

## Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, *Boarding Gate* and *Southland Tales*

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### *Introduction*

In this text, I look at three recent media productions – two films and a music video – that reflect, in particularly radical and cogent ways, upon the world we live in today. Olivier Assayas' *Boarding Gate* (starring Asia Argento) and Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales* (with Justin Timberlake, Dwayne Johnson, Seann William Scott, and Sarah Michelle Gellar) were both released in 2007. Nick Hooker's music video for Grace Jones's song 'Corporate Cannibal' was released (as was the song itself) in 2008. These works are quite different from one another, in form as well as content. 'Corporate Cannibal' is a digital production that has little in common with traditional film. *Boarding Gate*, on the other hand, is not a digital work; it is thoroughly cinematic, in terms both of technology, and of narrative development and character presentation. *Southland Tales* lies somewhat in between the other two. It is grounded in the formal techniques of television, video, and digital media, rather than those of film; but its grand ambitions are very much those of a big-screen *movie*. Nonetheless, despite their evident differences, all three of these works express, and exemplify, the 'structure of feeling' that I would like to call (for want of a better phrase) post-cinematic affect.

Why ‘post-cinematic’? Film gave way to television as a ‘cultural dominant’ a long time ago, in the mid-twentieth century; and television in turn has given way in recent years to computer- and network-based, and digitally generated, ‘new media.’ Film itself has not disappeared, of course; but filmmaking has been transformed, over the past two decades, from an analogue process to a heavily digitised one. It is not my aim here to offer any sort of precise periodisation, nor to rehash the arguments about postmodernity and new media forms that have been going on for more than a quarter-century. Regardless of the details, I think it is safe to say that these changes have been massive enough, and have gone on for long enough, that we are now witnessing the emergence of a different media regime, and indeed of a different mode of production, than those which dominated the twentieth century. Digital technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations, have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience. I would like to use the three works I have mentioned in order to get a better sense of these changes: to look at developments that are so new and unfamiliar that we scarcely have the vocabulary to describe them, and yet that have become so common, and so ubiquitous, that we tend not even to notice them any longer. My larger aim is to develop an account of *what it feels like* to live in the early twenty-first century.

I am therefore concerned, in what follows, with effects more than causes, and with evocations rather than explanations. That is to say, I am not looking at Foucauldian genealogies so much as at something like what Raymond Williams called ‘structures of feeling’ (though I am not using this term quite in the manner that Williams intended). I am interested in the ways that recent film and video works are *expressive*: that is to say, in the ways that they give voice (or better, give sounds and images) to a kind of ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today, although it cannot be attributed to any subject in particular. By the term *expressive*, I mean both *symptomatic* and *productive*. These works are symptomatic, in that they provide indices of complex social processes, which they transduce, condense and rearticulate in the form of what can be called, after Deleuze

and Guattari, ‘blocs of affect.’<sup>1</sup> But they are also productive, in the sense that they do not *represent* social processes, so much as they participate actively in these processes, and help to constitute them. Films and music videos, like other media works, are *machines for generating affect*, and for capitalising upon, or extracting value from, this affect. As such, they are not ideological superstructures, as an older sort of Marxist criticism would have it. Rather, they lie at the very heart of social production, circulation and distribution. They generate subjectivity and they play a crucial role in the valorisation of capital. Just as the old Hollywood continuity editing system was an integral part of the Fordist mode of production, so the editing methods and formal devices of digital video and film belong directly to the computing-and-information-technology infrastructure of contemporary neoliberal finance. There’s a kind of fractal patterning in the way that social technologies, or processes of production and accumulation, repeat or ‘iterate’ themselves on different scales and at different levels of abstraction.<sup>2</sup>

What does it mean to describe such processes in terms of affect? Here I follow Brian Massumi (2002, 23-45) in differentiating between *affect* and *emotion*. For Massumi, affect is primary, non-conscious, asubjective or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified and intensive; while emotion is derivative, conscious, qualified and meaningful, a ‘content’ that can be attributed to an already-constituted subject. Emotion is affect captured by a subject, or tamed and reduced to the extent that it becomes commensurate with that subject. Subjects are overwhelmed and traversed by affect, but they *have* or *possess* their own emotions. Today, in the regime of neoliberal

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<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, Deleuze and Guattari say that the work of art ‘is a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects’ (1994, 164).

<sup>2</sup> I am implicitly drawing upon Jonathan Beller’s account of what he calls ‘the cinematic mode of production,’ or the way that cinema and its successor media ‘are deterritorialized factories in which spectators work, that is, in which we perform value productive labor’ (2006, 1). The cinema machine extracts surplus labour-power from us, in the form of our attention; and the circulation and consumption of commodities is effected largely through the circulation and consumption of moving images, provided by film and its successor media. Beller gives a highly concrete account of how media forms and culture industries are central to the productive regime, or economic ‘base,’ of globalized capitalism today. However, I think that he underestimates the differences between cinematic and post-cinematic media: it is these differences that drive my own discussion here.

capitalism, we see ourselves as subjects precisely to the extent that we are autonomous economic units. As Foucault puts it, neoliberalism defines a new mutation of '*Homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings' (2008, 226). For such a subject, emotions are resources to invest, in the hope of gaining as large a return as possible. What we know today as 'affective labour' is not really affective at all, as it involves rather the sale of labour-power in the form of pre-defined and pre-packaged emotions.<sup>3</sup>

However, emotion as such is never closed or complete. It also still testifies to the affect out of which it is formed, and that it has captured, reduced and repressed. Behind every emotion, there is always a certain surplus of affect that 'escapes confinement' and 'remains unactualised, inseparable from but unassimilable to any *particular*, functionally anchored perspective' (Massumi 2002, 35). Privatised emotion can never entirely separate itself from the affect from which it is derived. Emotion is representable and representative; but it also points beyond itself to an affect that works transpersonally and transversally, that is at once *singular* and *common* (Hardt and Negri 2004, 128-129), and that is irreducible to any

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<sup>3</sup> My terminology here is somewhat differently from that of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who have done the most to develop the concept of affective labour. For Hardt and Negri, 'unlike emotions, which are mental phenomena, affects refer equally to body and to mind. In fact, affects, such as joy and sadness, reveal the present state of life in the entire organism' (2004, 108). This seems wrong to me, precisely because there is no such thing as 'mental phenomena' that do not refer equally to the body. The division between affect and emotion must rather be sought elsewhere. This is why I prefer Massumi's definition of emotion as the capture, and reduction-to-commensurability, of affect. It is this reduction that, among other things, allows for the sale and purchase of emotions as commodities. In a certain sense, emotion is to affect as, in Marxist theory, labour-power is to labour. For labour itself is an unqualifiable capacity, while labour-power is a quantifiable commodity that is possessed, and that can be sold, by the worker. Hardt and Negri's own definition of affective labour in fact itself makes sense precisely in the register of what I am calling labour-power and objectified emotions: 'Affective labor, then, is labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion. One can recognize affective labor, for example, in the work of legal assistants, flight attendants, and fast food workers (service with a smile)' (108).

sort of representation. Our existence is always bound up with affective and aesthetic flows that elude cognitive definition or capture.<sup>4</sup>

On the basis of his distinction between affect and emotion, Massumi rejects Fredric Jameson's famous claim about the 'waning of affect' in postmodern culture (Jameson 1991, 10-12). For Massumi, it is precisely subjective emotion that has waned, but not affect. 'If anything, our condition is characterised by a surfeit of [affect]... If some have the impression that affect has waned, it is because it is unqualified. As such, it is not ownable or recognisable and is thus resistant to critique' (Massumi 2002, [27-28]). 'The disappearance of the individual subject' with which Jameson is concerned (1991, 16) leads precisely to a magnification of affect, whose flows swamp us, and continually carry us away from ourselves, beyond ourselves. For Massumi, it is precisely by means of such affective flows that the subject is opened to, and thereby constituted through, broader social, political and economic processes.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, Fascism and Nazism in particular are noteworthy for their mobilisation of cinematic affect; though arguably Soviet communism and liberal capitalism also mobilized such affect in their own ways. Much has been written in the last half-century about the Nazis' use of cinema, Goebbels' manipulation of the media, and the affective structure of films like Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. But already in the 1930s, Georges Bataille pointed to the centrality of affective politics in his analysis of 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' (Bataille 1985, 137-160). And Walter Benjamin explicitly linked this fascist mobilisation of affect to its use of the cinematic apparatus in his essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (Benjamin 2003, 251-283), especially when he diagnoses fascism's 'aestheticizing of politics' (270). Part of my aim here is to work out how the post-cinematic manipulation and modulation of affect, as we are experiencing it today, differs from the mass mobilisation of cinematic affect in the early and middle twentieth century.

<sup>5</sup> Affect theory, or 'non-representational theory' (Thrift 2008), is usually placed in sharp opposition to Marxist theory, by advocates of both approaches. I am arguing, instead, that we need to draw them together. This is precisely what Deleuze and Guattari attempted to do in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983). The attempt was not entirely successful, but it seems prescient in the light of subsequent 'neoliberal' developments in both affective and political economies. To put this in a slightly different way, I am largely sympathetic to Bruno Latour's insistence that networked social processes cannot be explained in terms of global categories like 'capital,' or 'the social' – because these categories themselves are what most urgently need to be explained. As Whitehead says, the business of philosophy 'is to explain the emergence of the more abstract things from the more concrete things,' rather than the reverse (Whitehead 1929/1978, 20). The only way to explain categories like 'capital' and 'the social' is precisely by working through the

Indeed, and despite their explicit disagreement, there is actually a close affinity between Massumi's discussion of transpersonal affect which always escapes subjective representation, and Jameson's account of how 'the world space of multinational capital' is 'unrepresentable,' or irreducible to 'existential experience' (Jameson 1991, 53-54). Intensive affective flows and intensive financial flows alike invest and constitute subjectivity, while at the same time eluding any sort of subjective grasp. This is not a loose analogy, but rather a case of *parallelism*, in Spinoza's sense of the term. Affect and labour are two attributes of the same Spinozian substance; they are both powers or potentials of the human body, expressions of its 'vitality,' 'sense of aliveness,' and 'changeability' (Massumi 2002, 36). But just as affect is captured, reduced and 'qualified' in the form of emotion, so labour (or unqualified human energy and creativity) is captured, reduced, commodified and put to work in the form of 'labour power.' In both cases, something intensive and intrinsically unmeasurable – what Deleuze calls *difference in itself* (Deleuze 1994, 28-69) – is given identity and measure. The distinction between affect and emotion, like the distinction between labour and labour power, is really a radical incommensurability: an excess or a surplus. Affect and creative labour alike are rooted in what Gayatri Spivak describes as 'the irreducible possibility that the subject be more than adequate – super-adequate – to itself' (Spivak 1985, 73).

This super-adequacy is the reason why neither the metamorphoses of capital nor the metamorphoses of affect can be grasped intuitively, or represented. But Jameson is quick to point out that, although the 'global world system' is 'unrepresentable,' this does not mean that it is 'unknowable' (Jameson 1991, 53). And he calls for 'an aesthetic of cognitive mapping' (54) that would precisely seek to 'know' this system in a non-representational and non-phenomenological way. This proposal, again, is closer than has

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network, and mapping the many ways in which these categories function, the processes through which they get constructed, and the encounters in the course of which they transform, and are in turn transformed by, the other forces that they come into contact with. But explaining how categories like 'capital' and 'society' are constructed (and in many cases, auto-constructed) is not the same thing as denying the very validity of these categories – as Latour and his disciples, in their more uncautious moments, are sometimes wont to do.

generally been recognised to the cartographic project that Massumi inherits from Deleuze and Guattari, and that I would like to call, for my own purposes, an aesthetic of affective mapping.<sup>6</sup> For Jameson and Deleuze and Guattari alike, maps are not static representations, but tools for negotiating, and intervening in, social space. A map does not just replicate the shape of a territory; rather, it actively *inflects* and *works over* that territory.<sup>7</sup> Films and music videos, like the ones I discuss here, are best regarded as affective maps, which do not just passively trace or represent, but actively construct and perform, the social relations, flows and feelings that they are ostensibly ‘about.’

In what follows, I map the flows of affect in three dimensions, in conjunction with three ‘diagrams’ of the contemporary social field.<sup>8</sup> All three of these diagrams are more or less relevant to all three of the works that I am discussing; but for heuristic purposes, I will link each work preferentially to a single diagram. The first diagram is that of Deleuze’s ‘control society,’ a formation that displaces Foucault’s panoptical or disciplinary society

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<sup>6</sup> Jameson explains the difference between knowledge and representation by referring to Althusser’s notorious distinction between ‘science’ and ‘ideology’ (Jameson 1991, 53). But however unfortunate his terminology, Althusser is really just restating Spinoza’s distinction between different types of knowledge. Spinoza’s first, inadequate kind of knowledge corresponds to Althusser’s ideology, and to the whole problematic of representation; while his third kind of knowledge, of things according to their immanent causes, *sub specie aeternitatis*, corresponds to Althusser’s science. The same Spinozian distinction is the basis for Deleuze and Guattari’s contrast between ‘cartography and decalcomania,’ or mapping and tracing, where the latter remains at the level of representation, while the former is directly ‘in contact with the real’ [(Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 12-14). For a close look at practices of affective mapping, and their difference from Jameson’s ‘cognitive mapping,’ see Giuliana Bruno.

<sup>7</sup> As Eleanor Kaufman, commenting on Deleuze and Guattari, puts it: ‘The map is not a contained model, or tracing, of something larger, but it is at all points constantly inflecting that larger thing, so that the map is not clearly distinguishable from the thing mapped’ (Kaufman 1998, 5).

<sup>8</sup> I am using ‘diagram’ here in the sense outlined by Foucault and by Deleuze. Foucault defines a diagram as ‘a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men... [The Panopticon] is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance, or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system; it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use’ (Foucault 1979, 205). Deleuze cites this definition, and further elaborates it, in his book on Foucault (1988, 34ff.) and elsewhere.

(Deleuze 1995, 177-182). The control society is characterised by perpetual modulations, dispersed and ‘flexible’ modes of authority, ubiquitous networks and the relentless branding and marketing of even the most ‘inner’ aspects of subjective experience. Such processes of control and modulation are especially at work in the ‘Corporate Cannibal’ video. The second diagram marks out the delirious financial flows, often in the form of derivatives and other arcane instruments, that drive the globalised economy (LiPuma and Lee, 2004). These flows are at once impalpable and immediate. They are invisible abstractions, existing only as calculations in the worldwide digital network and detached from any actual productive activity. And yet they are brutally material in their ‘efficacy,’ or in their impact upon our lives – as the current financial crisis makes all too evident. Financial flows are the motor of subjectivity, most crucially, in *Boarding Gate*. Finally, the third diagram is that of our contemporary digital and post-cinematic ‘media ecology’ (Fuller 2005), in which all activity is under surveillance from video cameras and microphones, and in return video screens and speakers, moving images and synthesised sounds, are dispersed pretty much everywhere. In this environment, where all phenomena pass through a stage of being processed in the form of digital code, we cannot meaningfully distinguish between ‘reality’ and its multiple simulations; they are all woven together in one and the same fabric. *Southland Tales* is particularly concerned with the dislocations that result from this new media ecology.

In all three of the works I am discussing, I focus upon the figure of the media star or celebrity. Grace Jones has always been a performance artist as much as a singer. Her music is only one facet of her self-constructed image or persona. ‘Corporate Cannibal’ gives this persona a new twist. *Boarding Gate* is a star vehicle for Asia Argento. Its concerns are close to those of Assayas’ earlier films, and especially *Demonlover* (2002); but these concerns are filtered, and rearticulated, through Argento’s visceral, self-consciously performative onscreen presence. *Southland Tales* has sprawling, multiple plotlines and an ensemble cast; but nearly all its actors, including Justin Timberlake, are pop culture figures who actively play against their familiar



personas. Kelly thereby creates a sort of affective (as well as cognitive) dissonance, a sense of hallucinatory displacement that largely drives the film.

Jones, Argento and Timberlake are all perturbing presences, exemplary figures of post-cinematic celebrity. They circulate endlessly among multiple media platforms (film, television talk shows and reality shows, music videos and musical recordings and performances, charity events, advertisements and sponsorships, web- and print-based gossip columns, etc.), so that they seem to be everywhere and nowhere at once. Their ambivalent performances are at once affectively charged and ironically distant. They enact complex emotional dramas and yet display a basic indifference and impassivity. I feel involved in every aspect of their lives and yet I know that they are not involved in mine. Familiar as they are, they are always too far away for me to reach. Even the *Schadenfreude* I feel at the spectacle of, say, Britney's breakdown or Madonna's divorce backhandedly testifies to these stars' inaccessibility. I am enthralled by their all-too-human failures, miseries and vulnerabilities, precisely because they are fundamentally inhuman and invulnerable. They fascinate me, precisely because it is utterly impossible that they should ever acknowledge, much less reciprocate, my fascination.

In short, post-cinematic pop stars allure me. The philosopher Graham Harman describes *allure* as 'a special and intermittent experience in which the intimate bond between a thing's unity and its plurality of notes somehow partly disintegrates' (Harman 2005,143). For Harman, the basic ontological condition is that objects always withdraw from us, and from one another. We are never able to grasp them more than partially. They always hold their being in reserve, a mystery that we cannot hope to plumb. An object is always more than the particular qualities, or 'plurality of notes,' that it displays to me. This situation is universal; but most of the time I do not worry about it. I use a knife to cut a grapefruit, without wondering about the inner recesses of knife-being or grapefruit-being. And usually I interact with other people in the same superficial way. Now, in general this is a good thing. If I were to obsess over the inner being of each person I encountered, ordinary sociability would become impossible. It is only in rare cases – for instance when I intensely love, or intensely hate, someone – that I make the

(ever-unsuccessful) attempt to explore their mysterious depths, to find a real being that goes beyond the particular qualities that they display to me. *Intimacy* is what we call the situation in which people try to probe each other's hidden depths.<sup>9</sup>

What Harman calls *allure* is the way in which an object does not just display certain particular qualities to me, but also insinuates the presence of a hidden, deeper level of existence. The alluring object explicitly *calls attention* to the fact that it is something more than, and other than, the bundle of qualities that it presents to me. I experience allure whenever I am intimate with someone, or when I am obsessed with someone or something. But allure is not just my own projection. For any object that I encounter *really is* deeper than, and other than, what I am able to grasp of it. And the object becomes alluring, precisely to the extent that it forces me to acknowledge this hidden depth, instead of ignoring it. Indeed, allure may well be strongest when I experience it *vicariously*: in relation to an object, person, or thing that I do not actually know, or otherwise care about. Vicarious allure is the ground of aesthetics: a mode of involvement that is, at the same time, heightened and yet (as Kant puts it) 'disinterested.' The inner, surplus, existence of the alluring object is something that I cannot reach – but that I also cannot forget about or ignore, as I do in my everyday, utilitarian interactions with objects and other people. The alluring object insistently displays the fact that it is separate from, and more than, its

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<sup>9</sup> Three additional things need to be noted here. In the first place, Harman's discussion does not privilege human subjectivity in any way. His descriptions of how objects exceed one another's grasp in any encounter applies as much 'when a gale hammers a seaside cliff' or 'when stellar rays penetrate a newspaper' as it does when human subjects approach an object (Harman 2005, 83). When I use a knife to cut a grapefruit, the knife and the grapefruit also encounter one another at a distance, unable to access one another's innermost being. In the second place, I do not have any privileged access into the depths my own being. My perception of, and interaction with, myself is just as partial and limited as my perception of, and interaction with, any other entity. And finally – although in this respect I am going against Harman, who argues for the renewal of something like a metaphysics of occult substances – the withdrawal of objects from one another need not imply that any of the objects thus withdrawn actually possess some deep inner essence. The argument is that all entities have more to them than the particular qualities they show to other entities; it says nothing about the status or organisation of this *more*.

qualities – which means that it exceeds everything that I feel of it, and know about it. This is why what Kant calls a judgment of beauty is non-conceptual and non-cognitive. The alluring object draws me beyond anything that I am actually able to experience. And yet this ‘beyond’ is not in any sense otherworldly or transcendent; it is situated in the here and now, in the very flows and encounters of everyday existence.

Pop culture figures are vicariously alluring, and this is why they are so affectively charged. They can only be grasped through a series of paradoxes. When a pop star or celebrity allures me, this means that he or she is someone to whom I respond in the mode of intimacy, even though I am not, and cannot ever be, actually intimate with him or her. What I become obsessively aware of, therefore, is the figure’s distance from me, and the way that it baffles all my efforts to enter into any sort of relation with it. Such a figure is forever unattainable. Pop stars are slippery, exhibiting singular qualities while, at the same time, withdrawing to a distance beyond these qualities, and thus escaping any final definition. This makes them ideal commodities: they always offer us more than they deliver, enticing us with a ‘promise of happiness’ that is never fulfilled, and therefore never exhausted or disappointed. In terms of a project of affective and cognitive mapping, pop stars work as anchoring points, as particularly dense nodes of intensity and interaction. They are figures upon which, or within which, many powerful feelings converge; they *conduct* multiplicities of affective flows. At the same time, they are always more than the sum of all the forces that they attract and bring into focus; their allure points us elsewhere, and makes them seem strangely absent from themselves. Pop culture figures are *icons*, which means that they exhibit, or at least aspire to, an idealised stillness, solidity and perfection of form. Yet at the same time, they are fluid and mobile, always displacing themselves. And this contrast between stillness and motion is a generative principle not just for celebrities themselves, but also for the media flows, financial flows and modulations of control through which they are displayed, and that permeate the entire social field.

*Corporate Cannibal*

Nick Hooker's video for Grace Jones's 'Corporate Cannibal' is in black and white. Or, more precisely, it is just in black. The only images that appear on the screen are those of Jones's face and upper body. These images were captured by two video cameras, in a single take. The director recalls that, at the time of the shoot, Jones had just spent several months in Jamaica; as a result her skin 'was intensely black, like *dark*, dark black.' There is no background to contrast with the black of Jones's figure, or with what Hooker calls 'the raw glow of her skin' (Hermitosis 2008). The video was actually shot in colour, with a white wall for background; but in postproduction the director 'desaturated the footage...and brought up the contrast which made the white wall fall away entirely and consequently enhanced the blackness of her skin' (Hooker 2009). As a result of this treatment, there is literally nothing in the video aside from Jones's skin, her features and her silhouette. Behind her, there is only an empty blankness; it is this absence of any image whatsoever that we see as white. Evidently this play of black and white and of full and empty has racial implications, as well as formal and visual ones – implications to which I shall return.

The video works by continually manipulating Grace Jones's figure. In the course of the song's six minutes and eight seconds, this figure swells and contracts, bends and fractures, twists, warps and contorts and flows from one shape to another. At the start, there is just a twisted, diagonal double band, extending across the empty screen like a ripple of electronic disturbance; but this quickly expands into Jones's recognisable image. At the end of the video, the entire screen goes black, as if it had been entirely consumed by Jones's presence. In between, Jones's image is unstable and in flux; nothing remains steady for more than a few seconds. Certain configurations tend to recur, however. In the most common of these, Jones's body, and especially her face, are elongated upwards. It is as if she had an impossibly long forehead, or as if her notorious late-1980s flattop haircut had somehow expanded beyond all dimensions. Along with being distended, Jones's body is also thinned out: made gracile (if that isn't too much of a pun) and almost insectoid. At other times, in extreme close-up, Jones's mouth

stretches alarmingly as if it were about to devour you; or one of her eyes bulges out and smears across the screen like a toxic stain. Sometimes her whole figure multiplies, as if in a house of mirrors, into several imperfectly separated clones. And sometimes, we even get to see a nearly undistorted shot of Jones's eyes, nose and mouth. But then it is gone, twisted out of shape again, almost before we are able to take it in.

In spite of all these distortions, Jones remains recognisable throughout. This is not surprising when you consider that, after all, Grace Jones has never looked (or sounded) remotely like anyone else. Even in her early modelling days, before she became a singer and performer, she stood out by dint of sheer ferocity. At the peak of her popularity, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, her persona was hard-edged and confrontational. She went through many changes, but what always remained the same was a sense that nobody could mimic her or replace her – and that they'd better not even try. The 'Corporate Cannibal' video extends this history. Even as it melts and scatters Jones's features, it retains their abrasive, angular uniqueness. In the course of the video's manipulations of her image, Jones's appearance loses all identity; it is never 'the same' from one moment to the next. And yet her figure continues to insistently confront us. As we hear her voice on the soundtrack, her lips and mouth hold our visual attention. Through all its changes, Jones's figure projects a certain *style* or *emphasis*; it *marks* the screen in a unique way. Such is Jones's *singularity* as a pop culture icon. I mean this in an almost material way. Nick Hooker recalls that, when he started to work on Jones's image in post-production, 'I realised quickly that she started to feel like an oil spill' (Hooker 2009). I take this to mean that her figure on screen is fluid and mutable, but at the same time thick and viscous. It never goes away; and it retains a certain dense materiality, even within the weightless realm of digital, electronic images. It thereby resists the very transformations that it also expresses. 'When the music ended,' Hooker says, 'I imagined Grace returning to such a state: silent, still, shapeless' (Hooker 2009). The stickiness and inertia of Jones's image, its material self-retention through all

its fluid transformations, is what I call her iconic singularity, without identity.<sup>10</sup>

Nick Hooker's earlier music videos, for U2 and other bands, make use of the same kinds of electronic manipulation that we find in 'Corporate Cannibal.'<sup>11</sup> But many of these earlier videos are in full colour; they are often wholly abstract; and they tend to involve full-field transformations, rather than concentrating on a single human figure. As a result, they feel trippy and psychedelic – in contrast to the harshness and ferocity of 'Corporate Cannibal.' These earlier videos are about free-flowing metamorphosis; but 'Corporate Cannibal' is about *modulation*, which is something entirely different. Metamorphosis is expansive and open-ended, while modulation is schematic and implosive. Metamorphosis implies 'the ability...to move laterally across categories' (Krasniewicz 2000, 53); but modulation requires an underlying fixity, in the form of a carrier wave or signal that is made to undergo a series of controlled and coded variations.<sup>12</sup> Metamorphosis gives us the sense that anything can happen, because form is indefinitely malleable. But the modulations of 'Corporate Cannibal' rather imply that no matter what happens, it can always be contained in advance within a predetermined set of possibilities. Everything is drawn into the same fatality, the same narrowing funnel, the same black hole. There is no proliferation of meanings, but rather a capture of all meanings. Every event is translated into the same binary code, and placed within the same algorithmic grid of variations, the same phase space.

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<sup>10</sup> Specifically, Hooker compares the viscous materiality of Jones' video image to the way that a pool of oil fills half the space of the gallery, mirroring the ceiling, in Richard Wilson's installation piece *20:50* (Hooker 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Some of these earlier videos can be found at the director's website (<http://www.nickhooker.com>), and on his MySpace page (<http://www.myspace.com/nickhooker>).

<sup>12</sup> Modulation is initially an analogue process, as in the amplitude modulation (AM) or frequency modulation (FM) of radio waves. In analogue modulation, 'certain *dimensions* of one medium are modulated to serve as imprints bearing the variations of another medium, thereby *transmuting* the original form's embodiment without *transforming* these formal variations.' When modulation becomes digital, however, an additional step is added: 'in digital we both transform *and* transmute the medium,' breaking the chain of analogical resemblances by a translation into binary code, so that variation is not just controlled, but also *coded* and reductively *homogenised* (Shores 2009).

The 'Corporate Cannibal' video consists in continual modulations of Grace Jones's figure. It thereby exemplifies – and internalises or miniaturises – *modulation* as the central mechanism of what Gilles Deleuze calls the emerging *control society*. Modulation works, Deleuze says, 'like a self-transmuting molding continually changing from one moment to the next, or like a sieve whose mesh varies from one point to another' (Deleuze 1995, 179). That is to say, in a regime of modulation there are no fixed or pre-given forms. In Foucault's disciplinary society, as in the regime of Fordist industrial production, everything was forced into the same fixed mold: workers were held to the same disciplinary rhythms on the assembly line, and products were identical and interchangeable. But in the control society, or in the post-Fordist information economy, forms can be changed at will to meet the needs of the immediate situation. The only fixed requirement is precisely to maintain an underlying *flexibility*: an ability to take on any shape as needed, a capacity to adapt quickly and smoothly to the demands of any form, or any procedure, whatsoever.

Flexibility is valued today, in the first place, as a way to cut costs, by making just-in-time production possible. In the second place, flexibility is the attribute that 'new economy' corporations look for in their employees: workers must be '*adaptable* and *flexible*, able to switch from one situation to a very different one, and adjust to it; and *versatile*, capable of changing activity or tools, depending on the nature of the relationship entered into with others or with objects' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, 112). And finally, flexibility also characterises consumers, who no longer settle for Fordist standardisation and uniformity, but instead demand products that are customised for their own particular 'preferences,' or whims of the moment. In a world of *flexible accumulation* (Harvey 2006, 141-172), modulation is the process that allows for the greatest difference and variety of products, while still maintaining an underlying control.

Of course, modulation is not just a special feature of 'Corporate Cannibal'; it is a basic characteristic of digital processes in general.<sup>13</sup> All

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<sup>13</sup> Deleuze says that, where the older mechanisms of confinement, foregrounded in Foucault's disciplinary society, are *analogical*, in the emerging control society, with

digital video is expressed in binary code, and treated by means of algorithmic procedures, allowing for a continual modulation of the image. But in ‘Corporate Cannibal,’ these technical means, or conditions of possibility, become the video’s overt, actual content. Here, the medium really is the message. I have already noted that the whiteness behind Jones’s image is a void and not a background. This has important consequences for how we apprehend the video. Usually we ‘read’ images in terms of a figure-ground relationship; but we cannot look at ‘Corporate Cannibal’ in such a way. Jones’s imaged body is not a figure in implied space, but an electronic *signal* whose modulations pulse across the screen. The screen works as a material support *for* this signal/image. But the screen does not itself emit a signal; and it is not present, and does not figure anything, *within* the image. ‘Corporate Cannibal’ is therefore neither a classical work (like, say, the films of Renoir) in which the screen is a window upon a represented world, nor a modernist work (like, say, the films of Godard) that reflexively focuses upon the materiality of the screen itself as a surface.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to both classical and modernist paradigms, ‘Corporate Cannibal’ does not offer us any pre-existing structure of space within which Jones’s signal/image might be located. There is only an electromagnetic field that is dynamically generated by the signal itself in the course of its continual modulations. ‘Corporate Cannibal,’ therefore, does not imply, and

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its continual modulations, ‘the various forms of control...are inseparable variations, forming a system of varying geometry whose language is *digital*’ (Deleuze 1995, 178).

<sup>14</sup> I am thinking here, in part, of Laura Mulvey’s discussion of how ‘the cinema is divided into two parts...split between its material substance, the unglamorous celluloid strip running through the projector on one side and, on the other, entrancing images moving on a screen in darkened space.’ Mulvey aligns this formal division with the ‘fundamental, and irreconcilable, opposition between stillness and movement that reverberates across the aesthetics of cinema.’ She further associates moving images with the narrative drive of mainstream fictional films, and stillness with the avant-garde project of bringing ‘the mechanism and the material of film into visibility’ (Mulvey 2006, 67). Mulvey is interested in considering how the transfer of cinematic works to digital media allows for a renewed contemplation of them, precisely because our ability to freeze the frame at any moment makes the cinematic dialectic between stillness and motion more accessible to us. I am trying to look, instead, at the ways in which recent digital video works like ‘Corporate Cannibal’ reject both sides of the stillness/movement dichotomy, and operate according to a different logic: one aligned not around stillness and motion, but around the composition of forces, modulation, and feedback.



does not take place within, the absolute, perspectival space of ordinary perceptual experience. Rather, the video constructs a *relational space*, of the sort theorised by Leibniz and Whitehead, and more recently by David Harvey. As Harvey describes it, ‘the relational view of space holds that there is no such thing as space or time outside of the processes that define them... Processes do not occur *in* space but define their own spatial frame. The concept of space is embedded in or internal to process’ (Harvey 2006, 123). Relational space varies from moment to moment, along with the forces that generate and invest it. It continually alters its curvature and its dimensions; it does not persist as a stable, enduring container for objects that would be situated solidly within it.<sup>15</sup>

This means that the space presented by ‘Corporate Cannibal’ is radically different from any sort of cinematic space. Analogue photography and film are indexical; as David Rodowick puts it, they ‘transcribe or document rather than represent’ (Rodowick 2007, 58). Their very materiality consists in the persisting chemical traces of objects that actually stood before the camera at a particular time, in a particular place. Cinema therefore always assumes – because it always refers back to – some sort of absolute, pre-existing space. And this referentiality, or ‘see[ing] at a distance in time’ (Rodowick 2007, 64), is what allows it to be, as well, a record of *duration*. But such is no longer the case for digital video. As we have seen, Grace Jones’s hyperbolic figure in ‘Corporate Cannibal’ generates its own space, in the course of its modulations. And these modulations happen in ‘real time,’ in a perpetual present, even though the video is prerecorded.

It is true, of course, that Jones actually did stand before the camera, at one point in the production of ‘Corporate Cannibal.’ But the video’s

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<sup>15</sup> Actually, Harvey describes three conceptions of space. The first is the *absolute space* of ordinary perception; this is Cartesian-Newtonian space. The second is the *relative space* of Einstein and modern physics. *Relational space* is the third. Harvey emphasises that it is not a question of determining which of these three would be the ‘true’ concept of space, but of understanding how ‘space can become one or all simultaneously depending upon the circumstances. The problem of the proper conceptualization of space is resolved through human practice with respect to it’ (Harvey 2006, 125-126). I am interested here in how the practices of what Deleuze calls the ‘control society,’ and the mechanisms of digital media, participate in, and are themselves in turn affected by, the social construction of relational space.

*ontological consistency* does not depend, in the way that a film would, upon the fact of this prior physical presence. ‘Corporate Cannibal’ does not point us back to what André Bazin described as the fundamental stake of all photography and cinematography: ‘the object itself... the image of things [that] is likewise the image of their duration’ (Bazin 2004, 14-15). In contrast to analogue photography as described by Roland Barthes, digital video no longer offers us ‘a certificate of presence’; it can no longer ‘attest that what I see has indeed existed’ (Barthes 1981, 87, 82). More generally, there is no room, in relational space, for the uncanny sense of ‘space past...the curious sentiment that things absent in time can be present in space,’ that Rodowick identifies as a basic ontological feature of traditional photography and film (Rodowick 2007, 63, 67).

Instead, as Rodowick complains, ‘nothing *moves*, nothing endures in a digitally composed world... in digital cinema there is no longer continuity in space and movement, but only montage or combination’ (Rodowick 2007,171-173). Where classical cinema was analogical and indexical, digital video is processual and combinatorial. Where analogue cinema was about the duration of bodies and images, digital video is about the articulation and composition of forces. And where cinema was an art of individuated presences, digital video is an art of what Deleuze calls the *dividual*: a condition in which identities are continually being decomposed and recomposed, on multiple levels, through the modulation of numerous independent parameters (Deleuze 1995, 180, 182).<sup>16</sup>

‘Corporate Cannibal,’ therefore, does not refer back indexically to Grace Jones’s body as a source or model. It does not image, reflect and distort some prior, and supposedly more authentic, actuality of Jones-as-physical-presence. We should say, instead, that the video’s multiple inputs include images of Jones lip-synching her song. These inputs were sampled by two digital devices, one sensitive to signals in the visual spectrum, and the other to infrared signals. In the course of post-production, these inputs were

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<sup>16</sup> The non-indexicality of digital video has lately perturbed many film theorists, including Rodowick (2007). For my own earlier take on this issue, see my article ‘Emotion Capture: Affect in Digital Film’ (Shaviro 2007).

made to *enter into composition* with one another, and with certain other inputs: most notably, with the audio signals of the prerecorded song (which include, but are not limited to, digital samples of Jones's voice). This means that Grace Jones's figure is a complex, aggregated and digitally coded electronic signal – rather than a 'visual transcription,' a 'witnessing or testimony,' as Rodowick characterises the cinematic image (Rodowick 2007, 58, 61). Jones's face, her torso and her voice – the dividual elements of her persona – are themselves, already, electricity, light (or darkness) and sound, digital matrix and intense vibration. Nick Hooker does not manipulate Jones's image, so much as he modulates, and actively recomposes, the electronic signals that she already is, and whose interplay defines the field of her becoming.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, the electronic image is one more iteration – and a particularly visceral one, at that – of 'Grace Jones' as a celebrity icon. I say *iteration*, rather than *version*, or *copy*, because there is no original, or Platonic ideal, of a celebrity: all instances are generated through the same processes of composition and modulation, and therefore any instance is as valid (or 'authentic') as any other. 'Corporate Cannibal' is only the most recent in a long string of Jones's reinventions of herself. Over the course of her career, she has continually rearranged her body, her appearance and her overall persona. Now, there may well be a gap between Grace Jones the private person and 'Grace Jones' the iconic celebrity. Indeed, Jean-Paul Goude, Jones's partner and artistic collaborator in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the father of her son, says that their personal relationship fell

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<sup>17</sup> Filmmakers such as Godard, and film theorists from Eisenstein to Chion, have been concerned with exploring the multiple relations between sound and image, and especially with pointing out how images and sounds are recorded on separate devices, so that their synchronisation is an illusion – or at the very least an artifice created after the fact. But digital video is no longer limited by the image/sound dichotomy. 'The components of the image' (Deleuze 1989, 225-261) are multiple; and regardless of the sensory sources from which they have been sampled, they are all transcoded into the same indifferent binary code, which then becomes material for new constructions. Not only is digital video *composited* rather than edited, so that it has to do with 'a palimpsestic combination of data layers' rather than with 'contiguous spatial wholes as blocks of duration' (Rodowick 2007, 169); in addition, an input of one sensory mode can become an output for another, as is the case with music visualisation programs – which generate patterns similar to those in some of Hooker's earlier music videos.

apart when Jones ‘felt I had started to love the character we had created more than I loved her’ (McDowell 2005). But the very point of this anecdote is that ‘Grace Jones,’ the character or persona, exists actually in the world, just as much as Jones the private person does – and precisely because these two do not coincide. Jones the private person is not the model, or the privileged source, of Jones the icon. If anything, the problem for Goude, and perhaps for us as well, has to do with whether it is even possible for Jones the human person to have as full an existence as her image does: to live up to the demands, and the promises, of Jones the celebrity figure.<sup>18</sup> In any case, the iconic ‘Grace Jones’ is just as ‘real’ an object, or a presence, as any other – even if its mode of being involves, not just the medium of the flesh, but many other media as well. We encounter ‘Grace Jones’ the icon in the physical spaces of the runway and the concert stage, the virtual spaces of television studios and movie sets, and the relational spaces of video screens and computer monitors. Jones as celebrity construct is present in her skin, in her make-up, in her clothes, in her live performances, in her photographs and movies and videos and in her sound recordings, both analogue and digital. The figure we know as ‘Grace Jones’ simply *is* the ‘historic route of living occasions’ (as Whitehead would call it: 1929/1978, 119) through which it

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<sup>18</sup> In an article about Andy Warhol, I argue that Warhol’s multiple portraits of Marilyn Monroe, all made after the actress’ death, dramatise the fact that ‘even Marilyn Monroe, you might say, was never entirely successful in playing the role of ‘Marilyn Monroe’... This discord between the performer and the role, or between the empirical person and the ideal of beauty that she is supposed to incarnate, may well be regarded as the cause of Marilyn Monroe’s tragic death, no matter what the actual facts of the case. Marilyn’s flesh simply could not bear what she was supposed to be.’ Warhol’s Marilyn portraits, with their numerous random variations, generated by the imperfections of the silkscreening process, illustrate ‘the failure of the enactment to match the role. And this is why these paintings are all pictures of Marilyn’s death’ (Shaviro2004, 134). Evidently, Jones has succeeded where Monroe did not: in negotiating the gap between the existential person and the celebrity icon. Monroe’s endeavour to close the gap, and to live her incarnation as a star, inevitably failed, with tragic consequences. Jones, instead, affirms and even replicates this gap, with an ironic performance strategy of *disidentification*. As Francesca Royster puts it, ‘Jones’ adoption of hypersexualised, animalistic, machinic, and apparently degrading positions act as what Jose Munoz calls ‘disidentifications’ with the toxic aspects of dominant ideology of black womanhood’ (Royster 2009, 84). Instead of trying to *become* her celebrity role, therefore, Jones precisely *performs* its impossibility and distance.

has passed, the entire series of its transductions, translations and modulations.

These transformations have always had a transgressive and confrontational edge. Jones's performances in the late 1970s and early 1980s appropriated, mocked and inverted traditional (racist and sexist) signifiers of blackness and whiteness, and of femininity and masculinity. In the first place, Jones created spectacles that parodically embraced historically dominant white Euro-American images of black people – including animalistic images, and images drawn from minstrelsy – in order to throw them back in the face of the audience. And in the second, she alternately exhibited herself in masculine drag (with references to boxers and other athletes) and in such stereotypical items of 'feminine' (drag queen) display as stiletto heels. Jones's performances of this period, as Miriam Kershaw puts it, 'oscillated between exploiting the 'feminine' myth of 'primitive' sensuality and the 'masculine' construction of threatening savagery,' in order to make an 'ironic commentary on this iconography of power and subordination' (Kershaw 1997, 21). In other words, Jones *embodied* an all-too-familiar racist and sexist iconography with such vicious, sarcastic excess as to blow it apart. At the same time, she crossed the boundaries separating men from women not with a cozy androgyny, nor even with the 'glam rock' stylisations of the period, but by displaying a cold and forbidding, more-than-masculine, and ultimately ungenderable hardbody.

In thus transgressing boundaries of gender and race, the iconic 'Grace Jones' pushes beyond the human altogether. She embraces her own extreme objectification, her packaging as a saleable commodity. And she transforms herself (well before this became fashionable) into a posthuman or transhuman being, a robot or cyborg. In the words of Anneke Smelik, Jones appears as 'the ultimate hi-tech product... present[ing] self-images with quotations from the world of advertising and fashion photography' (Smelik 1993). Or as Mark Fisher puts it, Jones makes herself into a chilly object-machine, whose 'screams and...laughter seem to come from some Other place, a dread zone from which Jones has returned, but only partially. Is it the laughter of one who has passed through death or the scream of a

machine that is coming to life?’ (Fisher 2006). In this way, Jones does not just express a new or different mode of subjectivity. She does not just give voice to a black female perspective that was previously excluded from public expression. In addition, she *also* transgresses the very sense of what it means to be a self or a subject at all. She turns herself into a *thing* – thereby forcing us to confront the ways that slavery and racism turn black people into things, that patriarchy turns women into things, and that capitalism turns all of us into commodities, or strangely animated things. She revivifies, and reclaims the powers latent within, all of these reifications. She embodies, and transmits, flows of affect that are so intense, and so impersonal and inhuman, that they cannot be contained within traditional forms of subjectivity. This is what makes her performances so explosively charged, and yet at the same time so cold and distant, so *alien* or inhuman. ‘Grace Jones’ has moved beyond identification, and beyond any sort of identity politics, into an entirely different realm: one that can only be expressed in the terms of science fiction.

Donna Haraway, writing in the early 1980s – at the very moment of Jones’s greatest fame as a performer – identified three ‘boundary breakdowns’ that she saw as harbingers of a new ‘informatics of domination,’ but also as the conditions of possibility for an emerging ‘cyborg politics’ that would be ‘oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence’ (Haraway 1991, 151 and 149-181 *passim*). In our networked and globalised postmodern world, where ‘the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion’ (149), there are no longer firm oppositions, but only increasingly ‘leaky distinctions,’ first ‘between human and animal’ (151), then ‘between animal-human (organism) and machine’ (152), and finally ‘between physical and non-physical,’ or between material, mechanical devices and ones that are pure energy, ‘nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum’ (153). In the course of her crossings from black to white, and from female to male, Jones also enacts all three of Haraway’s boundary breakdowns. In her performances of the late 1970s, ‘she becomes identified with the animal kingdom’ (Kershaw 1997, 20), both mocking and reappropriating Euro-American racism’s ascription of

animality to black people. In her more commercial phase of the 1980s, when she moves musically from disco to ‘new wave and experimental-based work,’ and ‘replac[es] her S&M look of the ’70s with a detached, androgynous image’ (Prato 2009), she traces a passage between organism and machine. And finally, in ‘Corporate Cannibal,’ her persona casts off the constraints of locality, and achieves modulation as a digital signal.

All these transformations are dangerous – and Grace Jones evidently savours this danger. Indeed, she makes her living from it. The danger comes from the fact that transgression, reappropriation, and *détournement* are all inherently ambiguous. Precisely because it is so radical, Jones’s work continually and unavoidably ‘risks misreading’ (Royster 2009, 84). Every act of transgression offers at least a backhanded compliment to the order, the norm, or the law that is being transgressed – since it is only the continuing power of that order, norm, or law that gives meaning to the action of defying it. If gender binaries and hierarchies were ever to disappear, for instance, drag performance would lose all of its bite. But boundaries that are in process of breaking down have not yet, by that very fact, been altogether abolished; leaky distinctions are ones that have lost some of their force, but that nonetheless are still being made. For their part, reappropriation and *détournement* necessarily run the risk of giving new life to the very forces that they endeavour to hijack, and turn to different ends. In drawing on cultural memories of oppression and degradation, they reinforce those very memories. No performance is entirely able to control its own reception and interpretation. Jones’s feral and animalistic gestures work to explode a whole racist mythology; but they cannot escape the risk of also perpetuating that mythology.

I think that the power of Grace Jones as a media icon comes from the way that she addresses these paradoxes head on, foregrounding them in her performances. In this regard, it is instructive to compare Jones’s star persona with that of her younger colleague and rival, Madonna. Both divas emerged from the world of disco and camp performance. Both gained notoriety for self-consciously ‘performing’ their femininity, and thereby denaturalising it. And both were able to move from a cult following largely among gay men

into a much broader mainstream popularity. Both Grace Jones and Madonna flaunt an aggressive sexuality that is at odds with older norms of how women were supposed to behave. But both of them nonetheless remain acutely aware that the ‘post-feminist’ sexual freedom which they celebrate is also intensely commodified. This is why they present themselves, simultaneously, both as voraciously consuming subjects, and as glitzy, perfectly sculpted objects to be consumed.

And yet, despite this common ground, there is a vast difference between these two performers. Madonna puts on and takes off personas as if they were clothes; indeed, the clothes are often what make the persona. The brilliance of this strategy lies in the way that it suggests that everything is merely a matter of surfaces, or of style. There is nothing beneath the surface; there are no depths and no essences. All ‘identities’ are factitious; and this allows Madonna to play with them innocently and pleasurably. Because these personas are all stereotypes and fictions, and self-consciously known to be so, none of them is irreversible, and none of them has any real cost (apart from the up-front financial one). Madonna’s transformations never have serious consequences, and this is why she is free to indulge in them.

Grace Jones’s transformations are altogether more troubling. In a sense, they are incised more deeply in the performer’s flesh – for all that they are (no less than Madonna’s) a function of clothes and styles and the powers of the fashion world. Jones’s changes are ‘deeper’ than Madonna’s because they have to be: without Madonna’s white skin privilege, Jones cannot treat her self-mutations as casually as Madonna does. She cannot retreat into the anonymity that is the implicit background of Madonna’s performances, the neutrality and lack-of-depth that exists (or rather, does not exist) behind all the costumes. Grace Jones, as a black woman, is always already ‘marked’ as a body – in a way that Madonna Ciccone, simply by virtue of being white, is not. This means that Jones cannot simply dismiss depth, and present a play of pure surfaces, in the way that Madonna can. She has much more at stake in her transformations than Madonna could ever have.

And so, if Madonna’s transformations are playful and fantasy-like, Grace Jones’s transformations are considerably harder and harsher. This does



not mean that they are devoid of pleasure. But Jones's own pleasure in them is not necessarily something that she transmits to, and shares with, her audience. She always stands alone, apart from us. That is to say, Jones's figures, unlike Madonna's, are not necessarily ones that 'we' (her admirers) can identify with. Think of the difference between the coyness of Madonna's 'Like a Virgin' and the Ballardian savagery of Jones's 'Warm Leatherette.' Jones never stops being a dominatrix – something that Madonna definitely is not, for all of her diva airs, and her willingness to toy around with the edges of sadomasochism. Madonna admirably plays with the image of 'femininity,' exulting in its artifice, its artificiality and its inessentiality; but Grace Jones aims instead to blast this 'femininity' apart, or to blast it into outer space.

The difference between Madonna and Grace Jones is therefore both affective and ontological. Where Madonna is playful, Jones is playing for keeps. And where Madonna critiques subjectivity by suggesting that it is just a surface-effect with nothing behind it, Jones critiques it by actually delving beneath the surfaces, or into the depths of the body, to discover a dense affectivity that is not subjective any longer. Jones rejects the subordination that Western culture has so long written into the designations of both 'woman' and 'black'; but she does this neither by recuperating femininity and blackness as positive states, nor by claiming for herself the privileges of the masculine and the white. Rather, she subjects the very field of these oppositions to implosion, or to some sort of hyperspatial torsion and distortion. And she takes up the risk that these manoeuvres will fail to achieve their goal, or even backfire.

This project, and this risk, place Jones within the genealogy of what has come to be known as *Afrofuturism*. Most immediately, this term refers to 'speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future' (Dery 1994, 180). But in a broader sense, Afrofuturism uses the tropes of science fiction and futuristic speculation, and a vision of the transformative

potentiality of new technologies, in order to reevaluate all aspects of Afrodiasporic (and not just African American) experience. In the case of music in particular, Kodwo Eshun (1998) traces an Afrofuturist line that runs from Sun Ra in the 1950s, through certain aspects of free jazz in the 1960s, then through George Clinton in the 1970s, on to Detroit techno in the 1980s, and beyond that to more recent electronic forms. (Today, we might think of Janelle Monáe's 'Metropolitan Suite' and Burnt Sugar's 'More Than Posthuman' as exemplary Afrofuturist works).

In purely musical terms, this is a very diverse and heterogeneous group of artists. But they all make music in which the soulful human singing voice – traditionally at the centre of Afrodiasporic music – is erased, decentred, or subjected to electronic distortion and modulation. And they all develop rhythm in startling ways, so that it ceases to be 'organic' and breath- or body-centred, and instead becomes more or less *inhuman*. Either rhythm becomes mechanistically repetitive, as is generally the case in techno; or else, it becomes superhumanly polyrhythmic, dispersed beyond any single focus of attention, so that (in Erik Davis' words) it 'impels the listener to explore a complex space of beats, to follow any of a number of fluid, warping and shifting lines of flight, to submit to what the old school hip-hop act A Tribe Called Quest calls 'The rhythmic instinction to yield to travel beyond existing forces of life'' (Davis 2008, 56).<sup>19</sup>

Afrofuturist musical ventures also tend to invoke the imagery of science fiction – aliens and robots, and advanced electronic technologies – in order to figure both the alienation, suffering, and horror of the history of black oppression, and the utopian hope of escaping or overturning that oppression. Looking back into the past, Afrofuturists see the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans, and the Middle Passage that forcibly took them to the New World, as something like what today we would call an episode of alien abduction. These Africans were overwhelmed and subjugated by a

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, this sort of rhythmic experimentation is a wider tendency of Afrodiasporic music in general, throughout the second half of the twentieth century. James Brown is not commonly counted as an Afrofuturist; but when he transforms himself into a 'Sex Machine,' he is in fact expressing both robotic, mechanistic repetition and superhuman, polyrhythmic dispersal at one and the same time.

barbarous, but technologically powerful, invader from another world. Once taken back to that other world, the Africans themselves became aliens, as their humanity was not recognised, and they were put to work as slaves. The horror of this experience propelled them into modernity. As Eshun puts it, paraphrasing Toni Morrison, ‘the African subjects that experienced capture, theft, abduction, mutilation and slavery were the first moderns. They underwent real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation and dehumanisation that philosophers like Nietzsche would later define as quintessentially modern’ (Eshun 2003, 288). These kidnapped Africans were the first to live the modern experience, even as the labour forcibly extracted from them provided the accumulation of wealth to kick-start capitalist modernisation on a global scale,<sup>20</sup> thereby extending this experience to everyone.

Looking to the future, on the other hand, Afrofuturists also conceive liberation in terms derived from science fiction. This involves a radical inversion, in which figures of inhuman oppression and estrangement – figures of aliens and robots – now work as images of escape, via posthuman transfiguration. In contrast to the mainstream Civil Rights movement, which demanded full recognition of the humanity of black people, Afrofuturists equate ‘the human’ *per se* with white supremacy, and with the normative subject positions of white, bourgeois society. Therefore they regard humanity, not as something to be attained, but in Nietzschean fashion as ‘something that must be overcome.’ Through figures ranging from George Clinton’s Starchild to the cybernetic machines of Detroit techno, Afrofuturist musicians construct their own versions of the so-called ‘Singularity,’ in which all-too-human limitations are transcended through new technologies, and by

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<sup>20</sup> The classic account of this process remains that of Eric Williams (1994). The industrial capitalist mode of production, with ‘free’ workers selling their labour power to capitalist owners, would seem to be more or less incompatible with formal slavery. But this does not contradict the claim that accumulations of wealth under slavery were a crucial part of the ‘primitive accumulation’ that capitalism needed in order to take off on a global scale. Nor does it contradict the observation that ‘residual’ pockets of slavery continue to exist today within an overall capitalist economy. For ‘primitive accumulation’ is a recurring and continuing phenomenon of capital accumulation, rather than just a ‘stage’ that would precede the establishment of capitalism *tout court*.

the subsumption of flesh into machines.<sup>21</sup> For Eshun, Afrofuturist music is a 'Postsoul' phenomenon, involving 'a 'webbed network' of computerhythms, machine mythology and conceptronics which routes, reroutes and crisscrosses the Black Atlantic' (Eshun 1998, -6). This music 'alienates itself from the human; it arrives from the future'; it manifests 'an extreme indifference towards the human,' a refusal to understand black experience in traditionally soulful, humanistic terms, since these are seen as implying continued oppression (-5).

Grace Jones's music works through the consequences of this Afrofuturist 'line of flight' from the human, this sense in which 'black existence and science fiction are one and the same' (Eshun 2003, 298). Jones's sound is rooted first of all in disco, which Eshun identifies as 'the moment when Black Music falls from the grace of gospel tradition into the metronymic assembly line' (Eshun 1998, -6). Not only is the disco beat hypnotically precise; but disco vocals, buried deep in the mix and reduced to phrases repeated like mantras, convey a muffled and depersonalised affect.<sup>22</sup> A 1970s disco diva like Donna Summer is already 'Postsoul,' in that her vocal stylings are cool, sublimely distant and (in Simon Reynolds' words) 'curiously unbodied' (Reynolds 1998, 25). But Jones's singing moves several steps beyond this. Her voice is harsh, precise, indifferent and almost scornfully detached; or (to cite Reynolds again) 'simultaneously imperious and fatalistic' (Reynolds 2005, 513). This is the diction of a robot dominatrix. It demands our obedience, without promising us any hope of empathy, intimacy, or identification in return.

All this is audible in Jones's 1985 song 'Slave to the Rhythm.' The music, produced by Trevor Horn, is a strange hybrid: as Reynolds (again)

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<sup>21</sup> Of course, mainstream visions of the Singularity – the most famous of which is probably that propounded by Ray Kurzweil (2005) – are utterly depoliticised, and express little more than adolescent white male power fantasies of infinite potency, and of entrepreneurial accomplishment writ large. I discuss this hegemonic science fiction of the Singularity in a recent essay (Shaviro 2009). Afrofuturist reimaginings of the Singularity, however, transmute it into something crazier and more fantastic, approaching the 'ironic political myth' and skewed utopianism of which Donna Haraway writes (Haraway 1991, 149).

<sup>22</sup> That is to say, they move away from personal emotion and towards an expression of asubjective, unqualified, and intensive affect.

puts it, it ‘started life sounding Germanic, but veered off in a radically (even racially) different direction when welded to the polyrhythmic chassis of go-go’ (Reynolds 2005, 513). That is to say, ‘Slave to the Rhythm’ simultaneously embraces both extremes of the Afrofuturist sound continuum: Kraftwerk-style roboticism on the one hand, and African-derived rhythmic multiplicity on the other. Listening to it is a strange experience, a bit like looking at the famous figure of the duck-rabbit. You can pay attention either to the song’s mechanistic onward thrust, or to the undertow of its polyrhythms; but it is nearly impossible to focus upon both at the same time.

Jones sings ‘Slave to the Rhythm’ without any warmth or soul; her tone is domineering, but cold and uninvolved. She is the stern taskmistress of the dance floor, ruthlessly imposing its despotic rhythm, compelling us to dance. This is entirely appropriate to the song’s lyrics, which equate the ecstasy of dancing with the numbing repetition of work on the assembly line, and trace both of these activities back to the toil of slavery. Disco dancing, industrial labour and working in the fields to harvest cotton or sugar cane all require a strict discipline of the body. An agitated, but precisely articulated, motion must be repeated over and over again, for long hours, without stopping. In this way, work and leisure both respond in the same way to the relentless demands of capital: with a terrible, self-abnegating *jouissance*. The song exhorts us to ‘work all day... never stop the action, keep it up, keep it up.’ The cliché of self-abandonment on the dance floor is thus identical to the command of Taylorist workflow management. We are also told to ‘sing out loud the chain gang song’; this links Jones’s own role as a musical entertainer back through minstrelsy to convict labour, and before that slave labour. The phrase ‘slave to the rhythm’ starts out as a metaphor, but it has been literalised by the end of the song. The same disciplinary rhythm dominates everything, compelling us to move in accord with its beat; we must breathe to it, dance to it, work to it, live to it, love to it. Rhythm isn’t everything; it’s the *only* thing.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Jean-Paul Goude’s music video for the song also deserves commentary. It is a rapid montage of surreal sequences, many of them taken from commercials that Goude made with Jones. There is a strong emphasis on the transformation and

'Corporate Cannibal' explicitly hearkens back to 'Slave to the Rhythm'; the lyrics include a line about being 'slave to the rhythm/ Of the corporate prison.' But the change of context is significant. Jones moves from a vision of hard labour (on both the dance floor and the factory floor) to one of the corporation itself as a malevolent, rapacious entity. Instead of being a dominatrix, now she is a vampire – and not a romantic one, at that. Rather, her cold passion recalls Marx's famous description: 'Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks' (Marx 1992, 342). In 'Corporate Cannibal,' Jones is similarly predatory; she is a force of life-in-death that can never get enough. Her voice is wheedling at first: 'Pleased to meet you/ Pleased to have you on my plate.' But it quickly turns severe, imperative and threatening, as we become aware that 'have you on my plate' is not just a metaphor. Jones informs us, in a calmly menacing voice that barely reaches above a whisper, that she will devour us: 'I'm a man-eating machine... Eat you like an animal... Every man, woman, and child is a target.' As Jones heats up, the song's lyrics absurdly juxtapose the clichés of corporate-speak ('Employer of the year') with those of pulp horror ('Grandmaster of fear'). Jones mockingly embraces the language of neoliberal politicians, to the point of even giving her own version of the Laffer Curve: 'You'll pay less tax but I will gain more back.' The music that accompanies these declarations has an easy, loping backbeat, but with grinding, dissonant guitars shrieking above it: the aural equivalent of an iron fist in a velvet glove. Jones's bottom line in this song is that 'I deal in the market'; she promises that 'I'll consume my consumers.' By the end of the song, Jones's voice has modulated yet again: this time beyond words, into a predatory snarl.

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distortion of Jones' body through various techniques of (analogue, at that time) editing, and on the actual, physical process of producing these distortions. The video even begins with a series of close-ups showing the process of cutting up a photograph of Jones, and then pasting in fragments taken from other copies of the photo, in order to elongate the shape of her face. In this way, 'Slave to the Rhythm' video prefigures, by analogue means, the distortions that 'Corporate Cannibal' produces digitally. The earlier video both displays Jones' body/image as a commodity, and shows the labour required to produce that commodity.

In taking on the role of the ‘Corporate Cannibal,’ Grace Jones expresses an absolute identification with capital itself. This is something that goes well beyond any of her previous demonstrations of mastery. Francesca Royster remarks that ‘a complicating factor of Jones’s art has always been its collaboration with commercialism, even as it comments on that process’ (Royster 2009, 91). But this ‘collaboration’ now reaches a hyperbolic extreme. Jones embodies capital unbound, precisely because she has become a pure electronic pulse. Just as the groundless figures of digital video are no longer tied to any indexical referents, so too the endlessly modulating financial flows of globalised network capitalism are no longer tied to any concrete processes of production. Incessantly leveraged and reinvested, these flows proliferate cancerously – at least until they reach a point of necrosis, or sheer implosion. And just as capital continually devours and accumulates value, transforming its materials into more of itself, so Jones-as-electronic-pulse devours whatever she encounters, converting it into more image, more electronic signal, more of herself. Jones’s electronic modulations track and embrace the transmutations of capital; they express the inner being of a world of hedge funds, currency manipulations, arcane financial instruments, and bad debts passed on from one speculator to the next. Nick Hooker’s video modulations and the worldwide ‘culture of financial circulation’ (LiPuma and Lee 2004, 18ff.) are both driven by the same digital technology.

A lot has changed – politically, socially, economically and technologically – since Grace Jones’s heyday in the late 1970s and early 1980s. ‘Corporate Cannibal’ takes the measure of these changes. The song and the video are terrifying; but they overlay this terror with an exacerbated awareness that ‘inducing terror’ has itself become, after long years of media overexposure, a stereotype or a cliché. Jones has always been an aesthetic and cultural extremist. But ‘Corporate Cannibal’ gives extreme expression to a world in which there are no extremes any longer – since everything can be tweaked or modulated in one way or another, until it finds a niche within which it can be successfully marketed. Jones forces us to confront the fact that even her transgressions of race, sexuality and gender, which so thrilled

us twenty-five years ago, are now little more than clever marketing concepts. Beyond all those enthralling discourses about race and gender and power and ‘the body,’ the only thing that remains ‘transgressive’ today is capital itself, which devours everything without any regard for boundaries, distinctions, or degrees of legitimacy. Postmodern finance capital ‘transgresses’ the very possibility of ‘transgression,’ because it is always only transgressing itself in order to create still more of itself, devouring not only its own tail but its entire body, in order to achieve even greater levels of monstrosity.

Of course, all this has grave consequences for the Afrofuturist project. Without transgression, how can there be transformation or transcendence? In his ‘Further Considerations on Afrofuturism’ (2003), Kodwo Eshun points out how problematic posthuman futurism has become, at a time when the dominant order is itself entirely futuristic and science fictional: ‘power now operates predictively as much as retrospectively. Capital continues to function through the dissimulation of the imperial archive, as it has done throughout the last century. Today, however, power also functions through the envisioning, management and delivery of reliable future. The powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past’ (289). In consequence, the very idea of ‘the future’ seems to have been drained of all hope and all potential. This ‘future’ leaves us blank and numb, even as it arrives in the present and radically changes our lives. In his 1983 film *Videodrome*, David Cronenberg imagined a ‘new flesh’ of visceral video embodiment. This ‘new flesh’ was a source of both wonder and terror, as well as a political battleground: ‘the battle for the mind of North America,’ we were told, ‘will be fought in the video arena – the videodrome.’ But today, Cronenberg’s extreme vision has become a banal actuality: this is the real message of ‘Corporate Cannibal.’ Grace Jones’s modulating electronic flesh is the chronic condition of our hypermodernity, rather than a radical rupture or an acute symptom of change.

In other words, now that the posthuman future once prophesied by Afrofuturism has actually arrived, it no longer works as an escape from the



domination of racism and of capital. Rather, it serves as yet another ‘business scenario’ for capitalism’s own continued expansion. ‘As New Economy ideas take hold,’ Eshun says, ‘virtual futures generate capital. A subtle oscillation between prediction and control is engineered in which successful or powerful descriptions of the future have an increasing ability to draw us towards them, to command us to make them flesh... Science fiction is now a research and development department within a futures industry that dreams of the prediction and control of tomorrow’ (Eshun 2003, 290-291). Capitalism has always depended upon the ever-accelerating extension of *credit*, which is a way of monetising – and therefore appropriating and accumulating – the future itself. In the last twenty years or so, this stockpiling of the future has reached unprecedented levels, thanks to the way that financial instruments like derivatives have objectified and quantified – and thereby ‘priced, sold, and circulated’ – ‘risk’ in general, understood as the sum of all uncertainties about the future (LiPuma and Lee 2004, 148-150 and passim). Today, we have gone so far in this process that (as Marlene Dietrich says to Orson Welles in *Touch of Evil*) our future is all used up. It has already been *premediated* for us: accounted for, counted and discounted, in advance.<sup>24</sup>

Such is the demoralising condition that Grace Jones addresses in ‘Corporate Cannibal.’ Today, capital predicts, controls and stockpiles the

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<sup>24</sup> I take the term *premediation* from Richard Grusin (2004). Needless to say, this does not mean that our future existence has actually been determined for all time, or that the system of capital is so complete, and so totalising, that nothing whatsoever can exist outside of its control. It does mean, however, that there is no *pure* otherness, no gesture or position so radical that it cannot possibly be recuperated. We cannot avoid the risk of recuperation, because every possible change or difference has already been accounted for within capitalism’s own calculus and commodification of ‘risk.’ Our future has been mortgaged – both literally and metaphorically – to high finance. As Deleuze puts it, in the control society ‘a man [sic] is no longer a man confined but a man in debt’ (Deleuze 1995, 181). In consequence, even if we can imagine all sorts of possible futures, we seem unable to imagine one that would really *make a difference*, in terms of our relation to capitalism. As Slavoj Žižek memorably puts it, ‘today it’s much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest change in capitalism’ (Taylor 2005). The desperate vagueness of currently popular Nietzschean, Levinasian, and Derridean invocations of uncertainty, undecidability, and radical alterity seems to me to confirm, and to be symptomatic of, this fundamental failure of imagination. We don’t seem to be able to come up with anything concrete that would be independent of the logic of financial flows.

future – and thereby *uses it up* – through a process of continual modulation. But this is the very process that is at work in the video as well. Jones and Hooker perform a feat of homeopathic magic. They do not claim to escape the mechanisms of the control society; rather, they revel in these mechanisms, and push them as far as possible. Their remedy for the malaise of the digital is a further, and more concentrated, dose of the digital. We usually regard the postmodern or posthuman condition as a weightless play of surfaces, from which all depth has been evacuated. And, depending upon the circumstances, we may find this depthlessness either terrifying or exhilarating. But ‘Corporate Cannibal’ refuses both of these alternatives. Instead, it blasts open the very surface of the world, in a burst of Weird energy.

I use the word ‘Weird’ here advisedly. Jones’s personification of the corporation as a vampiric cannibal is a trope of ‘Weird fiction.’ This term was first used in the 1920s, to characterise the writings of H. P. Lovecraft and other contributors to the pulp journal *Weird Tales*. More recently, it has been taken up by China Miéville (2008), and other writers of what has come to be known as the ‘New Weird’ (VanderMeer and VanderMeer, 2008). In both its earlier and more recent incarnations, the Weird conveys a sense of intense anxiety and dislocation, with its ‘insistence on a chaotic, amoral, anthropoperipheral universe’ that is radically unfamiliar and irrecuperable, not to be assigned any sense or meaning (Miéville 2008, 112). At the same time, Weird expression often feels slightly hokey or forced, because it renders something that cannot be described literally and precisely, but only evoked vaguely and incoherently. Miéville associates the Weird of the early twentieth century with ‘the crisis tendencies of capitalism [that] would ultimately lead to World War I (to the representation of which traditional bogeys were quite inadequate)’ (111). He suggests that the New Weird of our present moment responds to ‘the advent of the neoliberal *There Is No Alternative*,’ for which ‘the universe [i]s an ineluctable, inhuman, implacable, Weird, place’ (128).

‘I’ll make you scrounge/ In my executive lounge [...] I’ll consume my consumers/ With no sense of humor’: Grace Jones identifies her persona with

the alien monstrosity of Capital, and with its barbaric (but slightly tacky) glamour. In so doing, she channels and conducts, condenses and conjures, the maleficent forces that stand against us in this time of crisis. Such forces are omnipresent, yet impalpable; she makes them visible, audible and tangible. 'I'll make the world explode.' Jones renews the Afrofuturist project by turning it inside out, even at the point of its last extremity. More than this we cannot ask of any artist. The dangerous modulations of 'Corporate Cannibal' give voice and image to the vertiginous 'globalised network society' that we live in today.

### *Boarding Gate*

Olivier Assayas' 2007 film *Boarding Gate* is a delirious thriller about sex and lust and murder, money and business, drugs and designer clothes, and international finance. Assayas describes the film as part of a loose trilogy that also includes his earlier works *Demonlover* (2002) and *Clean* (2004) (Hillis 2008). All three of these films focus on female protagonists; all are concerned with transnational flows of both people and money, and with cultural exchanges between East and West; and all make extensive use of B-movie plot devices and motifs. But in other respects, these films are quite different from one another. *Clean* is the only one of the three that features a conventional linear narrative, as it follows the efforts of its protagonist Emily (Maggie Cheung) to shake off heroin addiction and regain custody of her son. The other two films, in contrast, are convoluted and circuitous thrillers, with menacing, uncertain endings. *Demonlover* and *Boarding Gate* are both organised, as Claire Perkins puts it, around 'a narrative fissure by which the film spirals into a rhetorical puzzle' (Perkins 2009, 4). In both films, linear causality and narrative logic break down, resulting in an impasse that itself becomes the main focus of the narrative. By foregrounding these disruptions, *Demonlover* and *Boarding Gate* shock us into a heightened awareness of the new configurations of social and narrative space that have emerged in the last thirty years or so, along with the rise of digital technologies, and with the post-Fordist, neoliberal reorganisation of capitalism. Assayas' avowed aim of 'being in touch with

the world as it is' leads him to reject what he regards as 'a whole world of very conventional storytelling that ends up being [called] sophisticated, highbrow arthouse cinema,' and instead 'to make a movie that ha[s] a kind of roughness and [i]s not scared of occasionally being over the top' (Hillis 2008).

Despite their pulp, B-movie ambitions, however, *Boarding Gate* and *Demonlover* both remain unavoidably 'difficult' films. That is because their aim is to explore, in depth, what Fredric Jameson calls 'the bewildering new world space of late or multinational capital' (Jameson 1991, 6). This is something that cannot be done easily or directly. For as Jameson insists, the 'global world system' is strictly speaking 'unrepresentable,' since its flows and metamorphoses continually elude our 'existential' grasp (53). It is necessary instead to proceed by abstraction: to 'diagram' the space of globalised capital, by entering into, and forging a path through, its complex web of exchanges, displacements and transfers. Assayas' ambition is therefore cartographical, rather than mimetic. The narratives of *Demonlover* and *Boarding Gate* are unavoidably fractured and fragmented, because the space they explore is non-Euclidean, and not cut to human measure. Assayas surveys the abstract landscape of capital piece-by-piece and step-by-step, drawing his camera from one scene into another, building up relations and tracking equivalences.

To put this in another way: Assayas' filmmaking responds to a crucial paradox, or to what we might even call a fundamental Antinomy of neoliberal globalisation. The space of transnational capital is at the same time extremely abstract, and yet suffocatingly close and intimate. On the one hand, it is so abstract as to be entirely invisible, inaudible and intangible. We cannot actually 'see' or 'feel' the virtual 'space of flows' (Castells 2000, 407-459) within which we are immersed. For this space is a relational one, largely composed of, and largely shaped by, the arcane financial instruments and other transfers of 'information' that circulate through it. These instruments and flows, and the transactions in the course of which they are exchanged, cannot be 'represented' in any form accessible to the human senses; they can only be defined computationally, as the terms of utility

functions and partial differential equations. Assayas' difficult task, therefore, is to translate (or, more precisely, to *transduce*) the impalpable flows and forces of finance into images and sounds that we can apprehend on the screen. His aesthetic problem is the same one that Deleuze ascribes to Francis Bacon: 'How can one make invisible forces visible?' (Deleuze 2005, 41; we could also add, audible). Certainly the *effects* of these forces are concrete enough, and susceptible to representation: they range from manic construction booms in big cities to the catastrophic collapse of entire national economies. But Assayas seeks 'to render visible these invisible forces' themselves (Deleuze 2005, 43) – in addition to their more readily evident consequences.

If this can be accomplished, it is thanks to the other side of the Antinomy that I have been describing. For at the same time that the space of global capital is abstract, it is also overwhelmingly proximate, and hyperbolically present. It is a 'tactile space' (Deleuze 1986, 109), or an 'audile-tactile' one (McLuhan 1994, 45) – in contrast to the more familiar visual space of Cartesian coordinates and Renaissance perspective. Visual space is empty, extended and homogeneous: a mere container for objects located at fixed points within it. But audile-tactile electronic space 'is constituted of resonant intervals, dynamic relationships, and kinetic pressure' (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988, 35), and constructed out of 'intercalated elements, intervals, and articulations of superposition' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 329). Such a space is a heterogeneous patchwork, continually being curved and folded and stretched. It is traversed by 'densifications, intensifications, reinforcements, injections, showerings' and other such processes (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 328). Movement through this space is therefore not smooth and continuous, but abrupt, nonlinear, discontinuous and discrete. Tactile space has 'lost its homogeneity,' Deleuze says, and 'left behind its own co-ordinates and its metric relations' (Deleuze 1986, 108-109). In consequence, it must be apprehended – and indeed, it can *only* be apprehended – bit by bit, 'fragment by fragment,' and from moment to moment, through the constructive action of 'linking' one space to another, materially feeling one's way from one space to another (Deleuze 1986, 108-

109).<sup>25</sup> Such spatial links are not given in advance; they must be created in real time, through the motions of Assayas' camera, in the same way that they are created by 'just-in-time' investments of capital.

In order to explore this space of flows, to accurately render both its abstraction and its tactility, and thereby to cleave to the Real of global capital, Assayas is obliged to abandon Bazinian realism, with its long shots, its 'composition in depth' (Bazin 2004, 34), and its objective points of view. The reason for this is ontological. Bazin divides the filmmakers of the years 1920 to 1940 between 'those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality' (24). Bazin of course champions the latter, and disparages the former; and he sees the increased use of sequence shots and depth of focus in the years following 1940 as marking the definitive triumph of realism over image-based aestheticism. But much has changed in the half century since Bazin's death. The very opposition between reality-based and image-based modes of presentation breaks down in the contemporary world of electronic media and global capital. Today, the most vivid and intense reality is precisely the reality of images. These images are displayed on screens of all sizes, all around us; and, as McLuhan says, they tend to 'require participation in depth' (McLuhan 1994, 31). That is to say, they tend to be haptic rather than merely optical; and they are fully imbued with glutinous and tactile qualities. In such a world, it is only by putting his faith in the image that Assayas can express his faith in reality. It is only

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<sup>25</sup> In the passage I cite, Deleuze is actually describing the construction of space in the Longchamp and Gare de Lyon sequences of Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket*, in which 'the hand ends up assuming the directing function...dethroning the face... vast fragmented spaces [are] transformed through rhythmic continuity shots which correspond to the affects of the thief. Ruin and salvation are played on an amorphous table whose successive parts await the connection which they lack from our gestures, or rather from the mind' (Deleuze 1986, 108-109). The situation in Assayas' films is somewhat different, since in the world of transnational capital neither human gestures nor actions of 'the mind' are able to track, much less create, the connections that link fragmented spaces together. These connections are no longer forged by human bodies acting directly, but rather operated by means of digital technologies of computation and communication. Ruin and salvation are still very much at stake in Assayas' films; but these outcomes are themselves digital and 'machinic.' They no longer seem to have any relation either to individual initiative, or to spiritual faith. These changes are also correlated with recent changes in the nature of what Deleuze calls *any-space-whatevers*; I discuss these latter changes below.

through a delirious aestheticism, and by embracing the artifice of images and sounds, that his movies are able to ‘relate physically with an audience,’ and thereby actualise their extreme abstractions. Such a ‘relationship to physicality,’ Assayas says, is ‘what is missing today from arthouse cinema’ – although horror films have it in abundance (Hillis 2008).<sup>26</sup>

In response to the double imperative of abstraction and tactility, Assayas makes films that are at the same time inhuman in their icy distance, and yet intimate, visceral and creepy, in the way that they offer us vulnerable body-images, and organise themselves around microperceptions of corporeal affect. In this sense, *Demonlover* and *Boarding Gate* are both ironically humanistic narratives of ‘how we became posthuman’ (Hayles 1999). Or, to put the same point slightly differently, they both attempt to render post-cinematic affects and modes of being, but in a manner that itself remains cinematic. This is Assayas’ way of responding to the anxiety so many cinephiles and film theorists have felt in recent years about the advent of post-cinematic, electronic media. Vivian Sobchack compellingly argues, for instance, that electronic media ‘engage [their] spectators and ‘users’ in a phenomenological structure of sensual and psychological experience that, in comparison with the cinematic, seems so diffused as to belong to *no-body*... the electronic is phenomenologically experienced not as a discrete, intentional, body-centred mediation and projection in space but rather as a simultaneous, dispersed and insubstantial transmission across a network or web that is constituted spatially more as a materially flimsy latticework of nodal points than as the stable ground of embodied experience’ (Sobchack 2004, 152, 154). But Assayas’ paradoxical aim is precisely to render, in embodied, ‘cinematic’ terms, this post-cinematic regime of dispersed or disembodied experience, whose phenomenology Sobchack so aptly describes. Where Sobchack – much like David Rodowick (2007) – laments the way that ‘the techno-logic of the electronic’ has displaced ‘the residual logic of the cinematic,’ leading to a ‘material and technological crisis of the flesh’ (Sobchack 2004, 161), Assayas rather heeds Deleuze’s suggestion that, in a

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<sup>26</sup> I further discuss the dilemmas of Bazinian realism in the digital age in my article ‘Emotion Capture’ (Shaviro 2007).

time of radically new social and technological forms, 'it's not a question of worrying or of hoping for the best, but of finding new weapons' (Deleuze 1995, 178).

*Demonlover* and *Boarding Gate* are united by the project of finding visible, audible, fully embodied, *cinematic* expression for the impalpable forces conducted by post-cinematic media. However, although the two films share a common goal and a common style, they actually *feel* quite different from one another. *Boarding Gate* is more existential than *Demonlover*, and more fully embodied. Where *Demonlover* narrates the dissolution of the 'humanist' subject in flows of virtual, abject, posthuman *jouissance*, *Boarding Gate* is rather concerned with what it takes to resist such a dissolution, to survive in the midst of such flows. Assayas himself says that '*Boarding Gate* is a much less theoretical movie. *Demonlover* was like a manifesto or something. It's the one movie I've made that is very much about ideas. [*Boarding Gate*] takes place in the world that *Demonlover* defined, except these are two flesh-and-blood characters...It's much more simple and straightforward in its own way' (Hillis 2008).

*Demonlover*, the more 'theoretical' of the two films, envisions the postmodern world as an enormous pornographic video game, with proliferating fractal levels and self-reflexive feedback loops. Every space contains another space within it, and turns out to be itself contained within yet another space. The film's locations, in both physical space and cyberspace, are something like what Deleuze calls *open boxes* (Deleuze 1972, 105-110). Each space has its own particular content; but this content turns out to be the container, or the medium, for some other, radically different content. The film thus fleshes out McLuhan's observation that 'the 'content' of any medium is always another medium' (McLuhan 1994, 8). In *Demonlover*, money flows through pornographic video images, which themselves work as incitations to rape and murder. Corporate offices are portals to bondage dungeons, whose scenarios are streamed live on the Net. Multiple spaces at multiple levels communicate with one another precisely by virtue of the 'gap between content and container... the inadequacy [or] the incommensurability of the content' (Deleuze 1972, 108). Rather than



separating the actual from the virtual, the film works towards what Deleuze calls their *indiscernibility*, so that they change places, again and again, ‘in a relation which we must describe as reciprocal presupposition, or reversibility’ (Deleuze 1989, 69).

There’s plenty of action within the labyrinthine passages of *Demonlover*, but it all leads to a dead end of stasis, imprisonment and bondage. Not only does the film present a story of duelling corporations seeking to dominate the online porn market; but the corporate intrigue thus portrayed is itself structured like a pornographic video game. *Demonlover* gives us a world in which – as McKenzie Wark puts it, writing of the ways that the logic of gaming has proliferated throughout postmodern social space – ‘the game has not just colonised reality, it is also the sole remaining ideal... Everything is evacuated from an empty space and time which now appears natural, neutral, and without qualities – a gamespace... Every action is just a means to an end. All that counts is the score’ (Wark 2007, 8). In the world of *Demonlover*, individuals are exclusively defined by their place in the game, or by their running score – which is also their spot on the corporate ladder. The competition is unremitting and ruthless. We are always compelled to play for the highest stakes – and we always end up being the losers.

In contrast, *Boarding Gate* presents the world of global capitalism as a loose ensemble of lateral connections among contiguous but separate spaces. In the course of the film, the protagonist Sandra (Asia Argento) moves between corporate offices, loading docks, airports, swank condos, sweatshops, shopping malls, nightclubs, latrines and workrooms filled with computing equipment. She flees from the outskirts of Paris to Hong Kong; and by the end of the film, she is ready to move on to Shanghai. Some of the spaces through which Sandra passes are nearly empty, and others are filled with crowds. Some of them are run down, and some are luxurious. But none of them is home; none of them is a place where Sandra might be able to stop for a moment and take a breath – let alone a place where she might actually feel that she *belongs*. Rather, all these places seem to have a built-in air of transience. They evince the sleek, functional anonymity of what the

anthropologist Marc Augé calls ‘non-places,’ demarcating ‘a world where people are born in the clinic and die in hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions... where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces is developing; where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce’ (Augé 1995, 78). In *Boarding Gate*, these locations are more than just background. They seem, if anything, to play a more active role in the narrative than do most of the people who pass desultorily through them. The whole film revolves around the way that these non-places are so vividly tactile, and yet at the same time so oddly empty and ‘without qualities.’

Augé’s non-places are also what Deleuze, in his first *Cinema* volume, calls *any-space-whatevers* (Deleuze 1986, 109, 111-122).<sup>27</sup> Such spaces are ‘*deconnected*,’ Deleuze says (120). This isolation, or decontextualisation, can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, any-space-whatevers are ‘defined by parts whose linking up and orientation are not determined in advance, and can be done in an infinite number of ways’ (120). As in what Deleuze elsewhere calls a rhizome, ‘any point...can be connected to any other [point], and must be’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7).<sup>28</sup> But on the other hand, an any-space-whatever can also be understood as ‘an amorphous set which has eliminated that which happened and acted in it... a collection of locations or positions which coexist independently of the temporal order which moves from one part to the other, independently of the connections and orientations which the vanished characters and situations gave to them’ (Deleuze 1986, 120). In both cases, any-space-whatevers are indeterminate; they are places of ‘pure potential’ without actualisation

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<sup>27</sup> Deleuze does not mention Marc Augé, but refers the concept of *any-space-whatever* (*espace quelconque*) to one (otherwise largely unknown) Pascal Augé (Deleuze 1986, 109 and 122). Charles Stivale (2006) discusses this confusion, and suggests that ‘Pascal’ may have been Deleuze’s slip for ‘Marc.’ However, Stivale also includes an email from Les Roberts claiming that the name ‘Pascal’ is in fact correct, and that Marc Augé had nothing to do with Deleuze’s formulation. Be that as it may, the link between Deleuze’s *espace quelconque* and Augé’s *non-lieu* has entered the literature, as Stivale shows.

<sup>28</sup> Translation slightly modified.

(120). But in the first case the ‘disconnection’ is spatial, while in the second case it is temporal. Under either description, these spaces are so articulated that you can move from any one of them, to any other, and then yet another, without ever arriving at a final destination. As always in the control society, ‘you never finish anything,’ but just suffer a series of ‘endless postponement[s],’ as the same problems and conflicts are relayed from one space to the next, without ever being resolved (Deleuze 1995, 179).

Deleuze associates any-space-whatevers with a certain project of modernist abstraction; he discusses the use of these spaces in Rossellini and Bresson, in the films of the French New Wave, and in the experimental cinema of Michael Snow and Marguerite Duras (Deleuze 1986, 121-122). For all these artists, the emptying-out of habitual connections and associations breaks down the established order, and allows new forces of invention to emerge. But even if such an oppositional role for art was plausible in the mid-twentieth-century, it is no longer so today. In the twenty-first-century world we live in, the world of *Boarding Gate*, any-space-whatevers have spread beyond the ‘undifferentiated urban tissue [with] its vast unused places, docks, warehouses, heaps of girders and scrap iron’ evoked by Deleuze (1986, 120), to include as well all those glittering new high-rise constructions and architectural fantasias fuelled by economic speculation. As Manuel Castells observes, postmodern business centres are characterised by a strange ‘architectural uniformity... Paradoxically, the attempt by postmodern architecture to break the molds and patterns of architectural discipline has resulted in an overimposed postmodern monumentality which became the generalised rule of new corporate headquarters from New York to Kaoshiung during the 1980s,’ and which has only spread further since. The result is that ‘architecture escapes from the history and culture of each society and becomes captured into the new imaginary, wonderland world of unlimited possibilities...as if we could reinvent all forms in any place, on the sole condition of leaping into the cultural indefinition of the flows of power’ (Castells 2000, 448).

This means that the ‘disconnection’ and blankness of urban spaces is as much a result of intensive capital investment, as it is of capital flight. The

ruins of old Detroit, and the new business towers and luxury hotels of Shanghai and Dubai, are two sides of the same coin.<sup>29</sup> In consequence, the powers of invention that emerge from these disconnected spaces can no longer be claimed by an oppositional, heroic modernism. The emergence of ‘communicative capitalism’ (Dean 2005), or ‘cognitive capitalism’ (Moulier Boutang 2007), has led to a mutation in the relation between the virtual and the actual. An any-space-whatever, Deleuze says, is a space of pure virtuality: it ‘shows only pure Powers and Qualities, independently of the states of things or milieux which actualize them’ (Deleuze 1986, 120). And historically, the extraction of surplus value has involved an actualisation of the virtual, whether in the form of the conversion of the open potentiality of labour into the quantifiable, commodified abstraction of ‘labor-power’ (Marx 1992, 270ff.), or in that of the ‘valorization of value’ in the ‘constantly renewed movement’ of the circulation of commodities (Marx 1992, 253). Unactualised Powers and Qualities would thus seem to be immune to exploitation; an art that reverts from the actual to the virtual, through what Deleuze calls *counter-actualisation* (Deleuze 1990, 150-153), would seem thereby to resist the depredations of capitalism.<sup>30</sup>

But in recent years, these unalloyed Powers and Qualities have themselves increasingly been subsumed by capital, and put to work. The ‘unlimited possibilities’ arising from ‘cultural indefiniteness’ are continually

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<sup>29</sup> And in a period of economic crisis, the transformation of frenetically active business centers into decrepit urban ruins can be almost instantaneous. Simon Jenkins (2009) describes one such transformation, as the global crisis of 2008-2009 puts a halt to extravagant building projects in Dubai. Jenkins explicitly compares the hypermodern, half-built or soon-to-be-abandoned, future ruins of Dubai to the past ruins of Detroit.

<sup>30</sup> There is a hidden affinity between the aesthetics of Deleuze and of Adorno. For both thinkers, the authentic work of art resists an otherwise ubiquitous culture of commodification, by virtue of its force of negativity (Adorno) or of counter-actualisation (Deleuze). Deleuze’s account of how modernist art works to ‘prevent the full actualization’ of the event to which it responds (Deleuze 1990, 159), and to reverse ‘the techniques of social alienation’ into ‘revolutionary means of exploration’ (161), echoes Adorno’s insistence that it is ‘only by virtue of the absolute negativity of collapse’ that art can ‘enunciate the unspeakable: utopia’ (Adorno 1997, 32). For both thinkers, and despite their radical differences in vocabulary, art restores potentiality by *derealising* the actual. The question that haunts aesthetics today is whether such strategies of derealisation are still practicable, in a time when negation and counter-actualisation have themselves become resources for the extraction of surplus value.

being harvested as new sources of profit. Today, surplus value is not only extracted from the virtual by means of its actualisation; the inverse process takes place as well. Value is also captured when space is ‘deconnected,’ so that the virtual event may be extracted from the state of affairs that incarnates it. Corporations value nothing more than innovation; and they increasingly commodify and market pure virtualities, in the form of events, experiences, moods, memories, hopes and desires. For this purpose, they construct and colonise any-space-whatevers, whose very vagueness works to insinuate an expectation that anything can happen. Such is our post-cinematic condition: the fantasies that used to be manufactured specifically by the movies can now be found more or less everywhere. This is why Assayas, for all his daring, seems to be making films under a sort of constraint. In an age of ubiquitous recuperation, he cannot hope to display anything like the exuberance, caprice and freedom of invention of his predecessors in the French New Wave.

In *Boarding Gate*, despite the blankness – and hence the similarity – of the any-space-whatevers through which the camera and the protagonist roam, these spaces are nonetheless all detached from one another. They never intermingle. Each of them seems self-contained, self-reflexive and monadic. Flows of goods, people, money and data pass continually through them, moving restlessly from one to another – but without ever leaving any traces behind. Whenever you cross over to a new space, you completely lose touch with the old one. Sandra suffers a break in continuity when she shifts locales; her legal identity is totally made over in the course of the film. It’s not that she herself has become a different person; but whenever she moves, she has to get rid of the markers of her social identity – most notably, her mobile phone and her credit cards – and pick up new ones instead. The spaces that Sandra moves through are something like what Deleuze calls *sealed vessels*: they are separate universes, each with its own concerns and coordinates. They only communicate with one another indirectly, by means of ‘*transversals...from one world to another...without ever reducing the many to the One, without ever gathering up the multiple into a whole*’ (Deleuze 1972, 112). A transversal flow of bodies, goods, or money can cross

from any space to any other; but there is no permanent record of these crossings. There is no place for a synoptic overview, no Archimedean point from which it might be possible to grasp all the spaces at once.<sup>31</sup>

Precisely because the world of *Boarding Gate* is a patchwork of local spaces that are ‘without qualities,’ and yet sealed off from one another, traditional qualitative and categorical distinctions tend to break down. In the emptiness and pure potentiality of any-space-whatevers, anything can be traded for anything else. The homogeneity of all the containers ensures the translatability of all their contents. Throughout the film, the camera continues to rove nervously back and forth through the space on screen, regardless of whether it is photographing a murder or a business deal, people at work or people going shopping or people running in terror. In this world, everything is interchangeable, or at least exchangeable: sex, money, drugs, business trade secrets, personal identities and clothing and other consumer goods. Even human actions, qualities and feelings are subject to promiscuous exchange. Everything flows through the conduits of international air travel, electronic transfers, mobile phone calls and shipping in cargo containers. Everything is a potential medium of exchange, a mode of payment for something else. And all these exchanges are regulated, not by law, but by contract: import-export contracts, murder contracts, prostitution contracts and BDSM contracts.

The world of *Boarding Gate* is therefore organised around such activities as prostitution, drug dealing and murder for hire. These are all forms of freelance work under contract. And Sandra, the protagonist of *Boarding Gate*, engages in all three of them over the course of the film. She

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<sup>31</sup> This is precisely why, as Jameson argues, the ‘world space’ of transnational capital cannot be represented. In proposing that this irreducibly plural and unintuitable space can nonetheless be *mapped* in terms of ‘open boxes’ and ‘sealed vessels,’ I am hijacking a schema that Deleuze introduces in entirely different circumstances. For open boxes and sealed vessels are the two correlative forms of organisation that Deleuze discerns in Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* (Deleuze 1972, 103-115). I am undoubtedly doing a certain degree of violence to Deleuze’s schema when I transfer it from Proust’s early-20th-century modernist novel to Assayas’ early-21st-century postmodernist film. However, my implicit argument here is that Deleuze (who detested the term ‘postmodern’) nonetheless generally tends to characterise modernism and modernity in ways that actually apply better to more recent social and cultural formations.

runs drugs as a lucrative sideline of her work for an import/export company; she does a contract killing in the hope that it will help her to escape from a situation in which she feels trapped. And of course, she uses her body as a medium of exchange – as women are so often compelled to do. Though prostitution is stereotypically regarded as the ‘oldest profession,’ Assayas suggests that it as a crucial motor and *sine qua non* of what we think of today as the ‘new economy.’ Prostitution both constitutes human intimacy as a commercial transaction, and smoothes the way for other sorts of commercial transactions. In the backstory of *Boarding Gate*, Sandra earns her keep from her businessman lover Miles (Michael Madsen) by fucking his clients. She then reports back to him, both on what they did in bed, and on whatever information about their business ventures they might have inadvertently revealed. It is unclear whether her knowledge about their sexual habits is ever actually used for blackmail, or whether the information she gathers about their business is really of any commercial value to Miles. But the process clearly greases the wheels of commerce, and helps to seal the deals that Miles has made. It also evidently turns on both Sandra and Miles: an excitement for which he pays her well.

Assayas thus presents ‘service industries’ like prostitution, drug dealing, and murder for hire as quintessential examples of the ‘affective labour,’ or ‘immaterial labour,’ that – as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue – is central to contemporary capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2001, 289-294). Affective or immaterial labour is any sort of ‘labour that creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response’ (Hardt and Negri 2004, 108). And such labour has come to have an increasingly crucial role in the organisation of neoliberal, globalised capitalism. As Hardt and Negri put it, ‘what affective labor produces are social networks, forms of community, biopower... the instrumental action of economic production has been united with the communicative action of human relations’ (2001, 293). Instead of seeing the economy as embedded in different sorts of social, cultural and political institutions and practices, we must now see all forms of society, culture and politics as themselves embedded within the matrix of the (so-called) ‘free

market.’ There is no longer any way to distinguish between work and leisure, or between economic activities and other aspects of human life. The predominance of affective labour means that we have moved to what Marx calls the *real subsumption* of labour under capital, as opposed to its merely formal subsumption (Marx 1992, 1019-1038).<sup>32</sup>

I can state the same point in a different way. Affective labour, under the regime of real subsumption, conflates production and circulation. In *Capital*, Marx distinguishes between the fundamental process of production proper, in the course of which surplus value is extracted from living labour; and the secondary, external process of circulation, in the course of which this surplus value is ‘realised’ through the sale of the produced commodities. But the circulation process is entropic and inefficient. Some surplus value is unavoidably lost as a result of what Marx calls the *‘faux frais’* of bringing the product to market and supervising its distribution. Under the conditions

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<sup>32</sup> The difference between formal and real subsumption is that, in the former case, pre-capitalist or non-capitalist forms of labour, and of socialisation, continue to exist – even though their products or outputs are appropriated by capital, so that surplus value may be extracted from them. In contrast, in the case of real subsumption, all aspects of the labour process and of social life are themselves directly ‘rationalized’ according to capitalist imperatives. In such a situation, ‘all of nature has become capital, or at least has been subject to capital’ (Hardt and Negri 2001, 272). The capitalist system no longer has an ‘outside.’ Foucault makes a related point (even though he never uses the term *real subsumption*) when he discusses how neoliberalism reverses the traditional relation between the economy and the State. Where traditional liberalism called on the State to regulate, and insure the fair functioning of, the market, neoliberalism instead ‘asks the market economy itself to be the principle, not of the state’s limitation, but of its internal regulation from start to finish of its existence and action. In other words, instead of accepting a free market defined by the state and kept as it were under state supervision...the [neo]liberals say we should completely turn the formula around and adopt the free market as organizing and regulating principle of the state... In other words: a state under the supervision of the market rather than a market supervised by the state’ (Foucault 2008, 116). State functions are not just managed in the interests of capital, but are themselves directly organised according to market principles and imperatives. I follow Hardt and Negri (2001, 254-256) in arguing that, in globalised, post-Fordist capitalism, real subsumption has largely displaced formal subsumption. However – somewhat in contrast to Hardt and Negri – I think that real subsumption is best understood as a continuing *tendency*, rather than as a finally attained state. For capitalism always needs to expand. It will stagnate if it cannot discover new ‘outsides’: new sources of labour to exploit, new sources of raw materials to appropriate, and new markets in which to sell its goods. There is always still some remainder, some aspect of human life or of the world, some reservoir of subjectivity or objectivity, that has not yet been appropriated by capital in the ongoing process of ‘primitive accumulation.’



of real subsumption, however, circulation is no longer external to production. Surplus value can be now extracted at all points of the value chain. As Jonathan Beller puts it, today ‘the circulation of capital’ must itself be ‘grasped simultaneously as productive and exploitative’ (Beller 2006, 115). Production and circulation have become indistinguishable. The very performance of affective or immaterial labour is already an exchange in which value is, all at once, produced, realised and consumed.<sup>33</sup>

Under such conditions, passion is indistinguishable from economic calculation, and our inner lives are as thoroughly monetised and commodified as our outward possessions. Libidinal flows are coextensive with financial ones. We manage our personal lives in the same way that businessmen manage the enterprises that they control. The same strategy, the same ‘art of war,’ the same calculus of risks, may be applied to erotic conquests and to corporate takeovers. At one point in *Boarding Gate*, Sandra taunts Miles by citing an article in an online business publication that ridicules his failed financial schemes, and calls him ‘the perfect cliché of bygone times.’ Sandra uses this appellation so that it refers to Miles’ erotic life as well as his financial one. In both realms, he is outdated, he has missed his peak, and he has seen his opportunities vanish. Sandra tells Miles that he suffers from performance problems: he always gets harder planning an erotic or business move than he does when he actually tries to carry it out.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> For Marx, the secrets of the valorisation of capital, and of the exploitation of labour, can only be unveiled when we ‘leave this noisy sphere [of circulation], where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone, and follow them into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice ‘No admittance except on business’’ (Marx 1992, 279-280). But affective labour – a category that includes film acting – is productive only to the extent that it is a public *performance*. It cannot unfold in the hidden depths; it must be visible and audible. We see it displayed right in front of us, both in ‘real life’ and on the screen.

<sup>34</sup> The society of real subsumption is one in which something like Gary Becker’s neoliberal vision of society has largely been actualised. Becker regards all aspects of intimate and personal life as ‘markets’ for the investment of ‘personal capital’ (Becker 1978). One’s choice of a life partner is, for instance, a business decision, an investment made in the hope of maximising future earnings. Drug addiction, crime, racism, and so on, are all explained by Becker as rational choices made in order to maximise utility, or to get the best possible returns on one’s self-investment. As Foucault puts it, Becker defines ‘*homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings’

Of course, just because affective or immaterial labour predominates under transnational capitalism, this does not mean that the physical labour of industrial manufacturing has somehow ceased to exist. It continues, more relentlessly than ever – even if it is cybernetically regulated, and hidden away from our affluent eyes. Physical, manufacturing labour and affective or ‘symbolic’ labour, are not opposed. Rather, they are located at different points along a continuum – or better, along the value chain. Material goods and intangible goods equally rely, for their production, upon the exploitation of labour for hire; they both equally take the form of commodities; and they are both continually being exchanged against one another. The gangsters and power brokers of *Boarding Gate* are involved in all sorts of shady financial dealings, often enforced at gunpoint; but they also own factories in China that manufacture clothes cheaply for transformation into expensive ‘designer label’ goods in the West. As Sandra moves, in the course of the film, from one ‘sealed vessel’ to another, she is really being displaced along the value chain. In the first part of the film, she oversees a port facility in France where imported goods are unloaded from cargo containers. But later, as she flees for her life in Hong Kong, she weaves her way among sweatshops hidden in nondescript warehouse buildings overlooking busy streets.

Assayas gives us a sensuous, almost tactile, sense of this world of real subsumption, with its radical abstractions, its play of universal equivalences, and its ubiquitous commodification. Everything is shot in what J. Hoberman is not wrong to call a ‘jagged yet posh faux-vérité style’ (Hoberman 2008).<sup>35</sup>

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(Foucault 2008, 226). This means that consumption is, itself, really just another form of production: ‘The man of consumption, insofar as he consumes, is a producer. What does he produce? Well, quite simply, he produces his own satisfaction’ (Foucault 2008, 226). Fredric Jameson similarly emphasises that Becker’s neoliberal vision ‘is in reality a production model’ (Jameson 1991, 267). For Jameson, ‘Becker’s model seems to me impeccable and very faithful indeed to the facts of life as we know it’ under late capitalism; it is only ‘when it becomes prescriptive’ that it leads to ‘the most insidious forms of reaction’ (269).

<sup>35</sup> Hoberman does not much like *Boarding Gate*, and does not really ‘get’ the film as all; but his description of its style is more or less accurate, as long as we take it in a more positive sense than he intended. We might also say, as Claire Perkins does, paraphrasing Jonathan Romney, that the film ‘updates the notion of the *cinéma du look* – that term used in a mostly disparaging sense by critics to describe

The film is set in Paris and Hong Kong; but also in airplanes flying from one city to the other, and in cars, cabs and limos moving down the streets and highways of both cities and their suburbs. The dialogue is mostly in English, but there are conversations in French and Cantonese as well. The camera floats hypnotically through all of the film's non-places, which always seem tangibly luscious, and yet oddly distanced at the same time. It's like being at an extremely upscale mall, where everything is beautifully arranged, and almost crying out for sensuous contact and absorption. Yet such contact turns out to be impossible. Everything is just a spectacular, empty display. There's nothing that one could actually make use of, or interact with. The *mise-en-scène* of *Boarding Gate* virtually screams: *look, but don't touch*.

There are few still shots in *Boarding Gate*. The camera is always restlessly moving, zooming in and out, reframing, panning laterally and horizontally. Sometimes it circles back on itself, or nervously turns left and right. Nearly everything appears in shallow focus. Rack focus shifts are frequent; they are often used – in place of shot/reverse shot alternations – for moving back and forth between the two speakers in a dialogue. Throughout the film, there are planes that remain blurry, before or behind whatever layer the camera is focused clearly upon. Everything seems to come in layers: glass, machinery, moving crowds. We see layers through the blurs or transparency of other layers. Everything is immaculate, and tastefully patterned: even blood pooling on the floor after a murder, and even the toilet bowl into which Sandra pukes after witnessing (or performing) such violence. The decor, and the camerawork that presents it to us, are not exactly numbing, even if they are distanced: there is always a sense of cold fever, of icy delirium. This is epitomised by, but not restricted to, the ritzy Hong Kong nightclub with dazzling disco lights that Sandra comes to at a late point in the film, where somebody is equally likely to thrust a karaoke microphone in your face or to spike your drink.

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a strain of 1980s French cinema whose spectacular visual style and perceived lack of ideological depth is understood as something directly influenced by media including television, music video and advertising' (Perkins 2009, 1). Assayas 'redeems' the *cinéma du look*, as it were, by explicitly turning it back upon its own unacknowledged presuppositions.

The narrative of *Boarding Gate* is generic or genre-specific: the genre in question being what's best described as the slick Eurotrash thriller, with equal parts glamour and sleaze, paranoia and crass calculation.<sup>36</sup> This genre tends to emphasise surface appearances over deep meanings, and action thrills over plot logic and narrative closure. And Assayas is only too happy to play along; he even raises the stakes, with a series of wild inventions. *Boarding Gate* is filled with what Manohla Dargis, in her lovely review of the movie, calls its 'moment[s] of delirium in what has become an increasingly unhinged enterprise,' such as when 'Kim Gordon...shows up, barking orders in Cantonese' (Dargis 2008). *Boarding Gate* actively calls attention to its digressions and non-sequiturs. The film has its share of shootouts and tense escape/chase moments; but it also has 10-minute-long dialogue sequences in which ex-lovers argue fruitlessly about the nature of their dead relationship. The fragmentation, the irresolution, the continual switching back and forth between moments or sequences that are plot-driven, and ones that are instead purely affect-driven, the insistence that genre conventions and expectations can neither be transcended and escaped, nor fulfilled: all these features of *Boarding Gate* reflect – or better, work towards, and help to construct the vision of – a world that is too complex and far-flung to be totalised on the level of any grand narrative (paranoid/conspiratorial or otherwise), and at the same time too intricately interconnected to be treated linearly or atomistically.

Another way to put this is to say that, because 'the bewildering new world space of late or multinational capital' cannot be represented, it also cannot be contained within the framework of a conventional narrative. Events interpenetrate and feed back upon one another; they have complex, multiple, nonlinear ramifications; they spread out in too many directions at once. Money is the universal equivalent into which, and out of which, anything whatsoever may be exchanged; but for this very reason, finance obscures and tangles the lines of linear cause and effect. We often say that

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<sup>36</sup> The quintessential postmodern example of this genre might well be Luc Besson's *La femme Nikita* (1991). Evidently, the narrative category of the Eurotrash thriller overlaps with the cinematographic category of the *cinéma du look*.

the way to solve a mystery is to ‘follow the money’; but we also know that money can be easily ‘laundered,’ so that the traces of its past metamorphoses are washed away, and it is returned to an immaculate state. Postmodern financial instruments, like CDSs (credit default swaps) and CDOs (collateralised debt obligations) are in effect money-laundering schemes, obscuring debts by scrambling and recombining them, and selling them off in ‘tranches’ so as to wipe them off corporate balance sheets. More generally, financial derivatives are ‘functionally indifferent’ (LiPuma and Lee 2004, 44): they can be used to ‘price,’ and thereby to stand in for, the ‘risk’ implicit in any situation whatsoever. This indifference, or infinite substitutability, means that the underlying situations themselves need not have anything in common – aside from the fact that they have all been arbitrarily priced. Things don’t need to harmonise, or to fit together. In the world of finance capital, there is no unity or ‘pre-established harmony’; rather, as Deleuze puts it, ‘bifurcations, divergences, impossibilities, and discord belong to the same motley world... It is a world of captures instead of closures’ (Deleuze 1993, 81).

In the world of *Boarding Gate*, therefore, it is intrinsically impossible to answer the question: ‘what is actually going on?’ Rather, the questions one must ask are: ‘what is going to happen to me now?’; and ‘what (if anything) can I do about it?’ These questions are unavoidably narrow in scope, as they refer only to ‘me’ and my immediate prospects – not to the ‘global world system’ as a whole. Also, they can only be asked in the very short term: ‘what will happen to me in the next week, in the next day, in the next five minutes?’ Worrying about long-term prospects and consequences is a luxury that nobody can afford. In a world of ‘just-in-time’ production, one cannot make more than ‘just-in-time’ plans. One’s power to negotiate one’s circumstances is severely limited, because there is so little that one is able to know. One’s actions always have ‘unintended consequences,’ and one is always under the sway of circumstances that one cannot foresee, much less control. As the great market ideologist F. A. Hayek puts it: ‘the knowledge of the circumstances of which we must make use never exists in concentrated or integrated form but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and

frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess' (Hayek 1948, 77). All these contingencies make 'the market' seem like a fatality, a 'natural,' ineluctable force beyond which there is no appeal.<sup>37</sup>

*Boarding Gate* thus describes a world so fragmented and dispersed that there seems to be no way to get beyond one's own limited perspective as an isolated individual. At the same time, the film reveals the 'individual' itself to be an exceedingly precarious construct. The market forces traversing our world are so intense and so disruptive that one's very identity is continually under threat. In a world of affective labour and real subsumption, one is always being called upon to reconfigure one's being into new forms. *Boarding Gate* ominously literalises this injunction, narrating its protagonist's flight from one identity to another. As becomes clear in the course of the film, instruments like credit cards, mobile phones and passports are necessary in order for one to have an 'identity' at all, as well as for one to be able to act effectively. But of course, these instruments also make it possible for one to be tracked and to be kept under surveillance. *Boarding Gate* thus envisions a world in which identity is infinitely malleable – but only to the extent that one has the resources to pay for the process of counterfeiting and altering the legal and contractual marks of this identity.

The problem with everything I have said so far is that I have used the impersonal form of 'one'; when in *Boarding Gate* this 'one' is a particular,

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<sup>37</sup> Hayek, of course, makes his argument about 'dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge' in the course of a polemic against the very possibility of socialist economic planning. But one can appreciate Hayek's warnings about the limitations of individual knowledge, even without sharing his faith in the 'marvel' of the 'price system' as an automatic mechanism for 'solv[ing] problems which we should not be able to solve consciously' (Hayek 1948, 86-87). Where Hayek idealises the market as the solution to the problem of limited, perspectivist knowledge, one may invert his formulation, and say instead that it is precisely the institution of the 'free market' as a 'world system' that produces the sort of 'individual' for whom such limited knowledge is a problem. From this perspective, Hayek's account of the limitations of explicit knowledge confirms Jameson's observation that transnational capitalism cannot be understood in terms of 'existential experience' (Jameson 1991, 53). One can then go on to question Hayek's own extremely circumscribed notion of rationality, and his implicit, empiricist assumption that the only possible form of explicit knowledge is the existential one.

indeed a singular, figure: the film's protagonist, Sandra, played by the incredible Asia Argento.<sup>38</sup> Throughout *Boarding Gate*, Argento is dynamic and dangerous, sexy but tough. She clearly embodies a heterosexual-male fantasy of the ultimate *femme fatale*, as alluring as she is menacing, and alluring precisely because she is menacing. In putting Argento's body so continually on display, the film radiates a certain sense of pornographic sleaze – as Assayas himself acknowledges (Hillis 2008). Yet this is only one side of the story. For Argento also mocks her *femme fatale* role, and the whole fantasy surrounding it, with a deep, who-gives-a-fuck irony. This has something to do with her perpetual pout, and with the way she casually tosses off her lines, as if relegating them to some other plane of existence with which she is basically unconcerned. Argento does this even when the lines in question express doubt, passion, or pathos, and when her body language reinforces these affects. In other words, Argento turns acting conventions inside out, at once stylising and naturalising her performance. She manages to radiate sexuality in an entirely unselfconscious way; yet this unselfconsciousness is a deeply *knowing* one: 'completely without innocence' (as Haraway says of the figure of the cyborg – 1991, 151), and not in the least bit naive. Argento's knowingness both accentuates her sexiness, and allows her to distance herself from it. She is thus able simultaneously to display a method-acting intensity of commitment to her role, and at the same time to put her entire performance into postmodern 'quotation marks.'<sup>39</sup>

Argento is a post-cinematic celebrity, and she inhabits movie and video screens in a far different way than older generations of actresses did. A classical female movie star, like Greta Garbo, is an image of purity and

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<sup>38</sup> Argento's role in *Boarding Gate* is roughly analogous to those of Connie Nielsen in *Demonlover* and Maggie Cheung in *Clean*. For an overall discussion of female subjectivity in Assayas' trilogy, see Claire Perkins (2009).

<sup>39</sup> It might seem like a desperate (or disingenuous) oxymoron to credit Argento with being consciously unselfconscious, and wholehearted at an ironic distance. But I cannot think of any better way to describe the disorienting effect of her performances of 'femininity,' not only in *Boarding Gate*, but also in Catherine Breillat's *The Last Mistress* (2007) and Abel Ferrara's *New Rose Hotel* (1998), as well as in the films in which she directed herself: *Scarlet Diva* (2000), and *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2004).

perfection. She is an object of infinite desire; she seems ‘descended from a heaven where all things are formed and perfected in the clearest light’ (Barthes 1972, 57). She keeps us away from her at an infinite distance – a distance out of which we worship her. It is no wonder that Garbo concluded her career by withdrawing entirely from public view. Coming to the screen several decades later, Marilyn Monroe is unable to match Garbo’s transcendent perfection, or to maintain the same degree of distance. Instead, Monroe supplements her beauty with her performance as a comedic ingenue. Her seeming unconsciousness of her own sexual allure gives us permission, as it were, to approach the mystery of this allure. Even as Monroe retains a definite aura, she also – unlike Garbo – brings this aura down to earth. This descent from the heavens to the earth is what allows Monroe to commodify her image, to multiply it and make it signify – as Andy Warhol so clearly understood.

In contrast to both Garbo and Monroe, Asia Argento no longer retains even the slightest hint of transcendence. She is directly carnal, immediately present in the flesh. And her ferocious intelligence cannot be separated from this carnality. Argento collapses the seductive distance between star and audience, and instead offers us her own hyperbolic presence. Her performance is *excessively* immanent and embodied. Even her irony is too immediate, and too close for comfort. In this way, Argento embraces the very condition denounced by Jean Baudrillard as the ‘obscenity’ and ‘transparency’ of postmodern society. Baudrillard seems caught in the throes of heterosexual panic, as he describes how ‘the body is already there *without even the faintest glimmer of a possible absence*, in the state of radical disillusion; the state of pure presence’ (Baudrillard 1988, 32, and 29-44 *passim*). Baudrillard hysterically fears this excess; he yearns, instead, for the seductiveness of the traditional feminine mystique, as exemplified by the old-school Hollywood stars. Seduction, he says, is ‘simply that which lets appearance circulate and move as a secret’ (63-64); it ‘makes things appear and disappear’ (71). Garbo and Monroe are seductive because they are never simply and wholly present; they allure the male viewer’s gaze, beyond visibility, into the realm of that which is secret and hidden. Argento,



however, short-circuits this dialectic. She frustrates the desire of the male voyeur, precisely by dropping the pretense of being unaware of it. She is self-demystified, self-consciously performative, and all too fully *there*.<sup>40</sup>

As played by Argento, Sandra is both a stoic and an existentialist (oxymoronic as this combination might seem to be). She demonstrates an unrelenting will to survive. But she also has a clear-eyed, unromantic ability to grasp things in their painful, unadorned actuality. She seems entirely detached from any sort of wish-fulfilment fantasy. She both accepts the hostile, unrelenting fatality of the world in which she finds herself, and works on constructing a sustainable place for herself within that world. Since things are changing rapidly all around her, and unexpected contingencies are always coming up, she is forced to improvise from moment to moment. When the cops bust in on a drug deal she is making, or when a rendezvous with her lover turns into a death trap, she has to respond as quickly as possible, simply in order to find a way out.

Sandra therefore takes on all sorts of ‘professional’ roles – from assassin to whore – when she has to, and drops them again as soon as they are no longer needed. In this way, she continually ‘reinvents’ herself. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello describe ‘reinvention’ as the highest imperative of ‘the new spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). One must be ‘*adaptable* and *flexible*, able to switch from one situation to a very different one, and adjust to it; and *versatile*, capable of changing activity or tools, depending on the nature of the relationship entered into with others or with objects. It is precisely this *adaptability* and *versatility* that make [one] employable’ (112). Employability, here, is a *sine qua non*: it is only by fashioning herself as more-than-employable, or as adaptive and flexible even to excess, that Sandra can hope to stay a step ahead of the ever-more-ruthless demands of her employers. And so she throws herself fully into whatever she has to do, while still maintaining an ironic reserve towards the

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<sup>40</sup> For Baudrillard, seduction is a sort of metaphysical striptease, a play of simultaneous revealing and concealing. In opposition to this, consider the ‘radical disillusion’ of Argento’s cameo appearance as a stripper in Abel Ferrara’s *Go-Go Tales* (2007): the pole-dancing act of Argento’s character culminates in an artfully provocative French kiss that she exchanges with her Rottweiler. Here, the play of seduction is itself détourned into a literal ‘obscene transparency.’

whole process. In this way, Argento's oddly discordant acting style reflects, and entirely meshes with, the demands placed upon her character within the world of the diegesis. Sandra must become a supreme actress, a *virtuoso* of improvised performances, if she is to outrun, and avoid, the horrific fate – to become a pure object devoid of agency, and a sexual plaything for sadists – to which Connie Nielsen's character succumbs in *Demonlover*.<sup>41</sup>

Sandra's virtuosity within the diegetic world of *Boarding Gate* mirrors Asia Argento's own virtuosity as an performer. But Sandra can only experience her performative skill as a grim necessity, not as a source of pleasure or of pride. For flexibility, versatility and resourcefulness are forced upon her – as they are forced upon all of us – by the very conditions of neoliberal globalisation. If you don't adapt to these conditions, you simply won't survive. If you can't sell your virtuosity in the form of labour-power, you will not be employed at all. Sandra's position in the 'world space' of transnational capital is radically insecure. She is never able to relax, and she can never take anything for granted. She does not have the time for reflection that she would need in order to act meaningfully and on her own initiative. Instead, she is only able to *react*: to devise 'just-in-time' responses to immediate threats and problems. Her improvisations are born of desperation. Throughout the film, we see her in unbearable situations. She is fearful; she is nervous; she is exhausted; she is paralyzed in the face of danger; she is consumed with doubt. She pukes with horror and disgust in a

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<sup>41</sup> I am drawing here on Paolo Virno's sense of labour in the post-Fordist era as *virtuosity* (Virno 2004, 52-71). Such skill in performance has a double function. On the one hand, it answers the corporate demand for flexibility and versatility. Virtuosity 'characterizes...the totality of contemporary social production. One could say that in the organization of labour in the post-Ford era, activity without an end product, previously a special and problematic case...becomes the prototype of all wage labor' (61). On the other hand, and at the same time, virtuosity is an expression of *general intellect* as the ultimate source of value. General intellect has an 'exterior, social character' (38); it involves the entire 'communicative capacity of human beings' (65); it belongs to everyone. Today we all face continual pressure, both inside and outside the workplace, to embody and display our share of general intellect as fully and intensively as possible. This is necessary, in order that general intellect may be extracted from us, and privatised, as a new sort of surplus value. Throughout *Boarding Gate*, Sandra is obliged to demonstrate, in exacerbated form, the performative virtuosity that is compulsory in neoliberal society.

disco toilet; she passes out from a knockout drug; she runs for her life down stairways and through narrow corridors; she compulsively fires her gun, again and again, into the body of a man who is already dead.

These are all typical action film situations, but Assayas transforms them into something else. *Boarding Gate* is built around what Claire Perkins calls a 'turn' that 'in the terms of Deleuze's work on cinema...represents the invasion of the movement-image by the time-image' (Perkins 2009, 8). In traditional action films, according to Deleuze, 'a sensory-motor schema takes possession of the image' (Deleuze 1986, 155). These films move smoothly from perception to action. The protagonist apprehends a certain world-situation, and acts in such a way as to alter it, or correct it. Situation and action are proportionate to one another; the more onerous the dilemma faced by the protagonist, the more resourceful and impressive the action by means of which he or she resolves it. There is a smooth movement from sensory perception to motor response; a stone-faced action hero, like Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry, is able to remain impassive, and true to himself, because he is always able to discharge his feelings outwardly – with the help, of course, of his .44 Magnum.

But nothing like this happens in *Boarding Gate*. Where Dirty Harry is impassive, Sandra is *oversensitive*. At every point in the film, she is overwhelmed. Nothing she does is adequate to the demands of the situations she finds herself in. Indeed, she can use a gun if she has to; but this does not give her any security, or any sense of mastery. That is why Sandra is not an action hero. She belongs, instead, to the world of what Deleuze calls the time-image. Each situation she faces is an experience of intense embodiment and heightened affect. Each of them is 'a purely optical and sound situation': that is to say, a situation of existential blockage, in which perception 'does not extend into action' (Deleuze 1989, 17). Such a situation exceeds any possibility of a commensurate response; it is 'a matter of something too powerful, or too unjust, but sometimes also too beautiful, and which henceforth outstrips our sensory-motor capacities' (17). In the non-places of transnational capital, 'our sensory-motor schemata jam or break' (20), and we are buffeted by forces beyond our control. Instead of being able to act,

Sandra *suffers* her encounters. She experiences viscerally, within herself, whatever it is that she cannot accomplish in the world around her. She is *forced to feel* what exceeds all measure of feeling: something ‘that cannot be felt,’ but that ‘also cannot but be felt’ (Massumi 2002, 133). Sandra therefore registers *in her body* all the transactions and exchanges – monetary and otherwise – that flow through her and define the space around her. And she then relays these forces to us, in the form of her expressions, her bodily postures and her movements and gestures.

Olivier Assayas is concerned, above all else, by the ‘turn’ in the course of which the movement-image crosses over into the time-image, and action on a humanly comprehensible scale gives way before the incomprehensible, inhuman flows of transnational finance and digital informatisation. This is why *Boarding Gate* is not a pure film of the time-image, but a strange hybrid between genre filmmaking and art-house cinema. Deleuze associates ‘the crisis of the action-image,’ and the consequent turn towards the time-image, with the devastation and dislocations caused by World War II (Deleuze 1986, 206 and 196-215 *passim*). Of course, he says, even to this day ‘people continue to make [traditional, sensory-motor-oriented genre] films: the greatest commercial successes always take that route, but the soul of the cinema no longer does’ (206). The distinction between the movement-image and the time-image thus comes to be equated, somewhat unfortunately, with that between mass-market movies and art-house cinema. Assayas, however, incorporates this very distinction within the structure of *Boarding Gate*. Deleuze sees the turn from the movement-image to the time-image as a definitive break between classicism and modernism. But Assayas suggests that, in the space of transnational capitalism, the break is never definitive, and the turn is never completed. It does not happen once and for all, but instead must be played through over and over again. We are never done with the dissolution of subjective agency into networked feedback effects, with the transcoding of the analogue into the digital, and with the ‘real subsumption’ of society into capital and its markets.

All this is epitomised by Sandra’s position within the film. Today, as Deleuze says, we are so demoralised that ‘we hardly believe any longer that

a global situation can give rise to an action which is capable of modifying it' (Deleuze 1986, 206). Indeed, in the wake of the triumph of neoliberalism, 'the modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world' at all (Deleuze 1989, 171). Sandra too suffers from the waning of hope and desire. She lives a life of the utmost precariousness. She finds herself at the mercy of transpersonal forces whose outlines she is unable to trace, whose origins she is unable to discern, and in whose concrete actuality she is not quite able to believe. She experiences existence in 'the bewildering new world space of late or multinational capital' as an ongoing catastrophe. Disaster is always looming; and it is always – at best – just barely averted. But Sandra also bears witness to the prospect of living on, of provisionally surviving the catastrophe. She helps restore to us at least 'a belief in this world' (Deleuze 1989, 188) – if not quite the sense of how another world might be possible. This may not seem like much; but it shouldn't be scorned either. Just by surviving her condition – which is also ours – Sandra emerges as an exemplary figure. She gives us hope. Sandra's mode of precarious, intermittent and 'just-in-time' subjectivity, however damaged and limited it may be, is the only one still possible in our world of ceaseless modulations of control, and delirious financial and libidinal flows. A point of view like hers is the only sort of 'centre' to which we can still refer, in a world so thoroughly decentred, so complex and tortuous and so utterly devoid of empathy.

Assayas underlines Sandra's point of view by doubling it in a kind of cinematic 'free indirect discourse.' Pier Paolo Pasolini introduced this term into film theory, importing it from literary studies, in order to make sense of what he called the 'cinema of poetry' of the 1960s. According to Pasolini, a film like Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964) is distinguished by the way that the filmmaker 'looks at the world by immersing himself in his neurotic protagonist, reanimating the facts through her eyes' (Pasolini 1988, 179). *Red Desert* is composed almost entirely of what Pasolini calls 'free indirect point of view shots' (176-180). These are shots that do not literally reproduce the protagonist's point-of-view, but are also neither omniscient nor objective. Rather, Antonioni transmutes the sensibility of his female

protagonist Giuliana (played by Monica Vitti) into his own ostentatiously non-functional cinematic style. The film's own view of the world is tinged, or contaminated, by Giuliana's neurotic alienation, her inability to act, her failure to feel any sense of accomplishment. Antonioni's eccentric camera movements, and his 'obsessive framing' of objects of 'pure pictorial beauty' (179) bring Giuliana's sensibility into resonance with Antonioni's own 'feverish formalism' (180). This is what accounts for the film's 'poetic freedom' (180).

Now, Argento's Sandra has very little in common with Vitti's Giuliana. Where Sandra is constrained on every level, Giuliana has all the money, time and leisure that she might want. Where Sandra is pressured by too much too soon, Giuliana suffers the *anomie* of having nothing to do, and nothing to live for. Where Sandra is enmeshed in a world of corporate intrigue, Giuliana stands entirely apart from the business concerns of her husband. The only similarity between the two characters, and the two films, is that we gain access to both via free indirect discourse. Antonioni registers Giuliana's neurosis, and identifies with it, through his exacerbated cinematic style. Assayas similarly conveys, and identifies with, the dynamic instability of Sandra's world, and her consequent edginess and distraction and continual need to recalibrate her plans, through his restless camera movements, reframings and refocusing. Antonioni's 'obsessive framing' is matched, and opposed, by what we might call Assayas' equally obsessive deframing (*déecadrage*). In the forty-three years that separate *Red Desert* from *Boarding Gate*, we have moved from an industrial society characterised by massive alienation, to a digitised and ostensibly 'post-industrial' one that 'require[s] participation in depth' (McLuhan 1994, 31) from everyone. Today, alienation is a quaint luxury that cannot be permitted to anyone any longer. In consequence, Antonioni's poetry of exclusion and idle beauty is replaced by Assayas' poetry of forcible involvement, relentless inclusion and compulsory monetisation. In *Boarding Gate*, Assayas' poetic stylisations respond to the way that the society of cognitive capitalism and immaterial labour continually transforms affect into currency – and vice versa.

In free indirect discourse, Deleuze says, ‘the camera does not simply give us the vision of the character and of her world; it imposes another vision in which the first is transformed and reflected.’ In this way, the cinema ‘attain[s] self-consciousness’ (Deleuze 1986, 74-75).<sup>42</sup> In the formal structure of *Boarding Gate*, no less than in Asia Argento’s style of performance, and in Sandra’s character within the film, we encounter a sort of double consciousness: a reflexivity that does not operate on a meta-level, but is immanent to the situation upon which it reflects. This allows *Boarding Gate* to raise a series of crucial questions. How can we survive the transition from a world of movement to a world of duration? What is the fate of determinate motion in space and time, when all action seems to be swallowed up in the endless expanses of a ‘space of flows’ (Castells 2000, 407-459), and pre-empted by the synchronicity of a ‘timeless time’ (Castells 2000, 460-499)? What action can still be meaningfully accomplished in the new ‘world space’ of endless circulation and modulation? What cinematic image of achievement can still be generated, in a world where all is time, where ‘time is money,’ where money is the ‘most internal presupposition’ of cinema, and where money always implies, as in Marx’s formula M–C–M’, ‘the impossibility of an equivalence...tricked, dissymmetrical exchange’ (Deleuze 1989, 77-78)? What sort of subjectivity can remain true to itself, in a world where body and mind are measured and defined as flexible investments of ‘human capital’?

*Boarding Gate* does not offer answers to any of these questions; its accomplishment is precisely to keep them open *as questions*, when the logic of neoliberalism seeks rather to foreclose them. The film ends as Sandra apparently decides not to murder Lester (Carl Ng), her other ex-lover, for whom she abandoned Miles. Lester has cajoled and manipulated Sandra into disrupting and destroying her own life; she is now lost to such an extent that her only escape is to ‘disappear’ into an entirely new and manufactured identity. She must flexibly adapt herself, once again, to a false name, a false nationality, a false passport, and transplantation to an entirely different part of the world. Lester has roundly betrayed Sandra, just as Miles did, in the

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<sup>42</sup> Translation slightly modified.

pursuit of his own financial interests. But Sandra still loves Lester enough, or lusts after him enough, or remembers the sex with him fondly enough – we cannot really tell which – that she finds herself simply walking away, after stalking him and planning to go after him with a knife. I don't think that this represents a lapse in Sandra's otherwise awesome ferocity and determination. It's rather a fateful decision, and a stubborn insistence, that the reign of universal equivalence has to stop: that something needs to remain incommensurable, non-negotiable, unexchangeable, outside the circle of capital. At this moment, in the final shot of the film, the screen itself becomes unreadable: the camera goes from shallow focus to an out-of-focus blur.

### *Southland Tales*

*Southland Tales* (2007) is the second film by Richard Kelly, whose previous work was the cult hit *Donnie Darko* (2001). *Southland Tales* shares with its predecessor a general air of apocalyptic unease, and a plot that circles around the idea of time travel. In both films, 'time is out of joint'; linear, progressive temporality has somehow come undone.<sup>43</sup> But *Southland Tales* is a much more wide-ranging and ambitious movie than *Donnie Darko*; and it features a large ensemble cast, instead of being focused upon a single protagonist. The eponymous hero of *Donnie Darko* sacrifices himself in order to save the world. By accepting his own death, he abolishes an alternative timeline in which his teenage alienation redounds into disaster for everyone around him. Donnie's sacrifice offers us what Gilles Deleuze describes as the cinema's greatest gift: the restoration of our 'belief in this world' (Deleuze 1989, 188). *Southland Tales*, however, is set entirely within a catastrophic alternative timeline. There is no way back to suburban normalcy. The End

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<sup>43</sup> Gilles Deleuze uses this phrase from *Hamlet* to describe the Kantian revolution in philosophy, as a result of which time is freed from its classical subordination to movement (Deleuze 1984, vii). This liberation of time, the unveiling of 'time itself, 'a little time in its pure state' (Deleuze 1989, 17), is the key to what Deleuze calls the cinematic *time-image*, in which 'we enter into temporality as a state of *permanent crisis*' (112). Both *Donnie Darko* and *Southland Tales* are concerned with such a sense of temporality in crisis, or temporality *as* crisis; though I want to suggest that the latter film moves 'beyond' the Deleuzian time-image in order to articulate a new regime of images and sounds, and a new mode of temporality.



Times are near, as the film makes clear with its frequent quotes from the Book of Revelation. And the drama of sacrifice and redemption in *Southland Tales* points, not towards a restoration of ‘this world,’ but towards its nihilistic purgation and transcendence. We are swept headlong, through the raptures of media immersion, into an entropic terminal state – and perhaps also beyond it, out the other side.

*Southland Tales* begins with home video footage of a family Independence Day celebration. The date is July 4, 2005. The footage, filled with random cuts and amateurish swish pans, shows folks, both old and young, just enjoying themselves. But then there’s a roar and a flash, followed by a rumbling and a jittering and the sight of a mushroom cloud in the distance. Terrorists have detonated two atomic bombs in Texas. This is the bifurcation point, the rupture in continuity, the moment when the ‘straight line’ of time becomes a ‘labyrinth’ (Deleuze 1989, 131). We have left the world we know, and entered an alternative timeline: one that diverges irreparably from our own. The homeliness of the film’s opening moments will never return. History has been derailed – it has gone mad – and there is no putting it back on track. Cut to computer graphics, voiceover narration and the hallucinatory mediascape of *Southland Tales*.

The bulk of the movie takes place in Southern California (the ‘Southland’), three years after this initial attack, in the days leading up to the frenzied Independence Day celebration of July 4, 2008. The ‘war on terror’ has blossomed into a full-fledged World War III. American troops are fighting, not just in Iraq and Afghanistan, but in Syria, Iran and North Korea as well. The draft has been reinstated; martial law has been declared in some areas. Throughout the United States, police surveillance is ubiquitous, and there is no interstate travel without a visa. All Internet communication is monitored by a government spy facility called US-IDent. The police are authorised to shoot on sight anyone suspected of terrorism. The Republican Party is firmly in control of the country. Electoral politics has been reduced to its essence: television advertising. International oil supplies have been cut off, and the sinister Treer corporation holds a monopoly on America’s alternative energy resources. The only opposition to

this state of affairs comes from a comically inept, confused and internally fragmented 'neo-Marxist' underground.

*Southland Tales* is, evidently, deeply concerned with the post-9/11 American security state. The conceit of an alternative timeline allows Kelly to explore, in exacerbated and hyperbolic fashion, our actual current condition of ubiquitous surveillance, restricted civil liberties and permanent warfare. This regime of control was instituted by the second Bush administration, in the wake of the World Trade Centre attacks; it largely remains in effect today.<sup>44</sup> *Southland Tales* could be described, to a certain extent, as a dark satire in the tradition of Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. It pushes the logic of the security state to absurdist extremes. In the world of the film, there is no right to privacy, and almost no private space. Phone calls are routinely wiretapped, recorded and traced. All public activity is captured on video; even the toilets are watched by surveillance cameras. A recurrent image in the film shows the creepy Homeland Security czar Nana Rae Frost (played by Miranda Richardson, channelling Angela Lansbury's performance in *The Manchurian Candidate*), sitting in her command chair at US-IDent headquarters, monitoring the video feeds on multiple screens that cover a large curving wall in front of her. In the world of *Southland Tales*, if you step out of line, or arouse distrust, you are likely to have your home invaded by an armed and masked SWAT team, or to be picked off on the beach by a government sniper. But most people remain oblivious to all these intrusions; they continue to drink, party and otherwise enjoy themselves on the Venice Beach boardwalk, just as if nothing were amiss.

However, despite these currents of satire, *Southland Tales* is finally best described as a science fiction film. Its overall tone is earnest and urgent, even visionary – more than it is sarcastic or comic. *Southland Tales*, like most science fiction, is not about literally predicting the future. Rather, it is about capturing and depicting the latent *futurity* that already haunts us in

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<sup>44</sup> Although Barack Obama was elected President on promises to reverse Bush administration policies, and although he has curbed some of its worst excesses, at this writing (2009) the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue, surveillance remains widespread, and the White House still endorses the use of preventive detention without trial.

the present. At one point in the film, the porn actress Krysta Now (Sarah Michelle Gellar) excitedly remarks that ‘scientists are saying the future is going to be far more futuristic than they originally predicted.’ The reason this comment is ludicrous is that ‘futuristic’ is not an objective category, but an anticipatory inflection of the present. *Southland Tales* is indeed futuristic, in that it shows us an otherness, an elsewhere and elsewhere, that is inextricably woven into the texture of the here and now. We usually think of hauntings as traces from the past; but the future also haunts us with its hints of hope and danger, and its promises or threats of transformation. Especially in times of great social and technological change, we *feel* the imminence of the future in the form of gaps and leaps in temporal progression, and shifts in the horizon of what is thinkable. Of course it is impossible to *know* what changes the future will bring; but the signs of this impossibility – the intimations of instability, the shifts of perspective and the incipient breaks in continuity – are themselves altogether real. They are part of the conjuncture, part of what shapes the present. If the past *persists* in the present, then futurity *insists* in the present, defamiliarising what we take for granted. Science fiction highlights this sense of futurity, making it visible and audible. *Southland Tales* is an ironically cinematic *remediation* of the post-cinematic mediasphere that we actually live in. The film’s alternative timeline is defined precisely by its *divergence* from the world we know.<sup>45</sup>

*Southland Tales* is more about what I am calling the post-cinematic media regime in general, than it is about the national security apparatus in particular. Terrorism and the ‘war on terror’ are parts of this new media regime, but they are not its basis, nor even its primary focus. At most, they are *catalysts*: they intensify and speed up the emergence of new media forms, and of their corresponding new modes of subjectivity. Surveillance is only one aspect of a broader process; Nana Rae Frost is not the only one

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<sup>45</sup> In other words, science fiction is a kind of ‘realism’: but it is a realism of what Deleuze calls the *virtual*, rather than one of the actual here and now. For Deleuze, ‘the virtual is fully real’ on its own account; but it is a special sort of reality, ‘real without being actual, ideal without being abstract, and symbolic without being fictional’ (Deleuze 1994, 208). I discuss science fiction as a realism of the virtual, which ‘addresses events in their potentiality,’ in my book *Connected* (Shaviri 2003, xi and passim).

monitoring multiple screens and trying to pay attention all at once to a plethora of media feeds. In fact, all of the characters in the film are doing this, more or less; and so are most of us in the audience. *Southland Tales* surveys and maps – and mirrors back to us in fictive form – the excessive, overgrown post-cinematic mediasphere. The film bathes us in an incessant flow of images and sounds; it foregrounds the multimedia feed that we take so much for granted, and ponders what it feels like to live our lives within it. Video surveillance cameras are ubiquitous, of course, in the world of the film as well as in the world that we inhabit; but so are many other sorts of recording, broadcasting and communications devices. Social space is filled to bursting with handheld videocams, mobile phones, portable screens, 24-hour cable news channels, YouTube clips, MySpace pages, automated response systems and celebrity-tracking paparazzi. Images and sounds are continually being looped for endless replay, or composited together into new configurations. In *Southland Tales*, traditionally ‘cinematic’ sequences are intermixed with a sensory-overload barrage of lo-fi video footage, Internet and cable-TV news feeds, commercials and simulated CGI environments. These often appear in windows within windows, so that the movie screen itself comes to resemble a video or computer screen.

Despite the emphasis upon surveillance and security, the mediascape explored by *Southland Tales* is not in the least bit hidden or secretive. It is rather a vast, open performance space, carnivalesque, participatory and overtly self-reflexive. Not only do we see multiple, heterogeneous screens within the movie screen; we also see the characters in the movie appearing on these screens, creating content for them, and watching them – often all at the same time. If the government isn’t recording your actions with hidden cameras, then perhaps someone else is, for purposes of blackmail. But more likely, you are making and distributing videos of yourself, in a quest for publicity and profit. In any case, your mediated image is what defines you. If you aren’t already an actor or a celebrity – as most of the characters in *Southland Tales* are – then you probably have a business plan to become one. Every character in the movie seems to be frantically engaged in exhibitionistic display, outlandish performance, and ardent networking for

the purpose of self-promotion. The world of *Southland Tales* has become what Jamais Cascio, inverting Foucault, calls the *Participatory Panopticon*: ‘this constant surveillance is done by the citizens themselves, and is done by choice. It’s not imposed on us by a malevolent bureaucracy or faceless corporations. The participatory panopticon will be the emergent result of myriad independent rational decisions, a bottom-up version of the constantly watched society’ (Cascio 2005). The reign of universal transparency, with its incessant circulation of sounds and images, and its ‘participatory’ media ecology in which everyone keeps tabs on everyone else, does not need to be imposed from above. Rather, in the post-cinematic media regime, it ‘emerges,’ or ‘self-organises,’ spontaneously from below. The greatest success of what Michel Foucault calls *governmentality* comes about, not when a certain type of behaviour is forcibly imposed upon people, but when people can be ‘incentivised’ to impose this behaviour willingly upon one another, and upon themselves.

*Southland Tales* does not exempt itself from the frenzied media economy that it depicts. The movie is itself a post-cinematic, transmedia object. Tom Abba describes it as an ‘extended narrative,’ in which the story is spread across several media (Abba 2009, 60). Most notably, Richard Kelly published a three-part comic book, or graphic novel, that gives the movie’s premises and backstory (Kelly and Weldele 2007). Many of the plot twists, convolutions and digressions in *Southland Tales* can only be understood by reading the comic first. This is why the movie’s titles divide it into Parts IV, V and VI; Parts I, II and III are found in the comic. In addition, when *Southland Tales* was first released, a number of the film’s (fictional) characters had websites on MySpace; the movie’s (equally fictional) Treer Corporation had its own website as well. There was also a certain amount of spillover between the characters in the movie, and the pop culture celebrities who played them. Sarah Michelle Gellar actually recorded, under her own name, the song ‘Teen Horniness Is Not A Crime’ – which in the film is written and performed (with an accompanying music video) by her character Krysta Now. The song is included on the movie’s soundtrack album, and is available for download from the iTunes Music Store.

Of course, this sort of spread among multiple platforms is not unique to *Southland Tales*. It is an increasingly common media strategy today. As Richard Grusin notes, film today is turning into a *distributed medium*: ‘the film is not confined to the form of its theatrical exhibition but is distributed across other media as well.’ For instance, ‘the production, design, and distribution of DVD versions of feature films are part of the original contractual (and thus artistic) intention of these films.’ Grusin adds that this sort of remediation ‘marks a fundamental change in the aesthetic status of the cinematic artifact’ (Grusin 2007). His point is that the aesthetic experience of a film today may reside just as much in watching the DVD extras, or in exploring the associated websites, as it does in watching the film itself. For that matter, the media experience may well reside in children’s playing with toys that are modelled after figures from an animated film, and given away as part of a cross-platform promotional strategy. The aesthetics of distributed media cannot be separated from their marketing. For its part, *Southland Tales* not only supplements itself with a variety of intertextual materials in other media, but also folds the practice of multimedia distribution and dispersion into the narrative of the film itself. Most notably, Krysta Now seeks to leverage her semi-celebrity as a porn starlet not only by recording songs and making a music video, but also by starring in her own talk-show-cum-reality-television series, and by selling her own energy drink.

What this means is that, although *Southland Tales* is very much a *movie*, it is also profoundly post-cinematic in both form and content. I say that it remains a movie, in the sense that it is big and spectacular, and that it was clearly intended to be viewed in a movie theatre, on an enormous screen.<sup>46</sup> However, its audiovisual flow is entirely post-cinematic, and of a

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<sup>46</sup> Ironically, very few people have seen *Southland Tales* on the big screen; in its limited release to movie theatres, it was a calamitous flop. The film disappointed fans of *Donnie Darko*, because it was so oblique and disjointed narratively, and because it was impossible to ‘identify’ with any of the characters in the way that so many viewers did with *Darko*’s eponymous protagonist. As I will argue below, *Southland Tales* is no less empathetic to its characters than *Donnie Darko* is; but this empathy no longer takes the form of traditional cinematic ‘identification.’ As for film critics, *Southland Tales* had a few enthusiastic supporters among them: J. Hoberman (2007), Manohla Dargis (2007), and especially Amy Taubin (2007). But the majority of critics rejected it, perturbed by its loose ends, nonlinearity, and

piece with the video-based and digital media that play such a role within it. The compositional logic of *Southland Tales* is paratactic and additive, having little to do with conventional film syntax. The film is filled with inserts; it overlays, juxtaposes and restlessly moves between multiple images and sound sources. But it does not provide us with any hierarchical organisation of all these elements. Many of the film's most arresting images just pop up, without any discernible motivation or point of view. For instance, around the five-minute mark, shortly after a title reading 'Los Angeles,' there is a shot of a G. I. Joe doll, advancing on knees and elbows along a wet sidewalk, then firing a rifle. It is night time. We see the toy in sharp focus and in close-up, while behind it the full extent of the boulevard, lined by palm trees, stretches out-of-focus into the deep background. The sounds emitted by the toy are accompanied, on the soundtrack, by Moby's soothing ambient music, and by a voiceover newscast reporting that celebrity-turned-soldier Pilot Abilene (Justin Timberlake) has been wounded in Fallujah by friendly fire. The film never returns to this toy figure; it has no function in the narrative. Of course, the film is filled with references to soldiers, and to wounded veterans like Pilot Abilene; but is that enough to motivate the appearance of the toy? The image of G. I. Joe is just *there*. It grabs our attention because it is anomalous and unexpected; it is evocative in a way that we cannot quite pin down. The film bequeaths us this moment and then moves on to something else. G. I. Joe is just one figure in the movie's ceaseless flow.<sup>47</sup>

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resolutely post-cinematic forms. Links to other reviews of the film can be found at <<http://www.mrqe.com/movies/m100064789?s=1>>. I can only hope that *Southland Tales* will find a new audience, thanks to its recent DVD and Blu-Ray releases.

<sup>47</sup> The film critics Richard T. Jameson and Kathleen Murphy include the shot of G. I. Joe in their list of 'favorite moments' from the movies of 2007: <[http://movies.msn.com/movies/2007review/moments\\_2/](http://movies.msn.com/movies/2007review/moments_2/)>. It is worth noting that much of the recent theoretical discussion of *cinophilia* has been concerned with 'the cinephiliac moment': that is to say, with the way that cinephiles tend to focus upon, and even obsessively fetishise, particular shots, instants, or details of a film, which they extract and isolate from the film as a whole (Keathley 2006, 29-53). But *Southland Tales* is edited in such a way that each of its moments is, as it were, *already* thus extracted and isolated for cinephiliac delectation. Kelly simultaneously overloads us with 'information,' and disperses that information in such a way that we cannot bring it together, and grasp it as a whole.

Kelly's repetitive *compositing* of images and sounds is almost the polar opposite of Eisensteinian montage. For Eisenstein, 'montage is conflict' (Eisenstein 1949, 38). Contradictory images interact precisely by clashing with one another; out of this clash, a higher order image – or even a concept, which no single, isolated image could possibly express – is generated dialectically. In this way, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. 'From the collision of two given factors *arises* a concept,' Eisenstein says (37); 'from the superimposition of two elements of the same dimension always arises a new, higher dimension' (49). As Deleuze summarises the process, Eisensteinian montage features an ascending 'organic spiral' composed of dialectical leaps (Deleuze 1986, 33); 'the image must, effectively, change its power, pass to a higher power' (35). From this point of view, Eisenstein explicitly and scornfully rejects any 'understanding of montage as a *linkage* of pieces' (Eisenstein 1949, 37), or 'as a means of description by placing single shots one after the other like building blocks' (48), or like 'bricks, arranged in series' (37).

However, Kelly's images and sounds do not interact dialectically. They really do seem to be linked together merely in the manner of bricks or building blocks. At best, the connections among shots, or among elements within a shot, are only allusive and indirect. Early in the film, for instance, as a voiceover newscast informs us that the Republicans have captured supermajorities in both Houses of Congress, a video clip embedded in the screen shows a pair of elephants fucking. Presumably this is a snarky reference to the elephant as a symbol of the Republican Party. In any case, the clip shares space on the screen with a number of computer graphics; these include corporate logos for the newscast's sponsors, Panasonic, Bud Light and Hustler. (This is a brilliant list, including as it does three crucial commodities that are bought and sold in the age of affective labour: electronics, intoxicants and sex). At a much later point in the movie, the Baron von Westphalen (Wallace Shawn), head of the ubiquitous Treer Corporation, shows a commercial for his new gas-free automobile, the Saltair. The ad is a CGI sequence that shows one of these cars approaching, mounting and sexually thrusting into another one. (A phallic appendage



extrudes out of the first car, and penetrates the exhaust pipe of the second). This evidently literalises, and thereby satirises, the sexual subtext that permeates so much automobile advertising. In addition, the humping automobiles recall the humping elephants; but we are not given any rationale for this connection. All these correspondences and connections form something like an affective constellation; but they are too dispersed, and too indefinite and arbitrary, to work in the focused and organised way that Eisensteinian montage theory demands. Rather, these links are *weak ties*, such as we are accustomed to find on the Internet.<sup>48</sup>

The film critic Jim Emerson has a sense of what's at stake here, in his disapproving review of *Southland Tales* (originally entitled 'Is It Even a Movie?'): 'There's an obvious channel-surfing aesthetic to mimic 'information overload,' but nothing's on, anyway. One shot could just as easily be followed by any other shot – they aren't cut together with any verve or intelligence, so the effect is flat and linear... What's missing is resonance – a quality that's hard to define' (Emerson 2007).<sup>49</sup> Emerson dislikes the film because, as he accurately observes, it is not edited according to any traditional cinematic logic. Not only does *Southland Tales* not follow the method of dialectical montage; it also does not follow Hollywood continuity rules for organising a narrative in such a way as to maximise narrative flow and impact.<sup>50</sup> Emerson is acutely aware of what's going on in

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<sup>48</sup> The notion of *weak ties*, originally proposed by the sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973), has been applied to the Internet by such network theorists as Duncan Watts (2004) and Albert-László Barabási (2003). If anything, the concept has been overused in recent years. I use it here only as a marker in order to help describe what I see as the dominant aesthetic of post-cinematic media forms, in which links and correspondences proliferate, without coming together in the unity of an overarching structure. Although the concept was originally meant to describe social links among individuals, I think it is useful as well to describe the way in which documents are loosely connected to one another via hyperlinks.

<sup>49</sup> Emerson originally called his review 'Is It Even a Movie?'; but he subsequently changed the title to: 'Southland Tales: No Sparkle, No Motion.' As he explains: 'I don't want to sound like one of those people who says, for instance, "Rap isn't even music!" Not my intention. So I changed it.' I am recalling Emerson's original title not to embarrass him or take him to task, but precisely to suggest that he was right in apprehending that, in a certain sense, *Southland Tales* isn't quite a movie any longer – and that this is probably what put him off when he watched it.

<sup>50</sup> On a scene-by-scene basis, Kelly does not necessarily depart from the norms of what David Bordwell describes as the style of 'intensified continuity' in recent

*Southland Tales*; it's just that what he objects to is not a bug but a feature. The looseness or arbitrariness of its montage is in fact the very *point* of the movie. Kelly's shots refuse to coalesce into any sort of higher, synthetic unity. They never make the leap from affect to concept, or from their flatness to 'a higher power,' or to 'a new, higher dimension.' This is because the images and sounds of *Southland Tales* do not even *clash* in the first place. Rather, they coexist in their very distance from one another, their 'incompossibility.'<sup>51</sup>

In other words, Kelly's images and sounds are wildly disparate, and yet they all exist on the same plane. They do not fit together in any rational way; they are so miscellaneous, and so scattered, that they do not even conflict with one another. At the same time, none of these images or sounds is privileged over any other; no image source or sound source is treated as more authentic than any other. In particular, there is no hierarchy of

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American films (Bordwell 2002). But to the extent that this is so, it only shows the limitations of Bordwell's formalist claim that 'nearly all scenes in nearly all contemporary mass-market movies (and in most 'independent' films) are staged, shot, and cut according to principles which crystallised in the 1910s and 1920s' (24). Indeed, Bordwell is accurate in describing how physical action is made intelligible within a single scene – not just in recent American film, but in television and music video as well. The trouble is that Bordwell takes far too narrow a view of expressive form in moving-image media. There are other modes of articulation in audiovisual media, in addition to the one that Bordwell privileges: tracking the locations and movements of physical bodies in space. These other modes range from the modulation of the audiovisual spectator's moment-by-moment affective response on a micro-level, through the organisation of spectatorial identification with characters or personas on a medium level, all the way up to general narrative organisation on the macro-level. On all these levels, there is a much greater variety in regimes of vision and audition, and in modes of address, than Bordwell's shot analysis is able to account for. And this is especially the case with works produced using the new digital technologies, as well as with television, video, and computer-based media, and with films like *Southland Tales* that adopt the procedures of these post-cinematic media.

<sup>51</sup> Deleuze uses this word to describe Leibniz's conception of the divergence between incompatible worlds (Deleuze 1993, 59ff.). The question is not whether two events or instances contradict one another; it is rather whether the two events can take place in the same world, or whether they necessarily imply different timelines. 'Incompossibility is an original relation, distinct from impossibility or contradiction' (62). For the clash of contradiction can only take place within a given single world; the divergence of worlds or timelines exceeds any possibility of mere contradiction. Where Leibniz presents God as choosing the best among impossible worlds, Deleuze sees in modern art and philosophy the simultaneous affirmation of all the impossibles (81).

representations; the images on a screen are just as real, and just as efficacious, as the objects from which those images are supposedly derived. In the terms used by Deleuze and Guattari, the film refuses any 'supplementary dimension,' and operates only 'with the number of dimensions one already has available' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 6). In this way, *Southland Tales* exhibits an entirely *flat ontology*.<sup>52</sup> This is what accounts for the fact that, on the one hand, the editing of the film seems 'flat and linear' (as Emerson complains); while at the same time narrative sequences proliferate deliriously, bifurcate and fold back upon one another, in a manner that is anything but 'linear.' In *Southland Tales*, chains of cause and effect both multiply and break down entirely, in defiance of traditional narrative logic. Nothing in the film makes sense in terms of linear causality, or in terms of action grounded in character, or even in terms of dialectical contrast. The onward flow of the film, as it zigzags towards catastrophe, is rather a matter of juxtaposition, dreamlike free association, and the proliferation of self-referential feedback loops.

For example, consider an almost impossibly convoluted narrative sequence in the first half of the movie. It concerns a pair of hip, 'underground' performance artists, Dion (Wood Harris) and Dream (Amy

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<sup>52</sup> I take the concept of *flat ontology* from Manuel DeLanda, who uses it to characterise a view in which all entities at all scales have the same degree of reality and the same sorts of properties: 'while an ontology based on relations between general types and particular instances is *hierarchical*, each level representing a different ontological category (organism, species, genera), an approach in terms of interactive parts and emergent wholes leads to a *flat ontology*, one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status' (DeLanda 2002, 47). DeLanda hedges on the question of whether Deleuze's ontology is really a flat one (DeLanda 2002, 178, 195). This is because he objects to Deleuze's willingness to speak 'without hesitation' of entities such as 'society' and 'science,' which DeLanda rejects as illegitimate, pre-given 'totalities' (178). However, I would argue that a flat ontology only makes sense if it operates all the way up, as well as all the way down. DeLanda offers no good philosophical grounds for his reluctance to accept that 'society' is just as much an individual, or a real entity, as are the 'individual decision-makers, individual institutional organisations, individual cities, individual nation-states' (195) that form a population and thereby make it up. DeLanda's flat ontology is equivalent to what Deleuze calls *univocity*: the proposition that Being speaks with 'a single voice,' that 'Being is said in a single and same sense of everything of which it is said,' even though those things *of which* it is said 'are not equal' and 'do not have the same sense' (Deleuze 1994, 35-36).

Poehler). He is black and she is white. They are a couple in real life and collaborators in all their performances. They disguise themselves with facial prosthetics so that they will not be recognised. In this disguise, they pretend to be a viciously arguing newlywed couple. Their plan is to simulate a scenario in which they are murdered by a racist cop. Another collaborator, pretending to be the cop, will break in on them, as if responding to a domestic violence call. He will shoot them with blanks, and they will pretend to be hit, while a hidden accomplice presses a button in order to make fake blood spurt out. All this will be recorded on video, and released to the media and on the Net as something that really happened. It's an agit-prop political action, being staged in order to discredit USIDent, and to blackmail some leading Republican politicians.

The fake racist cop is Ronald Taverner (Seann William Scott), who is impersonating his identical twin brother Roland Taverner (also played by Scott). Roland actually is a police officer, who has been kidnapped and is being held prisoner by the neo-Marxists. Ronald is accompanied by the amnesiac actor Boxer Santaros (Dwayne Johnson). Boxer has written a screenplay in which he plays the role of a psychotic police officer; he wants to accompany an actual officer on his rounds, in order to research the role. Boxer takes along a video camera, with which he records everything that happens; Dion and Dream's plan is for the fake double murder to be recorded on this camera. As Ronald and Boxer drive along, Ronald tries to get into character, by making a racist comment, on camera, to Boxer (who, like the actor playing him, is black). However, when Boxer responds with confusion and disbelief, Ronald backs off and says that he was only joking.

The whole fake-murder scenario goes awry, however, when a second supposed racist cop, Bart Bookman (Jon Lovitz), barges in on the scene of Dion and Dream's argument. At first, Dion and Dream continue screaming at one another, using their brilliant 'improv' skills; but then, in fear of Bookman's threats, they break character and reveal themselves as the notorious performance artists they really are. Bookman does not care; he fires real bullets and kills them. As they fall, the hidden accomplice still pushes the special-effects button at the sound of gunfire, in order to spill the

prearranged prosthetic blood. Ronald and Boxer flee the scene in a panic. In a subsequent scene, we learn that Bookman is also an impersonator rather than an actual cop; he's yet another neo-Marxist agent. He has killed Dion and Dream, and confiscated the video camera that recorded the double murder, in service to yet another confused agenda that also seems to involve both political activism and blackmail for cash. In further developments, however, the videotape of the incident is itself mistaken for a different video, and stolen to further yet another political-intervention-cum-blackmail scheme.

The Dion-and-Dream subplot is only one small portion of *Southland Tales*; nearly everything else in the movie could be unpacked in similarly obsessive detail. My point in recounting the episode at such length is simply to give a sense of how dense and overstuffed the movie is. *Southland Tales* is filled with conspiracies and counter-conspiracies, with character impersonations and character doublings, with staged events and spontaneous events and re-enactments of all these events, and with multiple digital recordings and simulations. And each of these can be interpreted in numerous, often contradictory ways. The film teases us, for instance, with the possibility of an allegorical reading. Thus, Dion and Dream may be identified with the Two Witnesses who play an important role in the Book of Revelation (11:3ff), and in subsequent Christian eschatological thought.<sup>53</sup> Finally, however, we are compelled to take the film's incidents and characters as *literally* as possible. Jim Emerson is once again accurate – albeit for the wrong reasons, and with a negative judgment that I do not share – when he complains that ‘the whole thing is so literal that everything

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<sup>53</sup> At least one website, *Life in Motion*, identifies Dion and Dream as the Two Witnesses (*Southland Tales* and Unanswered Questions,' <<http://oasis1315.wordpress.com/2009/03/16/southland-ales-whatta-flic/>>). Other websites, however, suggest that the Two Witnesses are Ronald and Boxer – precisely because they are the ones who witness the murder of Dion and Dream (e.g., ‘Everything You Were Afraid To Ask About *Southland Tales*,’ <[http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/feature/2007/12/19/southland\\_tales\\_analysis/print.html](http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/feature/2007/12/19/southland_tales_analysis/print.html)>). The former of these readings seems to me to be the more accurate one. Dion and Dream, as performers, are the ones who give ‘testimony’ about the hypocrisy of their society, as the Biblical Witnesses are said to do. Ronald, together with his ‘brother’/double Roland, has the properly Messianic role in the film; and Boxer is his prophetic precursor, sort of a John the Baptist figure.

has a banal explanation' (Emerson 2007). For the film's sheer density of incidents and references baffles our efforts to 'translate' what we see and hear into something more abstract, more metaphorically palatable and easily manageable. The obsessive details of the movie are piled on, and left for fans to untangle and argue over, in a manner that is usually found only in long, multi-episode television and comic book serials. Kelly compresses several TV seasons' worth of episodes and plot twists into 145 minutes. *Southland Tales* may be long for a movie; but regarded as an implicit television series, it is almost brutally compressed and foreshortened.

If Kelly's juxtapositions of images and sounds do not fit into any tradition of cinematic montage, this is because they are organised according to the vastly different logic of digital compositing. The historical shift from montage to compositing – which occurred in Hollywood during the 1990s – is explored in great detail by Lev Manovich (2001, 136-160). Even if, 'most often, the composited sequence simulates a traditional film shot' (137), nonetheless the fundamental assumptions of digital compositing are opposed to those of the analogue cinema. The final output of electronic simulation may resemble the final output of mechanical reproduction, but these are generated in entirely different ways.<sup>54</sup> According to Manovich, 'digital compositing exemplifies a more general operation of computer culture – assembling together a number of elements to create a singular seamless

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<sup>54</sup> The analogue cinematic image is indexical, in the well-known sense defined by André Bazin; but the digital image is not. Where the cinematic image is a copy, the digital image is rather a simulacrum. Deleuze distinguishes the copy from the simulacrum as follows: the copy imitates, more or less faithfully, the model of which it is a copy; on the other hand, even if the simulacrum 'still produces an *effect* of resemblance...this is an effect of the whole, completely external and produced by totally different means than those at work within the model' (Deleuze 1990, 258). The copy (or the Bazinian image) is mimetic in the deep sense that its production is continuous with the existence of its model; the cinematic image 'shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction (Bazin 2004, 14). But in digital simulation, this is no longer the case; the effect of mimetic resemblance is produced by means that are not themselves mimetic or resembling. The digital image gives us only 'the pseudorealism of a deception aimed at fooling the eye (or for that matter the mind); a pseudorealism content in other words with illusory appearances' (Bazin 2004, 12). Even if Hollywood mostly uses digital imaging techniques for the purpose of achieving a convincing 'perceptual realism,' as Stephen Prince argues (1996), the result is still a simulacrum rather than a 'legitimate' copy.

object' (139). This means that the cutting-and-pasting of elements that are synchronically available in a database replaces the suturing of shots that unfold diachronically. 'Where old media relied on montage, new media substitutes the aesthetics of continuity. A film cut is replaced by a digital morph or digital composite' (143). In contrast to the complexly hypotactic organisation of twentieth-century modernist media forms, digital multimedia production 'follows the principle of simple addition. Elements in different media are placed next to each other without any attempt to establish contrast, complementarity, or dissonance between them' (143). In short, 'montage aims to create visual, stylistic, semantic and emotional dissonance between different elements. In contrast, compositing aims to blend them into a seamless whole, a single gestalt' (144).

Digital compositing implies a continuity and equality among its elements. The assembled images and sounds all belong to a single 'smooth space' – as opposed to the hierarchically organised 'striated space' of montage (to use Deleuze and Guattari's distinction – 1987, 474-500). However, this does not mean that the result of compositing is always 'seamless,' in the way that my previous quote from Manovich suggested. Manovich himself concedes that, when 'hybrid spaces' are created, 'television normally relates these spaces semantically but not visually.' When we see a newscaster with a video clip behind her, for instance, the two spaces are visually 'disjointed, as they share neither the same scale nor the same perspective. If classical cinematic montage creates the illusion of a coherent space and hides its work, electronic montage openly presents the viewer with an apparent visual clash of different spaces' (Manovich 2001, 150).

This suggests that the combination of moving images is governed by two pairs of oppositions, or unfolds along two axes. On the one hand, the mimetic, hypotactic and striated space of cinematic montage may be opposed to the simulacral, paratactic and smooth space of digital compositing. On the other hand, the *effects* aimed at by these procedures may range from the seamless unity of the multiple elements to their more or less explicit disjunction. On the side of analogue cinema, both the

standardised causal logic of the Hollywood continuity system and the Bazinian long-take style, with its ‘ambiguity’ and ‘uncertainty’ (Bazin 2004, 36) may be contrasted with Eisenstein’s aggressive montage. On the side of digital simulation, the ‘perceptual realism’ Prince aimed at by films like *Jurassic Park* and *Forrest Gump* may be contrasted with the hypermediated juxtaposition of incompatible elements in a film like *Southland Tales*. Classical Hollywood films, and more recent blockbusters by the likes of Spielberg and Zemeckis, both create illusions of continuous action – albeit by very different means. *Potemkin* and *Southland Tales*, on the other hand, both foreground the heterogeneity of their construction – although Eisenstein’s dialectical contradictions work very differently than Kelly’s impossibilities.<sup>55</sup>

One problem with Manovich’s account of digital editing is that it is focused almost entirely on visual images. It ignores the role of sound in digital media. But *Southland Tales*, like so many post-cinematic works, is weighted more to the sonic than to the optical. It assumes a world that, as McLuhan says, is ‘audile-tactile,’ and no longer centred on the eye (McLuhan 1994, 45). With digital media, we find ourselves ‘back in acoustic space’ (McLuhan and Fiore 1967, 63). Digital compositing involves sounds as well as images; it even reduces the difference between them, since both

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<sup>55</sup> The work of a younger-generation Hollywood blockbuster director like Michael Bay could usefully be examined in the light of these distinctions. Bay’s films – in contrast to those of Spielberg and Zemeckis – eschew considerations of continuity almost entirely, in favour of disjunctive cutting engineered so as to maximise shock. In Bay’s films, as Bruce Reid puts it, ‘edits seem random, every rule of film grammar is tossed out the window, and the headlong rush of movement forward is all.’ Bay’s aesthetic is based upon the faith that you can ‘splice any two shots together and they’ll match.’ The result is a cinema that is entirely incoherent, and yet ‘immediately legible to anyone’ – as Bay’s high box office numbers prove (Reid 2001). Or, as Charlie Jane Anders puts it, the lesson of Bay’s cinema is ‘that once the world is reduced, forever, to a kaleidoscope of whirling shapes, you are totally free. Nothing matters, effect precedes cause, fish spawn in mid-air, and you can do whatever you want’ (Anders 2009). Using the tools of digital editing and compositing, together with CGI, Bay makes films that are utterly disjointed, and yet unfold in such a ‘smooth space’ that these disjunctions scarcely matter to mass audiences. Even in mainstream popular cinema, we now have films that, in Deleuze’s terms, evidence ‘a new status of narration,’ in which ‘narration ceases to be truthful, that is, to claim to be true, and becomes fundamentally falsifying’ (Deleuze 1989, 131). Bay’s films, no less than the art films of the Deleuzian *time-image*, reject organic unity, and are littered instead with gaps and false accords.



sensory modalities are processed through the same digital code. But also, the very multiplication and fragmentation of visual sources leads to a certain destitution of the eye, and a consequent shift of emphasis towards the ear. Cartesian perspectival space gives way to 'a discontinuous and resonant mosaic of dynamic figure/ground relationships' (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988, 40). *Southland Tales* repeatedly emulates the computer screen or cable television news screen, in which multiple windows compete for attention. In such conditions, my eyes no longer 'know' where to look. The media experiencer can no longer be figured as a 'spectator,' standing apart from and overlooking a homogeneous visual field. Rather, he or she must parse multiple, windowed image sources as rhythmic patterns and as information fields. 'In this electric age we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information'; perceptual impressions are 'translated into information systems' (McLuhan 1994, 57). These systems, with what Manovich calls their 'database logic,' composed as 'collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other' (Manovich 2001, 218), cannot be ordered by vision alone. This is why their very presentation demands the foregrounding of the other senses, most notably hearing.

Michel Chion, the great theoretician of film sound, is equally sensitive to the role of 'sound on screen' in post-cinematic media (1994). In traditional analogue cinema, the images are primary. The coherence of a film comes mostly from its *mise en scène*, cinematography and editing. The soundtrack serves as a support for the images, giving them emotional resonance and a guarantee of (seeming) naturalism. That is to say, sound provides what Chion calls '*added value*'; it 'enriches a given image' in such a way as to give the false impression that 'this information or expression 'naturally' comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself' (Chion 1994, 5). Film sound is therefore a *supplement* (in Derrida's sense of the term): it subliminally supports the primacy of an image that nonetheless would not mean or feel the same without it.

But all this changes in post-cinematic media like television and video. Sound now operates overtly instead of covertly. Instead of sound providing

'added value' to the image, now a visual element is 'nothing more than an *extra image*,' working 'to illustrate or rather decorate' whatever is spoken on the soundtrack (Chion 1994, 158). In this way, 'television is illustrated radio'; for 'sound, mainly the sound of speech, is always foremost in television. Never off-screen, sound is always *there*, in its place, and does not need the image to be identified' (157). In television news especially, spoken commentary weaves together and makes coherent what otherwise would seem to be an utterly random stream of images. For televisual images have no intrinsic logic of their own; they are only strung together through the guidance provided by the sound. This does not necessarily mean that images will tend to disappear; more often, it leads to their mad proliferation. When images are governed only by speech, a regulatory principle entirely external to them, they are no longer constrained by any intrinsic logic. This allows them to multiply without limit.

Music video operates according to a related, but slightly different, logic. Chion says that, because music videos are anchored in pre-existing songs, they feature 'a joyous rhetoric of images' (Chion 1994, 166). Music video paradoxically 'liberates the eye. Never is television as visual as during some moments in music videos, even when the image is conspicuously attaching itself to some music that was sufficient in itself' (166). Images are freed precisely because they are entirely superfluous. They do not provide any added value to a song that is already self-sufficient. But they also do not have to advance a narrative, since the music video 'does not involve dramatic time' (166). Instead, 'the music video's image is fully liberated from the linearity normally imposed by sound' (167). The visual track is wedded to the soundtrack in that it establishes certain 'points of synchronisation, where the image matches the production of sound in some way.' But 'the rest of the time,' outside of these synchronisation points, the image track ignores the sound and 'goes its separate way' (167).

Chion notes that 'cinophiles especially attack music videos as eye-assaulting; they dislike the stroboscopic effect of the rapid editing.' However, this is only 'because they are judging the editing according to cinematic criteria' that are no longer valid (Chion 1994, 167). In fact, 'the

rapid succession of shots creates a sense of visual polyphony and even of simultaneity' (166), despite the fact that we only see one image at a time. Chion, writing in 1990, notes that the literal simultaneity of multiple images on a single screen, or of frames within the frame, tends to be rare in film – and even in video, where it is technically easier to accomplish (166). But of course, this situation has changed in the last twenty years. *Southland Tales* has no trouble with multiple frames or windows, and images within images, because these have become so familiar a feature of our contemporary media environment.

*Southland Tales* uses sound precisely in the ways that Chion describes as characteristic of post-cinematic media. In the film, just as in television news, speech guides us through an otherwise incomprehensible labyrinth of proliferating images. The voiceover narration provided by Pilot Abilene (Justin Timberlake) is 'always *there*, in its place,' even when Abilene himself is off-screen, or when the voice is not issuing from his demented onscreen image. Abilene's commentary is tonally flat and detached;<sup>56</sup> it includes backstory information, evocations of various characters' states of mind and readings from the Book of Revelation. This neutral, all-encompassing voice accounts for, and thereby makes possible, the 'apparent visual clash of different spaces' evoked by Manovich – a clash which cannot be resolved on the visual level alone. In traditional Hollywood film, the off-screen voice often acquires a transcendent or God-like authority.<sup>57</sup> In contrast, the flat voice of the television newscaster suggests a bare accumulation of facts, which cannot be made subject to any transcendent judgment. Justin Timberlake's voiceover in *Southland Tales* is similarly blank and

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<sup>56</sup> In the original version of *Southland Tales* shown at Cannes in May 2006, the tone of Timberlake's voiceover was apparently more sarcastic; Kelly says that, in reworking the film for its 2007 commercial release, 'I also had Justin rerecord his narration to be more like Martin Sheen's in *Apocalypse Now*. I had him do it really deadpan' Steuer 2007).

<sup>57</sup> This is the case, for instance, in Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly*, a film that is referenced several times in *Southland Tales*. The stentorian, masculine voice of the villain, Dr. Soberin, is heard throughout; but we do not get to see his face until the very end of the movie. The film emphasises 'the invulnerability of that voice during the extended period of time when its source remains invisible, and its abruptly actualized mortality the moment its source comes into view' (Silverman 1988, 62).

dispassionate. It reduces the film's images to the status of data, or pieces of information, that can be combined in innumerable ways, without concern for the traditional constraints of film syntax. Everything in *Southland Tales* is spoken in the same way, 'said in a single and same sense' (Deleuze 1994, 42); and this Deleuzian *univocity* is the indifferent background that allows differences and impossibilities to emerge.

Stylistically, Kelly's images tend towards a televisual flatness. They usually feature conventional character positioning: either centred two-shots, or shot/reverse-shot setups. But this deliberate visual blandness is what allows for the stacking of images within images, as well as for the frequent irruption of bizarre tableaux and hallucinatory visual displacements. I have already mentioned the car commercial and the G.I. Joe doll on the Venice Beach boardwalk. But there's also the freakish entourage of the Baron von Westphalen; and the dazzling three-minute-long sequence shot that weaves through the crowd celebrating Independence Day aboard the Baron's 'mega-zeppelin'; and the vision of Pilot Abilene turning round in his gun turret, with his disfigured face, his maniacal grin and an insane glint to his eye; and the scene in which Ronald Taverner gestures in front of a mirror that only returns his reflection with a delay of several seconds. All these are possible only because, as Chion says, in a televisual mode 'the image [i]s something extra' (Chion 1994, 159). The overfullness of *Southland Tales*' soundtrack – which includes, in addition to Abilene's voiceover, a scattering of CNN-style news reports and Moby's brooding, ambient musical score – allows for the unmooring of the film's images, a scattering of the weightless detritus of more than a century of moving pictures.

With its tendency to congeal action into self-contained set pieces, *Southland Tales* also frequently approaches the condition of music video. At certain points in the film, the already fractured narrative comes to a complete halt. 'Dramatic time' is suspended, giving way to an 'audiovisual passage' whose temporality is dictated by a pop song that dominates the soundtrack.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the most memorable sequence in the film is precisely

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<sup>58</sup> For the notion of the 'audiovisual passage,' I draw upon the work-in-progress of Carole Piechota (2009). At certain privileged moments in many recent American

such a passage. The sequence features Pilot Abilene – which is to say, Justin Timberlake – dancing and lip-synching to the Killers’ hit song from 2005, ‘All These Things I’ve Done.’ There is no fast cutting, but the cinematography is entirely subordinated to the rhythms of the song. Within the diegesis, the scene is motivated as Abilene’s drug-induced hallucination, the result of injecting himself with a powerful psychedelic called Fluid Karma. But really, it breaks out of the diegesis altogether, and addresses the film’s audience directly. The sequence is a delirious, but utterly cold and abstract, sexual fantasia; it is best regarded, perhaps, as a post-cinematic, videocentric revision of Busby Berkeley’s big production numbers from Warner Brothers musicals of the 1930s. The scene is utterly extraneous as narrative, but it works as a kind of affective focal point, bringing to a head the feelings of displacement and distraught confusion that have drifted throughout the film, and touched nearly all the characters. In an interview, Kelly even calls the sequence ‘the heart and soul of the film’ (Peranson 2007).

In this sequence, Abilene/Timberlake stumbles about in a game arcade, as dry ice smoke swirls from the floor. He is wearing a bloodstained T-shirt. He exhibits a ravaged beauty: the symmetry and perfect sculpting of his features is disrupted by the scar lines that traverse one side of his face, traces of his injury in Fallujah from friendly fire. As he progresses through the arcade, he flips the dog tags around his neck while lip-synching the repeated line: ‘I’ve got soul, but I’m not a soldier.’ But the lip-synching is not maintained consistently; at times, he stops doing it, even as the song continues. Abilene/Timberlake drinks beer and pours it over his head like a frat-boy party dude. He moves forward, staring into the camera, except

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films, she writes, the director ‘subordinate[s] the image to the counters and tempo of the music’ (21). A familiar pop song is played in its entirety; its excessive insistence within the film addresses, and affects, the viewer/listener directly, demanding an immediate emotional response. Interpellated in this way, the viewer/listener cannot understand the song just as an expression of the protagonist’s sensibility. The music overflows the diegetic situation in which it arises, and to which it ostensibly refers. ‘As these passages frequently last for several minutes (often the length of a pop song) and either lack or downplay dialogue, the perceiver is left with more time to acknowledge or contemplate her bodily and affective experiences’ (22).

when he seems too befuddled to focus his attention anywhere. At one point, he gives the camera (and us) the finger and then smirks as he passes out of the frame. All the while, Abilene/Timberlake is surrounded by a bevy of Busby Berkeley-esque nearly identical women wearing platinum-blond, curly wigs and skimpy nurses' uniforms. They are 'sexy' in a tawdry and tacky way, with the fake smiles we expect to see on TV. They gyrate and kick their legs, as Abilene/Timberlake entertains their attentions briefly and then pushes them out of the way. The dance continues, with dreamlike motions, even as the song fades from the soundtrack, to be replaced by Moby's low, ambient drone.

The sequence as a whole is dominated by Justin Timberlake's charismatic presence. You can't forget the celebrity behind the character he plays. This is all the more so, in that the rock grandiloquence of The Killers is so distant from the R&B-inflected pop of Timberlake's own musical recordings. This discordance only draws our attention still more acutely to Timberlake as a media construct, or celebrity persona. For here, as in so many places in American popular culture today, Timberlake displays a charisma that seems incompatible with – and yet that somehow arises seamlessly out of – his bland-as-white-bread, blue-eyed-soul presence. Justin Timberlake seems to be a 'man without qualities,' hyperbolically bland and ordinary; and yet this everydayness generates a powerful aura. He radiates a smothering sexual heat, especially when he appears in music videos by female R&B singers (Rihanna, Ciara and even Madonna).<sup>59</sup> In *Southland*

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<sup>59</sup> See Timberlake's videos with Rihanna ('Rehab,' directed by Anthony Mandler, 2007), Ciara ('Love Sex Magic,' 2009, directed by Diane Martel), and Madonna ('Four Minutes,' 2008, directed by Jonas & François). These videos may be contrasted with the videos from Timberlake's own *FutureSex/LoveSounds* album, which Joshua Clover convincingly describes as a 'homosocial' exchange between Timberlake and his producer Timbaland: 'The album itself, both in its sonic intertwining and lyrics, is almost entirely about the great love between Justin Timberlake and Tim Mosely, who basically sing, rap and murmur romantic, sensual phrases to each other for about an hour, climaxing mid-album with the slinky, beautiful 'What Goes Around...'' (Clover 2006). In this case as well, sexual intensity seems to be conjured out of almost nothing. It's as if the glamour and heat were not anchored in Timberlake's physical or empirical presence, but arose precisely out of the gap or distance between that actual presence and the endlessly reproduced, fluttering image of Timberlake as pure media product. The aura does not come from the performer himself, so much as from the *production*

*Tales*, this sexual energy is turned inside out, or diverted into a solipsistic dementia. But it retains the odd, haunting sense of something not-quite-there: as if it were not reduced, but rather intensified, by the process of being hollowed out, turned into an empty shell of itself. It's not for nothing that Pilot Abilene incessantly quotes, in addition to the Book of Revelation, the final lines of T. S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' – only inverted so that 'the world ends/ Not with a whimper but a bang.'

In any case, Pilot Abilene's music video hallucination is at once utterly depraved, and yet also oddly impersonal. It is flat, self-contained and without resonance, as if it were being performed in a special chamber designed to muffle and absorb anything that might exceed the literal, or that might lead us to connotations beyond the obvious. The scene is nearly unspeakably ridiculous, at the same time that it is creepily menacing, and yet also exhilarating. When you shoot Fluid Karma, Abilene says just before injecting himself, 'you talk to God without even seeing Him. You hear His voice and you see His disciples. They appear like angels under a sea of black umbrellas. Angels who can see through time.' In other words, speech is severed from vision. You hear what you are unable to see; and what you see (the fake-porno nurses as angels) is the always-inadequate representation, or messenger, of a divine futurity that you can never quite apprehend. For Richard Kelly, as for Philip K. Dick, if you let the forces of the cosmos stream through you, then you will find yourself channelling chintzy advertising specials and reality shows. Watching Timberlake strut and lip-sync among the fake-porno nurses, it's almost as if time had stopped for the duration of the song, looping back upon itself in order to intensify, by a sort of positive feedback, the film's overall sense of apocalyptic imminence: of something catastrophic not so much happening, as always being about to happen. Justin Timberlake dramatises the state of teetering on a precipice without actually falling over; or better, of falling over but never finishing falling over, never quite hitting the ground.

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*process* in the course of which he is transfigured. The old Hollywood manufactured celebrities, of course. But Timberlake's post-cinematic celebrity is different, in that it openly attaches itself to the actual process of manufacture, rather than just to its result.

What I have been saying about the Justin Timberlake music video scene applies, in large, to the movie as a whole. *Southland Tales* is overloaded to the point of hallucination; yet at the same time it depicts a culture drained of vitality and on the brink of death. The movie exuberantly envisions the entropic dissipation of all energy and the implosion of social and media networks into a flat, claustrophobic, degree-zero banality. This end-point looms continually before us, but it is never quite reached. It is as if the film were always holding something back; or as if it were running repeatedly through a holding pattern, like an airplane circling the airport without landing. Timberlake/Abilene repeatedly tells us that we are watching the end of the world. But this end is continually being deferred. Even in the last moments of the film, when we finally get the ‘bang’ that we have been promised all along, it is unclear what (if anything) has actually been accomplished. It may be the Apocalypse foretold by the Book of Revelation, or it may be just another media show. We usually say in such cases that ‘time will tell’; but in the world of *Southland Tales*, there is precisely no time left to tell.

Indeed, time has been depleted in the world of *Southland Tales*, just like every other natural resource. The psychedelic drug Fluid Karma allows you to travel or ‘bleed’ through time. But this drug is just a by-product of the new energy source, also called Fluid Karma, that has freed America from its dependence on oil. Fluid Karma is produced by the Baron von Westphalen and his Treer Corporation; they manufacture it by capturing the motion of the ocean tides, a seemingly limitless source of energy. But of course, there is no such thing as a ‘perpetual motion machine’ (which is how the Baron describes Fluid Karma). The extraction of the ocean’s energy results in a kind of tidal drag that slows down the rotation of the earth. This leads in turn to a gradual running down of time itself and a rift in the space-time continuum. The leaking-away of time – its asymptotic approach to an end that it never fully attains – is both a major theme of *Southland Tales* and the principle behind its formal organisation of sounds and images.

Deleuze describes modernist cinema as an art of the *time-image*. Post-World-War-II art cinema offers us an image of ‘time itself, ‘a little time in its



pure state'' (Deleuze 1989, 17). In the modernist cinema's direct image of time, sheer duration is affirmed in its own right and liberated from any subordination to narrative. But *Southland Tales*, as a post-cinematic work, is about the exhaustion of this image of time – or perhaps I should say, the exhaustion of temporality itself. This is evidenced by the way that digital media do not seem able to 'communicate duration' – as David Rodowick complains, quoting Babette Mangolte (Rodowick 2007, 163). Just as the movement-image gave way to the time-image, so now the time-image gives way to a new sort of audiovisual or multimedia image: one lacking 'the sense of time as *la durée*' Rodowick 2007, 171).<sup>60</sup> What Rodowick sees as sheer loss, however – a reduction to 'the 'real time' of a continuous present' (171) – needs to be regarded in an affirmative sense as well. If we have lost a certain humanist pathos of lived duration, in return we have gained the sheer profusion and density of 'real-time' innovation and invention. Post-cinematic works like *Southland Tales*, with their imploded temporality, 'don't bother to be concerned about the way they combine devices that might be opposed in the abstract' (Chion 1994,167). Few works go further than *Southland Tales* in exploring the potentialities, both for good and for ill, of the new media regime that is now emerging before our eyes and ears.

The hypermediated reconfiguration of time and space that *Southland Tales* offers us is a creative response, not just to the demands of new digital technologies, but also to the social and cultural conditions of what Mark Fisher calls *capitalist realism* (Fisher 2009). As Fisher puts it, echoing both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, today 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.' Even as we shudder with apocalyptic premonitions, we are haunted by 'the widespread sense, not only that capitalism is the only viable political and economic system, but that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.' In such a world, the future is no longer open. We have an inescapable sense that 'the future harbours only reiteration and re permutation. Could it be

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<sup>60</sup> Though I am still using the word 'image' here, this must be understood in a multimedia sense, as Deleuze uses it towards the end of his second *Cinema* volume: the audiovisual image can be a 'sound image' as well as a 'visual image' (Deleuze 1989, 241-261).

that there are no breaks, no ‘shocks of the new’ to come?’ (Fisher 2009). For all processes, and all relations, have been captured in the form of saleable commodities. This is the real meaning of Hegel’s and Kojève’s ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama 1993). Capitalism not only ‘subsumes and consumes all previous history’ (Fisher 2009); it preemptively appropriates and commodifies all futurity as well. The world can end, but it cannot change; or better, the only change it can know is the ‘capitalistic fashion-novelty’ derided by Ernst Bloch: ‘sheer aimless infinity and incessant changeability; – where everything ought to be constantly new, everything remains just as it was... a merely endless, contentless zigzag’ (Bloch 1995, 201, 140). In the world of capitalist realism, duration implodes; it shrinks down to a dimensionless, infinitesimal point. Time is emptied out, or whittled away. The task for a critical art today is not to mourn this loss, but to discover what possibilities the new situation offers.

*Southland Tales* accomplishes such a task through its manic multiplication of new-media strategies. Every characteristic of the post-cinematic media regime, under the conditions of capitalist realism, is accelerated to the breaking point. We see this in Richard Kelly’s experiments with narrative and cinematic form; but also in the film’s treatment of subjectivity and in the way it uses celebrities. Most of the actors in *Southland Tales* are pop culture icons of one sort or another. Some of them are best known for their roles in previous films, while many of them made their name in other media. In every case, however, their acting in *Southland Tales* cuts sharply against their familiar personas. I have already mentioned the odd, pivotal role that Justin Timberlake plays in the film. But there’s also Dwayne Johnson (a.k.a. The Rock), whose Boxer Santaros is a befuddled amnesiac; Johnson shows a vulnerability, and a continual fearfulness, utterly at odds with his past roles as a professional wrestler and as an action hero. Sarah Michelle Gellar will never escape her identification as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; but nothing could be more un-Buffy-like than her hilarious performance here as the perky, upbeat, humourless, self-promoting and incorrigibly naive porn starlet Krysta Now. And Seann William Scott, who radiates existential anguish in his role as the doubles Ronald and Roland

Taverner, is best known for his performance as the irrepressibly crass Stifler in the *American Pie* movies. In all these cases, the violent contrast between the character in the diegesis, and the well-known persona of the celebrity who is playing that character, leads to a kind of cognitive dissonance.

For instance, Dwayne Johnson's character, Boxer Santaros, is amnesiac and literally beside himself; we ultimately learn that this amnesia is a consequence of space/time displacement, together with the murder of his 'other' self. Boxer is a rich and famous Hollywood star with Republican Party connections (much as Dwayne Johnson himself is in 'real life'); he is even married to Madeleine Frost (played by Mandy Moore in yet another bit of celebrity counter-casting), the bitchy, fashion-victim daughter of a key Republican Senator. But Boxer does not remember anything of his past life. This means that, although everyone else in the world of the film recognises him, he does not recognise himself. Amnesia takes away his knowledge of his own stardom; but it also turns him into even more of an actor, since anything he does makes him feel like he is playing a fictional character. His only possible mode of being is therefore to play it by ear, straining to imagine himself into whatever role he finds himself having been cast for. No wonder Boxer keeps slipping into the role of a character in an apocalyptic screenplay that he is supposed to have written – though he does not remember writing it either, but only reading it.

Dwayne Johnson gives a brilliant performance as this sort of a performer. You can see him trying on the various roles, being touched by fear and anxiety and surprise, and above all by a sort of bemused puzzlement – but always braving it out and trying to act in the way the situation demands. Is it possible to be a Method actor, inhabiting your role, when you don't have any personal memories to call upon in order to think yourself into that role? Is it possible to be a Method actor, drawing upon personal memories in order to inhabit the role of somebody without any such personal memories? Boxer Santaros' hyperperformative, or improvisational, simulation of interiority is the only model of subjectivity that *Southland Tales* gives us. The 'split subject' of an earlier Hollywood era (the particularity of the diegetic character, doubled by the unchanging,

recognisable persona of the star who played that character) opens up into a potentially endless hall of mirrors. Boxer Santaros is an extreme version the *flexible personality* demanded by what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2007) call 'the new spirit of capitalism.' On the one hand, such a personality must be capable of participating, with total energy and enthusiasm, in whatever project engages him at the moment. On the other hand, he must also have 'the ability to disengage from a project in order to be *available*' for a new one. 'Even at the peak of engagement, enthusiasm, involvement in a project,' the flexible personality must be 'prepared for change and capable of new investments' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, 112). Who could meet these schizophrenic demands better than an amnesiac actor?

But there's more to Boxer Santaros, and to the other characters in *Southland Tales*, than just this radical lability. Boxer and Pilot Abilene and Ronald and Roland Taverner and even Krysta Now, also possess what I can only call a powerful and moving *sincerity*. Such an attribute might seem entirely out of place, in a 'postmodern' world, with no depths, where everything is reduced to the status of a one-dimensional caricature and where 'personality' is entirely a matter of self-promotion and of continual adaptation to changing circumstances. But sincerity is precisely *not* a question of depth, or of authenticity, or of some fundamental inner quality of being.<sup>61</sup> Sincerity merely implies a certain *consistency* in the way that a being acts and presents itself, without presupposing anything about the basis

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<sup>61</sup> The classic reference point for these matters is Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972). Trilling sees authenticity as a modernist invention, while sincerity has a much longer genealogy. As Orlando Patterson summarises it, updating Trilling's distinction for the twenty-first century: 'sincerity...requires us to act and really be the way that we present ourselves to others. Authenticity involves finding and expressing the true inner self and judging all relationships in terms of it' (Patterson 2006). Today, I think that we have good reason to be suspicious of claims to authenticity: in the first place, because such claims rely upon a modernist sense of depth which is no longer tenable in an age of universal commodification or 'real subsumption'; and in the second place, because 'authenticity' has become entirely a category used by advertising and marketing. Sincerity, however, has a much wider range of application; it does not presuppose the existence of any 'true inner self' to which one must remain faithful at all costs. A fiction, fabrication, or construction may well be sincere, even though it is evidently not authentic.

of this consistency. Graham Harman defines sincerity as the way that ‘a thing always just is what it is’ (Harman 2005, 143).<sup>62</sup>

In this sense, we must say that Boxer Santaros is altogether sincere. What is being expressed sincerely, throughout *Southland Tales*, is precisely the diffuseness and discomfort of this character, together with its difference from the usual screen persona of Dwayne Johnson, together with the difference between that usual persona and the actual, empirical person who Dwayne Johnson is. None of these uncertainties and differences are smoothed over and none of them are posed as ‘contradictions’ to be dialectically resolved. Instead, they are just *presented*, and transformed into spectacle, in their full messiness and intractability. In the midst of his multimedia barrage, Kelly also ‘fill[s] the screen,’ as Amy Taubin rightly puts it, ‘with tenderness, longing, [and] despair’ (Taubin 2007). Boxer Santaros never figures out who he truly is; but the pathos is overwhelming when, towards the end of the film, he gets up to dance on a big disco floor, and is joined both by his girlfriend Krysta Now and by Madeleine Frost, the wife he has forgotten. In purely narrative terms, the moment is absurd. But after two hours in which their characters have argued, plotted with and against one another, and generally gone around in circles, this final conjunction of Dwayne Johnson, Sarah Michelle Gellar and Mandy Moore has a force of conviction that makes it almost sublime.

*Southland Tales* does not offer us a way out from the nightmare of ‘capitalist realism,’ or the neoliberal ‘end of history.’ But in its crazy ambition, its full engagement with contemporary media, and its terrible sincerity, it is one of those rare works that dares to be ‘as radical as reality itself.’ In its demented fabulation, it reflects upon our actual situation, while at the same time inserting itself within that situation, rather than taking a pretended distance from it. Kelly’s ‘science fiction’ is scientifically and

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<sup>62</sup> So understood, Harman says, sincerity is ‘a universal structure that is inescapable by any entity, one that is present at all moments in all parts of the universe’ (Harman 2005, 136). I find this useful as a background assumption, in opposition to the universal cynicism that is sometimes assumed in accounts of the ‘postmodern.’ But I still claim that sincerity is manifested in different ways, and to different degrees, as objects relate to other objects, or more generally to their surroundings.

technologically unsound and could best be described as delirious – but that is precisely why it is directly relevant to a world in which ‘the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion’ (Haraway 1991, 149).

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