



DELEUZE AND  
THE CINEMAS OF  
PERFORMANCE

POWERS OF AFFECTION

Elena del Río

## Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance

A mis queridos padres Victoria y Enrique

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of Performance  
Powers of Affection

Elena del Río

Edinburgh University Press

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Edinburgh University Press Ltd  
22 George Square, Edinburgh

Typeset in Monotype Ehrhardt by  
Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire, and  
printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7486 3525 2 (hardback)

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## Acknowledgments

Under the title “Between Brecht and Artaud: Choreographing Affect in Fassbinder’s *The Marriage of Maria Braun*,” an earlier version of a part of Chapter 2 has appeared in *The New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 3:2 (November 2005). Under the title “Rethinking Feminist Film Theory: Counter-Narcissistic Performance in Sally Potter’s *Thriller*,” an earlier version of a part of Chapter 3 has been published in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 21:1 (January 2004). An earlier version of a part of Chapter 4 has been published in *Kinoeye*, 3.7 (June 9, 2003) under the title “Performing the Narrative of Seduction: Claire Denis’ *Beau Travail*”; an expanded version of the latter has appeared in *Studies in French Cinema*, 3:3 (December 2003) under the title “Body Transformations in the Films of Claire Denis: From Ritual to Play.”

This book could not have materialized without the intervention of many intellectual and personal encounters over the course of twenty years. I consider myself very fortunate to have met the most outstanding scholars and the warmest of friends at each step along the way.

I am grateful to Kaja Silverman for providing me with the first model of feminist scholarship. Professor Silverman’s intellectual passion and commitment to feminist thought were crucial in ushering me into film studies and in giving me the confidence I needed in my first years as a graduate student. I am grateful to Judith Butler for listening and helping at a time when I was in great need of support. I am deeply indebted to Vivian Sobchack’s work and support over the years. My encounter with Vivian was instrumental in enabling me to find my own voice and to articulate the philosophical interests and concerns closest to my heart. Of my peers at UC Berkeley, I want to thank Susan Courtney for her continued friendship despite geographical and temporal distance.

I also want to thank the many colleagues and friends who have been close to me in either a professional or a personal capacity while I was writing this book. My belief in this project was sustained and encouraged by the stimulating feedback I received from those who read or listened to portions of the manuscript – Brenda Austin-Smith, Jennifer Barker, Jodi Brooks, Janina Falkowska, Homa King, Patricia Pisters, and George Toles. I owe



a special debt of gratitude to Ian Buchanan and Ronald Bogue for supporting this project, to David Martin-Jones for his detailed answers to my questions, to Amy Herzog for her willingness to engage with me in a really stimulating exchange of ideas, and to Corrinne Harol and Rosalind Kerr for their unwavering generosity with their time and their amazing minds. I am grateful to Sarah Edwards and James Dale at Edinburgh University Press for their guidance throughout the editing and publishing process.

Finally, I wish to thank my brother Enrique for his interest in my work and for making me laugh till it hurts, the Edmonton gang for the love and the laughter that keep us warm and sane, and Rita, for being the loyalest, kindest friend one could hope for.

My greatest debt is to P. Rawat for teaching me the most necessary kind of knowledge.

## INTRODUCTION

# Cinema and the Affective-Performative

Thought lags behind nature.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

An intensive trait starts working for itself, a hallucinatory perception, synesthesia, perverse mutation, or play of images shakes loose, challenging the hegemony of the signifier. In the case of the child, gestural, mimetic, ludic, and other semiotic systems regain their freedom and extricate themselves from the “tracing,” that is, from the dominant competence of the teacher’s language – a microscopic event upsets the local balance of power.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Once again, I am watching the scene of Dorothy Malone’s “dance of death” in *Written on the Wind*. First, I see a female body dancing to the brassy sounds of a Latin jazz score. Then, as the music and the body become one, their force can no longer be confined within the frame of the dancer’s body. Such fury cannot survive the contours of a thing. It gives way to a red, headless and armless, amoeba-like stain that pulsates on the surface of the screen with a movement that lacks calculation or goal, its purpose spent on its own maddening undulations. The framed portrait of Rock Hudson has long been forgotten as the dancer’s invited audience, its formal rigidity inadequate to the demands of such an unruly force. Shots of Malone’s frantic dance clash against shots of Robert Keith, the actor playing Malone’s father, as he laboriously works his way up the mansion’s staircase, lets go of his frail grasp of the banister, and then spirals down to the bottom of the stairs. The boundaries of life and death, rise and fall, have once more been scrambled in an impossible affective knot. The moment is always different, but one thing remains constant. Each time I watch, I am moved and affected in my body and in my senses. The Oedipal significance of the scene will surface later, or it may have been thought of countless times before. For now, I am being overtaken by a whirlwind of emotions and sensations. And the more aware I become of their difference from rational language, the more compelled I feel to describe them. It is moments like this that inspire me to write about moving images that have

an unlimited capacity to move us. Such capacity of images to affect, and to be affected, through their kinetic and gestural voices reminds me of Giorgio Agamben's idea that "[moving] gesture rather than [static] image is the cinematic element" (Agamben 1993: 138). Looking at the cinema as a series of moving gestures, this book aims at expressing the awesome force the performing body, and the film image as body, become when caught in the "throes of expression" (Massumi 2002a: xvii). But before I explain the relevance of such terms as "affect" and "expression" to a theory of film performance, I will take a brief detour and account for the ways in which my project intersects with similar projects and areas of debate in film studies.

The consideration of the film image as moving materiality/corporeality constitutes a relatively recent development in the field of film and media studies. From the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, the prevailing critical paradigm revolved around considerations of visual representation and the application of structures of meaning drawn from semiotic and psychoanalytic models. This paradigm yielded many fruitful investigations into the power relations concerning binaries of race, gender, and other power-differential situations. But the representational model proved either unwilling or insufficient to address the way in which the experience of the moving image can at times escape binary determinations and established signifying codes. Driven by notions of representation, semiotic, psychoanalytic, and ideological analyses unwittingly furthered oppositional binaries that the cinema itself has consistently proven quite capable of undoing, binaries such as reality/illusion, subject/object, thought/emotion, activity/passivity, and so on. The imposition of a totalizing picture of reality as structured meaning carried out by the representational approach left little, if anything, to the unstructured sensations that are likewise set in motion in the film-viewing experience.

Beginning in the early to mid-1990s, and crucially inspired by Vivian Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992), film scholars began to take an interest in rediscovering the material and sensual aspects of the body as capable not only of receiving, but also of acting upon, the structuration of meaning in the cinema. Thinking about film through such notions as the lived-body (applied to both film and spectator), the embodied and synesthetic nature of perception, the reversibility of perception and expression, and the material and sensuous operations of the technological film apparatus, *The Address of the Eye* sought to overcome, on the one hand, the sexual objectification performed by psychoanalytic film theory and, on the other hand, the reifying approach to existence practiced within the Marxist model.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of Sobchack's study,<sup>2</sup> other

scholars extended her concern for the active role of the film and viewer's body into more specific areas of investigation. Thus, Laura Marks' *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000) proposed a radical interlacing of vision and touch as one of the grounding concepts in her analysis of Middle Eastern video works. Through an emphasis on *haptic visuality*, Marks provided a comprehensive and alternative approach to the theoretical reduction of the viewing experience to vision and to the corresponding fragmentation of the senses.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Jennifer Barker's *The Tactile Eye* (2008) has offered another thought-provoking account of the film experience as a tactile interaction between film and viewer, an interaction that she situates at three overlapping levels of the spectator and the film bodies: the skin, the musculature, and the viscera.<sup>4</sup>

While Sobchack's and Barker's projects draw primarily upon Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology in their exploration of the corporeal dimensions of cinema, Marks works with both phenomenological and Deleuzian theories, bringing together the subjective implications of the former and the more impersonal aspects of the latter.<sup>5</sup> As evident in a number of books and edited collections by Ronald Bogue, Ian Buchanan, Gregory Flaxman, David-Martin Jones, Barbara Kennedy, Patricia Pisters, Anna Powell, David Rodowick, Steven Shaviro,<sup>6</sup> and others, the writings of Gilles Deleuze, sometimes on his own, sometimes in collaboration with Félix Guattari, have also offered a major source of inspiration for scholars attempting to reconsider the film image from a non-representational angle. For reasons that will become apparent in the course of this introduction, Deleuze's philosophy of transcendental empiricism (or, as is also termed, incorporeal materialism) has proven exceptionally relevant to the specific affective-performative concerns I set out to explore in this book. Deleuze's understanding of the body as an assemblage of forces or affects that enter into composition with a multiplicity of other forces or affects restores to the body the dimension of intensity lost in the representational paradigm. Even more directly relevant to the specific aims of this book, the conceptual proximity I posit between issues of affect and performance is one that I see already latent in Deleuze's own work. I will later account more fully for this conceptual tie. For now, I would like to suggest that bodily forces or affects are thoroughly creative and performative in their ceaseless activity of drawing and redrawing connections with each other through a process of self-modification or becoming. In this sense, the creative activity of bodily forces is ontologically akin to a performance, an action or event that coincides with the generative processes of existence itself. In the gestures and movements of the performing body, incorporeal forces or affects become

concrete expression-events that attest to the body's powers of action and transformation.

### From representation to performance

Brian Massumi's distinction between *structure* and *event* bears a strong resemblance to the distinction between representational and performative approaches underlying the core arguments in this book:

Nothing is prefigured in the event. It is the collapse of structured distinction into intensity, of rules into paradox . . . The expression-event is the system of the inexplicable: emergence, into and against . . . the re-production of a structure . . . Intensity is the unassimilable. (Massumi 2002b: 27)

As an event, performance is cut off from any preconceived, anterior scenario or reality. In its fundamental ontological sense, performance gives rise to the real. While representation is mimetic, performance is creative and ontogenetic. In representation, repetition gives birth to the same; in performance, each repetition enacts its own unique event. Performance suspends all prefigurations and structured distinctions, to become the event wherein new flows of thought and sensation can emerge.<sup>7</sup> *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (henceforth referred to by its shortest subtitle *Powers of Affection*) considers performance as expression-event of unassimilable affect (unassimilable to language, binary structures, and ideological functions), and the performing/performative body as the site where the affective event takes place, in either its productive or receptive modalities, or more likely, in both simultaneously.

Although my analysis of particular films will engage various levels of performance in the cinema – the literal, narrative level of on-stage performance; the discursive level of identity performance/performativity; and the affective level – it is the level of affectivity that I wish to foreground. *Powers of Affection* draws attention to the affective intensity bodies are for other bodies inside and outside a film. I am not concerned with film as a scene of visual representation, whether in a classical, naïve realist sense, or in the textual, semiotic/psychoanalytic sense; instead, I am concerned with the performative dimension of bodies in the cinema (and of the cinematic image itself as a body) at the ontological level: bodies as doers, generators, producers, performers of worlds, of sensations and affects that bear no mimetic or analogical ties to an external or transcendental reality. From this standpoint, performance involves a mobilization of affective circuits that supersedes the viewer's investment in the image through representational structures of belief and mimesis.

A concept of the performative as informed by Deleuze's thought on the body of affect differs in some crucial respects from concepts of spectacle and performativity that have previously garnered the attention of film scholars. As I argue more extensively in Chapter 1, both the notions of spectacle – as originally theorized within Laura Mulvey's account of the fetishization of the female body in the cinema – and performativity – as primarily understood by Judith Butler's account of identity as a performative, imitative process – remain strongly indebted to a representational paradigm. For Mulvey, the spectacle of the female body engaged in some form of literal or metaphorical performance functions as a momentary disruption of narrative. But this threat to the binding power of illusionist realism is normally canceled out by the film's own inertia toward subsuming spectacle within narrative. More importantly, and this is key to Mulvey's conflation of spectacle and fetishism, the inherent force of the spectacular body is often undermined by the critical tendency to read spectacle merely as a visual, static image rather than as a moving performance with the power to de-form and trans-form the physical/aesthetic as well as the ideological dimensions of the film. Agamben's definition of the film image as a gesture, which I alluded to earlier, eloquently exposes the limits of Mulvey's notion of spectacle:

Film images are neither "timeless postures" . . . nor "static sections" of movement, but "moving sections," images which are themselves in motion . . . the mythical fixity of the image has been broken, and we should not really speak of images here, but of gestures. (Agamben 1993: 139)

From the feminist psychoanalytic conceptualization of the female performer as visual fetish it follows that the performer's body is considered an exhaustively written body. Allegedly colonized by another's language/discourse, another's desire, another's fantasy, the female performer's is rarely a body capable of partially writing its own meanings or of momentarily escaping the zone of explicable meaning. The idea that everything, including natural processes, is "constructed in discourse"<sup>8</sup> (Massumi 1996: 231) is also central to Butler's theorization of the gender performative. As I show in Chapter 1, instead of attending to the positive force of difference in repetition – the uniqueness of each performative event – Butler submits the repetitive gesture to a culturally predetermined phantasmatic ideal that reinstates a transcendental logic of sameness and a notion of desire based on lack and negativity. From the perspective of performance as affective event, I argue, the body's expressions are not exhausted by the pressures to perform according to cultural, linguistic, or ideological requirements. Rather, alongside the inevitability of conforming

to these pressures, there always lies the possibility that affective intensity may provide a line of escape – in Deleuze's words, a line of flight.

*Powers of Affection* reconsiders issues of spectacle and performativity from an affective, not merely visual, standpoint: spectacle as an affective-performative force that upsets the balance of power between performer and world, performer and audience. My readings of films in this book will show how the body's movements and gestures are capable of transforming static forms and concepts typical of a representational paradigm into forces and concepts that exhibit a transformative/expansive potential. For example, by no means irrelevant to my understanding of films in this book, such psychoanalytic concepts as fetishism, sadomasochism, or narcissism will nonetheless be shown to undergo certain processes of deterritorialization and reconfiguration. Thus, as is especially the case in the films by Sirk and Fassbinder examined here, the fetish may show a tendency toward becoming a distorting, de-forming force, sadomasochistic relations may provoke a shock to thought, and a subjective narcissism may easily turn into the film's subjectless self-affection.

The binary opposition of body and language, body and mind, in the representational approach gives way to a far more complex and indeterminate relation between these terms when assessed from a performative perspective – not only because words and flesh are continually overlapping fields,<sup>9</sup> but also because, as a number of both phenomenological and Deleuzian thinkers remind us, the flesh possesses its own intelligence or logic, and, in this sense, it displays a certain “indifference to semiosis” (Kirby 1997: 125). In other words, as part of an intractable and wild nature, the body thinks without thinking. It goes about the business of advancing its life-preserving goals with an exactitude and complexity that defies the egological systematicity of representational thought. *Powers of Affection* posits the inherent literacy of nature as a far greater challenge to the human claims to exclusivity of consciousness and agency than psychoanalytic notions of lack or misrecognition/*méconnaissance*. For, as Vicki Kirby argues, the antihumanist tenets of Lacanian psychoanalysis may well “acknowledge a subject caught in the vicissitudes of language and . . . incapable of knowing himself,” yet “the extent of this decentering is limited to the complexities of the cultural order and to its psychical and social determinations” (Kirby 1997: 127). The shift in Deleuzian thinking from an emphasis on subjectivity to the idea of subjectless subjectivities – singular becomings disengaged from human egological agency – both decenters and multiplies the possibilities of action and affection of the performative body. As will become apparent when I turn to examine specific films, the weakening of subjectivity is invariably attended by a simultaneous

intensification of bodily forces and capacities. *Powers of Affection* is thus driven by the pragmatic, ethical emphasis on what the body is *capable of doing* with, and in excess of, its cultural positioning. Such bodily ethics is committed to the principles of motion and exchange, an ontology of becoming rather than being.

### **Deleuze and performance: the affective-expressive event**

In the last decades, film and performance studies have intersected in two main areas: an increasing attention to performance as a synonym for acting, with an emphasis on the relation between theatre and film performance,<sup>10</sup> and a focus on performativity as a way to account for the social construction of identity. For the most part, scholars interested in acting have focused on delineating dramaturgical codes and actorly conventions, at times also crossing over into the cultural analysis of the phenomenon of the star and the star system. This latter interest connects in some ways with the emphasis on performativity. The term “performativity” has been so widely applied in film and cultural analysis as to become a practically empty designation. Performativity has come to be understood as the culturally dictated performance of identity based on the well-trodden binarisms of gender, race, class, and so on. Thus, scholars have variously referred to “performing femininity/masculinity,” “performing queerness,” “performing whiteness/blackness,” or as many other discriminatory categories as one may be able to consider. Although these perspectives are necessary insofar as they address the cultural and social positionings of identity, they tend to pay little or no attention to the specific and unique bodily expressions that accompany performative acts, treating the body’s physicality as an abstract given.<sup>11</sup> In short, these predominantly discursive approaches to performance remain philosophically insufficient when one wishes to address the wealth of intersections between the performative and the cinematic.

For Deleuze, the function of thinking is to constantly reinvent the act of living. Given Deleuze’s understanding of thinking as a never-ending process that forges connections among concepts without striving for a unifying systematicity, a fully coherent or finished theory of performance could hardly have been his aim. Yet Deleuze’s work offers a wealth of conceptual tools that allow us to think through the function of performance in film in productive and inventive ways. In his *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989), Deleuze devotes part of a chapter to the cinema of the body. Deleuze’s interest here lies in the capacity of bodily surfaces to make us think of the unthought. Both in its ceremonial and in its everyday attitudes, gestures, and postures, the body in films by Cassavetes, Godard, Rivette,



Akerman, and others begins to respond to, and indeed perform, the fundamental question Deleuze borrows from seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza: “What can a body do,” how can we know its awesome powers of action and affection? In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari echo Spinoza’s question in these terms:

We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 257)

In what follows I would like to suggest how Spinoza’s bodily ethics and Deleuze’s references to the latter in his writings on cinema and elsewhere may be elaborated and expanded upon in order to make some crucial headway into the present confluence of performance and film studies. Such confluence may be productively tapped into by looking at film performance through the lens of Spinoza’s and Deleuze’s concepts of affect and expression.

Spinoza defines a body’s essence as its degree of power, “a certain capacity to be affected . . . and the affections that, each moment, exercise that capacity” (Deleuze 1992: 217). Deleuze adopts Spinoza’s affirmative idea of power as *potentia* – the body’s power to do, to act, “its capacity to multiply connections that may be realized by a given body to varying degrees in different situations” (Massumi in Deleuze and Guattari 1987: xvii). This capacity for existence expresses itself both in the body’s *active power* to affect, and in its *passive power* to be affected by, other bodies. Affects are thus the *powers of the body*.

As Elizabeth Grosz has noted, a Spinozist ethics offers a radically different account of the body at the intersection of affect, expression, and power than the largely negative and deterministic account elaborated by psychoanalytically based theorists. As she explains, alongside the dominant notions of desire as lack or negativity,

there is a tradition, we can date from Spinoza, in which desire is primarily seen as production rather than as lack. It cannot be identified with an object whose attainment provides satisfaction, but with processes that produce. For Spinoza . . . [d]esire is the force of positive production, the action that creates things, makes alliances, and forges interactions . . . Spinozist desire figures in terms of capacities and abilities. (Grosz 1995: 179)

If desire in Spinoza/Deleuze is conceived as a force of positive production, power is no less inflected by positivity. Spinoza’s affirmative idea of power

as a potential or capacity for existence (*potentia/puissance*) provides a necessary supplement to the negative model of power as domination or circumscription (*potestas/pouvoir*).<sup>12</sup> The latter, defined by Massumi as “an instituted and reproducible relation of force, a selective concretization of potential” (Massumi in Deleuze and Guattari 1987: xvii), is the kind of power involved in representational paradigms that situate the body within a limited binary set of discriminating categories (male/female, white/black, old/young). And it is this notion of power as circumscription that film and cultural analysis have thus far almost exclusively considered. Although, as we will have occasion to see in specific film analyses, the two modalities of power feed into, and overlap, each other in almost any affective–performative event, *Powers of Affection* follows Spinoza–Deleuze in giving primacy to *potentia/puissance* over *potestas/pouvoir*. Insofar as each body displays its own capacities for existence (*potentia/puissance*), its possibilities for action, thought, and becoming are not entirely disabled by the operations of cultural and social systems. The intertwining of these two forms of power runs parallel to the intertwining of the *molar* and the *molecular* modalities or dimensions of the body as theorized by Deleuze and Guattari. Thus the body simultaneously figures as a normative structure regulated by binary power relations (on a *molar* plane of formed subjects and identities) and as an excessive, destabilizing intensity responsive to its own forces and capacities (on a *molecular* plane of impersonal and unformed becomings).

Spinoza’s idea of expression, and Deleuze’s understanding thereof, share remarkable affinities with an ontological/ontogenetic notion of performance. For Spinoza, expression amounts to a radical way of being whereby Substance, attributes, and modes unfold or explicate their own existence in the world.<sup>13</sup> But existence neither precedes nor transcends its unfolding or expression; rather, existence is immanent to the expressionist process of explication or unfolding itself. Similarly, one may say that a body’s existence is always performative insofar as it does not pre-exist its own unfolding/becoming through particular actions and thoughts. As well, in performance as in expression, beings manifest/explicate themselves not as static entities, but as constantly evolving and mutating forces. Both expression and performance are conceptually linked to a rhetoric of action, relation, and modification. As an expressive modality, performance is the bringing forth of the power of bodies, in sum, the mobilization of the body’s affects. Performance is the actualization of the body’s potential through specific thoughts, actions, displacements, combinations, realignments – all of which can be seen as different degrees of intensity, distinct relations of movement and rest. Thus, the body’s expressivity coincides

with its continually transformative activity in its relations with other bodily assemblages, human or otherwise.

Before I suggest some ways of considering the mutual imbrication of affect and performance, I would like to comment on the important distinction between affect and personal emotion or sentiment. Affect broadly refers to the body's capacities to affect and be affected by other bodies, thereby implying an augmentation or diminution in the body's capacity to act. Affect precedes, sets the conditions for, and outlasts a particular human expression of emotion. While emotion refers to habitual, culturally coded, and localized affects (such as a character's sadness or happiness), affect proper coincides with the actor and the film's openness to often anomalous, unexpected, and always expansive expressions of emotions (Massumi 2002b: 227). But, no matter the differentiation between emotions and affects, one should also keep in mind that in practice these two notions remain rather fluidly connected. For although the term "emotion" is generally preferred when describing psychologically motivated expressions of affect, emotion nonetheless actualizes and concretizes the way in which a body is sometimes affected by, or affects, another body. Thus, I regard emotion and affect as connected and coterminous, involving varying degrees and distinctive modes in a continuum of affectively related concerns.<sup>14</sup>

From an expressionist standpoint, a theory of performance cannot dispense with a consideration of the relation, indeed the slippage, between notions of performance and affect. Both these terms have by now become assimilated into the vocabulary and critical practice of film and media scholars, yet their interdependence has hardly been given the attention it deserves. I would therefore like to offer some preliminary ideas as to how the conceptual proximity of these terms may be addressed. I would define affected bodies as bodies that are altered or displaced by virtue of additions or subtractions of material forces. In the cinema, a privileged medium for the exhibition of bodies, whatever happens to a body becomes instantly available to perception. Thus, the performing body presents itself as a shock wave of affect, the expression-event that makes affect a visible and palpable materiality. Put in a different way, performance involves the expression and perception of affect in the body. Affect is the force of becoming that enables characters/actors, and ultimately the film itself, to pass from one bodily state to another, while performance constitutes its expression. But force and expression do not occur as two linear, consecutive moments; rather, they generate one single affective-performative event that exceeds the character/actor and pervades the filmic moment. The performative thus involves a creative ontology oper-

ating outside that which has already been organized into binaries. As such, the performative cannot unfold without a certain advent of the new, a certain displacement or passage from one state to another. Affect is precisely such an impingement of the outside upon the inside, of the new and unpredictable upon the familiar. The close conceptual alliance between affect and performance thus insistently points in the direction of an affective–performative cinema.

In an essay entitled “He Stuttered,” Deleuze mentions the words “affective” and “performative” in the same passage, albeit a few lines apart. Without linking these terms in any explicit way, Deleuze instead leaves the connection open for us to make. In this passage, he refers to the stuttering of the writer as a performative activity (insofar as the stuttering “no longer affects preexisting words,” but constitutes its own language system) and an affective intensity (insofar as “we are faced with an affective and intensive language . . . and not with an affection of the speaker”; Deleuze 1994: 23). The kind of displacement effected upon the organization of words in this context – their becoming affective/intensive by virtue of being disengaged from the linguistic system through a performative operation – can also be seen at work in the potential dis-organization of movements and gestures of the bodily system in performance. Here, movements and gestures can also become affective and intensive, rather than functional and extensive, through a performative act that deterritorializes the body and turns it into a body without organs.

As is well known to Deleuze scholars, Deleuze and Guattari found in dramatist Antonin Artaud’s idea of the “body without organs” an extremely resonant conceptual backbone for their own anti-Oedipal project. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, the “body without organs” refers to a process that dis-organ-izes the organs/affects of the body; through such a process, the organs multiply connections with each other and with the organs of other bodies in ways that defy the systematicity that keeps them bound to the slave morality of representation and majoritarian behavior: “A body without organs is not an empty body stripped of organs, but a body upon which that which serves as organs . . . is distributed according to crowd phenomena . . . in the form of molecular multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 30). Thus, besides drawing substantially from Spinoza’s bodily ethics, the film analyses featured in this book are crucially inspired by Artaud’s thinking of the body as a site of anarchic creativity, and by his vision of the theatre as a medium of bodily and affective immediacy.

When Deleuze says in the passage mentioned above that it is not a question of considering “the affection of the speaker,” but rather “the affectivity of language itself,” he is pointing to a radically desubjectified

dimension of expression, one that I also wish to stress in the area of performance. Just as the activity of thought or intelligence is not dependent upon linguistic, human ratiocination, but inheres and operates in all aspects of the physical world, expression, from a Deleuzian/Spinozist perspective, does not require a human consciousness, mind, or ego for its unfolding. Likewise, if we turn to the concrete kinetic activities of the body in performance, we can see a similar desubjectifying process under way. As Constantin Boundas has noted, following Bergson, Deleuze gives primacy to the event of movement itself rather than to the idea of a subject giving rise to this event: in the case of Bergson–Deleuze, “movement is not subordinate to a subject which performs it or undergoes it. We are dealing here with a ‘pre-human’ or ‘inhuman’ world having a privilege over the human-all-too-human world of phenomenology” (Boundas 1996: 84). Drawing upon Bergson’s theses on movement in his first cinema book, Deleuze explains that the moving body is not an a priori entity undergoing a series of static poses, the reconstruction of which into a continuous flow would only reaffirm the body’s stability and unity. Rather, the aspect of the moving body that holds Deleuze’s interest, and my own in this book, is its power of affection/becoming as a force perpetually in the making. Through moving and gesturing processes, the body emerges as an assemblage of virtual and actual expressions with the capacity to affect and to be affected by other bodies.

In the chapter “Cinema, Body and Brain, Thought” of *The Time-Image*, Deleuze notes that body attitudes and postures in the cinema can “bring about a more profound theatricalization than theatre itself” (1989: 191). The fascination Deleuze expresses in his cinema books with respect to the body’s capacity to “force us to think what is concealed from thought” (1989: 189) is one that he also expresses, sometimes in even more detailed ways, when he discusses the theatre. As Mohammad Kowsar explains, in his consideration of playwright Carmelo Bene’s production of Shakespeare-based *Richard III*, Deleuze speaks of Bene’s precise surgical amputation of characters – his subtraction of superfluous representational elements such as destiny, fictionality, psychological unity, and his submission of characters to a bodily process that “has nothing to do with the birth of an ego” (Kowsar 1986: 21). Here, the coherence of language and the power of the text are dismantled through disruptive operations such as aphasia, decimated dialogues, and stammered speech (Kowsar 1986: 23).

More specifically, Deleuze points to Bene’s dislocation of the repertory of traditional gestures supportive of majoritarian power (*potestas/pouvoir*). Against the tendency of representational theatre to choreograph the body’s movements as a smooth, continuous flow, Deleuze advocates a choreogra-

phy that foregrounds “encounters and collisions between bodies” (Kowsar 1986: 23). The purpose of such less than graceful choreography is to “reveal process as it pertains to gesture” by “unveil[ing] a variety of impediments and interceptions, obstructions and collisions” (Kowsar 1986: 23). Echoing his own comments in *A Thousand Plateaus* on the importance of (qualitative) speed in generating the body’s affective intensity, Deleuze also refers to the speed variation of the gesture as that which reveals the body in process characteristic of performance. “In variation,” Deleuze says, “what counts is the relationship of fastness and slowness, the modifications of these relationships, in as much as they carry the gesture . . . following variable coefficients, along a line of transformation” (Deleuze and Bene 1979: 113). Elsewhere, this time in *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze also speaks of the crucial role of speed in enhancing affect, implying that the actor/mime’s task is to magnify affective intensity in the least amount of time (Deleuze 1990: 147). As we will see in Chapter 2, some crucial scenes in Fassbinder’s *The Marriage of Maria Braun* enact these Deleuzian ideas on an affective choreography of bodies with stunning exactitude. In these scenes, the smooth trajectory and consistent speed attributed to gesture and movement within the classical, representational paradigm give way to a spastic choreography that emphasizes collisions of bodies, kinetic and gestural interruptions, and heightened contrasts between fast and slow motion. In the face of this kind of affective performance, the spectator’s attention is held captive by the ceaseless alteration of the play of speeds that sets the gesture along a continuous line of flight.

### Genre and the affective-performative

The purely analytical bent of film studies during the 1970s and 1980s began to give way in the 1990s to an increasing concern with reclaiming the affective as a legitimate category of critical/theoretical cinematic discourse. Key to such revalorization of the affective was Linda Williams’ work on melodrama as well as her rethinking of the cinema as an experience impacting the viewer’s body in tangible, material ways. Williams’ attention to the workings of emotion in the broad category of films she identifies with the Hollywood melodrama remains crucial in moving the center of the debate in film studies from purely analytical, Brechtian concerns to including affective considerations that were earlier regarded as extraneous, or even obstructive, to the task of identifying the film’s semiotic, psychoanalytic, or ideological structures. For Williams, the propensity of critics to read emotional excess in terms of Brechtian distanciation and critique “avoid[s] the more crucial and obvious question of spectatorial emotion in melodrama”

(Williams 1998: 46). In her redefinition of the emotional, sensational force of the closing moments of *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), for example, Williams attempts to take emotions from the level of oversimplification to the level of a complex dynamic where thought and emotion are indivisible:

The understanding of melodrama has been impeded by the failure to acknowledge the complex tensions between different emotions as well as the relation of thought to emotion. The overly simplistic notion of the “monopathy” of melodramatic characters . . . has impeded the serious study of how complexly we can be “moved” . . . If pathos is crucial to melodrama, it is always in tension with other emotions. (Williams 1998: 49)

Williams speaks of melodramatic emotion in terms of “sensation,” and she refers to climactic scenes that reveal the moral truth about a character as “melodrama’s big sensation scenes.” Moreover, her argument leaves no doubt as to the inadequacy of the linguistic register to account exhaustively for the categories of spectacle and sensation:

The revelation occurs as a spectacular, moving sensation – that is, it is felt as sensation and not simply registered as ratiocination in the cause–effect logic of narrative – because it shifts to a different register of signification, often bypassing language altogether. Music, gesture, pantomime, and . . . most forms of sustained physical action performed without dialogue, are the most familiar elements of these sensational effects. (Williams 1998: 52)

Williams extends the label of melodrama from its prior discursive use as a specific generic category designating woman’s films or family melodramas (films generally devoted to female spaces and discourses as signs of patriarchal oppression) to a far more inclusive denomination representing “the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures”: “Melodrama is a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action” (Williams 1998: 42). While Williams astutely redraws and expands the boundaries of the melodramatic, her expansive/inclusive redefinition of the genre still subscribes to the privileged relationship traditionally established between the affective and the melodramatic. My project in *Powers of Affection* takes a slightly different route: I want to explore the possibility of destabilizing the relation between the affective-performative image – which I see as inherently tied in with processes of transformation and becoming – and the notion of genre – which I see as culturally identified with processes of stabilization of meaning and knowledge.

The key role performance plays in destabilizing generic classification has been persuasively addressed by Josette Féral:

[P]erformance, caught up as it is in an unending series of often very minor transformations, escapes formalism. Having no set form, every performance constitutes its own genre, and every artist brings to it, according to his background and desires, subtly different shadings that are his alone. (Féral 1982: 174)

If one considers performance an affective and sensational *force* that disrupts, redirects, and indeed affects narrative *form*, it is difficult to consign the affective-performative to stable and well-defined generic paradigms. Because narrative conventions and generic labels are often closely interrelated, the disruption that performance brings into the narrative coherence of a film may simultaneously impact the stability or coherence of this film's generic identity. Insofar as classical narratives follow the iconic, thematic, and ideological conventions of specific genres, the inclusion of a performative moment within a film may offset the totalizing imposition of generic meaning. To the relative autonomy the affective-performative displays with respect to narrative and representation, one would thus have to add its autonomy with respect to generic considerations.

Although for Williams, as we have seen, the affective maintains a strong generic alliance with the melodramatic, the implications of some of her ideas are as likely to advance the notion of an affective-performative cinema that escapes generic containment. Williams' remarks that "the [moment of] revelation [in the melodrama] occurs as a spectacular, moving sensation," and that "it is felt as sensation and not simply registered as ratiocination in the cause-effect logic of narrative," entail a distinction between the film's narrative and the affective-performative moments that express the emotional force of the melodramatic event. But implied in this very distinction, it seems to me, is the idea of a temporal alternation in the predominance of each of these registers, a continuous rising of one at the expense of the other in a relation of overlapping simultaneity rather than oppositionality.<sup>15</sup> At each moment, the representational imperatives of narrative and the non-representational imperatives of the affective-performative displace each other without ever completely canceling each other out. Rather than depending upon a particular kind of film (a stabilizing condition inimical to the very disruptive function of the affective-performative), the eruption of affective-performative moments is a matter of a constantly fluctuating distribution of degrees of intensity between two series of images: those belonging to explainable narrative structures, and those that disorganize these structures with the force of affective-performative events. Thus, the affective-performative emerges not as fixed generic identity, but as the very outcome of an unpredictable, disorganized, rhythmic alternation that each film singularly orchestrates to fulfill its own



unique needs. A logic of temporal becoming therefore supersedes a logic of identity such as we find in generic categories.

Indeed, Deleuze's distinction between "the cinema of action" and "the cinema of the body" (1989: 203) is more resonant with the variable preponderance between narrative and affective-performative registers I want to emphasize in this book than categorically assigned notions of genre responsive to narrative content. Where narrative and action prevail, the molar plane of unified subjects is more actively at work, while where the affective-performative body prevails, the molecular plane of subjectless intensities is dominant.<sup>16</sup> In *Powers of Affection*, the variable preponderance between *molar* and *molecular*, *narrative* and *affective-performative*, operates not only within each particular film, but also across the different cinemas I examine, each of which as a whole may favor one or the other registers. My selection of scenes for close analysis privileges the cinema of the body over the cinema of action, the dimension of molecular intensities over that of unified characters and psychologically motivated actions. It is in fact a shared concern with choreographing the performer's body as a site of autonomous affective force that links these films and binds them into a common project.

Nevertheless, it is still important to stress the interdependence of levels, keeping in mind that the very capacity of the molecular plane for disorganization and transformation depends to some degree upon the existence of the molar plane itself, for one needs to "retain a minimum of strata . . . of forms and functions, a minimal subject from which to extract materials, affects and assemblages" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 270). Thus, in each film a constant flux leads us out of one plane and into the other. The affective-performative unfolds as an interval demarcated by first the cessation, and then the resumption, of narrative. Prior to the affective-performative event, ideology seems to be securely in place, yet certain narrative causes or psychological motivations build a pressure that leads to the moment of performative eruption. In the aftermath, we witness a certain wreckage of ideological stability, the debris of a passing storm, as former corporealities and their relations appear profoundly altered or dislocated.

The affective-performative moments highlighted in this book shift the emphasis from the organized body, slave to morality and representation, to the ethical and creative potential of the expressive body. They contribute to a reconfiguration of the poststructuralist concept of subjectivity as a more impersonal, yet at the same time more expressive, agency than is found in the subjugated subject of ideology, psychoanalysis, or semiotics. The politics of the affective-performative thus ought to be seen as embedded in the power of experimental practices to perform unforeseen connections

between bodies/concepts and between their capacities. In as much as this political intervention aims to modify signifying systems, and modes of perception and thought, it figures as a micropolitics of desire, rather than a macropolitics. That is, it is hardly a question of performance restoring agency to an individual character or a particular social group; instead, it is a question of the film's mobilization of performance as the catalyst for the dissolution of (narrative, ideological, and generic) meaning in a more abstract, less personalized way. In any case, affective intensity often stretches and deforms signifying and ideological systems beyond recognition. The affective-performative body is thus linked with power in more than one guise – it not only displays the power of *puissance* (the creative capacity or potential for existence that allows it to multiply connections with other bodies), but through this very potential, it can sometimes impact relations of power (*pouvoir*) of a more social or institutional dimension, even if that impact is confined to the film and/or the viewer's perceptual and affective (dis)organization.

### Trajectory

The films and filmmakers I discuss in *Powers of Affection* trace a movement from qualified realism to unqualified abstraction. This movement takes us from Sirk's family melodramas – films where expressions of excessive emotion are triggered by power-differential and subjectified relations based on gender, race, and class – to contemporary films by Denis and Lynch, where affect has become pure intensity unencumbered by narrative or psychology, transmuted instead into a power of cinematic self-affectation. In the middle chapters, Fassbinder and Potter provide a bridge between the subjectively centered and the more abstract versions of the affective-performative, each somewhat ambiguously situated between these two extremes. In each case, the affective-performative perspective enables me to reconsider a particular set of concepts or positions held within former theoretical practice. In Chapter 1, "Animated Fetishes," I challenge the notion of the female body as a visual, static fetish by focusing on the body's expressive capacities and their effect upon oppressive structures. Chapter 2, "Choreographies of Affect," argues for a reconsideration of Fassbinder's Brechtian aesthetics from the point of view of his engagement with the emotions, a reconsideration I undertake via Artaud's ideas on the theatre of cruelty. Chapter 3, "Dancing Feminisms," discusses the shifting relation of feminist film theory to the female body as a site of narcissistic and visual pleasure. I trace a kind of theoretical history of narcissism, from its most negative Freudian implications to its most affirmative and

productive Deleuzian modality. In Chapter 4, “Kinesthetic Seductions,” I consider the abstract operations of intellectual cinema not as the purview of Brechtian analysis, but rather as directly linked to the sensory and kinesthetic intensities of the body. Finally, Chapter 5, “Powers of the False,” disengages emotion from both subjectivity and objectivity. I propose an impersonal, affective unconscious in place of the representational, Freudian unconscious, and ethical experimentation in place of binary moral judgments.

Looking at three of Sirk’s films – *Imitation of Life*, *Written on the Wind*, and *The Tarnished Angels* – Chapter 1 foregrounds the mobility and expressiveness that enable the fetishized female body to escape fixation and homogenization. This chapter examines the limits of previous feminist theories of spectacle and performativity. More specifically, following Deleuze and Massumi’s ideas on the expression-event, I engage Butler’s assessment of the gendered phantasmatic gesture of femininity as exhaustively colonized by ideological oppression and therefore severed from the expressive dimension. As shown in Sirk’s films, I argue, the gestural emphasis typical of the melodrama suggests that oppressive circumstances may in fact function as enhancers, rather than inhibitors, of expression. The mutual involvement of expression and oppression allows for a more heterogeneous process than Butler’s account suggests, for it involves not only the character’s social, gendered, and racial inscription, but also the uniqueness of each expression-event. In *Imitation*, such uniqueness is primarily embodied by Sara Jane/Susan Kohner’s performative actions, which, notwithstanding their racial/racist motivations at the narrative level, act as the catalyst for certain anomalous affects in excess of both narrative and ideological necessity. My analysis of *Written* centers upon the scene of Marylee/Malone’s “dance of death” as an example of the ways bodies affect other bodies beyond the requirements of co-presence, visibility, or cognition. Through montage, the film juxtaposes body behaviors whose different speeds spark the anomalous sensations that give rise to affective force. In *Angels*, the impersonality of affective processes is further enhanced by the displacement of the performative dimension from the female performer to the expressive mechanisms of the film itself – a jarring juxtaposition of aerial performances at the narrative level and Mardi Gras carnival images at the affective-performative level.

Fassbinder’s uncompromising assault on subjectivity results in a dramatic intensification of the affective-performative dimension already at work in Sirk’s cinema. Chapter 2 looks at Fassbinder’s *The Marriage of Maria Braun* and *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* to supplement the formal notion of the tableau as static image (a Brechtian, representational

perspective) with a notion of the tableau as precarious containment of affective force (an Artaudian, performative perspective). Another general aim of this chapter is to consider the distinct, yet interwoven, roles of verbal and physical expression in generating Fassbinder's specific body of affect. In my analysis of *Maria Braun*, I argue for a disjunctive synthesis of influences in Fassbinder's work, juxtaposing the well-documented influences of Brechtian theatre and Sirkian melodrama with the rarely examined influence of Artaud's theatre of cruelty. I consider *Petra von Kant* as a case of performativity where word and gesture become synonymous, feeding into and augmenting each other. Here I use Deleuze and Artaud to examine the way crucial aspects of performance such as framing and faciality generate significant points of convergence between theatre and film. I also draw on their theories to trace the transformation of the sadomasochistic impulse in the film's narrative into a power of affection – in other words, a conversion of Artaudian cruelty into love.

My attempt in Chapter 1 to “animate” the female fetish of classical Hollywood cinema resurfaces under a different guise in Chapter 3, as I turn to examine the need for feminist thinking to involve itself in a process of perpetual movement. This chapter draws on both Deleuze and phenomenology to consider the ways in which female bodies negotiate their affective-performative encounters with male bodies. I look at Potter's *Thriller* and *The Tango Lesson* as symptomatic of the evolution undergone by the feminist relation to the female body in the last decades. Potter's explicit involvement with the medium of dance in both these films directly conveys the ways feminist theory has either repressed or allowed for the representation of the female dancer/performer as a source of sensual and narcissistic pleasure. I begin by examining *Thriller* as indicative of the strategic withdrawal from the pleasures of the body that characterized much of early feminist cinema and theory. An example of anti-essentialist feminist theory, *Thriller* foregrounds the objectification of the female body in classical ballet and opera as well as a Foucauldian disciplinary practice of movement and gesture. At the same time, *Thriller* reintroduces the body through its use of the voice-over, which enables the film to flesh out its corporeal dimension while strategically avoiding the pitfalls of visibility for the female body. In the more recent *The Tango Lesson*, Potter renounces the privileges of critical distancing and theoretical abstraction to enact the possibility of bodily proximity with the male as a far riskier, yet ultimately more pleasurable, experience for the female body. Casting herself in the leading role as filmmaker and aspiring tango dancer, Potter puts in motion her body's potential (*puissance*) not only to move in a physical sense and to create intensely affective moments, but to push the boundaries of gender and tango alike in the

service of deterritorializing the power dynamics (*pouvoir*) in both these spheres.

While my reading of *Thriller* relies on feminist phenomenology, with *The Tango Lesson* I explore the possibility of a feminist perspective that can fluidly transition from the subjectively centered philosophy of embodied consciousness put forth by phenomenology to a more impersonal, Deleuzian perspective where the subject is conceived as a catalyst of vital forces that express themselves through affective encounters and becomings. The Deleuzian mode of thinking also enables me to explore the value of narcissism as a potentially creative force seeking to connect with multiple bodies, and not simply as the manifestation of the subject's struggle for a unified ego.

Chapter 4 looks at Denis' films *Nénette and Boni*, *Beau Travail*, and *Friday Night* through the lens of Deleuze's account of modern cinema as both a "cinema of bodies" and a sensation-producing abstract machine. *Nénette and Boni* uses sensory disorder to disarticulate the familiar, Oedipal parameters of sexuality and narrative. The film is highly invested in the surface of the image, hence productive of viewing sensations of touch and bodily contact. Its unconventional emphasis on anonymous yet intensified sensuality over gendered, fetishized forms of sexuality is uniquely suited to a discussion of such Deleuzian concepts as molecular sexuality and becoming-woman. In *Beau Travail*, the erotic seduction of the spectator is also displaced from the sexual act between two people to the sexual charge that pervades the entire film's intricate performative web. Gradually, the film abandons its interest in the homoerotic rituals of seduction occupying its narrative in order to follow its own libidinal inclination to seduce the spectator with minimal interference of characters as mediators. Bodily components characteristic of performance break down the formulaic structures of narrative by introducing the elements of temporality and surprise into the acting and moving body. Storytelling is thus practiced in the film as the development and transformation of bodily attitudes rather than as the confirmation of a preconceived set of psychological traits.

*Friday Night* offers an outstanding example of Deleuze's ideas on space, time, and movement. Countering the force of a narrative that revolves around a traffic-jam situation, space in this film nonetheless manages to become disconnected from fixed points of origin and destination. The film privileges a concept of betweenness – in terms of identity and temporality – as the dimension in which things gather true speed, that is, affective intensity. The relationship between man and woman in this film is akin to a rhizomatic alliance, independent of past knowledge or future

expectation, and wholly devoted to the intensity of duration in the present. I read the film's central car-ride scene as the moment where the film conducts its own experiments with the affective powers of speed.

The last chapter, on the cinema of David Lynch, offers another perspective on the dismantling of representation and narrative that makes affect synonymous with the film image. I focus on *Mulholland Drive*'s pivotal scene at Club Silencio as this film's most intense rendition of an affective-performative cinema. Here, the unraveling of illusion performed by the showman does not lead to Brechtian enlightenment, but rather to an experience of raw and unmotivated affect that leaves characters and viewers in a state of perceptual and affective shock. Circuits of affect in the film cannot withstand the conventional concept of subjectivity or character, but they are rather pre-personal/impersonal forces of becoming which converge and find contingent expression in the concrete bodies of the characters and films through which they pass. Enacting once more Lynch's proverbial attachment to dream worlds and unconscious forces, *Mulholland Drive* nevertheless undermines important tenets of the Freudian/Lacanian unconscious. Instead, I argue, this film points in the direction of what Dorothea Olkowski has called an ontological unconscious (Olkowski 1999: 150–1), one that follows affective, rather than representational, aims. Through the lens of this affective unconscious, *Mulholland Drive*'s playful scrambling of narrative coherence amounts to the actualization of a virtual plane of memory where no event is slavishly constrained to mimicking or reproducing any other event. Such freedom from representational narrativity runs parallel to a freedom from rigid moral schemas. This chapter thus devotes a segment to Lynch's separation of affect from moral binaries, as seen especially in key performative scenes in *Blue Velvet*. I conclude Chapter 5 with a discussion of *Mulholland Drive*'s relation to genre as an example of the disorganizing effects the affective-performative has on stable generic configurations.

In trying to capture the elusive force of the body in the course of writing this book, I have often encountered what Olkowski calls "the resistance of physical reality to linguistic and logical symbolisation [sic]" (Olkowski 2000: 94). The body's eruptions into affective-performative moments confront us with a logic of its own, challenging us to build connections between a wealth of non-verbal affects and the limited linguistic tools at our disposal. Faced with this challenge, my aim in *Powers of Affection* is neither to provide a full-fledged theory of performance in film nor to describe these body performances in an accurate or truthful way. My aim is rather to utilize the form of words to evoke the formlessness of affect, while leaving it as unformed and open to further interventions as I possibly can. While the most theoretically

informed parts of the book no doubt lean more heavily on the side of logic than on the side of affective resonance, my direct engagement with concrete performative events has striven to transmute theory into affective experience. It is precisely at those moments that I recognize my writing as less of a representational act, and more of a performance aimed at seducing the reader. My desire is therefore to share with the reader/viewer the power of language to bring about the uniqueness of each expression-event, the power of performance to beget its own possibilities of becoming. In short, I want to speak the movement of a body caught in a whirlpool of affect.

### Notes

1. I give a full account of the phenomenological tradition in film theory, and of Sobchack's valuable contributions to this tradition, in an entry featured in *Handbook of Phenomenological Aesthetics* (Sepp and Embree forthcoming).
2. Sobchack's more recent book, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (2004), extends her former phenomenological investigations of film with essays that emphasize the capacities of bodies in making sense of all sorts of perceptually and technologically mediated experiences in today's image-saturated culture.
3. Marks' second book, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (2002), pursues a similar line of investigation in its analysis of experimental films and videos.
4. Like Marks' and Barker's, my own work has been extensively influenced by the phenomenological account of cinema developed in *The Address of the Eye*. I have found phenomenological theory to be most productive and illuminating when applied to issues of corporeal and sensory engagement in the area of technology. I have pursued this line of inquiry in essays such as "The Body as Foundation of the Screen: Allegories of Technology in Atom Egoyan's *Speaking Parts*" (1996), "The Body of Voyeurism: Mapping a Discourse of the Senses in Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*" (2001), and "Fetish and Aura: Modes of Technological Engagement in *Family Viewing*" (2007a). I have also been interested in the ways phenomenology helps us redefine the female body onscreen by expanding its potentialities for self-reinvention and agency. In "Politics and Erotics of Representation: Feminist Phenomenology and Valie Export's *The Practice of Love*" (2000), I challenge the overlooking of gender within traditional phenomenology. Although *Powers of Affection* is clearly more indebted to Deleuzian theory than to phenomenology, some of my arguments in this book do rely on the phenomenological model, most notably when I discuss issues of female agency and empowerment from the perspective of molar, organized subjectivities.
5. Chapter 3 of this book, "Dancing Feminisms," attempts to account for some of the affinities and disparities between Merleau-Ponty's and Deleuze's

philosophies of the body, which I explore in more detailed ways in “Alchemies of Thought in Godard’s Cinema: Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty” (2005).

6. The list of books on Deleuze and cinema includes Ronald Bogue’s *Deleuze on Cinema* (2003), David-Martin Jones’ *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* (2006), Barbara Kennedy’s *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation* (2000), Laura Marks’ *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000), Patricia Pisters’ *The Matrix of Visual Culture: Working with Deleuze in Film Theory* (2003), Anna Powell’s *Deleuze and Horror Film* (2005) and *Deleuze, Altered States and Film* (2007), David Rodowick’s *Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine* (1997), Steven Shaviro’s *The Cinematic Body* (1993), and the edited collections *The Brain Is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema* (Gregory Flaxman, ed., 2000) and *Micropolitics of Media Culture: Reading the Rhizomes of Deleuze and Guattari* (Patricia Pisters, ed., 2001).
7. Bogue’s reference to a Francis Bacon painting as seen by Deleuze accurately conveys the separation of the performative body from the strictures of representation and narrative that I also stress in this book:

The encircling force of the field isolates the figure, disconnects it from all incipient narratives and thereby empties it of its figurative, representational content. The expanding force that issues from the figure in turn induces a contorted athleticism in which the body is seized by a convulsive effort to escape itself. (Bogue 1996: 261)

8. Massumi addresses the current dominance of language in cultural analysis in these terms:

A common thread running through the varieties of social constructivism currently dominant in cultural theory holds that everything, including nature, is constructed in discourse. The classical definition of the human as the rational animal returns in new permutations: the human as the chattering animal. Only the animal is bracketed: the human as the chattering of culture. This reinstates a rigid divide between the human and the nonhuman, since it has become a commonplace, after Lacan, to make language the special preserve of the human . . . saying that nature is discursively constructed is not necessarily the same as saying that nature is *in* discourse . . . for in either case, nature as *natur-ing*, nature as having its own dynamism, is erased. (Massumi 1996: 231)

9. As Vicki Kirby explains,

[w]ord and flesh are utterly implicated, not because “flesh” is actually a word that mediates the fact of what is being referred to, but because the entity of a word, the identity of a sign, the system of language, and the domain of culture – none of these are autonomously enclosed upon themselves. Rather, they are all emergent within a force field of differentiations that has no exteriority in any final sense. (1997: 126–7)



10. The first of these approaches includes titles such as James Naremore's *Acting in the Cinema* (1988), Roberta Pearson's *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films* (1992), and Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs' *Theater to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (1997). Additionally, a few edited volumes have also appeared on the subject of film acting: Carole Zucker's *Making Visible the Invisible: An Anthology of Original Essays on Film Acting* (1990), Peter Krämer and Alan Lovell's *Screen Acting* (1999), and the more recent collection *More than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance* (2004) edited by Cynthia Baron, Diane Carson, and Frank P. Tomasulo.
11. A notable exception to the pervasive overlooking of the body's materiality in accounts of performativity is a collection of essays titled *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance* (Stern and Kouvaros 1999). The analyses in this volume present some of the most theoretically adventurous and sophisticated arguments on film performance that I have come across.
12. Deleuze's alignment of affect/power with positivity is not meant to restore power to the subject in a traditional humanist sense; on the contrary, the notion of affect as intensity or power rests upon a conception of bodies as subjectless subjectivities. For Deleuze, *puissance* – the form of power that operates within the virtual plane of consistency – is the kind of power embedded in affect, whereas the concept of power as *pouvoir* operates within the actual plane of organization where subjects dominate or resist one another in social, ideological, or political relations and systems.
13. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, Spinoza's idea of substance does not involve a unity of substance, but rather "the infinity of the modifications that are part of one another on th[e] unique plane of life" (1987: 254).
14. While emotion and affect seem to be continuous categories, the difference between them a matter of degrees of subjectivity versus non-subjectivity, I believe affect should be clearly distinguished from sentimentality. Whereas sentimentality is the kind of emotion for which we have a familiar, recognizable label, affect falls outside what we can name or ascertain – its effect to move us to new forms of thought, sensation, and even language. While sentimentality complies with the patterns and expectations of ideologically recognizable structures and forms of behavior, affect does not, allowing us instead to experience paradoxical, unforeseeable, and as yet uncategorized forms of emotion. The distinction between emotions that can be classified and those that are "cognitively impenetrable" is also made by Noël Carroll, whose cognitive approach, unlike mine, emphasizes the emotions that include cognitive elements (Carroll 2006: 217).
15. In point of fact, Williams herself considers melodramatic pathos and realist narrative far more interdependent than scholars previously thought. "Melodrama should be viewed," she argues, "not as an excess or an aberration but in many ways as the typical form of American popular narrative in literature, stage, film, and television" (Williams 1998: 50). Like Williams, I consider nar-

rative and affective components overlapping and continuous, but, unlike Williams, who argues for the inclusion of affective excess within the normative, I still think the notion of “excess” as a distinct category is a useful one to maintain in terms of the irreducibility of affects to linguistic translation or rational explanation.

16. While in Deleuze’s theory of cinema, the cinema of the intensive body implies a focus on duration and becoming, hence its affinity with the time-image, the cinema of action features the body extending itself into space, hence its affinity with the movement-image. The cinema of the movement-image, dependent upon the sequentiality of realistic action and the preservation of sensory-motor linkages between images, aims at the development and formation of *molar*, unified subjects in both the film’s characters and the viewers. On the other hand, the cinema of the time-image, severing its connections with the sensory-motor schema and moving into the virtual plane of immanence, features subjectless processes at the *molecular* level.

## CHAPTER 1

# Animated Fetishes

If there is no straight line in the universe, this has its effect on art. Art must consist of something bent, something curved.

Douglas Sirk, interview with Michael Stern

What interests me is how you move so quickly from one pose to another.

Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover*

In her essay, “Film Body: An Implantation of Perversions,” Williams discusses Eadweard Muybridge’s zoopraxiscope projections of human movement sequences, remarking on discernible differences in his treatment of male and female bodily comportments:

Some of the movements and gestures in the women’s section . . . parallel those of the men. Yet even here there is a tendency to add a superfluous detail to the woman’s movements – details which tend to mark her as more embedded within a socially prescribed system of objects and gestures than her male counterparts. (Williams 1986: 512)

Noting how these protocinematic examples “invest the woman’s body with an iconographic, or even diegetic, surplus of meaning” (p. 514), Williams implicitly extends the critique of fetishism proffered by Mulvey and others to the arena of female movement and gesture. She thus implies that the gestural and kinetic languages embodied by the women attest to a more socially regimented bodily existence than might be the case for men. Without rejecting the value of feminist film theory’s longstanding use of fetishism as a diagnostic tool, this chapter will attempt to destabilize the fetishistic emphasis of the feminist psychoanalytic paradigm by drawing attention to the expressive and transformative capacities in both the female body and the film body’s movement. To this end, I will rely not only upon Deleuze and Guattari’s deviation from Oedipal, binary structures of thinking, but also upon a number of feminist critics who have found Deleuzian philosophy inherently attuned to the feminist interest in empowering women through their bodies.

With their concepts of the molar and the molecular planes, Deleuze and Guattari offer a way of understanding the double coexistent dimensions on

which the body operates: never just a formed and given entity, nor a totally chaotic play of forces, but a constant interplay, movement, and passage between form and non-form. Deleuze and Guattari describe the molar plane of organization as a teleological plane ruled by genetic and analogical principles. In this plane, the body is the vehicle for “the development of forms and the formation of subjects” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 265). The molecular plane, on the other hand, is devoid of forms and subjects, structures and organizations. In it,

there are only relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between . . . elements that are relatively unformed, molecules and particles of all kinds. There are only haecceities, affects, subjectless individuations that constitute collective assemblages . . . haecceities form according to compositions of nonsubjectified powers or affects. We call this plane . . . the plane of consistency or composition. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 266)

The concepts of the molar and the molecular planes are readily transferable to the analysis of different kinds of cinema. The molar plane roughly coincides with the cinema of the movement-image, whereas the molecular plane is logically associated with the cinema of the time-image. As I explained in the Introduction, in the performative context that I want to emphasize, the molar plane may be identified with *narrative* action, while the molecular plane unfolds through a more or less abstract series of *affective-performative* events.

Through the paradoxical notion of the “animated fetish,” this chapter invokes the dual status of the (female) body as belonging within both the molar and the molecular planes as defined by Deleuze and Guattari. My account of the female body as an animated fetish is meant to address the unresolved tension between, on the one hand, the appropriation of the female body by male-ordained systems of representation and desire – the patriarchal formation of a female subject on the molar plane – and, on the other hand, the body’s potential acts of resistance against that appropriation – molecular processes that engage the affects and escape a totalizing or definitive appropriation. The idea of a female body as an animated fetish is rather in keeping with the affective-performative cinematic register as described in the Introduction. As I then noted, affect is a force of becoming that enables bodies to pass from one experiential state to another. The term “animation” powerfully resonates with the constantly unfinished process of becoming involving the affective body. As Greg Lynn has noted, “animation” is not simply motion. “Animation” begins from the premise that the body is never a fixed or unified entity, but, instead, an open and unstable whole:

While motion implies movement and action, animation implies the evolution of a form and its shaping forces: it suggests animalism, animism, growth, actuation, vitality and virtuality . . . animate form is defined by the co-presence of motion and force at the moment of formal conception. (Lynn 1998: 9)

Thus, rather than simply a *moving fetish* – a stable body engaged in motion – the *animated fetish* accounts for the ongoing impact of force upon the formal constituents of a particular body image.

As I noted in the Introduction, the molar and the molecular planes are not oppositional, but interactional, their different forms/degrees of interactivity and interrelationality resulting in different kinds of assemblages. It is therefore not a question of reinstating binary systems of thought by labeling films either molar or molecular, but rather of mapping varying combinations and degrees of both planes across different films and identifying the points at which one or the other become more prominent within a single film. Of all the affective-performative cinemas I examine in this book, Sirk's is undoubtedly the most emphatically driven both by classical narrative organization and by a certain adherence, however fraught with contradiction, to some fundamental principles of a patriarchal and racist ideology. The narrative and ideological conservatism of Sirk's films clearly entails a higher ratio of molar organization to molecular composition. Yet two features of these films have prompted me to consider them as illustrative of the affective-performative: first, their ambiguous positioning between the movement-image of classical narrative and the time-image of modern cinema; and second, their intense, multi-leveled investment in performance.

To account for the first of these features, I would argue that, while the narrative structures in Sirk's films are still fundamentally indebted to the requirements of causality and linearity, Sirk's cinema is not particularly interested in releasing the viewer's or the character's perceptions into external actions. As Thomas Elsaesser has observed, like other *auteurist* versions of the melodrama, Sirk's is partly defined by the characters' inability to find external solutions to their internal problems:

The social pressures are such . . . that the range of "strong" actions is limited. The tellingly impotent gesture, the social gaffe, the hysterical outburst replaces any more directly liberating or self-annihilating action, and the cathartic violence of a shoot-out or a chase becomes an inner violence . . . the pattern of the plot makes [the characters] . . . constantly look inwards, at each other and themselves . . . there is no world outside to be acted on, no reality that could be defined or assumed unambiguously. (Elsaesser 1987: 56)

In this kind of impasse where the possibility of external action is foreclosed, one can see the beginnings of the wandering character of modern

cinema. As a substitute for other forms of goal-oriented action, the aimless expression of inner violence may be but a step away from the suspension of action and the recoiling of affect upon itself characteristic of the time-image.

As is the case with the visionary characters of modern cinema, albeit within a much stricter narrative framework, the act of looking is also central to the affective logic of these films – characters constantly look at each other and at themselves through various framing devices and mirrors. Looking, in these films, may thus qualify as one of those substitute acts that, for Elsaesser, define the Sirkian character. Other such acts may be excessive drinking, excessive acting or performing, and, of course, excessive or deviant sexuality. Through frequent involvement in these acts, Sirk's characters become catalysts for the emergence of affective-performative events. While the hyperbolic corporeality of all of these acts aligns them with the performative, the energies absorbed and transferred in these acts are unmistakably enmeshed with the affective. Poised between classical narrative and affective-performative intensity, Sirk's films thus oscillate between moments of repression and moments of overexpenditure – between images that contain the characters' libidinal energies to a degree of unbearable bodily regimentation and images that liberate these energies in ways that exceed any goal except the vital expression of their own affective force. Keeping in mind the distinction Sobchack makes in her analysis of Jim Carrey's performance, my inquiry into the performative aspects of Sirk's melodramas will thus focus "on the way energy is deployed and transmitted through the body rather than . . . [on] psychological and mimetic principles" (Sobchack 2001: 200).

Adapting some of the terminology Deleuze associates with the time-image – *optical situations*, *sound situations* – I would argue that Sirk's films are radical enough in their aesthetic sensibility to accommodate certain moments of pure *kinetic and gestural situations* where movements and gestures are given in and for themselves. These moments disable the sensory-motor schema from its otherwise normal capacities for action, which causes the image to invest all the more intensely in its objectless movement or gesture. The affective-performative in Sirk's films thus unfolds as a series of random piercings of the narrative fabric by singularly expressive events whose effects are highly disorienting or shocking.<sup>1</sup> Following the exceptional affective-performative moment, the narrative line is picked up again until another such moment occurs or until the film runs its course. Yet, as both the film and its audience return to narrative normalcy and composure following each of these moments, we cannot but carry on the effects of the affective trail they leave behind. This affective remainder does

in fact color our perception of narrative coherence by encouraging us to find signs of disarray within its neatly codified system of values and beliefs.

The complex and multi-layered involvement with performance in some of Sirk's family melodramas, such as *Imitation of Life* (1959), *Written on the Wind* (1956), and *The Tarnished Angels* (1957), provides a unique opportunity for examining the ways in which the notion of the affective-performative builds upon, while at the same time differing from, other theories of performance and performativity (mainly, Mulvey's and Butler's) that have been highly influential in film studies over the last decades. A consideration of what I see as the shortcomings of these theories follows below. For now, I want to distinguish three intersecting levels of performance in Sirk's films: the diegetic level, where characters are literal performers for audiences within the film; the metaphorical/discursive level concerning the characters' performance/performativity of their femininity on and off particular diegetic stages; and a third level that constitutes the affective-performative proper. While the first level corresponds to narrative content, the second belongs to ideological/discursive form, and the third expresses affective force. This third level is not achieved by simply magnifying or intensifying the conditions of either of the two other levels; rather, affective force is released as the film radically and unaccountably breaks away from the normative codes and expectations of narrative and ideology. As I hope to show in my analysis of Sirk's films, the affective-performative level is intrinsically aberrant in its consistent deformation of the values and categories that keep both the narrative and the ideological levels in check under their self-censoring regimes.

Working on the molar plane, both the narrative and the ideological axes of these films work to sediment structures and relations – between shots/images, characters/subjects, and events – aiming at a coherent organization and the achievement of closure. At these levels, gender is firmly in place as a site of psychological and ideological struggle between two polar opposites that are assigned certain essential codes and values. Thus, the female performer in these films embodies the mythical dancing quality attached to femininity, fulfilling the cultural/ideological alignment of the feminine with exhibitionism and a general attention to the body. Not coincidentally, all three of Sirk's films mentioned here showcase women characters who not only figure as literal performers for diegetic audiences, but who also perform their femininity in order to survive in a patriarchal, racist world. As is the case with the female dancer, for whom dancing “figure[s] as the . . . very mode of being in the world” (Foster 1996: 4), these films no doubt position the women characters as natural performers and exhibitionists. In *Imitation of Life*, white middle-class mother Lora Meredith

(Lana Turner) strives for a career as a stage actor, while the daughter of Lora's black maid, Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore), light-skinned Sara Jane (Susan Kohner), imitates Lora's white, successful identity in the less exclusive world of vaudeville and cabaret performance. In *Written on the Wind*, Marylee Hadley (Dorothy Malone) circumvents her sexual frustration by indulging in her dancing and performing talents in both the private and public spaces of seduction she inhabits. *The Tarnished Angels* features Malone again in the role of LaVerne Shumann, a trick parachutist married to neurotic racing pilot Roger Shumann (Robert Stack).

And yet, while the alignment of woman with bodily expressivity (at both the narrative and discursive levels) may be part and parcel of the cultural attempt to codify and contain women within safe and predictable limits, such an alignment need not be taken as definitively determining, but rather as a point of departure in a process that may lead to a less safe configuration. In fact, the cultural association of the female body with a more emphatic, wilder expressivity makes this body a particularly productive site for the emergence of the affective-performative at its most subversive. Ironically, the same features that tend to be used in the service of ideological coercion may also serve as the vehicle for a deterritorialization of cultural norms and frames of reference. These deterritorializing effects may not liberate the female subject in any definitive way, but they can radically interfere with, and alter, the otherwise stagnant relation between her state of confinement and her capacities for movement. Although not every feminist will find this Deleuzian deterritorializing agenda sufficiently empowering or even desirable for women (especially those feminists who confer a privileged status on language and culture), the following analysis will aim at showing that the intrinsic feminist desire to shake things up in the interest of change is quite consonant with the Deleuzian concern with "valori[zing] and mobili[zing] difference as a force that 'does what it can do'" (Flieger 2000: 62). Thus, my focus will not be what the (female) body *is*, but what it *is capable of doing* with, and in excess of, its cultural positioning.

### **Ruling out expression: feminist theories of spectacle and performativity**

An analysis of performing bodies in Sirk's melodramas may illuminate the degree to which previous focus on the female performer on the part of feminist theorists such as Mulvey and Butler has failed to acknowledge the coexistence of oppressive structures and expressive capacities. As in later chapters that foreground issues of gender and desire (Chapter 3, "Dancing



Feminisms,” and to some extent Chapter 4, “Kinesthetic Seductions”), my overall concern here is with the possibility of moving beyond a notion of difference as absence, of desire as negativity and lack, and, by extension, beyond a notion of the body as inert and mute form. I have purposely chosen to engage with Mulvey and Butler as two paradigmatic feminist theorists who, on the surface, seem to belong to widely divergent strains of feminist theory – the former closer to the structuralist model, more reliant upon a notion of identity, the latter more closely identified with a post-structuralist questioning of the limits of identity. But despite this notable difference between them, some of the fundamental psychoanalytic premises of Mulvey’s notion of the female body persist in Butler’s account, in either case failing to supplement the proverbial passivity imputed to the female body with a transformative capacity for action.

For all its strategic value and its timely importance, early feminist film theory’s monolithic perception of the female body as fetishistic morphology/representation proved itself rhetorically fetishistic. That is, its implication with a visual genderized rhetoric of presence and absence could not help but reinforce the same fetishistic dynamics it sought to overturn. As Grosz has remarked, the feminist appropriation of psychoanalysis came at a high price:

It is not clear that one can utilize a whole range of Freud’s concepts (about fantasy, desire, pleasure, sexuality, etc.) without accepting that which underlies and links them – the castration complex, the primacy of the phallus, the relations of presence and absence governing the sexes. (Grosz 1995: 168)

Thus, for instance, Mulveyan concepts key to a performative emphasis such as the dichotomy narrative-spectacle, while useful, are still locked in the very gender binaries that subtend them. Mulvey’s distinction between the image that advances narrative and the image that halts it is quite pertinent to both the contexts of the melodrama and the affective-performative. After all, the exaggerated use of style in melodrama likewise injects a spectacular and arresting force into the linear inertia of the narrative. But Mulvey’s notion of the spectacular moment mirrors the fetishistic reduction that she herself imputes to the patriarchal mechanisms of the film apparatus. By considering spectacle a purely visual, static form, Mulvey overlooks not only accompanying layers of sensual address in the image, but also its temporal movement and inherent capacity for self-mutation. Spectacle/performance is thus not identified as a potentially *deframing force*, but rather as a *framed view*. As a consequence, far from rupturing the objectification of the female character carried out at the narrative level – her passivity at the level of action – the interruption of narrative by spectacle doubles up such

objectification by alleging her passive relation to the act of looking. From the affective-performative perspective I propose, spectacle does arrest narrative, but such arresting by no means inhibits the force of the body. If anything, it favors the unleashing of that force by freeing the body from the tyranny and the rigidity of narrative requirements. Spectacle in this sense is no longer a framed view or fetish, for it indeed becomes an actively dislocating or de-forming force.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the seemingly more radical implications of Butler's concept of performativity, the foundational premises of her argument are equally inimical to a notion of flesh as intelligent matter. Not surprisingly, Butler's body as performative surface of phantasmatic cultural inscription results in a similar foreclosure of expressive possibilities to that which can be seen in Mulvey's female body as male-constructed fetish. The disregard for the body's expressive and expansive actions in both theoretical scenarios rests upon a split – and the hierarchy of terms resulting therein – that feminist theory has inherited from male systems of thought: the split, and mutual alienation, between mind and body, and, as a consequence, the reduction of the body to a passive surface in need of language and culture to remedy its own lack of intelligence and logic. As I hope to demonstrate as I engage with Butler's analysis of performativity in *Imitation of Life*, other basic tenets underpinning Mulvey's theories also inform Butler's thought, preventing her from considering the active and transformative potential of the body's expressive capacities. Crucial among these tenets are: the notion of desire as lack in relation to a transcendental, phallic Signifier; the related notion of difference as substitution; the body as a fictional representation lacking in corporeal substance and preceded by an utterly inaccessible reality; and the idea of power as synonymous with circumscription. Since I have already given a general account of the limitations of these ideas in the Introduction, while offering a Deleuzian/Spinozist alternative model, I will now simply illustrate them through the lens of Butler's reading of Sirk's film.

In her essay "Lana's 'Imitation': Melodramatic Repetition and the Gender Performative," Butler (1990) offers a rather persuasive analysis of the performative/imitative function in the acquisition of gender and race identities as exemplified in Sirk's *Imitation of Life*. But, while Butler's core argument astutely defines feminine identity as a repetitive gestural production, she downplays the force of difference that underpins repetition, insisting on describing this process as exhaustively constructed and coercive.<sup>3</sup> Thus women characters in the film engage in a robotic imitation of a phantasmatic and barely embodied ideal whose effects are totalizing and inescapable. Throughout her many observations on Lana

Turner's performance, Butler seldom refers to concrete gestures, alluding instead to the "incessant repetition of *the* gesture" (Butler 1990: 10, my emphasis), as though this were a given detached from embodied particularity or uniqueness. In its general disregard for corporeal detail and distinctiveness, Butler's account of the feminine performative follows a widespread tendency in current scholarship on the body to effect what Susan Leigh Foster calls a "synecdochic substitution of body for a theoretical topos" (Foster 1997: 235). According to Foster, analyses such as Butler's prioritize theoretical abstraction over the materiality of bodily events, "treat[ing] the body as a symbol for desire or sexuality" as they "move quickly past arms, legs, torso, and head on their way to a theoretical agenda that requires something unknowable or unknown as an initial premise" (Foster 1997: 235).

Indeed, in its subordination to the linguistic sign, Butler's performativity is practically divorced from the physical or corporeal realms. As Kirby has argued from a Derridian perspective, "Butler [generally] eschews description because it is a gloss for what is purportedly timeless, essential, and outside the performative iteration, or alteration, of language" (Kirby 1997: 123). Allegedly, performance is the topic of Butler's analysis. But ironically, the "phantasmatic gesture of femininity" that Butler posits as the "unknowable initial premise" of her argument can only fit in a context of representation, and hardly in one of performance. For, whereas representation is always irretrievably marked by lack and negativity – the difference between a transcendental elsewhere and a material here, a phantasmatic ideal and its poor imitations – performance involves a desiring production detached from the kind of notions of originality and transcendence that suffuse Butler's rhetoric. Unlike representation, performance is an instance of pure positivity untrammelled by indebtedness to truth or reality – positivity not in a static or reified sense, but in the sense of a multidimensional flow of ever-changing singularities of expression.

From Butler's Lacanian perspective, the repetition/imitation of the genderized phantasmatic gesture is entirely colonized by ideological and cultural *oppression*, hence altogether disengaged from the *expressive* dimension. Referring to several of Lana/Lora's gestures in the film, Butler insists on their lack of expressivity: "*This gesture is not primarily expressive but operates performatively* to constitute femininity as a certain frozen stylization of the body" (Butler 1990: 6, my emphasis); and later in the same essay, Butler writes:

although melodrama has been understood as an expressionist genre, [Lana/Lora's] gestures are not primarily expressive. On the contrary, through a tenuous repetition,

*these gestures performatively constitute the appearance of expression* and, as a consequence, *the illusion of an abiding and concealed interiority of sexual depth*. (Butler 1990: 11, my emphasis)

In her account of the behavior of film bodies, Butler reproduces the same rhetoric of metaphysical binaries that Christian Metz applied to the theory of film apparatus and spectatorship in the 1970s. Just as Metz (1986: 248–9), in a decidedly Platonic move, inherently devalued the film image by considering it a copy or forgery of the real, pro-filmic event, Butler's references to the "appearance of expression" and the "illusion of sexual depth" imply that real expression and real sexuality both exist in some transcendental, forever unreachable realm.

Butler's assessment of the gesture effects an unnecessary split between *expression* and *performance/performativity*. Her substitution of the performative for the expressive/expressionist points to a more generalized trend among scholars that Massumi describes as follows:

For many years, across many schools, "expression" has been anathema. The underlying assumption has been that any expressionism is an uncritical subjectivism. Expression conjures up the image of a self-governing, reflective individual . . . Communicational models of expression share many assumptions . . . the interiority of individual life, its rationality . . . the possibility of transparent transmission . . . between the private and the public, and the notion that what is transmitted is fundamentally information. All of these assumptions have been severely tested by structuralist, poststructuralist, postmodern, and postpostmodern thought. Communication has long since fallen on hard times and with it, expression. (Massumi 2002a: xiii)

Butler is no doubt one of the critics implied in Massumi's comments. While she implicitly links *expression* with a kind of Cartesian/humanist subjectivity where the gesture is an unmediated sign of authentic interiority, she identifies *performance/performativity* with a (purportedly less naïve) postmodern subjectivity where the gesture is mere surface disconnected from any notion of interiority. The problem with both these notions of the gesture is that they are equally the result of a binary division of the subject between interior mind or psyche and exterior body or surface. Even as Butler's notion of performativity aims at surpassing this binary model, it merely reverses the priority of the terms involved.

In its radical ontological/ontogenetic sense, performance lies outside a series of binary organizations such as stimulus-response, interior meaning-exterior sign, anterior-posterior. Rather than thinking of performance as either the *active expression of authentic interiority* or the *passive inscription of external oppression*, I would like to consider performance as an ever-changing

material event that registers the impact of social and cultural pressures on the body in an active and creative way. The idea that, as expressive event, performance does something with those social pressures and conditions, as opposed to simply suffering them passively or reactively, is key here. As Massumi reminds us, it is important to distinguish between expression and a certain static configuration of ideological or cultural forces. As a transformative force that “strikes the body . . . directly and immediately” (Massumi 2002a: xvii), expression introduces a modification into the system of ideological and formal regulations that make up a specific body. “In the throes of expression” (Massumi 2002a: xvii), the body does not coincide with a certain subject-position, but rather with the force that pushes boundaries toward a different configuration. Performance/expression thus involves not simply a *reactive* gesture in response to an oppressive force, but also an *active* and aesthetically enabling production that may provide solutions to an otherwise unbearable situation by unhinging and shifting its lines of force (Flieger 2000: 50). The expressive gesture of performance is not so much reflective of a predetermined content as it is expansive in its ability to multiply connections with the real. In effect, speech and gesture can add to reality, becoming creative and ontogenetic forces in their own right (Massumi 2002a: xxviii).

Such a notion of performance is also more in sync with the radical political potential found in some melodramas, a potential all but washed out by Butler’s implicit distinction between *oppression* and *expression*. Melodrama markedly deviates from the classical tenets of expression theory, according to which circumstances of oppression would be thought to curtail and inhibit expression. By contrast, the gestural emphasis typical of the melodrama suggests that oppression may in fact function as an enhancer of expression. Along these lines, dance and cultural critic Randy Martin insists that “the body’s capacity for struggle must be found in the history of its repression” (Martin 1990: 51). Martin argues that the body may emerge as a likely site of opposition in a culture where the mind is the most obvious target of control and domination by the linguistic sign: “The body is the appropriate source of action precisely because the control of mind makes it a site of resistance” (Martin 1990: 2). Far from resulting, then, in what Butler terms a “compulsory normative requirement,” the expression-event attests to the idea that “[the body’s] liberatory promise becomes prominent only when specific forms of social control establish its potential as a site of resistance” (Martin 1990: 14). Thus considered, the excessive gesture or the deviant body in melodrama may simultaneously figure in two interrelated guises, the juncture of which confounds the boundaries between oppression and expression: as the *expression of oppression* (as in the phrase “excessive gestures in contained spaces”) and simultaneously as the

*oppression of expression* (in the sense of a set of determining field conditions that both configure and limit the body's expressive faculties).

Like Mulvey's notion of the female subject as fetishistic sign, Butler's binarized account of performance also promotes the idea of a homogeneous circulation of women's bodies in the cinema, effectively reinforcing a notion of difference predicated on self-sameness and negativity (i.e. every woman aspires to embody the same unattainable ideal). In the Deleuzian sense, highly pertinent to performance, difference is not dependent on a binary alternation between two terms, where one always remains dominant. As Abigail Bray and Claire Colebrook explain:

Deleuze's "transcendental empiricism" posits a univocity whereby bodies, consciousness, actions, events, signs, and entities are specific intensities – each with its own modality and difference. They do not need their "difference from" each other in order to be . . . in their specific singularity beings are positively different . . . no particular event – neither mind nor body – can be posited as the origin or meaning of any other. On this account, difference is not a question of negation. (Bray and Colebrook 1998: 56)

Implicit in Butler's model of (non-)difference is a denial of the many variations and inflections the abstract "phantasmatic" gesture constitutive of femininity may accrue as it becomes positively different, that is, as it acquires specific value and dimension in the materiality of the body – from each character's particular circumstances of oppression, from each actor's unique and versatile physical make-up and kinetic style, and from the film's own way of framing each actor's performance. Indeed, close attention to these and many other variables may prove such "phantasmatic gesture" and its attendant notion of difference far too reductive and homogenizing.

Interestingly, Butler does acknowledge that not "all imitations are alike or uniform," nor do they "try to approximate the same impossible or irrecoverable ideal" (Butler 1990: 3), yet her essay is not concerned with analyzing the dissonances and resonances between the film's different performances, but rather with stressing the unconscious effects of an ill-defined gender ideal whose influence reaches dictatorial proportions. Although Butler points out, for example, that the sexuality repressed in Lora's stilted poses and regal mannerisms surfaces in Sara Jane's sexualized song-and-dance numbers (Butler 1990: 10), she does not elaborate on this difference in any significant way. Instead, Butler devotes the larger portion of her analysis of *Imitation* to identifying the normative gesture in Lora/Lana Turner's performance of femininity, glossing over other performances in the film whose deviant tendencies may in fact invalidate the very proposition of a master gesture of femininity.

While Butler's argument logically prioritizes Lora/Turner as the most successful imitator of the phantasmatic gesture, my analysis will privilege Sara Jane's capacity to set in motion affective forces of deformation that undermine notions of an original standard, however phantasmatic. Rather than simply stressing resemblance and identity, reiteration and imitation, I will try to examine the relationality among the physical practices where reiteration and imitation become singularly embodied (Foster 1998: 4). My reading will adopt Massumi's idea of relationality as "the potential for singular effects of *qualitative change to occur in excess over or as a supplement to* objective interactions" (Massumi 2002b: 225, my emphasis). From an affective-performative standpoint, I will argue, Lora and Sara Jane do not instantiate a binary system of dominant and subordinate terms; rather, they stand for two processes of mutual becoming (Lora becomes with Sara Jane and Sara Jane becomes with Lora) that affect, and change, each other's congealed/molar identities. In a political sense, what emerges is thus a variety of forms of oppression and a correlative variety of performative acts of defiance and resistance.

### *Imitation of Life*

#### *Upward thrust: ideal abstraction*

Lora's relentless pursuit of idealized visibility resembles the perpetual upward thrust of the ballet dancer. In both performative contexts, the woman's actions are largely severed from the weight and sensuality of her body.<sup>4</sup> Lora's bodily comportment is regulated by the phallic principles of a rational aesthetic tradition that strips the woman of any chance to experience the affective processes of embodiment.<sup>5</sup> But, unlike Butler, who sees Lora/Turner's performativity as the substitution of a phantasmatic sign for the far-fetched, naïve possibility of bodily expression, I see Lora's rigid performative style as an instance of expressive poverty – a body that expresses the constraints that representational systems impose on the unstoppable movement of expression. Thus, the abstraction and rigidity that imbue Lora's bodily behavior should not be further abstracted by reference to an unlocatable signifier such as the "master gesture of femininity." Instead, I would suggest that we consider this bodily behavior as the expression of specific, materially embodied, representational practices typical of the genderized, classical narrative system of Hollywood cinema.

In a reiterative style that seems to leave no room for contradiction, Lora's most memorable performative signatures consist of frontal stances, hieratic poses, and upward/outward stretches of the torso.<sup>6</sup> Two bodily positions stand out as most significant, splitting Lora's body into two

conflictive directions. The first insists on Lora's frontality vis-à-vis the camera, while the second places her in profile, as she is often seen engaging with other characters. While, in the first instance, the film positions the woman as a self-absorbed erotic icon in direct rapport with the camera and the viewer's gazes, its conservative moral and ideological stance is more likely to define her as responsive to social and familial demands, hence contained by narrative requirements that destine her for marriage or motherhood. Thus, Lora's body may be seen as the site where the film stages its ideological battle between divergent notions of femininity. In the final analysis, the split choreography of Lora/Turner's body reveals the difficulties, and the ultimate failure, of the classical, patriarchal film aesthetic in seamlessly blending the narrative and the spectacular together into a single, unitary system. Through Lora's resistance against becoming engulfed by narrative goals (marriage, motherhood) at the expense of purely spectacular ones (abstract idealization), the film in fact acts out its own schizophrenic split, while conveniently displacing the assumption of its moral burden onto the female character.

The film abstracts Lora's corporeality not only through its containment by the camera, but also through an editing style that treats her professional career as a series of interchangeable moments of triumphant success devoid of conflict or transformation.<sup>7</sup> *Imitation* decorporealizes Lora's characterization as a working actress first by depicting her meteoric rise to fame in a static, unproblematic way, and second by erasing all signs of work or effort from her body. Ultimately, the film necessitates the undisturbed upward mode of Lora's career – a highly unrealistic state of permanent success – in order to rationalize/naturalize its indictment of Lora as a neglectful mother. By representing the independent, professional woman as driven by overly self-centered, narcissistic goals, *Imitation* manages to render the definitive judgment of Lora as a bad mother necessary and justified.

Although, at the level of psychology and narrative, *Imitation* looks upon acting as an exercise in dissimulation and inauthenticity – while at the same time not hesitating to make Lora's exhibitionistic desires fully coincident with its own voyeuristic needs<sup>8</sup> – at the affective-performative level, the film allows both Lora's and Sara Jane's activities as consummate performers to destabilize its own organized systems of gender and race values. From a phenomenological perspective, the women use their performing talents to defy the patriarchally imposed idea of "I cannot" with the defiant force of a corporeal "I can."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Lora's repeated rejections of Steve Archer's (John Gavin) marriage proposals are refreshing, for, regardless of the poor alternative supplied by the film, they suggest the possibility of a



line of flight from patriarchal containment. In what I consider one of the most compelling moments of Turner's performance, Lora's rejection of Archer in the staircase of her apartment building, even the film shows sympathy for Lora's predicament, as she literally flees a *mise-en-scène* of narrow hallways and dreary gray walls that exactly anticipates the stifling consequences of a marriage to Archer.

In fact, this moment is structurally related to both the film's first and last scenes. As in the film's opening and closing scenes, Archer tries to stop the movement of Lora's desire by freezing her into the image of a domesticated housewife and lover. Yet, by contrast with the film's ending, the scene in the staircase still attests to a rebellious energy that will henceforth gradually dissipate. As the phone rings inside Lora's apartment, Archer grabs Lora by the arm in a replay of a similar gesture on their first encounter on the beach, forcing her to face him at the expense of any other attraction or distraction. Lora, however, is more attracted to the impersonal gaze of audiences, and, by extension, to the camera's gaze, than to Archer's offer of subservient domesticity. Accordingly, she extricates herself from his embrace and picks up the phone from Annie to hear agent Loomis' (Robert Alda) news about a promising audition. What ensues is a struggle between a breathless, overly excited Lora and a self-righteous, domineering Archer. After mocking Archer's compromised ambition, symbolized by his prosaic photograph of a beer can "going up and down and up and down" over a man's belly, Lora determinedly declares, "I'm going up and up and up and nobody is going to pull me down!" The upward thrust of Lora's performance in both a physical and a professional sense is thus categorically established.

That Archer asks Lora in this scene to stop acting and to grow up is fully consistent with the reliance of patriarchy upon molar, stable subjectivities. Archer wants Lora to stop acting not just on literal theatrical stages; more importantly, he wants her to stop living in between, and messing with, different roles and identities – the mother, the lover, the actor – in order to embrace a single, codifiable role. To varying degrees, Lora and Sara Jane exhibit the transformative qualities of becoming, a capacity to move between identities, while refusing to embrace a definitive one. While Lora's acting ambitions destabilize the patriarchal division of labor between male public and female private/domestic roles, Sara Jane's skills in impersonating hyperbolic blackness thoroughly disorganize the binary system of racial/racist codes and meanings.

*Downward thrust: anomalous repetition*

Sara Jane's performances in the film, I submit, ought not to be seen as poor imitations of Lora's, or even as self-conscious renditions of her mother's,

but rather as unique events expressing a constellation of physical, libidinal, and social forces that compose and decompose in unrepeatable ways. Thus, if we attend to the notion of power as instituted and reproducible relation of force (*pouvoir/potestas*), we may regard Lora's white, wealthy body as the privileged and more powerful one. Yet the powers/capacities of Lora's abstracted body pale in comparison with the force and intensity (*puissance/potentia*) that accompany the onscreen presence of Sara Jane's body. I am not saying that socioeconomic, sexual, or racial categories no longer operate when one considers the film's affective dimension. Indeed, such binary demarcations are crucial in shaping the field conditions that give rise to a certain expression and its affection. But, however *necessary* to the onset of the expressive event, these binary demarcations are not *sufficient* to account for its force. In other words, bodily expressions may be altogether anomalous and excessive with regard to the social, racial, or sexual causes that have allegedly originated them. This means that it lies entirely within a body's power to set in motion a series of forces of deformation that act upon the rigid parameters of sexual or racial binaries. In *Imitation*, one of the most obvious destabilizing effects of Sara Jane's performance is to switch the film's entire center of gravity from Lora to herself – not just to substitute the problem of race for the problem of gender, but, more radically, to inject unpredictability into an ideological context aiming for stability, thereby unleashing the film's repressed, eventful energies.

Sara Jane's chameleon nature – her ability to perform the gestures and speech of both whiteness and blackness – is perhaps the film's most subversive statement regarding the impermanence of identity, its openness to reinvention, and the non-essential ties between the body's vocabulary of gestures and movements and the particular meanings those signs mobilize in a given culture. In the scene where Sara Jane performs the black Southern mammy “for Miss Lora and her friends,” she shows up carrying a tray of seafood appetizers on her head in an excessive re-enactment of the white fantasy of exotic femininity. With her right arm holding up the tray, the left resting supply on her waist, and displaying an exaggerated grin on her face, Sara Jane puts an ironic spin on the image of the black woman as the graceful and willing carrier of white devaluation and exploitation. To Lora's question, “Where did you learn [that trick], Sara Jane?” Sara Jane responds, “I've no trick to tell, Miss Lora. I learn'd it from my mammy, and she learn'd it from old Masser 'fore she belong'd to you.” Sara Jane thus implies that her hyperbolic gestures and accent are not really her own, or her mother's for that matter; instead, they originate in the white master's appropriation of black bodies.

If my analysis of this scene were to stop here, I would have accounted for the necessary cultural and racial causes that contribute to the scene's dramatic impact and psychological importance. But these *necessary* causes are not in themselves *sufficient* to explain or justify the unscripted conditions that make each repetitive performative instance paradoxically unrepeatable. And here precisely is where Butler's reading needs to be taken a step further. Butler sees Sara Jane's act as "an imitation of her mother's 'act.'" The difference, Butler suggests, is that "in this second rendition the imitation is meant to expose the illusion that the first act [Annie's blackness] sought to produce and sustain" (Butler 1990: 9). Here, as in the case of the feminine gesture, Butler submits the racial gesture to a binary rhetoric of reality versus illusion, and depth versus surface. No doubt Sara Jane's choice of performing whiteness over blackness in her life is motivated by a racist cultural context and a history of slavery. But although this context and its historical reality constitute the general and necessary condition of Sara Jane's performative act, this general condition is exceeded in the contingencies that creep in through her unique repetition of the slavery-event. Thus, it is not a question of pronouncing Annie's blackness an illusion of racial depth, or of describing Sara Jane's merely as the unveiling of such an illusion, but of considering each intersection of corporeality and race as composed of singular contingent ingredients that give it its distinctness "in addition to being a member" of a more general class of events (Massumi 2002b: 222), in this case the history of racism and slavery.

Undoubtedly, one of the most important contingent ingredients in Sara Jane's imitation of blackness is her own light skin, which allows her to confound visual and epistemological distinctions between white and non-white bodies. Through her performance, Sara Jane expresses her uniqueness as a bodily event by paradoxically accentuating the markers of racial/racist uniformity and binary inequality. By producing the racial/racist standard in an excessive form, Sara Jane opens up a gap of difference between herself and such a normative standard. Insofar as Sara Jane's act does not pursue a slavish mimicry of the standard, from the side of either blackness or whiteness, her expression is thoroughly and positively different. Sara Jane's act in fact demonstrates that she is neither black nor white, but *a unique instance of in-determinate relations between whiteness and blackness*. Sara Jane thus illustrates the ontogenetic dimension of the performative body, its creative uncertainty and its potential for destabilizing ideological or cultural systems. Even if later in the film we see Sara Jane succumb to the cultural idealization of whiteness through her attempts at passing, this scene shows her capacity to counteractualize the experience

of slavery with a performative will that undoes its allegedly transcendental representational supports.

In contradistinction to the frozen and finished poses of Lora's abstract physicality, Sara Jane's performativity in the film can be seen as an exercise in tactical and provisional mobility. Sara Jane's bodily style in space and time registers the pressures of a racist and sexist environment that demands of her a continuous reassessment of trajectories and goals. Accordingly, Sara Jane's bodily actions are riveted not only by suspenseful uncertainty, but also by the kind of resourcefulness and inventiveness that arise therein. Sara Jane instantiates a complex experience of embodiment insofar as her *oppressive* difference also enables a more *expressive* and variegated performance than Lora's.<sup>10</sup>

Not coincidentally, the greater mobility in Sara Jane's performance in relation to Lora's also gives rise to greater affective intensity. The surplus of affect results not only from the pathos of Sara Jane's oppressive racial status, or even from the overall melodramatic context whereby she simultaneously loves and hates her sacrificial mother. While all of these causes are clearly at work in the film, they address a narrative, personalized kind of emotion. But one may also consider the propensity for the affective in the melodrama not as a matter of subjective relations, but rather in the Deleuzian/Spinozist sense of a "prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another" (Massumi in Deleuze and Guattari 1987: xvi). In this regard, the melodrama owes its emphatic affectivity to its openness to frequent and swift reversals of mood and tone, its proliferation of passages from one experiential state of the (film's) body to another. The intense affect in Sara Jane's performance thus arises from the disorganized, unpredictable movement that informs her trajectory, which makes her pass suddenly, and sometimes cruelly, from one bodily state (upward thrust, determined body) to another (downward thrust, diminished or suffering body).

Sara Jane's performance often displays the complex fluidity of the body's powers of affection, which can take disabling as well as enabling forms. Thus, for example, although her boyfriend Frankie's (Troy Donahue) brutal racist assault on her body drastically diminishes her immediate capacity to act, it is paradoxically the affective impact of this event that leads her to initiate a series of public performances.<sup>11</sup> Even if only briefly, these performances expand her power to make things happen and to shake things out of their habitual rigidity. Sara Jane thus illustrates the capacity of affect to enliven the predictable context formed by Lora's stagnant movement upward. Paraphrasing Massumi's remarks on the vivacity of affect, I would say that Sara Jane re-makes the film eventful;

ever on the move from situation to situation, she alerts us to the possibility of the new and unpredictable entering the ordered contexts of the film in order to shake up its inertia toward narrative and ideological stability (Massumi 2002b: 220).

To Lora's unassailable fortress of whiteness and wealth, Sara Jane counterposes a precarious sense of identity that requires the camouflage tactics of a skillful nomadic performer. Accordingly, the film handles her performance in some unique ways: first, by allowing Sara Jane's body to display some signs of hesitancy, effort, pain, discomfort, and duration; second, by featuring her performing career as an ongoing process of physical and metaphorical becoming; and third, by insisting on the earthbound, downward character of her physical movements and gestures, in sharp contrast to the (physically and socially) upwardly mobile Lora.

Lora's and Sara Jane's divergent performative styles may be read through Deleuze and Guattari's ideas on the differences between smooth/nomad and striated/sedentary spaces. Deleuze and Guattari's definition of striated space reads like a description of the way *Imitation* stages Lora's literal and metaphorical performances: "Striated space is defined by the requirements of long-distance vision: constancy of orientation, invariance of distance . . . inertial points of reference . . . central perspective" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 494). All of these properties are embodied in Lora's fixed, distant gaze, in a style that favors static posing over mobility, ideality over physicality, and even in the classically centered images the film selects to stand in for her theatrical career. By contrast, Sara Jane's on- and off-stage performances bear many of the signatures characteristic of smooth space. Smooth space is not defined by optical, but rather by haptic, perception. It is a space that "possesses a greater power of deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 480), insofar as "its orientations, landmarks, and linkages are in continuous variation" (p. 493). Smooth space does not lend itself easily to ideality or abstraction, for "one never sees from a distance in a space of this kind . . . one is never in front of" (p. 493). In place of unified ideality, smooth space is composed of a continuously changing number of local and fragmented perspectives and is tied to any number of observers, thus never amounting to a fixed or stable totality. Sara Jane's movement away from home, her tactical remapping of plans and trajectories as she moves from city to city, from club to club, and even the changing conditions of her public performances instantiate the features of smooth or nomadic space.

Through starkly different *mise-en-scènes*, Sara Jane's two performances accentuate the contrasting uses of space between herself and Lora. But these spatial differences do not place the two women in a relation of static

opposition, nor do they imply a failed imitation on the part of Sara Jane. Although Sara Jane's performances may arguably aspire to resemble Lora's, and a progressive approximation does take place between them, the differences remain fluid and open, evidence of a relationality that never amounts to outright imitation. More importantly, Sara Jane's performances unfold as a series of changing relations between herself and her mother, performer and audience, and performer and race, and these changes affecting personal relations are impersonally materialized through changing configurations of darkness/light, depth/height, and visibility/invisibility.

Sara Jane's first performance takes place in Harry's Club – a rather dark, underground establishment that Annie later refers to as a “low-down dive.” Throughout Sara Jane's performance, Annie remains in a position of invisibility. While Annie, like a masochistic voyeur, stands by and observes in the darkness behind a screen, Sara Jane begins a vaudeville number where she insinuates herself into a largely male audience whose leering glances and raucous laughter are exaggerated to the point of grotesque caricature. On this first occasion, Sara Jane does not perform on the distant, removed space provided by a stage, but instead walks and dances on the same level as her audience, mingling among them and offering her body up for inspection as she approaches customers and sits or reclines on their tables. Such spatial arrangement stands in stark contrast to Lora's projection of an inaccessible image impermeable to external appraisal or criticism. In the case of Sara Jane, the absence of a stage reiterates the close-range vision and the tactile possibilities of smooth space available to the audience. Likewise, it evokes the downward direction of the performer's body – the gravitational pull that affects her movements and gestures.

In her dance, Sara Jane continually swings her body up and down (notice the contrast with Lora's upward mobility), while she alternately strokes one of her arms or one of her hands in a similar up-and-down motion. Embodying the sexuality repressed in Lora's performance, Sara Jane's overtly erotic gestures represent a kind of hermaphroditic performance of the sexual act itself. This reading is also confirmed by Sara Jane's song, in the lyrics of which a woman pleads to have both her purse, and, by metaphoric extension, her vagina, filled up by the man. By thus equating the male sexual organ with money in no uncertain terms, Sara Jane does not merely re-enact the patriarchal commodification of the woman's body as a prostituted body. More radically, although perhaps unwittingly, she includes the man's body in the same commodifying dynamics. I would argue, then, that Sara Jane's performance is a burlesque version of phallic sexuality. In embodying sexual intercourse itself, Sara Jane's body becomes

a perverse juncture of both femininity and masculinity, not merely acting as the passive mirror of male desire, but self-consciously refracting its grotesque image back to the men and women in the audience. Sara Jane's deviant movements and gestures act out the rebellious energy that even the most phallic of female dancers may at times embody. Foster describes the subversive potential of the ballerina-phallus<sup>12</sup> in terms that may be applied to Sara Jane as well:

There is . . . a promise in the naughtiness of the ballerina-phallus, the promise that all monsters afford, to forge from the cataclysmic energy of their aberrant parts a new identity . . . Perhaps the ballerina-as-phallus can even reclaim . . . a certain sensual and even sexual potency. (Foster 1996: 3)

In contrast with her number at Harry's Club, Sara Jane's second performance at the Moulin Rouge erases her singularity by casting her as one among many interchangeable women whose movements and gestures are part of an assembly line of sexualized bodies. This homogeneity, together with the fact that the women are placed on a rather high and distant stage, further abstracts their physicality. The women are uniformly divested of their own ambulant capacity by being positioned on a "champagne train" – an electrically propelled chain of bodies using reclining chairs as props. On or around these chairs, the women assume a series of fetishistic postures that maximize the posing effect of their bodies, while minimizing their expressive and kinetic abilities.<sup>13</sup>

At the Moulin Rouge, both Sara Jane's highly illuminated and colorfully staged performance and Annie's unusual exposure to the public eye mark a reversal of their tendency to dwell in the dark (or "to live in the back," as Sara Jane describes their fate in an earlier scene where she and her mother are welcomed to occupy Lora's back room). But this occasion also introduces a change in their respective sense of racial constraints. As Annie steps into the light and walks up to the edge of the stage, she unwittingly becomes a social rebel defying the paradigms of visibility and invisibility dictated by hierarchies of class, race, age, and gender. Unlike Sara Jane's increasingly acute sense of the restrictions imposed upon her body by a racist culture, Annie's maternal affect and the instinctual knowledge of the proximity of her death enable her to cross into a space that is permanently barred to her. On the other hand, Sara Jane's elevated and illuminated performance, closer in some respects to Lora's white, wealthy ideals, implies a loss of her former subversive irony. In its closing moments, the public spectacle of Annie's funeral, the film reasserts the difference between those bodies that are constrained by public decorum and those that are gripped by affective forces. While, even in the way she

mourns Annie, Lora cannot but represent the public, organized body, Sara Jane, impulsively launching her body over her mother's coffin and declaring her active part in her death, once again stands in for the disorganized body of affect.

As these examples make clear, the liberating power of Sara Jane's transgressive exhibitionism should be qualified. The nomadic deterritorialization or line of flight that Sara Jane traces in contrast to Lora's fetishistic ideality does not take place without a parallel reterritorialization concerning the internal power dynamics of Sara Jane's space. That is, Sara Jane's line of flight is limited – plugged and prevented from effecting further transformations – because it is still demarcated by a patriarchal and racist organization of forces. This impulse towards reterritorialization is clearly displayed not only by the audience's sadistic, or simply indifferent, responses to Sara Jane's performances, but also by the kind of people whose company she keeps in her life away from home, such as the overtly racist man flirting with her at Harry's Club, or her insensitive female friend and co-worker at the Moulin Rouge. Thus, it is not so much at the level of personal/individual liberation that Sara Jane's performance displays its transgressive value as at the level of its capacity to change or displace the struggle, to "reconstitute its stakes, confront new obstacles, invent new paces, [and] switch adversaries" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 500).

### Sadomasochism, a shock to thought

Affective displacements and inventions often occur through the juxtaposition of incongruent affections. In Sirk's melodramas, a violent and transformative energy is felt through an affective montage that forces together the speeds and rhythms of contiguous disparate scenes or of disparate bodies within a single scene. *Imitation's* gradual complication of its initial focus on gender with its attention to the problem of race manifests itself not only as a switch in narrative priorities, but also as a switch in rhythmical and musical choices that accentuate crucial bodily differences. Thus, as Sara Jane leaves Harry's Club hurriedly and determinedly in pursuit of anonymity, an affective violence emerges from the disparate speeds and capacities between mother and daughter – Sara Jane's powerful, energetic body versus Annie's exhausted, sick body. But additionally, affect erupts from the loud, discordant notes of the jazz soundtrack, which punctuate the unexpected and rushed movement of a bright yellow cab whose loud horn momentarily halts Sara Jane's fast-paced gait. The new speed *Imitation* registers in Sara Jane's bodily style (as *Written on the Wind* likewise registers in



Marylee Hadley/Malone's style) is, not coincidentally, choreographed to the sounds of several aggressive jazz scores that clash with the more romantic or sentimental melodies the film reserves for Lora and Susie. The interspersed sounds of jazz usher in the nomadic and intensely jarring rhythms of the big American city, echoing, however obliquely, the social and racial struggles that it goes through in the 1950s.

The scene of Sara Jane's first public performance performs its own kind of affective assault by splitting its point of view between two contrary emotional states. As evoked in the thespian masks of tragedy and comedy on the club's wall right behind Sara Jane, the affect results from the poignant incongruity between the grotesque, sadistic voyeurism of Sara Jane's male audience and Annie's concerned, masochistic voyeurism. Affect also arises from the forced proximity of highly discontinuous bodily singularities, as instantiated by the club's (male) audience and Annie: garish/corpulent visibility versus invisibility, loudness versus silence, large and aggressive gestures versus stealthy and guarded movements.

But I think it is also important to note that for sadomasochistic situations to give rise to affect in a Deleuzian sense – affect as productive of new thoughts or feelings – a certain displacement of familiar values and beliefs is required. In this sense, certain scenes in *Imitation*, such as Frankie's assault on Sara Jane, are so driven by the oppositional power dynamics of gender and race that it is justifiably impossible for the emotional impact of the scene to move outside such binary categories. Be that as it may, insofar as this scene combines strong and incompatible impulses, it may also be said to exceed the kind of affective expressions that merely repeat what we already know.

Enraged at the idea that he has been unwittingly dating a black girl, Frankie slaps Sara Jane's face and upper body a number of times in a brutal show of force. Sara Jane collapses by a group of wooden boxes next to a wall, and, as she hits the ground, a puddle of dirty water is exposed under and around her body. Crouching by the boxes, and with her hair and clothes soiled by the water, Sara Jane resembles a pile of human garbage. As Frankie leaves the scene, she slowly raises her head in his direction. The frantic pace of the jazz score heard in the soundtrack, together with Sara Jane's tensely stretched body, do not fail to invest this performance of near human waste with an undeniable sense of spectacle. The waste, in other words, is not wasted, as the film manages to recycle it into a highly eroticized display of female masochism. By the end of the scene, Sara Jane's excessively fetishized image clearly stands in contradiction to the realistic demands of the script concerning her violated, less than attractive body.

As in the scene at Harry's club, the excess in this scene does not simply derive from the fetishization of Sara Jane/Kohner's body. While the female body as fetish is normative and familiar enough a cinematic sign, its insertion into a context of pain is clearly in excess of what makes us comfortable. It is the dissonance between Frankie's sadistic devaluation of Sara Jane's body (a downward thrust) at the narrative level and the film's erotic/spectacular overinvestment in this body (an upward thrust) that causes the scene to become both affective and excessive. Under a different guise, of course, the conflict of aims *Imitation* exhibits vis-à-vis Lora's narcissistic self-involvement (both benefiting from it at the level of erotic spectacle and punishing her for it at the level of narrative) also applies to the film's handling of Sara Jane's corporeal and performative style. Whereas *Imitation* portrays Sara Jane's public performances as demeaning to both herself and her mother by insisting on the audience's detached commodification of the female performer, the film no doubt continues to invest Kohner's body with the force of erotic spectacle.

In the scene I have just discussed, both the film's irrational erotic investment in Kohner's body and the violent impact of the gender and race dynamics upon this particular body make the possibility of a molecular reading rather strained. It would be inconceivable, in other words, not to take a moral stance with regard to such a racist and sexist inscription of the body. For narrative actions to mutate into affective-performative events, such actions require a level of aesthetic abstraction that is clearly missing in the violent encounter between Frankie and Sara Jane. The more abstract and depersonalized the film's various means of expression can become, the greater its capacity to produce intensely disconcerting affects. Put in a different way, the excessively powerful, painful, or beautiful image that places characters and viewers beyond the possibility of either action or reaction (Deleuze 1995: 51) does not arise from an increase in the *quantity* of sensory impressions suggestive of power, beauty, or pain. Rather, affective excess derives from a *qualitative* change whereby the image takes a flight toward abstraction (an abstraction based on material assemblages of forces, rather than ideal forms). In its openness to the transitional and the virtual, its departure from the already formed and organized, abstraction is a prerequisite for affective immediacy. By means of abstraction, sadomasochistic relations between characters at the narrative level may often function, at the affective-performative level, as the production of a "shock to thought" in the audience (Deleuze 1989: 156).

In leaning toward abstraction, the affective-performative moment implies a desubjectification of expression. Expression becomes the film's own impersonal event. In this sense, although the human body still remains at

the core of the expression event, it becomes a non-subjective catalyst for the event, rather than its conscious originator or orchestrator. As Massumi implies, individual characters/actors' bodies act as the necessary channels for the unfolding of an expression that is always larger than themselves:

The continuing of expression across experiences means that it is too big to fit the contours of an individual human body . . . If expression's charge of potential were not incarnated in an individual body capable of renewing it, it would cease to be expressed. Expression's culmination effects consent to perceptual pick-up by the human body. (Massumi 2002a: xxix)

From this perspective, affective-performative moments challenge not only the concept of narrative organization, but also the concept of character as a self-contained individual whose acts result from conscious and willful intentionality. In the case of Sirk's cinema, these moments can no longer, or not only, be attributed to self-willed acts of defiance against a parental figure (in Sara Jane and Marylee's cases), against patriarchal dominance (in Lora's case), or even against oneself (in LaVerne's case). Simply put, affects are expressed regardless of whether characters (or even Sirk himself) are consciously involved in producing them or not. This disinvestment from subjectivity can potentially expand the scope of political action, for bodily forces that lie outside human will or intentionality also prove capable of generating ideas and sensations that are in excess of those ideologically sanctioned.

The kind of individuality at stake here is accurately evoked by the term "singularity." Singularity stripped of subjectivity is what Deleuze and Guattari call a *haecceity*, which they define as "a mode of individuation very different from that of a person, subject, thing, or substance" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 261). *Haecceities* are variously described as individual degrees or intensities that may "enter into composition with other degrees, other intensities" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 253), or as "relations of movement and rest between molecules and particles, capacities to affect and to be affected" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 261). Pointing to the molecular underside of narrative, this rather impersonal discourse hints at the force of melodrama itself as it is affectively choreographed and experienced. Words such as "degrees," "intensities," "movement and rest," and "affect" are indeed evocative of the core elements of an affective-performative theory of the melodrama interested in a minute dissection of its forces at a molecular level.

On the abstract, molecular plane, the Sirkian film refuses to take sides between the female performer's oftentimes sadistic position (be it Sara Jane, Lora, or Marylee), and the person to whom she causes grief (Annie),

emotional neglect (Susie), or even, indirectly, death (Jasper Hadley). The film at this level is less interested in reproducing the oppositional system of social relations of power and more invested in disabling the audience's secure mechanisms of knowledge, seeking to interrupt our clichéd emotional responses in order to provoke in us a new thought or feeling. Because of its inherently unsettling force, such emergence of the new is usually experienced as a kind of Artaudian cruelty that aims at "inflict[ing] a symbolic violence in perception, language, opinion, character, [and] mood" (Lambert 2000: 263). This symbolic violence accumulates a unique degree of impersonal vitality in a few moments in *Written on the Wind* and *The Tarnished Angels* – two films where Sirk seems to have momentarily stepped into riskier, more uncertain territories.

### *Written on the Wind*: lethal powers of the fetish

Of the four protagonists/actors in *Written* – Kyle Hadley (Robert Stack), Mitch Wayne (Rock Hudson), Marylee Hadley (Dorothy Malone), and Lucy Moore (Lauren Bacall) – Marylee/Malone most emphatically embodies the expressionistic mode of performance and its exaggerated affections. Paradoxically, Marylee's strategic voyeuristic tendencies are lined with wild, uncontrollable desire. And it is this desire that serves as a catalyst for the film's affective-performative eruptions. The affective dimension of the film is greatly advanced by the pairing off of particular musical themes with particular bodies. One might even say that in *Written* each character appears to "own" his or her music, a detail that can also be seen at its most pronounced in Marylee/Malone's performance. As is the case with Sara Jane in *Imitation*, Marylee's onscreen appearance is usually attended by different jazz scores that reinforce her oversexualized, curvaceous figure, as well as her circuitous methods of operation.

The film pits fiery, hyperbolic Malone against cool, restrained Bacall. Each woman's relationship to music defines her as either actively intervening in or passively receiving the film's production of affect. While Marylee's musically exuberant corporeality immediately impacts the film's production of affect, the film never affords Lucy's subdued bodily style the possibility of such active intervention. Marylee performs quite a few tempestuous dances to the sound of diegetic music that she herself initiates or actively enjoys. On the other hand, the use of music in scenes that pivot on Bacall's character is psychological (and extradiegetic) rather than physical (and diegetic).

At the party thrown at the Hadley estate to commemorate Kyle and Lucy's first wedding anniversary, Kyle equates his alleged impotence, of

which both Mitch and Lucy are unaware at this point, with the inability to perform/dance with his own wife ("I can't [dance with you, Lucy]. Somebody just stole my magic dancing slippers"). Whereas Marylee's and Kyle's bodies are represented as excessive, either through an exhibitionistic and insatiable sexuality (nymphomaniac Marylee) or through a masochistic and inhibited behavior (alcoholic Kyle), Mitch and Lucy figure as the ideal dancers and lovers from an Oedipal, heterosexual standpoint. Mitch's and Lucy's bodies are thoroughly "sober" and contained, registering very little deviation from a neutral, balanced state (except, perhaps, for Lucy's fainting spells, a physiological response nonetheless befitting the patriarchal codification of female biology).

As an effectively impotent man and an exceedingly potent woman, the Hadley brother and sister pose an undeniable threat to patriarchal, Oedipally based norms of sexual conduct. The affective implications of Marylee's deviance are fully displayed in the film's "dance of death" scene. In this scene, Marylee dances in her room before a picture of Mitch, while her father, Jasper Hadley (Robert Keith), falls down the staircase and dies. In an affective/virtual sense, Marylee's dance shows the outcome of the uncontrollable sexuality she exudes: the irrelevance and demise of patriarchy itself.

The scene begins after the Hadley police bring home an unrepentant Marylee from one of her sexual adventures with working-class men. While Jasper Hadley interrogates the man Marylee has picked up in an effort to reassert his patriarchal right to monitor his daughter's sexuality, Marylee withdraws to her room in the mansion's upper floor. After the man is tried by Mr. Hadley for his trespassing act and dismissed by Mitch with a mild admonition of discretion, we cut to Marylee's room, where she begins to play a 1950s Latin-flavored jazz rendition of "Temptation," also featured in her former dance at the party. Swaying her hips, she takes a series of pronounced steps forward, while maintaining both arms folded and synchronizing their movements to those of her feet. She then places Mitch's picture up on a shelf, and, keeping her gaze on this substitute voyeur and her cigarette in her lips, she begins to undress behind the shelves. A cut to the downstairs studio, where Mr. Hadley proceeds to leave the room after his conversation with Mitch, provides a sharp contrast to Marylee's volcanic eruption of desire. We can hear the loud music coming from upstairs as Mr. Hadley's slow and dejected body leaves the room in silence. As we can surmise from the aggressively loud music invading the entire house, Mitch's status as the guardian of morality and common sense proves utterly ineffectual in preventing the violent scene about to ensue.

Cutting back to Marylee's room, we see her emerging from behind the glass shelves in a red gown that accentuates the explosive force of her

movements. As Marylee swirls and twists around the room to an ever more shrieking pitch of trumpet music, the scene cuts three times to shots of her father walking up the stairway. With each of these cuts, Mr. Hadley's efforts to move up the stairs become increasingly strained. In the final shot of this series, his grasp of the railing fails and he falls down the entire length of the stairs. The shots of Marylee's dance framing her father's collapse and downward trajectory are especially noteworthy in terms of the scene's figuration of bodily excess. Sirk creates in this moment a staggering counterpoint effect between two bodies whose movements and speeds are equally, albeit in divergent ways, out of kilter. He also constructs an intense, virtual continuity out of the very discontinuity between Marylee's triumphant spinning dance and Mr. Hadley's destructive spinning fall.

This scene uniquely exemplifies the idea of what a body can do to another body. Since bodies, in a Deleuzian sense, are not primarily construed as isolated, unified individuals (functioning at the molar level of organization), but rather as relations of speed and movement, degrees of intensity (taking place at the molecular level of composition), the ability of bodies to affect other bodies does not depend upon their visual or spatial coexistence. Basing her argument on different scientific, historical, and philosophical sources to Deleuze's, feminist author Teresa Brennan comes to a similar conclusion. For her, too, "the transmission of affect means . . . that we are not self-contained in terms of our energies" (Brennan 2004: 6). Interestingly, too, Brennan argues that the transmission of affect does not rest on sight alone, and this only seems to be so because "this sense appears to leave the boundaries of discrete individuals relatively intact" (Brennan 2004: 10). Other senses, such as hearing and smell, do not separate individuals to the same extent. In the scene under discussion, for instance, the sound of Marylee's music, reaching from the top of the house to the downstairs studio, already initiates a jarring juxtaposition with Mr. Hadley's dejected body even prior to her dance. Like the editing, the acoustic dynamics of the scene reveal the futility involved in the compartmentalization of (domestic) spaces (territorialization) in the face of the actual transmission of affects that takes place among bodies (deterritorialization).

For the affect to arise, then, it is not necessary for Marylee and her father to react to each other's presence, or for Marylee to provoke her father's death in a cause-and-effect kind of link. While such a traditional model of causality concerns the empirical bodies or states of affairs that are actually involved in a situation, the quasi-causality (Massumi 2002b: 225–8) that is at stake in this scene concerns the affective forces that are virtually, yet no less really, involved. Marylee does not cause her father's death any more than Sara Jane causes Annie's death in *Imitation*. And yet a quasi- or

affective causality links the two series and provokes the force that erupts in between them (hence my earlier reference to the “intense continuity” that traverses discontinuous images or bodies). Likewise, although Marylee’s dance is framed, and initially motivated, by rigid gender binaries (her sexual and emotional frustrations in a patriarchal culture, her anger toward her father, her unreciprocated desire for Mitch), it soon develops into a force unto itself, lacking cause/origin as well as effect/goal, and yet precipitating her father’s death through a relation of virtual or affective causality.

The rapid cutting between Marylee’s dance and Mr. Hadley’s ascension and fall is just as integral a part of the performative aspects of the scene as are the movements and gestures of the individual actors’ bodies themselves. Editing is crucial in generating resonance and dissonance between bodies that realistically occupy separate shots, yet are brought together in an affective knot. Thus Marylee’s aggressive movements and Mr. Hadley’s depleted body respectively gather their shocking effect from their contiguous placement and from the rapid alternation from one to the other. Marylee’s excessively potent body is further augmented by Mr. Hadley’s impotent body, while, conversely, the father’s body is further diminished by the daughter’s.

In this instance, Sirk seems to have emulated Eisenstein’s concept of dialectical montage. Gathering speed and momentum, the abstracting qualities of montage transform Marylee’s dancing body into a red moving surface evacuated of all fetishistic traces. Deleuze and Guattari’s words on the deforming effects of affective speed could not be more appropriate to this moment in *Written*: “The line escapes geometry by a fugitive mobility at the same time as life tears itself free from the organic by a permutating, stationary whirlwind” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 499). Unlike Lora’s body, frontally exposed and perfectly contained within the frame, Marylee’s rebellious body becomes literally deframed – a whirlwind of sexual energy celebrating its own uncontainable desire against the patriarchal forces of moral restraint. As it unleashes the very pressure that keeps her sexuality permanently unsatisfied, Marylee’s dance confounds the limits between *expression* and *oppression/repression*, becoming a catalyst for the *expression* of the *oppression/repression* that also affects all other bodies in the film.

It bears repeating, at this point, that the affectivity of this scene is sparked by the cinematic capacity for abstraction/virtuality – a capacity that expands the concept of the individual human body into the concept of the film itself as body. What is at stake is the film’s capacity/desire to bring together, and beyond subjectivity, the forces at work in two disparate corporeal configurations. Affect is thus transmitted beyond individuation and cognition – between film bodies, as well as between the film and the

viewer's bodies. The result is not a sum of discrete bodily units, but a kind of sensational aggregate – the film as a collective, expansive, and permeable body.<sup>14</sup>

As in the case of Sara Jane's performances in front of Annie, the closing shots of this scene reinforce the sadomasochistic overtones that invariably accompany female performances in these Sirk melodramas. A close-up shot of appalled and incredulous Lucy covering her face with her hands cuts to a full-body shot of Marylee concluding her dance on an easy chair – her resplendent and self-complacent smile and the playful movements of her legs visibly colliding with the scene of death unfolding right outside her door.

Following such brief moments of impersonal vitality, *Written* resumes its molar/moral mandates. Thus, the film's ending definitively repositions Marylee's deviant sexuality under Oedipal, patriarchal law. Looking out the window up in her father's studio, a fully resigned Marylee observes Mitch and Lucy's departure from the Hadley estate. Sitting at her father's desk, Marylee holds the oil derrick duplicated in her father's portrait behind her. Marylee's sobering grey business suit and the prudish bow of her white blouse, together with her almost adoring strokes of the derrick, indicate the sad containment of energies involved in her enforced miming of patriarchal identity. In Deleuzian terms, the film's closing moments restore the molar plane of organization in place of the momentary lines of flight mobilized in such scenes as Marylee's dance of death. Deleuze and Guattari's remarks are applicable to many such instances of narrative and ideological closure in the cinema:

The plane of organization is constantly working away at the plane of consistency, always trying to plug the lines of flight, stop or interrupt the movements of deterritorialization, weigh them down, reterritory them, reconstitute forms and subjects in a dimension of depth. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 270)

As in *Imitation's* final scene, the end of *Written* proclaims the ideological desirability of maintaining a patriarchal sexual, racial, and social order that straitjackets bodies by redirecting their wandering and unproductive movements into a straight and secure path.

### ***The Tarnished Angels: Bakhtinian carnivalesque as Deleuzian affective shock***

*Angels* offers an even more uncompromisingly cynical perspective on the rigid network of heterosexual relations than one might find in *Imitation* or *Written*.<sup>15</sup> At the outset, the film seems rather conservative, for the range



of expressions and actions it allows its female performer is quite limited. Compared with the bodily exuberance Malone features in *Written* (and no doubt Kohner in *Imitation*), her gestural and kinetic phrasings in *Angels* appear relatively understated. Her role as LaVerne Shumann, a parachute jumper in love with her domineering husband Roger Shumann (Robert Stack), instantiates the female submission to patriarchal codes and demands. But, while LaVerne/Malone sporadically resists this submission via a self-conscious use of language that puts an ironic spin on her own objectification, the film's overall design goes much further in its critique, scathingly mocking the male attempts at heroism no less than the female attempts at redemption-through-love. By juxtaposing the main narrative action with jarring images of a Mardi Gras carnival taking place simultaneously, *Angels* effects a shocking carnivalization of values and beliefs that includes, yet exceeds, the sphere of sexual relations. Thus, the consistent interference of carnival images suggests an extension of the process of material abstraction informing the "dance of death" scene in *Written* to the aesthetic mechanisms of the film in its entirety.

Although Mikhail Bakhtin has rarely been paired off with Deleuze and Guattari in terms of possible conceptual links between their respective philosophies, feminist scholar Jane Drexler offers an incisive account of these links. Drexler looks at Bakhtin's notion of carnival as a practice of experimentation and becoming that has similar deterritorializing effects to those produced by the workings of the molecular plane in Deleuze and Guattari.<sup>16</sup> Whether through the effects of carnivalesque heteroglossia in Bakhtin, or through the energies and capacities of multiplicitous bodies in Deleuze and Guattari, the aim is in both cases to render identity, language, and social relations non-static and non-totalizable. The reading of *Angels* that follows will set up a brief dialogue between Bakhtin and Deleuze and Guattari to illustrate the ways in which Sirk's use of carnival images dismantles the traditional deployment of *mise-en-scène* as static and incidental backdrop to a privileged focus on narrative. Instead, the carnival here becomes an active power of affection whose impact on the narrative layer completely undermines the latter's claims to centrality.

It is this carnivalesque subtext, more forcefully than the sensationalist drama involved in Roger and LaVerne's literal aerial performances, that serves as the film's affective-performative catalyst. The grotesqueness of the carnival images is not only due to their unrealistic exaggeration of body sizes and facial expressions. More precisely, the sense of the grotesque stems from the incongruous juxtaposition of carnival spectacle with narrative actions that would have normally affirmed the values of a conservative gender ideology (the male participation in heroic acts and the female

participation in erotic and romantic moments). As in Bakhtin's analysis of the carnivalesque, the effect of these intrusive carnival images is to overturn established hierarchies and to provide a debasing parody of all things the characters deem high and sacred. Thus, while the characters' participation in the normative narrative lines of the film clearly organizes the body along hierarchized gender lines, the carnivalesque plane deterritorializes these lines and brings empty ideals down to the level of the material body. Aerial impulses and aspirations, a theme Sirk also identifies with Kyle/Robert Stack in *Written*, are thus exposed as nothing but illusions and sublimations inspired by fear, and, accordingly, debased. The emotional tone of the film is thus split (to use Bakhtin's words, "dual-bodied," "dual-faced"; Bakhtin 1968: 408) between "false seriousness" and parody.

The film repeatedly returns to the carnival setting as a means both to undo the rigid stratification of gender norms and to undercut the viewer's potentially sentimental response to a story of pathetic characters engaged in abusive relations. The carnivalesque and the aerial worlds come together visually and affectively at several points in the film. For instance, the shocking effect of masks and effigies pierces through entrepreneur Matt Ord's (Robert Middleton) lustful gaze at LaVerne just as it frames and interrupts the intimate narrative of LaVerne's relationship with Burke Devlin (Rock Hudson). The indiscriminate interference of carnival images in the film works to minimize the difference between the seemingly redeeming love affair between Burke and LaVerne and other relationships (such as Ord and LaVerne's, or Roger and LaVerne's) where power remains unilateral and sadistically enforced. As it extends its ironic perspective to all encounters between male and female bodies, the film thus shows a profoundly distrustful attitude toward the idea of romantic love and its durability.

Blending hyperbolic facial expressions with impossibly rigid and artificial bodies (in the case of effigies) or with actual bodies engaged in aberrant actions (in the case of people wearing masks), the carnival figures function as corrective supplements to, and distorting mirrors of, the naturalistic bodies and faces displayed in the characters/actors' performances. Thus, for example, the film mocks Ord's voyeuristic pleasure by shock-cutting his close-up of lustful complacency with an effigy of a gigantic head with wide-open eyes and a gaping mouth, the effect of which recalls Bakhtin's idea that "the grotesque face is reduced to the gaping mouth" (Bakhtin 1968: 317). Similarly, a mask of a big grinning face is shown at the end of the first night the Shumanns spend at Burke's apartment, perhaps emphasizing the futility of Burke and LaVerne's attempts to engage in reflection and mutual self-disclosure. Yet the undercutting of melodramatic sentimentality is nowhere more jolting and apparently unjustified

than in a later scene in which Burke and LaVerne express their love for each other.

In a previous scene, Roger has practically asked LaVerne to prostitute herself to Ord. Roger needs Ord's plane for the upcoming race "like an alcoholic needs his drink," and he knows that only LaVerne's sexuality can be attractive enough a bait for his rival. Even though LaVerne pretends to be undaunted and ready to comply with Roger's wishes, Burke decides to spare her the shame of selling her body to Ord, and offers to meet with Ord himself. After a difficult, but eventually successful meeting with Ord, Burke returns to his apartment. Upon his arrival, LaVerne is drinking her pain away, while in the soundtrack we can hear loud noises from a party next door. As in Marylee/Malone's "dance of death" in *Written*, the fluidity of sound (and later, montage) enhances the virtual continuity of spaces and the unencumbered circulation of affects. LaVerne laments that "the party's always next door" and expresses regret for not having gone to Ord herself, which might have given her the final reason to "walk out on Roger." Burke wants her to stop drinking, and uses the opportunity to express his romantic feelings in a half-joking manner. "A few more drinks and I'll tell you how much I'm going to miss you," he says.

The effusive kiss that follows is interrupted by a man who breaks abruptly into the room wearing a death mask and ushering in the loud sounds of laughter and clashing cymbals from the party next door. With this violent sensory irruption, the film marks its ironic distance from the characters' intimate rapport – a distance that immediately resonates in their estranged bodies and faces. Thus, when LaVerne looks at Burke again, her questioning gaze and her rigid posture signal a break in her former romantic involvement, perhaps finding in the grotesqueness and vulgarity of the party revelers a self-censoring echo of her own adulterous behavior. LaVerne then reclines on the couch face down, adopting the characteristically melodramatic position of the gallantly suffering woman. The scene cuts a second time to the apartment next door where an unknown blonde wearing black leotards dances frantically amidst the rest of the boisterous guests. At the close of the scene, LaVerne yields again to Burke's caresses, and the film intersperses yet another disturbing commentary on their intimacy by cutting to the female dancer in black leotards half-kissing, half-biting the man wearing the mask of death responsible for the first interruption in the sequence.

The interfering images of carnival in this scene target one of the most enduring clichés of Hollywood narratives: the idea that love between a man and a woman can act as a redeeming force by liberating them from their individual weaknesses or incapacities. Instead, these images enact a liberation of

a wholly different kind. As in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, they “degrade” and “uncrown” an act of considerable human significance. Visually and acoustically aggressive, the images abuse and dismember both the act of love, in a narrative sense, and the continuity of the scene, in a cinematic sense, rethinking what is “sacred and exalted . . . on the level of the material bodily stratum . . . and mixed with its images” (Bakhtin 1968: 370). From a Bakhtinian perspective, this kind of intrusion is a necessary and welcome cultural/aesthetic intervention that “liberates objects from the snares of false seriousness” (Bakhtin 1968: 376).

As in the scene of *Written* previously discussed, editing in this case endows the film with a kind of carnivalesque quality. One might see the decentralizing impact of editing here in the light of Bakhtin’s thought on dialogical truth, a truth predicated on linked, interpenetrating utterances between self and other (Drexler 2000: 216). Moments in Sirk’s films that significantly rely on montage thus exhibit a similar understanding of dialogical truth – the idea that cinematic truth belongs to no single image, but rather to the interpenetration of contiguous images, their capacity to affect each other. Just as one can find stabilizing and destabilizing forces in language, one can find stabilizing/centripetal and destabilizing/centrifugal forces in the image. Editing thus activates the image’s centrifugal force, its porosity and openness toward other images/bodies.<sup>17</sup> In Deleuzian terms, the intrusion of the outside into the image activates the image’s capacity for self-affection, its potential for becoming other than what it is at the molar level of organized meaning.

It is difficult, if not outright impossible, to determine to what extent Bakhtin might have been a direct influence on Sirk’s use of the carnivalesque in *Angels*. But whatever the case might be, it is still worth noting that the stylizing tendencies of the Sirkian melodrama lend similar parodic and debasing effects to the genre’s representation of 1950s American culture. As Elsaesser has implied, the inherent ideological critique of the melodrama supplies a carnivalesque kind of destabilization of hierarchies and deposition of higher truths:

The strategy of building up to a climax so as to throttle it the more abruptly is a form of dramatic reversal by which Hollywood directors consistently criticized the streak of incurably naïve moral and emotional idealism in the American psyche, first by showing it to be indistinguishable from the grossest kind of illusion and self-delusion, and then by forcing a confrontation when it is most wounding and contradictory. (Elsaesser 1987: 61)

The affective-performative quality of the carnival is intimated in Bakhtin’s words: “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live

in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (Bakhtin 1968: 7). Unlike the idea of spectacle as visual, static fetish rendering the body a passive recipient of an external gaze, the carnival envelops and transforms, hence affects, those who become its active, or even seemingly passive, participants/performers. The carnival is a bodily assemblage where "the confines between the body and the world and between separate bodies are drawn . . . quite differently than in the classic and naturalist images" (Bakhtin 1968: 315). As in Artaud/Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the "body without organs," the Bakhtinian bodies of carnival are temporarily freed from the burdens of individual subjectivity, their boundaries becoming permeable to each other. At peak affective-performative moments, the characters' individual psychologies give way to the rhythmical and sensational patterns of the film's body. The ensuing affect no longer stems from subjective, self-centered sentimentality, but rather from the film's own desire to confront the audience with the force of paradox and shocking incongruity.

Bakhtin's analysis of the grotesque body establishes a close link between carnival and death. In *Angels*, Burke's boss at the newspaper sets up the same association, albeit contemptuously, when he calls the gypsy world of the "Flying Shumanns" a "carnival of death," a phrase that is later echoed not only by Roger's semi-suicidal crash, but also by his confession to Burke that "[his] first love is with airplanes and [his] flirtation with death." Mortality is not only the ultimate downward thrust, a definitive inversion of the ideal movement of ascension. More importantly, for Bakhtin, the central role death plays in carnival imagery is also unconventionally devoid of sentimentality. Death and birth are not unrelated opposites, but part of a continuous spinning wheel of vitality that involves the body in a movement of temporal and historical becoming. The wealth and abundance that for Bakhtin are to be found at the level of the material lower stratum are also to be found in the regenerative powers of death, violence, or abuse. Any of these typically negative phenomena are thus seen in their dual aspect of affirmation and negation, creation and destruction. From this standpoint, Roger's death in *Angels* is the logical consequence of an ascending movement that exhausts itself by refusing to ground its ideal aspirations in material ties. Conversely, the same event allows LaVerne to move forward into new possibilities. Unlike Roger, who can only live off of heroic ideals away from the earth, LaVerne can live and move on because she is paradoxically capable of "descending."

As I have argued in this chapter, the subversive force of the female performer in these Sirkian melodramas does not primarily rest upon notions of individual agency. Rather, the most notable subversive effects of these

films lie in the capacity of certain heightened affective-performative moments to disorganize the constrictive ideological lines enforced by their narratives. Even while the impersonal dynamics of these moments might seem to disempower the female performer by wresting the force of individual agency away from her body, they also crucially interfere with an unproblematic fetishistic perception thereof. Moreover, however impersonal this subversive process may seem, it is still invariably the privilege of the female performer to act as its material catalyst. In so doing, the female body piles up a fabulous potential energy ready to explode when we least expect it. Like a wild bird flapping its wings inside a cage, the animated body of the deviant woman becomes action itself.

Despite the wealth of affective-performative moments in the typical Sirkian melodrama, these moments still function as anomalous irruptions of affective force into an otherwise largely coherent narrative fabric. In their intensification of affective-performative force, the Fassbinder melodramas I examine in the next chapter represent a qualitative leap with respect to Sirk's. Although Fassbinder was critically indebted to Sirk in his attempts to combine the denunciatory stance of his generation toward the ills of fascism and corporate capitalism with the possibility of retaining an emotional flavor, the powers of affection operating in his films are expressed through a more direct and relentless assault on the notion of subjectivity. From the psychoanalytic standpoint from which Fassbinder's films have been mostly understood thus far, this assault has been construed in largely negative terms. Drawing upon Artaud's theatre of cruelty and Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of the body, Chapter 2 will foreground the affective-performative dimension of cruelty and shock. In Fassbinder, I will argue, cruelty and shock are the vehicles of an affirmative desire to make cinema the active, transformative force that it can be.

## Notes

1. The ideas subtending the "animated fetish" in this chapter present many affinities with Amy Herzog's analysis of the musical, in which she draws on Deleuze's comments in *The Time-Image* to suggest that the flights into dance in this genre "provide a potentially disruptive force, a point of 'indiscernability,'" that reveals a strong "discrepancy" between action and spectacle (Herzog forthcoming).
2. Even when considering screen acting from a classical perspective, the limited scope of early feminist film theory becomes readily apparent. As Peter Krämer and Alan Lovell remark in their introduction to *Screen Acting*, "the psychic mechanisms of mainstream cinema make actresses objects to look at. Mulvey doesn't recognize that they have to use their faces, bodies, and voices

- expressively and that to do this demands intelligence and perception” (Krämer and Lovell 1999: 3). Voicing a similar opinion in her analysis of *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946), Adrienne McLean contends that the corporeal competence and autoerotic pleasure frequently displayed by Rita Hayworth within the film invalidate the passivity and quiescence that attends the “presumed fetishization of women in *all* musical numbers” (McLean 1993: 8).
3. In my general assessment of Butler’s notion of performativity, I concur with Jana Evans Braziel’s remark that “whilst Butler’s process of materialisation [sic] is both discursive and performative, it emphasizes restrictive, interpellated norms over the creative movements of energy, force and desire” (Braziel 2004: 112).
  4. Foster’s remarks on the highly codified movements of the ballet dancer warrant a comparison with Lora/Turner’s bodily style in *Imitation*:

The choreographic and stylistic demands of ballet take the weight of the body and make it disappear into thin air. Everything lifts up, moves towards height rather than depth; *everything gestures out and up, never in, never down*. This obsessive aeriality reinforces the erection of the penis-like ballerina . . . *gesturing upwards into the realm of abstraction itself*. (Foster 1996: 14, my emphasis)

5. The link between the absence of affectivity in women’s bodies and their colonization by the phallic principles of domination and rationality is addressed by Olkowski in terms that resonate strongly with Lora/Tuner’s case: “When the woman’s body is represented as without affectivity, not touching itself, woman is exiled to the outside where she can only imitate in face, form, and language each new power that comes to dominate her, each master she perceives” (Olkowski 1999: 68).
6. During the film’s opening scene, Lora’s performance is punctuated by a series of static poses that anticipate her entire kinetic behavior as one that leads her from one pose to the next. As drama scholar David Mayer has pointed out, a gesture may become an isolated instance of expression provided that “the end of a scene or a key moment in that scene has been intentionally selected to form a momentary ‘picture’” (Mayer 1999: 17). Such intentional selection is clearly at work in the film’s recasting of Lora’s earlier gesture at the beach as a static photographic image. By turning the moving image of Lora’s body into a still, the photograph Archer takes of Lora reiterates the tense quality of her movements and completes the spectacular function of her body. However, as Mayer also explains, the most frozen of gestures is always far more complex than a single isolated moment insofar as “within and around any gesture, there are innumerable permutations of movement” (Mayer 1999: 17). Such is also the perspective taken by Jean-Luc Godard, whose repeated intentional selection of stills of the human body (especially the female body) brings attention to “all the possible permutations” and “thousands of possibilities” that surround it and prevent it from ever becoming closed or certain (Godard 1985: 462).

7. As shown by a rapid montage sequence that covers the first ten years of Lora's theatrical successes (1948–58), *Imitation* takes for granted Lora's acting skills in a way that can only be described as ironic. Exhibiting a high degree of self-consciousness regarding Lora's performing identity off the stage, the film shows no interest in seeking a redundant confirmation of Lora's ability to perform on stage. This montage sequence shows Lora's movement upward as a movement in place. The representation of Lora's theatrical career compresses the passage of time and unfolds as a quasi-static collage of consecutive stage productions, applauding audiences, and neon signs. As all traces of duration, process, or work are eliminated from Lora's acting, only her final bows to the audience in slow and solemn gestures are selected for display.
8. As is the case with other female characters in the classical Hollywood film, such as Helen Faraday (Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus*, Josef Von Sternberg, 1932) and Gilda (Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*), *Imitation* can only allow its protagonist to become the domesticated housewife and mother at the very end, or else the film could not utilize her body in the service of its voyeuristic and fetishistic aims.
9. Feminist phenomenologist Iris Marion Young refers to this double and somewhat contradictory experience when she argues that the woman lives her body both as a thing and as a capacity. One is thus faced with a dialectic "between the lived-body's inherent 'I can' and the female body's acculturated 'I cannot'" (Young 1989: 153). Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the girl as a desiring production that exceeds the constraints of Oedipus has similar implications. Deleuze and Guattari regard the process of genderization as a stealing act that freezes the body's capacities into intractable binaries (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 276). For them, the girl is placed in a more extreme situation than the boy, both as the first "victim" of Oedipus and as the one enjoying the greatest potential for an escape from its rigid polarities. Involving a more fluid, less subjectified identity than the one implied by Young's phenomenological perspective, Deleuze's notion of becoming-woman also points to a dismantling of Oedipal framings, equally stressing the body's capacity to change and transform itself over the objectification taking place in its early history. In the films I analyze here, the female characters' attempts to circumvent the prevailing patriarchal system of gender norms depend on phenomenological notions of individual agency and resistance (acts of defiance at the molar level) as much as they depend on non-individuated becomings (shocking events at the molecular level).
10. The film's more emphatic embodiment of Sara Jane may be linked to Foster's idea that marginalized groups maintain a closer relation with the bodily dimension of subjectivity than subjects belonging to dominant groups:

The body shares with women, racial minorities and colonized peoples, gays and lesbians, and other marginalized groups the scorn and neglect of mainstream scholarship . . . Body stands along with Woman, Native, and Other as a neglected and misapprehended object of inquiry, but it stands uniquely as a



category that pivots inquiry easily into any of these marginalized domains.  
(Foster 1995: 11–12)

11. Sara Jane's public performances may be seen as both a qualitative change and a continuation of her performative acts within the home. As seen in the scene where Sara Jane undresses in front of Susie (Sandra Dee) while telling her of her secretive encounter with Frankie, Sara Jane increasingly assumes a self-conscious stance toward her body and toward a potential audience. By moving out of the domestic and into the public spheres, Sara Jane's performances build upon her former attempts to move out of the kitchen space (of invisibility, oppression) allotted to herself and her mother, and into Lora and Susie's living-room space (of visibility, privilege). Sara Jane's domestic performances masterfully encapsulate the utter coincidence between her expressive capacities and the field conditions of oppression that give rise to these capacities (Massumi 2002a: xxviii).
12. Foster's gender analysis of the ballerina represents a middle point between the passive female body of Mulvey's account and a Deleuzian reading inclined to privilege the fluidity of molecular forces over the rigidity of molar structures. Also recalling Mulvey's distinction between narrative and spectacle, Foster argues that classical dance uses the woman's inherent predisposition to dance as a strategy to build the gap between story and spectacle: "Her pressing desire to dance . . . facilitate[s] an easy transition from story to spectacle and back again" (Foster 1996: 4). But Foster ascribes a higher degree of agency to the body than the Mulveyan paradigm affords, supplementing the body's ideological determination with its own ability to interpret and transform the given conditions into specific and unique bodily responses. Foster addresses the double structure of activity and passivity that I also find at work in the "animated fetish":

[B]odies are both active and reactive, generative and responsive, writing and written. Their actions are not an unmediated authentic expression, nor are they only the summation of all the discursive practices that contain and objectify them . . . These thought-filled actions defy strategies of containment and move us toward new theorizations of corporeal existence and resistance.  
(Foster 1998: 18–19)

Foster's position may be considered in line with that of other scholars, such as Amelia Jones, Sobchack, and Young, who use the phenomenological notion of the lived-body as a basis for endowing female corporeality with the possibilities of agency and transformation.

13. The women on the "champagne train" in this scene end their performance with a swinging motion on their allocated reclining chairs that represents the culmination of the straining postures maintained throughout. As each woman lies down, she holds up a silver, phallic-shaped champagne glass above her head, and then stretches her body to the limit, propped up with the sole aid of shoulders and knees. Such acrobatic position embodies the phallic

transformation of the woman's body into a tumescent penis, a transformation that Foster traces to the following corporeal and kinetic features: an "obsessive aeriality [that] reinforces the erection of the penis-like ballerina" (Foster 1996: 14); an overinvestment in the legs, which "signal [the ballerina's] situatedness just in between penis and fetish" (p. 13); an emphasis on choreographies that rationalize and homogenize the female body, featuring "similarly dressed bodies moving in unison like merchandise lined up on a shelf" (p. 10); and a general tendency to use the body as a tensile instrument capable of stretching and stiffening until it is about to reach breaking point.

14. My analysis of the "dance of death" scene in *Written* is not incompatible with cultural or historical readings that ground the sensationalistic and shocking content of 1950s melodramas in the Hollywood industry's need to capitalize on the contemporary trend toward sexually explicit representation as a means to compete successfully with the ascendancy of television. Thus, for example, Barbara Klinger considers *Written* as symptomatic of the complexity of sexual discourses that circulated during the Eisenhower era – the affiliation between a new sexual liberalism and explicitness with suggestive representations of the female body that further enhanced its visual objectification (Klinger 1994). But my point here is that, aside from the molar structures involved in such socioeconomic considerations, other elements, far less readily structured, are nonetheless decisive in producing a particular viewing experience. I regard these unstructured elements – rhythm, color, speed, alternation, irregularity, intensity – as the very qualities that endow the (female) fetishized body with animation.
15. Given that *The Tarnished Angels* is not as well known a film as *Imitation* or *Written*, I will give a brief account of its storyline here. Stack, Hudson, and Malone, three of the leading actors in *Written*, team up again in *Angels*, a film in black and white making use of highly expressionistic lighting schemes to tell the tragic story of the Flying Shumanns, stunt pilot Roger and parachute jumper LaVerne, who, together with their mechanic Jiggs and their son Jack, travel the circuit of air shows. These nomads or "gypsies" of the modern age capture the attention of newspaper man Burke Devlin, whose initial feelings of mystified admiration for them change into pity and disgust as he becomes aware of Roger's self-tormented temperament and exploitative neglect of his wife LaVerne. Burke and LaVerne begin a relationship that allows LaVerne to realize the price she has paid for having given her life to an idealization – the "Liberty Bomb" poster of World War II hero Roger Shumann that impelled her to abandon her native Iowa along with her own identity. As Roger gets into his plane for the final race of his life, he asks LaVerne for forgiveness. The couple reconcile, but Roger's accidental death thereafter brings overwhelming guilt to LaVerne, who now despises herself "for having let her hair down" with Burke. Ready to sell her body to wealthy entrepreneur Matt Ord in exchange for a financially secure life for her son, LaVerne realizes that it would only bring shame to her son, and, encouraged by Burke, decides to go

back to Iowa in search of the woman she left there some twelve years ago. In their first conversation in the film, Burke surprises LaVerne reading Willa Cather's novel *My Antonia*, which she says she began reading twelve years before in Iowa, but was forced to put aside in order to follow Roger. To signal LaVerne's return to her former self, the film's closing scene shows Burke offering LaVerne a copy of *My Antonia* right before mother and son depart on a plane for Iowa.

16. Drexler describes Bakhtinian carnival as a kind of Deleuzian micropolitics of ethical experimentation: "Carnival is the very *practice* of experimentation and becoming, and its social effectiveness lies in its capacity for that practice and not in its ability or nonability to give the 'right' answer for the solution of social ills" (Drexler 2000: 228).
17. I explore the connections between affect and montage further in "Alchemies of Thought in Godard's Cinema: Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty" (del Río 2005).

## CHAPTER 2

# Choreographies of Affect

The theater like the plague is a crisis which is resolved by death or cure . . . the supreme equilibrium which cannot be achieved without destruction . . . the action of theater causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie . . . in this slippery world which is committing suicide without noticing it.

Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*

Few cinemas are as visibly and heavily marked by the affective-performative body as Rainer W. Fassbinder's. Such early films in his career as *Love Is Colder than Death* (1969) and *Gods of the Plague* (1969) already exhibit an obsession with containing and releasing gestures and movements through emphatic choreographies that alternately organize and disorganize the body. Synonymous with Fassbinder's *auteurist* signature, the term "stylization" particularly befits the choreographic sense of bodies in his films. Fassbinder's foregrounding of the body seems to emerge from a desire to counter its frailty and mortality with a redoubled attention to its life – its possibilities of expression and affection. At first glance, the body's powers of affection in Fassbinder's films express themselves in primarily negative ways, that is, by expressing their very incapacity to express. Limp and heavy with self-consciousness, Fassbinder's bodies suffer from an incurable inability to respond to other bodies. But the passivity registered in these static choreographies often erupts into unexpected forces of aggression and transformation. Beyond either positive or negative judgment, these bodily forces transform the transparent, self-evident body typical of classical theatre into the active body typical of the theatre of cruelty. Thus, to insist on passivity and stasis as the single qualities of Fassbinder's stylized body is only to account for one facet of his affective-performative aesthetics. To identify the other facet – of uncontained expressive force and vital aggression – this chapter proposes a turn to Fassbinder's encounter with Artaud's active theatre of cruelty, an encounter which also reveals a close approximation between Fassbinder and Deleuze at the level of the body's affections.

The visual and representational bias of much of film theory and criticism during its peak, most productive years (a period that roughly

stretches from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s) contributed in no small measure to shaping the scholarly evaluation of Fassbinder's films. Film theory's emphasis on representation found in the Brechtian notion of distancing a most likely ally of its own theories of spectatorship (a blend of Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist/Althusserian ideological critique). Consequently, film criticism upheld Brechtian aesthetics as the most illuminating paradigm for understanding Fassbinder's work. The Brechtian method, with its concern for drawing attention to the socio-economic structures subtending spectacle, played a crucial role in advancing a particular reading of the tableau vivant and its characteristic body as found in Fassbinder's films. According to the visual/representational bias of such reading, the tableau disrupts the body's natural condition of mobility, thereby creating a distancing effect that awakens the spectator's critical consciousness of the body's unconscious participation in social processes. Thus, much like a photographic still, the tableau is regarded as the very evacuation of corporeal movement.

But such a Brechtian reading ignores the tableau's vital, active/performative dimension. By looking upon a choreography of bodies as a finished image rather than as a processual and multidimensional becoming of images, the visual/representational approach overlooks the continually changing relation and exchange between form and force, stasis and movement, seizing on the tableau's apparent stasis instead of considering its function as provisional containment of force. In contrast with this reading, I propose a notion of the tableau (and its body) as an intense locus of force – a field of concentrated energy that the film eventually releases, whether gradually or abruptly. An extreme example of this notion of the tableau can be found in a scene in Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1973) in which Emmi (Brigitte Mira) introduces Ali (El Hedi Ben Salem), her much younger, Moroccan, *gast-arbeiter* husband to her racist, bigoted children. After Ali's pronounced bow to them, the camera's deliberate left-to-right pan accentuates the children's shock by laying emphasis on their overwhelming silence and static postures. But following this tableau-like moment, one of the children gets up from his chair and begins kicking the TV set, thereby unleashing the aggression he and the rest of his siblings have been thus far at pains to contain.<sup>1</sup> It is from this perspective that the tableau becomes a privileged figure for the affective-performative, not only because of its obvious function as suspension of narrative, but also because of its less obvious function as tense, and intense, containment of force.

Thus, while my approach to Fassbinder's cinema is in no way meant to discount its affinities with Brecht's method, I do want to argue for a heterogeneous, interactive perspective that animates and complicates the

Brechtian model with the Artaudian emphasis on the force of affective immediacy. Like Deleuze and Guattari, Artaud relentlessly struggles against language, art, and theatre as ideal or fixed forms. At its best, form for Artaud is a temporary vehicle for channeling forces; at its worst, it makes the power of forces stagnate by captivating them with its promise of completion and self-containment. As Edward Scheer explains, the theatre for Artaud “is less a matter of representation and more a concern with the actions which approach the limits of the representable” (Scheer 2004: 3). For Artaud, as for Deleuze, the domain of representation and morality – “passing judgment on what already exists” (Scheer 2004: 28) – should be displaced by the domain of performative and ethical experimentation – a generation of possibilities of what *can* exist. Within this model, whatever *is becomes* such a thing through an active generative process that is akin to a performance.

A Deleuzian approach to performance thus cannot bypass the enormous influence Artaud had on Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking on the body, particularly through his notion of the “body without organs.” Artaud’s aversion to the body’s organs is directed against their participation in an organized totality or organism. Deleuze and Guattari seize on the Artaudian body without organs as a conceptual basis for their anti-Oedipal project. In place of the Oedipal model, subsuming desire under a predictable set of binary choices and stable positionalities, the body without organs provides a model of desire as pure, self-begetting positivity untrammelled by lack or absence, “an open series of intensities, all positive, which never constitute the final equilibrium of a system, but rather an unlimited number of metastable stations through which a subject passes” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 26). Indeed, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari’s comments on the body without organs are powerfully evocative of the notion of the performative that informs my own project in this book. For them, the body without organs is defined “by axes and vectors, gradients and thresholds, by *dynamic tendencies involving energy transformation and kinematic movements involving group displacement, by migrations*” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 153, my emphasis). Deleuze and Guattari’s remarks imply a rather specific notion of cinematic performance as a kinematics: the study of the motion of bodies as channels for the displacement and transformation of energy. This chapter will examine the many levels at which the Artaudian/Deleuzian body of force figures in Fassbinder’s cinema. But before I begin my analysis of particular films, I will account for the ways in which Fassbinder’s affective-performative aesthetics more broadly accommodate both Brechtian and Artaudian influences.

### Fassbinder's Brechtian aesthetics: in the realm of the emotions

Fassbinder's fascination with Brechtian theatre decisively influenced the way the filmmaker employed the actor's body as a significant part of the *mise-en-scène*. It is well known that Bertolt Brecht advocated an aesthetics of alienation against the spectator's emotional involvement in the psychological aspects of the performance. In Brecht's acting method, partly conveyed through his notion of the *gestus*, the actor's movements and gestures contribute in large measure to the disruption of classical identification and its allegedly regressive political consequences. *Gestus* is not simply synonymous with a physical gesture, but rather implies a conscious effort at representing or copying gestures in order to reveal the socioeconomic and political situation that subtends the gesture and shapes identity. Thus *gestus* is to gesture what the actor is to the character he or she portrays. Just as the *gestus* places the gesture at a critical remove, the actor "does not allow himself to become completely transformed . . . into the character he is portraying" (Brecht [1940] 2002: 94). Instead, the actor serves to highlight the divergence between the character's illusions of autonomy and his or her own intention to undermine these.

For decades, Brecht's dramatic theories have remained the single most influential approach in assessing Fassbinder's cinema. However, the turn away from theory that film studies began to undergo in the mid-1990s brought about a decreasing interest in, and even a suspicion of, the Brechtian legacy. Murray Smith, for instance, contends that Brecht's account of spectatorial responses to fiction is unduly based on the dualistic opposition between emotional empathy and rational criticism (Smith 1996: 130). Fassbinder's films themselves invalidate this Brechtian opposition, as they do not divorce their overt political intervention from the possibility of emotional engagement. Fassbinder himself recognized a difference between Brecht and his own approach to the emotive aspects of the performance. "With Brecht," he said, "you see the emotions and you reflect upon them . . . but you never feel them . . . I think I go further . . . in that I let the audience feel and think" (Fassbinder in Sparrow 1977: 20). It is true that, when asked about the role emotions ought to play in the theatre, Brecht emphasizes that one should not ignore emotions so much as approach them critically. But while emotions for Brecht remain wholly subordinated to their social relevance, Fassbinder conceives the relation emotional/social in terms of mutual implication.

While the impact of Brecht's ideas on Fassbinder's work is still undeniable, it seems to me that a more productive analysis may emerge if we place

these ideas in a dialogue with other sources of influence. This confluence might even help elucidate the way in which Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (distanciation effect) itself is adapted to the specific affective logic of Fassbinder's films. In this regard, some scholars have noted the influence of Sirk's Hollywood melodramas on Fassbinder's ambitious project to forge "a union between something as beautiful and powerful . . . as Hollywood films and a critique of the status quo" (Fassbinder in Gemünden 1994: 55). Following Elsaesser, Gerd Gemünden locates Fassbinder's affective emphasis in his affinities with Sirk. Gemünden sees the joint refiguration of Brecht and Sirk in Fassbinder as a potential site of both irreconcilable differences and logical continuities. For, while the Hollywood melodrama is undoubtedly more concerned with emotional subjectivity than with social commentary, the importance of the performing body still looms large in both Brechtian and melodramatic practices. As Brecht's comments make clear, the *gestus* is no different from the stylized melodramatic gesture in that they both aim at externalizing emotion: "everything to do with the emotions has to be externalized . . . developed into a gesture. The actor has to find a sensibly perceptible outward expression for his character's emotions" (Brecht [1940] 2002: 96). Moreover, Fassbinder's cinema turns this conceptual parallel into actual practice, as it successfully weaves together the sociohistorical aspects of the *gestus* with a melodramatic emphasis on individual experience and affect.

Fassbinder's appropriation of Brecht is therefore no mere exercise in mimicry. In the spirit of German playwright Heiner Müller ("To use Brecht without criticizing him is a betrayal"; Müller in Wright 1989: 122), the Brechtian influence on Fassbinder ought to be seen within a constellation of personal and historical forces that allow Fassbinder's involvement with emotion to remain fully congruent with his project of ideological critique. Among these forces at work in Fassbinder's cinema, I would stress: the inseparable dynamics of psychic and social structures; a lucid distinction between sentimentality and affect; and the postmodern devaluation of referentiality (a notion all too important to Brecht's sociopolitical agenda) accompanied by a heightening of sensual and affective intensity. The implications of these specific conditions of Fassbinder's cinema are worth examining in some detail.

In Fassbinder's films, the historical and linguistic frameworks that constrain the body are indivisible from the affective, preverbal signs through which the body voices the said historical or linguistic constraints. In aligning the body with affect, Fassbinder is less divesting it of its semiotic and social status than complicating this status with an added dimension — indeed tracing the social to its corporeal site of inscription. As Fassbinder's



films show, it is not in spite of social and ideological determination, but precisely by virtue of the latter's relentless pressure on the body, and in response to it, that the affective body emerges. If ideology constructs a repressed body, the affect repressed is bound to return in one form or another. The body thus becomes the site where a transfer takes place between the abstract social or ideological meanings and the material individual ways of responding to and embodying those repressive meanings. Thus, in joining the ideological/historical with the affective, Fassbinder takes up a position similar to those scholars who reject the age-old distinction between nature and culture. As Massumi eloquently puts it, "The 'natural' and the 'cultural' feed forward and back into each other . . . It is necessary to theorize a *nature-culture continuum* . . . a dynamic unity of reciprocal variation" (Massumi 2002b: 11). As cultural habits taking up residence in the flesh, hence both acquired and automatic, bodily behaviors in Fassbinder's films instantiate this continuum.

Fassbinder's preservation of the affective dimension of performance suggests the need for a theoretical distinction between *sentimentality* and *affect*, a distinction which, as I noted in the Introduction, is crucial to the dynamics of the affective-performative. Although Brecht did recognize that the *V-effekt* could produce "a different class of emotion . . . from those of the orthodox theatre" (Brecht [1940] 2002: 97), he did not go further in speculating what this new kind of emotion might specifically entail. But it seems to me that the difference I am proposing between sentimentality and affect is already enabled by the project of critical distancing Brecht himself pursued. That is, the same distance that separates *gestus* from gesture, and actor from character, can be seen at work in the difference that separates affect from sentimentality. Yet Brecht failed to see that distancing could be applied to the realm of the emotions in order not so much to turn emotion into rational consciousness as to give rise to unsettling, and unsanctioned, kinds of emotion.

While a sentimental involvement in the performance typical of classic forms of identification may lead to a universalist/humanist consideration of man's plight that does not directly affect or touch the spectator, an experience of affect makes the spectator aware of the ways in which he or she bears the ideological or psychic marks of determination sustained by the character. Thus, through a certain distance that allows for examination or contemplation, the spectator is paradoxically affected and moved in a more genuine and individualized fashion.<sup>2</sup> In this sense Fassbinder's films substitute an experience of empathetic affect for the melodramatic experience of sentimental oblivion and vicarious emotion promoted in much of classical Hollywood cinema. The form of address in Fassbinder's films does

not fluctuate between critical distancing and affective involvement, but rather posits the estrangement produced by distancing as the simultaneous and necessary condition for the very emergence of affect. Simply put, it is precisely by adopting a Brechtian critical stance that Fassbinder avoids the sliding of emotion into sentimentality.<sup>3</sup>

In an interview with Christian Braad Thomsen, Fassbinder says: “Feelings are very important to me, but feelings are being exploited by the film industry today, and that is something I hate. I am against speculation in feelings” (Fassbinder in Thomsen 1980: 83). In point of fact, one of the central targets of Fassbinder’s ideological critique is the commodification of feelings within a capitalist, bourgeois social order. Therein lies a crucial difference between Brecht and Fassbinder, in that, to some extent, the Marxist critique of sociopolitical and economic structures pursued by Brecht shifts in Fassbinder to a critique of what Fredric Jameson has called “the historical system of psychology . . . the inherited words and concepts for the various feelings and emotions” (Jameson 1998: 42). Although for Jameson such a critique of inherited, stereotypical emotions is already at work in Brecht’s formulation of the *V-effekt*, it is my belief that while maintaining an affective stress is crucial to Fassbinder’s method, it is not a priority for Brecht. Put in a different way, whereas Fassbinder’s critical involvement with emotion remains an emotional affair, Brecht’s displays a detached, cool rationality more attuned to his didactic approach.

While the affective component in Fassbinder’s films can be irrefutably traced to Sirk’s Hollywood melodramas, I would like to supplement and expand this line of inquiry by situating Fassbinder’s preoccupation with emotion in his knowledge and application of Artaud’s “theater of cruelty”<sup>4</sup> as a “physis of absolute gesture” (Artaud 1958: 40). Although the Artaudian influence on Fassbinder is not as widely documented as his borrowings from Sirk and Brecht, evidence for it is nonetheless available – not only in a number of intratextual aspects of performance in particular films, but also in critical assessments of Fassbinder’s theatrical practice prior to his involvement with film. Thus, for example, both Gemünden and Michael Töteberg mention Fassbinder’s exposure to Artaud’s theatre of cruelty by way of his involvement with the American collective ensemble The Living Theater. As Töteberg explains, traces of Artaud’s influence on Fassbinder appeared early in his theatrical work, but “he only caught up with Artaud’s original writing years later” (Töteberg 1989: 31). For both Gemünden and Töteberg, Fassbinder’s joint appropriation of Brecht and Artaud represents a kind of “disjunctive unity” whereby divergent methods are integrated in an inclusive and productive way. Fassbinder’s antitheatre “experimented with combining Brechtian episodic plots, didacticism, the

refusal of psychological explanations, and a sober and distancing acting style with Artaudian violence, energy, and spontaneity”<sup>5</sup> (Gemünden 1994: 61).

In numerous instances, Fassbinder’s critique of ideology as performed through the actor’s body maintains a closer affinity with the Artaudian concept of corporeality as a hysterical, excessive force than with the cool and rational operations characteristic of Brechtian drama. Elsaesser’s comments on Fassbinder’s cinema as a “body of work” that involves “work on the body” obliquely address Fassbinder’s grasp of the Artaudian body as that which, in all its violent efforts against coherence, may be more present and alert than the mind:

The move towards undoing, the shattering aspect, the anarchic impulse to tear the self down . . . point[s] to different values and intensities, to different circuits of communication and exchange, which include the body’s presence as perceptual surface, receptive to emotions such as hate, to suffering directly represented and violence valorized, but also to tenderness as suspended hurt and the tenderness of the intended touch: the body offered as gift and symbol, but also as that which cannot be symbolized. (Elsaesser 1996: 255)

Elsaesser’s reference to the shattering, anarchic aspects of Fassbinder’s cinema recalls the immediate and unsymbolized violence of Artaud’s *corps déchirant* (translated by Timothy Scheie as “tearing,” “rending,” and “affecting” body; Scheie 2000: 172). Artaud’s *corps déchirant* releases a force that suspends the logic of linguistic and social structures. Artaud’s dramaturgical method identifies the body’s voice, gesture, and movement as the primary vehicles of meaning, firmly believing that the theatre’s expressive domain is located in a language outside words. Thus, the *mise-en-scène* should not be subordinated to the demands of a tyrannical discourse that exists prior to the living and immediate event of the performance. To the customary slavishness to the text practiced in the theatre, Artaud counters “the triumph of pure *mise-en-scène*” (Derrida 1978: 236) – the autopresentation of “pure visibility and even pure sensibility” (Artaud in Derrida 1978: 236). In a reversal of the classical hierarchy, language must be beholden to the body and acquire its own properties of carnal evocation. Accordingly, certain physical attributes of language such as sonority, intonation, and intensity are worth preserving, whereas the abstractions and conceptual generalities of rational speech have no place in a theatre that strives to mobilize the transformative capacities of the body.

Derrida defines the Artaudian *mise-en-scène* as “the visual and plastic materialization of speech,” and as “the language of everything that can be said and signified upon a stage independently of speech, everything that

finds its expression in space, or that can be affected or disintegrated by it" (Derrida 1978: 240). Judging from the similarities between Artaud's ideal theatre and the definitions of melodrama provided by Elsaesser, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, and others, it would seem that the Artaudian theatre is essentially melodramatic – if not always in its thematic inclinations, at least in its formal/stylistic principles.<sup>6</sup> The parallels are numerous and remarkable. As in the most characteristically stylized melodramas, "the possibilities for realization in the [Artaudian] theater relate entirely to the *mise en scène* considered as a language in space and in movement" (Artaud 1958: 45). Elsaesser's reference to melodrama's downplaying of the intellect may be compared with Artaud's emphasis on "the reduced role given to understanding" in the theatre (Artaud 1958: 87). Elsaesser's point that "concentrated visual metaphors" in the melodrama are a result of "commercial (and formal) compression" (Elsaesser 1987: 52) is echoed in Artaud's reference to the "energetic compression of the text" in theatre (Artaud 1958: 87).

At first sight, the Brechtian and Artaudian perspectives appear to put forth incompatible theories of the performing body. While the body in Brecht functions as intelligible sign in a system of socioeconomic and political relations, and requires the aid of rationality to provide a lucid understanding of these relations, the Artaudian body finds in its own pre-linguistic, irrational force the only means to wage its struggle against ideological automatization. But, while differences between them are, at a conceptual level, too fundamental to be ignored, major principles of both theories seem to coexist at the practical level of actual performances.

Scholars such as Elizabeth Wright and Rainer Nägele have argued against assessing Brecht and Artaud as representatives of the classical polarities of rationality and asceticism versus irrationality and emotion.<sup>7</sup> Making a similar attempt at reconciling Brecht and Artaud's respective methods, Gregg Lambert notes that Brecht's "epic theater" and Artaud's "theater of cruelty" share a desire to destroy the "classical automatons" of theatrical space. Both implement methods of alienation that "[entail] the suppression of all protective barriers' and [strike] against the mental automatons of artificial and exterior mimicry" (Lambert 2000: 260). The goal for both would be "a spectacle acting as a force rather than as a reflection on external happenings" (Lambert 2000: 260). But Lambert follows Deleuze in thinking that Brecht falls somewhat short of achieving this goal, insofar as in his gestic theatre the image remains too committed to representational goals for it to shake the spectator's entire organism. As I implied earlier, Brecht's legacy is instrumental in enabling Fassbinder's films to produce a "shock to thought." However, Fassbinder conceives of

this shock as a fully corporeal and performative process rather than as a purely mental construct. Insofar as the image in Fassbinder is no longer attached to a stable referent, it ceases to reflect “external happenings,” becoming instead a sensuous surface that is stubbornly intense in its affective provocations.

The following discussion of *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978) and *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1971) will reconsider the significance of the performing body in Fassbinder’s oeuvre by opening up the Brechtian paradigm to issues of force, performance, and action especially prominent in Artaud’s theories of the body. I do not wish to reduce Fassbinder’s complex films to a binary model whereby scenes may neatly fall into the dichotomy of Brechtian static representations/tableaux versus Artaudian aggressive actions. Rather, I want to suggest that the passage between form and force, hence the interaction between Brechtian and Artaudian models, is crucial in mapping the affective-performative intensity that traverses the body at all times in these films.

I will theorize *Maria Braun*’s affective-performative dimension via three interrelated models: the one provided by psychoanalytically informed theories of melodrama and trauma, the Brechtian *gestus* as a means to convey the actors’ alienated relation to their social milieu, and the Deleuzian-inflected theory of performance proposed by Artaud. Although in some important respects, the combination of psychoanalytic theory and Artaudian/Deleuzian philosophy may seem counterintuitive, I see Fassbinder’s idiosyncratic use of these various sources as a “disjunctive synthesis” – a method which “allows impossibilities to coexist in the paradoxical formulation ‘either . . . or . . . or’, rather than privileging one term in a binary exclusion (‘either . . . or’)” (Flieger 2000: 50). In the manner of a disjunctive synthesis, Fassbinder’s performative body will be shown to bring together, and indeed reconcile, what are often-times deemed irreconcilable conceptualizations of the theatrical body. Fassbinder’s Artaudian legacy will be further explored as I later turn to examine *Petra von Kant*’s performativity – a unique and profuse blend of theatrical and cinematic expressions, verbal and bodily affections.

### Between Brecht and Artaud: *The Marriage of Maria Braun*

Q: What is uncertain about the body?

A: Its relation to its home/owner.

Peggy Phelan, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Choreographing Writing”

*Zones of affect: psychoanalysis, melodrama, trauma*

The early conceptualization of the psychoanalytic session incorporated a performative component that well surpassed Freud and Breuer's intellectual understanding of the body as symptom. In an attempt to restore both psychic and physical movement to the patient, doctor and patient were required to reproduce the symptomatic body jointly by engaging in some form of physical contact. However, as Peggy Phelan has noted, soon after the early histories, the performative elaboration of the symptom was abandoned in favor of the talking cure – allegedly, a more suitable method for advancing psychoanalysis' scientific aspirations. I would like to revalorize the “truth of bodily performances” (Phelan 1996: 90), a centerpiece of the original Freudian formulation of hysterical conversion, as a tool for reading the performing body in the cinema as well. As in a psychoanalytic session, where the analyst may observe certain truths in the gestural or postural behavior of the patient, the performing body in the cinema may speak louder or more truthfully than the dialogue that overlays the performance. In fact, cinematic gesture and movement are more likely to speak the truth of the character when they are not blocked by the censoring mechanisms of a rational language – whether this may occur in a silent image or in one that preserves its own difference from the spoken words. While films adopting a realist aesthetics strive to render the body as neutral and inconspicuous as possible – a functional performer of outward actions – the genre of the melodrama provides one rare instance of the cinematic embracement of the body in its non-representational/non-utilitarian facets.

Theoreticians of melodrama such as Elsaesser and Nowell-Smith have stressed the genre's privileging of the affective life of the body, its radical substitution of a corporeal, pre-reflective logic for the textual and intellectual aspects of representation. Recent debates on trauma theory have contributed to a kind of historicizing of the melodrama by tying the genre's affective component in with the need to re-enact and cure social and historical traumas affecting a whole culture. Notably, E. Ann Kaplan identifies strong links between the melodrama as a film genre and the need to “repeat family and war traumas and recoveries” in order to “seal over the traumatic ruptures and breaks that the culture endured” (Kaplan 2001: 202–3). For Kaplan, “The family traumas . . . imaged in melodrama . . . are closely linked to the politics and economics of the Euro-American nation-state” (Kaplan 2001: 202).

Kaplan's notion of melodrama as a representational arena concerned with negotiating cultural trauma is fittingly exemplified in Fassbinder's *Maria Braun*. The film's hysterical performance of gender and ideology

may be regarded as a psychoanalytic cure (verbally no less than physically articulated) in both a private and a historical sense. Relying on the notion of “history from below” (Kaes 1989: 82), the film explores Germany’s relationship with the traumatic experience of its own fascist ideology. Just as Maria Braun’s (Hanna Schygulla) personal trauma of loss becomes deferred and displaced onto a series of substitute material goals, Germany substitutes economic success and military power for its inability to relive the trauma generated by its fascist past.<sup>8</sup>

Maria’s inability to mourn her husband’s alleged death and subsequent absence parallels Germany’s inability to engage in a work of memory and mourning by directly confronting the emotional burden of guilt of its fascist period. In either case, as Anton Kaes remarks, “practical survival and accommodation take precedence” over understanding and reliving the unlive, traumatic event (Kaes 1989: 83). In representing the realities of both Maria and Germany as a repressed/displaced and empty affect, Fassbinder squarely addresses the impossibility of positing a real referent as the origin of the trauma. According to Elsaesser, “‘trauma’ would be the name for a referentiality that can no longer be placed . . . in a particular time or place, but whose time-space-place-referentiality is . . . doubled and displaced in relation to an ‘event’” (Elsaesser 2001: 200). The trauma can no longer be identified with a punctual event, but rather with a repetitive structure that belies the existence of the trauma less through visible signs than, paradoxically, through the absence of any visible traces (Elsaesser 2001: 199). The apparent lack of traces connecting structure and originating event leads Elsaesser to categorize trauma as a case of the “negative performative” (Elsaesser 2001: 196).

In *Maria Braun*, the interruption of Maria’s marriage to Hermann, the alleged original point of the traumatic fantasy, proves incommensurate with the affective content that it unleashes. But the film exactly demonstrates Elsaesser’s point that the traces of trauma, however invisible, “are nonetheless recoverable by a different kind of hermeneutics” (Elsaesser 2001: 199). Although Elsaesser does not elaborate on this point, it seems to me that such a recovery would be the task of a hermeneutics of the affective body. This bodily hermeneutics would locate the inscriptions of trauma in a repetitive structure of gestures and movements visibly severed from a purportedly original event, yet actively enacting the force of the event in its bifurcation into past and future.

In *Maria Braun* the “negative performative” takes the form of immobility and redundancy, stasis and repetition. The film’s aesthetics of distanciation are accomplished through a self-conscious choreography where stasis – as compressed and contained force – frequently interrupts a realist

or natural-looking flow of movement. Treating movement selectively as a special effect enables Fassbinder not only to extricate movement from its self-evident status, but also to rescue the body's social and ideological framing from its daily inconspicuousness. In compositions that are prevalently still, the rare and strategically located instances of movement are likely to elicit a surplus of affect in the viewer. Gaining an increase in affect by means of decreasing, selecting, or repeating the sensory stimuli at one's disposal is a well-known strategy in the domain of performance. As Michael Kirby explains,

There is plenty of time to become aware of the possibilities inherent in the actor. As the eyes move over the static composition, they may repeatedly send the same data, resulting in several identical messages . . . *Contemplation may provide intensification through redundancy.* (Kirby 1973: 28, my emphasis)

Kirby's comments suggest that a specific economy of movement and time/duration is key to the viewer's affective relation to the image. The following exchange between Fassbinder and Thomsen further illustrates this point. Thomsen asks Fassbinder: "Perhaps your ambivalent attitude to emotions finds its way into your films when you show an emotionally charged scene but hold the shot so long and move the camera so slowly that you produce a kind of alienation?" Fassbinder replies:

Yes, stylistically it is a kind of alienation . . . when the scene lasts a long time, when it's drawn out, then the audience can really see what is happening between the characters involved. If I started cutting within a scene like that, then no one would see what it was all about. (Fassbinder in Thomsen 1980: 83)

Fassbinder's response is significant in two important respects. First, it makes clear that the awkward prolongation and stasis of the shot allow the spectator to dwell in, and be impacted by, the affective situation at hand. And second, the shot's excessive duration shifts the axis of movement in the image. The most prominent movement no longer resides in the editing that connects each frame to the next. Rather, a kind of intra-frame editing takes hold of the performing body itself, transmuting the external movement of editing into the movement of choreographed gesture internal to the image. This point will become more apparent shortly, as I turn to examine specific scenes in the film.

Besides generating affect at the level of each individual scene's kinetic organization, redundancy may also play a significant role in mapping a distinct pattern of reiterated movements and gestures throughout a performance. Just as repetition serves to disavow the lack of a fixed center at the



heart of the trauma, it also proves necessary to deny the impossibility of arresting, hence mastering, the body's (traumatic) movement. As Heidi Gilpin observes, the effect of disappearance generated in moving bodies is often counteracted by a repetition compulsion that attempts to affirm the ontological consistency that is negated in the body's evanescent movement:

Performance is constantly oriented towards the impossible desire to stop disappearance. If disappearance is a condition of performance, *repetition is a crucial strategy that . . . manifests the absent presences of that which has disappeared . . .* Performance, in this sense, is a survival mechanism . . . that allows for the tolerance and endurance of trauma. (Gilpin 1996: 110, my emphasis)

The attempt to neutralize disappearance by resorting to repetition is also a landmark in Maria Braun's performance. Maria's intensely traumatic experience of her husband's disappearance inaugurates a series of repetitive movements in her life that are meant to substitute for her inability to access memory. To examine the intense affect at work in *Maria Braun's* redundant choreographies, I will discuss two tableau-like scenes in the film. This analysis will seek to uncover a consistent set of movements or "dance" patterns in Maria/Schygulla's overall performance – the kind of gestural mapping that Artaud describes as an "alphabet of [bodily] signs" (Artaud 1958: 90). I will also attempt to show the possibility of a paradoxical cooperation, indeed a mutual reinforcement, between the Brechtian and the Artaudian bodies.<sup>9</sup>

*"Der Hermann ist tot," or how Maria began to move*

The first scene concerns Willi's (Gottfried John) return from World War II and his announcement to Maria that her husband, Hermann Braun (Klaus Löwitsch), has died in the battlefield. The scene opens with a deep-focus and highly stylized composition that conveys the tension between an uncontrollable affect and the oppressive weight of ideology on the body's ability to voice such affect. Sitting in profile in the middle ground, Maria's crying mother (Gisela Uhlen) is framed by Willi on one side and Betti (Elisabeth Trissenaar), Maria's sister and Willi's wife, on the other. In a medium close-up in the foreground left, Willi's wringing hands speak loudly to his uneasy reinsertion into the family, while a long shot of an alienated Betti, standing immobile in the background right and facing the wall, completes the dysfunctional picture of the couple's reunion. Shortly thereafter, Maria announces her arrival home from the streets.

The frantic choreography that ensues exemplifies Artaud's notion of theatre as a "passionate overflowing, a frightful transfer of forces from body to body" (Artaud in Derrida 1978: 250). As actors' bodies alternate

between static configurations and unaccountable eruptions of movement, their diverse groupings and displacements instantiate the dialectical exchange between *form* and *force* in a most striking way. Just as Betti's endeavors to unite her body with Willi's have the ultimate effect of further exposing the couple's alienation, a series of successive attempts by all four characters to establish similar unions blatantly fail, showing both their emotional discomfort and their inability to keep it in check. As the fast-paced and short-lived emotional transactions among Betti, Willi, the mother, and Maria reveal, the unions the characters/actors manage to act out become undone as soon as they are performed. In a premonitory fashion, Maria detaches herself from these effusive and fleeting embraces and walks up to the kitchen sink in the background right. While Maria, her back to the camera, puts her hand under the running water, the mother enters the foreground left in a frontal shot. Betti, and then Willi, position themselves behind the mother in a perfect diagonal, dramatically signaling the import of Maria's isolation in the background. A reverse shot shows Betti and Willi now turned toward Maria, while Willi bluntly announces: "Der Hermann ist tot" ["Hermann is dead"].

Although non-German-speaking viewers will read the English version in the subtitles, it is still Willi's German words we hear, and the material physicality of their sound – carried over by actor Gottfried John's potent voice – is also what seems to provoke Maria's ensuing movement, not merely their meaning.<sup>10</sup> This scene undeniably stresses the immediate force of the voice as a potential generator of affect and motivator of action. The sound of Willi/John's voice reverberates in and affects Maria's subsequent gesture. It first provokes Maria's paralysis, followed by her dragging, trance-like steps toward her family, ending in her impulsive movement away from them and from the familial enclosures that pronounce her a widow.<sup>11</sup> This affective transfer from sound to gesture is indeed what Artaud invokes when he writes: "a sound . . . has its equivalent in a gesture and, instead of serving as a decoration, an accompaniment of a thought . . . causes its movement, directs it, destroys it, or changes it completely" (Artaud 1958: 39). The sound of Willi's voice is all the more compelling in that it is followed by a deafening silence. Here again Artaud's methodology becomes pertinent, as he remarks on the effectiveness of "interspers[ing] from time to time a sufficient extent of space stocked with silence and immobility" (Artaud 1958: 87) in order to enhance the expressive force of surrounding images and sounds.

The variation of speeds in the movements of bodies that I just indicated (from Maria's paralyzed body to a fast movement that reverses its course), no less than the bodies' general obstructive behavior towards each other,

are elements of performance Deleuze is also keen to stress. In the few explicit remarks on theatre he ever made, on the occasion of his collaboration with Italian playwright Carmelo Bene apropos of Bene's production of *Richard III*, Deleuze joins Bene in advocating a theatre that attempts to reveal gesture as process by "unveil[ing] a variety of impediments and interceptions, obstructions and collisions" (Kowsar 1986: 23), and by revealing, rather than circumventing, "encounters and collisions between bodies" (Kowsar 1986: 23). Both Deleuze and Bene believe that the impediments a body encounters (whether in the form of other animate or inanimate bodies) are crucial to the release of gestural variation, which is a matter of changes in speed. Deleuze writes: "In variation, what counts is the relationship of fastness and slowness, the modifications of these relationships, in as much as they carry the gesture . . . following variable coefficients, along a line of transformation" (Deleuze and Bene 1979: 113). It seems to me that speed variation is also radically incorporated in the choreography of bodies in the scene under discussion. Speed variation is the key element that carries the affective force of the body "along a line of transformation," thereby preventing the tableau from ever becoming a rigid or finished form.

This scene also provides a vivid example of the distinction between *sentimentality* and *affect* I proposed earlier. Massumi's definition of affect points to such a distinction in ways that powerfully resonate here:

[A]ffect is the quasi-causal openness of a characteristic interaction . . . to a sensing of "something new," the arrival or irruption of which is expressed in a global qualitative change in the dynamic of the interaction, to sometimes striking effect . . . the "affect" in play [is] not so much the personal "familiarity and fondness" already felt . . . these [are] already operating emotions, personalized contents. The affect [is] more accurately the openness of the context to an anomalous expression of those emotions. (Massumi 2002b: 227)

While the mother's and Betti's crying at the beginning of the scene may belong within a sentimental context – as expressions of inherited or ideologically contained emotions – Fassbinder seems more interested in the choreography of affect that ensues, which opens up that familiar context to the sensing of "something new." The scene proceeds along ways that mirror Massumi's definition: it is Maria's "*arrival*" or "*irruption*" into this familiar setting that introduces a qualitative change in the dynamic of interactions between the characters already in the scene, provoking the discomfited bodily exchanges that follow. Such "anomalous" choreography allows the actors' bodies more effectively to act out the repressive nature of their familial relations through a spectacle of spastic movements

and formalized spatial configurations. Paradoxically, this kinetic spectacle reaches its point of highest affective intensity during the final moments of stasis and silence that follow Willi's pronouncement of Hermann's death, once again confirming that the tableau is no mere formal configuration, but rather a tense compression of vital affective energies.

In its intensely choreographic structure, this scene displays the balletic quality pursued in Artaud's theatre of cruelty. In this instance, Fassbinder unmistakably adopts the Artaudian tendency "to emphasize the musical structure of the text and to carry it over into an accurate rhythmical performance/*mise-en-scène*" (Töteberg 1989: 28). Accordingly, speech and dialogue are less instrumental in formulating the contradictory expression of emotional impulses than is the heavily punctuated choreography in which characters participate. If the accent here falls on movement and gesture, it is no doubt because of the body's capacity to voice psychic contents despite the concurrent interference of censoring mechanisms. That these mechanisms are still in place, however, should be emphasized, for, even in its unconscious or irrational status, the performing body is not completely disentangled from the constraints of ideology. Rather, as this scene and others in the film make evident, the oppressive burden of ideology on the body reduces the performance to a failed and inconclusive affair. The lack of fullness or completion of movement exhibited by all characters in *Maria Braun* evokes Freud and Breuer's psychoanalytic preoccupation with "bodies that will not or cannot move" (Phelan 1996: 90), an idea also echoed in the following remark by Foster: "movement [may] reveal blockages, areas of tension and distortion in the body which have direct correlations to psychological inhibitions, unresolved trauma, or repressed desires" (Foster 1986: 56).

It is also apparent that the body in this highly choreographed scenario does not simply further the subject's conscious intentions towards the world. The body's locomotion is not aimed at an external goal or representational object. It is instead an affective, objectless locomotion. And, just as the fulfillment of Maria's desire in the film becomes indefinitely postponed, the accomplishment of her movements or gestures is interrupted, deferred, or circumvented. In this sense, the Brechtian agenda, with its emphasis upon the actor's conscious intentions toward revealing the constraining laws of the social order, proves clearly insufficient. As Fassbinder's performative approach shows, the actors' conscious intentions, however politically enlightened, cannot be disengaged from their own, and the characters', unconscious ones; nor can this conscious political intentionality be severed from the actors' embodied and affective experience of the performance.

The absence of a consciously defined goal in the above scene makes Maria's, and by extension all the characters', movements jerky, disjointed, and graceless, more evocative of a rehearsal process than of a finished and polished performance. This stylized anti-naturalism is again indicative of an Artaudian trace. The actors' minimal use of language and the exaggeration of their poses and attitudes are rhythmically patterned through the use of *zäsuren* or caesura (a term Töteberg uses to refer to pauses, breaks, or divisions in the rhythm of a scene; Töteberg 1989: 28) as well as through the juxtaposition between slow and fast motion. Maria/Schygulla's zig-zagging and erratic movements externalize the interfering noises in the performer's psyche. Marked by a staccato rhythm of discontinuities, starts and stops, and hesitations, such a choreographic style may be seen as the kinetic counterpart of a disjunctive or discontinuous editing practice. As I indicated earlier, it is the actor's body that in this instance functions as the repository of the kind of cinematic fragmentation usually confined to the areas of framing and editing. As in the realm of editing (and even lighting), the *mise-en-scène* can ignore smooth transitions in the body's articulation of movement and gestuality; priority is given to isolating shape and contrast rather than to representing a seamless, naturalistic unfolding of movement. As transitional movements are eliminated, the remaining ones figure as the most intense on an expressive scale, somewhat recalling the pointed, jagged forms of expressionism.

Maria's frozen stance following Willi's announcement of Hermann's death is immediately juxtaposed with an abrupt and seemingly incongruous movement that reverses her initial passive acceptance of the news. When one considers Maria's ascending trajectory within the narrative – the ease with which she succeeds in improving her socioeconomic status – her quick and forceful response to the announcement of Hermann's death stands out as her single, most emblematic movement in the entire film. Besides providing some momentary sense of relief, Maria's rushed movement outside the home also functions metaphorically in two divergent ways. On the one hand, Maria's desperate and almost primeval gesture initiates her projection outside the domestic sphere and her full participation in the socioeconomic dimensions of history. The gesture bodies forth a desire to exit the claustrophobic enclosure of patriarchal ideology, introducing a kinetic pattern that appears to lead Maria upwards and away from traditional female passivity and oppression. On a less promising note, Maria's escapist movement also seems to announce her subsequent tendency to displace/repress the effects of trauma with the pursuit of material goals. As I will explain in a moment, these two readings are more compatible than one might think.

It seems as though Hermann's alleged death – along with Maria's physical separation from him after his reappearance – provides Maria's movement with the direction and purpose it lacked prior to this loss. Indeed, later scenes in the film present Maria's bodily style as the antithesis of traditional female kinesics. In an essay that describes the bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality characteristic of the female subject in a patriarchal culture, Young (1989) argues that female kinesics is generally informed by timidity, passivity, uncertainty, and hesitancy.<sup>12</sup> In contrast with these conventional features of female motility, the film represents Maria's corporeal style as the physical counterpart of her self-assertive, enterprising attitude towards the patriarchal socioeconomic system she has to grapple with. In a scene where she acts as mediator between her boss and the American businessman interested in selling textile machinery to the Germans, Maria succeeds in convincing the men to take some risk and invest in the company's future, later reminding her male colleagues that she would "rather make the miracles than wait for them."

Maria's performance in space is direct and unencumbered, so much so, in fact, that it belies a repression or inhibition of a different kind altogether. While decidedly distinct from the timid deportment and motility typical of a female body, Maria's body recurrently figures as a photographic cut-out, evoking the uncanny presence of a moving dummy in the midst of a more naturally animated crowd. Maria's hieratic pose – the robotic rigidity with which she normally carries her head and gaze – resembles that of an animal wearing blinders to the sides of both its eyes so as to avoid any distractions from its compulsory forward movement. Ultimately, Maria's obsessive desire not to be sidetracked by any memory that might impair her determination to move forward has the paradoxical effect of disempowering her movement by turning it into an increasingly unconscious, uncontrollable performance.

### *Frame and performance: dancing in Oedipal enclosures*

Critics attempting to define the ontology of performance unanimously posit the concept of framing as one of its necessary conditions.<sup>13</sup> *Maria Braun*'s intensely performative quality is thus evident not only in the actors' own theatrical kinetic and gestural language, but also in the film's emphatic use of framing devices. But alongside the foregrounding of the frame, Fassbinder also draws attention to the relationship between the frame and the body. The exploration of this relationship, as the two films discussed in this chapter show, can proceed along very different paths. For, while the frame in *Maria Braun* unambiguously embodies the function of ideological containment or determination, in *Petra von Kant*, as I will show

later, the frame does not determine the body in advance; instead, the body itself is shown capable of generating its own frames through its powers of affection and expression. The frame in *Maria Braun* thus stands in for the spatial/Oedipal/structural/nationalistic forms of subjective determination, whereas in *Petra von Kant* the frame coincides with what Deleuze calls the “Open” – the aspect of duration and affective intensity beyond the visible parameters of the set.

The use of internal framings in *Maria Braun* inserts the actors within a formalized *mise-en-scène* whose rigorously set boundaries act as a metaphor for both the possibilities and the restrictions that affect human mobility. Thus, however tempting it may be to read Maria’s unencumbered movement as an instance of triumphant female self-assertion, the narrative movement itself (no less than the ideology of self-victimization typical of Fassbinder’s films) encourages us to see Maria’s busy masquerade as an instance of repressed affect. Unbeknownst to Maria, Oswald (Ivan Desny) and Hermann sign off a contract that permits the former to enjoy Maria’s sexual favors while financially compensating the latter. This patriarchal contract makes clear that Maria’s apparently unrestricted movements are hardly directed towards the conscious goals she has set for herself, but are more likely the expression of unresolved affect. Maria’s escape from a circle of passive domesticity thus turns out to have been circumscribed all along within a larger, more insidious circle of patriarchal mores. Maria’s transformation into the ideal object of male consumption brings to mind Phelan’s argument regarding the “impossibility of ‘having a body’ separate from the community in which desire to ‘possess’ it – libidinally, syntactically, psychically – circulates” (Phelan 1995: 207).

This feature of highly restricted, while nonetheless partly inventive and deviant, movement is accurately represented in a scene where Maria takes her own relatives as successive dancing partners. The scene brings together Maria’s family on the celebration of her mother’s birthday. At one point during the family reunion, the mother and Wetzel (Günter Lamprecht), her boyfriend, dance to a song in mutual self-absorption. Maria and her sister Betti follow the couple’s movements with their gazes, as they stand by the window and look screen left in a medium close-up. Maria comments on her surprise at seeing her mother as a woman for the first time. Betti goes a step further, judging her mother’s sexual involvement with her lover “indecent” in a woman her age. Betti’s extremely repressive and circular choices (she both hates and needs sexuality, just as she both hates, yet cannot overcome, her uncontrolled eating habits) contrast with Maria’s seemingly more mobile position. Refusing to engage in self-pity, Maria detaches herself from Betti and initiates a dancing movement that takes her

from Willi through grandpa Berger, Wetzel, and her mother, eventually ending with her present lover, Oswald. Maria crosses the room as the camera tracks and pans to follow her in a medium long shot. Shifting from partner to partner, Maria's body language is so minimalist as to appear mannered. Imperturbable, her facial expression registers no changes or inflections, while her arms remain limp and her gaze rests nowhere in particular.

This brief, yet highly unusual mo(ve)ment may be read in a number of different, and perhaps even complementary, ways. For one thing, Maria's circulation among family members anticipates and somatizes her involuntary circulation between Oswald and Hermann. Further, her unconscious, robotic dance may echo the fact that she remains in complete ignorance as to the contract signed by the men. The semi-incestuous, semi-parodic overtones of such visual staging of desire (also at work in Willi's insistent choice of grandpa Berger as a dancing partner) denaturalize the limits of heterosexual desire internalized through cultural prohibitions within the patriarchal family. This scene may thus be equally suited to a Deleuzian and a psychoanalytic readings. If one stresses the movement itself, and the intense anomalies it produces, Maria's multi-partnered dance echoes Deleuze and Guattari's anti-Oedipal model of desire as "an unlimited number of metastable stations through which a subject passes" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 26) without ever reaching a final state of organized equilibrium. But, at the same time, the scene's ending (in the normative figure of Oswald) does suggest such a final organization, retroactively mapping the entire trajectory as a metaphor for the gradual Oedipalization to which the family submits the infant's desire. The fact that Oswald is older and financially more solvent than Hermann renders him a suitable surrogate for Maria's dead father, which reinforces the Oedipal framing of the scene. From a psychoanalytic perspective, then, the dance inscribes a kind of subjective history, through which Maria acts out the child's passage through various stages of libidinal attachment until her complete assumption of an adult sexual identity.

In *Maria Braun*, the affective surplus typical of the melodrama does not merely concern an individual character's psychic and social histories. As Fassbinder implies in his stated aim for his historical trilogy ("to give the German people a supplement to their own history"; Fassbinder in Kaes 1989: 81), what is at stake in *Maria Braun* is a reappropriation of collective history as well. Yet, as in the melodrama, it is in large measure through the body that the film carries out this mnemonic act of reappropriation. In this sense, the film offers a dramatic example of Walter Benjamin's and Agamben's respective analyses of gestural practices as



inscriptions of the crisis entailed by the experience of modernity.<sup>14</sup> As in these authors' perspectives, the gesture in *Maria Braun* is the site of an affective inscription that wavers between forgetfulness and remembering<sup>15</sup> – forgotten by the character, who performs the gesture without knowing its meaning; and remembered by the film itself and, potentially, the audience, who may receive the gesture in all its critical and emotional force. While the character is circumscribed by the inexorable fate of its own gestures, the film's discourse can enlarge the gesture so as to undo its "natural" supports.

To some extent, the idea is in line with both Brecht's and Artaud's methods. Brecht's desire to turn the actor into an observer of the character he or she portrays entails a denaturalization of the gesture. A similar denaturalization is at stake in Artaud's theatre of cruelty: in order to reverse the state of decomposition that affects the Western body, the paradoxical solution is to intensify the conflict so as to bring the body's maladies to the fore. But, although both dramatists dwell on the violence done to the body by the inscription of the Law, an important difference still separates them. While Brecht regards the actor's emphatic work on the body as a means to raise the spectator's social consciousness, Artaud regards the body itself as the repository of value. Thus Artaud stresses the dual status of the body – on the one hand, restricted and incapacitated by the operations of culture; on the other hand, sporadically bursting with possibilities of intelligence and change that, for the most part, remain untapped. While Brecht uses the body to understand better the social laws that inevitably regulate our relations to other bodies, Artaud strives for the utopian possibility of the body's existence independently of linguistic and social rules.

The difference that I have just outlined is directly related to the conceptual shift from theatre to performance that took place in the twentieth century. The new theatricality invoked by the term "performance" exhibits two features that are crucial in defining the disparities between Brecht and Artaud: first, a destabilization of dichotomies (realism-fiction, subject-object, mind-body) that undermines the importance of rational analysis and redefines the notion and scope of political intervention;<sup>16</sup> and second, a sense of sensual and bodily proximity that reconfigures the way the spectator experiences the performance. Both these features are more easily incorporated into Artaud's method than they are into Brecht's, if only because Brecht was invested in a theatre of consciousness at the expense of unconscious or involuntary processes. As Wright explains, Brecht's commitment to "the spectator's discovery of his own contradictory production process via a theatre of consciousness" prevented Brecht

from fully undertaking the radical refunctioning of the theatre into performance (Wright 1989: 115).

Predating *Maria Braun* by seven years, *Petra von Kant* might be seen as a hyperbolic example of the “refunctioning of the theatre into performance” proposed by Wright. In this regard, *Petra von Kant* is not as crucially invested in psychoanalytic, Oedipal considerations, instead more closely attuned with a Deleuzian/Artaudian performative paradigm.<sup>17</sup> The emphatic abstraction of *Petra von Kant* is particularly interesting in that it takes hold not only of bodily, but also of verbal, expression. Instead of prioritizing body language over verbal language, as I have argued *Maria Braun* tends to do, *Petra von Kant* aims at fusing the two expressive channels by filtering speech through the body. The film’s discursive abundance is simultaneously performed and perceived as an abundance of intensely embodied affections.

### Cruel performance: *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*

Every word is physical, and it immediately affects the body.

Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*

#### *Performance: an intensive kind of theatre*

Even as a cinematic production, *Petra von Kant* retains several constitutive elements of theatre: its division into five distinct acts separated off by fade-outs and fade-ins in the manner of a stage curtain; the confinement of the action to conversations that take place in a single locale; and the reduction of the external world to a narrative reference, secondary to the film’s concern with setting in motion an affective process. But despite these theatrical underpinnings, *Petra von Kant*’s relationship to the theatre is not mimetic. This not a filmed play, but rather a film that performs the very possibility of staging cinema as performance. The film’s performative dimension stands out when one considers certain fundamental differences between theatre and performance. As Féral argues, whereas theatre “cannot escape from representation . . . [and] narrativity” (Féral 1982: 175), “performance escapes all illusion and representation . . . [Whereas] theatre cannot do without . . . (a completely assumed subject) . . . [p]erformance . . . brings emotional flows and symbolic objects into a destabilized zone – the body, space – into an infrasympbolic zone” (p. 177).

Féral situates the ontology of performance not in a complete break with theatre, but rather in its ability to draw attention to, and magnify, a particular zone or mode of theatre:

In its very stripped-down workings, its exploration of the body, and its joining of time and space, performance gives us *a kind of theatricality in slow motion* . . . Performance explores *the under-side of . . . theatre*, giving the audience a glimpse of *its inside, its reverse side, its hidden face*. (Féral 1982: 176, my emphasis)

In its emphatic performativity, *Petra von Kant*, too, may be regarded as a special case of theatricality. The film's unique relation to the theatre emerges through a comparison with the chamber play (*Kammerspiele*), one of the most theatrical of film genres. For Paul Schrader, "[t]he chamber plays were 'intimate', featuring a slow-paced drama between members of a 'family', (or social group) within a 'house' (fixed number of rooms). These were the limits – both physical and thematic – in which psychological depths could be probed" (Schrader 1972: 114). In this sense, *Petra von Kant* enacts a kind of postmodern version of the *Kammerspiele*, less interested in organizing meaning around psychological considerations (dependent on coherent subjects as characters) than in staging impersonal affective forces.<sup>18</sup>

Just as the *Kammerspiele* draws its psychological depths from the very physical and thematic limits that constrain it, *Petra von Kant*'s extreme spatial restrictions result in unlimited powers of affection. Faced with limited possibilities of action, the performer's body grows in the direction of affective intensity. As the extensive function of space ceases to matter, editing and camera work enter the virtual zone of time – the opening of the image to a sense of unlimited duration. As Deleuze explains in connection with the function of framing, the more space is closed off to a continuum of other spaces that operate within realistic narrative parameters, the more it is open to the whole, which is nothing but openness itself, the abstract realms of time and the spirit (Deleuze 1986: 17). This is an affective-performative space, itself animated by, and responding to, affection, as it extends each and every one of its occupants into an unfinished series of virtual doubles and reflections. In such a space, the body's smallest gestures find a subjectless echo in other bits and pieces of bodies that alternately gather and disseminate – the many figures in the Poussin painting covering one of the walls in Petra's apartment, the mannequins, dolls, and mirror reflections. The actor's face, or any other visible part of her body, becomes a surface of affective inscription, a literal unveiling of the "hidden face" of theatre.

*Petra von Kant*'s flirtation with the conceptual aspects of the frame is integral to the film's performative dimension. Like the frame's function of focusing attention on objects or qualities that would otherwise remain marginal, the performative emphasis in *Petra von Kant* lays bare affective

connections and qualities that a more classical theatrical style would keep below the surface. Thus, *Petra von Kant*'s infatuation with the physical frame echoes the film's own performative, hence marginal, relation to the theatre. Referring to the notion of performance as margin, Féral writes:

Performance indicates the theatre's *margin* . . . something which is never said, but which, although hidden, is necessarily present . . . Margin does not refer here to that which is excluded. On the contrary, it is used in the Derridian sense . . . to mean . . . what in the subject is most important, most hidden, most repressed, yet most active as well. (Féral 1982: 178)

The self-exhibitionistic frame announces that which is true of every body – its dual status as both margin and center, dissemination and focused intensity. Just as the foregrounding of the frame brings the margin into the center of the image, performance brings the hidden into view. Indeed, performance brings forth the body's powers of affection. *Petra von Kant*'s frame-saturated space instantiates this process in a uniquely intense way.

In *Petra von Kant*, the linguistic and representational frames that, under the classical regime of cinema, contain and organize the body are instead absorbed or redirected by the body's own powers of affection. That is, the body coincides with, or even subsumes, both linguistic and spatial framings. In this sense, the film's general thrust is essentially Artaudian. Like Artaud's theatre, *Petra von Kant* strives to make us realize thought (or rather, the unthought) in the body. Through this realization, the film becomes an agent of cruelty, for it forces the mind to be active and affected. Fassbinder, like Artaud, practices cruelty as a method for the most rigorous and lasting awakening. As such, the effects of cruelty may be akin to those of love.

### *Words that "strike a pose"*

Words, not bodies, strike a pose; words, not garments, are woven; words, not armors, sparkle.

Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*

Incomparably a more verbal film than *Maria Braun*, *Petra von Kant* systematically uses the spoken word, in the Artaudian sense, "for [its] shape and sensuous emanations, not only for [its] meaning" (Artaud 1958: 125). In this respect, the film fully ascribes to Artaud's postulates regarding the ability, and duty, of theatre to extend language beyond its recognizable semantic properties: "What the theater can still take over from speech are its possibilities for extension beyond words, for development in space, for dissociative and vibratory action upon the sensibility" (Artaud 1958: 89).

In *Petra von Kant*, language and the body function in such coordinated tandem that it is impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends.<sup>19</sup> Bodily and verbal expressions become fused with each other, and the face figures as the main site of this fusion. In her protracted conversation with her friend Sidonie (Katrin Schaake) in the film's first act, Petra (Margit Carstensen) frequently responds to her friend's questions about her estrangement from her former husband with a guttural monosyllabic sound, the closest a human expression of disgust may come to being unmediated by arbitrary linguistic signification. Either as a preface to a verbal response or as a substitute for a response *tout court*, Petra's frequent "ahhhhhhh" unaccountably (even in a language such as German, filled with guttural sounds) drag the guttural sound out for several seconds. Petra's repeated "ahhhhhhh" stand between the masking power of language and the open crack of silence and death – fueled by a compulsion to speak, yet too close to the passions of the body to mask her exhaustion and disgust. Petra's speech instantiates what Deleuze calls "flexion," the quality that body and language share, which allows words, like body limbs, to bend, contract or extend: "If language imitates bodies, it is not through onomatopoeia, but through flexion. And if bodies imitate language, it is not through organs, but through flexion" (Deleuze 1990: 286). Petra's unmotivated act of dragging out her words far beyond the boundaries of proper diction or pronunciation correlates with the mannered, crawling movements of her body.

Petra's performance has only itself as a point of reference and origin – words mirroring gestures and gestures mirroring words. As an inscription of performativity, the gesture/word tandem in *Petra von Kant* does not represent anything – either an external reality or an inner psychological content. Instead, the gesture/word symbiosis is a kind of piercing presentation of its own immediate force. Affect and expression are thus synonymous and simultaneous. The affect is so intensely concentrated upon gesture and word that it exhausts itself in them, rising and falling with the physical exactitude of the form traced by the gesture or the sound produced by the word. A particular moment in the film is especially noteworthy in its ability to show the coincidence of affect with its expression. After declaring her affection for Karin (Hanna Schygulla), Petra calls Marlene (Irm Hermann) to bring out a bottle of champagne. Petra does so with a dance-like, ultra-affected movement resembling the quick fluttering of a bird's wings – lifting both her arms to shoulder level, she projects her body upwards to indicate her upswing mood, also revealed by her smile and the excitement in her voice. But, just as quickly as the body has risen, it immediately falls back to its neutral posture, thus making the affect fully readable

in, and coterminous with, the singular moment of corporeal and verbal articulation/flexion.

Deleuze characterizes the parallelism of body and language as “obscene” (Deleuze 1990: 281). The mutual reflection/inflexion of body and language produces a hysterical surplus of expression and affection. Language becomes as excessively visible and revealing as naked flesh, while the body becomes as loud and eloquent as language. A minor, but significant, example of such doubling occurs in a gesture Petra often uses to accompany the words she addresses to Sidonie in the film’s first act. In the same dialogue previously mentioned, Petra repeatedly raises her hand to neck or chin level, her index finger slightly touching her skin. Then, she either opens all the fingers in that position, which makes her hand look like a long-nailed vampire’s hand or a bird’s claw, or she points her index finger insistently upwards. Petra’s hand gestures, like her guttural speech, destabilize the boundary between body and language. With her index finger close to her throat, Petra punctuates the validity of her own assertions, hence blurring the line between thought and flesh. In this guise, language functions as a narcissistic reinforcement meant to mirror the self back to itself, “the ultimate double which expresses all doubles – the highest of simulacra” (Deleuze 1990: 284).

A more conspicuous example of the mutual doubling of verbal and corporeal figurations, and one that involves larger gestures and movements, may be found in what I call the “chase” episode in act 2, in which Petra and Karin seduce each other into a romantic affair of sorts. As Karin begins to reveal her troubled family history to Petra, Petra responds in kind, in turn exposing the socioeconomic and cultural gap that separates her from Karin (“I have a daughter myself. She’s at the best school there is”). Petra counters the anarchy and neglect prevailing in Karin’s childhood with her own deeply ingrained idea of discipline. The scene proceeds to embody Petra’s imposition of discipline on Karin in the most corporeal, tangible fashion. “Discipline” ceases to be merely a word and becomes a body, Petra’s stifling body, relentlessly following in Karin’s evasive steps as she walks from one end of the painting-covered wall to the other. Karin’s body likewise doubles her speech, sneakily but unequivocally fleeing the imposition of discipline and subjection acted out by Petra’s pursuing body. As the camera pans with Petra to reframe the off-frame Karin, Karin renews her escape, walking away in the opposite direction.

Not only do body and language feed off each other pervasively in this film, but they are both also shown to participate in a simultaneous process of concealing and revealing that crosses linguistic and bodily lines in an indeterminate way. As Deleuze notes, “the body is capable of gestures

which prompt an understanding contrary to what they indicate” (Deleuze 1990: 285). The speaking body may thus split into different directions at once: its indexical meaning as well as its negation. Deleuze complicates the relationship between body and language and their complex dialectic of concealing and revealing by introducing the notion of “silence.” That is, both body and language may choose silence, withholding their ability to speak and reveal:

The body . . . may conceal the speech that it is . . . The body may wish for silence with respect to its works . . . repressed by the body but also projected, delegated, and alienated, speech becomes the discourse of a beautiful soul that speaks of laws and virtues while keeping silent over the body. (Deleuze 1990: 290)

Petra’s speech oftentimes resembles the “discourse of a beautiful soul that speaks of laws and virtues while keeping silent over the body.” This most notably occurs in the film’s first two acts, when Petra is relying on her worldly knowledge of men (in her dialogue with Sidonie) and on her superior intellectual and economic capital (in her dialogue with Karin) and has not yet succumbed to the pangs of unrequited love. Although, even at this early stage in the film, language cannot quite keep the lid over the exhaustion and disillusionment that plague the body, it still manages to maintain a modicum of composure and control. Beginning in act 3, when Karin’s and Petra’s respective desires are shown to be too incompatible to keep up their illusions of romance, Petra’s speech starts losing its denotative, law-adhering function, to take on an increasingly affective role.

Significantly, the loss of the representational, referential value of language is accompanied by the loss of the unified self/ego and by a concurrent intensification of the body. The body’s force intensifies in two ways: through the disclosing function the body shares with language (once it gives up its masking efforts), and through the body’s dissemination into other bodies in space. The process whereby, through language and the body, the subjective ego comes undone, while the affect intensifies, is unequivocally addressed by Deleuze:

At the same time that bodies lose their unity and the self its identity, language loses its denoting function . . . in order to discover a value that is purely expressive, or . . . “emotional.” It discovers this value, not with respect to someone who expresses himself and who would be moved, but with respect to something that is purely expressed, pure motion or pure “spirit” – sense as a pre-individual singularity, or *an intensity which comes back to itself through others*. (Deleuze 1990: 299, my emphasis)

This kind of desubjectifying process simultaneously involves identity, the body, language, and emotion itself. As I will argue later in this chapter, such

evacuation of subjectivity – the disorganization of the body into a body without organs – entails a seemingly paradoxical proposition: the more unstructured bodies become, the more they gain in intensity.

Proof of the idea that body and speech draw from each other both as supports of the ego (in their silencing, hiding mode) and as affective inscriptions of the non-unity of the self (in their disclosing, revealing mode) is that at the end of her birthday party, Petra lets go of body and words simultaneously. Like Artaud, Fassbinder in this scene drives language and the body to their limit, staging a simultaneous dismantling of both. Addressing her mother in a quiet, calm, voice, Petra says: “I want to die, mother . . . I want to sleep, mother.” Significantly, as Petra speaks these self-silencing words, Marlene is shown hand on mouth standing by the left edge of the frame of the Poussin painting. Given that for the film’s duration Marlene serves as a refractive surface for Petra’s own affections, her gesture of placing her hand on her mouth at the very moment when Petra ceases to move and to speak seems to signal the end of her refractive function vis-à-vis her mistress, rather than any desire on her part to restrain her own otherwise non-existent speech. Petra asks Marlene for more gin to drown her sorrow in, and then inquires, “Or are you leaving too?” The full meaning of Marlene’s hand-on-mouth gesture and her answer to this question are disclosed in act 5, when she leaves Petra as Petra decides to stop being her sadistic mistress.

### *Bits and pieces of bodies*

Féral describes the performative body as “a body in pieces, fragmented and yet one” (Féral 1982: 171). But in place of Féral’s “body in pieces,” a phrase which still retains the idea of a unified body having been fragmented or divided, I would like to refer to the performative body as “bits and pieces of bodies” – a body without organs that neither results from an original unity, nor strives towards its definitive restoration. Like a body without organs, *Petra von Kant*’s body is strewn about in a multiplication of signs or part-objects that never reach a stable organization. The resulting body is thus a material aggregate “whose elements vary according to its connections, its relations of movement and rest, the different individuated assemblages it enters” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 256). Of all the bodily assemblages Petra forms with other bits and pieces of bodies, none achieves the subjectless intensity gathered and expressed by the assemblage Petra-Marlene.

With her stunningly white skin, inexpressive face, black clothes, and robotic movements, Marlene is akin to a moving mannequin. As I suggested earlier, in her emptiness of subjective desire and her automatization,



Marlene functions as a pure refracting surface. The expression of Petra's emotions bounces off of Marlene's blank gaze to acquire a certain transparency, literally enacting Deleuze's idea of "an intensity which comes back to itself through others" (Deleuze 1990: 299). Marlene's neutral gaze, zeroed in by the camera on several occasions, suggests neither approval nor disapproval of Petra's words, actions, or emotions. It is instead, as Lynne Kirby has noted (1985–6: 21), the very absence of point of view, hence discouraging us from projecting moral judgments on Petra's sadomasochistic behavior.

Not unlike the expressive role Marylee/Malone plays in relation to the other characters in *Written on the Wind*, Marlene's body doubles up and releases the affect repressed in Petra's body, oftentimes registering the unaccountably sadistic tone of Petra's commands. In act 4, Petra reprimands Marlene for failing immediately to carry out her instructions that she see to the birthday cake. At the sound of Petra's angry voice, Marlene gets up quickly and walks to the left background. The camera's panning movement brings attention to the palm of her right hand resting open against her lower back – her excessively white hand and its convulsive tics standing out against the background of her austere black dress. The expressivity of Marlene's hand is enhanced as it joins a series of other hands in the painting in a composition of bits and pieces of bodies arranged at different angles and on multiple planes – notably, the hands belonging to the central figure of Dionysus, the sitting male figure on the left, and the recumbent female figure on the bottom left.

Marlene's gestures become even more eloquent when read through Deleuze's account of the affection-image, whereby any part of the body can become as intensive and expressive as the face itself (Deleuze 1989: 97). Furthermore, Deleuze links the quality of faciality required for the affection-image with the proper combination of movement and immobility, also a key ingredient in the expressivity of Marlene's hand:

The moving body has lost its movement of extension, and movement has become movement of expression. It is this *combination of a reflecting, immobile unity and of intensive expressive movements which constitutes the affect* . . . Each time we discover these two poles in something – reflecting surface and intensive micro-movements – we can say that this thing has been treated as a face [*visage*]. (Deleuze 1989: 87–8, my emphasis)

Precisely because of Marlene's very lack of individual subjectivity, one may say, paraphrasing Deleuze, that her body has sacrificed her own mobility to receive and refract the affective fluctuations displaced or hidden by Petra's own body. The most expressive of Marlene's "movements of

expression” is also appropriately the one that announces the limit and the end in her function as refracting surface for Petra: the moment referred to earlier when Marlene brings her hand to her mouth at the end of act 4. But precisely because the affect has reached its limit at this point, it is about to release its hold on Petra, who immediately thereafter in the film’s final act gives up her former sadomasochistic ways, consequently triggering a change in Marlene’s affective role as well.

By having Marlene repudiate Petra’s final offer of individuality, the film reaffirms in its closing moments the Artaudian position it has maintained throughout. That is, from the outset, Marlene’s lack of the humanist privileges of individual consciousness and thought facilitates a view of her alliance with Petra as the literalization of the Artaudian idea that someone else thinks in us (Lambert 2000: 276). Marlene thus embodies the theft of the body and the mind that, Artaud believes, every postmodern subject suffers at the hands of language and rationality. But, concurrently, the very evacuation of subjectivity and the attendant gain in intensity featured by Marlene already constitute the antidote to the body’s state of disease – a disassembling of the supports of the humanist subject responsible for violating the body in the first place.

### *The frame and the open: the moving tableau*

In *The Movement-Image*, Deleuze discusses the function of framing in realizing the spatial dimension of cinema. Insofar as it determines the image as a closed system, the frame acts as a subtractive or selective intentionality. But the frame is at the same time always engaged with the whole or the open – “that which prevents each set . . . from closing in on itself . . . [and] forces it to extend itself into a larger set” (Deleuze 1986: 16). Although, as the out-of-field, this whole or open visibly remains outside the frame, it is nonetheless related to the frame’s interior space through two qualitatively different aspects: a *relative* aspect by means of which the imaginary space of the out-of-field is subject to recuperation as visible space through cutting or reframing, and an *absolute* aspect by means of which the closed system opens to an invisible duration that is immanent to the whole universe (Deleuze 1986: 17).

In thinking that the frame is related to the whole through the qualitative aspect of duration, Deleuze is indebted to Bergson’s notion of real movement as concrete duration, or qualitative change. For Bergson-Deleuze, real movement does not consist of a series of immobile sections to which an abstract concept of time is added. Rather, real movement expresses the essence of the whole, which is duration, or the ability to endure, “to give rise to something new” (Deleuze 1986: 9). Fassbinder’s choreography of

frames in *Petra von Kant*, I would submit, literally performs the idea of movement as duration. By incorporating movement into itself, the frame turns the many tableau-like compositions of bodies into mobile sections traversed by their constantly changing relation to the whole, constantly open, and constantly becoming. The sense of duration whereby the whole or open intrudes into the space of the image is felt in the form of affective intensity. In other words, the film expresses its resonance with the outside by opening itself up to a virtual plane of unbound affect.<sup>20</sup>

One may find in the cinema various uses of framing that rely upon spatial restriction as a vehicle for an affective opening. Deleuze refers to the cases of saturation and rarefaction of images according to the number and kinds of frames that may be used (Deleuze 1986: 12–18). Thus, saturation occurs when frames multiply due to a differentiation between foreground and background spatial planes. On the other hand, rarefied images are produced via emptiness or disappearance – the isolated object, the empty or monochromatic set are thus instances of rarefaction. But, as shown in *Petra von Kant*, these diverse modes of framing need not be as mutually exclusive as Deleuze's distinctions imply. Thus, the film at times manages to combine the qualities of saturation (multiplicity) and rarefaction (emptiness) of the image to equal degrees, and even within a single shot.

To begin with, the interior frame of the Poussin painting, pervasively visualized in the film, generates a kind of quasi-permanent quality of saturation. That is, the painting acts as a primary interior frame within or upon which other frames are layered. Bodies moving or posing in front of the painting act as such partial, layered, secondary or tertiary frames. Act 3, in which Petra and Karin's relationship is seen to dissolve into a series of offensive and defensive moves, provides a good example of such frame saturation. The central portion of the painting, occupied by the standing figure of Dionysus, is displaced to the left margin of the image. Karin sits in the center middle ground between Dionysus and the kneeling figure of Midas in the right-hand side of the painting. Petra occupies the bottom foreground of the frame, lying down with her head placed in the lower right corner. Just in case the figure of Dionysus (left-hand side of the frame from top to bottom) and Petra's body (bottom portion of the frame from left to right) were not eloquent enough in their framing qualities, the image provides another framing device in the form of a wooden beam placed above Petra's body in the closest foreground. Topping the frame-saturation tendency in this shot, this wooden beam confines Petra into an even more limited space, resembling the open lid of a coffin.

But, by constantly shifting the framing lines of the painting and its perspectival center, Fassbinder dismisses not only the static quality of the

frame as a definitive line of enclosure, but also the corollary concept of the tableau as a framed view. Indeed, the film shows that, as an element of cinematic composition, the frame can never be rid of movement, hence its function as a catalyst for multiple decompositions and recompositions of the image. It is in this sense that the Poussin reproduction opens up the set to an unlimited series of moving and changing relations.<sup>21</sup> By focusing at different points in time on different partial and decentered portions of the painting's surface, and by combining these with the actors' moving or posing bodies in a variety of ways, the film utilizes the Poussin painting as a veritable moving and affecting space, and not simply as a fixated and enclosing boundary. As it interacts with the rest of the bodies in the set, the painting's frame becomes mobile, uncertain, and open to the whole as well.<sup>22</sup>

As I argued earlier in this chapter, the relationship between frame and body is more heterogeneously mapped in *Petra von Kant* than is the case in *Maria Braun*. Here, frame and body cannot always be separated out as container and contained, for sometimes the body is indeed coincident with the frame. In *The Movement-Image*, Deleuze briefly addresses the phenomenon whereby bodies and frames can become synonymous: "The limits of the frame can be conceived in two ways . . . either as preliminary to the existence of bodies whose essence they fix, or going as far as the power of existing bodies goes" (Deleuze 1986: 13). While the first usage corresponds to the traditional deployment of the frame as a limit that encloses and predetermines the body, the second usage displaces the frame's determining and limiting power onto the body itself. In *Petra von Kant*, I would suggest, the frame goes "as far as the power of existing bodies." It is the affective power of the face or body itself that carves out a space and a boundary as distinct from other spaces and boundaries in its proximity.

A spatial arrangement in act 1 is particularly eloquent in suggesting that a frame may emerge from a certain positioning of bodies. As my reading of this image will also show, the frame expresses the simultaneous fragmentation and immanent continuity that characterizes the bits and pieces of bodies without organs. At one point during Petra and Sidonie's conversation, the two women are framed in a medium shot in the center foreground. In the highly formalized fashion common to many of the film's two-body configurations, Petra sits slightly behind Sidonie's body, while the right top corner of the frame is occupied by the torsos of two mannequins standing in close proximity to each other. The mannequins generate their own space, and almost their own shot, within the shot framing Petra and Sidonie. Even though there is no physical frame surrounding the mannequins' bodies, the outlines of the figures themselves and the space they

carve out are remarkable enough to produce the sense of a separate geometrical field within the shot. But, more importantly, the mannequins' bodies spark a strong affective echo with Petra and Sidonie's own bodies and space. It thus seems that if the frame contains anything here, it is only to make it vibrate all the more intensely with something else enclosed by another frame. If the frame fragments the space, it is only to enhance the affective intensity that glues all the different fragments into a single open whole. Paraphrasing Deleuze, this dovetailing of frames allows the parts of the closed system of the set to be separated, but also to reunite and converge (Deleuze 1986: 14). The primary function of such a use of framing is not to contain/organize the body, but rather to enhance the force that is the body without organs – an uninterrupted continuum of intensities in the field of immanence, or as Deleuze and Guattari put it, "a fusional multiplicity . . . of . . . attributes that . . . constitutes the ontological unity of substance" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 154).

As noted earlier, the strategy of saturating the image with multiple framings may also overlap with an emptying out or deframing of the image. A case in point is the very last shot in act 4: the end of Petra's family reunion on the occasion of her birthday, a shot that is memorable for its sustained duration and the posing quality of its figures.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, by emptying the set of the pieces of furniture and décor seen in previous acts – Petra's bed, surrounding lamps, the mannequins – and by displacing these items to the opposite side of the room (previously serving as Marlene's working space), the image in act 4 becomes rarefied and deterritorialized. The few remaining objects – the telephone, the Karin-lookalike doll, and the bottle of gin – function as affective intensities, or bits and pieces, of both Petra and Karin.<sup>24</sup>

The frozen tableau that announces the end of act 4 is without a doubt one of the stillest moments in the film, yet it is by no means a static, changeless form. Physical movement here has been transmuted into a feeling of intense duration, which is akin to the real movement of becoming. Such intensity is precisely felt through the spatial and affective resonances generated between the actors' bodies and the bodies of figures in the background painting. While Marlene, Sidonie, Gaby (Eva Mattes), and Valerie, Petra's mother (Gisela Fackeldey), are positioned in equally expressive poses as witnesses to Petra's disintegration, Petra's recumbent body stretches itself from left to right in the middle ground. Still lying by the phone and the doll, Petra's body has nonetheless abandoned both hope and desire by now. Dressed in her customary black and positioned in the far background on the left-hand side of the painting, Marlene presents the most inconspicuous figure among the women, despite her eloquent

gesture, mentioned earlier, of covering the lower part of her face with her left hand. While Gaby, kneeling in the center background right in front of the painting, is practically engulfed by its composition, the bodies of Sidonie, Petra, and her mother provide framing lines that almost coincide with the left, right, and bottom edges of the painting. Again, the saturation of framings provided by the correspondences between painted and live figures demonstrates that body and frame are synonymous entities for Fassbinder, for, just as the painting frames the bodies, the bodies in this instance are seen as capable of framing the painting. This mutual resonance suggests that the body is not so much (or at least, not exclusively) constructed by a frame that fixes and preordains its capacities (a moral, transcendental paradigm); rather, it itself can generate its own determining positionings out of its affective interactions and combinations with other bodies (an ethical, experimental paradigm).

*Petra's narcissism, the film's self-affection*

In his account of novelist Pierre Klossowski's bodies-language, Deleuze identifies a kind of pantomime that "is essentially perverse and has the form of a disjunctive articulation" (Deleuze 1990: 280). "It is possible to say," Deleuze continues, "that the animal body 'hesitates', and that it proceeds by way of dilemmas. Similarly, reasoning proceeds by fits and starts, hesitates and bifurcates at each level. The body is a disjunctive syllogism" (Deleuze 1990: 280). The perverse hesitancy, the lack of teleological unity and clarity of purpose, that I identified in Maria/Schygulla's bodily style in *Maria Braun* are performative signatures in Petra/Carstensen as well. The languor of Petra's gestures and poses, the unfocused direction of her gaze, the way her head is drawn away from her own, or someone else's, body – all of these bodily signs reflect the dissimulating and doubling behavior Deleuze identifies in Klossowski's bodies. This hesitancy is physically performed in a moment in act 2 when we are given a medium close-up centered shot of Petra and Karin sitting on the bed – Karin's body in front of Petra's, hence more visible. While keeping their bodies in close proximity, the women's heads are tilted in opposite directions, their eyes looking away from each other. Because the visible skin of their shoulders and arms is practically of the same pale hue, their bodies seem to coalesce in one single corporeal assemblage, with their heads, by contrast, ostensibly differentiated and directionally divergent.<sup>25</sup>

Hesitancy and disjunction are not only the attributes of the bodily style most consistently favored by the film, for they also become the very signatures of the film's own behavior in a larger sense. The wavering in Fassbinder's films between narrative and affective-performative interests

has already been identified, albeit in slightly different terms, by Elsaesser, in one of his most perceptive remarks on Fassbinder. Thus, for Elsaesser, the moving effects of Fassbinder's cinema depend on the marked distance between the subjective *mise-en-scène* of the characters (conveying their narcissistic illusions and larger-than-life aspirations) and the objective *mise-en-scène* of the camera (intent on proving the futility of the characters' desires; Elsaesser 1980: 29). Just as, in the instance described above, Petra and Karin's bodies hesitate between a drawing towards and a drawing away from each other, the film itself hesitates between stressing the shot's connections to the present set (its interest in a narrative of a budding friendship or romance between the two women) and dwelling on its connections to the open beyond measurable space and linear time (its involvement in an impersonal affective process that shatters Petra's narcissistic control and composure and renders her increasingly vulnerable to the inner sickness that culminates in act 4). In the above example, two divergent circuits or planes operate simultaneously: an experience of narcissistic inwardness (at the molar plane of narrative and psychological considerations) and an instance of the film's self-affection in a subjectless sense (at the molecular plane). *Petra von Kant* is thus constantly poised between a centripetal force that makes the film an excessively closed, and excessively subjective, system and a centrifugal force that renders it open to a process of desubjectification.<sup>26</sup> The film instantiates Deleuze's description of the shot as having "one face turned toward the set and another face turned toward the whole, of which it expresses a change" (Deleuze 1986: 19).

While the intrusion of the whole/open into the closed system of narrative certainties undoubtedly precipitates a moment of radical crisis in the film, it also brings forth a kind of cure or repose that alters Petra's affective relations with others. Paradoxically, then, the same event that triggers Petra's disintegration by forcing upon her a merciless self-confrontation may also be seen as a saving or loving grace that rescues Petra from herself. To put it in a different way, cruelty in this film is a saving force, hence possibly another name for love.

### *Cruelty as love*

Among the various emotional states explored in *Petra von Kant*, cruelty seems paramount. In act 2, the discourse of cruelty revolves around the idea of discipline, whereas in act 3, cruelty is aligned with the sadistic behavior of the uncaring lover, in this case personified by Karin. But it is in act 4 where the discourse of cruelty becomes a performance of cruelty in the Artaudian sense. At this point, the film takes a leap away from the strictly narrativized and subjectified instances of cruelty in order to

employ cruelty as the catalyst that precipitates Petra's, and ideally the audience's, affective release. While Petra's drunken expressions of sickness and disgust undoubtedly violate the sense of decorum and the cultural expectations of her diegetic audience, the film avails itself of such aggressive gestures to express its own assaulting intentions towards its audience. Thus the film takes Petra and Karin's cruelty towards each other – a subjective, impure cruelty – and converts it into a subjectless/objectless, pure cruelty.

It is important to remember that for Artaud, cruelty consists more of an ethical attitude than a literal physical action. Accordingly, the body targeted in the film is not any particular body, but a more abstract idea of the way we generally live in our bodies. Be that as it may, the violence required to combat the body's numbed condition may range from the symbolic fragmentation and isolation of body parts to something Féral calls a “fully accepted lesionism” (Féral 1982: 171) – the tendency to accentuate the wounded and diminished state of the body by inflicting further wounds or lacerations upon it. An instance of such literal lesionism occurs in act 4 of *Petra von Kant* when Petra crushes her glass of gin in her own hand upon hearing Sidonie's name announced by her daughter Gaby.<sup>27</sup>

The kind of cruelty Artaud envisions for his theatre undoes the hierarchies that tend to structure human relations, for it is equally leveled at all subjects regardless of their power positions: “In the practice of cruelty there is a kind of higher determinism, *to which the executioner-tormenter himself is subjected and which he must be determined to endure when the time comes*” (Artaud 1958: 102, my emphasis). In this regard, Petra is quite precisely Artaud's “executioner-tormenter.” If she acts as Marlene's tormenter for most of the film's duration, she also becomes Karin's, and mostly her own, victim during the film's third and fourth climactic acts. The moment of repose that features her with her mother at the beginning of act 5 shows the outcome of Artaudian cruelty: lucidity, submission to necessity, and the application of consciousness. This particular scene may be read as an awakening from a state where the body's passive affections (the constant wavering between sadistic and masochistic positions) had Petra formerly bound to unconsciousness. By taking Petra to a radical state of self-aggression and destruction, the film has reached the limits of the representable, transforming Petra's, and our own, passive affections into active ones.

In act 3, to Petra's accusations of cruelty, Karin responds, “I'm not cruel. I'm honest, Petra.”<sup>28</sup> Such is the double-sided nature of cruelty, which can be perceived as furthering an unwelcome disintegration of the self or, alternately, as the deterritorializing force capable of interrupting



the delusions that impede the body's expansion outside its rigid narcissistic boundaries. From this angle, cruelty is the ethical attitude that allows performance and performer to become vehicles of honesty and love. As Patrick Fuery has suggested, the theatre of cruelty reveals a double circuit of power: power over the audience, but also the desire to show the audience its own power (Fuery 2002: 223). While the former gesture alone would be akin to torture, the latter can render cruelty an act of love. Fassbinder's desire to empower the audience – his trust in the audience's capacity to think and feel – may be seen as such an act of love. The aim for Fassbinder, as for Artaud, is to allow the viewer to experience a dislocation that might break with "the placid and moribund situation" (Fuery 2002: 223) of mainstream drama/film, mainstream culture, and mainstream thinking/feeling. Only when feeling ceases to be mere cliché, and instead becomes disorganizing and even biting, can it unleash its violent, and paradoxically healing, powers. For Artaud, and no doubt for Fassbinder as well, "a kind of tangible laceration [is] contained in all true feeling," and it is the task of theatre to inflict such laceration "on the heart and [on the] senses" (Artaud 1958: 65).

"Humans," Fassbinder once said, "do not run freely through fields, but instead move within boundaries" (Fassbinder in Steinborn and Maso 1982: 22). Such a paradox of movement-in-confinement succinctly invokes the inevitable partnership between the singular and heterogeneous modes of existence available to the particular body (in a Deleuzian, Artaudian sense) and the social impositions limiting such heterogeneity (in a Brechtian sense). As I have tried to show in this chapter, the performing body in Fassbinder's work cannot be exhausted by a Brechtian reading alone, for it seems to stand and move at the juncture between the fetishistic control waged by the social contract and the ontological dissemination that enables it to find unique ways of embodying and transforming the affect generated by such control. Thus, a performance as rigorously Brechtian as that featured in Fassbinder's films can, at the same time, produce an intensely physical and densely textured affect. This is exactly Deleuze's position when he writes that "the gest is necessarily social and political, following Brecht's requirements, but it is necessarily something different as well . . . It is bio-vital, metaphysical and aesthetic" (Deleuze 1989: 194). Whether the marriage of history and affect propounded by Fassbinder may be seen as a logical extension of Brecht's own subversive politics, or as a much-needed correction to his subordination of the affective to the social, Fassbinder's cinema no doubt shows that social and individual bodies, conscious and unconscious gestures, have a way of mirroring, provoking, and touching each other.

## Notes

1. As Robert Kolker and others have noted, this moment in *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* echoes a scene in Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) when Cary's (Jane Wyman) children give their widowed mother a TV set as a Christmas present to substitute for her passionate affair with Ron (Rock Hudson), the lower-class man they disapprove of. In Sirk's film, the affect is most intensely felt as we see an image of Cary reflected on, and literally swallowed by, the TV frame, as if Cary had been buried within the TV like the entombed widow of ancient Egypt she identifies with earlier in the film. Compared with the subtler form violence takes in Sirk's film, Emmi's son in *Ali* erupts in a far more aggressive way. Yet, here, mother and TV are also interchangeable: Bruno hits the TV in lieu of hitting his mother.
2. Considered from the point of view of the spectator's experience, affect seems to belong in the liminal zone between conscious and unconscious. The peculiar nature of affect may precisely consist in its bringing to consciousness the viewer's unconscious emotions or drives. In her discussion of the legacy of Artaud's theatre, Helga Finter repeatedly alludes to this peculiar capacity of affect. Through the affective engagement in the performance,

the spectator could become physically aware . . . of his potential . . . for *Mordlust* [the desire to murder], not rejecting this sensation but rather letting it penetrate into his or her consciousness so that he or she could become aware of the estranged Other *within*. (Finter 1997: 36)

Additionally, Finter refers to a feature of affect that I also see at work in Fassbinder's cinema – affect as an experience based on an individualized address. In Finter's words, countering communal impulses, which normally seek to exclude the heterogeneous, “cruelty . . . was to be transformed into an experience in and for each individual” (Finter 1997: 36).

3. In an early essay on Fassbinder's cinema titled “A Cinema of Vicious Circles,” Elsaesser presents a slightly different argument vis-à-vis the relationship between identification/distanciation and affect in these films. He thus contends that in Fassbinder, “the directness of the emotional assault is mediated via the mechanics of identification and distanciation” (Elsaesser 1980: 28).
4. As Artaud himself is quick to point out, the cruelty his theatre advocates is not one of blood or physical torture, but rather one where the body, no less than the mind, becomes exposed to certain truths whose disclosure is disturbing and unwelcome. He writes:

“*Theater of cruelty*” means a theater difficult and cruel for myself first of all. And, on the level of performance, it is not the cruelty we can exercise upon each other by hacking at each other's bodies . . . but the much more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us. We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us that first of all. (Artaud 1958: 79)

In this sense, both Fassbinder films discussed in this chapter exhibit Artaud's notion of "cruelty" in an almost literal way. Whether as a historical trajectory that is bent on progress yet leads to self-annihilation, in the case of *Maria Braun*, or as an affective process that reveals the fragile supports of the self, in the case of *Petra von Kant*, both films display highly ironic and cruel endings.

5. In addition to displaying Artaudian qualities in his work, Fassbinder rendered explicit homage to Artaud in his 1981 film *Theater in Trance*. This documentary film on the Cologne theatre festival featured various dance and theatrical performances, and its screenplay incorporated texts from Artaud's *The Theater and Its Double* (Watson 1996: 301).
6. In his *Second Manifesto* for the theatre of cruelty, Artaud writes that "the Theater of Cruelty will choose subjects and themes corresponding to the agitation and unrest characteristic of our epoch" (Artaud 1958: 122). However, unlike Brecht, who believes in the historical specificity of social events and ideological values, Artaud's thematic preferences lie in the adaptation of "great preoccupations and great essential passions" whose scope is "cosmic and universal" rather than historically specific (Artaud 1958: 123). Artaud's themes rely less on history than on myth: "These gods or heroes, these monsters, these natural and cosmic forces will be interpreted according to images from the most ancient sacred texts and old cosmogonies" (Artaud 1958: 123).
7. For Elizabeth Wright,

the critical potential within the works of Brecht and Artaud . . . challenges those very polarizations . . . Brecht's theatre reveals the discordance in the body, because by means of his *gestus* he shows that the body's gestures always include its relations to other bodies; like Artaud's theatre Brecht dwells on the violence done to the body by the inscription of the Law. In neither case may the body present itself as complete in itself, but what identity it has comes from the system which has given it its place in a code of social relations. (Wright 1989: 17)

8. The film opens with Maria and Hermann Braun pronouncing their marriage vows in the midst of an air-raid attack. After the couple spend one night and one day together, Hermann is drafted. When Willi, Maria's brother-in-law, returns from the warfront, he declares Hermann dead. For a brief period, Maria lives her own life, works as a bartender in an American bar off-limits to the Germans, and begins a relationship with Bill, a black American soldier. One day, as Bill and Maria begin to make love, Hermann reappears, suddenly reigniting Maria's imaginary attachment to him. While Bill and Hermann fight, Maria grabs a bottle and, hitting Bill over the head, kills him. Hermann takes responsibility for the murder and goes to jail. In the years that follow, Maria waits for Hermann while focusing most determinedly on building an economic future for Hermann and herself. Gradually fulfilling her financial goals, she becomes secretary and lover to Oswald, a mild-tempered Swiss businessman who dotes on her. Cognizant of the terminal illness that afflicts him, Oswald signs a financial contract with Hermann (still in prison) that allows

him to enjoy Maria's sexual partnership for the remainder of his life. Upon finishing his jail term, Hermann absents himself until Oswald's death. On the day of Hermann's return, as Oswald's will is disclosed, Maria learns about the contract signed by Oswald and her husband. Dislocated by the news, she lights a cigarette on the stove and forgets to switch the gas off. A little while later, as she prepares to light another cigarette, she provokes an explosion that presumably kills both her and her husband. The explosion is accompanied by loud proclamations of Germany's victory in the world soccer cup coming out of a radio. This is followed by a series of portraits of Germany's chancellors, from Konrad Adenauer to Helmut Schmidt, which provide a strong sense of continuity between the Hitler era/portrait that opens the film and the consecutive moments in Germany's political and ideological history.

9. For a different account of the performative body in *Maria Braun*, see Johannes von Moltke's "Camping in the Art Closet: The Politics of Camp and Nation in German Film" (von Moltke 1994). von Moltke reads Hanna Schygulla's performance as an instance of Butler's notion of the gender performative. von Moltke argues that the excess in Schygulla's filmic presence "cannot be fully integrated into the national meanings represented by her role as allegorical image, but [it] lies instead in the more intractable histrionics of her performance" (1994: 98). Whereas my argument associates the "intractable histrionics" of Schygulla's performance with the Artaudian tradition of the affective body, von Moltke defines the surplus of theatricality in Schygulla's performance as a function of the film's "campy" aesthetics. Whereas von Moltke's argument sees this campy dimension as overriding the Brechtian sense of distanciation ("Rather than estranging the actor's screen presence in the Brechtian sense, it reinforces the theatricality of performance"; von Moltke 1994: 99), I regard the film's excessive theatricality as productive of both analytical distanciation and affective shock.
10. In privileging the sound over the intellectual or representational dimension of the sentence, I draw from Elsaesser's notion of the voice as melodic materiality in melodrama (Elsaesser 1987: 51). I am also indebted to Finter's analysis of the importance of the bodily aspects of the voice in Artaud's theatre. According to Finter, the task for Artaud became "one of discovering a voice – beyond the prompted rhetoric of the role – that would retain traces of . . . corporeal reality" (Finter 1997: 21). "The timbre of the actor's voice . . . speaks of a reality . . . of the actor as a desiring being and of the relationship of the actor to his or her own body" (Finter 1997: 22). For more on the affective-performative aspects of the voice, see my analysis of Potter's *Thriller* in Chapter 3.
11. Catherine Dale's comments on Artaud's notion of cruelty as a force that makes us move resonate rather powerfully with this moment in *Maria Braun*:

Artaud's theatre of cruelty . . . highlights words as objects of cruelty and direction . . . cruelty makes us move, it wakes up the heart and nerves and tests our

vitality in order to confront us with our potential . . . to force us into combat with our chaos. (Dale 2002: 92)

12. In her account of female kinesics, Young writes: "The woman's motion tends not to reach, extend, lean, stretch, and follow through in the direction of her intention" (1989: 56); Young continues,

for many women as they move in sport, a space surrounds them in imagination which [they] are not free to move beyond; the space available to [their] movement is a constricted space . . . women tend to wait for [the ball] and then *react* to its approach rather than going forth to meet it. (Young 1989: 57)

13. Bert States, for example, suggests that

framing and performance are, at the very least, overlapping, if not coterminous principles. Framing is simply the way in which the art work sets itself up, or is set up, to be performed, in [the] sense of offering a sensuous presentation to the spectator and in [the] sense of producing an interaction between itself and an auditor. (States 1996: 19)

14. In "Notes on Gesture," Agamben expands the scope and import of gestural-ity from a textual and aesthetic levels to the level of an entire society's relation with its gestures. Agamben describes a cultural moment characterized by the "Tourette syndrome," "a generalized catastrophe of the gestural sphere" (Agamben 1993: 136). Paraphrasing Agamben, Jodi Brooks explains that the gestures and movements indicative of this gestural collapse figure as "dislocated fragments which are involuntarily repeated and interrupted" (Brooks 1999: 78–9). This description is sufficiently evocative of *Maria Braun's* performative patterns. But Agamben's discussion of the social dimension of individual bodily signs provides yet another connection between the gestural practice of a modernity in crisis and Fassbinder's choreographies. Agamben notes that "in the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures seeks to reappropriate what it has lost while simultaneously recording that loss" (Agamben 1993: 137). Agamben's comments are fully incorporated into Fassbinder's intentions "to give the German people a supplement to their own history" (Fassbinder in Kaes 1989: 81). If Maria is denied an awareness of the cultural straitjacketing that restricts her movements, the film itself – as a self-conscious rendition of gesture and movement – exceeds the bounds of realistic representation, casting itself as a hysterical body engaged in the simultaneous act of recording and reappropriating Germany's traumatic past and compulsory movement forward.
15. Benjamin's account of the gestural practice of Franz Kafka's characters is extremely pertinent to the double movement of forgetting and remembering that defines *Maria Braun's* performative process as well. Paraphrasing Benjamin, Jodi Brooks writes that in Kafka,

the gesture stands as a site of a forgetting: the meaning of a gesture is barely known by a character who undertakes and carries it out, and this forgotten meaning weighs his characters down. But if gestures are the site of a forgetting, it is for this very reason that they are also . . . the site on which the forgotten is to be remembered. (Brooks 1999: 85)

While Kafka's characters are weighed down by their forgetting of the meaning of their own gestures, in Maria's case, the protracted separation of the body from consciousness and memory culminates in physical death.

16. The passage from theatre to performance also involves a shift from a politics oriented towards social action to a micropolitics of the affections. At the outset, such micropolitics of singular bodily events seems like a much less ambitious project. Yet, as Deleuze and Guattari and Artaud showed, this kind of politics can gain in intensity what it loses in social or geographical scope.
17. In his illuminating study of Fassbinder's cinema, Elsaesser sporadically draws attention to certain Deleuzian aspects of Fassbinder's work. Throughout his discussion of *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* (1978), for example, Elsaesser makes a number of implicit and explicit references to both Deleuze and Artaud. Elsaesser refers to Fassbinder's cinema as "a world of immanence without transcendence where hierarchies are inverted" (Elsaesser 1996: 203). He posits the body in Fassbinder as "ultimately unrepresentable" (Elsaesser 1996: 214), and he describes Erwin/Elvira's (Volker Spengler) body as a body that "in its very indeterminacy becomes a kind of 'theatre of cruelty'" (Elsaesser 1996: 203).
18. Fassbinder played with the *Kammerspiel* genre again in his 1974 film *Fontane Effi Briest*, which is based on Theodore Fontane's novel, and, as Elsaesser explains, "reinterpet[s] the realistic tradition of German literature as an entry-point to German social history" (Elsaesser 1996: 287).
19. In an essay on *Petra von Kant* titled "Fassbinder's Debt to Poussin," Lynne Kirby points out the relevance of Deleuze's analysis of bodies and language in Pierre Klossowski's literary works to Fassbinder's film (Kirby 1985–6). My own analysis of *Petra von Kant*'s synchronized performativity through body and language owes a great deal to Kirby's reference. But, instead of taking Kirby's representational approach, a performative emphasis allows me to extend Deleuze's remarks further into the film. *Petra von Kant* resembles the predicament of the characters in Klossowski's novel *Le Souffleur*, which, as Deleuze has noted, brings to light the "complicity of sight with speech" in their shared function as doubling and dividing vehicles: "The function of sight consists in doubling, dividing, and multiplying . . . Language is itself the ultimate double, which expresses all doubles – the highest of simulacra" (Deleuze 1990: 283–4). The question Deleuze asks regarding the relations between speech and the gaze in this novel may be equally pertinent to *Petra von Kant*: "What can one do, vis-à-vis doubles, simulacra, or reflections, other than speak?" (Deleuze 1990: 284). What can one do in the film's tightly framed space of performance other than speak? Here, as well, spatial claustrophobia and its attendant proliferation of

simulacra are linked to a discursive proliferation that borders on the compulsive.

20. Being of an intensive, rather than extensive, nature, affect saturates both the visible and audible qualities of the image. Except for my earlier remarks on the affective qualities of Petra's speech and voice, the links between affect and sound in this film lie beyond the scope of my analysis. It is evident, however, that *Petra von Kant* utilizes sound – alongside with camera, framing, and faciality – to impart its sense of the continuous thread of duration and affect that brings the presence of the whole into the closed system of the shot. Words and their specific cadences, intonations, and pronunciations, but also the rustling sound of clothes as the body walks, the sound of white noise that resonates in empty air, and the several pieces of diegetic or extradiegetic music played throughout – all of these have the ability to invoke a presence that hovers above or lurks outside the frame while at the same time inflecting the expressive possibilities of the bodies that perform within it.
21. My reading of the Poussin painting as opening the set rather than predetermining its possibilities notably differs from most scholars' understanding of its function in the film. It is no coincidence that the most favored reading of the Poussin painting has focused on the gender positionings of the figures both inside and in front of the painting, and that, although these positionings have been found to be rather ambiguous, they do not escape the general binary organization of gender as a system (as shown by the general emphasis on the phallogentric connotations of Dionysus, the painting's central figure). Looking at the painting through the lens of a fixed system of meaning such as gender cannot but affect the way the framing capacities of the painting are also assessed: the frame thus appears as determining and constrictive rather than mobile and multiplicitous. In my view, the modifying/affecting effects of the Poussin reproduction upon the performing bodies around it also extend to the deterritorialized/disorganized sexuality of both the figures in the painting and the surrounding bodies. The absence of a stable system of meaning in *Petra von Kant*, be it in relation to psychology or gender, is also linked to the difficulty in situating the film's politics along a simple and stable binary line, a point most scholars agree on.
22. Time and again in Fassbinder's films, the relationship between physical bodies and painted or photographed bodies is disengaged from a hierarchical distinction between the real/physical and the represented. An example from his early films, for instance, might be the gigantic poster of a blonde woman's face covering the wall of Franz and Margarethe's bedroom in *Gods of the Plague*. Rather than having the photographic image represent the live one, the animated face of Margarethe von Trotta, who plays the role of Franz's provisional girlfriend in the film, and the close-up face in the poster may be said to perform each other, neither one serving as the original or model for the other (on this point I disagree with psychoanalytic critics who, following a Lacanian, representational model, ascribe a more determining function to what they call

the external or doubly representational image than to the physical one). Fassbinder's lack of interest in representing the real, as shown in his handling of bodies in these examples, clearly follows a Deleuzian/Nietzschean stance. For him, too, "the real is not representable because it does not preexist its emergence or production, its becoming" (Canning 2000: 335). In other words, the real only emerges as a creative, performative process.

23. The prolonged closing moments of act 4 perform what Williams refers to as the "concentrated summing up of and punctuation for the tensions of the whole act" (Williams 1998: 66). In her essay "Melodrama Revised," Williams discusses the importance of the tableau in creating the "aesthetics of astonishment" that attend the melodramatic mode of storytelling:

In the stage tableau, the actors would move into a held "picture," sometimes self-consciously *imitating* existing paintings or engravings, sometimes striking conventional poses of grief, anger, threat, and so on. The tableau was used theatrically as a silent, bodily expression of what words could not fully say. It was also a way of crystallizing the dramatic tensions within a scene and of musically prolonging their emotional effects. (Williams 1998: 66–7, my emphasis)

While Williams here emphasizes the tableau's imitative function, Fassbinder's films seem to foreground the tableau's expressive dimension of force. Affective resonance thus prevails over formal analogy.

24. In the constricted space of the film, the phone becomes an important nexus for establishing relations with the outside that hinge on two different means of communication. In his theoretical account of the affection-image, Deleuze distinguishes between "means of communication-translation" and "means of communication-expression." As examples of the former, he cites those transportation devices – boat, car, train, aeroplane – that enable a conquest of space and time. On the other hand, means of "communication-expression" (letters, telephone, radio, gramophones, and cinematographs) "summon up phantoms on our route and turn us off course toward affects which are uncoordinated, outside co-ordinates" (Deleuze 1986: 100). Both these means of communication play a substantive role in *Petra von Kant*, but it is clear that while Karin is consistently aligned with means of translation/travel (her past in Australia, her unlocatability for much of the film, her ride to the airport with Marlene in Petra's car, her use of the phone merely to talk dispassionately to her husband, Freddy, or to make flight reservations through Petra), Petra is rather more involved with media of expression-affection (the letters she writes to or receives from others, her obvious attachment to the record-player, and her emotional reliance on the phone, not to mention her reliance on mirrors).
25. The two-headed, anomalous body formed by Petra and Karin may also point to the bifurcation of desire into the poles of sadism and masochism that Petra and Karin are seen to occupy as the following act unfolds. Instances of composite bodies such as are found in some of the films I discuss in this book (multiform and multiple in *Petra von Kant* and *Mulholland Drive*, more restrained in



- The Tango Lesson*) evoke the Spinozist/Deleuzian idea of bodies forming alliances with each other in the interest of composing a more powerful body.
26. The subjectless self-affection *Petra von Kant* works its way towards is what Deleuze has in mind when he mentions the New German Cinema of the 1970s and 1980s as the prototypical cinema of fear (of fear), a cinema where the void “affect[s] surviving faces with a single and identical fear” (Deleuze 1986: 101). Describing the affection-image in the same section, Deleuze notes that, “[t]he affection-image . . . has as its limit the simple affect of fear . . . But as its substance it has the compound affect of desire and astonishment – which gives it life – and the turning aside of faces in the open, in the flesh” (Deleuze 1986: 101). Deleuze’s reference to “the turning aside of faces in the open” powerfully evokes the affective dynamics of the scene I just discussed as well as of the entire film.
  27. Scenes that feature characters crushing or smashing a glass either by wounding their own hands or by throwing it at a nearby wall, mirror, or person are numerous in Fassbinder’s work, and can be found in films such as *The American Soldier* (1970), *Beware of a Holy Whore* (1970), and *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1973).
  28. In this instance, Schygulla speaks virtually the same words of her character Anna in *The Merchant of Four Seasons* (1972) in a scene where she blames her own hypocritical mother and relatives for despising her brother Hans’s occupation as a street fruit vendor: “I’m not aggressive, I’m just frank.”

## CHAPTER 3

# Dancing Feminisms

Asking people to take pleasure in their own bodies puts them in fear more than anything else.

Hanna Wilke, interviewed in *New Musical Express*

I can only imagine peopled things, not necessarily “inhabited” but certainly, animated. Things, whether subjects or objects, with intentions, although not necessarily clear ones. I fear fears without memory, sadness without wounds, ideas like lost souls without bodies and finally . . . I fear bodies colonized by words.

Marta Savigliano, “Fragments for a Story of Tango Bodies”

Feminist film theory of the 1970s and 1980s was marked by a deep suspicion of the female body as source of aesthetic and erotic pleasure. Inspired by Mulvey’s seminal analysis of the unconscious structures that govern the relations of visual/spectatorial pleasure and gender in classical narrative cinema, feminist theorists strove to restore to women those aspects of subjectivity that the patriarchy had historically suppressed. If patriarchal interests had rendered woman a speechless and thoughtless body, reclaiming her capacity to engage in a rigorous analysis of her predicament would become the foremost objective of a feminist critical agenda. Not surprisingly, feminist film theory was initially heavily drawn to the theoretical models furnished by semiotics and psychoanalysis. In both these models, the body is not so much a material entity in itself as it is a written and spoken sign. The notion of the body as linguistic or symbolic sign accorded well with the feminist efforts to revalorize woman’s speech and to promote her integration within symbolic social and cultural systems. Born of urgent necessity, this analytical stress did not foresee the new imbalance it would foster, as it would relegate the sensual and affective aspects of female embodiment to a practically irrelevant status.

Indeed, in their strategic erasure of the body, feminist film critics did not sufficiently account for the difference between the fetishized body (the product of a specific form of patriarchal representation) and the body’s necessary involvement in countless processes of change and modification. As I argued earlier in this book, whereas the fetishized body is construed

as a static and fixed form, the body in process never achieves a final state of formal unity. In Chapter 1, I used the notion of the “animated fetish” to show that even the most patriarchally organized of female bodies may give rise to performative moments of deformation that offset the effects of a fetishistic mode of representation. This chapter turns away from the female body of classical narrative cinema to look at the avant-garde/independent work of British filmmaker Sally Potter as a cinematic rendering of feminist film theory – a theory that, much like the body itself, is involved in a process of unfinished becoming. I look at Potter’s *Thriller* (1979) and *The Tango Lesson* (1997) through the lens of two philosophical accounts of the body: Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological notion of the lived-body and a Deleuzian/Spinozist bodily ethics that emphasizes the body’s powers of affection. Making a strategic use of these philosophical contributions, my aim is to explore the ways in which affective–performative concerns may be of relevance to the changing landscape and interests of feminist film theory.

Both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze are interested in surpassing deterministic notions of the body as fully coerced by the operations of cultural and social systems. The lived-body of phenomenology enables a reading of the female body (or indeed, any body) as engaged in possibilities of action and meaning in addition to, or in place of, those stipulated by culture. Thus, as the site of an “excessive, mobile, and ‘wild’ signification” (Sobchack 1992: 144), the phenomenological lived-body has much to offer to a feminist perspective interested in extricating the female body from phallogentric constraints. As Sobchack argues, although the particular lived-body is always known to us as a limited set of discriminating categories (male/female, white/black, old/young), it simultaneously resists a totalizing reduction to these homogenizing binaries. If the particular body has the potential to perform “in excess of the historical and analytical systems available to codify, contain, and even negate it” (Sobchack 1992: 147), it means that the particular female body is always more than just the fetishized construct of the male gaze.

In a similar way, as I also explained in Chapter 1, Deleuze’s consideration of the molar and molecular planes addresses the double status of the body as both normative structure and excessive, destabilizing intensity. Grosz’s account of the functions proper to each of these planes bears a striking resemblance to Sobchack’s phenomenological position on the lived-body’s excessive possibilities: “If *molar unities*, like the divisions of classes, races, and sexes, attempt to form and stabilize identities, fixities . . . sealing in their energies and intensities, *molecular becomings* traverse, create a path, destabilize, enable energy seepage within and through these molar unities”

(Grosz 1994a: 203, my emphasis). Thus, for Deleuze, the territorialization of the body, its exhaustive classification and disciplinary regimentation, never happens without the concurrent deterritorializing effects of a web of vital and invisible forces that continually traverse the body.

But however similar in some notable respects, the above accounts of the body's fluctuation between normativity and excess depend on different models of the body, which in turn might suggest different, and perhaps complementary, possibilities of action/intervention available to a politically engaged feminism. Thus, the phenomenological concept of the lived-body rests on the assumption of an ideal coincidence between the body and the world via the common bond of the flesh. Deleuze rejects this coincidence – and the subject/object paradigm it still maintains – in favor of an intensive, non-individuated body. As Grosz explains, Deleuze does not conceive the body “as a block, entity, object, or subject, an organized and integrated being” (Grosz 1994a: 203), but rather as a disorganizing force or intensity operating at a microlevel of molecular processes. While phenomenology largely operates within the realm of subjectivity – a subjectivity reconciled with its opposite pole, objectivity – Deleuze's transcendental empiricism operates in a desubjectified field of forces. While for Merleau-Ponty movement and affect are subjective phenomena arising out of an intentional and individuated rapport with the world, Deleuze regards the kinetic and the affective as material flows whose individuation and exchange do not rest upon subjectified intentions, but rather upon the workings of a non-organic, anonymous vitality.

Deleuze distinguishes two forms of political action: a *molar* politics that works at the level of the binaries and macrostructures of social systems, and a *molecular* micropolitics of desire that takes place outside or beyond the fixity of subjectivity and the structure of stable unities. While at the molar level, political action requires the maintenance of subjectivity, together with its organizing and signifying supports, operations at the molecular level can have political effects without the mediation of subjective intentionality or agency.<sup>1</sup> The flows, speeds, and intensities affecting minuscule particles may “cross and impregnate an entire social field” (Grosz 1994: 206).

A Deleuzian model of the body as an impersonal flow of forces may arguably fall short of meeting the political needs of a feminist position that still finds it necessary to differentiate between the sexes, and to maintain a distinct notion of female subjectivity as individuated molar identity. On the other hand, as suggested by the work of feminist scholars such as Grosz herself, Olkowski, Rosi Braidotti, Claire Colebrook, Moira Gatens, and others, the latest stages in the evolution of feminism itself do suggest the possibility of a productive alliance between the aims and struggles of

feminism and a Deleuzian emphasis on the destabilization of molar, majoritarian identities through such concepts as the body without organs and becoming-woman.<sup>2</sup> Given these different strategic needs, the kind of militant feminism practiced in the 1970s, and informing the gender dynamics and textual operations of Potter's *Thriller*, is no doubt far better served by a *molar* political practice reacting against blatant conditions of oppression in the context of visible social or signifying structures. Accordingly, my analysis of *Thriller* is more heavily indebted to the notion of embodied subjectivity supplied by a feminist phenomenological model. On the other hand, the affective-performative encounters between male and female bodies figured in *The Tango Lesson* generate a less rigid, albeit equally combative gender dynamics that befits the practice of a molecular politics at the level of the affections. My discussion of *The Tango Lesson* will thus experiment with the possibility of a feminist perspective that can fluidly transition from the subjectively centered philosophy of embodied consciousness put forth by phenomenology to a more impersonal, Deleuzian paradigm where the (female) subject acts as the catalyst of vital forces that have a far-reaching expressive and transformative potential.

But, despite these philosophical differences, my accounts of both these films will underscore the importance, within feminist debates, of stressing the body's powers of relation and affection, whether these powers are referred to phenomenological ideas on reciprocity/reversibility between subject and object, or whether they are derived from the intense connectivity among bodies that characterizes a Spinozist/Deleuzian affective body. No matter the gender of the bodies concerned, or the combination thereof, the body only exists in relation, which is to say in performance. Prior to relation, the body is nothing but an ideal abstraction, indeed a series of terms drawn out of a set of binary linguistic categories. It is precisely through relation/relationality that bodies become excessive with regard to binary codifications and their mimetic repetition. The provisional and shifting status of the body's relation-ability always incorporates a performative dimension that, in each new encounter, brings forth unsuspected connections and becomings. Thus, each time bodies come together, they try out their powers of affection on each other. As a body relates to another body, it acts out its capacity to affect, and be affected by, the other body.

Such powers of relation and affection, I would argue, are more tentatively tapped in *Thriller* than they are in *The Tango Lesson*, mainly because the earlier film's inevitably defensive stance against phallogentrism does not leave much room for the possibility of a creative relationality between male and female. Insofar as *Thriller* looks upon the death of woman in the

patriarchal master narrative as the direct outcome of a blindly narcissistic masculinity, this film can only conceive of gender relations as antagonistic. But even within this rigid schema, *Thriller* remains a film thoroughly invested in creating body images that surpass the ordinary possibilities and normal conditions of the body, thereby establishing an affective dialogue, if not between male and female bodies, at least between the female bodies themselves (not to mention the affective links between the film's body and the viewer's body). In *The Tango Lesson*, the bodily rigidity affecting the earlier film, and subsequently revisited in *The Tango Lesson*'s own intradiegetic film *Rage*, is released into a more expressive and direct performative mode. *The Tango Lesson* renounces the privilege of critical distancing to enact the possibility of the female dancer's bodily proximity with the male as a far riskier, yet altogether more pleasurable experience for the female body. In the gap between the two films, one can literally discern feminism's ability to dance out its own becoming, from a committed opposition to narcissism to the acknowledgement of narcissism as, paradoxically, the unavoidable step in the way to the undoing of identity's boundaries.

### *Thriller*: counter-narcissistic performance

Potter's 34-minute film *Thriller* is an outstanding example of the tendency of the first feminisms applied to film and cultural studies to oppose the objectification of the female body by curtailing the latter's narcissistic and exhibitionistic tendencies. *Thriller*'s case is remarkable because Potter, a trained dancer herself,<sup>3</sup> uses the medium of dance, classically identified with self-expression, to enact a disciplinary discourse of the body that strictly limits the range and fluidity of its gestural and kinetic expressions. But, paradoxically, the stasis of the body here is so extreme as to attract the viewer's attention toward its austere and naked gestures. Fueled by this paradox, my analysis of *Thriller* will discuss the film's ambiguous relation to a feminist politics grounded in the body, as opposed to one that relies primarily upon speech and other symbolic systems.<sup>4</sup> I would like to pursue this question specifically by examining *Thriller*'s relation to a melodramatic (and operatic) aesthetics of the body. This complementary question will focus not only on the contestatory dialogue the film establishes with the inherently melodramatic opera medium, but also on the hyperbolic strategies *Thriller*'s own avant-garde aesthetics shares with the genre of the melodrama.

In *Thriller*, the woman-object – alternate prey to male idealization and murder – engages in a process of interrogation whereby she becomes the subject who rewrites and reauthorizes her story. The film uses Giacomo

Puccini's opera *La Bohème* (1830) as a representative instance of the unconscious narrative ploy that establishes the undoing of woman as a prerequisite to male narcissistic fulfillment. In *La Bohème*, Mimi, a young, beautiful, and poor seamstress, falls in love with the young poet Rodolfo, who shares his living quarters with Marcello, a painter. When the cold winter and the long working hours bring on Mimi's illness, Rodolfo abandons her because he cannot bear to see her ill. Eventually Mimi, the "good girl," dies, while Musetta, the "bad girl" who, as a dancer, revels in the display of her body, is allowed to live. The story achieves closure through the tragic pathos furnished by the death of beauty and innocence identified with Mimi. As stated by Colette Laffont, the actor/dancer who investigates Mimi's death from the confines of a barren attic, the woman's demise "serves [the men's] desire to become heroes in the display of their grief."

*"Redefining melodrama for our times"*

*Thriller* alternates stills from a performance of Puccini's opera with further stills – and a few moving images – of a barely furnished room where a couple of female actors/dancers (Laffont and Rose English) and a couple of male actors/dancers (Tony Gacon and Vincent Mechant) perform a formal and ideological deconstruction of the operatic text. To stage its own version of the male-orchestrated master narrative, the film relies on the figure of the double – the mirror image as basic metaphor of identification/recognition. The specular double, however, does not fully coincide with the original, but, instead, yields a distorted, albeit truer, version of the issues examined. *Thriller's* method of investigation is epitomized by a close-up appearing early in the film and reinserted numerous times throughout. I am referring to the split close-up of Laffont's face and its mirror reflection. In a diagonal composition with a fairly distorted perspective, we see Laffont's right jaw, the right side of her neck and right ear in an almost upside-down position occupying the left-hand side of the screen, with the mirror reflection of her right eye in the utmost lower right-hand side of the screen, hardly fitting inside the frame. Not only does the reflected part – her eye – not coincide with the parts of her head and face shown in front of the mirror, but, together with the distortion, the doubling also generates a revelation or illumination – the ability to see – as indicated by the one eye looking back at Laffont from the reflected surface. The idea of discovery through reflection is invoked by Laffont's words regarding her own investigating role as well: "Is the reason for the murder to be found in a reflection? Sitting in front of the mirror, she waits for a clue." Henceforward, every aspect of the master narrative rewritten in the film follows the same distorting specularity – for every space reminiscent of

patriarchal, bourgeois representation, there is another space that subverts the principles of the dominant *mise-en-scène*; for every sound that sings the inevitability of woman's role as romantic partner and tragic victim, there is another sound that derides that scripted fate; for every gesture of the body performed as the naturalization of fetishism, there is another gesture that freezes the flow of movement and suspends the very idea of the natural body; for every woman, there is another woman who acts as both her mirror image and her other.

Each of the above-mentioned instances of distortion opens up a space where the master narrative may be reassessed through a distanced, querying gaze. Such distanciation is, in fact, similar in its mechanisms and effects to the Brechtian transformation of pathos and sentimentality applied to countless melodramatic moments in films by Sirk and Fassbinder. But, in their own different ways, neither Sirk's and Fassbinder's films nor *Thriller* mobilize distanciation effects at the expense of affective force. As is the case in these films, *Thriller* also uses the melodrama as its raw material, combining analytical and affective effects to varying degrees. Interestingly, the film's avant-gardism springs not from a total dismissal of melodramatic pathos, but, instead, from a self-conscious desire to re-evaluate the ideological interests that give rise to pathos in the patriarchal model. By exposing the ideological interests of patriarchal pathos, the film can then redefine the notion of pathos from a perspective that takes into account the woman's position. The avant-garde body thus acts out, and brings to consciousness, the meanings repressed in the hysterical body of the melodrama. The various examples from *Thriller* examined here will thus stress the continuities and the common interests between the melodrama – an intrinsically feminine, but not always self-conscious, mode of discourse – and the feminist avant-garde, committed to tracing and resisting the repression of female subjectivity under patriarchal rule.<sup>5</sup>

In her study of Yvonne Rainer's filmmaking career, Ruby Rich pairs Rainer's work with melodrama, describing her films as enacting a "re-definition of melodrama for our times" (Rich 1989: 9). The same, I would argue, may be said of Potter's films in general, and of *Thriller* in particular. This film's desire to deconstruct the melodramatic underpinnings of opera results from a deep-seated mistrust of the way narrative has traditionally deployed emotional and sensual/musical elements to perpetuate men's command over women. In her feminist analysis of opera, Catherine Clément argues that "the forgetting of words, the forgetting of women, have the same deep roots" (Clément 1988: 22). Indeed, music in the opera medium captivates the listener's attention to the degree that meaning is no longer decisive in the pleasure attending the sonorous display. Not only are



words irrelevant; for some male fans of opera, “the words of language are an unacceptable interference in music that cannot be permitted” (Clément 1988: 13). This interference of words clearly suggests the intrusion of a political or ideological content that might be at variance with those tacit meanings relayed by the music – meanings that are so obvious and familiar to the audience as to dispense with verbal articulation. Such is precisely the case with opera’s use of music to advance the typically melodramatic pairing of pathos with femininity.

There is in opera an uncanny but predictable coincidence between its musical splendor and the moment that announces the woman’s undoing. This sadomasochistic use of sound is by no means unique to opera, of course. As French film critic and sound theorist Michel Chion writes,

The point of the cry in a cinematographic fiction . . . is defined . . . as something which gushes forth, generally from the mouth of a woman . . . which above all must fall at a named point . . . the film functions . . . like . . . a machine made in order to deliver a cry . . . This cry incarnates a fantasm of absolute sonorousness. (Chion 1982: 68)

Clément’s description of the cry on the opera stage is virtually identical to Chion’s account vis-à-vis the cinema: “The voice is never more poignant than at the moment when it is lifted to die” (Clément 1988: 5). *Thriller*’s understanding of the sadomasochistic undertones of the female voice in the melodramatic staging of desire is unequivocally rendered in the film’s recurrent substitution of Bernard Hermann’s *Psycho* musical score for the poignant cry emitted by the female actor/singer in *La Bohème*. Woman’s tragic ending in the opera text – something the spectator is encouraged to see as a matter of romantic contingency – is thus reconfigured as a cultural practice of textual and representational “murder” half-way between deliberate and unconscious.

### *Disciplining the body*

In its hyperbolically minimalist choreographies, *Thriller* counters the excessiveness of the melodrama without renouncing the principle of excess itself. However, it is important to ask whether *Thriller*’s disciplinary excess effectively contributes to an empowered female subjectivity based upon the joined exercise of mind and body, or whether it unwittingly reinforces the very patriarchal repression of the female body under scrutiny. On the one hand, the film’s austere and static rendering of the body functions as a self-empowering strategy designed to counteract the surplus of expression at work in male choreographies of female performance. But, at the same time, as I indicated in my critique of Mulvey and Butler in Chapter 1, it is worth

noting that the feminist desire to steer clear from the pitfalls of the narcissistic body is deeply rooted in the psychoanalytic/poststructuralist dismissal of the body's expressive capacities, a dismissal grounded in the belief that the body is exhaustively colonized by the homogenizing influences of language and culture. From this standpoint, *Thriller's* disinvestment from the narcissistic body may simultaneously entail the less productive disinvestment from the body's inherent potential for deviance – the possibilities for heterogeneous action and signification suggested earlier in connection with the lived-body.

Relying upon the joined effects of still photography and a minimalist dance performance, *Thriller* converts opera's formal unity and splendor into formal fragmentation and austerity. If *Thriller* denies the female body a full repertoire of movement, it concurrently denies its own images the capacity to move as well. Fragmentation and minimalism are different strategies in a common attempt to interrupt the naturalistic flow of representation so as to extract a few overdetermined moments out of its constructed continuum. Frozen on the screen for the film's, and our own, examination, these moments condense a multiplicity of meanings. Take, for example, the doubling provided by related images of Musetta in *La Bohème* and English in the attic. First, a close-up is shown of Musetta's foot issuing from her long skirts and extended forward, a spectacle attracting the gazes of her male entourage. This still is echoed and distorted by several stills of English in a series of dancing postures that both mirror and reconfigure the fetishized status of the female foot in classical dance and performance in general.

The most prominent among the stills of English just mentioned is a close-up of her leg and foot extended in mid-air (with the rest of the dancer's body left off-frame), the dancing posture the voice-over describes again and again as "frozen in arabesque." This frozen posture seems to enact a polyvalent metaphor: the pervasive and deadly cold in the Parisian winter of *La Bohème* – allegedly responsible for Mimi's physical death – the impossibility of female physical and discursive agency, the fetishization of the female figure men have procured in order to disavow their own lack, and finally, the rigidity of gender representation as a whole.

Clearly, English's recreation of Musetta's body takes the latter to its fetishistic extreme: the leg and foot, now wholly fragmented and decorporalized, are stretched to their maximum capacity in order to expose the disciplinary quality of classical choreographies of the female body. Foster describes this classical ballet posture as a patriarchal imposition upon woman of a corporeal style that oddly combines gracefulness and immobility.<sup>6</sup> The female dancer's strained responsiveness to, and ineluctable

dependence upon, her male counterpart render her movements rigid and predictable. Constantly moving, yet forever man's abstraction, the female dancer is thus reduced to being his "proud ornament" (Foster 1996: 1). By isolating and repeating this image in various guises, *Thriller* lays bare the disciplinary mechanisms at work in the seemingly fluid and spontaneous kinetic expressions of the female body not only in classical ballet, but, by extension, in any form of spectacle.

Later in the film, English again performs her arabesque while leaning against a wall in the attic. At that juncture, Gacon and Mechant, the male actors impersonating Rodolfo and Marcello, walk into the room and, in standard moving images, place English's "frozen" body upon their shoulders and carry it out of the room. This scene might refer to the moment in *La Bohème* when Musetta is carried away by Marcello after her foot gets hurt. Additionally, it might also evoke the male erasure of Mimi – her utter expendability as a sick woman. It is because the notion of performance in the film extends beyond the narrow limits of a literal stage that the image of the frozen body can equally apply to both Musetta and Mimi. After all, while only Musetta is a professional dancer, both women are involved in a performance of femininity. Accordingly, in her analysis of *La Bohème*, Clément describes both of them indistinctly as dancers: her account of Musetta as the girl who takes a provocative leap and "make[s] them all watch her jump into infinity" (Clément 1988: 86) echoes her earlier reference to Mimi as "leaping over winter as if she leaps beyond the void" (p. 85).

While, from a patriarchal standpoint, the female act of leaping may be read as a sign of woman's alleged lack of grounding in reality, I rather think Clément's comments point to the woman's capacity to assert herself through her body. That Rodolfo is not fully in sync with Mimi's love does not render her dancing celebration of love meaningless. When, against the odds of her own sickness, Mimi engages in a dance that aims to reach "beyond the void," she is not merely fabricating a fantasy of mobility before the reality of death sets in. Rather, Mimi exemplifies what Amelia Jones sees as the female performer's right to access the same potential to transcendence that men have traditionally had (Jones 1998: 156) (a transcendence that in this case is exercised through the body, and not, as is typical in the male striving toward transcendence, through a disembodied mind). For Jones, the female performer's physical movement allows her body/self to be torn away from objectification, thus instantiating Merleau-Ponty's idea that "it is . . . in action that the spatiality of our body is brought into being" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 102). No longer "jumping into a man's arms," as Laffont elsewhere suggests women have done for

centuries, Musetta and Mimi for once relinquish the frame of their bodies to become something other than objects rooted in place. Through their respective leaps, these women challenge the traditional features of female motility and spatiality – ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity with their surroundings – countering their body's acculturated “I cannot” with their lived-body's inherent “I can” (Sobchack 1992: 153).

Interestingly, unlike Clément, *Thriller* does not mention Mimi's, or Musetta's, daring leaps beyond the void, perhaps because, as I indicated earlier, the film adopts a psychoanalytic/poststructuralist discourse that casts serious doubt on the body's capacities of expression. *Thriller*'s overall tendency toward fragmentation and austerity is redoubled in the case of the female actors, who, unlike their male counterparts, do not engage in full movement until the end of the film.<sup>7</sup> In the attic, the women's recurrently frozen postures enact many of the characteristics associated with the bodily comportment typical of femininity – as noted by Young, a failure to make full use of the body's spatial and lateral potentialities, the tendency to concentrate motion in one body part, and tentative rather than fluid and directed motion (Young 1989: 55–6). Laffont and English's bodies are often represented as physical burdens, “which must be dragged and prodded along, and at the same time protected” (Young 1989: 59). Countless moments in the film engage in a literal and excessive rendition of the female body as a thing devoid of intentionality – several shots of Laffont propped up like a trophy upon Gacon's and Mechant's hands while the men's arms create a triangular frame around her body; Gacon holding Laffont's body upside down in a rigid and diagonal position, and, of course, the many enactments of English being carried out of the attic in arabesque.<sup>8</sup>

In her reworking of both Musetta's literal dance and Mimi's metaphoric dance, English enacts Foucault's definition of a disciplinary use of the body. English's doubly fragmented dance (through the still framing and through her own suspended movements) is visualized as a heavily regimented exercise that emphasizes the elements of time, precision, and application – in Foucauldian terms, “the temporal elaboration of the act” (Foucault 1979: 152). This militarization of movement and gesture is not exclusive to the more explicit dance images. For most of the film's duration, both the male and female actors exhibit a sort of “anatomochronological schema of behavior” that Foucault describes as follows:

The act is broken down into its elements; the position of the body, limbs, articulations is defined; to each movement are assigned a direction, an aptitude, a duration;

their order of succession is prescribed. Time penetrates the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power. (Foucault 1979: 152)

There are in *Thriller* quite a few instances of this fragmentary and disciplinary corporeal behavior: the erectness of the back in a sitting position (both male actors as well as Laffont in front of the mirror); the repetition and meticulous precision Gacon exhibits when looking at a vase and detachedly placing it upon the mantelpiece (an example I will turn to in a moment); Laffont's jump into Gacon's arms ending in an awkward foetus position; and the calculated gestures of Gacon and Mechant as they carry English's body out of the attic (an action distinctly split into three separate stages: coming into the room, taking upon themselves English's statue-like body, and going out of the room – all three performed in a most soldierly fashion).

One of the aforementioned examples is especially relevant to the film's project of reworking melodramatic codes that pertain to the objectification of the female body. The scene in the attic where Gacon/Rodolfo repeatedly gazes into the vase and turns his gaze away from it brings attention to melodrama's objectification of characters, while deconstructing the gendered conditions of such objectification. This scene empties out the space of the multiple objects that typically crowd the melodramatic *mise-en-scène*, zeroing in instead on one single and overdetermined object: the large, urn-like vase that stands for Mimi.

By placing the image of Mimi in a contiguous, metonymic relation with the vase occupying Gacon's attention, the scene exposes the typical melodramatic substitution of objects for characters.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as he forcefully averts his gaze from the vase immediately after Mimi's face appears on screen, Gacon re-enacts Rodolfo's abandonment of Mimi – his inability to invest his love in a sick woman. Laffont's question, later in the film, regarding Rodolfo's change of heart renders Gacon's seemingly unaccountable gestures almost transparent: "Why did he find her face so charming, and later, so alarming?" she asks. From a beautiful ornament, Mimi turns into a threatening sight that is less than adequate to fulfill Rodolfo's narcissistic needs. Just as objects in space have their own places (the vase is placed upon a dusty mantelpiece), the sphere of patriarchal romantic relations assigns the diseased woman her own place as well – the place of expendability and forgetfulness. By dictating what is normative and useful, the disciplinary mechanisms of power at the same time indict and exclude what deviates from the norm.

If *Thriller* insists on coding the performer's body as an instrument, it is for the sake of materializing the multiple and conflictive powers that vie

for the body's acquiescence and submission. Two different forms of power at the molar level (*pouvoir*) are thus at work in *Thriller's* disciplined body. On the one hand, discipline in the film is synonymous with the "meticulous controls of power" deployed in patriarchal representation to supervise and regulate the female body. But discipline is simultaneously the mechanism appropriated by the film to offset the pleasurable image of female narcissism with a bare/destitute image – an image that underscores the heavy price exacted from the female body in order to secure male pleasure. Thus, by exaggerating the body's submission into docility and efficiency, *Thriller's* performances are able to turn the concept of the disciplined body on its head, utilizing its hyperbolic representation as a form of resistance against the very mechanisms of control that afflict the body. As *Thriller's* disciplinary focus makes clear, the film does not counter the objectified status of the female body with a series of corporeal strategies aimed at restoring the unity of body and mind. Instead, it merely renders objectification recognizable via an intellectualized, highly formalized concept of corporeality. As I will now argue, however, an alternative body language emerges via the film's singular deployment of the voice.

#### *Affective/conductive powers of the voice*

The Hollywood rules of sound synchronization and feminist theory's critical evaluation of these rules share a definition of the body as essentially confined to its visible boundaries. Because Hollywood often utilizes these rules to frame the female body, thereby disabling its kinetic and expressive abilities, feminist avant-garde filmmakers and sound theorists tend to regard a female disembodied voice as the surest vehicle for female agency and discursive authority. As Kaja Silverman notes in *The Acoustic Mirror*, synchronization has always been imposed much more firmly upon female characters than upon their male counterparts. Silverman argues that the female voice in Hollywood cinema has been excessively embodied, that is, excessively tied in with the assumption of woman's discursive lack and incompetence (Silverman 1988: 45–7). While I agree that the reduction of woman to body in many a classical narrative film's use of the female voice undeniably connotes woman's discursive lack and incompetence, it does not necessarily follow that the body should be regarded as a passive surface of mute and dumb physicality.

If the body is not credited with self-determining capacities, and is merely reduced to a passive frame, it is no surprise that the female voice in many feminist avant-garde films opts for becoming decorporealized.<sup>10</sup> No longer tied to the restrictions placed upon the body, the voice can then figure as pure thought, pure self-reflection unfettered by the weight of the

allegedly thoughtless body. *Thriller's* case, however, deviates somewhat from this pattern by implicitly questioning the idea that the recovery of female agency necessitates the relinquishing of the body. In its use of the voice-over narration, especially, *Thriller* exhibits a more ambivalent position vis-à-vis the relationship between language and the body than is the case in other contemporaneous feminist experimental films. Here, I will focus on the properties and effects of Laffont's vocal expressions as indicative of this ambivalence.

The use of sound in *Thriller* is calculated to neutralize the sonorous splendor of opera and its reliance on the erasure of woman. The general lack of synchronization between voice and body in Laffont's speech indicates her refusal to be spoken by the master narrative. One simple gesture, in particular, emphasizes her disaccord with the heavily scripted diegetic interiority of the female voice in operatic and melodramatic representation. When, following a shot of English dancing out of the attic, Laffont places her hand on her mouth as she sits with her back to the mirror in the same room, she is subverting the spectacular moment of highest emotional investment – the moment when the female voice delivers its cry of ultimate impotence. Laffont's is a gesture that parodies, through obstruction, the emission of any such cry.

In a scene enacted twice, in which Laffont reads some passages from several male-authored theoretical texts, *Thriller* pursues this subversive strain further. Prior to the second reading session, we see English being carried out of the attic, while Laffont's voice-over states:

You were carried away, certainly . . . You were reading from a book. You were immersed in the text. I turned away from language, became silent and was carried from the attic, frozen. What were you thinking of? I was searching for a theory that would explain my life, my death.

While Laffont reads her abstract theories, English, standing by the window in the background, lets her body fall inertly against the wall and begins a slow movement that ends in the proverbial arabesque position. While Laffont continues to read, Gacon and Mechant enter the room, mount English's frozen body upon their shoulders, and take her away.

By literally turning her attention away from Laffont's reading session and becoming a frozen object, English's physical performance resonates with the idea put forth by Laffont's words as well, the idea that women's cultural alienation from language is at the root of their objectification. But *Thriller* goes on to complicate its views on language further. After the men have disposed of English's body, Laffont mentions the names of the male authors whose texts she has just been reading (Lautréamont, Mallarmé,

Marx, and Freud), and then, in a seemingly unmotivated gesture, she begins to laugh hysterically, suddenly re-enacting, through her laughter, English/Mimi's own turn away from language. Whether through the sounds of consumptive coughing, through silence, as in the former example, or through laughter, *Thriller's* use of sound adopts an affective-performative dynamics whose aim is twofold: first, barely linguistic, these bodily sounds/expressions redefine subjectivity not only as a particular discursive position, but also as embodied materiality with a singular capacity to affect, and to be affected by, other bodies; and second, such affective powers expose the male fallacy (likewise perpetuated by a certain brand of feminism) of reducing meaning to a language extricated from the body. Laffont may realize at this point that the theories she has read do not explain anything – insofar as they have alienated language from the body, these theories cannot understand, let alone attempt to account for, women's oppression at the material site of their bodies where oppression is felt, repressed, or even potentially transformed.

The same affective-performative concerns are brought forth by the specific qualities of Laffont's voice. Laffont's narrating voice escapes the constraints of synchronization in various ways. Yet, unlike the typical male disembodied voice-over, her voice does not masquerade as source of epistemological authority. Insofar as Laffont's body is on screen during much of the film's duration, her voice can hardly be defined as conventionally disembodied. Neither embodied in the traditional sense, nor altogether disembodied, Laffont's voice inscribes a new, or different, relationship to the body. From a phenomenological standpoint, Laffont's voice participates in an embodied sense that exceeds the visible boundaries of her individual corporeality. It is as distant from the fictional space as a typically disembodied voice-over, while at the same time remaining affectively close to it by virtue of her personal investment and her intensely questioning performance. Such a double position again reminds us of the close, yet at times conflictive, relationship between a feminist avant-garde in search of analytic distancing and a feminine melodramatic discourse where affectivity remains a key ingredient.

Alternately identifying with her own position as female investigator of women's fates, and with Mimi/Musetta, Laffont's voice uses its migratory potential to construct a kind of fluid female body and agency. The limits of voice and body are thus extended to accommodate those of all women sharing a similar experience of patriarchal rule. The conductive/transitive powers of Laffont's voice make a mockery of the women's opposition at both the performative (Laffont and English) and narrative levels (Mimi as the "good girl," the abstraction/reification of the female psyche/soul;



Musetta as the “bad girl,” the abstraction/reification of the female body). Laffont’s voice-over narration aims at blending Mimi and Musetta in one continuous affective flow, moving freely between either woman’s position and interweaving both without the aid of identificatory transitions or breaks. As if forming a braid, Laffont’s speech in the scene I mentioned earlier alternates between statements that unequivocally refer to Mimi/English (“you were carried away . . . I turned away from language, became silent and was carried from the attic, frozen”) and others that address Laffont’s own questioning position as investigator (“You were reading from a book. You were immersed in the text . . . I was searching for a theory that would explain my life, my death”). Interestingly, too, in either case, Laffont’s use of pronouns shifts from first to second person when speaking for the same person, which further confirms the breakdown of oppositional boundaries between the women.

As stated earlier, Laffont’s unhinged voice enables a corporeal reinscription at the level of sound. No matter the rigidity or stasis of body postures in the film, the voice remains fluid and conductive, enabling the body, in its quality and intensity, if not in its empirical frame, to move and to connect with other bodies. Unlike rational language, ill-equipped to symbolize the properties of fluids (i.e. the affective, self-modifying nature of all life), the voice can incorporate “what is continuous, compressible, dilat-able, viscous, conductible, diffusible . . . what does not participate in good form(s)” (Olkowski 1999: 67) – in sum, the affective flows of bodies. Between the unscripted power of breath and the scripted weight of culture, the voice seems uniquely suited to the feminist task of restoring the intrinsic unity of body and language, body and mind.

Resonating in the midst of a barely furnished space, Laffont’s narrating voice becomes the single most compelling element to hold the viewer’s attention. The Barthesian grain of the voice, defined by Silverman as that which “retains an individual flavor or texture” (Silverman 1988: 44), provides a likely point of attraction for *Thriller*’s listener: Laffont’s intonations and inflections are thick and densely textured, but at the same time sensual and suggestive. The irreducible singularity of Laffont’s voice crucially hinges upon her French accent, but this detail paradoxically serves to advance, rather than preclude, both her discursive and affective powers. Showing no concern for disguising her heavily accented speech, Laffont instead displaces her potential cultural alienation onto the audience members themselves, who are compelled to understand the film in her terms. *Thriller* thus seems to reintroduce the body by way of the voice – its grain as well as its uniquely assimilated cultural features. If visibility is no longer a safe place for the female body, the voice is given the task of

actualizing the corporeal affectivity that the film might otherwise have been reluctant to express.

In staging the unconscious script of woman's undoing, *Thriller* no doubt privileges a representation of the *oppressive* forces impinging on the female body over the possibility of enacting the *expressive* forces inherent in this body. At stake in this choice is the question of whether *Thriller* believes in the body as a writing, not just written, materiality, or whether the film's disciplinary mechanisms, mobilized in response to male oppression, may concurrently intensify the repression of the body from the feminist side. The use of the voice as mark of corporeal affectivity in *Thriller* appears to be a fitting compromise for a film that subscribes to the anti-narcissistic principles of the anti-essentialist brand of feminism: while the film does not quite believe in relinquishing the body entirely, it still feels ill at ease engaging its visual presentation in more overt or direct ways. Nonetheless, even as it leans rather heavily on the side of Brechtian analysis and distancing, *Thriller's* most poignant and haunting moments are those that restore to analysis the force of affect through sensual and bodily elements. Such elements, however disciplined and contained, cannot be utterly rid of the excess that thrives in their very unrepresentability. In the final analysis, the bare sounds of uncontrollable and unaccountable laughter, consumptive coughing, and the almost constant thud of a heart-beat (not to mention the squeaky and monotone violin notes of Herrmann's *Psycho* score) can remind us of women's bodies more immediately than any words of language might allow. It is, after all, not only women's words that the master narrative keeps forgetting, but, just as conveniently, the unsettling voice of difference that continues to speak through their lived bodies.

### The thrill of tango: Potter's narcissistic performance

Les cinéastes du corps captent en images des passages entre deux postures. Le gestus est ce qui unit . . . les attitudes du corps.

[The filmmakers of the body capture in images the passage between two bodily postures. The *gestus* is that which joins . . . different bodily attitudes.]

Alain Beaulieu, "L'Expérience Deleuzienne du Corps"

The different approaches *Thriller* and *The Tango Lesson* take in conceptualizing and acting out notions of femininity and performance parallel general changes in feminist thought and practice taking place between the 1970s and the 1990s. For the purpose of the affective-performative emphasis that I am concerned with, I would characterize these changes as involving a shift from the necessity of disinvesting from the female body as a visible source of pleasure to a reconsideration of the role female corporeality may play, not only

as a form of affective self-empowerment, but also as a catalyst for drawing a more fluid and porous line between femininity and masculinity.

*The Tango Lesson* represents both a logical continuity and a dramatic rupture with *Thriller*'s disciplinary modes of performance. *Thriller*'s denunciation of man's sadistic and fetishistic ploys leads to the irreparable estrangement between the sexes. In *Thriller*, women dance by themselves, either as the fetish objects of the male choreographed script, or as the liberated sisters who in the end manage to banish men out of their space. By contrast, *The Tango Lesson* features Potter and Pablo Verón, her dance teacher and partner, laboriously, but productively, negotiating the power dynamics of their personal and professional relationship. *The Tango Lesson* no longer allows the filmmaker's position vis-à-vis the male subject to be one of distant scrutiny. From invisible judge, the director is transformed into a visible, even public, dancer. Potter's dancing body renders her both subject to the risks of embodied visibility and capable of eloquently expressing her thoughts and feelings. The sadomasochistic thrill evoked by the woman's death in *Thriller* turns in *The Tango Lesson* into the thrill experienced by the woman herself as she negotiates with her male counterpart the difficult steps of a dance designed for two. As in the popular saying "It takes two to tango," the film suggests the equivalence between tango and life, espousing an active participation in an erotic sense while cognizant of the dangers that arise in the relations between self and other. The film thus moves several steps forward – by abandoning intellectual abstraction for embodied expression, and by acknowledging the body's potential for self-determining activity and vital pleasure.

The tense opposition and erotic proximity of bodies in tango thus serve as a fitting metaphor for the inevitable struggles that mark the coexistence between the sexes. The film's episodic division into twelve lessons traces not only Potter's learning process of the tango, but, concurrently, a series of lessons on narcissism for both Potter and Verón, and the audience. Here, the fraught issue of woman's narcissism is not avoided, but explored in conjunction with the complementary interrogation of male narcissism. Out of that double interrogation emerges a more complex picture of narcissism than one might have expected from an earlier feminist vantage point. In this film, narcissism does not primarily figure as a negative overvalorization of self at the expense of the other, but rather as the self's necessary dependence on the other for validation and even transformation. At its most conflictive extreme, narcissism is shown to involve a disavowal of the mutual dependence between self and other. At its most expansive, narcissism figures as a stage in a creative process that allows the body to

multiply connections with other bodies, making identity porous to otherness and potentially leading to a less subjectified form of affection.

*From Rage to dance*

The films I discuss in *Powers of Affection* double up the relatively realistic performative context of their narratives with an affective-performative level that is more virtual than actual. But, while in most films I examine, the reworking of performance at the affective-performative level coincides with the film's most stylized sequences (in *Thriller*, for example, these would be the scenes taking place in the attic), *The Tango Lesson* presents an interesting exception to this tendency. In this case, the exceedingly stylized images of *Rage*, the film-within-the-film Potter is supposedly working on, figure as a stage of anachronistic abstraction that must be overcome in the interests of feminism's becoming. In this sense, *The Tango Lesson*'s affective-performative dimension may be located not so much in the extreme stylization of *Rage* as in the kind of stylization epitomized by Potter and Verón's tableau-like doubling of the figures in the painting of Jacob and the Angel in the film's Tenth Lesson. It is at this moment, which I will return to later, that the feminist anger of *Rage* is most successfully transformed into a mutual recognition of powers and capacities.

*The Tango Lesson* takes feminism's process of becoming as the organizing principle of its narrative structure and self-affective performativity. For the first six lessons of the film, Potter is engaged in writing the script of *Rage*. Throughout this stretch, *The Tango Lesson* alternates between black-and-white images of Potter sitting and writing in her barely furnished London apartment, and vivid color images that body forth her imagined idea for her future film project. As the screenwriter of *Rage*, Potter harks back to ways of representing the gender battles that are starkly reminiscent not only of her own thinking and imaging modes in *Thriller*, but also of images created by other feminist filmmakers (notably, the *mise-en-scène* in this portion of the film is strikingly reminiscent of Ulrike Ottinger's 1981 film *Freak Orlando*). In highly stylized postures, costumes, colors, and surrounding settings, the women in *Rage* participate in a photo-shoot directed by a disabled man with no legs, whose actions nonetheless have a lethal impact on the women. *Rage* unmistakably points to all the major premises of feminist film theory: the figure of the crippled director as a literal embodiment of male castration anxiety and projection of lack onto woman; the voyeuristic and fetishistic effects of the male gaze on women's bodies; and the association of the female body with narcissistic exhibitionism and spectacle. But, as I will explain shortly, the performative use of these psychoanalytic concepts is so literal and conspicuous that it suggests an

attempt on the part of Potter to stylize the theory itself by putting it at an ironic distance and a historical remove.

For example, one of the earlier series of images shows the women ceremonially walking down a staircase in a park. From a shot of Potter working at her script, the film cuts to a close-up of an extremely high-heeled, oversized female shoe as it lands precariously on a step. The woman then trips over her long, cumbersome gown and falls forward, seemingly dead, on the stairs. One blank, empty frame is followed by a shot of her body hitting the steps. The melodramatic excess of the image, typified by the fallen woman's suddenly inert body and open eyes, and by the other two women's horror-stricken stares, displays an unmistakable sense of parody. In a virtual repeat of a similar image in *Thriller*, the woman with albino hair then brings her hand to her mouth. But while Laffont's gesture in *Thriller* is dead serious even as it parodies patriarchal expectations of femininity, the gestures of the women in *Rage* seem to be engaged in a self-parodying move. Whether Potter may have deliberately quoted herself here or not, this highly self-conscious gesture at least suggests that feminism's long-sustained and exclusive focus on female subordination under patriarchy may have reached the end of its productive life.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the constraints these cumbersome clothes and accessories place on the women's ability to move in *Rage* are merely the performative counterpart of the constraints placed upon women's capacities by, paradoxically, feminist theory's own narrow focus on oppression at the expense of women's transformative powers of expression and affection. By substituting her tango lessons for her former interest in *Rage*, Potter seems to suggest the need for feminism to reinvent its old premises via a literal engagement with movement/dance.

Already at the end of the First Lesson, Potter gets up from her working chair and begins to rehearse her tango steps, as if trying out a different way of performing the feminine. As it shows the fluid passage from the activity of writing to that of dancing, this moment accurately translates into images the Spinozist/Deleuzian meaning of affect as "the passage from one experiential state of the body to another . . . implying an augmentation [or diminution] in that body's capacity to act" (Massumi in Deleuze and Guattari 1987: xvi). As Potter transitions from *Rage* to tango, she relinquishes a representational for a performative method, thus augmenting her own body's capacity to act. *Rage*'s attempt to reproduce prior texts and images is abandoned in favor of a testing out of unscripted possibilities with no assurance of success.

At first sight, Potter's shift from the implausible scenario of *Rage* to the more personal and somewhat less melodramatic story of her erotic

involvement with tango appears to incur a loss in theoretical sophistication. Yet, as I hope will become clear in what follows, *The Tango Lesson* chooses to flesh out its still considerable theoretical implications through the body's immediate kinetic and gestural acts.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the film does not ascribe to a self-reflexive Brechtianism, but rather adopts an affective-performative perspective that undoes the subject-object binary at the heart of traditional notions of both narcissism and power.

### *Powers and capacities*

In its engagement with corporeality, *The Tango Lesson* makes us think of the body as an *active* site of self-determination rather than simply as the *reactive* target of male objectifying operations. The possibility of this conceptual shift lies in the belief that the body's capacity to dance/move coincides with its powers of affection and expression. Accordingly, if the film does not hesitate to enhance the female anatomy through Potter's use of tight dresses and high heels, it is because the potential fetishistic significance of these clothing items is substantially qualified by the body's own ability to move.<sup>13</sup> In sum, movement enables the body to escape the categories that keep it locked within a static notion of identity. Tango thus figures as an affective-performative locus where the body no longer *is*, but, more properly, *becomes*. *Thriller's* tactics of withdrawing the body from visibility – as exemplified in Laffont and English's austere, nondescript costumes and bare feet – are replaced here by the revalorization of the acting body as the site of material forces equally available to male and female dancers. In the tango, the entire body, and even more so the legs and feet in particular (ironically, privileged sites of fetishization in a phallogocentric specular regime), transfer the woman's expressive and affective power from the level of verbal language to that of erotic communication.

The practice of tango in Potter's film enables the confluence between two ideas of power distinguished by Deleuze and Guattari. As I noted in the Introduction, Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of power bifurcates into the Foucauldian *pouvoir* and the Spinozist *puissance* (according to the two words for "power" in the French language). While "*puissance* refers to a range of potential . . . a 'capacity for existence', 'a capacity to affect or be affected' . . . [Deleuze and Guattari] use *pouvoir* in a sense very close to Foucault's, as an instituted and reproducible relation of force, a selective concretization of potential" (Massumi in Deleuze and Guattari 1987: xvii). In *The Tango Lesson*, *puissance* mainly figures as the body's potential for movement, but also as Verón and Potter's capacities to multiply their respective possibilities of action and affection by each receiving the gift of the other's talents – Potter thus becomes receptive to Verón's

dancing lessons and Verón eventually becomes receptive to Potter's filmmaking/acting instructions. Through this exchange of talents, Potter and Verón have a chance to augment their bodies' capacities for action, affection, and becoming.

But at the same time, such capacity for existence intersects with, and is crucially affected by, the gender dynamics (power as *pouvoir*) to which their bodies are culturally and psychically subjected. These power dynamics circumscribe a virtual scenario of quasi-utopian potentiality, instead giving rise to a series of particular, and limited, concretizations of potential – ultimately, the creation, out of their collaboration, of a film about the tango. Thus, existential capacity and concrete, socialized relations of power do not remain dissociated notions, for they indeed inflect each other constantly. In the tango, for example, the body's ability to move thoroughly impacts the ways in which power circulates between subjects. Such is clearly the case with Verón's use of his superior dancing skills to make Potter feel alternately adequate and inadequate to the task of partnering with him. But additionally, Potter's experience as a filmmaker challenges Verón to let go of his narcissistic need for control.

The issue of tango's use of erotic clothing briefly touched on a moment ago bears further discussion in the context of power. If body movement intersects with power, so do, in a parallel fashion, the dress codes that give the dancing body its particular surface of visibility and mobility. Attire is instrumental not only in the construction of a particular image of the performative body, but also in the displacements of power that constantly occur when bodies move in response to each other's intentions. As Savigliano's description makes evident, body and dress become indistinguishable in the interest of mobilizing power and resistance between the male and the female tango dancers: "She resists with her hips, disjointedly moving them back and forth, her smooth satiny skirt easing both his way in and her way out. Her high heels unbalance her own resistance . . . it is precisely her suggestive hips and footwork that provoke his desire for sexual conquest" (Savigliano 1996: 218).

The glaring gender inequalities that characterize the traditional practice of tango constitute the very basis for the female dancer's exercise of resistance against the male desire to dominate the dance. But, even though the male is accustomed to leading, his sense of performative self-sufficiency is hardly assured. Insofar as the female dancer is acutely aware of her dependence on the other, she may be better equipped not only to avoid illusions of self-sufficiency, but also to remain tactically more mobile and cunning. The female ability to incorporate difference as part of identity lies at the heart of the feminist exploration of narcissism pursued in *The Tango Lesson*.

*Lessons on narcissism*

I will begin to discuss the film's exploration of narcissism in relation to the well-established poststructuralist notion that narcissism involves a mutual imbrication of identity and otherness. The following section will extend this notion into a Deleuzian paradigm that dissolves the self-other binary; accordingly, a more intense dissemination of identity into the world will be seen to emerge as a process of multiplicitous forces/powers of becoming. Ultimately, my reconsideration of narcissism will move away from the visual/specular dynamics of (mis)recognition informing the psychoanalytic model of narcissism in order to stress the affective connections and exchanges taking place between bodies. Before I address the ways in which *The Tango Lesson* acts out the self's narcissistic dependence on the other, I will briefly account for the crucial differences between a traditional, patriarchal notion of narcissism and a more radical, feminist one informed by poststructuralist thought.

While narcissism has traditionally been conceived as a regressive self-absorption that prevents one from sustaining healthy relations with others, the narcissist's projection of the self onto the world paradoxically enhances the momentous role otherness plays in the constitution of identity. As the image of self-enamored Narcissus, or even its Lacanian reformulation in the mirror stage, makes plain, the narcissist's love of self is mediated through the self's external image, thus rendering him both subject and object of his own love/desire. But the narcissist's invariable perception of the other as an extension of himself can be seen in divergent ways, giving rise to two models of narcissism. According to the first position, narcissism has the negative effect of obliterating the other's identity. Yet, as Amelia Jones argues, this position assumes that both self and other possess clearly definable and permanent identities that can play the role of usurping subject or usurped object in a definitive way. It assumes, in other words, "that the other has a stable identity that is obliterated by the narcissist's . . . stabilizing, projections" (Jones 1998: 49). Instead, drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's idea of the chiasmic intertwining between self and other, Jones suggests that "such projection of the self is, rather, a marker of the instability of both self and other" (p. 49). Narcissism thus emerges as a positive force, insofar as it can potentially invalidate the (masculine) subject's claims to a self-sufficient, self-same identity that remains impermeable to the incursions of the other. From this perspective, narcissism no longer figures as a pathological and regressive failure to achieve a coherent identity, but rather as a necessary condition common to all subjects.

The lessons on narcissism enacted in *The Tango Lesson* take account of different male and female narcissistic attitudes, implying that, while women



are culturally trained to acknowledge the narcissistic implication of the self in the other, the patriarchal male subject exhibits a more repressed and conflictive relation vis-à-vis his own narcissism. Potter's and Verón's differences as narcissists are conveyed unambiguously at several points and through various narrative and stylistic devices. For instance, after Potter's departure to Hollywood, the film shows a parallel montage of images of each of them (Potter on her bed in her LA hotel, and Verón in his bathtub in his Paris apartment). While Potter is reading Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, Verón is alternately reading a book on Marlon Brando and comparing his own mirror image to the Hollywood ideal represented by Brando (an appropriate male ideal for Verón, for, as Lucy Fischer reminds us, Brando was the star of Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* [1973]; Fischer 2004: 53). Whereas Potter's narcissism is bound to her desire for a reciprocal bond with Verón, Verón's interest in a relationship with Potter seems to rest purely on his narcissistic aspirations to film stardom. As the film makes clear later on, Verón's hardest challenge is to accept that his narcissistic pursuit of celebrity must rely upon Potter's different talents and desires.

Upon Potter's re-encounter with Verón in Paris, their divergent narcissistic attitudes are rendered even more explicit. As Potter announces that she may do a film about tango in place of her *Rage* project, Verón initiates an exhilarating dance number in which he plays around with countless kitchen utensils and objects at hand. Although the pairing of masculinity with spectacle can often have some potentially ambiguous meanings, Verón's performance in this scene lends itself rather smoothly to a feminist psychoanalytic reading that identifies masculine spectacle with a narcissistic reinforcement of imaginary wholeness. Verón's solo performance prefigures what subsequent scenes in the film make evident: his attempts at self-sufficiency and his difficulties in accepting a dancing partner. In this instance, the mirror makes it possible for Verón to dance with himself. Both leader and dancing partner, subject and object, Verón/Narcissus looks at, and interacts with, his image in a seamless narcissistic loop of action and reaction. Later in their relationship, as Potter begins to assert her own will as a dancer, Verón demands that he be allowed to remain the sole controller and leader, thus confirming his ongoing desire to dance only with himself.

A major theme that Potter develops in her film to explore the differences between male and female narcissistic modalities is the division between the private/personal and the public/professional spheres. Here, too, Potter and Verón take radically different positions with regard to the need to maintain these spheres apart. On the morning after Verón fails to show up for a New Year's Eve date with Potter, he justifies his absence by alleging that he "had difficult experiences before, when [he] mixed the professional

and the personal.” Another clue to Verón’s fear of involving personal emotions into the professional arena is revealed during Potter and Verón’s conversation after their strained public performance in Buenos Aires. On this occasion, Verón is angry at Potter’s alleged misunderstanding of “what it means to be strong on a stage.” Verón accuses Potter of “confusing strength with tension,” himself apparently forgetting that the characteristic bodily stance of tango is precisely one of tension between the dancing partners. Verón’s words in fact carry a rather perverse meaning, for they imply that the female tango dancer is expected to enact tension merely as a professional façade, while, at the affective level, she should numb the nerve and muscular paths through which the body’s affects circulate. Accordingly, the female dancer would be compelled to fake the tension that binds her to her male partner, and to subordinate her passion to his narcissistic desire to lead.

Potter, however, refuses to reduce tension to a professional masquerade, in part because her relationship with Verón is a continually lived struggle of wills and desires, and in part because she cannot separate the dancing from the living the way Verón would have her do. Purposely mixing the professional and the personal is precisely the core intention that animates Potter’s entire film. Potter’s desire to cross the culturally constructed barriers between a filmmaker’s invisible presence behind the camera and the visible space of the screen – to turn thought into body, abstraction into corporeality – is the ultimate expression of a narcissism that understands its necessary reliance on the other (as we will shortly see, on many others).

Potter’s self-exposure extends not only to audiences within the film, but, concurrently, to viewers and critics outside the film. All too predictably, most reviews of *The Tango Lesson* allude to the film’s disconcerting blend of reality and fiction, denouncing Potter’s deliberate confusion of her personal and professional identities. For some reviewers, Potter’s act of casting herself in the leading role of her own film amounts to a less than dignified gesture that reeks of an unbearably embarrassing narcissism. Thus, for example, A. Roy writes in *24 Images*:

Having practiced the tango for thirty years, Sally Potter has given herself a real treat, at the expense of the spectator, who must suffer her attitude of unhappy child and misunderstood author, which she never fails to remind us of . . . The film is not an *ego trip*, as others have incessantly repeated, but rather a case of self-glorification through the assumption of the victimized, self-pitying, position. (Roy 1998: 59, my translation)

Clearly, Roy and other (mostly male) reviewers see Potter’s unapologetic narcissism as a threat to their patriarchal sense of propriety.<sup>14</sup> Implicit in

their reviews is the firmly entrenched cultural assumption that a director's visible presence ought to work as an icon of stability and permanence, a transcendental and coherent affirmation of authorship. As a forceful proponent of epistemological uncertainty and personal vulnerability, Potter clearly plays havoc with this assumption. In this sense, too, Verón's misconstruction of Potter's expressions of anger as "emotional weakness" is consistent with the critics' implicit belief that, by adopting an affective-performative stance, Potter has hijacked the film's, and the audience's, firm hold on the real.

As Amelia Jones has suggested in the context of body art, for the artist's self-enactment to be rid of both its transcendental and objectified status, "the body in representation [must be] returned to the body in production and linked – through interpretive desire – to the bodies of reception" (Jones 1998: 52). Potter's performative body, I would submit, acts as the catalyst for a series of non-hierarchical linkages between bodies (of representation, of production, of reception). Insofar as each audience member engages with the performative body onscreen "in a manner specific to her or his particular desires" (Jones 1998: 52), Potter's physical presence in the film entails an indefinite number of risks that cannot be foreseen or controlled in advance.<sup>15</sup> A consciously performed narcissism such as Potter's recognizes that the self-affirmation potentially achieved by the performer as she actively affects an audience never goes without the audience's reciprocal capacity to affect the performer in a myriad unanticipated ways that can either augment or diminish her. From this standpoint, narcissism in *The Tango Lesson* no longer unfolds as a self-absorbed concern with the unity and permanence of identity at the expense of the other. On the contrary, the kind of narcissism at play here involves a lucid understanding of the affective connections generated between bodies – their powers to affect, and to be affected by, any and all bodies they may come into contact with. Ultimately, the performer's narcissistic body thrives in its openness to affective processes that hold an unlimited transformative potential.

### *Actions and passions*

As Olkowski has argued, at stake in the generally negative evaluation of narcissism within psychoanalysis (even in its feminist version) is a disregard for "[the ego's] originally multiple nature" and the assumption "that it is . . . something unified and integrated, something signified by some ultimate myth or symbol" (Olkowski 1999: 173). From Olkowski's Deleuzian standpoint, "narcissism is movement . . . a creative force in which virtual objects are displaced and real objects disguised" (p. 172). Deleuze's concept of narcissism as a fluid, non-identitary exchange of affective forces between

a multiplicitous ego and a series of virtual objects (disguised as real objects) is a step beyond a poststructuralist concept of narcissism as the overlapping of self and other. Deleuze does not talk about the ego, but rather considers “multiple egos” whose activity of fashioning virtual objects out of the world is commensurate with creative, spiritual life. In a statement that evokes Potter’s changing methods from *Thriller* to *The Tango Lesson*, Olkowski writes that “narcissism is the condition of creation, a condition that transforms the child from a pathetic, revengeful ‘patient’ into a life artist, a creative and reflective spirit” (Olkowski 1999: 157). This final section will trace the transformation in Potter’s films from a *reactive* to an *active* feminist stance where narcissism figures as such a creative force.

The film’s Tenth Lesson represents a turning point in the impasse Potter and Verón reach in their relationship. This section initiates a turn away from their state of stale conflict and toward their acceptance of a condition of permanent struggle. But struggle here does not simply lead to destructive consequences. As suggested in Jorge Luis Borges’ definition of tango as the “direct expression of the belief that a fight may be a celebration” (cited in the production notes), the fight that involves the tango dancers is also productive and creative insofar as it engages them in a continuous dismantling and redrawing of bodily boundaries. Thus, forces of disruption are simultaneously expressions of vitality, moments in which lines of flight and becomings are made possible. I would like to read a few of the latter moments in *The Tango Lesson* as instances of a mobilization of forces that not only affects the relationship between Potter and Verón at the narrative level, but, more importantly, suggests a way out of the binary conceptualization of gender relations. Such disorganization of gender relations, I will argue, comes about through a radical shift in the conceptualization of the body – from the traditional subject-object, male-female, hierarchical model to a reconsideration of the body as a productive flow of forces (actions and passions) that have both a physical and an ethical dimension.

From a Spinozist/Deleuzian ethical perspective, the body’s powers of affection can be either active or passive. Actions and passions are the desiring forces that traverse the body, respectively augmenting or reducing its capacity to act. As Deleuze has noted, Spinoza advocates an increase in active affections, for “as far as we still have passive affections, our power of action will be inhibited” (Deleuze 1992: 222). While our power of suffering is the lowest degree of our power of acting (Deleuze 1992: 224), the power of action is the only real, positive, and affirmative form of our capacity to be affected (Deleuze 1992: 225). As a student of tango emotionally invested in her dominating instructor, Potter is under the sway of powerful passions that compromise her capacity to act. As the scene that I will now examine

makes clear, the moment of change in Verón and Potter's relationship hinges upon her shift from being consumed by passion – a *reactive*/resistant force against Verón's dominating will – to the discovery and mobilization of her own *active* powers of affection.

The scene opens with Potter walking into the church of St. Sulpice and coming across a life-size oil painting of an angel wrestling with, or rather resisting, a male warrior named Jacob. Jacob's left leg is thrust against the angel, while the angel is grabbing Jacob's left thigh in an attempt to control or impede his movement upon him. Jacob's right arm and the angel's left arm are lifted up to oppose mutual force and resistance. Seeking reconciliation, Potter calls Verón and tells him the Jewish story of Jacob and the angel:

They fought and wrestled through a long, long night. When a storm broke, Jacob realized he could never defeat the stranger because the stranger was an angel, or a god. Or perhaps, all along . . . Jacob had simply been wrestling with himself.

She asks Verón to come join her at St. Sulpice. Their encounter below the painting is unabashedly staged. The camera tilts down the painting to frame Verón, who walks into the shot from the left-hand side and joins Potter, who is standing in profile in front of the painting, already waiting for him. They join hands. Verón begins to mimic the angel's defensive posture, while Potter takes Jacob's more offensive stance.

As in the multiple meanings woven together in the still images of *Thriller*, the arrested pose of Potter and Verón in front of the painting resonates with many lines of thought. Here is finally the tango transmuted into life – a passage or interval from tango to cinema, from Verón as leader to Potter as leader, from a primarily unidirectional flow of power to a multidirectional flow of actions and passions. But this moment also involves a transition from a specular, representational form of narcissism, as captured by the painting, to a multidimensional field of corporeal forces capable of actualizing the virtual movement in the painting. All of these transitions are enabled by Potter's recognition that she has her own active power to wield. As Potter switches from follower to leader, she reduces her involvement in passive/reactive forces and, conversely, augments her investment in active forces capable of making things happen. Thus, new affective dynamics are established between Potter and Verón, when, still in the same pose, Potter says: "I've been following you in the tango, Pablo. But to make a film, you have to follow me. Are you ready?" With her posture and her words, Potter instantiates the coming together of the performative power of the body and the performative power of language, and it is precisely this joint performative power that seals the new affective pact between herself and Verón.

The painting and its performative double in vain strive to contain the tense/belligerent quality of tango/life.<sup>16</sup> As I indicated with respect to the intense choreographies in Fassbinder's films, the tableau-like assemblage formed by the pictorial and the performative images here is no mere static form, but rather a provisional containment of force. From the Spinozist point of view that "there only ever [is] movement and rest together" (Deleuze 1992: 235), the still image actualizes a greater tension than the moving one, its lack of movement only apparent. In capturing the quality of the tango, the bodies resonating in the assemblage formed by painting and live re-enactment become intense. As in my reading of bodies in front of the Poussin painting in *Petra von Kant*, the intensity of each of these body choreographies feeds off of the other, not in a relationship of formal resemblance or analogy, but in one of affective/active resonance and dissonance between the two corporeal assemblages. When compared to the still images of body postures in *Thriller* (isolated body parts, bodies in isolation from other bodies or displayed in a state of objectification), Potter's and Verón's poses entail a more mobile and productive state of affairs – although perhaps equally strained, these poses no longer indicate isolation and oppositionality, but rather suggest an ongoing exchange of actions and passions between two bodies.

The posing bodies in front of the painting capture the intensity of the many moves and countermoves that have passed, and will yet pass, between Potter and Verón in the film's narrative. In so doing, this most intense of images also points to the ethical resolution of the conflict, paradoxically implying that the solution does not lie in yet another reactive move of a moral or legal nature that might cancel out the conflict.<sup>17</sup> Rather, the solution lies in the ethical process that ensures the maintenance of the movement and flow of forces between bodies – in other words, a process that leaves the circuits of affection between them actively engaged. Just as the kind of narcissism that one acknowledges has radically different implications than the narcissism that remains blind to itself, the acknowledgment of the powers of affection that reside in our own and other bodies can enable us to establish productive and creative links with others.

Ultimately, the body's dancing skills in *The Tango Lesson*, its active powers of affection, are not just of a physical nature, but extend to the ethical dimension as well. Olkowski makes this point quite eloquently:

It is useful to note that *puissance* is not indicative of power over something; it is the capacity to carry out some activity, so that a force that goes to the limit of its power has both the capacity to carry out something and the greatest capacity to be affected. But active force or power is not a physical capacity; in Deleuze's reading, it is ethical. (Olkowski 1999: 45)

In this regard, Potter's active power does not only hinge upon her ability to learn and dance the tango, or even upon her filmmaking capacities. What this active power consists of is subtly, almost imperceptibly, given away in a conversation between tango dancer and filmmaker. As Verón tells Potter at one point in the film that he has not seen her do anything yet, hence he cannot believe in her strength, Potter replies: "You don't know how to use your eyes. You only want to be looked at. Not to look. That's why you don't see. That's why you know nothing about film!" The ability to see the world and to see others coincides here with the ability to expand/augment oneself by affecting, and being affected by, others. This ethical aspect of power (*puissance*) unfolds in *The Tango Lesson* through a singular re-enactment of tango, one that exactly corresponds to Savigliano's definition of the dance as "a game of bodies pushing mind boundaries" (Savigliano 1996: 200). The film's interest in "pushing mind boundaries" is reflected not only in its deliberate (con)fusion of fiction and fact, but also in its attempt at destabilizing the traditional concept and practice of tango. As I will explain momentarily, Potter's film reconfigures several hard-and-fast rules of tango, threatening to divest the dance of its normative features and transforming it into something that, to the purists and the connoisseurs, might no longer even qualify as tango.

Potter displays an ability to transform the dual-partnered structure of the dance and its reliance on a hierarchical gender dynamics into a multiple-partnered dance that rewrites binary relations between male and female as a playful dynamics of uncontainable difference. At the same time, she remaps the emotional parameters of the dance from its largely sad, melancholy tone to the possibility of incorporating joy into the emotional range of both its musical and its kinetic elements. The film features a number of choreographies in which Potter is seen dancing with several male partners simultaneously. On one of these occasions, Potter joins Verón and two other male dancers (Gustavo Naveira and Fabián Salas), proving the binary gendered choreographic boundaries of tango susceptible to modification. The choreography they engage in is a more joyous and freer version of the movements of tango, to the point where tango's quintessential definition ("a sad thought that can be danced"; Savigliano 1996: 202) no longer seems to hold. The dance is rid of much of the calculated tension and predictable appearance of struggle between partners, and instead proceeds in more mobile, less constricted, patterns. Furthermore, the transference of Potter's body from man to man does not register as an act of homosocial exchange. Instead, her own body becomes the active force that lends the performance its sense of plurality and playfulness. The end of the dance emphasizes Potter's freedom of mobility: fully extended horizontally in Verón's arms, and turned round and round at the height of his shoulders,

Potter's body is reminiscent of a swimmer or a bird in flight. Transformed into a "[joyful] thought that can be danced," the tango here constitutes the most eloquent expression of a Spinozist/Deleuzian bodily ethics. The dance thus expresses what the body is capable of in its relations with other bodies – its capacity not only for sadness and decomposition, but also for joy and expansion.

Interestingly, as the film's final moments reveal, although Verón has insisted on assuming the role of leader from the start, it is Potter who has occupied a more active and enabling position throughout. In this sense, Potter exhibits certain parallelisms with some of the female performers in Sirk's melodramas, such as *Imitation's* Sara Jane/Kohner, or *Written's* Marylee/Malone. Her apparent subordination to the leading will of Verón at the *narrative* level cannot detract us from the active and altering force she sets in motion at the film's *affective-performative* level. Verón, on the other hand, epitomizes the form of power which, even at the height of its competency, remains enslaved to reactive forces. Their respective modalities of power are described in the following remarks by feminist Deleuzian commentator Jerry Flieger:

"Man" in his majoritarian state harbours forces subject to a repressive ideology, a slave morality; in *Man*, "force is impeded in what it can do;" while "woman" is the marker of a more active force which motivates the differential force of becoming – a line of flight away from majority, faciality, centrality. (Flieger 2000: 53, my emphasis)

Flieger's point is echoed in Olkowski's remark that "the slave does not cease to be a slave when he is triumphant, and the slave is triumphant only by means of 'law'" (Olkowski 1999: 45).

Through the transmutation of life into tango, and tango into life, Potter reminds us that the performer (in all of us) is always already a narcissist. As such, our best option from an ethical, pragmatic standpoint may be to recognize that our ability to further our own joy can only be sustained if we acknowledge our capacities to affect and to be affected by other bodies – in sum, if we recognize the many others that we are and the many others that we seek. As a practice uniquely suited to unravel the non-unitary nature of the self, dance contributes to this acknowledgment in ways that are enormously pleasurable. Away from *Thriller's* compromising strategies, *The Tango Lesson* dances its way confidently toward a feminist politics rooted in the body's powers of affection. This politics does not arise as a reactive move against male domination, but as an active, ethically committed force cognizant of its own transformative potential and willing to experiment with it without the expectation of predictable goals or measurable results.



## Notes

1. As Deleuze and Guattari make clear, the difference between the molar and molecular planes is not a question of quantity or size; that is, it is not the case that the molecular is

in the realm of the imagination and applie[s] only to the individual and interindividual . . . there is just as much social-Real on one line as on the other . . . the two forms are not simply distinguished by size, as a small form and a large form; although it is true that the molecular works in detail and operates in small groups, this does not mean that it is any less coextensive with the entire social field than molar organization. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 215)

2. A series of books that explore the encounter between Deleuze and feminist theory have appeared in recent years. Some of the most salient include: Rosi Braidotti's *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (1994), Moira Gatens' *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (1996), Elizabeth Grosz' *Volatile Bodies* (1994b), *Space, Time and Perversion* (1995), and *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (2005), Dorothea Olkowski's *Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation* (1999), and *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, a volume edited by Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook (2000).
3. As we learn in SP-ARK, an online educational project based on the multimedia archive of Sally Potter, Potter's work as a filmmaker has been complemented by other artistic practices. She not only trained as a dancer and choreographer, an interest that solidified in the Limited Dance Company she founded, but she is also an award-winning performance artist and theatre director, and has been the member of several musical bands working as a lyricist and a singer (<http://sp-ark.typepad.com/blog>).
4. In acknowledging the central place the body should occupy within feminist film theory, I am not rejecting semiotic and psychoanalytic perspectives, which I find relevant at many junctures. Rather, I wish to combine these with a phenomenological approach (in my analysis of *Thriller*) and a Deleuzian approach (in my analysis of *The Tango Lesson*), both of which identify bodily action as not only inherently significant, but also indivisible from symbolic and discursive structures.
5. Whereas the melodrama achieves such ironic distanciation mostly through a stylized use of spatial and musical devices tightly woven into the very strands of sentimental or pathetic action, *Thriller* proposes a separation between commentary/discourse and the narrative material being commented upon. This strategy provides a more obvious dis-alignment between the master narrative of pathos and its deconstructed double.
6. Foster describes the female dancer in classical ballet in these terms: "Pliant, quivering with responsiveness, ready to be guided anywhere, she inclines toward him, leaving one leg behind, ever erect, a strong reminder of her desire" (Foster 1996: 1).

7. *Thriller*'s use of restrained movement is consistent with the melodramatic representation of the victim as "subjected to physical restraint" (Brooks 1994: 18). The increase of fluid movement in the women's bodies at the end of the film adheres to the melodramatic script outlined by Peter Brooks: "None of these melodramas can reach its denouement until the virtuous bodies have been freed, and explicitly recognized as bearing the sign of innocence" (Brooks 1994: 18). The last moments in *Thriller*, when the men jump off the window and the women embrace, take the analogy even further, for they exactly emulate the gestures of melodrama's final act – as described by Brooks, the public celebration and reward of the innocent and virtuous, and the complementary expulsion of the villain from the social realm (1994: 19).
8. The female body's state of excessive dependency is submitted to parodic reversal in a scene where Laffont, with her back to the camera, her legs apart and dressed in a masculine suit, carries the weight of Gacon's taller and stronger body in her arms. Dressed in a wild, dark-colored version of a female tutu, Gacon takes the typical position of a female dancer while his whole body is supported by Laffont. Laffont then turns clockwise toward the camera while still holding Gacon in that position. Finally, the movement is repeated in an overexposed shot that entirely erases Laffont and Gacon's facial features.
9. According to Elsaesser's dissection of melodrama, the genre consistently conveys the claustrophobic atmosphere of the bourgeois home through a cluttered *mise-en-scène* where décor not only exerts pressure over characters, but virtually supplants them:

The more the setting fills with objects . . . the more the characters are enclosed in seemingly ineluctable situations. Pressure is generated by things crowding in on them and life . . . [is] cluttered with obstacles and objects that invade their personalities, take them over, stand for them, become more real than the human relations or emotions they were intended to symbolize. (Elsaesser 1987: 51)

10. The feminist emancipation of the voice and its discursive capacities from the limitations of the body is one of Silverman's key arguments in *The Acoustic Mirror*:

Within that variety of feminist film practice which is characterized by . . . theoretical sophistication . . . the female voice is often shown to coexist with the female body only at the price of its own impoverishment and entrapment. Not surprisingly, therefore, it generally pulls away from any fixed locus within the image track, away from the constraints of synchronization. (Silverman 1988: 141)

Silverman examines an array of examples of feminist avant-garde films that disturb the normative fit between body and voice with a playful use of disembodied voices. Her examples include Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*

and *Jeanne Dielman*, Yvonne Rainer's *Film about a Woman Who . . .* and *Journeys from Berlin*, Sally Potter's *The Gold Diggers*, Marguerite Duras' *India Song*, Ulrike Ottinger's *Madam X*, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx*, Bette Gordon's *Empty Suitcases*, and Patricia Gruben's *Sifted Evidence*.

11. In her analysis of *The Tango Lesson*, Lucy Fischer puts forth a similar view of *Rage* as an anachronistic scenario no longer valid for the kind of feminist spirit that animates the rest of the film. She writes:

Although such a scenario might have been novel in the late seventies . . . by now the idea seems clichéd and hackneyed . . . On some level, Potter has not only abandoned the screenplay for *Rage* but the very emotion that it signifies. Thus, in trekking around the world in pursuit of the tango, she chooses pleasure over pain. (Fischer 2004: 44)

12. Potter's partial relinquishing of her formerly explicit theoretical focus in favor of a more expressive and direct performative mode offers an interesting contrast with Rainer, a contemporaneous feminist filmmaker whose work also intersects with the world of professional dance. Although intensely dedicated to dance prior to her work on film, Rainer's films soon grew disinvested from a notion of embodied performance, instead opting for transmuting bodily forces into textual gestures. Thus, practically all of Rainer's work, beginning with *Lives of Performers* (1972), submits the performers to a rigid and non-expressive choreography that chips away at the possibility of embodied affectivity far more pronouncedly than is the case in *Thriller*. The differences between Rainer's and Potter's methods in this respect may be understood in terms of the differences, examined in Chapter 2, between Brechtian representation and the Artaudian emphasis on a kind of theatricality that must be fully overtaken by the body. Like Brecht's gestic theatre, Rainer's treatment of spectacle relegates the body to an external position, and movement to its textual rendition. In *Lives of Performers*, for example, the physicality of the performance is reduced to a series of dispassionate references to the body spoken by the actors/dancers' disembodied voices.
13. Fischer's comments on Potter's appropriation of traditionally feminine footwear in *The Tango Lesson* offers a similar viewpoint. "Unlike the footwear depicted in *Rage*," Fischer notes, "[the tango-dancing shoes Potter purchases on her arrival in Buenos Aires] (despite their high heels) empower rather than constrain" (Fischer 2004: 51). On her part, Sophie Mayer argues that the use of feminine footwear in *The Tango Lesson* inscribes the film within a choreo-cinematic tradition, in particular establishing a dialogue with Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* (1948), in which the titular shoes "dance both The Girl and Vicky [Moirá Shearer] to her death," constrained by the impossible "choice between her artistic and domestic lives" (Mayer 2007: 17).
14. In *Cahiers du Cinéma*, film critic E. Huguin deplores Potter's narcissism in similar terms:

With *The Tango Lesson*, a sort of exceedingly narcissistic cinematographic auto-fiction, Sally Potter must have reached the peak of pleasure . . . The film is dragged down by its mannerisms and its pretentious posing, its fake adventures in montage filled with dream-like effects that accompany the film script written by Potter (the only sequences in color emulating the style of Derek Jarman, but lacking in humor or inspiration). (Higuinen 1998: 82, my translation)

One only wonders if critics such as Roy and Higuinen might have felt inclined to launch an equally acrimonious attack on any of the male directors who frequently cross the boundaries between fiction and reality by putting themselves within the camera's range of visibility either as fictional characters or exhibitionistic directors (Welles, Hitchcock, Godard, Fassbinder, Jarmusch, Tarantino, and Kitano, to name a few).

15. Claire Monk, perhaps significantly a female critic, recognizes Potter's act as risky and bold, and is able to see it as a fundamental tool in the film's ongoing demystifying project. Monk writes:

*The Tango Lesson* will inevitably be rejected by some viewers and critics as self-indulgent. But for a film-maker like Potter who has never marketed herself as a media or screen personality, the experience must have been closer to self-exposure. Miraculously, she transforms this highly personal material and uses her ambiguous screen presence . . . well to make a film which is mostly intriguing and affecting rather than embarrassing. (Monk 1997: 54)

Taking a more neutral tone, but equally perceptive, is Masson's view of the film as "un documentaire sur le corps de la cinéaste" ("a documentary of the filmmaker's body"); Masson 1998: 48).

16. This embodied reduplication of a flat, one-dimensional image is reminiscent of a tableau-like scene in Potter's 1993 film *Orlando*, where young Orlando, in his early masculine days, stands with his betrothed in formal portrait pose and attire in front of yet another portrait of his parents. The staginess of that particular tableau is accentuated by the fact that Orlando and his young lady first figure as spectators of the portrait, and then turn around toward the camera in an act of unmediated address to the viewer and self-conscious exhibitionism.
17. The lucidity with which the problem of gender relations is not only stated but also performed at this point in the film reminds me of Olkowski's idea that the act of clearly and accurately stating a problem is simultaneous with the articulation of its solution. Olkowski writes: "Once a problem is properly stated, then its solution exists, though it may be hidden or covered up . . . stating a problem correctly and not simply in terms of the order-words handed down to us requires invention" (1999: 91).

## CHAPTER 4

# Kinesthetic Seductions

Man is a slow being, who is only made possible thanks to fantastic speeds.

Henri Michaux, quoted by Gilles Deleuze in the interview  
“The Brain Is the Screen”

As long as we speak of a power of the soul over the body we are not really thinking of a capacity or power. What we really mean is that the soul has higher “duties”: it must command the body’s obedience . . . As for the body’s power, this is either a power of execution, or the power to lead the soul astray, and entice it from its duties. In all this we are thinking morally.

Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*

The films of Claire Denis are often described as sensual, even surreal, in their lack of conformity to narrative and cognitive structures of classical cinema. Denis’ cinema intersects the world less through the visual, one-dimensional grid of classical representation than through a multi-sensory, kinetic prism that is as decentered and chaotic as it is filled with intensity of affect. This chapter will examine the films *Nénette and Boni* (1997), *Beau Travail* (*Good Work*, 1999), and *Friday Night* (2002) as instances of an affective-performative cinema that dissolves the disciplinary mechanisms weighing upon both the performing and the viewing bodies into a playful event of unsuspected possibilities. I will engage these films primarily at the level of the seductive power of their images, that is, the capacity these images have to affect and transform our perceptual experience. My description of Denis’ films as “seductive” is by no means intended as a metaphor, but rather in the literal sense of seduction as the act that “leads a person away from proper conduct or duty” (*American Heritage Dictionary* 1982). The person led away from duty is oftentimes a particular character, but, more broadly, the act of seduction targets the viewer, who is invited to abandon the routinized and disciplined rituals of film viewing within classical narrative cinema and to embrace the pursuit of “contingency and chance” (Jayamanne 1999: 132). Thus, both characters and viewers are encouraged to take a Deleuzian line of flight, or in Denis’ own words, “a movement toward an

unknown other and toward the unknown in relations between people" (Denis in Camhi 1997: 26).

To deliver its full potential for the production of new affective experiences, Denis' cinema implicitly demands that we be ready to decompose our own perceptual organism – the shackles of bodily totality and cognitive organization – in order to be able to receive intense, disorganized pleasure. Such abandonment of the spectator in the hands of the film is echoed in Denis' own description of the spectator's position as "a kind of amorous passivity" (Denis in Darke 2000: 17) at the receiving end of the film's all-encompassing eroticism.<sup>1</sup>

The enveloping eroticism found in Denis' cinema presents close ties to Deleuze's anti-Oedipal thinking, instantiating the possibility of a productive alliance between a non-Oedipal paradigm of sexual difference and the feminist concern with overturning patriarchal, heterosexual norms. The kind of eroticism that interests Denis is captured in Deleuze and Guattari's idea of an unstructured, anti-Oedipal sexuality: "Sexuality brings into play too great a diversity of conjugated becomings; these are like *n* sexes, an entire war machine through which love passes . . . Sexuality is the production of a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 278). Denis' cinema takes the de-Oedipalization of desire to its ultimate consequences – first, by severing the erotic from narrative as well as heterosexual imperatives, but, even more radically, by dislocating the erotic sense from the anthropomorphic perspective altogether. That is, this cinema no longer takes the human form as the privileged engine of erotic meaning. In stark contrast with the majority of mainstream representations of the erotic, Denis' films effect a displacement of eroticism and sensuality away from the human couple and onto the unlimited series of perceptions, sensations, and affects that constitutes the film world. The traditional screen encounter between two bodies, so readily transformed into a fetishistic cliché, gives way to a molecular model that endows with sexual significance/sensation events and situations that are not deemed sexual in the vocabulary of classical cinema. Thus, what is important here is "the sexual charge that passes between the actors and the spectators" (Denis in Darke 2000: 17).

Denis' work provides an interesting contrast with Potter's implicitly feminist project in *The Tango Lesson*. As in Potter's film, Denis' *Nénette and Boni* and *Beau Travail* turn the tables of patriarchal gender codes by placing the male body center-stage. As well, both filmmakers expose the myth of masculine self-sufficiency through an unlikely focus on male narcissism and exhibitionism. Where they mostly differ is in the degree of abstraction injected into their narratives. While in Potter's *The Tango*

*Lesson* the weakening of the rigid supports of masculine identity is mediated by a female character/filmmaker within a relatively coherent, if highly self-reflexive, narrative, in Denis the dismantling of identity coincides with the dismantling of narrative and character as primary centers of desire. As a result, desire is expressed and performed at an ontological level: the film itself becomes a performance of desire's own process of proliferation and expansion, calling on the spectator to participate in this expansive process as well.

Combining a high level of abstraction with an intensely vivid physicality, Denis' films fit in smoothly with a Deleuzian philosophy of incorporeal materialism. These films are exemplary instances of Deleuze's notion of cinema as a "spiritual automaton," that is, "a machine that puts thought into contact with an Outside that comes to subvert the nature of the relations of representation existing in cinema between image and reality" (Bensmaïa 2005: 150). Denis, like Deleuze, "tears the cinematographic image from the "narrative-representative" field that [holds] it the prisoner of . . . logical thought" (Bensmaïa 2005: 154). My aim in the following readings of *Nénette and Boni*, *Beau Travail*, and *Friday Night* is to show the affective-performative qualities of these films, that is, their literal involvement in the performance of an affective, qualitative movement of desire. I will be engaging the kinesthetic seductions performed in Denis' films as the cinematic counterpart of Deleuze's idea that "real cinema achieves another violence, another sexuality, molecular rather than localized" (Deleuze in Flaxman 2000: 367).

### *Nénette and Boni: a disorder of the senses*

Through the simple story of a brother and a sister in their teens living in a Marseilles working-class neighborhood, their mutual disaffection, her pregnancy, and their gradual attachment to each other, *Nénette and Boni* challenges our viewing habits far more forcefully than a more complicated narrative ever might. This film exhibits a kind of extreme attachment to the surface of the image, hence to viewing sensations of touch and bodily contact. In many scenes, Denis employs a shaky hand-held camera and a proliferation of decentered close-ups without the cognitive relief provided either by establishing shots or by deep-focus composition. As Dominique Bluher has argued, the lack of visual and spatial depth in *Nénette and Boni* may be conceived negatively as indicative of the characters' lack of access to the world around them – their inability to see and to know beyond their most immediate and present surroundings (Bluher 2000: 17). Moreover, the epistemological limitations entailed in this visual style are shared by the

viewer, who may initially experience the film as claustrophobic. But alternatively, I would argue, these limitations may be regarded as the invitation the film extends to viewers to exchange their cliché-oriented visual drive for a multi-sensory experience that gives them access to new thoughts, affects, and sensations. According to Deleuze, this close, flat-on vision induces involvement of another kind in the spectator – an involvement that is no longer based on the distinction between internal and external space, objectivity and subjectivity, but one that instead joins the physical and the mental, the sensual with the abstract (Deleuze 1989: 6).

In his diary “Confessions of a Wimp,” Boni (Grégoire Colin) records his erotic fantasies of sexual encounters with the local lady baker (Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi). Boni’s persistent desire for clandestine encounters where he imagines himself penetrating the ultra-fetishized body of the baker places his sexuality firmly within a repressive phallogentric economy probably no different than that of most young men his age. Boni is thus initially shown as a withdrawn and solitary man who is badly equipped to have reciprocal sexual relations with real people. Moreover, Boni’s initial interactions with his estranged younger sister Nénette (Alice Houri) extend his emotional dyslexia more broadly to the realm of human relations of any kind. And yet, Denis’ rendition of even the most fetishistic of Boni’s fantasies confounds the visual stability of the sexual image as fetish by turning the fantasy into a playful event of sensory disorientation.

One of these occasions opens with Boni lying in bed while indulging in one of his fantasies. “I shove my cock in her. She barely puts up a fight,” he says. The fantasy encounter takes place at night-time in a deserted alleyway. The baker is brushing her hair. Boni walks up to her from the back and penetrates her. The image then unaccountably changes into an abstract geometrical pattern that resembles the highlights in her blonde hair, yet seems too stylized in its linear, angular shape. This shot goes in and out of focus, while the lighting flickers. A loud gurgling noise begins to be heard. In the next shot, with naked torso and closed eyes, Boni is sitting against a wall facing the sun, and then drops to his right side, as if losing balance. This suggestion of orgasm is followed by a close-up of Boni in bed, eyes still closed. The gurgling noise has now become louder. Boni then turns toward his left side, preparing us for the appearance of another person lying by his side. But, as the camera pans right toward the object of Boni’s look and comes to rest on his newly acquired coffee-maker, we are caught off-guard and lured by surprise. Not only do we retroactively identify the machine as the source of the gurgling sound heard over images of Boni and the lady baker, but we realize the libidinal and sensory nexus that, in those images, ties the coffee-maker with the baker’s body: both attract Boni’s



gaze and his haptic desire<sup>2</sup> to stroke their rounded contours. Rather than simply concluding that the film is complicit with Boni's objectification of the baker by equating her with a coffee-machine, I see this nexus as indicative of Denis' attempt to show cinema's ability to break down the boundaries between bodily surfaces beyond strictly anthropomorphic criteria. Boni's caressing touch of the coffee-machine thus seems to evoke a pleasure supposedly not unlike that evoked by his desire to touch the voluptuous curves of the baker's body.

As I implied earlier, Denis' cinematic world is one where any body, or any singularity/*haecceity*, may potentially become an erotic actor in the fullest sense. Thus, although the encounter between Boni and the baker is clearly filtered through Boni's desire (Boni's desire acts as its catalyst), the scene I just described surpasses a simple depiction of a subjective fantasy to attain a level of impersonality that involves the film itself as a subject-less aggregate of sensible forces.

*Nénette and Boni* exhibits a strange fascination with the extraordinary potential for play crowding in on the surface of ordinary objects. As exemplified by a slow pan over what looks like a gigantic cream cake or the many close-ups of round buns sporadically interspersed in the film and associated with the female breast, the film re-establishes the connection, severed in fetishism, between the body and the world, between sexual desire and a continuum of unstructured sensual surfaces in and around us. Throughout, for example, the shape of bread is associated with sexual images. In the scene where Boni comes to the bakery trying to pass for a regular customer, the words "French stick," used in his diary to refer to his own phallic prowess, are used by customers right and left simply to ask for a baguette. The film spells out its ironic self-awareness of this double meaning by showing the baker husband (Vincent Gallo) with a big grin on his face as he watches his wife serving customers. Later in the scene, Boni looks on while she wraps up a pair of sweet round buns and brings them up to her chest level, drawing a visual parallel between her breasts and the buns, and thereby confirming Boni's lustful perception of her.

The world of Boni's phallic fantasies is gradually and literally touched by the feminine world of rounded and fertile shapes, exemplified in the film by two distinctive narrative/symbolic elements: the activity of making bread, identified with the baker couple and with Boni himself as a maker and seller of pizzas; and the mystery of life gestating in the womb, which, although identified with Nénette's pregnancy, provokes Boni's unstoppable fascination. Boni's usual mode of voyeuristic distance and disconnection thus gives way to an unexpected discovery of the possibility of proximity and connectedness.

Boni's more personal encounter with the lady baker outside the confines of his solitary thoughts and words is worth noting because it makes his transition from isolation to connectedness extremely clear. The scene opens with Boni standing still and alone on a sidewalk while a swarming crowd walks past him completely unawares of his bodily presence. Pushed to one side and the other, Boni looks sad and oblivious to the world around. While this image persists, we begin to hear the first notes of a beautiful, melancholy love song that serves as a sound bridge ushering us into the intimate world of reciprocity and connectedness at the bakers' home. After a utopian intermission where we see husband and wife dancing slowly to the same music and caressing each other, we return to Boni lost in the crowd. The lady baker, now walking past Boni, recognizes him and suggests that he join her for coffee. Boni is stunned. The actual lady baker renders him speechless and defenseless. She begins to talk about skin molecules called "pheromones" and describes them as "invisible things that send off signals" between men and women, "invisible fluids that say things like 'you turn me on' or 'I'm available.'" While Boni does not utter a word during their entire meeting, he manages to smile timidly in the end. But the really noteworthy element in the lady baker's sexual discourse is the way in which, while resorting to a popularized and oversimplified version of scientific theory, it manages to displace Boni's familiar masculinist and highly fetishistic sexual paradigm – a paradigm where man's ego is unequivocally in control – by emphasizing a non-localized, molecular-based sexual paradigm where bodily fluids and chemical reactions seem the predominant erotic agents.

Thus, from mimicking the inherited sexual attitudes of masculine control, Boni's sexuality is gradually transformed into a more feminized and sensual experience. Boni's transformation may be seen in the light of Deleuze's distinction, pertinent to all of Denis' films, between the *molar* and the *molecular* planes. As I have explained in former chapters, while the molar plane refers to traditional, humanist notions of identity and subjectivity, the molecular plane is understood as a perpetual becoming freed from the constraints of a stable territory, position, or goal. Flieger's definitions of both these notions confirm the appropriateness of Deleuze's philosophical concept of the molecular register to the lady baker's discourse on sexuality mentioned above. Flieger explains: "The molar register concerns whole organisms, subjects, forms, and their interaction, including social action, while the molecular register considers non-subjective being on the level of chemical and physical reactions, intensities, in a radically material 'micropolitics'" (Flieger 2000: 41).

The feminist implications of such molecular micropolitics of desire are worth considering. As Judith Mayne has noted, part of the film's rethinking of the erotic is the proximity, rather than the opposition, between the categories of the sexual and the maternal so crucial to the patriarchal stratification of female sexuality. Referring to the scene I have just described, Mayne writes:

There is a definite movement beyond [the] dichotomy [of the sexual and the maternal] in this scene . . . [the baker's] discussion of "invisible fluids" summarizes the film's preoccupation with flow – with water, movement, transformation . . . the "secret chemical dialogue" of which she speaks is also what Denis aims to achieve in relations between images. (Mayne 2005: 76)

Interestingly, although the lady baker and Nénette are initially identified with either one or the other of these two traditionally incompatible roles – the baker as the focus of sexual desire and Nénette as the mother-to-be – these identifications are subject to fluid modification in the course of the film. Thus, the baker becomes a kind of maternal teacher to Boni, while Nénette's relationship to Boni, and even to her newborn baby, is not seen as wholly disconnected from Boni's erotic activities.

Boni's engagement with a kind of deterritorialized, non-individuated sexuality is exemplified in the scene following his encounter with the baker, where he is shown practically making love to the dough he is kneading. His sensuous handling of the dough and the softness, malleability, and roundness of the shapes it takes extend the discursive analogy the film has already established at this point between the pliable nature of the dough – continually lending itself to modification – and the female breasts and womb as potentially engaged in a creative process of becoming. Boni smells the dough, buries his nose in it, and talks to it as if it were an animated and sentient being. A frantic series of arm and hand movements and loud moans ends in a suggestion of orgasm as he plunges his entire face right into a, by now completely amorphous, mass of dough, and then squeezes it and strokes his whole face with it.

Boni's transformation is also crucially related to his sister's pregnancy. I would like to suggest that the irrational, yet real, fervor with which Boni becomes involved with Nénette's pregnancy and with the newly born baby warrants a comparison with Deleuze's notion of "becoming-woman," a notion that is also closely linked to his advocacy of a molecular politics. For Deleuze, becoming-woman is available to men and women alike; it has nothing to do with becoming a gendered female, and everything to do with embodying a "minoritarian ethics" (Flieger 2000: 46) opposed to the instrumental and rational mode of thinking of the dominant majority.

*Nénette and Boni* offers an interesting example of such dislocation between the process of becoming-woman and the gendered female body. Thus, in the film, the fruit of the womb is a gift not necessarily for the gendered female subject whose body carries it, but for anybody who might want to embrace it. As I said earlier in a different context (the sensual resonance the film establishes between the lady baker's body and the coffee-maker's round shape), this potential disconnection between womb and woman does not objectify either, but rather posits the persistence and importance of life over and against any individuated ego or desire. In this regard, the film goes against any established expectations by having the asocial and seemingly uncaring Boni welcome this gift, while refusing to impose it on a clearly unprepared and overwhelmed Nénette. In this way, too, the failing family unit formed by Boni, Nénette, and their alienated father is transformed into the possibility of parenthood outside any ideologically sanctioned structures. Boni shows an unreflective, yet keen, awareness of the futility of any attempt at convincing a society reliant on disciplinary institutions such as the nuclear family of the possibility that he might be a good parent to this baby. Accordingly, he resorts to the drastic measure of abducting his sister's baby from the hospital, with the help of a gun, to prevent the inevitable outcome of its being given away for adoption.

At one point in the film, a close-up shot of Nénette's pregnant belly is enough to suggest the independence of the life it harbors from an individualistic or egocentric framework. In its perfectly rounded shape and smooth surface, Nénette's naked belly is visually akin to a fruit, while also reminiscent of the many round shapes of sweet buns that link the sensual and sexual axes of the film. What stands out markedly in this shot is the pulse or palpitation beating both inside and outside the belly. Towards the end of the film, Boni confronts his sister's denial of the growing life inside of her: "You say it doesn't exist, but I saw it in your belly," he says. As I will now try to show, the same dichotomy of fearful/repressed denial of life versus unfettered persistence of life is to be found in *Beau Travail*. As in all of Denis' films, there too we find an uncannily similar contrast between the laws of morality and discipline and the intensely joyful outcomes of ethical decisions unrelated to any known structures or programs.

### ***Beau Travail*: performing the narrative of seduction**

*Beau Travail*'s loose story concerns a group of French legionnaires stationed in the Eastern African country of Djibouti. By and large, the film's sensual focus is fixed upon the male body – its movements, gestures,

routine habits, rough training exercises, communal ceremonies, and communion with the earth and the sea. As Martine Beugnet and Jane Sillars have pointed out, the repeated images of the soldiers' "shaved heads, sculpted features and smooth, muscled physiques . . . offer a highly idealised [sic] vision of male bodies" (Beugnet and Sillars 2001: 171). The height of male eroticism centers upon the seduction/repulsion relationship between sergeant Galoup (Denis Lavant) and legionnaire Gilles Sentain (Grégoire Colin). In some of their moments of leisure, however, the men are seen dancing at the local nightclub with native women, and we are even led to believe that Galoup, the film's protagonist and narrator, is also involved in a steady relationship with Rahel (Marta Tafesse Kassa), a stunningly beautiful African woman. But, as I noted earlier, sexual exchanges between characters do not constitute the primary focus of Denis' attention. Accordingly, the film consistently chooses to orchestrate its sexual seduction of the spectator outside the sexual act itself – by maintaining male and female sexual and sensual activities as separate, by placing the spectator in direct rapport with, and at the receiving end of, each of these sensual axes, and, most ingenuously, by displacing the indefinitely deferred erotic charge between Galoup and Sentain onto Galoup's final and unabashed offering of his body to the spectator.

The absence of intermediary agents in the film's project of seducing the spectator is clear from the outset. Immediately after a panning shot over a primitive-looking painting of a group of soldiers from the Foreign Legion, the film cuts to a medium close-up of Rahel at the disco. Mimicking the sounds of the song she is dancing to, she delivers a sonorous kiss aimed at an unknown point offscreen right. Since there is no reverse shot disclosing the recipient of this kiss, and given the acoustic fullness of Rahel's kiss and the sensuality of her gestures, we might say that the film attempts to entice us into feeling its own erotic potentialities from the very beginning.

This kind of molecular sexuality/sensuality goes hand in hand with a transformation of the ordinary image into one capable of generating extraordinary effects and sensations. The inherent physicality of the legionnaires' lives offers the ideal ground for this transformation. Not only in the more formal choreographies sporadically interspersed in the film, but also in the sustained erotic intensity underpinning the camera's look at the legionnaires' bodies, *Beau Travail* replaces the molar, corporeally fixated sexuality of classical narrative cinema with a molecular sexuality that is dispersed across a variety of anonymous bodies, landscapes, sounds, and colors. The film carries out this transformation by increasingly shifting attention away from narrative considerations and favoring instead purely performative moments.

Performativity in this film is inscribed at three different, yet overlapping, levels: the inherent performativity of the (male) military body in the film's *mise-en-scène*; the private drama of seduction/repulsion between Galoup and Sentain;<sup>3</sup> and an affective-performative, meta-narrative plane, where the film becomes openly exhibitionistic in its seductive designs upon the viewer. The lines separating gymnastic exercises, military drills, and balletic choreographies are not absolutely drawn; instead, these lines change according to different, and fluid, degrees of intensity, speed, and slowness in the movements performed. As a general rule, the slower the movements the soldiers are engaged in, the more intense and solemn, and the more detached from narrative, their performance becomes.<sup>4</sup> *Beau Travail*'s ultimate effect is to reconfigure narrative by highlighting affective and bodily components characteristic of performance.

In *The Time-Image*, Deleuze refers to the everyday body and the ceremonial body as two poles that are "discovered or rediscovered in experimental cinema" (Deleuze 1989: 191). But it seems to me that, far from keeping these two bodies apart, a particular kind of cinematic look upon the everyday body brings forth its aura, hence its potential as a vehicle for ceremony in its own right. In *Beau Travail*, these two kinds of bodies become indistinguishable. The film endows the everyday gestures of the male body with a ceremonial, ritualistic quality reminiscent of Benjamin's thoughts on the aura. Agnès Godard's playful camera contributes to a large extent to the creation of a world capable of embracing seemingly discontinuous surfaces or unrelated spaces. Camera work and editing emphasize the slippage between the soldiers' different activities, thereby conflating the everyday and the ceremonial bodies. A similar slippage apparently took place in the shooting process, as suggested in Denis' response to a question about the film's relation to dance: "We never thought we were doing dance, we never pronounced the word dance . . . we were doing the training . . . but it slowly became like a dance" (Denis in Romney 2000: 4).

The slippage between the ordinary and the extraordinary occurs throughout the film, and it takes the most unusual forms. For example, at one point the legionnaires engage in a series of training exercises that take place above ground level. The men walk on ropes or cables while holding on to them with their hands. Appropriately, the next shot shows a pattern of several clotheslines filled with khaki undergarments hung to dry. Denis' description of this graphic/mental connection between shots suggests a way of working with the image that shuns the separation between the ceremonial and the everyday, the abstract and the physical. She says: "I thought the laundry lying on the lines . . . was the army itself drying on lines as the exercises were to walk also on lines" (Denis in Romney 2000: 6). Interestingly, it seems as

though in this particular connection between scenes, the demystification of the military body, its return to ordinariness, is accompanied not by a loss of aura but, paradoxically, by an increase in the image's auratic value. The aura here lies in the slippage between the mythical robustness of the military body and something as ordinary and dispossessed as a garment hung on a line to dry.

*Beau Travail's* insertion of military life into a performative framework reaches its highest dramatic point in the scene where Galoup and Sentain perform their rivalry in front of their fellow legionnaires. To the sound of Benjamin Britten's operatic rendition of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*,<sup>5</sup> Galoup and Sentain walk on opposite sides of an imaginary circle with rather slow and purposeful steps, mercilessly eyeing each other as if to test who might be better equipped to master the evil eye (a theme which resurfaces later in the film after Galoup sends Sentain away to his death in the desert). Aesthetically, Galoup and Sentain's formal enactment of their aggressive relationship does not strike us as a jarring oddity, but rather as a smooth continuation of the film's overall design. If it is possible to integrate such a stylized performative moment within the film's narrative, it is no doubt because from the outset the film seems intent on downplaying the differences between the more realistic physical activities occupying the men and the moments more explicitly framed and staged as performances. After all, as Denis remarks of the scene just discussed, Galoup and Sentain's outlandish performance is a real martial arts exercise where the opponents test their psychological endurance by locking eyes with each other (Denis in Romney 2000: 4).

Even if consistently informed by a sense of performance, the images of the legionnaires' communal training and leisure activities represent the more straightforward narrative axis of the film. By contrast, the images of Galoup engaged in purely narcissistic acts – ironing his shirt, but also combing and wetting his hair and looking into the mirror, not to mention his last dance – exceed all parameters of narrative design and logic. Galoup's isolation from the group in these instances, together with the ostensible lack of dramatic purpose attached to his actions, signal in a direction other than that of classical narrative. Further, the moments focusing on Galoup's narcissistic acts can neither be situated in the African space of the legion's communal life, nor assuredly be placed in the post-legion world of Marseilles.

*Beau Travail* features a gradual displacement from the disciplined body of military ritual to the playful body of *jouissance*<sup>6</sup> and seduction. Such displacement may also be understood as a contamination/contagion of narrative by the affective-performative level. The ordinary activity of ironing

addresses this process rather suggestively. Images of the legionnaires ironing their uniforms constitute the ritualized and predictable counterpart of the narratively unmotivated images of Galoup ironing his dancing attire in preparation for his final “date” with us. Several details attest to this conversion: the shirt Galoup is seen ironing several times throughout the film is not the khaki shirt of his military uniform, but a black civilian garment. Together with its matching black pants and black and white shoes, it is the only civilian attire he wears in the film, and he does so at two peak moments: on the night the legionnaires carry Sentain upon their shoulders (the night Galoup feels “the first pangs of the rage to come”), and during the film’s closing moments, when he lets his body become a pure vehicle of speed and slowness. Galoup’s black shirt is thus the sign of his undoing as a military man and of the possibility that, contrary to his belief, he may in fact be “fit for (civil) life.” Galoup’s undoing as a legionnaire begins precisely on the night just mentioned, and the proof of his fitness for life lies in his final explosive performance when, as Denis implies, Galoup escapes from himself (Denis in Darke 2000: 18).

These two scenes are linked by highly incongruous continuities. That is, although the scenes share certain elements of the *mise-en-scène*, this continuity is impossible from a rational or realistic standpoint. On the night he follows the group of legionnaires carrying a fellow soldier, and then Sentain, on their shoulders, Galoup unaccountably changes clothes half-way through the scene, shedding the military uniform of authority to don the clothes of seduction. As Galoup enters frame right behind the group’s steps, in the role of unseen and jealous voyeur, he is no longer wearing the khaki uniform he is seen in prior to this moment in the same scene. Instead, he is dressed in the black shirt and pants of his dazzling solo dance at the film’s conclusion. Interestingly, too, Galoup lights a cigarette and turns away from the group of soldiers with the same sensuous ease and graceful movements that he displays at the beginning of his final performance – exhibiting in both instances a bodily comportment that is inconsistent with his straitjacketed behavior in the rest of the film. The fact that the incipient seduction suggested in this scene is fulfilled, in a displaced manner, only at the film’s conclusion justifies the illogical continuities that link and unlink the two scenes.

Following Deleuze’s notion of the time-image as an image severed from realistic ties to time, space, and causality, one might say that the spatio-temporality of these moments is informed by a kind of virtual, rather than actual, reality.<sup>7</sup> These moments belong to other moments in the film, but do not possess a particular spatio-temporal axis of their own. More specifically, the images of Galoup seem to voice the film’s most direct



expression of self-affection: its own libidinal inclination to seduce the spectator. That is, only by the end of the film do we get to understand that Galoup has been preparing himself all along for his final dance with us. Galoup will not dance with Sentain, with Rahel, or with any other character in the film, hence his preparations are entirely divorced from a narrative context. In a very real sense, then, it is the film, via Galoup, which has been preparing itself throughout for the unique event of seducing us. Keeping the reason for those preparations a secret until the very end, the film shows full compliance with the element of surprise essential to the act of seduction.

The scene just discussed may be said to have openings or cracks that allow parts of other scenes or moments in the film to seep in and inhabit its precarious borders. In so doing, it constitutes a perfect example of Deleuze's account of the spatial configuration of the cinema of the time-image: "Disparate sets . . . fit over each other, in an overlapping of perspectives" (Deleuze 1989: 203). In *Beau Travail*, the sets formed by the city streets and the nightclub call on each other from the depths of Galoup's memory and desire, but they also reverberate with each other in an affective realm that goes beyond subjectivity and character to involve the film body as a sensation-producing machine. It is as if the film were sending ripples of affect and thought across a diversity of its moments. Deleuze speaks of these affective charges as having the function of linking the film's parts. In other words, affective forces take over situations where space and time are no longer reliable or determinate:

*Space is no longer determined, it has become the any-space-whatever which is identical to the power of the spirit, to the perpetually renewed spiritual decision: it is this decision which constitutes the affect, or the "auto-affection," and which takes upon itself the linking of parts. (Deleuze 1986: 117)*

From this perspective, the film's final scene takes on a whole new meaning. It indeed becomes the timeless, placeless setting where Galoup's (and the film's) decision to seduce and yield to seduction is embodied and performed in the boldest, most surprising way.

In its emphatic choreographic dimension, *Beau Travail* conforms to what Deleuze calls "the requirement of the cinema of bodies," which is that "the character [be] reduced to his own bodily attitudes" (Deleuze 1989: 192). The character becomes a summation of gestures rather than a preconceived and abstract compendium of psychological traits. Gestures and their affective effects build up in time, reinforcing, disabling, or multiplying each other. In fact, Deleuze refers to bodily attitudes as "categories which put time into the body" (Deleuze 1989: 192). It is out of this mindful

consideration for time and the body and their mutual bond that the possibility arises for a character in a film to work as an element of surprise or as an agent of seduction.<sup>8</sup> And therein lies precisely the seductive power Galoup wields in his final solo dance. When a character is not fixed in advance, it can undo itself without warning. In time, identity becomes other and the body crystallizes this transformation. What we thus witness in *Beau Travail* is not straightforward storytelling, but the development and transformation of bodily attitudes both in Sentain and, even more interestingly, in Galoup. Sentain's open, spontaneous, slightly cocky, but basically unself-conscious body becomes, through the pressure of Galoup's judgmental eye, a withdrawn, hesitant, and self-doubting body. Galoup's regimented and utilitarian gestures – his sheltered and repressed military body – give way in the end to a body of *jouissance*, maddeningly sterile, blissfully dissipated. Following the same bodily turn, Galoup the remorseful, quiet, and rusty-muscled narrator becomes Galoup the crazy dancer whose body seems capable of breaking free from its own frame.

In accord with *Beau Travail*'s consistent use of discontinuous continuities, the scene that precedes the film's conclusion forms an intriguing bridge with the ending, joining both moments at an affective level while severing all rational ties between them. In this scene, Galoup pulls a gun out of a drawer and lies on his bed. He places the gun right on his stomach. The camera then gives us a close-up look at the sentence tattooed on the left side of his chest: "Sert la bonne cause et meurt" ["Serve the good cause and die"], which Galoup's voice-over also speaks in a whispering tone. An extreme close-up of his left bicep shows the rhythmical beating of his pulse, in a way that cannot fail to remind us of the shot of the pregnant pulsating belly in *Nénette and Boni*. Amid an otherwise static and silent shot, the film thereby draws deliberate attention to the pulsing of Galoup's vein. Rational thoughts or intimations of suicide thus collide with a life-beat that stands outside control and ratiocination. The opening lyrics of a disco-song by Corona ("this is the rhythm of my life") begin to be heard over this most literal image of life. Situated between the lingering stasis that paralyzes Galoup's body and the incipient moments of his dance, this brief, but affectively intense, shot fuses a kind of death drive with a most primitive and persistent vitality, thereby confounding such a fundamental binary as life and death. Accordingly, the dance that ensues is neither an inscription of life (as the opposite of death), nor an inscription of death (as the opposite of life). It is, rather, a line of flight, a moment of *jouissance* dislocated from any intelligible series of causes and effects, intentions and results.

By means of an "irrational cut" (Deleuze 1989: 214) that takes us from Galoup's recumbent body to his dancing body, *Beau Travail* thwarts the

principle of causality – thoughts of suicide/death as outcome – and welcomes the interference of a physical vitality that is capable of overturning the predictable course of the film's final images. One might borrow Artaud's words regarding the power of the brain to "turn towards the invisible" and "to resume a resurrection from death" (Deleuze 1989: 212) by way of explaining the way the film's brain locks into this vital pulse to effect a resurrection from the death of rational linearity – the scripted ending of suicide that would logically follow. The death undergone by Galoup is thus the death of identity, of slavery to repressive morality and reactive behavior. It is the death sought by Artaud when he writes: "If I commit suicide, it will not be to destroy myself but to put myself back together again . . . [to] free myself from the conditioned reflexes of my organs" (Artaud 1965: 56).

Galoup's acrobatic dance appears to take place in the same Djibouti disco/nightclub featured throughout the film – the same back-wall mirror, the same flashing lights. And yet, the space no longer serves the same narrative purpose, nor is it filled with the same crowd of legionnaires and local women. Deleuze identifies the indeterminacy of location in modern cinema – achieved in the proliferation of the "any-space-whatever" – with the ability of space to change coordinates suddenly and without apparent justification. In these instances, space may be said to change faces, to disguise itself under an array of masks or cloaks that render it both seductive and unfathomable.

During his final performance, Galoup/Lavant increasingly lets his body be overtaken by the music and abandons himself to a kinetic pattern whereby he seems to lose control of everything except his ability to be immersed in the rhythm. Unlike the Lacanian model of specular (mis)recognition, which describes the child as deriving a sense of jubilation from the illusory coordination and wholeness projected in front of his uncoordinated body, Galoup/Lavant seems to derive *jouissance* from a maddening loss of control. The surrounding presence of the mirror here provides an interesting parallel with Verón's solo dance, also in front of a mirror, in Potter's *The Tango Lesson*. Although the two moments undoubtedly share a strong narcissistic component to the men's dancing acts, the resulting implications are astoundingly different. Whereas Verón's narcissistic dance merely underscores his desire for autonomy and self-sufficiency, Galoup/Lavant's dance spins a series of bodily images that eradicate all sense of fixed corporeal limits or boundaries. While in the first instance, the narcissist remains unaware of his own projections, in the latter instance, he turns his projections into a creative and transformative act.

It is evident that Galoup's transformation from disciplined military body to mad dancing body entails a great deal of loss – loss of unity, loss of identity, or at least, loss of the illusions the subject entertains concerning these. But, as I will explain in a moment, I think this loss is ultimately a blessing in disguise for the male colonizer customarily obsessed with mastery and control. Susan Hayward reaches a different conclusion when assessing the pathology suffered by the ex-colonizer's body and the ways in which the film's final scene relates the losses he has suffered. Hayward reads Galoup's final dance as his coming to terms with the meaninglessness of his past colonial endeavors:

[Galoup's solo dance] should be read as his post-colonial moment when he recognizes . . . the futility of it all, of trying to be an a-priori unity of experiences. Why else does he scuttle away after his performance? The dislocated post-colonial body disappears. (Hayward 2001: 164)

I agree with Hayward that the legionnaire's pathology, as instantiated by Galoup's interactions with the other (be it the men under his watch, Sentain, or the Djiboutiens), involves the repression of history, memory, and desire, together with the perverse displacement of desire onto a sado-masochistic violence perpetrated on the other (Hayward 2001: 162). But, unlike Hayward, who sees the disintegration of Galoup's postcolonial body as a return to insubstantiality couched in nostalgia for the "glorious" myth of the Legion, I regard Galoup's disintegration as a joyous surrender to the inevitable disappearance both of the myths of the Legion and of his own molar identity. As it disappears into rhythmical intensities, and, ultimately, into invisibility,<sup>9</sup> Galoup's body, in my view, gathers a phenomenal kind of power – a power that precisely derives from a relinquishing of *pouvoir* (power over something or somebody) and a concurrent accumulation of *puissance* (vital capacity); as such, Galoup's power is no longer contained or exhausted in his individuality. Galoup's case is literally described by Flieger in a Deleuzian passage that may also be attributed to Verón's transformation in *The Tango Lesson*:

In becoming-other, every "one" loses face and identity, and finds creative solutions, ways to gain pleasure. Paradoxically, one finds "survival" at the expense of "identity" . . . [M]odern "man" loses "manhood," his majoritarian identity, by becoming-intense, but this loss is enabling, and energising [sic]. (Flieger 2000: 61)

One of the most compelling features of Galoup/Lavant's dance is that it does not follow a smooth or consistent rhythmic pattern. Instead, it can be described as a hesitant pattern of fits and starts, and of abrupt, deliberate

stops. Such kinetic hesitancy is nonetheless consistent with Galoup's character, which wavers between a militarized and rigid control of the body and the final, seemingly unaccountable, release of affect. The most striking contrast between stasis and movement, slowness and speed, occurs right after the first final credits roll. We see Lavant standing in pretty much the same position a legionnaire might stand in military formation – head and shoulders erect, gaze unfocused yet frontally aimed, arms and hands close to the sides of the body in a relaxed posture. After some twelve seconds in this position, Lavant suddenly propels his body upwards and to his left side, reaching the full height of his body horizontally in the air and then landing unscathed and with ease in a recumbent position, only to lift his body immediately up again and continue with his acrobatic demonstrations. Although the juxtaposition of immobility with excessive movement in this scene may be regarded as contradictory, as Jean François Lyotard has suggested, “it is only for thought that these two modes are incompatible” (Lyotard 1986: 356). In the domain of the sensual, by contrast, these kinetic extremities work to produce the “blissful intensities” (Lyotard 1986: 351) of unmotivated *jouissance*. Lavant's dancing style thus demonstrates the immanence, rather than the opposition, of movement and rest, speed and slowness, as in Spinoza's idea that “there is never any movement on its own, but only ever movement and rest together” (Deleuze 1990: 235). Paradoxically, speed-as-intensity grows in stasis, and it is released in the outward expression of rapid movement. Thus, the elegant, nonchalant slowness of Galoup's initial movements accumulates an enormous degree of energy, which later erupts as Galoup's dance is literally no longer his to control.

It would be misleading to consider Galoup's final dance the justifiable outcome of a conventional pursuit of narrative closure/fulfillment (the scene, after all, is triumphant, to say the least). The reason why Denis placed the scene at the end may be instructive in this respect. In an interview with *Sight and Sound*, she explains:

In an early draft of the screenplay the dance fell before the scene where he takes the revolver, contemplating suicide. But when I was editing I put the dance at the end because I wanted to give the sense that Galoup *could escape himself*. (Denis in Darke 2000: 18, my emphasis)

Regardless of whether Galoup commits suicide or not at a narrative level – something intimated, but never actually consummated or shown – his decision is to let his body be carried away by its own vital force. From this angle, the decision stands out of discernible time and space because the possibility lies within him all along. To place it thus at the film's conclusion only

responds to the film's, and Denis', own desire to uphold Galoup's escape as an immanent potentiality. As for our desire to know what happens to Galoup's character from a conventional narrative standpoint, this may be utterly irrelevant. As Deleuze remarks, "We no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental, in the situation, not because they are confused, but because we do not have to know and there is no longer even a place from which to ask" (Deleuze 1989: 7).

### ***Friday Night: a line of flight against all odds***

*Friday Night* is literally about movement – a movement that is precarious, or even halted, from the perspective of subjective autonomy or agency, yet one that is overwhelming and surprising from the perspective of the world's eventfulness. The film shows that the possibility of moving does not depend on one's own individual will or control, but, more precisely, on the willingness to let oneself be carried away by the inevitable flow of movement (of perception and affection) taking place everywhere in and around our bodies. The traffic-jam situation the film uses as its basic narrative premise is extremely constraining and uncontrollable. In a Deleuzian sense, it is a situation that favors points (of departure and destination) rather than lines of flight or deterritorialization. And yet, it is in such an unlikely set of circumstances that *Friday Night* manages to insert its cutting edge of deterritorialization, carrying not only its characters, but primarily ourselves, away in its line of flight.<sup>10</sup>

The film opens with Laure (Valerie Lemercier) packing her belongings in preparation for her move, on the following day, to her boyfriend François'. That same evening, Laure gets into her car planning to drive to some friends' for dinner, when she gets stuck in a mass transit strike that turns into an endless traffic jam. In the middle of the jam, a stranger, Jean (Vincent Lindon), apparently following a Parisian custom established through the course of frequent similar jams, asks her if he can get a ride, although, as it later becomes clear, he has no particular destination in mind. At one point while still stuck in traffic, Laure gets out of the car to phone her friends and inform them that she will not be coming to dinner after all, leaving the keys, and Jean, inside her car. As she gets out of the phone booth, Laure's car has disappeared and she feels cold, perplexed, and destitute. A few moments later, Jean finds her on the sidewalk and brings her back to her car. He then takes charge of the driving and, in order to get the car out of the jam, initiates a long movement backward, then driving forward at full speed. The movement of the car alternates with a camera movement traveling in the opposite direction. While, for us, the resulting

effect is highly disorienting, for Laure, the ride proves outright vertiginous. As a result, she feels overwhelmed and asks to be let out of the car. Jean walks away, and, a short while later, Laure begins to drive in his direction, actively seeking him out. The two meet up again at a café, and, as they come out, they begin an endless kissing-while-walking act on their way to a hotel. After they make love with their clothes still on, they go out for dinner. Upon their return to the hotel, their lovemaking takes on a different tone: they know the former sensation of unlimited duration has given way to the fleeting nature of their one night together. Laure seems keenly aware of this, as she waits and spends some time by herself in the bathroom before joining Jean back in bed. Later, while Jean is asleep, Laure gets up, puts on Jean's socks and jacket, and gets out onto the balcony, attempting to capture the intensity of the moment even as it flees so fast with the arrival of dawn. When Laure comes back to bed and Jean attempts one last time to make love, she seems no longer to acquiesce. Later, she looks at her watch and, aware of the movers' imminent arrival at her apartment, she gets up, gets dressed, and after saying goodbye to a seemingly asleep Jean, she leaves. The last shots show her running on the sidewalk in the barely announced Parisian morning, first at normal speed and almost with a sense of anxiety or concern. But, as she turns a street corner, the film takes on a slow motion that, together with the qualitative change in the music, suggests an expansion of the freedom and joy she has felt in her encounter with Jean.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between *points* and *lines* as different ways of conceiving spatial relations. The point, they explain, belongs to the (category of the) arborescent; it is related to the genealogical, stabilizing functions characteristic of trees, their involvement in permanence and rootedness, their dependence upon points of origin and aspirations to teleologically inspired growth. Points define and determine positions in space, thereby attempting its organization, limiting space to a set of pre-established coordinates. As for the line, Deleuze and Guattari note that "any line that goes from one point to another is the aggregate of the molar system" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 293), that is, such a line has given up its possibilities of becoming and multiplying connections by yielding its force to the primacy and fixity of the point/s. As they explain, "arborescence is the submission of the line to the point" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 293). But the line need not be subordinated to the point, for its trajectory can become independent of points positioned in space. Such is the rhizomatic line – the line that belongs to the category of the rhizome, rather than the arborescent. The rhizomatic line or the line of flight "no longer goes from one point to another," but instead is

“between points, in their midst” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 298). The reading of *Friday Night* that I offer here will attempt to show the ways in which the images in this film partake of the conceptual creativity and complexity exemplified in Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking on space/time and movement as outlined in the above definitions.

As I implied in my account of the film’s story, Laure and Jean meet in the middle of things, and this in more than one way: in the middle of the traffic jam, and in the middle of lives, which, at least from the little we know about Laure, are already in full swing, not really waiting for anything to make them worth living or interesting. As well, and more importantly, in Laure’s case, the night of her encounter with Jean catches her literally in between/in the middle of her two lives – her past life as a single woman (as far as her living arrangements go), and her future life sharing François’ living space, hence more of a partnered, structured life than she has led thus far. In this sense, Laure’s situatedness between the points of single and partnered life renders her particularly capable of escaping the rigidity of dualistic positions as well as quite susceptible to welcoming the offer of movement crossing her path.

The betweenness quality of Laure and Jean’s encounter resonates on a striking number of levels with Deleuze and Guattari’s remarks on the nature of rhizomatic intensity:

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, inter-being, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is . . . uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb “to be,” but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, “and . . . and . . . and” . . . Where are you going? Where are you coming from? Where are you heading for? These are totally useless questions. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 25)

I think it would make sense to assign Laure’s union with her boyfriend François the category of a “filiation,” and conversely, to characterize her union with Jean as an “alliance.” Although the film is purposely not invested in exploring Laure’s relationship with François, it does intimate its more permanent, rooted quality, the prospects of long-term stability and home-making. Laure’s chance encounter with Jean, on the other hand, is not dependent upon the shared, well-established knowledge of each other’s identities (the imposition of “the verb ‘to be’”); it is a matter of a singular, non-verbal, affective intensity that relies solely on its own unmotivated force/desire as it traces a wholly unforeseen trajectory. In contrast with a kind of desire that participates in the molar dynamics of institutionalized partnerships, be it marriage or some other form, at stake here is “a desiring flow that is never actualized in a particular shape” (Bensmaïa 2005: 145).



Here, the conjunction “and” that functions in place of identity links different activities of equal value (to drive together *and* to kiss-while-walking *and* to make love *and* to have dinner *and* to make love) that prolong the intensity of the moment without a definite end in sight. The equal value of these activities is important in that they truly create a plateau in the very sense Deleuze and Guattari assign to this concept: “a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 22). Equally significant, as indicated in the above quote, is the absence of identity markers – in the form of questions – that might position Laure and Jean at certain fixed points with respect to both their pasts and their futures (“Where are you coming from? Where are you heading for?”). This is clearly the reason why the film at no point engages in such identity-fixing questions regarding background or destination. To Laure’s implied question, “I didn’t hear where you want to go,” Jean thus responds with an ambiguity and nonchalance that are totally appropriate. “Leave me where you want,” he says.

In place of the intimacy normally achieved through mutual knowledge and built in the course of time, the intimacy into which the circumstances of the jam throw Laure and Jean together is one that builds from the proximity of gestures and skins within the enclosed space of the car. Initially, intimacy is quite literally forced upon Laure and Jean, yet, later in the film, it is freely chosen by both and at the same time embraced by the camera’s close-range vision upon their lovemaking gestures (adopting a surface perspective that resembles the kind of vision we are given in *Nénette and Boni* as well). That Laure and Jean are total strangers when they first happen upon each other – and in a sense remain forever so – paradoxically allows for a proximity without the interference of formed expectations or determinations. Shortly after Jean gets in the car, the camera gives us a few close-ups of their respective intimate gestures – tactile gestures that, although each directs them at his or her own body, are suggestive of the intimacy they already share, their instinctual need to adjust their bodies to the other’s presence. We see Jean scratching his skin beneath his shirt-collar, and then his hands crossed in a relaxed posture; we see Laure stretching her black-stockinged legs in search of a more comfortable position, and, a bit later, Jean’s hand pressing upon Laure’s arm to wake her and draw her attention to the resuming traffic. Such simple gestures are nonetheless profound in reminding us of the unthinking physicality that, even prior to any thoughts or words, already binds us to others, both enabling and limiting our capacity for action and affection. Borrowing from Olkowski, I would say that these telling gestures speak of Laure and

Jean's bodies first and foremost as "zones of action . . . of movement, distinct material zones, from within the continuity of the universe" negotiating "internal muscular sensations and . . . external sensible qualities of matter" (Olkowski 1999: 132). As we also saw in the case of *Nénette and Boni* and *Beau Travail*, the camera's intense proximity to bodily surfaces weaves a sense of their connectedness and their continuity, their belonging-together within immanence, hence the kind of molecular/cosmic eroticism that arises in all of these films.

*Friday Night*, in a way quite similar to *Beau Travail*, seems to condense and express the film's affective-performative dynamics in one privileged scene. In *Beau Travail*, I proposed, this is the film's final scene, the line of flight that, having eliminated all narrative superfluities, brings together previous affective forces and makes them coincide with the film's own force of self-affection. Given the betweenness quality of Laure's encounter with Jean, the scene in *Friday Night* that acts as such whirlpool of affection appropriately falls right in the middle of things. I am referring to the scene in which, as Jean takes charge of the driving, the film takes a qualitative leap away from the unproductive project of quantitative movement in space that is the traffic jam, and towards a qualitative/intensive movement in time that blurs the line between the characters' and the film's powers of affection. As this scene shows, intensity is what makes a line of flight effectively deterritorializing, and not measurable or quantifiable distance. The experimental, pragmatic quality of the movement about to be initiated after Jean brings a disoriented Laure back to her car comes across in Jean's simple words: "let's try something." What follows are the film's own mind-boggling experiments in the affective powers of speed.

As the reader may recall, the rhizomatic line, in Deleuze and Guattari's thinking, is always in the middle, yet betweenness is precisely the zone of intensity and speed: "The middle is by no means an average . . . it is where things pick up speed" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 25). It is also the nature of the rhizomatic line or line of flight to enjoy its own autonomous direction, independent of any beginning or end points. As Jean drives, the speed the film gathers and the direction it traces are no longer defined by the traffic jam, even if, at a narrative level, Jean may still be motivated to get away from it. As Jean gets behind the wheel, he begins to drive backward and rather fast, reversing the former trend of left-to-right direction the film has had us accustomed to thus far. The music, an element I will later return to, significantly changes in this scene, taking on a quasi-Hitchcockian tone reminiscent of the violin chords in the scene in *Psycho* where Marion (Vivien Leigh) drives off with the \$40,000 stolen from her boss. Shapes of streetlights around their car become significantly more

blurred and abstract, as if their sources were no longer traceable or discernible. But the true affective engine of the scene, I would suggest, comes from the film's alternation between two opposing directions, and from the affective shock we receive in the brain's perception of both opposites as simultaneous occurrences. I am referring to the left-to-right movement of the car driven by Jean (after the initial movement backward that travels from right to left) in conjunction/collision with the right-to-left movement of the camera tracking along the buildings they pass by. More importantly, these two opposing directions alternate without a mediating factor making them rationally coherent.

The speed of the camera's tracking movement along the buildings blurs the surfaces of these, effectively making points in space indiscernible as the line of flight takes over; windows and balconies thus become so many abstract shapes recalling the rectangular frames of a filmstrip as it passes through the projector's gate. Again, such a level of abstraction in the depiction of movement makes apparent the intensity of the film's powers of self-affection at this point. This is a privileged moment in terms of the film's actualization of what Deleuze calls the "spiritual automaton," according to Bensmaïa, "a movement in which concept and image are one" (Bensmaïa 2005: 149). In this scene, *Friday Night* renders its experimental thinking of movement and its imaging thereof absolutely indistinguishable. Laure and Jean's movement inside the car is transformed into a sensation, a pure affect of virtual capacities and intensities. By providing an alternate direction to the car's trajectory, hence going outside the car, the film hands us a literal experience of the vertiginous speed that affects Laure. The film thus gets in touch with the outside, or the whole – concepts also related to the "spiritual automaton" – as a means to create a shock to thought. The "spiritual automaton" that takes over this moment "refer[s] to an outside that is neither reducible to an 'interiority' as subjectivity nor to an 'exteriority' as res extensa or 'exterior' world" (Bensmaïa 2005: 149). What we are thus given to experience is neither a series of inner, subjective impressions from Laure's point of view, nor a representation of external, objective reality, but rather the film's own spiritual/creative decision to engage in virtual movement. Calling this movement "virtual," however, does not mean that it occurs merely at a psychological or illusory level (the way cinematic movement was regarded by film apparatus theorists). On the contrary, this is real movement as duration, a real becoming at the molecular level.

Just as my reading of *Beau Travail* identified its closing scene as the culmination of the film's seductive designs upon the viewer, the scene in *Friday Night* I just described presents a similar capacity to perform a

kinesthetic seduction, leading both Laure and ourselves away from duty and normativity – the habitual, worn-out forms of perception and sensation that our sensory-motor apparatus keeps us bound within. Towards the end of this sequence, the camera stays on Laure's face for a while, a face that registers the intensity of the moment as expressed by the violins and the vertiginous speed. We see the neon signs of side buildings and stores superimposed on her face, the brightness of the lights on her face somehow taking stock of the increasing discomfort produced by such sensory and kinesthetic overload. The impression of affective intensity upon Laure's face makes clear that real movements of the kind that we are exposed to here "are not just changes in position." Rather, "real movement is grasped affectively as a change of quality" (Olkowski 1999: 132). The film does not take long to express this change of quality, for the formerly trusting and secure Laure has given way by the end of this scene to a temporarily disconcerted, distrustful woman who, seemingly forgetting that it is her car she and Jean are traveling in, asks Jean to stop the car and let her out. It takes Laure a few minutes of solitude and calmness, after the roller-coaster vertigo of the drive, to finally accept the challenge of seduction and to go after Jean of her own volition. Thus, while in *Beau Travail* the potential seduction of Galoup by Sentain is deferred and displaced in the film's final dance, the seductive impact of this scene in *Friday Night* is also felt somewhat retroactively through Laure's delayed acceptance of the possibility embodied by Jean – the thrill of the unknown actualized in the speed and intensity of which the car ride has just given her a taste.

The performance of movement in this scene is not tied to the production of a visually coherent form; rather, movement is performed as an affective experience that touches and transforms the body. For Deleuze and Guattari, too, "movement has an essential relation to the imperceptible; it is by nature imperceptible" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 280). When perception grasps movement, it usually finds it already congealed in a particular form, a particular moving body. Yet Deleuze and Guattari also point to another kind of perception whose function is precisely to express/actualize the very imperceptibility of movement, to bring to the threshold of perception the "pure relations of speed and slowness, pure affects . . . below and above the threshold of perception" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 289). Thus, despite the imperceptible nature of movement,

movement also "must" be perceived . . . on the other plane . . . of immanence or consistency, the principle of composition itself must be perceived, cannot but be perceived at the same time as that which it composes or renders . . . what cannot be

perceived on one [plane] cannot but be perceived on the other. It is in jumping from one plane to the other . . . that the imperceptible becomes necessarily perceived. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 281–2)

As I indicated earlier, the central car-ride scene in *Friday Night* fuses concept and image together, the plane of composition thus being perceived at the same time as the image that it renders. In jumping from the narrative plane (of molar organization) to the affective–performative plane (of molecular self-affectation) this scene renders movement’s very imperceptibility perceptible. Such is the conversion that also takes place in the majority of affective–performative moments I discuss in this book, especially in those where the rendition of movement is quite significantly tied to a desire for experimenting with speed and/or slowness as the catalyst for the release of affective flows.

In the midst of the philosophical complexity the scene gives rise to, I would like to return to Laure and Jean for a moment in order to understand how desire in the film proceeds in and through them, even as it exceeds their individual subjectivities. To this end, I will offer two complementary readings of the gender dynamics that operate in this scene. From a molar, Oedipal perspective, this sequence of moving images may prove disturbing. Here is the proverbial seducer, the heroic man at the helm, half-saving, half-abducting a woman in her own vehicle, hence dispossessing her of her capacity to determine the direction and speed of her own movement. This kind of Oedipal entrapment is what the film may perhaps be attempting to register in the *Psycho*-like music, undoubtedly a conscious choice on the part of Denis (as made clear by her reference in the commentary added to the DVD release, where she explains that the actor playing the part of the hotel clerk was modeled upon the character of Norman Bates/Anthony Perkins in Hitchcock’s film).<sup>11</sup> With such references, the film may be voicing its own memories of cinematic situations that resonate with Laure’s predicament, both at the level of the film’s self-affectation and at the level of Laure’s own skewed perception of her present experience. Largely, these would be memories and experiences of paranoia produced within an economy of desire circumscribed by molar, Oedipal principles.

And yet, from a molecular point of view, this sequence initiates the film’s line of flight into the unknown, the vertiginous speed of the sexual intensity that is to come. Up to the moment when Laure loses sight of Jean and her car, she has traveled as far as she is going to if she is to depend upon her own will to move. After this moment, it is not so much Jean who takes over as, more properly, the film. On a molecular level, Jean is thus simply the affective catalyst of the film’s line of flight (just as Galoup also

functions as such a catalyst in *Beau Travail*). That it happens to be a man driving a woman turns out to be only partially consequential: it becomes part of the “vertigo” (another implicit narrative reference to Hitchcock, perhaps) of being carried away from the familiar towards the unknown. Although the uncontrollable speed of the experience initially renders Laure helpless, such passivity is only temporary and apparent; more likely, the experience seems to hand Laure an invitation to actively welcome the possibility of joining her desire to the force of desire that crosses her path. Thus, for Laure, Jean is the other in the sense Olkowski describes it: “not just a perception of what is outside my bodily inhabitation . . . [but] also an affection, an invitation to act” (Olkowski 1999: 69). Interestingly, the interaction between Laure and Jean shows that their affective experience greatly differs from the organized experience of the traffic jam, for as Olkowski remarks, affection is not constraining – it does not impose a particular movement or direction on the body:

Each . . . affection is situated at the “interval” between a multiplicity of excitations received from “without” and the movements about to be executed. These movements arise because each affection contains an invitation to act as well as permission to wait to act, or not act . . . Within affectivity, there is nothing constraining choice. (Olkowski 1999: 93)

Such comments are powerfully captured in the interval between Jean’s departure from Laure’s car and Laure’s decision to seek out his company again. Respectfully, the film gives Laure “permission to wait to act.”

Laure does not desire Jean because of his identity (she knows practically nothing about him), but because of his speed/intensity. On the molecular plane, Laure and Jean do not figure as individuated subjects, but rather as subjectless subjectivities, singularities distinguished by their relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness, what Deleuze and Guattari call *haecceities*. As impersonal erotic forces, Laure and Jean become the very intensity of the moment. Having eliminated everything that exceeds the moment, they are able to “slip into other haecceities by transparency” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 280). Thus, they both suppress in themselves “everything that prevents [them] from slipping between things and growing in the midst of things” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 280). In the spirit of true difference, Laure and Jean coexist as “two asymmetrical movements that combine to form a block, down a line of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 293). At the coming of the new day, as Laure runs towards her car and towards her homes (her past and her future ones), she has neither lost nor gained anything in measurable terms. But she has been transformed by, and caught in, an ever expanding net of desire.

### Let the film love you

All three of Denis' films examined here present interesting, and slightly reconfigured, examples of what Deleuze calls the "pure optical and sound situations" of modern cinema. In the cinema of the time-image, Deleuze writes, "characters [are] found less and less in sensory-motor motivating situations, but rather in a state of strolling, of sauntering or of rambling which define[s] pure optical and sound situations" (Deleuze 1986: 120). Although sensory-motor activity in Deleuze's Bergsonian philosophy of cinema is associated with the viewer's cognitive and perceptual movement in reaction to the organized images of classical cinema, one might argue that an alternative model of sensory-motor situations does exist, one which, following an affective-performative logic, engages qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, aspects of movement. In this model, the image severs the viewer's consciousness from motivating links and instead offers itself as pure sensorial and kinetic intensity. Borrowing and recasting Deleuzian terminology, one may thus look at moments such as Galoup/Lavant's dance or Laure and Jean's ride as "pure sensory and kinetic situations."

The "pure sensory and kinetic situations" of Denis' cinema bring about a "disorder of the senses" (Rimbaud 1967: 102) that places upon viewers a different set of demands than those they are accustomed to – not only in terms of their departure from classical narrative patterns, but also in terms of their divergence from typically more cerebral experimental strategies. Here, the difficulty for the viewer does not lie in coping with a distanciating agenda that the film may have deliberately assumed, as might be the case in many a modernist or avant-garde film. If Denis' films, in all their sensuality, are paradoxically experienced as abstract, or even inscrutable at times, it is, I would argue, because of our own cultural alienation from sensual and bodily experience. From this perspective, all three films I have discussed take on the project of seducing us away from our proper customary conduct as viewers. They thwart our dutiful and well-trained desire to know, and offer instead to facilitate our entry into a realm of sensation and affect. In so doing, this kind of cinema constitutes itself as the most self-conscious and exhibitionistic form of seduction. The intense eroticism of Denis' cinema (of any cinema that undertakes the transformation of technique into sensuality) vibrantly resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's idea that, "the movement of the infinite can occur only by means of affect, passion, love . . . without reference to any kind of 'mediation'" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 281). Cinema is no longer, or at least not only, a "fetish that can be loved" (Metz 1986: 259), but primarily, and passionately, a body that loves us back.

## Notes

1. The “amorous passivity” that Denis herself attributes to the spectator of her cinema brings to mind Olkowski’s Deleuzian concept of narcissism as tied in with the unconscious process of passive synthesis. As I have also indicated in Chapter 3, for Deleuze, narcissism is a creative movement divested of the moral message and burden that it carries for Freud:

[narcissism] is the deepening of passive synthesis, the constitution of virtual objects as well as of the multiple egos of passive synthesis, since passive syntheses were, in the first instance, commensurate with life itself . . . In its second phase, passive synthesis is commensurate with spiritual life, a creative force in which virtual objects are displaced and real objects disguised, such that the passive ego becomes narcissistic as it experiences *itself* displaced in the virtual object and disguised in the real object. (Olkowski 1999: 172)

Denis’ cinema exhibits an extraordinary capacity to disperse the spectator’s ego into multiple displacements of virtual objects and multiple disguises of real objects, thus facilitating the spectator’s experience of itself as a multiple, desubjectified ego.

2. I am deriving the notion of “haptic” desire from Marks’ idea of haptic visibility. Marks adapts the term “haptic” from nineteenth-century art historian Alois Riegl’s distinction between haptic and optical images. As opposed to optic visibility, which, as Marks explains, “depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object,” haptic looking “tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture.” In words that are extremely pertinent to the performative and kinetic dimensions of Denis’ cinema, haptic looking is described as “more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze” (Marks 2000: 162).
3. For a reading of *Beau Travail* that emphasizes the homoerotic discourse of the film, see Sarah Cooper’s “Je Sais Bien, mais Quand Même . . . : Fetishism, Envy, and the Queer Pleasures of *Beau Travail*” (Cooper 2001).
4. “Speed” and “affect” are inseparable terms for Deleuze. Affect refers to the intensity of virtual, unstructured flows in the body. Such intensity is always a matter of variation between rest and movement, which are conceived not as opposite states but rather as different degrees of speed and slowness. Because real speed for Deleuze is not a question of measurable quantity, but a question of quality, the fastest body or movement, from a physical, visible standpoint, is not necessarily the most intense from an affective standpoint. Deleuze and Guattari posit the close proximity between speed and slowness in terms of their shared power of abstraction, which, as I also argue in Chapter 1, is a key ingredient in fashioning the affective-performative body:

It is precisely because pure animality is experienced as inorganic, or supraorganic, that it can combine so well with abstraction, and even combine the



slowness or heaviness of a matter with the extreme speed of a line that has become entirely spiritual. The slowness belongs to the same world as the extreme speed: relations of speed and slowness between elements, which surpass in every way the movement of an organic form and the determination of organs. The line escapes geometry by a fugitive mobility at the same time as life tears itself free from the organic by a permutating, stationary whirlwind. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 499)

5. The status of *Beau Travail* as a loose adaptation of Herman Melville's novella – “an adaptation that resists being an adaptation” (Grant 2002: 72) – is explored in Catherine Grant's “Recognizing *Billy Budd* in *Beau Travail*: Epistemology and Hermeneutics of an Auteurist ‘Free’ Adaptation.”
6. In my description of the final dancing scene in *Beau Travail*, I use the term *jouissance* in the sense of a pleasure or joy that is unmotivated, disorganized, and unproductive of useful ends. This sense differs markedly from the psychoanalytic notion of *jouissance* as pleasure connected to genital organization. Lacan refers to the significance of “genital maturation” in Freud as characterized by “the imaginary dominance of the phallic attribute and by masturbatory *jouissance*,” a *jouissance* which is localized “for the woman in the clitoris” (Lacan 1977: 282). Although Lacan elsewhere tackles the issue of a feminine *jouissance* beyond the phallus, he never steers clear of considering *jouissance* as a function of castration: “It is by being castrated, by renouncing love that [Kierkegaard] believes he accedes to it” (Lacan 1985: 148). Not only does Lacan genderize *jouissance* as more proper to the feminine (and the mystic), but he never entirely dissociates *jouissance* from the phallic function: “If [woman] is excluded by the nature of things, it is precisely that in being not all, she has, in relation to what the phallic function designates of *jouissance*, a supplementary *jouissance*” (Lacan 1985: 144). In contradistinction to the psychoanalytic model, Lyotard speaks of *jouissance* as a pyrotechnics that involves an expenditure of energy with no other end but its own enjoyment and pleasure – a “sterile consumption of energies” not “obtained through the channels of ‘normal’ genital sexuality” (Lyotard 1986: 351). For Lyotard, the emergence of *jouissance* in the cinema threatens the hope “for an accomplished totality . . . the unity of an organic body” (Lyotard 1986: 355).
7. For a fuller discussion of the actual and the virtual as theorized by Deleuze, see chapters 4 and 5 of *The Time-Image* (Deleuze 1989), as well as Chapter 5 in this book.
8. The temporal inhabiting of the body in *Beau Travail* – as a series of qualitative becomings – presents an interesting contrast with the Foucauldian temporal organization of the body in Potter's *Thriller*, where time is seen to penetrate the body in its measuring, quantifying aspects.
9. The disappearance of Galoup/Lavant's dancing subjectivity into rhythmical intensities in this stunning scene reminds me of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of “becoming-imperceptible.” Both becoming-woman and becoming-animal

are for Deleuze and Guattari molecular segments in their rushing toward becoming-imperceptible:

Such is the link between imperceptibility, indiscernibility, and impersonality – the three virtues. To reduce oneself to an abstract line, a trait, in order to find one's zone of indiscernibility with other traits, and in this way enter the haecceity and impersonality of the creator. One is then like grass: one has made the world, everybody/everything, into a becoming, because one has made a necessarily communicating world, because one has suppressed in oneself everything that prevents us from slipping between things and growing in the midst of things. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 279–80)

10. Although a stratified way of thinking might deem lines of flight or deterritorialization incompatible with the rigidity of molar structures such as the one represented by the spatial organization of the traffic jam in *Friday Night*, Deleuze and Guattari insist on the coextensiveness of the two lines: the molar line of rigid segmentarity, and the molecular line of supple segmentarity that extends into, and gives rise to, a line of flight:

The qualitative difference between the two lines does not preclude their boosting or cutting into each other; there is always a proportional relation between the two, directly or inversely proportional. In the first case, the stronger the molar organization is, the more it induces a molecularization of its own elements, relations, and elementary apparatuses. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 215)

Neither the territory nor the line of flight is an absolute term; thus, the relative deterritorialization drawn by the line of flight is always accompanied by a simultaneous reterritorialization: “To begin with, the territory itself is inseparable from vectors of deterritorialization working it from within . . . Second, D [deterritorialization] is in turn inseparable from correlative reterritorializations” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 509).

11. Besides its oblique references to Hitchcock's *Psycho* and *Vertigo*, another cinematic memory *Friday Night* seems to revive and revise is Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie* (*My Life to Live*, 1962). Nana's (Anna Karina) disaffected encounters with men in the impersonal, uninviting atmosphere of hotel rooms wholly dedicated to sexual trade are revisited and reconfigured through the affectively charged, yet in many ways similarly impersonal, encounter between Laure and Jean. Whereas impersonality in Godard's film has the ring of alienation – a commodification of affect that renders Nana's freedom precarious at best – in Denis' film impersonality is the very sign of new possibilities of action for both parties involved.

## CHAPTER 5

# Powers of the False

“To overturn Platonism” means to make the simulacra rise and to affirm their rights.

Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*

The void of a situation is the suture to its being.

Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*

Issuing from a variety of perspectives, analyses of David Lynch’s films have often deployed theory in an attempt to explain what the films themselves refuse to give away in a rational form. Given the propensity of Lynch’s cinema to destabilize notions of reality through the preponderance of dream-like images, psychoanalytically oriented critics have seen these films as literal exponents of unconscious processes of desire and fantasy. Still within the psychoanalytic camp, some feminist critics have focused their attention on the controversial gender dynamics they see operating in these films – their problematic treatment of the female body as the target of male Oedipal sadistic impulses. Yet another widespread critical tendency regards Lynch’s cinema as a spectacle of postmodernist irony – a pastiche-like rendition of twentieth-century dysfunctional American culture on the brink of extinction. Although by no means exhaustive of all critical approaches taken in considering Lynch’s cinema, what these major interpretive frameworks share is a firm adherence to binary linguistic and representational structures (consciousness/unconscious; reality/fantasy; male/female; authenticity/irony) that I believe are radically expelled from Lynch’s own cinematic universe. Lynch himself has commented on the difficulties of translating his films into a series of rationalizing structures. “It’s better,” he says,

not to know so much about what things mean or how they might be interpreted or you’ll be too afraid to let things keep happening. Psychology destroys the mystery, this kind of magic quality. It can be reduced to certain neuroses . . . and since it is now named and defined, it’s lost its mystery and the potential for a vast, infinite experience.<sup>1</sup> (Lynch 2000)

This chapter addresses the “potential for a vast, infinite experience” in Lynch’s cinema – an experience that can “keep happening” as a matter of

intensity and affectivity. Like any and all theoretical perspectives, the affective–performative approach I take imposes its own linguistic and conceptual reduction upon the potentially infinite affectivity of Lynch’s cinema. Yet, rather than aiming for definitive explanations that might plug the holes and intervals that let things “keep happening,” my analysis will aim at pointing to the force of affective events in Lynch’s films, while attempting to leave the mysterious and the unexplained in these events as forceful as I found it to be in my own viewing experience.

In order to engage Lynch’s cinema at the affective and sensational levels, it is important to understand that the kind of affect and sensation that concern Lynch function as the very catalysts of a thinking process that need not come to an end. This thinking activity differs from mere cognitive understanding, and it surpasses the binary opposition between the emotional and the mental, the body and the mind. In the words of Olkowski, this kind of thinking is “not . . . a function of an interior self-reflective activity, but the process whereby a multiplicity of impersonal forces establish connections with one another” (Olkowski 1999: 53). In this and another way that I will shortly address, the case of Lynch resonates quite powerfully with Fassbinder’s desire to explore the transformative, vital capacities of the emotions. The idea that the emotions are devoid of thought, that their display can only belong within a brainless kind of cinema à la blockbuster, is rejected by both filmmakers in the surest of terms. From Lynch’s perspective, too, emotion should not be taken for granted, for the cinema has the awesome power to take emotion away from the sentimental level of the known and ideologically sanctioned to the affective level where emotion becomes as creative and self-begetting a force as thought itself.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while the cinema has, in no small measure, contributed to the rigidification of the language and experience of emotion by relying on repeatable formulas supporting all sorts of restrictive ideologies, it can also crucially contribute to the multiplication, the liberation, and even the invention of new emotions, activities which precisely distinguish “creative works from the prefabricated emotions of commerce” (Deleuze in Flaxman 2000: 370).

Tied in with the affective emphasis that pervades Fassbinder’s and Lynch’s cinemas, another important philosophical and aesthetic tendency these two filmmakers share involves their rejection of realistic representation, and their practice of what I would call, following Deleuze, an aesthetics of the false. Elsaesser’s characterization of Fassbinder’s cinema as the display and exploration of “real emotions through false images” (Elsaesser 1980: 27) is just as accurate a description of Lynch’s cinema. In this regard, I would say that for both Fassbinder and Lynch, image and

affect are coincident realities – the image is conceived first and foremost as affective carrier, generator, and transformer. Accordingly, cinema's project of creating new emotions can only be furthered through the creation of new images – images that have no original to copy, no real to emulate, and that move us beyond what we know, expect, or are able immediately to recognize.

In this chapter, I will primarily consider Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and to a lesser extent *Blue Velvet* (1986) as instances of a remarkable redefinition of cinematic ontology, one that privileges affective-performative intensities over cognitive, representational, or moral certainties. Such a redefinition of cinema, I will also argue, is accompanied by a radical notion of the unconscious as a productive force similarly released from the constraints of representation. I will pursue this twofold consideration via Deleuze's creative ontology of the false. In his account of the crystalline regime of narration, Deleuze refers to this regime as "fundamentally falsifying" – "a power of the false replac[ing] and supersed[ing] the form of the true" (Deleuze 1989: 131). Like the crystalline image, the affective-performative mode maintains a peculiar relationship to the notion of the real and the idea of truth. Unlike the representational mode, more or less indebted to an outside reality or referent, the performativity that informs the Lynchian image and its unconscious stream fundamentally unsettles the hierarchical relation between truth and falseness. As I pointed out in the Introduction to this book, whereas representation begins from the real/actual and achieves a more or less distorted version thereof, performativity engenders the false and elevates it to the status of true effects/affects. Thus privileging the powers of the false, Lynch reconfigures cinematic ontology and the ontology of the unconscious in terms of affect rather than representation. His films trace the process whereby the false (the virtual aspect of the real) detaches itself from the factuality of the actual and begins to be valid for itself by virtue of its own affective force.<sup>3</sup>

As we will see, Lynch's films are also illustrative of the impact of an affective-performative cinema on considerations of genre and generic specificity. A cinematic ontology of affect destabilizes critical assumptions that pair off the production of affect in cinema rather predictably with the discursive conventions of the melodrama. Rather than encouraging a notion of affect in terms of particular narrative or iconic elements characteristic of certain genres, Lynch's cinema practices affect as the active and creative property of every image. The ontology of affect prevailing in these films disarticulates generic boundaries, while at the same time laying bare these boundaries in the service of affective, non-representational aims. A reflective treatment of genre thus allows the films simultaneously

to use generic conventions and remain detached from the homogenizing organization of meaning that attends the very notion of genre.

The way in which Lynch's cinema will be positioned in this chapter resumes, and intensifies, the desubjectification process I have already engaged in former chapters as one of the attending features of the affective-performative. Much like Denis, for instance, but in ways that make his cinema absolutely unique, Lynch trades subjectivity for intensity, in other words, speed. A similar process of dissolution of subjectivity by means of real, qualitative speed to that which I described in my reading of Denis' *Beau Travail* and *Friday Night* can be seen at work in Lynch's cinema. Similar to *Friday Night*'s vertiginous car-ride scene, *Mulholland Drive* features a scene where things pick up real speed, and where the latter is no longer a question of how fast the body can move (*quantity*), but a question of *how intensely* it is able to receive and express the impact upon it of a certain force of affection. In *Mulholland Drive*, without question, this is the scene unfolding at Club Silencio. The affective-performative events taking place therein garner their intense speed and shocking effect not despite their undercutting of a reliable truth or reality, but rather by virtue of this very destructive process. As it brings the experience of love, of narrative, of dream and representation to a cruel halt, this scene produces an affective shock that jolts us out of the safety of the cliché.

### Affective contagion

The scene in *Mulholland Drive* where Betty (Naomi Watts) and Rita (Laura Elena Harring) listen to Rebekah Del Río's performance at Club Silencio constitutes the pivotal point in the film's twisted narrative, marking the transition from Diane Selwyn's (Naomi Watts) dream of reciprocated love and successful Hollywood acting career to the nightmarish reality she in fact inhabits. Betty and Rita's excursion to Club Silencio seems to be provoked by the unsettling words Rita has uttered in her sleep in the preceding scene: "Silencio, silencio: no hay banda, no hay orquesta" ["Silence, silence: there is no band, there is no orchestra"]. Through these words, and through the literal performance of their meaning at the club, the film enacts the dream's vertiginous self-awareness of its lack of grounding in actuality. This scene functions as the kernel of both dream and film, the point Diane's dream reaches at which it has no other choice but to self-destruct, thereby anticipating her own demise as well as the film's. The performance at the nightclub maps the close affinities between dream and spectacle, defining both as equally evanescent, yet incontrovertibly gripping. The technological recording of sound in spectacle and the

psychic recording of images, words, and sensations in the unconscious are similarly divested of a solid or stable ground, yet they are shown to be indisputably powerful in the way they affect viewer and dreamer alike.

The showman's insistence on the absence of a band or orchestra behind the musical sounds heard could point to the illusory nature of spectacle – the lack of a material, actual source of sound and the bypassing of this lack in the technological reconstruction of synchronized sound. Thus considered, the scene might unfold as a test case for the disclosure of illusion advocated by 1970s theorists of the cinematic apparatus. Yet the Club Silencio scene puts the unraveling of illusion to quite different ends than the achievement of Brechtian sobriety pursued by such theorists, in fact rendering the very use of the term “illusion” highly problematic. The scene deactivates the classical mechanisms of narrative and representation, leaving audiences inside and outside the film not so much enlightened as hanging by a thread of raw and unmotivated affect. The Club Silencio scene figures as a shocking displacement of referentiality and illusion alike, a double displacement that, as we shall see, is effected by means of an affective-performative cinematic ontology.

After an eerie ride through the deserted urban landscape of night-time LA, a fast tracking shot literally forces us into the virtual landscape of Club Silencio. The actual speed of this tracking shot in fact announces the virtual speed of the events about to take place inside the club. Addressing both the audience at the club and the film audience, a showman begins to repeat Rita's delirious words in Spanish, English, and French. Wielding a kind of magic wand that signifies his power to generate spectacle, and moving with large, histrionic gestures, he conjures up the sounds of several musical instruments by pointing his hand to various corners of the theatrical space. As he summons the sound of the trumpet, a man playing this instrument walks from behind the proverbial red curtain and onto the stage. A few moments into his performance, the “musician” sabotages his own act by extending his arms outward for the audience's applause while the sound of the trumpet continues to be heard. At one point, the showman lifts up his arms, and then, crossing arms and hands over his chest with a demonic smile, disappears in a cloud of smoke. The thunder and lightning conjured up by his disappearing act bring on the heaving convulsions that grip Betty's body.

An MC then comes on stage to introduce, in Spanish, “La Llorona de Los Angeles [The Crying Lady of LA], Rebekah Del Río.” In La Llorona's chilling Spanish rendition of Roy Orbison's “Crying,” the abandoned lover declares her surrender to endless sorrow and the impossibility of her love diminishing in spite of temporal and physical distance. This moment

undoubtedly yields one of the highest melodramatic intensities in the film. But so moving a performance could not have been staged had the film mobilized desire merely through a negative rhetoric of lack or absence. The intense affectivity of this moment rather unfolds as a positive force of desire. Thus, what La Llorona's performance demonstrates beyond any doubt is that the displacement of desire through virtual bodies or objects is no less a reality than the actual physical presence of those bodies or objects.

Neither the physical absence of the lover nor the lack of actual sound coming out of La Llorona's lips can mitigate the force of the affect, but instead both forms of virtuality serve to redouble its strength. As I will argue later in this chapter, in the most ostensibly performative scenes in both *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive*, lip-synching exemplifies Lynch's insight into the affective value and power of the false. The choice of lip-synching over actual singing here is quite disconcerting if we consider that Del Río is not an actor playing the fictional role of La Llorona, but a real Latina singer lip-synching to her own recording of Orbison's "Crying." As made clear in Del Río's self-narrated "Story behind Llorando" featured in her website, performed emotion is no less intense than so-called spontaneous emotion: "Every time I sing this song . . . I am crying inside, dying over a love lost and hanging on every word . . . It's real when I sing it because the pain still lives inside of me"<sup>4</sup> (Del Río 2003). Del Río's comments remind us of a similar pairing of performance with genuine emotion in Pedro Almodóvar's melodrama *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), whose female protagonist Pepa (Carmen Maura) faints while dubbing Joan Crawford's voice in the soundtrack of Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954).

Here too, the emotion expressed causes La Llorona to pass out on the stage, her expression much too big to fit the contours of her individual human body. Indeed, her riveting performance only increases in emotional force when the illusion of her lip-sync is uncovered as she collapses on the stage-floor in mid-song and her body is picked up by two men while the song continues to play. The theatrical suddenness of her fall, and, retroactively, close-ups of her exaggerated red and yellow eye shadow and painted tear, enhance the intense affect of her song. Explicitly announced in the showman's refrain – "There is no band, there is no orchestra" – the absence of musical instruments enveloping La Llorona's voice has the same paradoxical effects on the audience both inside and outside the film. On the one hand, the absence of a musical orchestra contributes to derealizing Diane's dream by disconnecting the latter from any sense of a tangible materiality. But at the same time such an evacuation of actuality is attended by an



increase in the affective charge experienced by dreamer and audience alike, for we find here no buffer zone that might attenuate the raw affect immediately relayed by the voice.

One of the most effective vehicles of affect in this scene is Lynch's consistent use of close-ups to mark the piercing emotion that binds Betty and Rita to La Llorona's song. Following a long shot that introduces the singer on-stage, the rest of the performance makes use of an "affective framing" that "proceeds by cutting close-ups" (Deleuze 1986: 107) alternating between La Llorona's and Rita's and Betty's faces. One could find ample narrative justification for the empathetic circuit formed between performer and audience; links could be established between Betty/Diane's attachment to and unrequited love for Rita/Camilla and La Llorona's attachment to her lover, as well as between La Llorona's on-stage collapse and Diane's self-inflicted death. But, however plausible, these narrative connections are far from established the first time we see this scene. In other words, the narrative explanation to account for the scene's affective force relies on our retroactive knowledge of the film's split into multiple realities and sets of identities. Until we are "awakened," together with Diane, from at least one layer of the dream-like fabric of the film, the affect received is entirely unaccountable from a narrative standpoint, thereby compelling us to find a different kind of justification for its powerful hold on us.

Narratively inconsequential, La Llorona's performance constitutes the point of condensation that expresses the film's affective shift from the happiness of love to the sadness of abandonment. Thus, rather than reading La Llorona's performance as a narrative event, one may see it as a force that interrupts narrative. The performance seems to unfold as a spectacle of the face and the voice, completely disengaged from every space and every event that occupies the film before or after, and entirely committed to its own self-sufficient and objectless affect. Deleuze's comments on a scene in G. W. Pabst's *Lulu* (a.k.a. *Pandora's Box*, 1929) are equally appropriate to account for the way *Mulholland Drive* uses the face as the "pure building material of the affect" (Deleuze 1986: 103):

There are Lulu, the lamp, the bread-knife, Jack the Ripper: people who are assumed to be real with individual characters and social roles . . . a whole actual state of things. But there are also the brightness of the light on the knife, the blade of the knife under the light, Jack's terror and resignation, Lulu's compassionate look. These are pure singular qualities or potentialities – as it were, pure "possibles." (Deleuze 1986: 102)

Here Deleuze makes a distinction between the "state of things," which narrative can realize or render actual, and the "expresseds [sic]," which, quoting Maurice Blanchot, he defines as "the aspect of the event that its

accomplishment cannot realize" (Deleuze 1986: 102) – in sum, the aspect that exceeds narrative realization. The expression of this pure quality or power embodied by the image (and especially by the image as face) "exists even without justification, it does not become expression because a situation is associated with it" (Deleuze 1986: 102). Thus, in *Mulholland Drive*, no narrative events can be alleged as exhaustive causes or explanations for the expressions of sorrow in Betty's or Rita's face. Even a consideration of the second part of the film as the disturbed reality that generates the need for the first, fulfillment-driven part is bound to fail given the many incidents and images that escape the possibility of a neat correspondence between reality and dream. As I will later explain, the film's more or less ambiguously defined two parts remain in this sense, like the fitting name of its Production Company, asymmetrical.

If from a narrative perspective the justification for the affect in the scene at Club Silencio is conspicuously absent, so it might be from the perspective of the film's fragile adherence to the classical concept of character as a more or less stable origin and receptacle of emotion. *Mulholland Drive* refuses to rely on unified characters who "own" emotions and who are singularly placed at the originating or the receiving end of affective transactions. Thus, what we see at the scene in Club Silencio is a circulation of affect between virtual bodies – a series of borrowings and lendings of emotion in a chain whose origins are impossible to determine. Just as, at the level of spectacle, Del Río borrows affect from her own recorded singing, which in turn might be said to borrow from Orbison as the song's prior singer and (together with Joe Melson) composer, and so on, a similar affective borrowing or contagion takes place at the level of reception. Viewers of the film borrow affect from Rita's and Betty's faces, which in turn are emotionally ignited by La Llorona's face. Lynch himself is included in this circuit of affect, as evident from Martha Nochimson's remarks about the filmmaker's personal attachment to Orbison's song since the days of the shooting of *Blue Velvet* (Nochimson 1997: 238 n. 14). Dismantling the classical hierarchy where subject originates affect, the affect here becomes somewhat detached from character and stands on its own, non-subjective, ground. Rather than one subject owning the affect, it dwells in and passes through a multiplicity of bodies.

Deleuze's elaborations on the Artaudian notion of the body without organs pertain to the banishment of representation and subjectivity from the affective scenario unfolding at Club Silencio. As I pointed out in earlier chapters, for Deleuze and Guattari, the body without organs is the expression not so much of an aversion toward the organs themselves as toward their organization or representational structure. The analogies used in

Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* to explain the operations of affective flows involving the body without organs as a desiring machine resonate with my economics-oriented metaphors centered upon the lending and borrowing of affects and the lack of subjective ownership over their flows: "Every [desiring] machine . . . is related to a continual material flow (*hylé*) that it cuts into. It functions like a ham-slicing machine, removing portions from the associative flow" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 36). Seen from the perspective of this cutting-machine analogy, the scene at Club Silencio unfolds as a series of interruptions of, or interventions into, a material flow of affections. But, paradoxically, the removal of portions from this flow does not result in its weakening, but rather in its reinforcement and expansion. The affective flow may be decreased at the site of its origin (in this case, perhaps Orbison, which constitutes an origin only insofar as it is the earliest site we can temporally and empirically trace), yet it unpredictably increases and multiplies by the thousands at the site of the film's audience.

Authors such as Bensmaïa have drawn attention to the versatility and constant mutation of concepts in Deleuze's philosophical practice. For Deleuze, Bensmaïa argues, "philosophical concepts are never . . . static entities fixed once and for all, but are, rather, matter to be further worked through and reconnected, ever called into crisis and reinvented" (Bensmaïa 2005: 144). Thus, I would argue, the fluidity and cross-pollination that characterize Deleuze's conceptual machine favor a slippage between such notions as the body without organs, the virtual body, image, or object, and the affections (capacities to affect or to be affected). The term "organ," defined by Ronald Carrier as "an affection . . . the power of acting or being acted upon" (Carrier 1998: 190), corresponds in meaning to "virtual bodies." In fact, disorganized organs retain their capacity to act and to be acted upon through their very virtuality, their status as "intensive and unshaped matter" (Colombat 1991: 14). This unshaped quality allows organs to be "taken up by other organs as their raw material, and these other organs are taken up in turn" (Carrier 1998: 192). As such, disorganized organs or virtual bodies hold powers of affection and sensation without necessarily relying on each other's physical presence. Freed from an imposed or fixed organization, virtual bodies, organs, or affections engage with other similarly deterritorialized organs, resonating with one another, producing effects on one another, and entering into diverse combinations with one another (Colwell 1997: 18). In *Mulholland Drive*, the impersonal or pre-personal notion of organ/affection applies equally to those bodies that may still qualify as characters, such as Betty's and Rita's, and to those that do not, such as Orbison's affective intervention in the

scene, or La Llorona's bodily, facial, and vocal presences. Thus, Orbison's song indeed functions as the raw material taken up (or the material flow cut into) by Del Río, which is in turn taken up by Betty, Rita, and ourselves, in an unlimited series of productions and sedimentations of affect.

The separation the film effects between affect and subjectivity carries profound ideological consequences. *Mulholland Drive* activates an excruciatingly violent dialectic between its superficial narrative layer of dreams and aspirations – typical of both a melodramatic story and the Hollywood industry as a dream-factory – and the film's non-negotiable destruction of all principles of individual identity and success upon which such a capitalist narrative rests. In so doing, Lynch engages in the kind of ideological critique Elsaesser sees at work in the classical melodrama, one that, as the reader may recall, I also pointed out in my analysis of Sirk's cinema:

The strategy of building up to a climax so as to throttle it the more abruptly is a form of dramatic reversal by which Hollywood directors have consistently criticized the streak of incurably naïve moral and emotional idealism in the American psyche, first by showing it to be often indistinguishable from the grossest kind of illusion and self-delusion, and then by forcing a confrontation when it is most wounding and contradictory. (Elsaesser 1987: 61)

Lynch's implicit attack on Hollywood's manufacturing of creatively exhausted, dead images is undoubtedly at the center of the ideological ramifications spun by the film. The film embodies this extinction of vital creativity through the image of Diane's fetid, decomposing body, which, like the monstrous, disintegrating body of Hollywood, lies beyond any capacity for action or transformation. In this context, Lynch's critique of Hollywood enacts yet another form of borrowing – another way of expanding affect beyond localized and individuated instances. As Graham Fuller explains,

Diane's story *borrows* from the tragedy of the actress Marie Prevost . . . From Toronto, like Diane, Prevost was a Mack Sennett Bathing Beauty who became a star in Lubitsch comedies in the mid 20s. She made a successful transition to sound, but went on a crash diet when she put on weight, and eventually died of malnutrition. (Fuller 2001: 16; my emphasis)

Fuller cites Kenneth Anger's hair-raising account of the way Prevost drank herself to death: "Marie dragged on until 1937 when her half-eaten corpse was discovered in her seedy apartment . . . her dachshund had survived by making mincemeat of his mistress." "The accompanying photograph," Fuller remarks, "is startlingly similar to the images of the putrefying Diane in *Mulholland Dr* [sic]" (Fuller 2001: 16).

As the Prevost story suggests, *Mulholland Drive* is haunted by old ghosts and ancient emotions: old melodramas and horrors that keep playing onscreen under slightly reconfigured names. Yet the film introduces a qualitative difference into these repetitive cinematic gestures insofar as its affective intensity depends upon the very destruction of the subjective and objective supports that turn emotions into representable, manageable experiences. The demolition of these familiar supports deprives the subject momentarily of the organizing mechanisms through which he or she can respond to the affective and perceptual stimuli. Because the image is stripped bare of a discernible epistemological ground or coherent interpretation, the viewer is left hanging between the perception of the image and the impossibility of translating that perception into cognitive action. The result of such moments of indeterminacy is the experience of the image as a virtual site evacuated of every content except a raw affect that is fully present to itself. The affective overload of such an experience is thus paradoxically received as a nothing to see, nothing to be, nothing to feel. But clearly, such a process destroys only the subjects and objects of affect, not the affect itself, which, unable to lean upon its usual crutches, engages ever more intensely in a state of creative frenzy. Thus, while affect itself is not compromised, two of the conditions that usually attend its representation in narrative cinema are: first, our ability to attribute a stable and individuated origin to the affective reverberations that traverse the screen; and second, our habitual expectation of seeing the affect resolved in relation to a well-defined object. In short, the affect that indeed survives the onslaught on sentimentality orchestrated by Lynch is not related to the referential content of the image, always an undecidable matter in his films, but is rather the result of what one might call, following Deleuze, the image's potential for self-affectation.

### **An affective unconscious: asymmetrical resonances**

As I pointed out in my introductory remarks to this chapter, the widespread tendency to read Lynch's films from a psychoanalytic angle is not totally without justification,<sup>5</sup> for the non-realistic atmosphere that pervades these films seems to call for a definition of reality that is based upon psychic rather than crudely material grounds. However, as I will argue in this section, the notion of the unconscious proffered by psychoanalytically informed critics is hardly a good match for the kind of non-dualistic, expansive creativity that unfolds in a film like *Mulholland Drive*. Thus, it is not so much a question of dismissing the prominent place the unconscious occupies in Lynch's cinema as of precisely defining what kind of unconscious we encounter here.

As will become apparent in what follows, my attempt to understand the ways in which the unconscious functions in *Mulholland Drive* has drawn invaluable support from the elaborations of several Deleuzian commentators on the ways Deleuze and Guattari rethink the Freudian theory of the unconscious. Olkowski, for example, regards the Freudian unconscious as predicated on psychological, representational rules, and offers instead the term “ontological unconscious” as a plane of virtual memory – multiple levels of ontological memory capable of actualizing absolutely new presents/futures instead of representing or reproducing the habitual modes of the past (Olkowski 1999: 165). The Bergsonian/Deleuzian philosophy of the unconscious adopted by Olkowski is echoed in Anna Powell’s analysis of *Mulholland Drive*, which involves a Bergsonian notion of the dream as coexisting sheets of memory, the overlay of which “produces a sense of quality, not quantity, as relations shift between outer, extensive consciousness and inner, intensive state of memory” (Powell 2005: 189). Yet another Deleuzian move that illuminates the kind of unconscious operating in Lynch’s cinema is the displacement of psychoanalysis by schizoanalysis, and of the notion of dream by that of delirium (Buchanan 2006: 118). According to Buchanan, schizoanalysis involves not only the end of all law and Oedipus, hence an orphan unconscious (Buchanan 2006: 119), but also a departure from the kind of signifying regime of signs that occupies the psychoanalyst, and toward a “conception of semiology in which the signifier does not have primacy” (Buchanan 2006: 127). The regime of signs proper to schizoanalysis, Buchanan asserts, is one that “doesn’t render a delirium legible to us, so much as reveal its consistency” (p. 128). The following discussion will gather and disseminate different strands of these authors’ varied emphases on the unconscious, while interlacing them with my own affective emphasis.

I would like to begin with a scene that serves to illustrate how the virtual plane figures as a source of unruly creativity difficult to fit within the logic of the psychoanalytic unconscious. In this scene, an ineffable encounter takes place between Betty and movie director Adam Kesher (Justin Theroux). Adam has been haunted by a conspiring gang of Hollywood executives that try to derail and contaminate his independent vision by imposing a prearranged lead actress on his film. In the scene in question, Adam is pretending to audition several girls for the part, but in fact he has already made up his mind that he will succumb to the executives’ demands. Fresh and exhilarated from her own triumphant success at a soap-opera audition,<sup>6</sup> Betty is brought to the sound stage by one of the TV producers who have just seen her perform. For two brief but intense moments, Betty and Adam lock eyes with each other. As Adam unaccountably turns around

toward Betty and away from the audition, the camera zooms in on Betty's lit-up face, constructing a believable love-at-first-sight moment perhaps because its purity and authenticity are preserved from further narrative contamination. In Betty's eyes and in her whole face, we can perceive the movement of a breathtaking affect. That, up to this moment as well as thereafter, Betty is emotionally tied to Rita seems of no consequence to the moment itself (except for the fact that Betty's hurried departure from the set seems to be caused by her sense of indebtedness to Rita – her obligation to narrative coherence). One might say that the moment is a "could-have-been" that never gets to be.<sup>7</sup> But one might also adopt a more affirmative emphasis and see this moment as one that, however briefly, does come to be.

If we chose to interpret this moment through the dream logic of psychoanalysis, we might see it as a representational displacement of Diane's anxieties vis-à-vis Camilla's (Laura Elena Harring) relationship with Adam in the film's second part. That is, by positioning herself as Adam's lover in this scene, Diane/Betty occupies Camilla's place and, through her active role, she masters the anxiety of her slow and masochistic disintegration as Camilla's cast-off lover. But such a psychoanalytic reading seems too dependent on coherent narrative structures to match the anarchic creative activity of the unconscious. In the terms I used earlier, it accounts for the "state of things," but it fails to account for the affective force of the moment, "the aspect of the event that its accomplishment cannot realize."

Instead, from an affective standpoint the encounter between Betty and Adam stands in the closest proximity to the virtual plane, insofar as it "detaches itself from [the] actualizations [of narrative], [and] starts to be valid for itself" (Deleuze 1989: 127). This scene makes clear that bodies in this film are not reducible to the events in which they participate, but are rather capable of crossing over into a realm of affects that are only actualized in a provisional, experimental vein. As a moment straight out of the virtual, the intertwining of looks and faces between Betty and Adam refuses to yield to the rules of reproductive/repetitive coherence that classical narrative is compelled to follow. As Olkowski explains, "what gets actualized from out of the virtual by means of action does not follow the rules of representation, but has its own rules . . . of differentiation, dissociation, and creation" (Olkowski 1999: 122). By making incongruous connections between some characters (Betty and Adam), which in turn imply a severance of fairly established connections between yet other characters (Betty and Rita), and by leaving these (dis)connections forever undeveloped and unresolved, this scene exemplifies the non-representational logic of the ontological, affective unconscious. The dislocation that takes place

here between characters and what we assume to be their more stable narrative roles or functions attests to the intelligence of an unconscious that is not satisfied with simply repeating, but instead works to create the new, an unconscious whose intelligent activity consists of “taking something intended to carry out one function and using it to accomplish something else . . . transferring functions from one activity to another” (Olkowski 1999: 123).

The notion of the unconscious as a virtual reservoir of memory disengaged from reproductive logic is exactly rendered in another remarkable scene I would now like to examine. Insofar as this scene is enacted twice, it proves even more powerfully evocative of the kind of repetition that is at stake in an affective, ontological, or delirious unconscious. Rita’s limo ride on Mulholland Drive during the film’s opening credits already constitutes an unlocatable and profoundly disturbing event. But it becomes even more so retroactively, as it is doubled up by Diane’s own limo ride close to the film’s ending. Is Rita’s ride a part of Diane’s dream? Is Rita’s escape from the deadly car crash ending the ride a compensatory displacement of Diane’s sense of guilt for having arranged Camilla’s murder? If this is so, what is the relationship between the hit man’s actual murder of Camilla and Rita’s opening ride? Does the scene of the dreamed ride coincide with the scene of the failed real murder? Does the murder ever take place? These questions are unanswerable, and, in a sense, futile. What matters is the hollowed-out desire that resonates between the two moments/women (a desire, perhaps, to avoid their ending at the hands of the film). “What are you doing?” they both say to the limo drivers, “We don’t stop here.” The two moments/events are so tightly and confusingly bound up together in a temporal loop of resonating affectivity that any attempt to posit linear or causal relations between them proves useless. Indeed, the two moments signal to a repetition which, to echo Buchanan’s words, “doesn’t render [the] delirium legible to us, so much as reveal its consistency” (Buchanan 2006: 128).

A non-mimetic repetition, of the kind that links the two moments I just mentioned, also links the film’s two parts. Thus, instead of considering the film’s structure as the narratively motivated binary of dream versus reality,<sup>8</sup> I would propose that we look at the entire film’s movement in time as a passage or interval that concerns the changing status of the affections. Indeed, a look at the film’s activity of repetition through the notion of “affection” proves far more consistent with the radical difference expressed in Lynch’s cinematic world. The doubling of the limo ride by the film’s first and second parts, as perhaps the doubling of some other scenes as well, is scrupulously exact in its bifurcation of the



two aspects of affection that splinter the film from the inside: following Deleuze/Spinoza's sense, the powers of affection to act or to be acted upon, what a being can do or what it can suffer. In the first instance, Rita/Camilla rides the limo seemingly to fulfill Betty/Diane's desire simultaneously for her life – as the woman she loves and is loved by in her dream – and for her death – as the woman whose rejection she attempts to master by commissioning her death. In the latter instance, when Diane rides the limo in the film's second part, she embodies the hysterical fragility of the cast-off lover about to disintegrate. Thus, the two unequal, asymmetrical parts of *Mulholland Drive* are structured around the difference between active and passive affections, and around the ways these resonate with each other through the virtual plane of memory and time.<sup>9</sup>

But here the difference between activity and passivity – the happy, outgoing Betty versus the washed-out and bitter Diane – is not fixated through the mutually exclusive terms of a binary opposition. Instead, the difference is constantly kept alive, changing and becoming, maintaining the approximations and distances between both terms in a continuously mobile relationship of resonance. In an essay that explores the Deleuzian notion of affect as intensity, Massumi notes the paradoxical coexistence of opposites on the virtual plane of immanence, as opposed to the necessary exclusion of one of the terms on the actual plane:

The levels at play could be multiplied to infinity . . . past and future, action and reaction, happiness and sadness, quiescence and arousal, passivity and activity, etc. These could be seen not as binary oppositions or contradictions, but as resonating levels. Affect is their point of emergence, in their actual specificity; and it is their vanishing point, in singularity, in their virtual coexistence and interconnection – that critical point shadowing every image/expression-event. (Massumi 1996: 226)

The Club Silencio scene functions precisely in this guise: as a resonating chamber that simultaneously brings together and separates all other moments in the film. Situated nowhere in particular, or, in a Deleuzian sense, in any-space-whatever, the scene's only reality lies in the temporal space between any two other before-and-after moments of the film (before the dream has been destroyed and after its destruction).<sup>10</sup> Occupying this empty, yet affectively overflowing, interval, the scene constitutes an exemplary moment of what Deleuze calls a becoming – “an extreme contiguity within a coupling of two sensations without resemblance” (Kennedy 2000: 108). Before and after reveal themselves not as mutually exclusive, but as coexistent levels of a becoming. In its paradoxical nature, the becoming of an affectively driven unconscious presents itself as a simultaneity of

opposites, a kind of “disjunctive synthesis” enabled by the resonating function of non-chronological, pure time.

Deleuze’s example of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* further enables the reading of the scene in *Mulholland Drive* as an instance of becoming:

When I say “Alice becomes larger,” I mean that she becomes larger than she was. By the same token, however, she becomes smaller than she is now. Certainly, she is not bigger and smaller at the same time. She is larger now; she was smaller before. But *it is at the same moment that one becomes larger than one was and smaller than one becomes*. This is the simultaneity of a becoming whose characteristic is to elude the present. Insofar as it eludes the present, becoming does not tolerate the separation or the distinction of before and after, or of past and future. It pertains to the essence of becoming to move and to pull in both directions at once: Alice does not grow without shrinking, and vice versa. Good sense affirms that in all things there is a determinable sense or direction (*sens*); but paradox is the affirmation of both senses or directions at the same time. (Deleuze 1990: 1, my emphasis)

Thus, in the scene at the club, Betty appears to be happy and sad at the same time, joining hands with her lover, yet profoundly shaken by inexplicable forces that are present, albeit elusive to consciousness or language. Such are the forces of becoming that render her simultaneously sadder than she was and happier than she becomes. (The comparison with Deleuze’s comments on Alice may entail yet another dimension, for is not Betty/Diane a kind of delirious version of the already postmodern Alice?)<sup>11</sup> From a referential standpoint, the scene is nothing, it contains nothing, but empty, resonating time, hence the simultaneity of happiness and sadness needs to be understood as an effect of this resonance, and not as a mark of psychological ambiguity or complexity.

In the transition from Betty’s active position as Rita’s lover to Diane’s masochistic passivity as Camilla’s rejected lover, a hollow space-time configuration opens up in place of narrative causes, links, or explanations. If the scene as a whole functions as such a *mise-en-abyme* in relation to the entire film, the moment that roughly occupies its center – the moment between several performances when Betty’s body shakes together with the entire space-time configuration that holds it – functions as the *mise-en-abyme* within a *mise-en-abyme*. The transition from bliss to horror is not narrativized, but rather performed through an electrified body that takes upon itself the material actualization of such impossible contiguity of extremes. It is as though at the juncture between the doing and the suffering, activity and passivity, bliss and horror, the excessive affect gripping Betty had given rise to an electrical surcharge or short circuit, rendering her body a genuine “conductor for transmitting movements” (Kennedy 2000: 119).<sup>12</sup>

### Creative forgers

Nochimson perceptively identifies the scene in *Blue Velvet* where Ben (Dean Stockwell) lip-synchs “In Dreams,” another Orbison song, as the “eye-of-the-duck” scene in this earlier Lynch film. The typical pivotal scene in a Lynch movie resembles the magnetic force of the eye of the duck in binding our eye to the asymmetrical beauty of the duck’s/film’s body. Like the eye of the duck, “disconnected from the connected lines of the duck’s body,” such a scene is disconnected from the unifying lines of narrative and representation, yet, like the eye of the duck, it too constitutes “the glowing impetus for all the movement that radiates mysteriously around it” (Nochimson 1997: 25). For Nochimson, such a scene “make[s] narrative a function of both will and the nonrational sensibilities beyond volition” (p. 26). I would like to introduce a slight change of emphasis in the relationship between narrative and the Lynchian eye-of-the-duck scene as proposed by Nochimson, by considering the latter not so much the creative engine of a still largely coherent narrative as the disorganizing force that disables the narrative inertia toward coherence and closure. Such a pivotal scene in fact functions as a whirlpool of affective energies drawing every film event centripetally into its irrational force.

Although Nochimson acknowledges the recurrence of performativity as one of Lynch’s signature qualities, rightly pointing to his tendency to put characters in shows and to have them exhibit the “performatory [sic]” nature of their roles, her analysis of performative moments in Lynch’s films falls short of accounting for the affective and philosophical richness these moments are able to produce. The performative mode, I would suggest, has the potential to disrupt not only the level of representation, but also the equally rigid moral patterns that structure our emotional and affective experiences. While, ontologically, the performative embraces the power of the false to produce true effects/affects regardless of actual states of affairs, morally, the performative aims at a radical displacement of moral boundaries that can profoundly dislocate the audience’s stagnated ways of thinking and feeling. Looking at both *Mulholland Drive* and *Blue Velvet*, this section will try to account for the creative, altering effects that derive from the powers of the false inherent in performativity.

The entire scene at Club Silencio seems to have been staged with the desire to highlight the powers of the false. Just as a performer’s act is sometimes highlighted by having a beam of light cast onto his or her body, the sequence at the club engages in a similar foregrounding gesture – not only by internally highlighting the “fake” musical numbers performed by the trumpet player and La Llorona with their respective spotlights, but also by

reflexively highlighting itself as the ineffable answer to the film's unformulated question. In this act of constituting itself as the core of the film's emptied relation to a stable reality, this scene sends out ripples of performativity and virtuality across the rest of the film, thereby articulating the film's desire as an inconclusive performative engagement with the false.

As evident in the central performative moments in both *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch often expresses his attachment to an aesthetics of the false via his characters' penchant for lip-synching. Fuller attributes "Lynch's interest in using lipsynched songs" to the effectiveness of lip-synching in "convey[ing] emotions mere naturalism cannot adequately express" (Fuller 2001: 17). The prevalence of lip-synching in Lynch's films thus implies an inherent inadequacy between realism and emotion, and a correlative adequacy between performance/falseness and emotion. But what needs to be emphasized is that Lynch's commitment to the false goes further than mere formal show, for it entails a severance of the classic link between a character's capacity to feel, or to relay feeling to an audience, and his or her moral status. In other words, the affective force actualized by the performer may at times cast a spell over us momentarily capable of overriding the narrative indictment of this character as a morally dubious, or even depraved, individual.

The paradoxical coexistence of psychopathology/moral perversion and affective intensity is crucial to the aforementioned eye-of-the-duck scene in *Blue Velvet*: Ben's lip-synched performance of Orbison's "In Dreams." This beautifully staged performance begins with Ben leaning against a doorway framed by a green curtain that smoothly contrasts with the dark pink of surrounding walls. Ben holds an exceedingly big, outdated mike in his right hand. As it projects light instead of sound, this mike sends out a soft, eerie light onto Ben's clownish, heavily made-up face, thus rounding up his persona as the "candy-colored man" alluded to in the song. A few lines into the song, the scene cuts to Frank (Dennis Hopper), who, part audience, part performer himself, is shown to be fully taken in by the song's moving music and lyrics. Frank's intense longing is expressed in his melancholy, lost gaze, and in his bodily stasis, almost indicative of reverence. Both Ben and Frank are framed by the green curtains and are positioned at a considerable distance from the audience formed by Ben's and Frank's henchmen, Jeffrey (Kyle MacLachlan), and Dorothy (Isabella Rossellini). For a few brief moments, Frank abandons his usual sadistic/voyeuristic position to become a part of the creative whirlpool of energy spun by Ben's performance. But he does not seem capable of sustaining this position for long: as Frank begins to sing along with the tune, his facial contortions betray unbearable pain, as if the affective experience were too intense for

his body to undergo. Accordingly, he shifts instantly from emotional vulnerability to active aggression, interrupting the nostalgic slowness of the performance with the frantic speed of the oncoming joyride.

I would like to quote what I consider Nochimson's most relevant comments on this scene in order to take the affective potentialities of the false further than her reading allows:

Ben obliges Frank by lipsynching for him . . . The extraordinary power of the image of Ben . . . is its revelation of *the pathetic reduction of dreams* within this context . . . Frank is agitated from the depths of his being by *a totally fabricated experience* . . . Ben's performance is *the icon of non-being* – a man who makes the gestures of femininity, and who *opens his mouth and does not sing*. (Nochimson 1997: 114, my emphasis)

Nochimson's devaluation of both Ben's lip-synching performance and Frank's experience thereof is, in my view, symptomatic of her failure to identify the creative and affective possibilities spun by the intensely disorienting powers of the false. Despite the film's alliance of Ben and Frank with the forces of moral degeneration and vital exhaustion, I do not think their participation in this particular performative event warrants the use of such negative rhetoric. On the contrary, I believe that the scene in question constitutes such an ineffable and shocking moment for the viewer precisely because the affect invoked by the song is actualized through the gestures and the gazes of such unlikely characters: a melancholy longing for intimacy and love is embodied by two men who are demonstrably incapable of either (note also that, as in the encounter between Betty and Adam in *Mulholland Drive*, the affective purity of this moment is crucially advanced by its brevity, its quick interruption). A sense of emotional disorientation arises whereby we are challenged to continue to feel despite the rational and moral imperatives that conventionally link the capacity to feel with the capacity for goodness. The scene dispenses with such a presupposed linkage, hence its ability to generate emotions for which we do not have a name. And even if one grants that Frank may be agitated "by a totally fabricated experience," the film avails itself of the powers of the false as the very force capable of disturbing and agitating its viewer as well.

While affective intensity may often arise from the unlikely pairing of certain depraved characters with a capacity to feel/power of affection, such a reservoir of vital potentiality is located in the ontological conjunction of differential speeds, and not in the signifying effects of moral or didactic principles. As in Fassbinder, the affective immediacy of Lynch's cinema does not aim at reproducing the socially palatable models of violence, sexuality, or virtue, but at bringing about a sense of disorientation from the clash between different forces or kinds of energy.<sup>13</sup> Kennedy's account of

the way Lynch himself describes the affective intensity of his films leaves no doubt as to his preference of vitalism over morality:

[Lynch] explains that a person can be fast or slow, just as a space can be fast or slow, or a range of perspectives in between. That person will then interact with space and time around him or her, a space and time which also have different “speeds” . . . [Lynch] suggests that this relation of speeds between “bodies” is what gives specific scenes in films that “unexplainable” intensity. (Kennedy 2000: 98)

Thus, it would seem that some of the pivotal scenes in Lynch’s films borrow from Orbison’s songs’ potential for sentimental cliché the kind of familiar and safe speed onto which the film grafts a more aggressive and disturbing speed – in *Blue Velvet*, the speed of Frank’s sadistic joyride mentality. A system of contrasting speeds or energies plays out on multiple and simultaneous planes both across different moments in the film and within each scene.<sup>14</sup>

The Orbison song in *Blue Velvet* is thus appropriately performed before and after a car ride of uncontrollable speed and madness. The second time “In Dreams” is heard, it plays on the stereo in Frank’s car, providing the background to Frank’s brutal verbal, gestural, and physical assault on Jeffrey. With lips smeared by Jeffrey’s own bloodied lips, and gaze intently locked with Jeffrey’s, Frank repeats the lines of the song, which he now addresses to Jeffrey with a disturbingly unwavering intensity (“In dreams, I walk with you, in dreams, I talk to you, in dreams you’re mine forever”). The incongruity between song and narrative action is taken to an extreme with the addition of several shots of a woman who gets on top of Frank’s car and turns it into her private dance floor. Like La Llorona in *Mulholland Drive* (and even Marylee/Malone in *Written on the Wind*), albeit with a markedly different resonance, this woman serves as an affective conduit in this instance. The swaying movements of her body amplify the clash between sentimentality and aggression already instantiated by Ben and Frank’s attachment to the song, indicating both her automated response to the emotional appeal of the song and her inability to respond emotionally to the violence unleashed in her proximity.

Deleuze’s advocacy of affective force over moral dictates figures implicitly in his consideration of Orson Welles’ sympathy for morally depraved characters such as detective Quinlan (Welles in *Touch of Evil*, 1958). In contrast to a traditional view of morality, Deleuze offers his own ethical position:

It is not a matter of judging life in the name of a higher authority which would be the good, the true; it is a matter, on the contrary, of evaluating every being, every action

and passion, even every value, in relation to the life which they involve. Affect as immanent evaluation, instead of judgment as transcendent value. (Deleuze 1989: 141)

The affective-performative scenes in *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive* discussed here are in fact engaged in redefining the good or goodness in creative, ethical, rather than moral terms. As such, the good emerges as a vital impulse that “knows how to transform itself, to metamorphose itself according to the forces it encounters . . . always opening new possibilities” (Deleuze 1989: 141).

Such ethical commitment to the value of each changing singularity, a commitment to evaluating each action or passion on its own terms and according to its own metamorphosing capacities, inevitably entails a weakening of the unifying, organizing outlines of identity.<sup>15</sup> As we see in *Mulholland Drive*, identity is displaced by an open series of virtual attributes, singular actions and passions indeterminately embodied by either Betty/Diane or Rita/Camilla, who thereby become authentic forgers in the Deleuzian sense:

There is no unique forger, and, if the forger reveals something, it is the existence behind him of another forger . . . The only content of narration will be the presentation of these forgers, their sliding from one to the other, their metamorphoses into each other. (Deleuze 1989: 133–4)

Betty and Rita are thus constantly “passing into one another,” metamorphosing into each other. Betty is Diane’s ideal version of herself, but Rita, in her blonde wig, is also Betty and Diane. Rita suffers from a constant state of sleepiness and amnesia, an extension of Diane’s own sleep and dreaming. Diane projects her fragile sense of identity onto Rita, who in turn does not know who she is (hence borrows “Rita” Hayworth’s name) and has no decision-making abilities, while Diane fantasizes herself as Betty’s confident, outgoing, and independent self. In her dream as Betty, Diane confronts her own dead body by distancing herself from it and by identifying it as someone else’s body. And, of course, presiding over all of these linkages and unlinkages between bodies and attributes, La Llorona is the point of convergence and divergence for Betty and Rita, who cry together during her performance, and are split apart soon thereafter. As expressions of the false, Betty/Diane and Rita/Camilla acquire almost unlimited creative powers – affective-performative capacities independent of any links to reality/actuality or identity.<sup>16</sup>

The very forgery in which bodies engage, in an effort to pass as the real source of emotion, is ethically enabling, insofar as it allows others, inside and outside the film, to insert themselves into the affective flow in a similar

performative position, thereby accessing new forms of thought and feeling. From this point of view, even acts that are conventionally regarded as the result of a corrupt morality or a pathological psyche take on a far more impersonal and less moralistic tone. Such acts as Diane's commissioning of Camilla's murder and her own suicide are conceived as the end of a process whereby the force/body that used to affect and be affected by others has reached a point of fatigue or exhaustion beyond repair. The kind of energy mobilized by this body is not generous or noble, for it is no longer capable of transforming itself (Deleuze 1989: 141). "What we can criticize in the forgers," Deleuze says, "is their exaggerated taste for form: they have neither the sense nor the power of metamorphosis; they reveal an impoverishment of the vital force [*élan vital*], of an already exhausted life" (p. 146). In this regard, Diane's dream figures as her last effort at making fiction, the final show of her power to make up her own legend. Bodily and affective impotence, the inability to continue lending oneself to the ever-transforming powers of becoming, eventually fans out signaling the end in all directions: The end of the dream/performance/forgery is the end of life is the end of cinema. *Silencio* is what remains in the absence of all resonance.

### At the limits of genre

To conclude this chapter I would like to address the impact of an affective-performative cinema, such as we see in *Mulholland Drive*, on considerations of genre and generic specificity. Earlier I alluded to the film's two asymmetrical parts, and to the Club Silencio scene as their point of disjunctive synthesis. My former comments on the film's transition from bliss to horror, from active to passive affections, imply a certain hybridity and transformative capacity in the film's generic identity. Even prior to the scene at the club, during Betty and Rita's lovemaking, one might already identify a liminal zone where melodrama and horror mate to breed an unpredictable and disturbing hybrid. Symptomatically, Betty's passionate declarations of love for Rita are not reciprocated, but met, belatedly and dissonantly, by Rita's delirious dream-words ("Silencio, silencio: no hay banda, no hay orquesta") in one of the film's eeriest, most unsettling moments.

At the most obvious level, one may simply regard the film's fluid generic identity as the outcome of narrative progression – an increasing intrusion of the horror genre into the domain of the melodrama. After all, there are plenty of narrative and iconic elements in the film to suggest a preponderance of these two genres. But, given the exuberant activity of the body in



*Mulholland Drive*, I would like to pursue this inquiry into the film's generic configuration through elements of corporeal expression rather than narrative signification. To that end, it may be useful to recall Williams' correlation of various forms of bodily excess with the generic discourses of melodrama, pornography, and horror (Williams 1995). Corporeal/affective excess in *Mulholland Drive* is often signaled by one of Naomi Watts' signature acting skills: the ability to make her body shake and convulse in the grip of intense emotion. But while some of these instances of bodily excess in the film may be congruent with certain generic codes, others seem to resist exact generic codification. Betty's trembling voice and body during her Hollywood audition are the result of erotic, if not pornographic, excess; and Diane's shaking body as it sits irresolute on the couch before the old couple slipping under her door "drive her over the edge" (Fuller 2001: 16) may well qualify as a body in the grip of horror. But the status of Betty's convulsing body at Club Silencio does not lend itself as readily to generic containment. Ambiguously situated between the melodramatic intensity generated by La Llorona's song and the horrifying self-awareness of the impending end of the dream, the body here resides in an interval that escapes exact generic classification. In this respect, *Mulholland Drive*'s affective body appears to exceed the generic configurations of the more or less classical narrative cinema examined by Williams.

The generic ambiguity exhibited by the film need not be attributed merely to Lynch's individual talent as an *auteur* escaping the constraints of established uses and meanings of genre. It may very well be that, as Rick Altman has suggested, traditional distinctions among genres are far too rigid and stable, and that these hard-and-fast distinctions fail to account for the ways in which genres constantly evolve through rather impersonal processes of combination and selection, which are largely, but not exclusively, driven by marketing imperatives (Altman 1999). But in addition to the historical, constantly changing status of genres, exclusionary distinctions between them also fail to account for the disorganizing effects the affective image introduces into any organized system of meaning. I am referring to the image's power of self-affectation, which, as we have seen, Lynch's films are rather intimately attuned to. In Deleuze's terms, the image's self-affectation involves its capacity to express "the nonactualizable part of an event" (Alliez 2000: 294), in short, the heterogeneity that also plays havoc with the homogenizing effects of generic categories. From this perspective, affect in the film is not a property of certain fixated systems of meaning we call genres, but rather the very quality that challenges the image to move away from any immediately recognizable, systematizable meaning. The film's affective activity is not dependent upon a semiotic

system external to it, but rather emerges as the film's own impersonal decision to mobilize the powers of the image beyond what can be explained. Affect in this sense may be defined as the unsettling force the image becomes when it cannot be explained except by recourse to a new form of thought or sensation.

Another way of thinking of the creative power of genre as deployed in *Mulholland Drive* is to consider it as a kind of fragmentary, inconclusive performance – a performance that, like those of the trumpet player and La Llorona herself, sabotages its own possibility of identity and coherence by constantly shortcircuiting itself. Although *Mulholland Drive* features melodrama and horror as its most dominant, most recognizable genres, the film's generic identity is splintered into a diversity of generic fragments. For example, Lynch's interest in the "emotional tones and moods that characterize the soap-opera form" (Nochimson 1997: 75) is evident in the scene of Betty's audition, which takes the most cliché-loaded of generic situations and transforms it into a stunningly sensual and vibrant moment. Yet other moments, and even iconographic elements, in the film suggest the mythical influence of fairy tales: Betty's rushed departure from the Hollywood set where she meets Adam recalls Cinderella's rushed departure from the ball where she meets her prince; the cowboy and the blue-haired lady dressed in eighteenth-century attire are decontextualized figures that have escaped from other films, times, or worlds; scenes like the hit man's sudden shooting of a guy he appears to be in friendly conversation with, and the ensuing string of grotesque complications leading to further murders, are reminiscent of similar parodies of noir in films such as Joel and Ethan Coen's *Blood Simple* (1983), or even Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956). However, insofar as these recognizable generic situations are reduced to an iconic and fragmented appearance, they may be termed virtual rather than actual. It is as though the film had built in a self-(con)structive mechanism that prevented these castaway fragments from ever achieving a sealed unity and a stable identity in the manner of more traditional configurations of genre.

Deleuze's comments in *The Time-Image* provide a way of thinking through *Mulholland Drive*'s fragmentary uses of genre. Here, Deleuze discusses the possibility of using genre "as a free power of reflection" (Deleuze 1989: 184) rather than simply deploying it in the service of narrative. This reflective possibility arises from the combination of several distinct genres and in the fluid passage from one to the other:

An entire film may correspond to a dominant genre . . . But even in this case the film moves through sub-genres, and the general rule is that there are several genres, hence

several series [of images]. The passage from one genre to the next . . . may be through straight discontinuity, or equally in an imperceptible and continuous manner with “intercalary genres” . . . This reflective status of genre has important consequences: instead of genre subsuming the images which naturally belong to it, it constitutes the limit of images which do not belong to it but are reflected in it. (Deleuze 1989: 184)

Thus, even as *Mulholland Drive* often draws from melodramatic convention and cliché, it uses these forms reflectively as the limit against which a different kind of affective force or energy bounces off and asserts itself. Genre, in this citational sense, is not the seamless pattern that, in subsuming all images, becomes in turn subsumed under them in one indivisible narrative and stylistic unit. Instead, the fissures and separations, the borders themselves, become the knotty points where genre is most perceivable and most conspicuously inscribed. And this emphasis on the moment of interruption as moment of inscription, presence caused by displacement, is intimately connected with the moment that gives rise to affect as well. If, as I said earlier, affect is the very quality that challenges the image to move away from any immediately recognizable meaning, then its emergence must be crucially bound up with the blurring of generic boundaries. Affect is thus at its most intense at the juncture where generic boundaries become unsettled, at the point where they converge, disperse, or dissolve.

In *Mulholland Drive*, the idea of genre as the limit of images, rather than as the safe ground or protective umbrella that sanctions their legitimacy and intelligibility, is nowhere more dramatically enacted than in the film’s pivotal scene. Here, the suspension of spatio-temporal markers is accompanied by a parallel suspension of generic identity. Thus, La Llorona’s unaccountable collapse marks precisely the point of generic interruption, an evacuation of meaning that enhances the affective intensity of the moment for both Betty/Rita and the audience. The role of the showman is crucial in this respect. What the showman is entrusted with “showing” in this scene is the gaping hole that looks at us at the point where the images of romance are no longer credible, while the images of shocking horror are as yet to become explainable.

The reflective function of a figure like the showman, as Deleuze implies, is closely related to the film’s playful interaction with genre. Deleuze cites the intervention of philosopher Brice Parain in Godard’s *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962) as an example of a reflective figure that “exhibit[s] the limit towards which a given series of visual images was moving and would move in the future” (Deleuze 1989: 186). If Parain in *Vivre Sa Vie* “exhibits and individuates the category of language, as the limit toward which the heroine [Nana/Anna Karina] was moving” (Deleuze 1989: 186), the showman in

*Mulholland Drive* has the function of marking the limit toward which the melodramatic or romantic portion of the film has been moving. This limit, Deleuze explains, “will be realized only by forming another sequence moving towards another limit” (Deleuze 1989: 184), in the case of *Mulholland Drive*, the predominant sequence of horror which continues relentlessly onward until the film’s end. The showman brings Diane’s identity as Betty to a cruel halt and impresses the rest of the film with that very same quality of merciless cruelty. Yet, moral dilemmas and calls to judgment aside, what such a figure facilitates is the use of genre in its raw, pure state, and not in the service of coherence or meaning: once genre gives up “its capacities for subsuming or constituting in favor of a free power of reflection” (Deleuze 1989: 184), it becomes all the purer.

Such prevalence of reflective concerns and citational style over a coherent or singular meaning has of course been extensively argued in connection with Lynch’s postmodernism. But what has not been interrogated to the same extent is the way affect survives, and indeed thrives, in the midst of the prevailing abstraction and frantic activity of thought that pervade his cinema.<sup>17</sup> At the outset, one might be tempted to see in Lynch’s defense of cinematic affect an evocation of the real value Freud attached to psychic reality. But in Lynch’s cinematic world, the primacy of surface signs over concepts of interiority based on a depth model makes the Freudian analogy quite inadequate. Indeed, the surface images of *Mulholland Drive* provoke intense horror, its highly staged situations make us experience profound dread. But such intensity of horror and dread no longer depends upon the classical theoretical distinction between the empirical presence and absence of the pro-filmic event. Instead, it arises within a practice of cinema where image and affect are synonymous – their relation independent of the world outside cinema itself. From this standpoint, Lynch’s cinema is the delirious playground of an affective-performative unconscious, a positive “displaceable energy,” which, in the words of Olkowski, keeps virtual bodies and objects in a permanent state of freedom “to circulate in whatever presents [this energy] may press itself upon” (Olkowski 1999: 166). This account cannot fail to remind us of Deleuze’s cinema of the time-image as a sensation-producing machine – a play of surface intensities, rhythms, and pulsations that the spectator experiences with no reference to the binary real/imaginary. Although this experience may still seem to fit Metz’s idea of suspended disbelief, it goes well beyond it, for it renders the difference between reality and fiction irrelevant, not only for the allegedly duped Metzian viewer, but this time for the supposedly more alert film critic or theorist as well.

## Notes

1. Available at [www.geocities.com/Hollywood/2093/quotecollection/psych.html](http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/2093/quotecollection/psych.html) (June 15, 2000).
2. In Chapter 2 I offer a lengthier discussion on the difference between sentimentality and affect.
3. I have referred to the virtual in former chapters, but, because of its relevance to my analysis of *Mulholland Drive*, I would like to expand further on this notion. For Deleuze, the real is split into the actual and the virtual. The actual designates present states of affairs into which *Being* manifests itself as *beings*. The virtual, on the other hand, refers to the *Being of beings*, that is, “a pure power of occurrence” (Badiou 2000: 49) that is as real as the actual, and indeed, cannot be separated from it. As Alain Badiou explains, the virtual is not “a latent double or ghostly prefiguration of the real,” but a “process of actualization . . . the perpetual actualizing of new virtualities” (Badiou 2000: 49). The virtual, therefore, “must . . . never be confused with the possible” (Badiou 2000: 48), insofar as the possible is a category of Platonism, “an image that one has fabricated from the real . . . a play of mirrors” (Badiou 2000: 48).
4. Available at [www.rebekahdelrio.com/llorando.html](http://www.rebekahdelrio.com/llorando.html) (2003).
5. For a psychoanalytic reading of *Mulholland Drive*, see Todd McGowan’s “Lost on Mulholland Drive: Navigating David Lynch’s Panegyric to Hollywood” (2004). McGowan’s Freudian/Lacanian analysis splits the film into the distinctive realms of wish-fulfilling fantasy and failing desire.
6. A compelling account of Betty’s soap-opera audition as well as other aspects of performance in the film can be found in George Toles’ “Auditioning Betty in *Mulholland Drive*” (2004).
7. Martha Nochimson’s negative take on this moment as a missed encounter privileges narrative and psychological considerations over the affirmative force of affect itself. Nochimson writes:

The meeting [between Betty and Adam] pointedly does not take place. It begins to seem inevitable, but sadly, even horribly what we watch is not the encounter itself, but its failure to materialise [sic] . . . When Betty leaves the set, when Adam does not call her back, the great sorrow that each of them radiates marks their profound, unspoken, unacknowledged foreboding that, although her suicide does not take place until much later, this is the end of Betty’s life. (Nochimson 2004: 172–3)

8. No matter the apparent dislocating effect the labeling of an event as a “dream” may have, the word “dream” still retains a generic, homogenizing function with respect to all events thus categorized. As Olkowski argues, applying the term “dream” to events of radical difference amounts to a representational reduction that deprives these events of their affective potentiality for becoming:

Radical ontological heterogeneity is passed over because it is mistakenly identified with the dream, the limit of intelligibility, making it possible for

representation, the spatialized, homogeneous, and hierarchical identity of selves and objects, to replace becoming as the true foundation of memory and action, and to replace the event as well, even though the event is what makes each present act truly innovative and new. (Olkowski 1999: 115)

9. On the narrative plane, given Lynch's choice to fashion a lesbian story of sorts, the distorting, asymmetrical relationship between the film's two parts may also be seen as an example of Luce Irigaray's labial metaphor. The never completed, forever open nature of becoming is also a crucial feature here:

In the two lips, the process of becoming form – and circle – is not only never complete or completable, it takes place . . . thanks to this non-completion: the lips, the outlines of the body reflect one another, and there is born of this movement a self-perpetuating and self-developing form of desire . . . [that] never detaches itself from the matter which generates it. Form and matter . . . beget one another endlessly. (Irigaray 1991: 97–8)

It is significant, in this sense, that the lesbian subtext of the film is at its most affecting during those moments leading into and following the scene at Club Silencio. The self-begetting nature of desire is not only appropriate to a lesbian content, but also coincides in this case with the film's own desiring production as an affair it overtly conducts with itself.

10. The Club Silencio scene enacts a temporality of anticipation and retroaction such as is intimated in Deleuze's comments that "power-qualities have an anticipatory role, since they prepare for the event which will be actualized in the state of things and will modify it" (Deleuze 1986: 102). The power-quality expressed by the image anticipates the event, while the event retroactively achieves its full disclosure by referring back to the affect expressed. Thus, the affect displayed in the scene at the club, while completely autonomous, may be said to anticipate and reach full meaning in the event of Diane's death, and, conversely, Diane's death can only be grasped in relation to the affect unleashed in Betty at the prospects of her own disintegration.
11. Fuller alludes to the comparison between Betty/Diane and Alice when he writes: "Betty disappears and Rita opens a small blue box . . . and we tumble Alice-like . . . into Diane's living hell as an unwashed, bitter prostitute and drug addict" (Fuller 2001: 16).
12. The body's status as affective/energetic conduit in *Mulholland Drive* goes hand in hand with the idea of an unconscious located "within the material configurations of energy and matter, not in psychic formations" (Kennedy 2000: 81). As Nochimson has noted, Lynch's cinema makes repeated use of artificial light sources to mark the presence of energy flows – unconscious forces that interfere with the workings of technical/technological instrumentality. Crude material instrumentality is thus converted or transmuted into affectivity. Seen from this perspective, the affects in Club Silencio are actualized through the eruption and perception of vibrating sources of lighting

and sound: from lightning and thunder to flickering lights highlighting the isolated presence of a microphone on stage, to clouds of smoke accompanying the showman's disappearance.

13. Olkowski's comments on the difference between immediate affectivity and the stale, vitally exhausted moral agendas often informing classical theatre – and no doubt classical cinema as well – are worth quoting here for their implicit advocacy of a cinema like Lynch's:

The classical theater . . . instead of offering the immediacy of affectivity, presents itself in terms of the moral injunction . . . to learn a lesson, to contemplate a fixed and dead expression, to conform to standards of perception that are constituted by a restrictive social norm. Such conformity does not merely bore the public, it substitutes for the affective immediacy of spectacle the representation of ideals, in order to then judge the public for not living up to the standard of those ideals. Rather than being challenged with what exceeds even their most intense series, the public is given stale models of resemblance, identity, analogy, and opposition . . . representations of violent acts . . . vicious acts . . . sexual acts . . . courageous acts . . . virtuous acts . . . And so people respond the only way they can . . . they do not learn; at best . . . they act out or represent to themselves degraded copies of these acts . . . they represent but cannot create. (Olkowski 1999: 187–8)

14. Thus, for instance, in *Blue Velvet*, one may point to the jarring juxtaposition of Ben's effeminate, soft gestures (his pose as a "suave fucker," in Frank's words) with his own violent beating of Jeffrey, or to the contrast between Ben's subtler form of sadism, as he elegantly mimics the melodious tones of the Orbison song, and Frank's more obvious pressing need to extract blood and subjection from others. Lynch's practice of cinema as a creative process predicated on dissonance/disjunction bears a striking similarity to the Bergsonian/Deleuzian idea that the actualization and expansion of memory involves not a simple motion but a process of "dissociation and divergence." "Dissociation and divergence are the creative forces of life" (Olkowski 1999: 119).
15. Daniel Coffeen's reading of the film also emphasizes the dissolution of individual subjectivity at the hands of the film's impersonal activities:

In some sense, *Mulholland Drive* is nothing but events, events without characters, nothing but the relentless assembling of signs. As these are events without cause and hence without effect, Lynch does not allow us recourse to psychoanalysis. There is no deep-rooted ambivalence, no burbling id, no stew of explanation . . . despite the persistence of dreams, the dreamwork will not suffice . . . there is not even a psyche to locate. (Coffeen 2003)

16. Even a cursory look into the activity of dreaming in the film alerts us to the idea that such creative powers are not owned by any of its characters, but are rather the film's to select, combine, and express. One might be tempted to regard Diane's dream as a *mise-en-abyme* structure that includes the dreams

of those who populate her own dream world as well. But the list of examples is too long and the depth into which they plunge us is too vertiginous for one single personal unconscious to handle. For instance, when Rita is shown sleeping at Betty's aunt Ruth's apartment several times, are the scenes immediately following Rita's own dreams, or is Betty dreaming that Rita is having those dreams? Whose nightmare is the guy at Winkie's telling his friend about? His own, Betty's, both, or neither? While, narratively speaking, "there is no unique forger" (Deleuze 1989: 133), at the level of immanence the film itself figures as the supreme forger who dreams, performs, masquerades, and poses beyond the restrictive boundaries of subjectivity. In his book on Lynch, Chion refers to the non-coincidence between subjectivity and the activity of dreaming in Lynch's cinema when he writes: "'Whose dream am I in?' This is the question which the Lynchian hero must avoid asking himself too clearly" (Chion 1995: 168).

17. Recently, several articles in the edited collection *The Cinema of David Lynch: American Dreams, Nightmare Visions* (Sheen and Davison 2004) have emphasized the affective dimension of Lynch's cinema over and against the former trend toward considering this cinema an example of the waning of affect in postmodern pastiche. I will not enter here into the debate of whether Lynch's cinema should be labeled postmodernist or not. But I think it bears repeating that it is precisely because Lynch aligns affect with the false (in the sense of a virtual, performative ontology), rather than with the authentic, that he is able to free affect from the rigid frame of actuality, thereby fashioning unlimited creative possibilities for affective activity.



## CONCLUSION

### Everything is “Yes”

At several key moments in Potter's *Yes* (2005), the narrator (Shirley Henderson), a woman working as a housekeeper at the female protagonist's (Joan Allen) home, tells us of her futile struggles with dirt (“it never disappears, it only changes places”). During the film's closing moments, Henderson finally reveals the logic behind her sporadic musings, as well as the affective principle driving the entire film: “I don't think ‘No’ really exists,” she concludes, “Everything is ‘Yes’.” With these words, spoken in Henderson's child-like, almost whispering voice, the film captures the affirmative character of its own affective dynamics. More broadly, the final words in *Yes* also express the essentially affirmative impulse of a Spinozist/Deleuzian understanding of the affections. As I have attempted to show in this book, insofar as powers of affection concern processes of change, transformation, and experimentation, they are thoroughly affirmative – not in the sense of yielding good, as opposed to bad, results, a matter of identity and morality, but rather in the sense of being ceaselessly active and productive, hence consequential. I would like to conclude by offering a few comments that will expand upon the political relevance of such affirmative ethics to our contemporary world. In so doing, my primary aim is to stress the affective continuum that joins life and the cinema, the apparently ordinary situations in which our bodies find themselves day in and day out and the apparently extraordinary movements and gestures that take hold of affective-performative bodies onscreen.

Because bodies and their affections are in perpetual motion and change, they can neither reach a fixed state of being nor ever be said to lack in being. Disengaged from the molar plane of formed identities, powers of affection are not bound by the representational organization of the latter, with their binary fluctuations between being and non-being, presence and absence, fulfillment and lack. In the molecular plane of composition/consistency where affective powers operate, neither movement nor rest is marked by absence or negativity, not even appearances of passivity or failure. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari see the movement of elements and particles on the plane of immanence as driven by speed differentials affecting the kinds of passages and assemblages that can be effected

between different molecular elements. Their comments stress the radically affirmative character of these molecular bodies and their connections:

If there are . . . jumps, rifts between assemblages, it is not by virtue of their essential irreducibility but rather because there are always elements that do not arrive on time, or arrive after everything is over . . . Even the failures are part of the plane [of immanence] . . . a plane of consistency peopled by anonymous matter, by infinite bits of impalpable matter entering into varying connections. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 255)

As these remarks imply, it is not a matter of regarding a failed connection or a missed passage as an irretrievable failure or a final interruption in the workings of the plane of immanence; rather, the failures themselves are part of the relentless activity of anonymous matter stirring in this plane.

In *Powers of Affection*, I have tried to reclaim such an essentially affirmative thrust for the performative body. If we look back at some of the affective–performative moments/expression–events evoked in this book, we may see, as in *Imitation of Life*, that the fetishized body may still be animated in instances where pain is inflicted upon it; we may also recall, as in *Petra von Kant*, *Nénette and Boni*, *Beau Travail*, *Friday Night*, or *Mulholland Drive*, that the body in crisis is far from lacking in active and transformative capacities; or that, as in *Written on the Wind*, *Maria Braun*, *Thriller*, or *The Tango Lesson*, the body circumscribed and straitjacketed by cultural norms never ceases to reinvent itself under the direst or most conflictive conditions. These are the irreducibly affirmative signatures of the body, which only the onset of death can fully erase, for it is precisely at that moment that the body’s powers to affect, and be affected by, other bodies reach a point of exhaustion.

If, as Henderson insists in *Yes*, no micromolecular particle of dust ever disappears, neither do the affects: like dust, they simply move, change places, get picked up by other bodies, gain or lose their individual strength according to their joining with other affects or separating from them. The staggering implications of this simple principle of physics also pertain to the realm of the affections.<sup>1</sup> Neither forgetfulness of signs or traces, nor the physical elimination of bodies, can truly result in a full erasure of their affects. Instead, the body subjugated cannot but continue, however stealthily, to express itself; the force ignored resumes its trajectory through circuitous routes; and the forgotten image or memory finds new ways of reasserting itself.

Yet our cultural bias toward visibility hardly encourages a belief in the kind of irreducibility of the affects I just described. Not surprisingly, our faith in the real as that which is visible/sizeable has long misled us into

believing that only measurable, large-scale events should grab our attention and spark our outrage. Thus, even as we speak of the next cataclysmic event to come, the powers of affection keep eluding us. For, as these powers now and again cross over into the visible and erupt in a screen-imparted explosion, atrocity, or shooting rampage, such visible extremity is ill-equipped in its crude velocity, in its circumscription by quantity and extension, to enable us to experience an intense affective encounter.<sup>2</sup> Instead, exposure to these images paradoxically has the effect of reinforcing our customary state of numbness, leaving us unable to engage in real thought or feeling. Invisibility, ignorance, forgetfulness, distance – these are our protective mantles against the world's affects, including our own.

To remedy this cultural state of visible frenzy, it is necessary to think of the real as exceeding the visible, and of real events as concerning bodies other than those whose boundaries we can trace or ascertain. As Pisters has suggested, we should think of a politics that operates beyond the traditionally defined borders of the organism, for “it is the invisible level that is most important in a culture that increasingly depends on the visible” (Pisters 2001: 25). And this, I would submit, is precisely one of the most radical thoughts Deleuze and Guattari have bequeathed to us – the existence of an incorporeal materialism that calls on us to become attentive to a micropolitics of the affections, a virtual plane, no less real than the actual, on which affects, thoughts, and desires continue to brew and transform long before and after they take a shape that we can see, name, or recognize.

Investment in such a micropolitics should not be considered a substitute act – a dismissal of a politics of classes, institutions, or social structures in favor of a politics of desire and affectivity. Rather, the detailed study of the affections should be conducted in conjunction with the study of social and political movements at the molar level. Emphasizing the former perspective over the latter, this book has tried to show the inherently political dimension of affective encounters. Throughout, and especially in the area of gender, I have stressed the ongoing impact of the affections on the ways bodies negotiate, balance, or unbalance power relations with other bodies. For instance, as I pointed out in my discussions of *Written on the Wind* and *The Tango Lesson*, the rigidity that characterizes the molar segmentation of social and private spaces and the codes regulating men and women's sexual relations may be thwarted by the flow of desire embodied in performative acts. The focus on the affections I have pursued has been shown to function as a springboard for a molecular dissolution of representational distinctions between the sexes based on a binary organization of gender. In this sense, none of the films featured in this book in which homoerotic relations figure prominently – *Petra von Kant*, *Beau Travail*, and *Mulholland*

*Drive* – is concerned with conducting an exploration of gay identity politics at the molar level. Nonetheless, these films find surprising ways of radically intervening in and altering their own mapping of gender, not, as it may initially appear, by skirting the issue of gender altogether, but rather by favoring the lines of flight that “escape the binary organizations, the resonance apparatus, and the overcoding machine” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 216) to perform possibilities of affection and relationality between bodies outside rigidified molar lines of behavior.

Not coincidentally, the cinemas I have discussed often show a discrepancy between the powers of affection and the idea of power as political dominance. In films like *Imitation*, *Written*, *Thriller*, *The Tango Lesson*, and *Nénette and Boni*, some of the most destitute characters in terms of social or political power are at the same time most capable of shaking things out of their rigid, stratified conditions. In other instances, as in *Maria Braun*, *Petra von Kant*, and *Beau Travail*, the bodies assuming a position of dominance for most of the film’s duration become exceedingly intense precisely upon relinquishing such majoritarian dominance and becoming minoritarian. The flows and transformations that traverse the affective-performative body in these films attest to a form of power (*puissance*) based on the vital laws of existence. Attention to this form of power, I would argue, might perform a much-needed deterritorializing function in the current global political climate where the power (*pouvoir*) of terror of different persuasions prevails as the means to impose one’s will over others. Insofar as powers of affection operate in each and every living body, they have an inherently equalizing/deterritorializing effect on the relations that bodies are capable of establishing with each other. Unlike forms of power operating at the molar level and organizing bodies into classes, genders, races, and a diversity of other such discriminatory categories, powers of affection do not respect the lines between subjects and objects, hence they do not discriminate on the basis of institutionalized segments or structures. Capacities for affecting and being affected lie at the heart of any body’s existence, thereby performing a radically leveling function across human, and even non-human, beings.

A Spinozist/Deleuzian consideration of expressive and affective capacities as shared by all beings in nature promotes a less personal way of thinking the human event itself. De-emphasizing ego-centered, individual subjectivity in our ways of approaching the human event today may be of great benefit to the pervasively conflicted state of local and global affairs. Through a penchant for sensual abstraction and the proliferation of affective possibilities resulting therefrom, the films I have discussed demonstrate, even in their limited aesthetic, creative capacity, the ethical

advantages involved in such a desubjectification process. Following the logic that pairs off affective intensity with the dismantling of subjectivity, the most abstract and impersonal films – those of Denis and Lynch – also tend to feature the most affectively intense, sometimes even utopian, moments.<sup>3</sup>

Forceful expressions of such equalizing effects are numerous in the affective-performative cinemas explored in this book. To varying degrees, the majority of the films I have surveyed ignore differences derived from the moral status/molar organization of bodies. Instead, in consonance with the Spinozist principle that “anarchy and unity are one and the same thing” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 158), these films insert their bodies into one single, yet disorganized, continuum of vital and creative flows. The privileging of ethical creativity tends to coincide with an emphatic disassembling of both moral codes and power structures (*pouvoir*). Such moments, in which moral restrictions and oppositions are superseded, abound in affective-performative films or scenes – from the attribution of affective capacities to morally corrupted characters in *Blue Velvet*, to the endowment of traditionally immoral female characters with a vital, subversive force in *Imitation* and *Written*, to the association of a morally “dead” character, such as Galoup in *Beau Travail*, with unlimited joy and unbridled sensuality. In all of these instances, it is in the nature of the affective-performative to be at its most ethical, vital, and creative when it pays no heed to the narrow restrictions of moral systems that drown our affects and silence our passions.

A division or compartmentalization between life and cinema is possible only at the level of representation, hardly at the level of the affections that transverse the body in any and all situations. Thus, as my thoughts in this conclusion suggest, it is important that we remind ourselves of the remarkable overlap between the worlds of cinema and non-cinema. The scenes of affective-performative intensity I have analyzed in this book are not just isolated aesthetic events disconnected from life (the representational model of fiction versus reality), but events that have the courage to engage in affective flows and exchanges that our media culture is generally rather afraid to activate. At its best, the cinema breaks ranks with the kind of affective neutrality that we are encouraged to maintain in our daily lives, a neutrality that entails the reduction of our capacity for both joy and sadness.<sup>4</sup> This institutionalized numbing of the affections, it seems to me, deprives us of crucial creative capacities for existence. I would therefore conclude, with Spinoza and Deleuze/Guattari, that the capacity to engage with the powers of affection goes hand in hand with the capacity to live in an expansive, creative way. In this regard, one of the foremost functions of

the cinema is to bring to consciousness the body's powers of affection. Such an activity neither begins nor ends at the movie theatre, but the body's affective experience in, with, and through the movies may act as a potent translator, conductor, and transductor of thoughts, sensations, and affects that continue to draw lines of flight along an indivisible line of transformation, and beyond punctual moments of either origins or closures.

It thus seems appropriate to end with an event of the powers of affection that I experienced outside the cinema, which nonetheless attests to the virtual continuum between affective-performative bodies on and off the movie screen. The event in question took place at a crowded supermarket in the Canadian city where I live. A friend and I happened to be there on a Friday evening when, out of the blue, a few feet away from where we were standing, a man started yelling and beating his own face, with such fury as to bring the whole supermarket to a grinding halt. For what felt like a very long moment, or perhaps the very evacuation of time, the yelling continued undisrupted, even gathering strength. The cashier woman in front of us could not operate on her routine words and gestures. Trying to elude the traumatic sight nearby, my eyes found refuge in the image of a mother holding her child and drawing the child's face toward her chest in a protective gesture.

People were bringing their hands to their ears in an effort to block the terrifying sound issuing from this man. As I now realize, we were all acting as protective shields for each other, yet no shield was strong enough to cancel out the affective impact of that one body amongst us. At first sight, there was this one performer in our midst, and we were all his audience. But in point of fact, all of our bodies were each other's performers and each other's audiences. Yet the stage/screen was nowhere and everywhere: as we were all on both the emitting and the receiving ends of the affective circuit that was formed, we became affective-performative forces for each other, each intertwined with the other at levels of which we could only be minimally aware. Whatever or whoever we happened to arrest our gaze at became the memory of the event for us. Much as in our experience of a film event, a string of particular images and sounds selected among countless possibilities was to compose the lasting affection each of us took away from this moment.

In my own body's powers of affection, I recognized the man's sound as a force – a force whose long history of invisibility had allowed many to ignore and suppress its very existence, a force beaten into compliance, detoured, delayed, arrested, displaced. Not coincidentally, the man was an aboriginal to this country, Canada. Like many aboriginal people here, he may have been classified as homeless and/or jobless, perhaps pronounced

to be addicted to something or other. Now that the force was finally expressing itself, no one knew how to handle it. Although the force I heard was neither aboriginal nor white, it was coming out of a body marked as aboriginal – by history, by me, by himself, by others. As such, one could not separate the force from the form it had taken, the micropolitics from the macropolitics, the molecular movements and flows of desire from the molar structures and institutions set on organizing and channeling these movements and flows. The particular convergence of micropolitical movements and macropolitical structures in this body had given rise to a concrete form of power capable of much damage.<sup>5</sup>

The event I just described is but an instance, at the microlevel, of the macropolitics of war, terror, and exploitation we are able to witness on a global scale today. It is doubtful, at best, whether such a macropolitics may ever be curbed by a macropolitics of peace and social justice. As Deleuze and Guattari have convincingly argued, war and peace have become such tightly dependent, mutually inextricable machines in our contemporary world that they can operate in perfect unison to advance the interests of the state apparatus. It is, after all, in the name of securing “peace” and “security” for the West that wars are currently being waged in other parts of the world:

It is politics that becomes the continuation of war; it is peace that technologically frees the unlimited material process of total war . . . *Wars ha[ve] become a part of peace . . . the war machine finds its new object in the absolute peace of terror or deterrence . . . this war machine is terrifying not as a function of a possible war that it promises us . . . but, on the contrary, as a function of the real, very special kind of peace it promotes and has already installed . . . this war machine no longer needs a qualified enemy but . . . operates against the “unspecified enemy,” domestic or foreign (an individual, group, class, people, event, world) . . . there ar[ises] from this a new conception of security as materialized war, as organized insecurity or molecularized, distributed, programmed catastrophe.* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 467, my emphasis)

As Deleuze and Guattari imply here, the macropolitics of war has already appropriated within its own mechanisms the macropolitics of peace. In such a bleak context, the project of advancing peace can no longer rest upon a quantitative argument, for I believe this argument would present us with at least two major hurdles. First, the prospect of massive undertakings (of the kind that requires the sum of the efforts of those who work for peace to be equal to or exceed the sum of the efforts of those who work for war) is likely to make us feel paralyzed and defeated in advance. But more importantly, the quantitative argument conceives of peace in negative terms as a reality in opposition to war, and this perspective, as evident in

Deleuze and Guattari's above assessment, binds peace and war in a relation of mutual interdependence.

Instead, a more effective, albeit not immediately visible, way of considering the question of peace would be to attend to the quality/ontology of peace itself. The possibility of peace, I would suggest, should be considered through the essentially affirmative prism of the affections. If everything is "yes," then peace is not necessarily dependent upon the absence of war, but is a state unto itself. Peace, one might say, is not relative to anything, but is its own feeling, regardless of whether we find ourselves in the middle of combat or in the middle of a beautiful, deserted island. To thus conceptualize peace as radically different than, and independent of, war does not mean giving up the work of peace at the molar level of institutions, politics, and social organizations: it simply means to root such sociopolitical activities first and foremost in the recognition of the embodied singularities where the possibility of peace resides in its most radical ontological sense.

Let us consider the following scenario for a minute. What if peace were a power of affection that resided in each body and could be accessed therein, a force that could be transmitted and expanded through our bodies' interactions and compositions with other bodies? What if peace and war alike were not merely the visible conditions of global or collective bodies, but affects living in each embodied singularity, from the microscopic to the global levels? Perhaps peace, kindness, and even love are not abstract, unreachable ideals, but living states of the body as accessible to us as our own breath, flows of vitality and energy springing out of the breath that animates us. A cinema that points to such affective vitality is indeed utopian, not because of its capacity to imagine and represent a dream forever deferred, but rather because of its capacity to make present a field of forces that are already here and now. As Flaxman notes, "cinema . . . might be said to be 'utopian' inasmuch as we understand that it does not refer to a field of possibilities at all but to a field of forces, above all to the force and flow of life itself, from which conditions of possibility are created" (Flaxman 2006: 214).

The reader may be wondering at this point by what circuitous path *Powers of Affection* has come to end in a discussion of the crisis that afflicts our contemporary world. As unlikely as it might seem at first, the inherent continuity between cinema and life becomes apparent when one abandons the very representational compartmentalizations that I believe are also at the heart of our failure to do away with war, hunger, or environmental collapse. As I implied earlier, there is simply no qualitative difference between the, sometimes invisible, war that rages in the human



body and the war that materializes in visible blood-baths and explosions. A micropolitics of peace might thus begin not necessarily in the absence of external war signs, but perhaps in our recognition of, and respect for, the powers of affection that live in every single body. A micropolitics of the affections may indeed be one of the few possibilities left to us in our desire to curb the macropolitics of war. And here it should be emphasized that the affirmative character of the affections does not wrest ethical responsibility away from us. On the contrary, because all affections are performatively active, hence consequential, the task of heeding them and recognizing their importance, of drawing their connections to sociopolitical structures, and their passage from virtual flows to actual expression-events, becomes all the more pressing. At a time when the death of cinema has been announced by many, *Powers of Affection* has tried to show that the cinema has a unique capacity to bring to living consciousness the most intense, most transformative affects in our lives. Whichever technological or aesthetic form the cinema may still take, it has just begun to show us the world, and to stir the world in us. On our part, we have barely started to think and feel through cinema.

### Notes

1. In stressing the principles the affective body shares with the natural laws of physics (energy is never destroyed, only transformed), I am drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari's own radical dissolution of the boundaries between the human sciences and the natural sciences. Their attention to the latter is founded upon the belief that,
 

the human sciences . . . lag behind the richness and complexity of causal relations in physics, or even in biology. Physics and biology present us with reverse causalities that are *without finality* but testify nonetheless to an action of the future on the present, or of the present on the past. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 431)
2. In her essay "Time Lost, Instantaneity and the Image," Olkowski examines the political effects of perception in a way that resonates with my own concern with the politics of the affections. For Olkowski, the technical organization of perception, through its interest-driven, habit-forming patterns, "functions so as to eliminate affective, temporal life" (Olkowski 2003: 31). Our hurried response to the world, she argues, hardly promotes the kind of perceptive encounters capable of attuning us to "the qualitative duration of the pleasure and pain" (p. 32) that we experience in our relations with others.
3. I see the utopian character of some of the moments in these films as in keeping with Flaxman's idea of utopia as the intervention of a virtual reality within the

actual world, an intervention that “opens up a disjunction in the space-time of the present” (Flaxman forthcoming).

4. The affective dysfunctionality of our contemporary culture is brilliantly addressed in Brennan’s *The Transmission of Affect*, where she comments on the simultaneous proliferation of rates of depression (“maladies of the soul”) and the obsessive personal concern with boundaries:

The reality of the increase [of affects] makes the Western individual especially more concerned with securing a private fortress, personal boundaries, against the unsolicited emotional intrusions of the other . . . Boundaries, paradoxically, are an issue in a period where the transmission of affect is denied. (Brennan 2004: 15)

The general cultural trend toward affective neutrality and numbness seems but the collective expression of the fortress-building process that takes place at the level of the individual body as it tries to ward off the risks of affective experience.

5. As Deleuze and Guattari remind us, the creative work of the body without organs cannot be simply advanced by a wild, uncontrolled dissolution of boundaries. Rather, its possibility rests upon the most careful and attentive watch of the tension between the organism’s reliance on borders/strata and the opportunities the body can seize to experiment with, and redraw, these borders:

You invent self-destructions that have nothing to do with the death drive. Dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself, but rather opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and distributions of intensity, and territories and deterritorializations measured with the craft of a surveyor . . . You have to keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn . . . you have to keep small rations of subjectivity in sufficient quantity to enable you to respond to the dominant reality . . . You don’t reach the [body without organs], and its plane of consistency, by wildly destratifying. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:160)

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