its breadth serves as the cover of *Detroit: 138 Square Miles*. And it is also this photograph that opens the section of the work that focuses on the plant.



Julia Reyes Taubman, *Packard Motor Car Plant*

It is an aerial shot, likely taken from a helicopter, with the Packard plant running diagonally from the lower right corner to the middle of the left side of the image, cutting the

lower two thirds of the photograph roughly in half. The upper third of the photograph is sky, the Detroit skyline standing in the background, providing a jagged barrier to the horizon. While the plant is clearly in bad shape it sits among houses that appear to be inhabited, at least in part. However, the streets are more sparsely populated than they should be, with large stretches of snow and brown grass interspersed at uneven intervals between the houses. This expansiveness at the outset stands in stark contrast with the images of the same space in *The Ruins of Detroit*, which does not show the space beyond the plant, exhibiting only the emptied landscapes and not those that extend beyond.

Other images in the series confirm this interest in not only showing the plant's space but also what lies beyond when one looks out. One image from *Detroit: 138 Square Miles* is particularly evocative of this desire to show the space of the factory in the context of the city. It shows a view of the downtown skyline through the reinforced concrete structure of the plant. The opening in the structure cuts through the middle of the image, streaking across the shadowed recesses of the plant at the top and bottom of the image, interrupted only by the supports that hold the building in place. Along both the ceiling and the floor are deposits of ice, evidence of the structure's precarity even as its solidity is emphasized. Standing as a sort of natural contrast to the concrete supports are a series of icicles hanging from the ceiling that have then pooled on the floor as an icy covering that partially reflects the light from outside back at the camera.



Julia Reyes Taubman, *Packard Motor Car Plant*

It is instructive to contrast this image with the first non-archival image from *The Ruins of Detroit*. It is also of the Packard plant, but its vantage point is far more limited. Beyond the lack of caption, the only skyline that it shows is the plant itself, a water tower features in the background, prominent because of its singularity, but there is a building in the foreground that takes up much more of the photograph's attention. However, the image's limited visibility is due to more than just its vantage point, but is also obscured by a cracked and dirty window that stands as a filter to the rest of the image, except in the bottom right side of the photograph where the glass has fallen away.



Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *Packard Motors Plant*

The features of these two photographs from their respective larger projects are actually quite indicative of their divergent concerns. While *Detroit: 138 Square Miles* seeks to locate itself within the larger space of the city, *The Ruins of Detroit* attempts to convey the imagistic centrality of ruin in Detroit. But what is signified by the latter image from Marchand and Meffre is representation itself, which is less of an issue for Taubmann. While Taubman seems to present a less restrictive representation of Detroit through her allowance of the city as a living and existent space, Marchand and Meffre's photographs embrace their fictionalizing and myth-making potential, building upon the spectacle of industrial ruin, working through their allure and reflecting upon the motors of history—photography and film—through their representations of their own obsolescence, their own lateness, as instances of high technology in a late age. It is as an obsolescent form that Detroit takes up its retroactive status as the capital of the twentieth century. To make this claim is to suggest

that it is paramount in an understanding of a specific cultural transition, in the same way that Paris was central to the imagination of the nineteenth century.³²

The images of Detroit catalog a rupture in representation itself; they signify a crisis in the possibilities of representation, pushing at the borders of their own material framing. This is the very issue that Benjamin pointed to in his concept of the dialectical image. In Benjamin's dialectical image, obsolescence uncovers the truth of an object or concept, unacknowledged or hidden in their own present but readopted for its utopian potential. Benjamin's raises the issue of obsolescence to the level of the epistemological. The images of Detroit model this epistemological obsolescence through their abstraction into allegories of other means of representation and through their depictions of what is absent—history itself. The dialectical image imports elements of the past into the radical present—from the late to the latest—insisting upon the potential for each forgotten moment to push forward into a future beyond the bounds of the contemporary.

³² For an idea of what might constitute the visual character of a potential capital of the twenty first century, see Tim Hecker, "The Slum Pastoral: Helicopter Visuality and Koolhaas's Lagos," *Space and Culture* 13 (2010): 256-269.

Chapter Five: Late Capitalism Redux, or, Financing the Future

When did capitalism become late? Or, perhaps a better question: what is “late” in late capitalism? The second question is a more precise formulation of the problematic at hand but the first question demonstrates how attaching “late” to capitalism imparts temporalities and teleologies to capitalism when used in concert with attempts at periodization. Late capitalism hints at a suspicion (or hope or fear) that capitalism has, in fact, already expired and the contemporary configuration is undead, a zombie that lumbers on after its (overdue or premature) death. Over the past three decades accounts of contemporary capitalism have suggested that it has entered a new phase of instability and crisis. And while this is undoubtedly true in contrast to the relative stability of the immediate post-1945, moment it seems an open question as to whether this is a radically new transformation of capital accumulation or simply an updated and expanded instance of a recurrent tendency.

Naomi Klein characterizes this presumably new moment as “disaster capitalism,” functioning through crises, whether manufactured or natural, from Chile to Baghdad to New Orleans and characterized by “...orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities...”¹ Chris Harman has named the present configuration “zombie capitalism” because it is “...seemingly dead when it comes to achieving human goals and responding to human feelings, but capable of sudden spurts of activity that cause chaos all around.”² At an earlier moment, in the midst of the emerging instability, Ernest Mandel sought an explanation for the growth and stability of the three decades following World War Two, and

¹ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 6.

² Chris Harman, *Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 85.

developed a historical account of contemporary capitalism that he named “late capitalism,” with all of the attendant millenarian implications of teleological termination. Meanwhile, David Harvey insists that the shift from the relative stability of Fordism to the disruptions and uncertainties of “flexible accumulation” may signal a shift in the strategies of accumulation but that the underlying predominance of exchange relations remain largely intact: “Signs and tokens of radical changes in labour processes, in consumer habits, in geographical and geopolitical configurations, in state powers and practices, and the like, abound. Yet we still live, in the West, in a society where production for profit remains the basic organizing principle of economic life.”³ Despite their differences of emphasis, all of these accounts highlight a growing instability in the functioning of capitalism with an emphasis on the role of credit-bearing capital, the importance of which is further emphasized and empowered by its reliance upon new communication technologies. This chapter will theorize the importance of finance and credit in accounts of late capitalism as a way to clarify the temporal complexities of lateness and to define a difference between late capitalism and late capital.

Late capitalism is the moment of capital’s confrontation with the spatial and temporal limits of its contemporary configuration. *Late capital* is the means by which the crises of capital are managed and its limits are absorbed into the logic of the system that they once bounded. This chapter will argue that the general understanding of late capitalism, as the third stage of capitalist development, following market capitalism and monopoly capitalism, posited by Ernest Mandel and promoted by Fredric Jameson, should be extended beyond its specific periodizing definition. Further, it should specify the role of finance and credit capital’s crises of excess; finance capital holds an excess of time. Alongside *late capitalism* I

³ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989), 121.

will propose *late capital* as a state of capital that manages crises through a projection of itself—of its own excess—into the future. This theorization will take seriously the centrality of finance capital in late capitalism for Jameson but contextualize it in a longer history of capitalism than the one offered in the three stage narrative that Mandel and Jameson offer.

Following Giovanni Arrighi, I will argue that finance capital becomes dominant at the end of each long phase in the history of capitalism as a mode of crisis management; it provides a potential outlet of profitable investment for excess surplus value. Late capitalism is that moment when late capital becomes the predominant form, when capitalism must be projected beyond its present moment, when its future must be purchased. In other words, *late capitalism is a recurrent moment of capital's history rather than a singular phase at the end of the twentieth century*. Late capital is a condition that returns again and again throughout the history of capital, a specter haunting it at its margins, but always present as a potentiality that is ready to act as a salvage in moments when the crises of capital are seemingly unmanageable. Finally, I will argue that finance capital represents a form of absolute tautology, whereby the negative logic of capitalism's system of valuation is pushed beyond its limitations and into a crisis of representability.

In dialogue with this theorization of late capitalism's representational crisis I will argue that the representational technologies of the present participate in this tautology through an analysis of Ryoji Ikeda's installation, *The Transfinite*. Specifically, I will claim that, as the historicity of cinema is forced to contend with the instantaneity of the digital, cinema finds itself in a crisis of representation not dissimilar to that of capital; cinema becomes the repository of an excess of time, an impossible burden that both traps it in the past and propels it onward into the future. I will claim that the contemporary configuration of late capital, its structure of marking its tautology through temporal difference, is expressed in the

material conditions of Ikeda's installation. This spectral cinema, one that is neither present nor absent, will become the final instance of late cinema, an instance of a medium's always impending death, and its inherently ghostly life.

Sublime Presents

The representation of capitalism is a difficult proposition.⁴ Jameson has recently argued that the first volume of Marx's *Capital* amounts to an extended inquiry into the proper representational means for something as dynamic, complex, and encompassing as capital. According to Jameson, the dialectical method of *Capital* is meant to respond to the complexity of capital itself: "The process must then be imagined as a specific proto-narrative form, in which the transformation or recoding of a conceptual dilemma in a new and potentially more manageable way also results in the expansion of the object of study itself: the successive resolutions of the linked riddles or dilemmas lay in place the architecture of a whole construct or system, which is that of capital as such."⁵ This epistemological problematic appears specifically in relation to capitalism to the extent that capitalism is figured as total; the representation of capital as a unique problematic of representation exists to the extent that capitalism is figured as at least partially determinant. In other words, the epistemological problem is also explicitly political in this instance, if it is ever not so.

Jameson, again: "The Marxist tradition—its critique of epistemology and the contemplative, its denunciation of one-dimensionality and of reification more generally—would enrich this analysis with an identification of modernity and capitalism. I myself would prefer to grasp

⁴ This is true in both philosophical-conceptual terms and aesthetic-poetic terms. The latter is the basis of the debates within Western Marxism during the middle of the twentieth century, with Georg Lukacs insisting that realism was the appropriate form through which to represent the totality of capitalist reality. Against this, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno all defended the abstractions of modernism as a figural representation of capitalism's damage to reality itself, such that attempts at realism only recreated that damage without offering a critique of reality. See Theodor Adorno, et al. *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 1980).

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (New York: Verso, 2011), 3.

representation as an essential operation in cognitive mapping and in ideological construction (understood here in a positive sense).⁶ In other words, representation is a contested space that must be actively and consciously engaged; representation is never transparent. The insistence that representation is a political act and that it must be actively engaged locate it as a—or perhaps the—terrain of ideological struggle. For Jameson this is a problematic that is acute in the era of multinational capitalism. As Jameson argues: “...we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience.”⁷ According to Jameson, the condition of postmodernity is of being incapable of locating oneself within the vast networks of capital flows, impossibly caught within an unrepresentable totality that is itself becoming ever more total. If Marx confronted a problematic of representing the totality of capital in the mid-nineteenth century, then the problematic is seemingly more acute in the present. Thus, the central challenge of contemporary theory and praxis becomes what Jameson terms cognitive mapping.

It is tempting to offer the photographs of Edwardy Burtynsky and Andreas Gursky as examples of the representational crisis of late capitalism; both attempt a depiction of capital’s contemporary functioning with an emphasis on landscapes (especially in Burtynsky), presenting the appearance of the mapping that Jameson highlights. Gursky’s images tend to focus on iconic instances of production, distribution, and consumption while Burtynsky is more concerned with aestheticized depictions of the environmental destruction and aftereffects of resource extraction. Through these images both seem to appeal to what Jameson terms the “postmodern or technological sublime.” For Jameson, in the third stage of capitalism, its late stage, technology comes to represent, not so much itself, as the

⁶ Jameson, *Representing Capital*, 6-7.

⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 21.

network of unknowable relations that form the totality of multinational capitalism. The sublime in this instance is specifically about the subject's confrontation with its own limits of knowledge. In Kant this unknowability was breached in confrontation with the immensity of nature. Jameson's version argues that capitalism has taken the place of nature as that which provokes the anxiety of the unknown. Jameson writes: "The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself."⁸ According to Jameson, representations of technology signify the complexity of contemporary capitalism through their own impossible organizational comprehension. In the almost thirty years since Jameson first published the postmodernism essay, the intricacies of the global financial network have developed at an extremely rapid pace with the increased deregulation of financial markets, the growth of complex financial products such as derivatives, and the rapid development of a global information network that allows for the instantaneous and constant movement of value at an almost inconceivable pace and with less and less oversight from both regulators and actual human traders. In a more recent essay Jameson reconsidered the temporal and spatial dynamics of postmodernism and commented on the centrality of finance capital in contemporary capitalism: "Finance capital suggests a new type of abstraction, in which on the one hand money is sublimated into sheer number, and on the other hand a new kind of value emerges, which seems to have little enough to do with the old-fashioned value of firms and factories or of their products and their marketability."⁹ How then does one represent

⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 38.

⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory* (New York: Verso, 2008), 642.

finance capital with its seeming ethereal existence? Burtynsky and Gursky would seem to be engaging finance through this postmodern sublime, with the technologies of contemporary capitalism serving as their entry point into the complexity of global exchange. But there is also a way that these images engage in just the sort of ahistorical depthlessness that Jameson ascribes to postmodernism. In other words, rather than simply existing as critical attempts to engage the contemporary experiential condition, they are also instances of the reified image culture of postmodernity.

In Gursky, the sublime fluctuates between images of technologized networks of capital's management infrastructure (*Chicago Board of Trade II* (1999)), the complementary processes of the commodification of art (*Ohne Titel VI* (1997)) and aestheticization of commodities (*Ohne Titel V* (1997)), the production and circulation of commodities (*99 Cent* (1999)), and images of landscapes with noticeable and often highlighted human alterations (*Breitscheider Kreuz* (1990)). An example that confirms Gursky's attempted staging of the postmodern sublime in the representation of finance capital is *Hong Kong Stock Exchange, Diptychon* (1994). Here, Gursky makes use of the diptych's division, creating an almost perfectly mirrored image, showing the floor of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange with rows of traders seated at desktop computers or devices of a more primitive age. The room is organized as rows of workstations in a square that emanate from an empty and partially absent center. The image is composed to accentuate this absent center through the placement of the diptych's division across it. The diptych is cut down the vertical axis in a just slightly imperfectly alignment that roughly divides the room into equal parts. The image is shot from a height close to the ceiling angled downward so that the majority of it is composed of the floor and the activity there, and a horizontal division is effected in the stark division between the coloration of the top third of the image and the bottom two thirds. The

color of the carpet nearly matches that of the jackets worn by the traders and panels (or mirrors) on the far walls capture the red as well, accentuating the division of the image. Meanwhile, the ceiling of the room is a bright shade of yellow that verges on gold (and the association of gold with money and value should not be lost).



Andreas Gursky, *Hong Kong Stock Exchange*, Diptychon

Thus, the image is divided along both the vertical and horizontal axes, which provides the appearance of a graph, as though it were aspiring to be an ordered representation of the chaotic transfers and reconfigurations of value that are being negotiated. But, while it manufactures order, it actively negates its own depth through the placement of the two images against one another, using the downward angle of the image to make it appear as though the rectilinear space were a triangle emanating from the vantage point of the camera. Thus, the image offers an ordered chaos and a managed depthlessness, which is a manner of ordering the contingent. The managed order of the image stands against the uncertainty depicted.

This particular image fits in a series where Gursky depicts financial markets at work. But what appears in the image is its very particularity, its limitation as a representation of finance. Its carefully composed division and symmetry seek to make an order out of something that is not knowable in its totality (or even imaginable, according to Jameson). And the image seems to recognize this limitation, negating its own center through the

diptych's division, removing the organizing point of the room shown, and diminishing its own depth; these absences signify the difficulty of locating a center or depth in late capitalism—its representational impenetrability.

A second example from Gursky furthers the linkage between his work and the sublime. *Turner Collection* (1995) combines Gursky's concern with the history of art and its commodification and the creation and transformation of the natural through human labor. Acting as a contrast to the gallery display of the three Turner paintings is *Prada I* (1996) where an austere display of Prada shoes is represented in a manner that draws out the aestheticized commodity form and its counterpart in the commodified artwork in *Turner Collection*. Both images traffic in the discourse of the sublime in ways that emphasize each other in their difference. While *Turner Collection* emphasizes the commonly understood meaning of "sublime" as a confrontation with, and even horror at, the excess, power, and inaccessibility of nature, *Prada I* brings its meaning more in line with Jameson's specific definition in the context of the postmodern. The shoes in the image appear as commodities and in that role they exist as an enigma both in and beyond Marx's definition. In this context, the enigmatic structure of the commodity is ruled by its place in the structures of distribution more than in production. As commodities the shoes stand in for the inconceivability of the structures of distribution, the networks of labor and products, the innumerable inputs and other commodities that are employed in the existence of these shoes in this place. In a sense, the exploitative conditions of its actual production are the least difficult to imagine in the process of the shoes' appearance for retail and transformation as capital back into its money form. It is this iteration of the sublime, as the unknowability of the complexity of capital accumulation as a totality, which finds a more developed expression in the work of Burtynsky.

In a review of Burtynsky's photographs Tom McDonough invokes the sublime, "The resulting images are appropriately sublime, in the strict sense of the term: they inspire feelings of awe mixed with terror." McDonough's association of Burtynsky with the sublime seems directed towards the specific content of the images of the Three Gorges dam that is the immediate subject of the images, but the characteristics that he identifies are common across much of Burtynsky's work. McDonough does not expand upon what he means by the sublime, but he does claim that Burtynsky's images recall the destruction of the World Trade Center in Manhattan as much as the romantic ruins of the nineteenth century. Burtynsky writes, "He undertook this project only 13 months after those unforgettable scenes unfolded, and the particular sublimity that he found along the Yangtze River, the palpable sense of tragedy and uprooting that he captured there, seems subconsciously linked to the overwhelming destruction that took place in lower Manhattan."¹⁰ The invocation of the events of September 11, 2001 highlights the destructive side of Burtynsky's images over the construction that is its complement. McDonough is correct in this emphasis within the images, but this also tells us something about the invocation of the sublime in this instance: it is an awe and terror of the power of the image itself. It is a spectacular terror of the insistent destruction of progress.

However, Burtynsky's *Oil* is less interesting to examine as an instance of the sublime through individual images than as a cumulative project that seeks to map the geography of contemporary capitalism by way of a focus on a prioritized commodity. In other words, it is more proximate to Jameson's definition of the postmodern sublime than Gursky or than what McDonough seems to allow for Burtynsky. Crude oil is the most heavily traded commodity, but oil is essential to the function of global capitalism not simply as a

¹⁰ Tom McDonough, "Edward Burtynsky at Charles Cowles," *Art in America* (May 2004): 158.

commodity but as a facilitator of the transportation systems that make the complex networks of commodity exchange possible. In this way, oil becomes a favored commodity that could be considered alongside money, and labor power, as unique within the structure of global capitalism. In a sense, oil takes on the contradictory status of money both as medium of commodity exchange and as measure of value. And as a medium of exchange oil sits at the apex of those inputs that complicate the total representation of the movements of capital. But oil also ties back to the association of the sublime with nature as a commodity that is both heavily imbued with a sense of being connected to the natural through the processes of extraction but also as an instantiation of the damages wrought by capitalism on nature. Burtynsky's images of oil are fundamentally alienating in their swing between the mundane and the unrecognizable.

In focusing on oil Burtynsky seeks an instance, a particularity that is familiar but also able to figure as an iteration of the totality of global capitalism. In a prefatory statement at the beginning of the collection Burtynsky writes, "It occurred to me that all the vast man-altered landscapes I had pursued for over 20 years had been made possible by the discovery of oil and the progress occasioned by the internal combustion engine." For Burtynsky, oil comes to signify both the complexity of global capitalism but also its possible elucidation, that determinate element that is hiding in plain sight and ready to expose complex systems. He continues, "In no way can one encompass the influence and extended landscape of this thing we call oil. These images can be seen as notations by one artist—contemplating the world made possible through this massive energy force, and the cumulative effects of the industrial revolution."¹¹ Oil represents for Burtynsky an avenue through which to understand the complexities of global capitalism through a particularly dominant and symbolically

¹¹ Edward Burtynsky, *Oil* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009).

resonant commodity. Thus, oil becomes a stand-in for capitalism itself, the representation of its flows, its networks of distribution, and its influence over vast swathes of life becomes the manner by which the unrepresentable totality of global capitalism is figured and visualized—modeled.

Burtynsky's book is organized schematically, divided into three sections, each dealing with a different moment in the production-consumption circuit of oil. The first section is titled "Extraction & Refinement" and it features images of oil fields in Alberta and California, oil sands in Alberta, and refineries in New Brunswick, Ontario, and Texas. The second section is on "Transportation & Motor Culture" and it contains images of highway interchanges from Texas, Shanghai, California, and New Jersey, suburban tracts of automobile-centered housing from Nevada, car lots from Texas and Shanghai, automobile events such as races and festivals from Utah, Alabama, South Dakota, and Iowa, and a highway interchange dominated by the neon signs of fast food chains, motels, and gas stations in Pennsylvania, all set up around the geography created by the automobile. The final section is titled "The End of Oil" and it contains the most haunting and spectacular images of the collection; these are the images that we might associate with McDonough's discussion of the sublime in relation to the images of the dam construction from China. This final section features abandoned oil fields in Azerbaijan, rusting military equipment at a closed base in Arizona, scrapped cars in Arizona, disassembled and unrecognizable auto scrap in Ontario, and piles of discarded tires in California. These images are monotonous in their repetition, showing endless rows or piles of discarded and rusting refuse. But the section is dominated, in both number and affect, by a series of images of shipbreaking in Bangladesh. These apocalyptic and shattering images show the work of disassembling the remnants of old oil tankers and other ships, rusted, broken, long since abandoned to one of

the poorest nodes in the vast networks of both oil and capitalism. In the images, large steel structures loom impossibly over seemingly endless fields of muddy waste that meld indiscernibly into a hazy sky; at points human figures emerge from the debris helping to provide a sense of the scale of these wrecks. But the focus is the debris of former ships scattered about and broken, waiting to be recovered as raw materials for new ventures. The force of these images lifts them out of the figuration of capitalism through oil that is the focus of the rest of the project. Instead, these images stand as instances of the end in progress. Rather than showing the aftereffects of abandonment as in the other images of this section—or so many of the images from Detroit discussed in the previous chapter—these images depict the process of destruction itself.



Edward Burtynsky, *Shipbreaking #10*

But while this may be the end of oil it is not the end. It turns out that there is an end after the end. Following the three sections and wedged into a set of contextual essays that discuss the importance of oil for both industrial and consumer society, is a section titled “Detroit Motor City,” positioned as though it is the missing piece in the vast puzzle that Burtynsky is seeking to assemble. As with the examples in the previous chapter, Detroit becomes emblematic of a melancholy attachment to American industrial modernity but also a repository for the fears about the current contours of capitalism. In this context then Detroit—the Motor City—becomes a sort of excess of the representation of oil, absent from the initial cartography that Burtynsky develops but central to the affective structure sought. Once again, Detroit signifies catastrophe unaverted but cautionary, past but continuing. The temporality of Detroit’s imagization is of repetition, a symptomatic expression of the death drive of a specifically American capitalism.

Beyond the spectacular affect of the images there is an understanding of the structure of Burtynsky’s tripartite model that is significant in the current consideration of the representation of capital. Burtynsky’s move from “Extraction & Refinement” through “Transportation and Motor Culture” to “The End of Oil” could be understood as an articulation of Marx’s own tripartite model of capital: money-commodity-money. The reasoning behind Burtynsky’s selection of oil as his focus is not dissimilar from Marx’s own selection of the commodity as his starting place in *Capital*. The commodity, like oil, is a seemingly tangible object that is familiar (one encounters examples constantly) but it masks a complexity and offers an area of traction from which to begin. And like Marx’s MCM’ circuit, the network of relations that oil dominates is highly dynamic. Capital, for Marx, is not a thing, but a process; capital is value in motion.

The MCM' circuit is about both the outlay of money capital that will be returned for a greater value of money capital and the obfuscation of the source of the surplus produced. In other words, it is about masking the source of surplus value, making it seem as though value is able to generate multiples of itself merely through existing. It is a matter of valorizing capital as generated through means other than exploitation. Marx writes, "For the movement in the course of which it adds surplus-value is its own movement, its valorization is therefore self-valorization. By virtue of being value, it has acquired the occult ability to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or at least lays golden eggs."¹² The secret is, of course, contained beyond the realm of circulation in production with the extraction of surplus-value from labor by capital. What is important here is the final moment of the MCM' circuit where a greater amount of money capital is returned in a process that is premised on the exchange of equivalents. The actor at both ends of the circuit in this form is the capitalist. The same circuit is reversed when viewed from the position of the laborer, so that MCM' becomes CMC, because the laborer has only labor power to offer on the market.

[The capitalist's] person, or rather his pocket, is the point from which the money starts, and to which it returns. The objective content of the circulation we have been discussing—the valorization of value—is his subjective purpose, and it is only in so far as the appropriation of ever more wealth in the abstract is the sole driving force behind his operations that he functions as a capitalist, i.e. as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will.¹³

The capitalist is driven by the forces of competition toward a need to accumulate ever more value, a portion of which must then be reinvested in order to maintain a competitive advantage. The surplus-value that is unable to find profitable avenues of reinvestment is the basis for crises in capitalism. This endpoint of the MCM' circuit, where a surplus of money capital is returned is represented in Burtynsky between the active destruction of the

¹² Karl Marx, *Capital, a Critique of Political Economy: volume one* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 255.

¹³ Marx, *Capital*, 254.

shipbreakers in Bangladesh and the static instances of obsolescent values lying unused and discarded in garbage piles and abandoned military bases. In other words, the moment of the valorization of surplus-value is figured by Burtynsky as the most violent segment of the process, as the site of instability and crisis.

I am not claiming that Burtynsky is consciously attempting to represent Marx's formula but rather that his schema represents a figuration of the actuality of Marx's theory in contemporary capitalism, however imprecise. Marx's formula describes the generality of circulation such that innumerable circuits are at work in each of the sections that Burtynsky develops. But Burtynsky does attempt to show the processual character of capital, moving from production through distribution and consumption and finally to the necessary moment of valorization and eventual devaluation. The end point of Marx's circuit, the accumulation of surplus-value, and the crisis through which devaluation occurs is figured by Burtynsky as the end of oil—a pronouncement that stands as both an acknowledgement of the remainders of oil usage but also an ominous preface to the dwindling reserves of the commodity itself. As the final moment in Burtynsky's model it depicts change through loss and destruction, an end point that belies its necessity within a recurrent system through the catastrophic and otherworldly character of the images themselves. But this destruction does prefigure the creation of new value, the end of one cycle becomes the starting point of another; the refuse of the shipbreaking will become the raw materials of a new circuit of commodity production. "[T]he general requirement for returning the system to some kind of equilibrium point is the destruction of the value of a certain portion of the capital in circulation so as to equilibrate the total circulating capital with the potential capacity to produce and realize surplus value under capitalist relations of production."¹⁴ Thus, the

¹⁴ David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (New York: Verso, 2006), 202.

necessary pretext for the start of a new cycle of accumulation is the destruction of surplus-value that is unable to find profitable investment opportunities and thus return the system to a semblance of equilibrium. Burtynsky's depiction of oil's impending termination, however that is understood specifically in relation to the particularity of oil, should be taken as an allegory of capitalism itself and the means by which capitalism manages its own excesses. In other words, the depiction of the destruction of value in Burtynsky's third section is contradictory. It contains representations of what Burtynsky calls the "end of oil," and I am arguing capital by extension, but the portrayal of devaluation actually represents an instance of capitalism managing its own production of value that is not able to be reinvested. But in the case of Burtynsky, the content of the images, the affective depth of the images, becomes that which cannot be reinvested. The image itself becomes the content in Burtynsky, mourning over the depleted form in its grandiose reproduction of photography, printed on a large scale, delicately composed and framed, rendered in deep and contrasting colors, and issuing a beauty out of despair and poverty. It is an impoverishment of the image through an imagination that it could both participate in a sort of cognitive mapping of capital while also recycling it for its aestheticized excesses. Its primary form of devaluation is its own possibility of representation (to recall the previous chapter, it is an instance of the late medium of photography). But Burtynsky's association of endings—of death—with capitalism is a tradition that extends at least as far back as Marx.

Lived Lateness

Rebecca Schneider employs the rhetoric of spectral capitalism in her discussion of theatrical labor and the Occupy Wall Street movement, emphasizing figures of the undead across street protests, the theatrical medium, and contemporary capitalism. According to Schneider, we have now moved beyond late capitalism into late late capitalism; she uses this

tautological transition to raise the issue of the contradictory meanings of “late.” Schneider asks the question, “Might late late capitalism contain both the sense of a time lag—to be late as in not on time—as well as other sense of late, as in, to be dead? To be a *late* late capitalist? How out of time, how dead, how *late* do we have to get to provoke real and sustained change?”¹⁵ Schneider assumes that both meanings of “late” only appear in the potential end of late capitalism, though her formulation would suggest that we are not yet free from late capitalism entirely. But while Schneider considers the implications of lateness in terms of death and time lag in Marx’s theory she does not draw out the connected implications of the third meaning of “late”—contemporaneity.

All three senses of “lateness” are interconnected in their relation to capitalism. This connection derives from having defined a particular period of capitalism as “late.” There is no conflict in periodization with contemporaneity so long as capitalism is still presumed to be in this period, but once there is a perceived shift “lateness” as contemporaneity comes into conflict with its periodizing function. This leads into the association of “lateness” with death, but it leaves unanswered what the association of death is with capitalism. Does it signal an end to capitalism itself? Does it signify the end of late capitalism? Or is it indicative of an undead capitalism, once we acknowledge the obvious point that capitalism endures? Finally, the association of “lateness” with a time lag is perhaps most enticing because of its complexity and multiplicity of potential valences. Schneider seems to imply that it is in the time lag that the potential for radical change is located. But it is also the premise of capitalist exchange, each commodity existing as a repository of time waiting to be realized; the commodity embodies time stilled and objectified. Schneider theorizes lateness through

¹⁵ Rebecca Schneider, “It Seems As If...I Am Dead: Zombie Capitalism and Theatrical Labor,” *TDR: The Drama Review* vol. 56 no. 4 (Winter 2012): 155.

theater—its mediations of labor, of liveness and death. In other words, lateness is understood through media and mediation, through a late medium. Schneider writes,

...commodities and laborers alike become like little packets of isolated temporal duration, frozen liveness, congealed as potential, posed as tableaux vivant—the packaged duration of the live labor of the laborer. Reanimation is then another word for work, or for exchange. Reanimation is what resists ruin or decay—otherwise known as the depreciation of capital. For remember that capital rots with distance from liveness, or distance from labor considered to take place as time. It may be, in fact, that another descriptor of capitalism in all its lateness may be ‘live arts.’¹⁶

Schneider’s focus on theater as the essential art of capitalism’s late stage elucidates the issues of temporality—of excess and disjuncture—that lateness implies. Although she misses the extent to which depreciation is the pretext for a new cycle of accumulation the connection of capitalism to what she calls the “live arts” implies the connection of life and death in theater in a manner that evokes capital’s processes of reanimation. However, Schneider poses an overly rigid distinction between life and death in her figuration of the laborer, assuming an *a priori* liveness of the laborer’s labor prior to its transformation into the deathly commodity. But labor power is already a commodity sold on the market; there is no identifiable moment of commodification because it is already a commodity according to Marx.

Schneider’s focus on the spectral language in Marx at the level of metaphor leads to an imprecise theorization of Marx’s account of the circulation process and its implications for lateness. Schneider does not engage death and the time lag as dynamic components within a theorization of lateness in Marx’s depiction of capital; she opts instead for a focus on the language of death and spectrality as mere representations. An understanding of lateness in Marx must contend with his theory of both commodification and circulation and recognize the fundamental mediations through what Schneider calls death and the time lag.

¹⁶ Schneider, “It Seems As If...I Am Dead,” 156.

In a real sense, lateness is the mediation itself in these levels of capital. Schneider writes, “Recall that for Marx, dead capital is capital that is not in immediate use...Capital that is not immediately engaged with living labor, or otherwise revested by circulation through the live, is dead capital. Dead capital constantly depreciates.” In this sense, capitalism is a constant process of reanimation. It stores death in order to reawaken it, and as this zombie form it becomes something more than it was—surplus, excess. Schneider continues, “...capitalism is a circulation machine that depends upon crossing a border from live-labor-in-time, pause, to dead capital, pause, to the reinvestment of dead capital through live labor in time. This circulation machine animates dead capital with live labor in and through the production and consumption of the *dead labored live*.”¹⁷ The process of circulation that Schneider is describing, the MCM circuit, constitutes the process by which capital valorizes itself. And as Schneider emphasizes it is a circulation of stored labor in the guise of value. But what is being valorized is dead labor, reanimated through its contact with living labor that then becomes dead labor again. Marx writes, “Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.”¹⁸ The ghostly world of capital that Marx describes is the world of commodities that contain the hidden labor within their form while masking it in its immediate appearance. Schneider’s misrecognition of the commodification of labor power can be read as a result of her focus on theater and its “live labor” as the appropriate figuration of late late capitalism. Instead I want to propose an alternate reading of late (late?) capitalism through late cinema. In cinema it is the scattered remains that live on, mourning itself through itself. This is apparent in certain recent

¹⁷ Schneider, “It Seems As If...I Am Dead,” 156.

¹⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 342.

installations that use the cinematic apparatus as a mannequin on which to hang something other—late cinema.

The Digital Excess of the End of Cinema

Ryoji Ikeda's exhibition at the Park Avenue Armory during the summer of 2011 titled *The Transfinite* offers an instance of late cinema as articulated in the specific context of late capitalism. It depicts the temporality and signifying processes of finance capital through a confrontation of cinema and the digital. But it also employs cinema as a medium that is passed, that is, late as something that lives on after its end, and this late cinema becomes the frame for the digital articulation of lateness through its insistent contemporaneity. In other words, *The Transfinite* adopted signifiers of cinema in order to emphasize their obsolescence through its own mediated difference. The exhibition was set up as a series of projections and screens that occupied two sides of a vertical structure serving as a division between what could be considered a front and back. Upon entering the large hangar-type space of the exhibition, the subject is inundated by loud and repetitive noise that seems to rhythmically coincide with the visual patterns on the screen directly in front of them. The first screen (I will refer to this side as the singular) rises in front of them and then stretches out from its vertical domain along the ground towards them. This expanded screen shows binary patterns of black and white. Further, the portion of the screen located on the floor was meant to be walked on—inhabited.

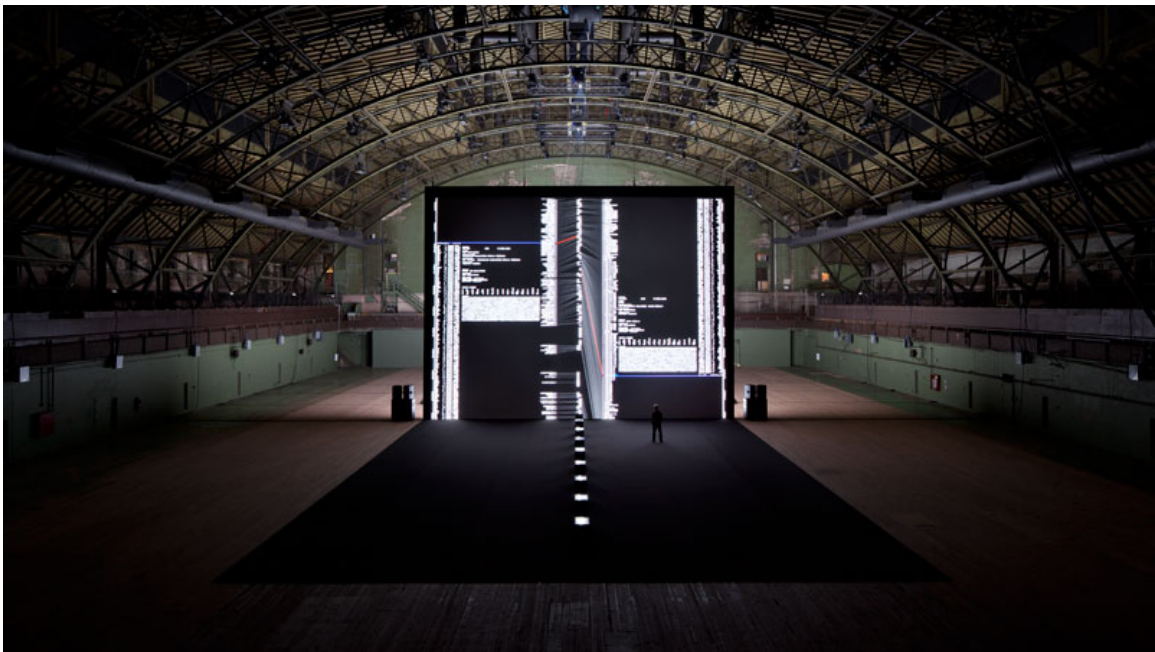


Ryoji Ikeda, *The Transfinite* (image from Park Avenue Armory)

The singular side of the exhibition was immersive in ambition, enveloping the subject; bounded by the darkness around the screens and the intensity of the sound, the space of the screen became both the stage from which to observe but also the space of spectatorship. This immersive character of the exhibition is disruptive to the cinematic subject, leaving no space from which to experience it without also becoming a part of the experience. The projective character of the exhibition recalls cinema as a frame of understanding, but the extension of the vertical screen to the floor and in front of the vertical screen space severs any exactitude of identity with cinema. However, if the exhibition's association with cinema is both clear and tenuous on this side of the vertical division, the opposite side of the screen provides an opening for the digital that reframes the meanings of the singular side.

If the singular side of the exhibition opens itself, seeking to absorb the subject and thus negate a stable space for contemplation, then the second side (which I refer to as the multiple) provides a space for the contemplation that is barred on the singular side of the

vertical screen. In the space of the multiple, in contrast to the simplicity of the black and white alternations on the singular side, appears a mass of information, text, numbers, complex charts, and other arrangements of data. As on the singular side of the screen, the multiple also extends from the vertical into the horizontal, but this time the attention is broken from a singularity into a series of small screens set into consoles that extend out in a row from the vertical screen. In contrast to the absorption of the singular, the multiple invites close inspection and contemplation.



Ryoji Ikeda, *The Transfinite* (image from Park Avenue Armory)

Through the juxtaposition of the singular and the multiple, the exhibition presents a representation of abstract equivalence. The binary patterns of black and white on the singular are meant to correspond to the informational flows of the multiple. Thus, the screen functions on either side as reflections of the other expressed through equivalent differences. The information, the already abstract representations of the Multiple become the simplified abstractions of the binary, expressed in the simplicity of black and white patterns on the Singular that abound in their own complexity. The numbers, text, and graphs of the Multiple

are translatable into the binary black and white of the Singular only as data. The concrete phenomena to which the data refers (if it exists) could not translate into the black and white binary as a uniform flow. It is only the abstraction of their translation as data that allows for the abstraction of the binary represented on the singular.

In the data's translation into a binary visual experience exists an excess of temporality. The data exists as it does in stasis; as data it is necessarily a static representation of a dynamic phenomenon. As the information is translated into the binary patterns it comes to exist only in and across time. In other words, the cinematic qualities of projection and movement are employed as means to revivify the stilled information as a visual pattern. This resurrection is, in a sense, the only thing that is added by the movement and projection of the binary. Because it is an exchange based on the premise of equivalence the translation would appear to offer only a tautology, a mere repetition of what is already present. It is a digital repetition of cinematic material, a "digital memory," in Domietta Torlasco's terminology.

Torlasco theorizes the memorialization of film in digital art as part of a heretical archive, a space of memories intercepted from a possible future. Torlasco writes, "...*digital memory* is a memory that originates from the future—one that remembers not only what happened but also what did not happen in our cinematic past (and yet might have, under different conditions), what 'will have happened' by virtue of these eccentric appropriations—a memory of, and in, the future anterior."¹⁹ Film is now a place for imagining potential pasts from a future that has abandoned the medium; it exists as a sign of the past, of modernity, of the industrial machine, but it is no longer a dominant medium, and so it must be imagined as present through other means. Cinema's identity with a concrete set of physical instruments and techniques and their attendant social institution is fractured but

¹⁹ Domietta Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xiv.

the remains become a space for imagining possible pasts from an impossible future.

Torlasco defines the heretical archive as a space where memory deepens and definition decouples from stable identities. She writes, "...memory comes into being as a folding of dimensions that cannot be simplified or translated into one another without residue: the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible, the sensible and the intelligible, the future and the past—it is such an excess or openness with respect to its own constitution that the heretical archive displays and affirms against the violence of definition and the inevitability of forgetting."²⁰ Torlasco envisions a space of uncertain transfer where the memory of film is projected back towards the past from the future, bypassing the present in its transit; film is envisioned to be alive in the past, dead in the future, and absent in the present.

Ikeda's installation is a more thorough negation of cinema than Torlasco's theory can accept. Most of Torlasco's examples traffic directly in cinematic materials, photographic images held in suspension, narrative redeployed while *The Transfinite* incorporates cinema as much through its radical negation as through its incorporation. But *The Transfinite* also presents a more radical reading of cinema's memorialization than Torlasco. Torlasco's conceptualization offers a phenomenology of what has been termed "late cinema" here. But according to Torlasco, the violence resides in the space of epistemology, divorced from the crises of the present that late cinema is seeking to figure, only offering a more general protest against the "violence of definition..." and ignoring the inequities and crises of capital. However, *The Transfinite* does offer an account of the contemporary flows of a capital-saturated information technology, one that finds its own figuration through a negation of a cinematic past. The abstract equivalence of *The Transfinite* also undergirds capitalism as the basis of universal exchange and the means by which surplus value is extracted from labor.

²⁰ Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive*, xvii.

Financial capital is especially important in regulating this equivalence, which is the premise of stability while also serving as the place where crises ultimately reside. Finance capital is an abstraction of an abstraction, a doubled abstraction that replaces one random signifier with another, altering the magnitude of the initial signifier with the addition of time as a further dynamic. Finance capital is late in its excess of temporality, which is its key characteristic; finance capital is late capital, existing in its own present while also prefiguring a future return, a future for itself. Finance capital manages a perpetual purchase of the future as capitalist, foreclosing the possibility of imagining other futures, projecting itself forward while carrying with it a reified past. This is late capital, the dominant form in late capitalism. All of these examples, from Burtynsky and Gursky to Schneider's walking dead on Wall Street to Ikeda's coded depiction of cinema's passing, are instances of the crisis of representation in late capitalism—Jameson's postmodern sublime—the complexity of the present, the difficulty of imagining or conceptualizing a totality, and the tautological exchange of the commodity *qua* commodity. This crisis of representation in late capitalism extends into the very theorization of the period itself, never specifying what it is that is late, what its lateness specifies or even implies, insisting on its ubiquity while employing its uncertain temporal affect.

The Excesses of Late Capitalism

What does late capitalism mean, especially in this moment of its crisis of representability? Is it a capitalism that is nearing its twilight? Is it a stage of capitalism that is in the process of a massive reorganization? Is it undead, as Harman's "zombie capitalism" would imply? Or is it the most recent, the most up-to-date version of capitalism, in which case, would late capitalism be a recurrent instance in capitalism? What is "late" in "late capitalism"?

“Late capitalism” is a term that has been in use since the Frankfurt School. Adorno considered the term in some depth in an essay that argues for the continued relevance of Marx in social theory.²¹ Mandel’s *Late Capitalism* introduces the dominant contemporary understanding of the term as a periodizing concept that describes the American-led material expansion in the immediate aftermath of World War Two. Fredric Jameson’s adoption of Mandel’s periodization of modern capitalism seeks to both connect culture to economy and to advance a periodization of broad cultural dominants. Mandel specifies three periods in the history of modern capitalism: market capitalism, monopoly capitalism, and multinational capitalism; late capitalism is synonymous with the last of these. Market capitalism is dated from roughly the American and French revolutions (late-18th century) to the failures of the revolutions across Europe (mid-19th century). Monopoly capitalism begins in the wake of these failed revolutions but it experiences a long death. The breakdown of the system begins with the First World War, enters its apex in the Second World War, and is finally surpassed as the United States institutes itself as the post-war guarantor of economic stability and order. Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin detail the institutional support network that is erected to manage capital’s multinational phase. They write, “The American state, in the very process of supporting the export of capital and the expansion of multinational corporations, increasingly took responsibility for creating the political and juridical conditions for the general extension and reproduction of capitalism internationally.”²² Mandel names this third stage as “multinational capitalism” but it is interchangeably referred to as “late capitalism”.

²¹ Rolf Tiedemann, Ed. *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 111-125. A good overview of Adorno’s view of capitalism in its transition from monopoly to multinational capitalism in relation to other members of the Institute for Social Research, such as Friedrich Pollock and Franz Neumann, is offered in Deborah A. Cook, “Adorno on Late Capitalism: Totalitarianism and the Welfare State,” *Radical Philosophy* 89 (May/June 1998): 16-26.

²² Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (New York: Verso, 2012), 6. Panitch and Gindin offer a comprehensive account of the transition and the

But what does the substitution of “late” for “multinational” in reference to capitalism signify? What is “late” in late capitalism? While endorsing Mandel’s argument, Jameson comments on the term and his own adoption of it:

But the objection to Mandel’s positions has turned on the latent teleology of his slogan ‘late capitalism’, as though this were the last stage conceivable, or as though the process were some uniform historical progression. (My own use of the term is meant as a homage to Mandel, and not particularly as a prophetic forecast; Lenin does say ‘highest’, as we have seen, while Hilferding, more prudently, simply calls it the ‘jüngste’, the latest or most recent, which is obviously preferable.)²³

Jameson’s comments do gesture towards the multiple contexts in which lateness can be understood while implicitly dismissing their importance by lumping them into a rejection of the critiques of Mandel. This is not the sole instance in which Jameson defers a theorization of the term ‘late.’ At the end of the introduction to his book on Adorno, noting its title, *Late Marxism*, Jameson frames the contemporary relevance of Adorno that he is arguing for in the context of a non-synchronicity, framing Adorno as an exile from history itself. Following on from a comment about the novelty of his own defense of the dialectic’s continued relevance and necessity, Jameson writes,

So may my title, which simply introduces a German expression of long standing (*der Spätmarxismus*) to the English-speaking public. I find it helpful above all for a sharpening of the implication I developed above: namely, that Marxism, like other cultural phenomena, varies according to its socioeconomic context. There should be nothing scandalous about the proposition that the Marxism required by Third World countries will have different emphases from the one that speaks to already receding socialism, let alone to the ‘advanced’ countries of multinational capitalism. Even this last is of course profoundly ‘uneven’ and ‘non-synchronous’ and other kinds of Marxism are still vitally relevant to it. But this book argues the special relevance of Adorno’s Marxism, and of its unique capacities within our own equally unique ‘late’ or third stage of capitalism. The word means nothing more dramatic than that: still, better late than never!”²⁴

supranational institutional framework that was assembled to legitimate American military power’s service to international capital.

²³ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (New York: Verso, 1998), 139.

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 1996), 11-12.

For Jameson, Adorno is a particularly pertinent subject from which to discuss lateness, given Adorno's own relation to the term (a fact which should be apparent in the context of my own project, particularly chapter two) and specifically because of what he is claiming for Adorno. Jameson asserts that Adorno's relevance was not of his own time, where capitalism was more fractured and partial, but the present (1989) of capitalism at near global dimensions, a culture industry that was reinforced beyond what Adorno had experienced, and the presence of alternatives quickly diminishing. This is all given added weight because of the historical coordinates and particularly the immanent collapse of the Soviet Union as the last significant instance of actually existing socialism. This passage hints throughout at the possibilities of lateness. Jameson seems to want to underplay the term by suggesting that it is merely an introduction of a prevalent German term to an English readership, but at the same time he seems to be guarding against the dangerous implications that he sees in the term—namely, the idea that Marxism has passed on, dead as a theoretical or political phenomenon. In other words, Jameson seems to want to hold lateness at arms length for two seemingly contradictory reasons: first, because it is merely an introduction of an already common term, and secondly, because it is too dangerous to seriously engage. Meanwhile, he wants to retain its sense of asynchronicity and uneven temporality as a feature specific to Adorno's Marxism. The same qualities of asynchronous and uneven temporality are constitutive of capitalism.

It is worth remaining with the problematic of the late, not because it catches Jameson or Mandel as less than rigorous, but because it is significant as an anxiety about the specific features of multinational capitalism that can be theorized as late in a more developed sense. Like Jameson, Mandel is evasive on the question of the meaning of the 'late' in his late capitalism and even skeptical of its efficacy. Mandel offers two reservations about the term

“late capitalism” in his introduction: “Firstly, the term “late capitalism” in no way suggests that imperialism has changed in essence, rendering the analytic findings of Marx’s *Capital* and Lenin’s *Imperialism* out of date...The era of late capitalism is not a new epoch of capitalist development. It is merely a further development of the imperialist, monopoly-capitalist epoch.”²⁵ Here, Mandel is trying to set out the parameters of his study, insisting that he is not presenting a radically altered capitalism but, rather, a new organization of a familiar model. But in this stage setting there is a glimmer of a sense of lateness that does not appear for either Mandel or Jameson, and to which I will return to at length below—death. While this first qualification implicitly contends with the contradictions of “late”, the second deals with it directly. Mandel writes:

Secondly, we must express our regret at not being able to propose a better term for this historical era than ‘late capitalism’—a term that is unsatisfactory because it is one of chronology, not of synthesis...we have retained the notion of ‘late capitalism’, judging it to be the most serviceable term available, and above all believing that what is really important is not to name, but to explain the historical development that has occurred in our age.²⁶

Mandel acknowledges the periodizing, and possibly even teleological, function of “late” in this passage while also insisting that it is both the most suitable and somewhat inconsequential as merely a name. The periodizing function that is attached to the “late” of late capitalism emphasizes the complex and contradictory temporalities functioning in the term. In the most basic understanding it seems to suggest a combination of timeliness, as in the “latest edition” of capitalism—a constantly renewed instance that shifts with history itself—and a tragedy of impending decline or termination. These temporalities initially seem opposed to one another but they are in fact intertwined. The sense of an impending end accompanies the immediacy of the present as a hope for the possibility of the future. In the

²⁵ Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 1978), 9.

²⁶ Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, 9-10.

context of capitalism this hope for the possibility of the future both preserves capitalism as a hope for what can possibly continue but also recognizes it as the very thing that endangers the possibility of a future. In other words, late capitalism collapses a mourning of the impending end of capitalism with a hope that its end might provide the possibility for something other (socialism?) to survive. This millennial lateness runs parallel to the third potential meaning of lateness—death and its negation—a death that does not sustain. Late capitalism is undead capitalism, revived again and again after multiple deaths that did not hold.

Contemporary characterizations of capitalism as supernatural continue a tradition that extends at least to Marx. Chris Harman is perhaps most invested in this characterization, defining what he calls zombie capitalism as, "...a system that creates periodic havoc for those who live within it, a horrific hybrid of Frankenstein's monster and of Dracula, a human creation that has escaped control and lives by devouring the lifeblood of its creators."²⁷ But while Harman may layer the supernatural metaphors heavily and in a heavily moralistic manner, he is hardly alone in drawing the connection. Marx uses metaphors of a supernatural nature throughout his corpus, and nowhere more famously than in the analysis of the fetishism of the commodity in the first chapter of *Capital*. After demonstrating the logical process of abstract equivalence through value in commodity exchange, Marx characterizes the commodity itself as something that sheds its veneer of normality once inspected. Marx writes, "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."²⁸ This sentence can be read as associating the concrete

²⁷ Harman, *Zombie Capitalism*, 85.

²⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 163.

physicality of the commodity with its triviality, its ubiquity, while what makes it unusual is something less tangible, something that cannot be physically touched or possessed. Marx argues that the commodity is something inanimate that seems to possess agency, to have a life of its own, to converse and interact with other commodities, other inanimate things; the commodity is neither inanimate nor animate, neither alive nor dead—undead. Marx writes, “But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.”²⁹ Marx’s description of the table as a commodity attributes to it abilities that do not exist in it as a table; these do not reside in its existence as a use-value but rather in its existence as an exchange-value. As an exchange-value the table’s importance is not in its existence as a table but as a sign of equivalent value in all other commodities. The commodity’s supernatural qualities accrue in its ability to exist both in its physical existence as a use-value and in its relationality as an exchange-value, to be defined by neither its physical nor its non-physical qualities, to always exist as both itself and its other; in both immediacy and absence, the commodity is both the universal and the particular at once. It only possesses these qualities in its existence as a commodity; its use-value cannot be considered without the exchange-value. They exist apart only in their theorization; in the commodity they are unique perspectives on the same thing.

The supernatural qualities of the commodity extend beyond the metaphorical language that Marx and others employ. The commodity is unsettling because it itself is an accumulation, a repository of past labor, dead labor, waiting to be reanimated. The secret of the commodity, its “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties,” consists not only in its

²⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 163-164.

ability to exist as more than it at first reveals, and the manner in which it employs that initial appearance as a mask for how it actually functions, but also through the function that it performs that is being masked. Marx writes,

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers.³⁰

For Marx, what appears in the commodity is a lack of historicity, its appearance as a natural object that was not made. This appearance hides the actual labor that accrues in the production of the commodity. At first appearance the commodity appears as its use-value, as its physical characteristics, but it functions as a commodity through its relation to all other commodities, as the reflection of their value. While containing the hidden labor that produced it, the commodity obscures the social relation that exists in its relation to other commodities through its concrete immediacy, its use-value. The commodity is an amalgamation of universal and particular. As exchange-value, as a reflection of the equality of all other commodities in a certain proportion it is a universal, a reflection of “the sum total of labour,” as Marx says. But its universality is matched by its particularity as a use-value, as its concrete physicality. The commodity's animation occurs in the space between its universal and particular aspects. Through this animation commodities become social beings, animated inanimate—uncanny.

Commodities function as a medium of value transfer, but they are a medium based in obscuring that which it carries—value. The commodity is always indefinitely positioned between use-value and exchange-value, between the particularity of the commodity as a tangible thing and its always-potential universality as value, between labor and its products.

³⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 164-165.

Ultimately, commodities function as a medium for the storage and transfer of segments of socially necessary labor time across time and space. It is the specific form in which this indeterminacy of animate and inanimate functions that determines the commodity's secret. According to Marx, the commodity provides the means for the relation between individual laborers to be mediated by objects and the relations between objects to appear social. "To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things."³¹ In other words, the social relation between producers is mediated by the commodities but the relation of the commodities appears immediate and unimpeded, free from any transitory moment. This follows from labor itself being a commodity, and this is only possible on the premise that all labor, as a commodity on the market, is ultimately exchangeable for any other commodity, including any other labor. This is Marx's concept of socially necessary labor time, which assumes a societal average at any given moment. Capital levels the qualitative distinctions between different forms of labor into differences of quantity. "Equality in the full sense between different kinds of labour can be arrived at only if we abstract from their real inequality, if we reduce them to the characteristic they have in common, that of being the expenditure of human labour-power, of human labour in the abstract."³² This function of capital, the reduction of individuals and their labor to a generalized mass is surely where many of the comparisons to the undead originate, but this equality is also key to the exploitation of labor, and it is in the theorization of money's—the great generality, the

³¹ Marx, *Capital*, 165-166.

³² Marx, *Capital*, 166.

signifier of generality—transformations into capital and back again that the questions of exploitation, surplus value, and lateness become paramount.

What the commodity form allows is for the extraction of more value from labor than what is returned to labor in the form of wages. This excess is surplus value and it is the only place from which profit originates according to Marx. This extraction is performed by consistently undervaluing labor power as a commodity in relation to all others. In other words, for example, labor is paid the equivalent of 4 hours for 8 hours of work actually performed: the other four hours are performed entirely for the benefit of the bourgeoisie and the creation of surplus value. This undervaluation is possible only through the abstract equalization that is performed in the commodity, which reaches its apex in money.

Marx argues that the appearance of independent agency on the part of value, whether as commodity or money, provides the basis for surplus value, by making the exploitation of labor invisible. Marx writes, "...capital is money, capital is commodities. In truth, however, value is here the subject of a process in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it changes its own magnitude, throws off surplus-value from itself considered as original value, and thus valorizes itself independently."³³ As Marx observes, value seems to be a self-propelled process, but it is this very appearance as natural and transparent that allows for the unusual attributes of capitalism: "By virtue of being value, it has acquired the occult ability to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or at least lays golden eggs."³⁴ Marx associates value's ability to seemingly produce itself over and again with magic, the occult, and the supernatural. This quality of value arises from the hidden extraction of surplus value from labor. The commodity contains remnants

³³ Marx, *Capital*, 255.

³⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 255.

of the excess value produced by labor and the hidden value imparted by labor as if it were ghosts of past labor. In other words, the commodity contains an excess of time—the time that labor expends to produce it—within its structure. This is its fundamental lateness, its excess of time, of labor.

Derrida's reading of the first chapter of *Capital* correctly insists that the language of spectrality is not external to Marx's theory of the commodity and capital but essential. "When Marx evokes specters at the moment he analyzes, for example, the mystical character of the becoming-fetish of the commodity, we should therefore not see in that only effects of rhetoric, turns of phrase that are contingent or merely apt to convince by striking the imagination."³⁵ The specter, the lateness of capital, is not merely a rhetorical figuration of the exploitation of an inhuman social relation, but an essential characteristic—capital functions through lateness. Derrida reads Marx's description of the act of the commodity entering the market: "This woody and headstrong denseness is metamorphosed into a supernatural thing, a *sensuous non-sensuous* thing, sensuous but non-sensuous, sensuously supersensible."³⁶ Derrida corrects the translation, reading in the version used here as "a thing which transcends sensuousness" to the more compelling and more negatively charged "sensuous non-sensuous."

In this move, Derrida translates the commodities supernatural qualities into an excess of the thing, of the object's concrete materiality, existing both beyond it and in it. "Marx does not say sensuous *and* non-sensuous, or sensuous *but* non-sensuous; he says: sensuous non-sensuous, sensuously supersensible. Transcendence, the movement of *super-*,

³⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006), 185-186.

³⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 189.

the step beyond (*über, epekina*), is made sensuous in that very excess.”³⁷ The excess that Derrida identifies is the coexistence of the sensuous and non-sensuous, their inextricability in the commodity that is the source of the commodity’s spectrality. As a commodity it is neither a use-value nor an exchange-value, both itself and the reflection of an other; as a commodity its very separation is its identity. The commodity is a forced identity of use-value and exchange-value, and the excess that Derrida describes is the mark of that violence. But the violence felt is more than just epistemological or rhetorical in this instance. As Derrida argues, what is felt in the sensuous non-sensuous is a suffering that lingers on in its non-presence, in the commodity’s spectrality. “One touches there on what one does not touch, one feels there where one does not feel, one even suffers there where suffering does not take place, when at least it does not take place where one suffers...”³⁸ The sensuous non-sensuous is the recognition of the commodities basis in the social condition of the division of labor, in exploitation and suffering. The spectral quality of the commodity is its essential feature, its ability to appear immediately as a physical object that appears very obvious—a wooden table—but this partial appearance stands in for its simultaneous existence as an equivalent to all other commodities and as the product of a social labor, the universal value of which it is the sign. It is the inability of the commodity to reflect back its value to labor, to the force that produced it, to be recognized as something made, something unnatural, that makes it spectral.

Through the division of labor the ability of labor to find itself reflected in its products is broken. This is the commodity’s secret: its ability to appear as something natural and unmade, or at least the making is diffuse enough that it cannot be directly identified.

³⁷ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 189.

³⁸ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 189.

And according to Derrida this makes labor itself a specter: “Men no longer recognize in it the *social* character of their *own* labor. It is as if they were becoming ghosts in their turn.”³⁹

Essentially, it is an “anthropomorphic projection” on to the commodity, seeing the relations among commodities as social relations and those among subjects as objective, mediated through the commodity.

...this phantasmagoria of a *commerce* between market things, on the *mercatus* or the *agora*, when a piece of merchandise (*merx*) seems to enter into a relation, to converse, speak (*agoreuein*), and negotiate with another, corresponds *at the same time* to a naturalization of the human *socius*, of labor objectified in things, and to a denaturing, a denaturalization, and a dematerialization of the thing become commodity, of the wooden table when it comes on stage as exchange-value and no longer as use-value.⁴⁰

This passage demonstrates that Derrida’s reading of Marx, while helpful in demonstrating the centrality of spectrality, is premised on a rigid division of use-value and exchange-value, such that a temporality and telos necessarily attaches itself to the movement from the purity of use-value to the abstraction of exchange-value. But is it possible that Derrida is misreading Marx? Is Derrida projecting a telos on to this process that does not exist? It seems that Derrida is mistaking Marx’s representational mode for that which he is describing. In other words, Derrida, by focusing so heavily on the language of Marx’s argument, and despite an insistence that spectrality cannot be reduced to a matter of metaphor or rhetoric, misses the theoretical object’s non-identity to the actuality of capital; Derrida misrecognizes the progression of Marx’s argument as historical rather than logical.

In this reading, Marx’s theorization of the commodity is a narrative of innocence lost, an historical account with an implicit progressive alienation. Derrida writes, “...the wooden table for example, comes on stage as commodity after having been but an ordinary thing in its use-value is to grant an origin to the ghostly moment. Its use-value, Marx seems to imply,

³⁹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 195.

⁴⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 197.

was intact. It was what it was, use-value, identical to itself. The phantasmagoria, like capital, would begin with exchange-value and the commodity form.”⁴¹ It is true that Marx begins with the use-value, the ordinary and concrete appearance of the thing, for his theory of capital and the commodity, the commodity itself serving as the starting point for the theory of capital. But this assumes that Marx’s theory is meant as, or even necessitates, a basis in the historical development of capitalism. In fact, it could be argued that *Capital* is not really a theory of capitalism *per se* but a critique of the bourgeois political economists’ theorizations and fantasies of an ideal capitalism.⁴² Further, Derrida presumes that because Marx begins with the use-value and shows its transformation into exchange-value that this is the same as the actual process that Marx envisions. But Marx makes clear that the commodity is composed of use-value and exchange-value simultaneously although from different perspectives. Marx is not implying a loss of purity in the transition from use-value to exchange-value because he envisions no such transition aside from in the motion of capital itself; use-value and exchange-value exist only relationally and are only different sides of the same thing. Neither use-value nor exchange-value exists in isolation from or prior to the other. Rather than presenting a history of capitalism through the commodity form, as Derrida appears to believe, Marx is constructing a logic of exchange that will allow him to present capital as a dynamic process, as value in motion. Derrida mistakes this dynamic method—the dialectic—for a narrative of historical progress and abstraction.

While my own theory of late capital develops in conversation with Derrida’s concept of spectrality there are key differences. Capital’s lateness is distinct from spectrality because Derrida locates death at the moment of the entrance of commodity exchange, the prior

⁴¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 200.

⁴² David Harvey makes this point consistently, arguing that Marx’s primary objective in *Capital* is a critique of bourgeois political economy. See David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx’s Capital* (New York: Verso, 2010), 52-53.

existence of exchange in the purity of use-value continuing to live on as apparitions in the abstraction of exchange-value. Derrida's specter is premised on a telos of the transition from use to exchange that does not exist in Marx's theory, at least beyond its representational mode. Lateness, with its own spectrality, is the continued existence of labor in the commodity after it has entered the market; the lateness of capital is the deferred existence of all value as expropriated in the division of labor, in the production of surplus-value. Lateness is the excess of temporality that is the premise of surplus-value. In other words, all commodities are late, containers of time that is past, of time taken through theft, and realized always in a potential future. The lateness of capital is its very functioning, its deferral of its own time through the production of excess time. But some forms of capital are later than others. Finance capital is not only a form more removed from the realm of production, and thus further from its necessary origin, it also values its own future realization. In other words, while money is a more purified form of the commodity, existing as the essential mode of exchange, finance capital values its own valorization, its own return in a future through a valuation of that future possibility. Finance capital purchases the future, working to ensure the continuation of capitalism through its own necessary validation; it projects itself into the future such that alternatives find little territory remaining, and what remains comes at a high cost. Finance capital is the essential form of late capital, and its predominant role is one of the key characteristics of late capitalism.

The Lateness of Finance

If a theorization of lateness is deferred in Marxist theory then one of the key characteristics of late capitalism, finance capital, is uncertainly defined within the same tradition. Harvey characterizes it thusly: "The concept of finance capital has a peculiar history in Marxist thought. Marx himself does not use the term, but bequeathed a mass of

not very coherent writings on the process of circulating of different kinds of money capital. The implied definition of finance capital is of a particular kind of circulation process of capital which centres on the credit system.”⁴³ Rudolf Hilferding’s foundational work on finance characterizes it as an increasing concentration and unification of capital through the combination of individual capitalists into monopolies. Lenin offers minor objections to Hilferding but ultimately adopts much of his framework, adding instead a political analysis of contemporary crisis and inter-imperialist war as characteristic of finance capital, the highest stage of capital. Most characterizations of finance usually involve some combination of the credit system, the management of the money commodity within capitalism (to the extent that this differs from credit), and a representation of the unified interests of the capitalist class itself as embodied through the management of capital’s circulation.

The current accounts of late capitalism rely on this undertheorized definition. However, there are more precise theorizations of finance that give a more precise definition of the term, specifically the work of Harvey and Arrighi, and both offer complementary but unique avenues for a theorization of the lateness of finance as an extreme instance of the lateness of capital. Harvey develops the implications of Marx’s own theories of money and credit in a more comprehensive and historically updated manner while Arrighi offers a historical account of the recurrence of financial expansions as the end of what he terms “systemic cycles of accumulation.” Arrighi specifies four of these cycles, each associated with a different city/nation-state as the hegemonic power of that historical moment—successively they are: the Genoese-Iberian, the United Provinces, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

⁴³ Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, 283.

Financial capital is central in the figurations of late capitalism in Jameson but curiously absent in Mandel. It is possible to suggest that Mandel's own historical circumstances did not provide a context in which finance capital was dominant and barely ascendant, publishing his work in 1972, prior to the massive deregulation and financialization of neoliberalism, and even before the final death of the gold standard. This raises the question of whether the regime of neoliberalism constitutes a continuation of late capitalism in a different stage of its development or a new formation, late late capitalism as Schneider suggests? The precise periodization of late capitalism is an issue to the extent that periodization is at issue at all, but I want to take the discussion of lateness in a slightly different direction while still maintaining the importance of finance capital in late capitalism as a period coincident with the second half of the twentieth century. The importance of maintaining the relation between finance and lateness is especially imperative given Jameson's characterizations of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, dominated by representations of representation, abstracted models of abstraction. Finance capital, with its extreme abstraction and minimal to non-existent tangibility, facilitating the contemporary regime of flexible accumulation, managing the easy movement of capital across spans of space and time, would seem the quintessence of the situation that Jameson is attempting to define. In fact, Jameson does comment on these characteristics of finance capital: "Capital itself becomes free-floating. It separates from the 'concrete context' of its productive geography. Money becomes in a second sense and to a second degree abstract (it always was abstract in the first and basic sense): as though somehow in the national moment money still had a content...Now, like the butterfly stirring within the chrysalis, it separates itself off from that concrete breeding ground and prepares to take flight."⁴⁴ Put simply,

⁴⁴ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 142.

Jameson is defining finance capital as money that is used as exchange for other money, making sense in the abstraction of commodities as one commodity exchanged for another, but its strangeness reveals the metaphysical oddities of commodity exchange itself. As we have already seen, the abstraction of the commodity allows it to appear as though value produces itself.

According to Harvey, finance is a sort of central nervous system for capital but also a representation of the common capital of the capitalist class itself.⁴⁵ Marx theorizes credit as that necessary form of money that fills in the inevitable temporal disjunctions in the systems of production and circulation: "...the credit system permits continuity in money circulation while embracing discontinuity in production, circulation, and consumption of commodities. By way of the credit system, all turnover times are reduced to 'socially necessary turnover time'."⁴⁶ Credit markets solve one of the central problematics facing capitalism and one of the consistent ostensible locations of crises: the gap between production and consumption. Any delay in the MCM' circuit has the potential to ripple out and to become systemic. Credit is meant to solve this issue by providing a buffer within the system so that a lack of money in one place or an overabundance of goods in another place will not lead to a broader crisis. The credit system accomplishes this by lending dormant capital, the risk of its loss paid for by the promise of interest—it values time itself, and specifically future time. For Marx, interest-bearing capital does not constitute a relationship between capital and labor but an inter-capitalist exchange; interest represents the rental of money capital by one capitalist to another. Thus, for Harvey, finance capital has two sides, built on the two most common accounts in Marxist theory—the process view and the power bloc view. The process view

⁴⁵ Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, 284.

⁴⁶ Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, 264.

focuses on Marx's theory of interest and credit and the management of the circulation of money capital. The power bloc view builds on the work Hilferding and Lenin, suggesting that finance capital is the agglomeration of greater amounts of capital into fewer and fewer hands and the decline of competition in a monopoly dominated market.

The essential quality of interest-bearing capital is that "it makes it appear as if money 'grows' automatically over time and makes even time itself appear as money."⁴⁷ It is the latter part of this that I want to highlight as the essential lateness of finance capital; finance capital rents the future, assuming a return on its investment *in the future*. Finance capital is not merely a purchase of the return of itself and interest in the future but a purchase of that future itself. Finance capital projects the capitalist present ever forward so that its ideal conditions, its payments, its exchanges, its debts are all already waiting for it when it arrives. Capital is premised on an asynchronicity of time, past labor stored for future revival, payments on past debts, the expectation of profit returned on investment even while it seeks to minimize these temporal differences—for instance, the emergence of "just in time" production models to minimize the storage of unused material or commodities. Finance capital embodies this contradiction. Its use-value is its ability to locate capital where it will be most likely to return the largest profit. In other words, in a practical sense, it exists to minimize the delay between supply and demand. However, its own profits are premised on the continued existence of temporal delay. Finance capital is where capital's temporal contradictions are most evident; it manages capitalism's transitions through its purchase of the future. But it also signals those moments in capitalist history when one regime of accumulation is nearing its twilight and a new one is about to dawn.

⁴⁷ Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, 259.

Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century* provides a historical account of the long growth and expansion of capitalism, from its first premature appearances in the Italian city-states of the thirteenth and fourteenth century to the present moment of American-led multinational capitalism. Arrighi positions his argument against the idea that the financialization of capital that began in the 1970s represented a radical new phase in the development of capitalism. Instead, Arrighi argues, the expansion of finance capital is a recurrent and somewhat predictable phase in the development of capitalism but one that is essential to its elucidation. Arrighi writes:

...finance capital is not a particular stage of world capitalism, let alone its latest and highest stage. Rather, it is a recurrent phenomenon which has marked the capitalist era from its earliest beginnings in late medieval and early modern Europe. Throughout the capitalist era financial expansions have signalled the transition from one regime of accumulation on a world scale to another. They are integral aspects of the recurrent destruction of “old” regimes and the simultaneous creation of “new” ones.⁴⁸

Arrighi positions his study against the idea that what happens in the 1970s constitutes a radical departure from the post-war Keynesianism and argues instead that it is in fact consistent with a recurrent tendency within capitalism to move from material expansion to financial expansion. In other words, the move from industrial expansion to financialization can only be considered a radical departure if the longer history of capitalism is ignored. Arrighi names these recurrences “systemic cycles of accumulation”, and there have been four to date. Arrighi specifies them: “...a Genoese cycle, from the fifteenth to the early seventeenth centuries; a Dutch cycle, from the late sixteenth century through most of the eighteenth century; a British cycle, from the half of the eighteenth century through the early twentieth century; and a US cycle, which began in the late nineteenth century and has

⁴⁸ Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (New York: Verso, 2010), xi-xii.

continued into the current phase of financial expansion.”⁴⁹ Each of these cycles begins with a phase of material expansion that grows out of the preceding financial expansion, which is then followed by its own financial expansion, which will in turn lead to a new phase of material expansion. Arrighi frames this cyclical movement of capital expansion from material to financial to material as a revised version of Marx’s formula for the circulation of capital, money-commodity-money, on the scale of world systems. Arrighi writes, “Marx’s general formula of capital (MCM’) can therefore be interpreted as depicting not just the logic of individual capitalist investments but also a recurrent pattern of historical capitalism as world system.”⁵⁰

These four systemic cycles of accumulation, each consisting of a phase of material expansion followed by a financial expansion that signaled both the end of the current cycle but also the simultaneous beginnings of the subsequent cycle, also correspond to instances of relative calm and instability, with phases of material expansion less turbulent than those ruled by finance. Arrighi describes these differential phases of the cycles of accumulation in a manner that complements the way that finance has been theorized throughout this chapter:

...(MC) phases of material expansion will be shown to consist of phases of continuous change, during which the capitalist world-economy grows along a single developmental path. And (CM’) phases of financial expansion will be shown to consist of phases of discontinuous change during which growth along the established path has attained or is attaining its limits, and the capitalist world-economy ‘shifts’ through radical restructurings and reorganizations onto another path.⁵¹

Thus, for Arrighi, finance constitutes a phase of “radical restructuring and reorganization” that ushers in a new cycle of accumulation in an expanded mode. The occurrence of these cycles alongside city-state or nation-state formations is essential to Arrighi’s overall argument.

⁴⁹ Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 6-7.

⁵⁰ Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 6.

⁵¹ Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 9.

Arrighi is pushing back against claims that capital and state are working at counter-purposes, instead insisting that successive nation-states with ever-greater territorial reach have provided the means for the stability and markets required for capitalism. Arrighi situates capitalism within the system of territorial rule: "...the expansion of capitalist power over the last five hundred years has been associated not just with interstate competition for mobile capital, as underscored by Weber, but also with the formation of political structures endowed with ever-more extensive and complex organizational capabilities to control the social and political environment of capital accumulation on a world-scale."⁵² For Arrighi, the state and capital work in tandem, one managing territorial expansion and control and the other performing the same functions for finance. Through his historical accounts of the systemic cycles of accumulation Arrighi demonstrates that the current instance of capital's financialization is not a radical departure in and of itself. But it also adds a dimension to my claim for the essential lateness of finance as a distilled form of capital.

Arrighi's insistence upon the recurrence of phases within the history of capitalism that are dominated by finance and which are characterized by instability, alongside Harvey's theorization of finance, should force a reconsideration of late capitalism. Whether or not the periodization of lateness implied a telos or presumption of an ending, late capitalism can be thought as one that is dominated by late capital, finance capital that contains an excess of time, the time of interest layered upon the time contained in the circulating value, and it is a stage that is repeated. Late capitalism returns again and again; it is an undead capitalism in this sense. In other words, finance capital, as late capital, returns, and thus it is late as undead but also as the most recent capital, the most current. And as we know the specific function of finance as interest-bearing capital forces it to always be the most immediate even to the

⁵² Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 15.

extent that it spills over into the future. Finance capital may exist in a position of extreme abstraction but it does not exist apart from the exploitation that is at the basis of all value.

Financing Absence

I want to finish by returning to the Singular and the Multiple, to Ryoji Ikeda's installation, *The Transfinite*, and the claim that central to late capitalism is a crisis of representation. And the specification of this crisis will help to further clarify the relation between late cinema and late capital. *The Transfinite* offers the appearance of cinema specifically through its absence. In a similar fashion, finance capital—late capital—functions through the appearance of pure transit, as a pure medium of delivering excess value to one sector of the economy from another, but it performs this function by effectively negating its own existence. Brian Rotman argues that the introduction of “imaginary money” towards the end of the seventeenth century signals a shift in the semiotic regime of capital that is similar to the emergence of zero in mathematics and the vanishing point in perspectival representation. Each of these is a sign that both belongs to its order of signification while also standing apart as a sign about signs, as what Rotman refers to as a meta-sign. Each of these meta-signs stands apart from its semiotic order through its specific signification of the absence of other signs. “All these signs...are structured around the notion of an absence, in the sense of a signified non-presence of certain signs...”⁵³ Like the absence of cinema in the late cinema articulated by *The Transfinite*, finance capital functions by signifying an absence of capital.

Although imaginary money is introduced at an earlier moment in capitalism, Rotman suggests that there is a new phenomenon that abstracts from that order of signification to a meta-sign that encapsulates a previously enclosed meta-sign. Rotman defines the present

⁵³ Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 4.

moment of capitalism with finance. “After mercantile, industrial, monopoly capitalism comes the most recent form, financial capitalism, dedicated to the buying and selling of money and all the financial instruments created and sustained by money. Financial capitalism operates through an instantaneous global market whose bookkeeping and calculation needs are met by computer.”⁵⁴ As with other definitions of contemporary capitalism, the importance of the digital as a means of expediting the movement of value across space and time is emphasized. The specific characteristics that Rotman identifies for contemporary capitalism produce a new order of money sign: “...a type of sign that replaces the familiar modern conception of money, that is paper money whose value is its promise of redemption by gold or silver, by a money note which promises nothing but an identical copy of itself; and which determines its value, what it signifies as a sign, in the form of a certain kind of self-reference.”⁵⁵ Rotman calls this new money sign “xenomoney,” a new more radical form of imaginary money with no discernible connection to anything beyond itself.

Imaginary money signifies absence through its function as a medium of exchange, standing in as the sign of stored value to be exchanged for a commodity. Money is the generalized commodity that serves to force the equivalence in quality of all commodities, equal to one another at some quantity. But further, money facilitates the production and valorization of surplus value as profit rather than exploitation. In this split but intertwined sense, money signifies absence. “In capitalism, what arose from labour was exchange-value materialised in commodities; these were abstract, lacking in social history, and meaningful only to the extent that they were bought and sold within transactions. For the capitalist, surplus value was turned into invisible capital, and had ‘all the charms’ as Marx, interested in

⁵⁴ Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, 5.

⁵⁵ Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, 5.

just such a facility, put it ‘of a creation out of nothing’.”⁵⁶ This is ground already covered in my earlier discussion of Marx’s theory of capital but Rotman is framing it in the context of representation. And the system of representation, the manner in which the money capital signifies a certain amount of value that can be equated to other non-money commodities, collapses with the interaction of money with other money, exchanging for one another, as though they were social beings. “For money signs the illusion of anteriority collapses at exactly the point when the printed bank note is recognised as an instrument for *creating* money.”⁵⁷ Rotman continues, “The scandal is the loss of anteriority: paper money, instead of being a representation of some prior wealth, of some anterior pre-existing quantity of real gold or silver specie becomes the creator, guarantor and sole evidence for this wealth.”⁵⁸ The system of representation breaks at the moment that paper money is able to produce and reproduce unknown multiples of itself, or at least to maintain the illusion of this self-creation.

Rotman argues that this self-creation reaches a new phase in financial capitalism, specifically the financialization of capital that begins in the 1970s. According to Rotman four factors converged in the 1970s to allow the emergence of the present regime of capitalist accumulation characterized by “...a multi-billion dollar a day global money market and a radically new highly volatile, world monetary order.”⁵⁹ These factors are: floating rates of exchange, the decoupling of the world currency (the US dollar) from any equivalence with gold, off-shore money markets (especially in Europe), and the development of new financial products of greater complexity in futures and options. The severing of the US dollar from its metallic base is particularly important for Rotman because it makes its role as a promissory

⁵⁶ Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, 23.

⁵⁷ Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, 49.

⁵⁸ Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, 50.

⁵⁹ Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, 88.

note problematic, given that it promises nothing; the US dollar becomes “...a tautological void.” A dollar can be exchanged for another dollar with its guarantor, the US government. But if it ultimately only exchanges for itself then how does it hold any value beyond its use as a medium of exchange? This is the tautological condition of xenomoney. Xenomoney is the apex of the abstraction of money; it loses all discernible connection to any source of value, thus appearing as purely a means of value transfer, and crucially as a transfer of value into the future.

It is in this sense that finance capital functions as a sign of the future, as the value that it imparts. “As a sign one can say that xenomoney, floating, and inconvertible to anything outside itself, signifies itself. More specifically, it signifies the possible relationships it can establish with future states of itself. Its ‘value’ is the relation between what it was worth, as an index number in relation to some fixed and arbitrary past state taken as an origin, and what the market judges it will be worth at different points in the future.”⁶⁰ Xenomoney is a sign that contains both the past and the future. It exists as a repository of the past as an accumulation of past labor as value and in the future as a potentially greater value through a gamble on its expansion. Xenomoney “...establishes itself as a sign able to signify its own future.” It is not only that xenomoney signifies itself, as value which precedes xenomoney, but that it signifies its own future potential, its own continued social existence—the eternal capitalist horizon. Xenomoney is not simply a feature of late capitalism but also an instance of late capital, capital that contains an excess of time, serving a triple function, having three use-values. It functions as a sign of value (the past), as a medium of exchange (the present), and as a potential of accumulation (the future). As witnessed in *The Transfinite*, late cinema functions in a manner similar to late capital. It

⁶⁰ Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, 92.

signifies through its own negation. Against the cinematic distance of the spectator from the projection, late cinema locates the subject in the space of the screen, not as an observer but as participant. Against the mirrored image of cinematic rear projection, late cinema is articulated in the difference of the visualized data and its translation into a binary visual pattern. But at its core late cinema exists as a negation of cinematic representational codes. It is a manner of figuring cinema that lives on after the death of cinema. Late cinema, like late capital, exists across the past, present, and future. In the past it exists as the medium of modernity, of industrial capitalism. In the present it exists as crisis, as the potential stability against which the chaos of the digital is cast. And in the future it represents a nostalgic hope constructed out of pasts and presents that never were. Late cinema and late capital both figure lateness as a colonization of the future by the present through an imagined, reified past. The imperative of the moment is to find out if there is anything left after lateness, if the excesses of the past and present have not completely ruled out the possibility of a different future.

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