

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: SEEING AND THE SEEN:  
POST-PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
ETHICS AND THE CINEMA

Brian K. Bergen-Aurand, Doctor of Philosophy, 2004

Dissertation directed by: Professor Orrin N. C. Wang  
Comparative Literature Program

What is the relationship between cinema and ethics, especially an elusive ethics more concerned with responding to alterity than with establishing moral order? Seeing and the Seen addresses this question by demonstrating how three seemingly unambiguous cinematic moments (from nations with totalitarian histories) are structured by ambiguity and aporia. These uncertain structures evoke non-assimilative, non-totalizing ethical responses that counter monolithic interpretations of cinema. Previously, skeptical approaches to cinema have not focused on ethics. They have relied upon hermeneutic techniques to “interpret” elements and then discuss their relevance. Their concerns have been ontological and epistemological. Using the post-phenomenological thought of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, I argue, however, that skepticism connects cinema to an ethics of response.

Chapter One introduces the ideas of post-phenomenological ethics, skepticism, and cinema, to show how their interrelationship actually challenges traditional views, such as Levinas's that see art as unethical.

Chapter Two analyzes narrative absence and the ethics of alienation in Michelangelo Antonioni's L'avventura. I compare ontological and ethical readings of this film to argue against interpreting it as tragic. The final caress between the film's protagonists is a metaphor for cinematic representations of ethical response.

Chapter Three discusses the ethics of pornography in films by Pedro Almodóvar, who shows how pornography and non-pornography remain interdependent. Focusing on cinematic iterability, I demonstrate how pornographic and non-pornographic tropes oscillate between the two genres, rendering their borders uncertain. This uncertainty makes pornography more related to skepticism and ethics than previously imagined.

Chapter Four outlines the "total criticism" of the ethics of law in Oshima Nagisa's cinema. Specifically, I examine how the freeze frame at the end of Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence evokes an ethics of the cinema that exposes the gaps of total criticism. The freeze frame is the least discussed cinematic device; however, it provides the most concrete example of the elusive relation between skepticism, ethics, and cinema.

The Conclusion argues that these examples are only starting points toward further investigations of how filmic uncertainty highlights the relation between cinema and ethics. In the end, I emphasize this point by responding to instances from contemporary documentary filmmaking.

SEEING AND THE SEEN:  
POST-PHENOMENOLOGICAL ETHICS AND THE CINEMA

by

Brian K. Bergen-Aurand

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of  
Maryland at College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2004

Advisory Committee:

Professor Orrin N. C. Wang, Chair  
Professor Peter Brunette  
Professor Peter Beicken  
Professor Giuseppe Falvo  
Professor Simon Richter  
Professor Eugene Robinson

©Copyright by

Brian K. Bergen-Aurand

2004

## Preface

When I began this study in 1992 two questions drove me toward a further investigation of what was beginning to be called “post-structuralist ethics,” “post-phenomenological ethics,” or sometimes, “the ethics of deconstruction or deconstructive ethics.” This was an ethics concerned with ethics as first philosophy. This was ethics concerned with consciousness of another, of consciousness brought about because of a responsibility toward another.

When I was teaching film and criticism at an historically black college on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, I was deeply immersed in Modern American literature, Marxist criticism, and Post-Structuralism. My primary concern lay in negotiating the writings of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Luce Irigaray in the light of a Marxist concern for liberation and over-coming self-estrangement. Politics and the relation between literature (mainly print) and alienation were the foundations of my scholarship and teaching. The post-structuralism I was most powerfully drawn to, though, seemed to fall short in regard to this final analysis. It did not seem to be concerned enough with bridging this gap between the aesthetic and alienation. What was post-structuralism not asking?

At the same time, I began to explore the cinema of Michelangelo Antonioni and kept returning to the question of the character of Anna in Antonioni’s L’avventura. How can a character who disappears from a film not really disappear from a film, and how can she still be the motivational force behind the film when she remains absent from it? I was reading and learning a tremendous amount from theorists associated with the journal Screen, especially Stephen Heath. I was

learning from and teaching cognitivists such as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. And, I was spending a good deal of time with Marxist and Materialist thought inspired by the work of Walter Benjamin. However, the two themes running through the film theory and interpretation I was consulting most (Lacanian influenced psychoanalysis and Marxism) continued to leave me less than satisfied.

What was film theory not asking?

In an unexpected way, Emmanuel Levinas's earlier work on presence and absence and Derrida's drawing on that work seemed to open new possibilities for answering both questions. Reading the works they had written in response to one another, and to Heidegger (hence the term post-phenomenological), brought to light the ethical possibility within deconstruction and the deconstructive possibility within the ethical that seemed to address my concerns about relationships and the cinema.

At that time Levinas was well below the radar of most critical thinkers, to the point that some of his major works, including Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Existence, were out of print or being remaindered by their publishers. (I still work from my photocopied version of Otherwise Than Being.) Susan Handleman's Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas had found an eager and respectful audience and marked out a small space for us to begin. Seán Hand's 1990 Levinas Reader gave those of us who did not read French a smart collection of basic excerpts from which to work. However, The Cambridge Companion to Levinas was nowhere on the map. The major Levinas websites were not even a dream. And, the over 27,000 hits I got from a Google search on “Emmanuel Levinas” this morning were unthinkable. For the

most part, mentioning his name required more prefacing than I was often capable of providing. Derrida was well known but little understood in an ethical light at this time, and the need to explain how Derrida had always been interested in post-phenomenological ethics from the start seemed never-ending.

Now, after fourteen years of working on this project and studying post-phenomenological ethics as a way to approach questions about ethics, cinema, and deconstruction, I have seen a good number of changes in the field. Ethics linked to skepticism or uncertainty seems less strange for many writers. The links between Derrida and Levinas now appear crucial for a lot of thinkers. And, we Levinasians, as a large group of us took to calling ourselves after a conference in 1999, are a growing community that no longer works in isolation. At least, not in regard to Levinas's thought.

The challenge at the start of the Twenty-first century is that we Levinasians working in post-phenomenological ethics are very much from different fields. We bring different questions to his texts on ethics and religion and walk away with new considerations we often still have difficulty relating, even to one another. Isolation threatens yet. Like other branches of post-phenomenology, studies of Levinasian ethics have grown considerably to include more feminist, performing arts, and political considerations. Visual art still has a way to go in considering what ethics or the call to ethical subjectivity might mean in that realm, but I hope this study provides at least one way to start more conversations.

## DEDICATION

To Anne and Jeff

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank a number of people for their help on this project. Some have been with me from the start, and for their continued support I want to thank John McConnell, Circe Stumbo, and J. Benson Ray. They have been good friends with the courage to ask me hard questions and remind me what was most important. I would also like to thank Todd Starkweather and Paul Fortunato, two new friends who have helped me craft almost every word of this study. Partners in a reading group at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Paul and Todd have read almost every draft of this dissertation and commented extensively on the whole text. (Of course, any and all errors in thought and writing remain mine to the end.) I would also like to thank Jeremy Bushnell, who shared an office with me during the last stages of my writing and listened every time I needed to think out loud.

I want to thank Julie Salverson and Joseph Christopher Schaub. Julie's work on Levinas and theater and Joe's work on film and consumer culture have always inspired me. In them I find kindred spirits.

None of this would have happened without the help and support of my family over these years. Thank you Mom and Don, Dad, Dorian, Scott, Kris, and Eric. Thank you also, Jackie and Don. You always asked how it was going and encouraged me every time I began to stumble.

Finally, I know my work would not be what it is without Orrin Wang, Jeff Gore, and Anne Bergen-Aurand. Thank you, Orrin for your direction and guidance with this dissertation and thank you for keeping me clear and concise. Thank you, Jeff, my dearest friend and other reader, for always looking out for me and for calling

me a scholar. Thank you, Anne, for marrying me and giving me a partner and cohort in thought and laughter. I see the three of you in every page of this study, and know I can never repay what I owe you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: How Do We Respond?	1
No Words	1
Cinema—Representation—Spectatorship	7
Post-Phenomenological Ethics: Aesthetic Totality and Ethical Totality?	11
Ethical Spectatorship	23
 Chapter Two: Seeing the Ethics of Alienation in Levinas and Antonioni	 27
Seeing the Adventure to Come	27
Ontological Interpretations	33
A Levinasian Lens	41
The Noise of Absence	57
Wakefulness	63
A First Gesture of Ethics	69
A Return to Anna	73
 Chapter Three: On the Verge of the Pornographic	 76
Forewarn	86
Pornography as Counter-Cinema	90
A Pornographic Romantic Fairy-Tale	97
Breaking the Binding	108
A Farcical Pornographic Tale	111
Cinematic Displacement	118
 Chapter Four: Coda: Oshima Nagisa, Ethics, Justice, and the (Un)Frozen Face	 124
Total Criticism	132
Before the Law	154
“To be or not to be”	164
The Ambiguity of Evidence and the Aporia of Law—The Certainty Hypothesis	186
 Conclusion: Seeing Terror and the Seen of Terrorism	 192
Selected Filmography	201
Bibliography	205

Chapter One:  
How Do We Respond?

Before doubt ever becomes a system, skepsis

has to do with the eyes.

—Jacques Derrida

### No Words

How do we respond to “NO WORDS”? This is the essential question for a study of cinema and ethics where ethics is not about laws and morality but about our elusive relationship with the world. It is important to note that this is not the way we usually think about ethics. As strange as it may seem, this is the question we must consider when we ask about ethics and cinema in the light of a non-traditional ethics of response. This ethics demands that we ask our questions differently from the start. Such an ethics radically changes our questions and our answers.

Near the end of Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1970 film Zabriskie Point the character, Mark, paints these words on the side of the borrowed airplane he intends to return to the air port in Los Angeles. The story of student strikes, corporate real estate development, counter-culture, and institutional violence, Zabriskie Point is filled with intersecting stories marked almost more by questions than answers.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> In the midst of a highly charged but disorganized student meeting, Mark claims to be bored and walks out. Meanwhile, at the Sunny Dunes Development Corporation headquarters, a young woman, Daria, tries to retrieve a book she has left behind while temping. In the process, she is introduced to the company’s director, Lee Allen. As the student strike progresses, police are called in to maintain order. One of them is shot and killed. Mark, carrying a revolver in his boot, is suspected. He rides a bus out of town to the airport where he takes off toward the desert in a single-engine airplane. In the desert, Mark and Daria meet, and they ride together to Zabriskie Point in Death Valley, where they have sex. Their sex act is replicated in a fantasy scene of other couples and triples in the sand. Mark, Daria, and an unnamed desert dweller paint the airplane to resemble a prehistoric bird with its genitals showing, and he flies back to Los Angeles. Daria proceeds on toward the business meeting in Phoenix with Lee. Along the way, she hears the radio news story that Mark was shot to death upon his return

What is striking about this quickly passing image of NO WORDS on the side of the plane is its self-contradiction. The use of words to declare a leaving off of words is paradoxical. William Arrowsmith reads these words as Mark's motto, explaining, "The character declares what he is by what he does, not what he says. NO WORDS says the motto on the painted airplane. Character is destiny, but the destiny reveals itself as destiny by being subvocal and silently purposive."<sup>2</sup> These words are markers of another language, of the technique of ellipsis<sup>3</sup> that pervades so much of the film narrative and traces of a story, which call spectators to respond to the points between the dots, to respond without being certain, how to respond.

These marks are not so readily reduced solely to a motto, especially one of subvocal or silent purposiveness, however. Their very placement within the text puts them in a difficult spot. Even if we see them as statements of ellipsis, then they are statements. Therefore, they are both placeholders and erasers at the same time. Whether stated by the words "NO WORDS" or the three dots that mark out what is not present, these markers remain markers that work to bar another's presence. They hold the place of what has been marked out and in so doing take up the space. Ellipses remain on the page, and this image remains on the screen. As much as these words may be a marker of some meaning, then, they are, also, an opening of

---

to the airport. She arrives at the desert "fortress" house, wanders its labyrinthine structure, and finds Lee, who laughs at her and then instructs her to go and change clothes. Suddenly, she rushes from the house and drives away. When she looks back, she imagines the house and all its contents exploding. As the film concludes, the audio track is filled with the sound of the explosions and the musical score, but there are no words except THE END.

<sup>2</sup> William Arrowsmith, Antonioni: The Poet of Images, ed. and intro. Ted Perry (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995) 128.

<sup>3</sup> Arrowsmith 129.

cinematic expression that refuses decided meaning. They are against monocular vision and a single point of view, challenging stasis and totality. NO WORDS call for a more complex response—an ethics of the cinematic—which responds to uncertainty without making it certain, which responds to its complexity by Seeing between the Seens. This cinematic instance challenging the logic of non-contradiction calls spectators to regard (gaze upon and care for) NO WORDS and its undecidability otherwise than through a totalization that would reduce it to the same.<sup>4</sup> It calls for an understanding while at the same time showing that no fixed answer can be the final one. Since NO WORDS takes up space, nothing can take its place without replacing it with something (at least slightly) different. Thus, it asks spectators to respond to it while not covering it with SOME WORDS.

My argument throughout this study is that such moments of interpretational blinking (with eyes closing and opening) call on spectators for an open and infinite response, Seeing, in the space of an interpretational closure, the Seen. Here cinema is not a frame, window, or a mirror. It is not even an address, but an other that calls me to respond by Seeing between the Seens. These concepts, Seeing and the Seen, are grafted from the later post-phenomenological ethics of the French, Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and his attempts to describe a non-normative ethics of infinite responsiveness to the other (infinite responsibility toward the other) as the relation between Saying and the Said which makes human discourse possible. This is an ethics of response, not a traditional ethics dogmatic absolutism, rational universalism, moral relativity, or even subjective reciprocity. It is an ethics of

---

responding to the otherness of the other, without grasping and reducing the other to the same. It is also linked to the “double gesture” of justice (and the ethics of justice) formulated by Jacques Derrida in his discussions of the law. Like the double gesture of writing and erasing that Derrida reads behind the law and the unsaying of the said that Levinas argues makes ethics possible, the Seeing and the Seen of NO WORDS calls for a spectator response otherwise than certain and totalizing.

Regarding cinema is Seeing cinema against its Seen.<sup>5</sup> It is a process opened by instances when films demand open responses of spectators. This is not to say that such moments cannot be subsumed or even ignored in favor of interpretation, but that such moments open themselves to something other than interpretations alone. Screening Zabriskie Point involves many such instances because its elliptical narrative structure often displays situations without revealing their motivations or outcomes. Indeed, it is a film filled with more questions than answers, a film which calls for Seeing between the Seen.

In the pages that follow, I argue that familiar filmic theories founded in concepts of the “gaze” and “look” or even the “glance” and “blush” fail in the light

<sup>4</sup> Throughout I will refer to the dual meaning of “regard” (to look/to care for).

<sup>5</sup> The study which may come closest to my own in its concerns for reading philosophy and film side by side is, perhaps, Wilhelm S. Wurzer’s Filming and Judgment: Between Heidegger and Adorno (New Jersey: Humanities P, 1990). “Filming,” according to Wuzer, is a judging that “exceeds the cinematic displacement of representation in transgressing the boundaries of a free imagination without abandoning thought’s relation to a tectonic of judgment” (xiv). Filming is like regarding in its refusal to be tied to the ground of sameness or truth in its judging. Both are bound to “unlimited narrative possibility” (xiv). However, filming returns to a Heideggerian, rather than Levinasian, concern for freedom in its reverie in “the disinterested relation.” Regarding remains always a non-disinterestedness rather than a disinterestedness. Filming, on the other hand, “at the limit of Ereignis, is no longer wedded to a discourse on truth. From a metaphysical perspective, it is judgment gone astray; from the viewpoint of a new style of thought, it is judgment discerning its freedom” (3). Regarding, also, is no longer wedded to a discourse on truth, but is judgment discerning its responsibility.

of such seriously perplexing moments. They fail precisely for their completeness, their ability to reduce all they survey to the economy of the same. Whether starting from concerns with misrecognition or false consciousness, they are unable to provide a description of the spectatorial movement between Seeing and the Seen because they eventually return to one side of regarding by covering over the other. They can only care for something after having interpreted it and having assigned it a value. In their stead, I propose a theory of “regarding,” that moves more toward a theory of spectatorship founded in the precise movement between caring for what is screened and understanding it.

To be clear, what I am writing about film spectatorship is not that the call of cinema as the other is the same as the call of the other person as Levinas or Derrida describe it. It is related, but not the same. Like Jill Robbins in Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature, I offer that “It is not my intention to propose that a text has alterity in the same way that the other person does. My goal is to explore the ways in which reading alters—or interrupts—the very economy of the same that the other interrupts.”<sup>6</sup> I am arguing that responses to film staked solely on agency and knowledge fail to respond at crucial moments to precise instances in cinematic experience. Traditional interpretive strategies can assimilate but they cannot respond to the ways in which the alterity of cinema interrupts the economy of the same. Perhaps these instances are extraordinary and, thus, cannot merit the authority of

---

<sup>6</sup> Jill Robbins, Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999) xxiv.

rewriting spectatorship away from the political and psychoanalytic theories backing prior theories.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps, though, it is precisely the force of authority that is at stake in the bargain. So much within film theory has relied upon discussions of authority, agency, and spectatorial recognition and identification. The essential references have always been made to issues of control and desire, to apprehending the truth of the political and psychoanalytic situation. Within film, agency has more often than not referred to characters attaining a goal, such as escaping to safety, liberating one's comrades, or finding true love. In terms of spectator theory, agency has most often applied to power over a text, to identification, voyeurism and fetishism, and the production of meaning.<sup>8</sup> All of these have their place and remain crucial to the understanding of cinematic encounters. However, these theories are concerned with a return to a unified and stable identity. Lacanian psychoanalytic theories based on misrecognition find their mastery in explanations of recognition. Marxist theories of false consciousness find their mastery in explanations of true consciousness. In the end, both return to stasis, and both function through a disavowal of an ethics of responding with an infinite openness that cannot be reduced in the process of knowledge production. What does not fit the process of knowledge production is

---

<sup>7</sup> The most influential of these studies remain Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Jean-Louis Baudry's "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni's "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," Christian Metz's The Imaginary Signifier, Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Kaja Silverman's "Suture," Stephen Heath's Questions of Cinema, and Fredric Jameson's The Geopolitical Aesthetic.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, what is being considered here is the projected image and its relation with an audience, and not the recorded image and the work of the camera, which is outside the scope of this study.

ejected or assimilated, made the same as what can be brought under the banner of an interpretation leading to stability.

This study picks up on the conversation between Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida surrounding the relation between ethics and visual art since the end of World War II. Then, it turns this conversation toward three non-conformist filmmakers from previously totalitarian nations: Michelangelo Antonioni, Oshima Nagisa, and Pedro Almodóvar. The goal here is to pick up the challenge laid out by Peter Brunette and David Wills in Screen / Play: Derrida and Film Theory and see responding to cinema without totalizing it, without eliding uncertainty, and without repressing my own theoretical consequences. This is a study of the narrative ethics of alienation, the generic ethics of pornography, and the filmic ethics of the law. The cinema discussed here especially opens itself to these concerns, making questions of ethics unavoidable. From their earliest public responses to one another, Levinas and Derrida have struggled over the relation between aesthetics and ethics. Levinas has often been quick to judge art unethical, but Derrida has almost always just as quickly opened the debate anew by questioning Levinas's absolute judgments. I hope to enter this debate precisely to further their considerations of the violence and ethics involved in cinema and spectatorship.

### **Cinema—Representation—Spectatorship**

When Siegfried Kracauer condemns the released version of Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari (dir. Robert Wiene, 1919) for its endorsement of totalitarian authority and repudiation of freedom and progressive ideas, his words serve as a preamble to the current study.

Whether intentionally or not, Caligari exposes the soul wavering between tyranny and chaos, and facing a desperate situation: any escape from tyranny seems to throw it into a state of utter confusion.<sup>9</sup>

In Caligari, the soul is tossed into an either / or trauma between two poles: tyranny (authority) and chaos. Any true alternative, according to Kracauer, is lost because the options are hedged from the start. The two poles are presented as the only natural ones, and anyone who would choose chaos must be insane. The game is over before it begins. Kracauer is not speaking in terms of the ethical spectatorship at work in this study, yet his view of the relationship between film and the world shares many of the same concerns. Kracauer's disgust over the rise of Hitlerism in 1920s Germany and his concern over the reworking of what might have been a revolutionary film is parallel to this study's consideration of ethical spectatorship and cinema's relation to the world. According to Kracauer,

While the original story [by Janowitz and Mayer] exposed the madness inherent in authority, Wiene's Caligari glorified authority and convicted its antagonist to madness. A revolutionary film was thus turned into a conformist one—following the much-used pattern of declaring some normal but troublesome individual insane and sending him to a lunatic asylum.<sup>10</sup>

There is only one right answer, only one interpretation, only one final solution, and that one comes from the vested authority (tyranny) that opposes the chaos of

---

<sup>9</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari," Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings, 4th edition, eds. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, Leo Braudy (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) 31.

uncertainty. Freedom is never brought into the picture, according to Kracauer, because the two poles of the film, and the two poles of the film's message remain only tyranny or chaos.

Kracauer's principal consideration of Caligari lies in the connection between the political message of the film's story and the political message of the film's expressionism. Rather than using expressive moments to challenge authority and univocal declarations, writes Kracauer, Caligari puts the force of expressionism into play precisely to make freedom look insane. It is not a question of investigating the world for other possibilities, or even of Kracauer's difficult realist response to the world that paradoxically lets the world in while penetrating it. Rather, in this film, and the way we are meant to understand it, all the facets of the cinema are arranged to remove all doubt from our minds. It becomes certain cinema, dictating our interpretations ahead of time. Although Kracauer's interpretation of Caligari denies the role of uncertainty in the film, it does open early considerations of the relation between cinema and ethics within film studies.

Later theorists, concerned primarily with film language and ideological or psychological theories of spectatorship, ignore much of what a post-phenomenological ethics of the cinema argues. In an interesting way such an ethics opens a discussion of the call of the cinema, of the fact that the cinema calls to spectators for a response. It does not simply position spectators to identify with, gaze at, or fetishize the Seen. As much as it may do this, it also hails or interpellates spectators as an interlocutor asks a question. It asks spectators to respond, coming

---

<sup>10</sup> Kracauer 25.

after the film, arriving late on the scene. Seeing comes after cinema, in response to cinema.

Of course, spectators can and do make choices concerning the cinema.

Regarding is between caring for and gazing at the cinema. The cinema calls spectators to make sense of films while watching them. It calls for epistemological certainty at times. However, such epistemological certainty comes after the spectator is called to respond without knowing how or why to respond. Epistemological certainty plays a secondary role to Seeing and responding. Certain moments within films highlight this call, this hailing, this interlocution that constitutes a self responding to the other, but they are there from the start throughout cinema.

Such a discussion of the cinema is not unrelated to the social theories of Louis Althusser, especially interpellation. In some basic ways, the ethical subject is interpellated into responsibility like the social subject. According to Philip Rosen, within Althusserian social theories, “the human subject is a function of a social formation which assumes and thereby continually constructs it in practices, in institutions, and therefore through discourse, without which there cannot be social practices and institutions, as a universal category of ‘lived experience.’”<sup>11</sup> Although there are vast conceptual differences between the call to respond and interpellation, they both work in a similar way to bring about a concept of responsibility in their subjects. The radical difference is crucial, yet the comparison is telling. On the one hand, interpellation works to create a subject who believes in the authority of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Philip Rosen, editor, Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 158.

totalitarian state, or the authority of the individuated citizen of the neo-liberal state. Ideological apparatuses hail the subject into the false consciousness that he or she is responsible to such authority and must protect it at all costs. On the other hand, the call to respond is an infinite, open call that can never be fulfilled. The alterity of the other calls me toward the unique one before me and to the infinite giving for which one calls. I am never more responsible toward the state, institutions, or myself.

Rather, I become myself through this call. In the end, they both call to their subjects. However, as much as interpellation reinvests us with a sense of authority by making us feel responsible for the state, our schools, or the success of ideology, post-phenomenological ethics divests us of a belief in the final say of authority, especially in what appears to be our own authority.

### **Post-Phenomenological Ethics: Aesthetic Totality and Ethical Totality?**

Emmanuel Levinas is highly suspicious of art. He most often described it as objectifying and idolatrous. In applying Levinas's ideas to cinema, this study both extends his description of ethics and critiques his objection to visual art. Levinas's project has been to describe an ethics that precedes ontology and epistemology—to describe how ethics is possible without ethics being secondary to something else.

Ethics is first philosophy. His work from the late 1930s until his death in 1995 has been focused on the relation between the self and the other, and he has most often described ethics in terms of a responsibility that comes from the other person calling the self into question. Referred to at times as "an Ethics of Ethics"<sup>12</sup> Levinas's

---

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," trans. Alan Bass, Writing and Difference (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) 111.

project is not to establish a set of values and a moral compass. He is not writing law or codes of conduct. Rather, as Simon Critchley describes it, Levinas's project seeks to delineate "the essence or meaning of the ethical in a way that disrupts traditional moral thinking and all claims to good conscience."<sup>13</sup> Ethics, in the Levinasian sense, is an opening toward the other (infinity) that calls the very construction of systems (totality) into question—while also being a grounding force in such procedural formulations. His project is to describe how ethics (the unique relation of one person to another) calls general laws and codes of conduct into question.

Crudely, one path through Levinasian ethics runs as follows. Levinasian ethics is an attempt to break with systems of thought founded in ontological categories and epistemological certainty that attempt to grasp the totality of being, reducing all difference to fit inside predetermined categories of sameness. Levinas is a student of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology who questions the importance of intentionality while still testifying to the importance of that phenomenology. Levinas agrees with Husserl that consciousness is consciousness of something, but asks what comes before that consciousness and how does it affect that consciousness? Against the grain of comprehensive systems founded in consciousness, Levinas argues that the encounter with the other is an instant that can interrupt the totalizing violence in the system, opening a way for a "non-allergic relation"<sup>14</sup> which overflows the predetermined compartmentalization and disturbs my being at rest within myself. The other calls for my response. Thus, my very subjectivity is called into question as

---

<sup>13</sup> Simon Critchley, The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 4.

the other calls me to respond uniquely rather than categorically. Being for the other exceeds being for oneself in responding to the other, as the call of the other interrupts the predetermined idea of the world constructed out of myself by bringing me “more than I can contain.”<sup>15</sup>

Relation is the key to knowledge and ethics. As Susan Handelman explains it, knowledge, then, might not be thought of in reference to “a reflection of some essential independent substance” but “as always a relation to the other.”<sup>16</sup> Handelman’s description here highlights the relational aspect of ethics over the systematic—blank template—mode of moral calculations and normative ethical systems. For her, Levinas’s project “redefines ethics as the primary relation and binding to the other that precedes and conditions any epistemology.”<sup>17</sup> Knowledge is not the basis for language. Ethics is the basis for language. Or, as Levinas describes ethics in terms of language, ethics is the interruption of the fixed articulation of the Said by Saying, what comes through from the other side of language, interrupts language, and is reabsorbed by language.

This is the more nuanced relation Levinas will draw out in his later work, such as in Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, when he revisits the separation of totality from infinity and the relation between ethics and skepticism. Near the end

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969) 51.

<sup>15</sup> Levinas, Totality 51.

<sup>16</sup> Susan A. Handelman, “The Torah of Criticism and the Criticism of Torah: Recuperating the Pedagogical Moment,” Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age, ed. Steven Kepnes (New York: New York UP, 1996): 228.

<sup>17</sup> Handelman 228.

of Otherwise Than Being, he states that “Language is already skepticism,”<sup>18</sup> when explaining the relationships between Saying and the Said and Reason and Skepticism.

The approach, or saying, is a relationship with what is not understood in the together, the out-of-the-series. A subversion of essence, it overflows the theme it states, the “all together,” the “everything included” of the said. Language is already skepticism. Does not the coherent discourse, wholly absorbed in the said, owe its coherence to the State, which, violently excludes subversive discourse? Coherence thus dissimulates a transcendence, a movement from the one to the other, a latent diachrony, uncertainty and a fine risk.<sup>19</sup>

Saying runs a fine risk. It is a good risk, a subtle and nuanced risk. It overflows, without holding to any metaphor of overflowing, the Said of ontological discourse. The State, the ultimate totalizing structure, allied with logic and a repression of the return of skepticism, stands in for all systems, for the economy of the same which must rule on the general and never on the specific and, thus, always fail ethically to respond to the uniqueness of the unique. Yet, Saying remains and interrupts the Said while always immediately reabsorbed by the Said. Saying calls to challenge the said as it makes the Said possible. The unique case of the other person who calls me to respond calls the State into question by demanding, in a reversal of the standard mode of operations, that the universal answer to the unique.

<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981) 170.

Logic breaks down in the relationship between Saying and the Said as it does in the eternal couple of skepticism and its refutation. Saying interrupts the Said and is, in turn, interrupted by the Said just as with philosophy and skepticism. The skeptical is always refutable but still always returns and in returning shows the very diachrony in play. According to Levinas, skepticism and its refutation cannot exist at the same time. They refuse synchrony in the same way as do Saying and the Said.

Skepticism, at the dawn of philosophy, set forth and betrayed the diachrony of this very conveying and betraying. To conceive the otherwise than being requires, perhaps, as much audacity as skepticism shows, when it does not hesitate to affirm the impossibility of statement while venturing to realize this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility.<sup>20</sup>

The very synchrony of the logical is exposed, put under pressure, and released by the skeptical. Skepticism, like Saying, calls philosophy into question.

For Levinas,

The periodic return of skepticism and of its refutation signify a temporality in which the instants refuse memory which recuperates and represents. Skepticism, which traverses the rationality or logic of knowledge, is a refusal to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation which this affirmation states in the said.

<sup>19</sup> Levinas, Otherwise 170.

Skepticism is a movement of radical doubt caught within itself. In other words, its very existence is tied to its very impossibility in that to doubt radically is to doubt that one can doubt radically. To proclaim that there is no truth is to proclaim at least one truth. Skepticism must always be out of time with itself so that its own negation comes after it, founds it and confounds it, simultaneously, at different times.

Why does Levinas judge art unethical, though? And how might ethics challenge Levinas's own thoughts on the aesthetic? How might this relationship between Saying and the Said, translate to responding to visual art: to Seeing and the Seen? From very early on the Levinasian stance toward the visible and visual art in particular has been direct. For Levinas, almost nothing (if anything) can redeem the image from its unethical nature. The image is always immanent to my thought, as if it came from me only to return to me. Its function, he argues in the early essay "Reality and Its Shadow," is precisely to bring the infinite possibility of the relation between the self and the other into the finite, thematic system of the fixed, eternal present. According to Levinas, "Every image is already a caricature. But this caricature turns into something tragic."<sup>21</sup> The very creation of the aesthetic object is a freezing of time in that object. All sculpture is locked into the instant. The artist may very well breathe a certain life into his or her work of art, but that life is always only the life of an instant. A permanent still life. Still born. "A statue realizes the paradox of an instant that endures without a future."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Levinas, Otherwise 7.

<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel Levinas "Reality and Its Shadow," trans. Alphonso Lingis, The Levinas Reader, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 138.

<sup>22</sup> Levinas, "Reality" 138

Within the life, or rather the death, of a statue, an instant endures infinitely: eternally Laocoön will be caught up in the grip of serpents; the Mona Lisa will smile eternally. Eternally the future announced in the strained muscles of Laocoön will be unable to become present. Eternally, the smile of the Mona Lisa about to broaden will not broaden.<sup>23</sup>

The still life of art renders its subjects into objects, forever held in the in-between time of aesthetics that denies the ethical possibility. Art is not between Saying and the Said, but trapped in-between, neither Saying nor the Said. For Levinas, ethics is the temporal relation between the self and the other that opens toward infinite possibilities. However,

Art brings about just this duration in the interval, in that sphere which a being is able to traverse, but in which its shadow is immobilized.

The eternal duration of the interval in which a statue is immobilized differs radically from the eternity of a concept; it is the meanwhile never finished, still enduring—something inhuman and monstrous.<sup>24</sup>

Little could be left to question here. Synchrony is at the heart of the work of art. The temporal non-relation created by art is a monstrosity. Levinas is in total opposition to the aesthetic totality and totally on the side of ethical infinity.

From his earliest writings in the 1940s, this has been the first and last word on aesthetics for Emmanuel Levinas. For the most part, this has been his stance

<sup>23</sup> Levinas, “Reality” 138

against the aesthetic. I say “stance” here precisely to name the relationship Levinas maintains toward art. Levinas does not respond to art in open terms; he confronts it. Levinas does not respond to the aesthetic. He totalizes it.

The most obvious way to read Levinas’s interpretation of the aesthetic object and images is to place it within the context of his devout Orthodox Judaism and life-long study of the Talmud. In the simplest of terms, one might read the sentence from “*Reality and Its Shadow*” on the relationship between monotheism and iconoclasm and find the root of Levinas’s concerns. “In a statue matter knows the death of idols. The proscription of images is truly the supreme command of monotheism, a doctrine that overcomes fate, that creation and revelation reverse.”<sup>25</sup> Above all else, the ultimate commandment is found in the proscription of images. Levinas’s stance is simply a religious rejection of idolatry. That idolatry is seen as the most serious of sins is evident from even a passing reading of the foundation texts of Talmudic literature.

One could spend an eternity discussing the readings and rereadings throughout the literatures of all the religions of the book in order to come to some level of understanding the nuances of this proscription of images. Between Jews, Christians, and Muslims of different ages and specific beliefs, the issues of idolatry and iconography have generated a vast amount of literature and debate. Surprisingly, though, what we see in Levinas’s stance is a stoppage of these debates. Rather than engaging in the full force of rigorous responses in regard to idolatry, Levinas falls

<sup>24</sup> Levinas, “*Reality*” 141

<sup>25</sup> Levinas, “*Reality*” 141.

within a tradition on one side alone. Unlike so much of his work, dedicated to an infinite response to the other and toward the very pluralism at the heart of a difficult religion and ethics, his terms are absolutist here. His own totality takes hold of the image he comprehends. For Levinas the heart of Midrash and the rabbinic mode is a complex matter,

of designating being in its pluralism and in the relations which govern the terms of this plurality. It concerns the various orders of the real in their coherence or in the ruptures which separate them. It may even concern the diversity of human beings where each person constitutes a world.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, Levinas refuses to regard at least one facet of this world, the idol, in this pluralistic light. “Idolatry consists in forgetting the fact that all these relative forces are due to Elohim in the originary meaning of the term.”<sup>27</sup> Whatever the complex relation between Elohim and the universe, whatever pluralisms are at stake in this relationship between totality and infinity, there is no space for idolatry to move. It stands always outside the system as a certain forgetting of the system itself. Aesthetics stands always outside ethics.

Interestingly, Levinas’s stance toward aesthetics mirrors his stance toward philosophy in his earliest writings. There, for Levinas, ethics stands always outside philosophy. At least, this is the concern Derrida raises in his response to Levinas’s earlier work, “Violence and Metaphysics.” In this essay, Derrida charges Levinas

<sup>26</sup> Levinas, “Image” 155.

with totalizing philosophy by placing philosophy inside Western tradition and ethics outside Western tradition. Derrida asks how Levinas can claim to be writing against philosophy without still doing philosophy. Although this debate between Derrida and Levinas is complex and challenges any simplification, it is at least possible to see a much-needed cautionary tale within Derrida's essay.<sup>28</sup> Derrida has always cautioned Levinas to see more to philosophy, to regard philosophy. In a similar light, my study is as a cautionary tale against any easy stance against aesthetics. I question Levinas's ideas on art and ask how we might use those ideas to regard cinema. I charge that, as Derrida charges he does with philosophy, Levinas totalizes art without responding to it. Levinas pushes aesthetics outside ethics. And, in the process, he fails to run the fine risk that constitutes the act of responding to art. When it comes to art, Levinas has sped past a nuanced and good risk.

As much as the aesthetic always remains the ghost haunting Levinas's ethics, the phenomena that continually challenges his post-phenomenology, Derrida's Memoirs of the Blind shows just how much writing the aesthetic out of ethics is a drawing, or inscription, of the two together.

What guides the graphic point, the quill, pencil, or scalpel is the  
respectful observance of a commandment, the acknowledgement

<sup>27</sup> Levinas, "Image" 156. Elohim is the name for God as Absolute, as Master of all the forces of divinity.

<sup>28</sup> The most rigorous considerations of the relationship between Derrida and Levinas have been Simon Critchley's The Ethics of Deconstruction, Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature, and Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity.

before knowledge, the gratitude of the receiving before seeing, the blessing before the knowing.<sup>29</sup>

Before all else, the ethical has to do the eyes, with seeing and being caught between believing and not believing. What guides visual art, Derrida shows us, is a response to a commandment that calls before knowing, prior to any response grounded in ontology or epistemology. Art is uncertain in a way that reflects the uncertainty of ethics.

In Memoirs of the Blind and The Truth in Painting Derrida confronts art by way of a response to the Levinasian ejection of the aesthetic from the ethical. Both texts see art as a response to the other, an engagement with otherness that commands a response, imposes a debt that cannot be repaid. Never simply disagreeing with the Levinasian judgment and stance concerning aesthetics, Derrida rather shows how much the very parergon of the aesthetic functions with regard to the ergon of ethics. Derrida shows how aesthetics delimits ethics and makes ethics possible, how the aesthetic's outside status has always been at the center of the ethical.

On page one of Memoirs of the Blind, Derrida reminds us of the (dis)junction between skepticism and vision.

—But skepticism is precisely what I've been talking to you about: the difference between believing and seeing, between believing one sees [croire voir] and seeing between, catching a glimpse [entrevoir]—or not. Before doubt ever becomes a system, skepsis has to do with the

---

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993) 29-30.

eyes. The word refers to a visual perception, to the observation, vigilance, and attention of the gaze [regard] during an examination. One is on the lookout, one reflects upon what one sees, reflects what one sees by delaying the moment of conclusion. Keeping [gardant] the thing in sight, one keeps on looking at it [on la regarde].<sup>30</sup>

The role of skepticism in ethics is one of the key points of this book. It closely follows how skepticism functions as a double gesture linking deconstruction and ethics as responses that conclude and suspend conclusions because they see conclusions linked to an uncertain future to come. Levinas's too quick dismissal of art fails to see how art both marks out the place of ethics and invokes the ethical through the skeptical, a concept always tied to the ethical in Levinas's later thought. This gesture between art and ethics, between cinema and skepticism, is the post-phenomenology of Derrida and Levinas in conversation. In the broadest of terms, we can see two paths diverge from the phenomenology of Husserl. One is taken up by Martin Heidegger. The other by Levinas. Derrida comes at the other end of those paths almost to reconnect them. In the most important of ways, he asks Heidegger's questions of Levinas and Levinas's questions of Heidegger. My project comes after to ask cinema's questions of Derrida and Levinas.

### **Ethical Spectatorship**

What links all the films in this study, and their three directors, is the call they place upon the spectator—one that is not identical to but does participate in the ethics of the call of the other person—to respond without fixing that response against a

---

future that is yet to come. This study takes readers through three different cinema-ethics encounters—the narrative ethics of alienation, the generic ethics of pornography, and the filmic ethics of the law—to show how ethics calls from across the cinema and not through only one aspect, genre, or address.

This study does not follow standard film studies divisions or categorizations. These films are not tied to one national or linguistic cinema, one historical period or movement. They do not fall within an accepted generic or aesthetic category. While I do use their directors' names to categorize them, I do not argue that they are marked by their directors as examples of auteurist cinema. They do not share ideological or formalistic concerns. In fact, the fact that they are so disparate (in traditional terms) is what links them as a small cross-section of cinema. They are a sample of three non-conformist cinemas that highlight what I see as three key aspects of an ethics of the cinema. They are neither inclusive nor exhaustive, though. They are connected, though, through a history that may tell us more about the rise of debates concerning ethics than anything else. The primary films of this study originate in nations that reached a certain philosophical sophistication before being thrown into the darkness of totalitarian regime. Totalitarian dictatorships lie behind all these films and open them even more to questions of the ethics of alienation, the ethics of pornography, and the ethics of law / justice.

Chapter Two, “Seeing the Ethics of Alienation in Levinas and Antonioni,” discusses the narrative ethics of alienation and absence in L'avventura, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni. Heralded by many as the architect of film, for his

---

<sup>30</sup> Derrida, Memoirs 1.

privileging the image over narrative, Antonioni is surprisingly connected to these thinkers by way of his insistence on positioning the filmic between the realms of the present and the absent. The mystery of the main and missing character of Anna in *L'avventura* is a telling case. Drawing upon the philosophical differences between Martin Heidegger and Levinas, the chapter compares and contrasts ontological and ethical readings of alienation in this film and the importance each philosophical position has for cinema. In the end, this chapter argues against ontologically biased readings that consider the end of the film tragic. Instead, the chapter locates a metaphor for cinematic representations of non-assimilative, non-totalizing ethical response in *L'avventura*'s final caress between the film's two protagonists.

Pornography may be based on the most certain epistemology in cinema. However, Chapter Three, "On the Verge of the Pornographic," discusses the ethics of the pornographic / non-pornographic oscillation in several films directed by Pedro Almodóvar to demonstrate how interdependent pornography and non-pornography remain. By subverting the seemingly steadfast divide between the pornographic and the non-pornographic, Almodóvar challenges generic separations and the cultural hierarchies that accompany them. His context switching in reiterative techniques have opened instances for questioning the very foundations of generic (and social) divisions and classifications. Using Derrida's theory of tropes and their iterability and the relation between written iterability and filmic cinematicality, this chapter argues how easily pornographic and non-pornographic tropes move between the two genres, rendering borders between them uncertain. This chapter then compares the relationship between the pornographic and the non-pornographic to the one between

skepticism and epistemology to show how pornography is more related to skepticism (and a related non-assimilating ethics) than we may have imagined.

Chapter Four, “Coda: Oshima Nagisa, Ethics, Justice, and the (Un)Frozen Face,” outlines the “total criticism” of the ethics of the law in the cinema of Oshima Nagisa and the particular use of the freeze frame at the end of Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence as an evocation of an ethics of the cinema that exposes the gaps of that total criticism. Challenging structures of hierarchy, knowledge, and the law, Oshima’s films ask us to question the foundations of questioning and the traditions out of which we answer them. From his earlier challenges to the sexual stasis of Japanese societal norms to his later pieces on militarism and legalistic investigations, he has made ample claims against the status quo of regimented decision-making processes. The freeze frame, as a specific device in this film and in general, is the least discussed cinematic device, yet this chapter argues that it provides the most concrete example of how cinema teaches us about ethics and ethics, specifically Levinasian ethics and Derridean justice, teaches us about cinema by showing the non-totalizing possibility of ethics and cinema.

In the end, Seeing and the Seen concentrates on three specific instances of uncertainty in cinema to describe the relation between cinema and ethics. However, its broadest claim is that these are not exhaustive instances but merely starting points toward a fuller examination of this relationship across a wider variety of cinema and a fuller survey of post-phenomenological ethics. The Conclusion points the way to the stakes of this uncertain response to cinema. Despite my choice of three high art auteurs at its center, I do not mean to exclude other possibilities from this study.

This project certainly could extend to Hollywood or independent productions in the United States, to Bollywood or Hong Kong action films, to animated or documentary cinema. In the end, such documentaries as Human Remains (dir. Jay Rosenblatt, 1998) and Fahrenheit 9/11 (dir. Michael Moore, 2004) offer ever more specific calls for spectators, specific calls that ever sharpen the relation between post-phenomenological ethics and cinema.

Regarding these films points not only toward their own oscillating instances, but also toward the larger realms of cinematic responsiveness. These examples of undecidability and refused identifications open all of cinema to questions of the ethical, to responses that cannot rely upon assumed presences, graspable knowledge, or monocular apprehension, assimilation, division, or classification.

## Chapter Two:

### Seeing the Ethics of Alienation in Levinas and Antonioni<sup>1</sup>

To see or not to see is the question.

—Michelangelo Antonioni

To be or not to be is exactly not the  
question.

—Emmanuel Levinas

### **Seeing the Adventure to Come**

What can ethics teach us about cinema and cinema teach us about ethics?

This chapter begins to answer this complex question by comparing and contrasting the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas and the cinema of Michelangelo Antonioni. It concentrates on Antonioni's 1960 film L'avventura—the film some have referred to as a “turning point” in “the search for a new cinematic language”—to illustrate the crisis Levinas describes in his discussions of the ethical aspects of existence.<sup>2</sup> The goal here is to explore an example of the relation between ethics and cinema that does not rely upon first interpreting an aesthetic instance and then treating it according to that interpretation. My own concerns for another way of approaching cinema began with this film, and with questions concerning the absence of Anna in

<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this chapter was presented as “Levinasian Investigations of Absence in Antonioni” at the Twenty-Second Annual Colloquium on Modern Literature and Film in 1997.

<sup>2</sup> L'avventura was ravished by the audience upon its premiere at Cannes in 1960. However, in the end, it was awarded a special jury prize at the event when Federico Fellini's La dolce vita won the main prize, the Palme d'Or. L'avventura was given a Special Prize by the jury, “for its remarkable contribution to the search for a new cinematic language.”

this film. What this chapter gets at is the call to respond before knowing how to respond, to regard Anna's absence before understanding and categorizing it.

When Levinas writes about the ethics of alienated existence, he alludes to the drama of William Shakespeare, especially Hamlet and Macbeth, to illustrate how ontological or epistemological worldviews have failed to account for the complexity of human existence.<sup>3</sup> Ontological and epistemological interpretations of these plays leave too many questions unanswered for Levinas. Instead, he offers that there is a concern with ethics behind these plays that highlights more of what is at stake in them. This chapter follows Levinas's method of citing from aesthetic examples but moves from dramatic texts to the cinema to examine how the crisis of alienation at the heart of existence affects the relation between cinema and ethics.

As a general answer to the question of the relation between the ethical and the cinematic, this chapter argues that non-ethical (ontological and epistemological) answers to questions concerning cinema stop short of responding to the complexity of what they address.<sup>4</sup> Non-ethical interpretations fail to respond to their targets precisely by turning them into targets of interpretation. They return the difference of their targets to the same by making them correspond to pre-existing expectations, by altering them to correspond to a pre-existing expectation. Simply put, non-ethical interpretations assimilate the alterity of their targets. Ethical responses, by contrast, resist closing and assimilating the alterity of the other to the same by not returning

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, "Signature" from Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) 291-295, where Levinas sketches the importance of literature for his work. I will return to this consideration of Levinas's use of Shakespeare in Chapter Four of this study, which considers the ethics of Oshima Nagisa's cinema.

the other to the confines of pre-existing expectations. Ethical responses resist turning what they respond to into targets by resisting this return to the same. They respond to the alterity of the other because at the same time as ethical responses answer to the call of the alterity of the other, ethical responses are themselves altered by responding to the call of the other. Therefore, rather than laying an established, static rubric upon the cinema, as ontological or epistemological interpretations strive to do, ethical responses are themselves opened to unimagined possibilities by their encounter with the cinema. According to Levinas, “Already of itself ethics is an ‘optics.’”<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, knowledge dictates action. Understanding clears the way for activity, determines activity, by procuring a safe path for that activity to follow through subjugation, mastery. Ethical response resists that subjugation and mastery by unclearing that path, by letting that path be uncleared, as it responds. It risks a difficult freedom over a safe peace. Ethics is already an optics because its Seeing is altered by what it sees. Or, as Levinas states, “in unsaying the said.”<sup>6</sup>

In more visual terminology, ethics is an optics that is refocused by its encounter with what it regards. Ethics regards cinema.<sup>7</sup> Ontological and

<sup>4</sup> Initially, I oppose ethical responses and non-ethical interpretations. However, as with all the pairings in this study, I later explore their necessary interconnectedness.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969) 29.

<sup>6</sup> Levinas, Totality 30.

<sup>7</sup> In his Regarding Film: Criticism and Comment (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), Stanley Kauffmann reminds us that “regard” has three meanings: (1) to look at attentively, observe closely, (2) to look upon or consider in a particular way, (3) to hold in esteem or respect. Although Kauffmann makes only slight use of the full meaning of “regard” in this collection of his 1993-1998 movie reviews from The New Republic, I take his reminder seriously. My use of “regard” comes from these three definitions and through the link between skepticism and regarding spelled out by Jacques Derrida in Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins (trans. Pascale-Anne Brault

epistemological interpretations seek and find the Seen in their targets while ethical responses practice a more open-ended Seeing in response to their targets.

Ontological and epistemological interpretations seek and find what they wanted to see in the first place, what they presupposed to be there in the first instance. They return what they see to the same by limiting their interpretations to the Seen. Ethical responses, similarly, begin by seeking the Seen, but then respond to the violence of their seeking by remaining open to Seeing what the Seen cannot encompass. They resist resting with the Seen, the static interpretation that returns them to where they started, by asking after what the Seen does not see. Seeing, as ethical response, opens to the tension between the Seen and the not Seen. Seeing is the double vision between the Seen and the not Seen.

As a more specific answer to the question of the relation between the ethical and the cinematic, this chapter responds to the Existential questions of L'avventura by seeing the dual possibilities of responding to this film in the light of Heideggerian and Levinasian responses to that Existentialism. While it is possible (and necessary) to interpret Antonioni's cinema in the light of a Heideggerian understanding of Existential crisis, it is also possible (and necessary) to see how ontological

Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993). Here Derrida describes the duality inherent in "regarding," especially in regarding art. According to Derrida,

Before doubt ever becomes a system, skepsis has to do with the eyes. The word refers to a visual perception, to the observation, vigilance, and attention of the gaze [regard] during an examination. One is on the lookout, one reflects upon what one sees, reflects what one sees by delaying the moment of conclusion. Keeping [gardant] the thing in sight, one keeps on looking at it [on la regarde]. The judgment depends on the hypothesis. (1)

Throughout Memoirs, Derrida demonstrates the relationship of delaying / judging between vision and blindness, between reflecting on what one sees and reflecting what one sees, between what I have termed Seeing and the Seen. He explains that the viewer must suspend her gaze when she judges just as the artist must look away from what she draws when drawing it (117). Every Seen is an interruption of Seeing. Every Seen is a moment of suspending Seeing, which suffers the tension of the Seen and the not Seen.

interpretation fails in the light of a Levinasian response to that cinema. While ontological and epistemological interpretations can answer presupposed questions about the cinema, they cannot respond to it. This chapter shows how this response remains open to questions of the alienation of Anna and Claudia in L'avventura and how it resists conclusively centering either character so that the final moment of the film retains its complex display of character interaction.

Most critics of L'avventura interpret the film and investigate its display of the Existential crisis through the lens of what Fredric Jameson calls “Antonioni’s Heideggerian and metaphysical dimensions.”<sup>8</sup> Some, like John Schliesser, overtly examine the film through this Heideggerian lens to explain its portrayal of freedom, self-assertion, and authenticity. Others, such as William Arrowsmith, Pascal Bonitzer, Peter Brunette, Kevin Z. Moore, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, and Gilberto Perez, also pursue these questions, although through less overt references to Heidegger’s ontological investigations of Existential crisis and his focus on the centrality of the death of the self. The bulk of these readings argue that L'avventura is the alienating story of an alienated world, filled with alienated characters, who end up just as alienated and unhappy at the finish as they were at the start because they fail to awaken to their authentic selves, even when confronted by the immanence of their own deaths.

Key interpretations of L'avventura and Antonioni’s subsequent films concentrate on the silence of the world portrayed, the lingering shots staged before

---

<sup>8</sup> Fredric Jameson, The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992) 20.

the camera, and the alienated status of the characters inhabiting the films' worlds. They examine the philosophical import of these films and concentrate on what Nowell-Smith refers to as their "moments of dead time in which the camera lingers somewhere while nothing appears to be happening, and [their concern] with the instability of feelings and relationships."<sup>9</sup> These interpretations connect these films and Existentialist thought. As characters move through the universe of Antonioni's films, they move through an environment they can never control. They can react to these worlds, but they can never assert dominance over them. They can and must learn to attend to each other, but never learn to do so fully. Most of all, because these characters are thrown together in the world, to achieve a sense of self, they must "learn to live alone with the margin of freedom that is inescapably theirs and

<sup>9</sup> Nowell-Smith, L'avventura 57.

See, for example, Pascal Bonitzer's comments in Seymour Chatman and Guido Fink, eds. L'avventura: Michelangelo Antonioni, Director, Rutgers Films in Print vol. 12 (News Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989). According to Bonitzer, the empty space of the world of Antonioni's films is crucial because it is not just empty space but, "that final point of being finally freed from negativity of intentions, of passions, of human existence" (218). Non-authentic characters unthinkingly lost in crowds eventually free themselves from these crowds as they assert their authentic identities over the passions which entrap them in the crowd.

For additional comments on Bonitzer's interpretations, as well as a different discussion of the importance of L'avventura as an Antonionian break from black and white filmmaking, see Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 1: The Movement-Image, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997) 119-20. Deleuze points here to the cinema's long tradition of juxtaposing populated with unpopulated shots of a single space and Antonioni's place in that tradition. For one comparison to Antonioni, he notes scenes from Josef von Sternberg's Der blaue Engel (The Blue Angel, 1930). In a different way, Deleuze's section on "any-space-whatevers" is related to this study of Levinasian solitude because both thinkers allude to Henri Bergson and his conceptualizations of movement, the instant, and thinking time as time itself. Levinas and Deleuze also cross paths in regard to what Deleuze calls the "fascinating idea . . . developed from Pascal to Kierkegaard: the alternative is not between terms but between the modes of existence of the one who chooses." See Deleuze, pages 114-122. For more on this concept of "any-space-whatevers," their role as affection-images which evoke an emotional response, and their relation to Antonioni see also Laura U. Marks, The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses (Durham: Duke UP, 2000) and Gregory Flaxman, ed., The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000). To compare and contrast "the face" in the work of each would itself be a task of significant proportion, dealing as it would have to with Deleuze's "face" I address and Levinas's "face" that addresses me.

theirs alone.”<sup>10</sup> These interpretations, especially those of Nowell-Smith, Bonitzer, and Brunette, rigorously highlight important points to help spectators better understand the complexities of Antonioni’s cinema. As powerful as these interpretations are, though, something has always remained to trouble these interpretations of the film. Something in the film has always called for a response not founded in ontology or epistemology. Even the best of these interpretations fail to respond to key moments in L'avventura and other Antonioni films precisely because the analyses come through a Heideggerian lens that fails to respond to the ethical dimensions displayed in the films.

Responding to alienation and what slips away from ontological discussions of L'avventura and related instances in Antonioni’s La Notte (1961), L'eclisse (1962) Blow Up (1966), Zabriskie Point (1970), and The Passenger (1975) means responding to a difficult hopefulness against the isolated unhappiness of alienation. Responding to this difficult hopefulness begins to answer the question: what can cinema teach ethics and ethics teach cinema?

### **Ontological Interpretations**

Nowell-Smith aptly describes the draw of L'avventura when he writes that it is a film whose self-presentation is quite modest. It tells a simple story, with few flourishes and a minimum of authorial intrusion. It does not seem to be setting out to do anything particularly original—to question conventional morality, to subvert narrative, to erode the traditional concept of character or redefine the relationship of

character to landscape. And yet it is a film which promotes reflection on all these things.<sup>11</sup>

L'avventura raises a large number of questions, precisely because it promotes reflecting on them rather than openly asking them. He cautions that the intuition and skepticism of L'avventura and the rest of Antonioni's cinema must be approached with care toward this modesty. The film "makes no claims to know the unknowable," but to go only as far as intuition can take spectators.<sup>12</sup> He continues, "If it offers a statement it is a second-order one, a statement about the limits of what it is possible to say. It speaks through silence. It opens up a space for comprehension to enter, without saying (because it cannot) what that comprehension should be."<sup>13</sup> The most common understanding of the film, though, seems to need to assimilate the film and its prompting under established norms of cinematic experience, ignoring Nowell-Smith's observation and denying the larger complexity of L'avventura as a turning point toward a new cinematic language.

The most common synopsis (interpretation) of the film is that L'avventura is the unadventurous adventure of a group of wealthy Romans on a four- or five-day sailing holiday around the Aeolian Islands. When they stop at one island, the wholly disinterested Anna disappears—never to be found. The others in the party, including

<sup>10</sup> Nowell-Smith, L'avventura 60.

<sup>11</sup> Nowell-Smith, L'avventura 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Nowell-Smith, L'avventura 47.

<sup>13</sup> 47-50. Although Nowell-Smith eventually also centers freedom and the individual in possession of that freedom in his readings of these films, he is careful to note how even that interpretation must be offered with some uncertainty. As he states at the end of his study, L'avventura, "Most of all [these

Anna's estranged lover Sandro and best friend Claudia, the only working-class member of the group, search the island in vain. After most of the party agree to continue to their next stop and await word from the police, Sandro and Claudia decide to continue searching for Anna by following leads and rumors that have begun to surface. While searching for Anna, Claudia and Sandro fall into a distracted affair that appears to mirror much of the estrangement Anna and Sandro shared. In the end, all the party, except for Anna, reunites at a luxury hotel outside the Sicilian town of Taormina. After unsuccessfully trying to fall asleep, Claudia leaves her hotel room in a panicked search for Sandro, whom she finds in the arms of another woman in the hotel lobby. After running away from one another, Claudia and Sandro come together on a bench outside the hotel, realizing that this unhappy despair is the life to which they are doomed.

Almost all the critics argue that Anna disappears and that Claudia replaces her by the end of the film. These critics see the process of replacement completed by the end of the film, when Claudia puts her hand on Sandro's head in the final scene of the film, a gesture Anna does not make in a similar circumstance earlier on the island. With their focus on the ontological interpretation of the film, they see this ending as the refusal of Claudia to heed the example of Anna and seize her freedom and authenticity by escaping the tethers of the crowd around her. They argue that Claudia and Sandro relate along the same lines as did Anna and Sandro, and that, in the end, Claudia is trapped in her own Existential crisis. Rather than recognizing the

---

characters] learn to live alone with the margin of freedom that is inescapably theirs and theirs alone" (60).

inevitability of her own death and the absurdity of her existence and seizing her own authenticity by freeing herself from responsibility, Claudia remains where we see her, trapped in the relation with Sandro, sacrificing her freedom so she can care for him. For the majority of critics, this is the ultimate warning of Antonioni's cinema—if we fail to seek our own authenticity, we will sacrifice ourselves to the control of others around us.<sup>14</sup>

This is what Kevin Moore calls the “tragic ending” of L'avventura, where Claudia and Sandro reunite at the end of the film only to “retreat” into their former roles, surrounded by the “melancholia” of negative alienation.<sup>15</sup> Moore’s thesis is precisely what this chapter challenges, not because Moore is inaccurate in what he argues, but because his argument is founded in an ontological understanding of alienation rather than an ethical response to it. According to Moore,

Most critics would agree that alienation is the property of being which is the central aesthetic determiner of [Antonioni’s] presentations of modern life, although it is the negative or reclusive effects of this property that are more often than not cited as thematically significant

---

<sup>14</sup> William Arrowsmith describes this final situation as a warning from Antonioni and the key to understanding everything Antonioni shows us. According to Arrowsmith in Antonioni: The Poet of Images, ed. and intro. Ted Perry (New York: Oxford UP, 1995),

In the mass world, Antonioni suggests, then, that individuality is fragile; incipient individuality...is difficult precisely because the world is organized to suppress individuality, to coerce each person back into the Game...to coerce those waking into individual life back into the ranks of the sleepers. To play the Game is to live life in opposition to Reality and to avoid being an individual. The group is powerful against the individual precisely because it is the group, because it can suggest that failure to conform to its norms is illness, neurosis, even madness.

I cannot stress the point too strongly. There is no more persistent theme in Antonioni’s work than this intricate, culturally crucial diagnosis of the crisis of individual life. (33)

to comprehending the ambiguities of his work. To be alienated in an Antonioni film is to be resentfully situated in an overly industrialized, capital-intensive world that fails to provide a nurturing environment in which the emotions might flourish.<sup>16</sup>

Moore's empiricist project questions how critics concentrate on the negative aspects of alienation and how alienation leads to the despair of character's lives. Linking the relation between characters in L'avventura and the later L'eclisse, Moore notes that the "adventure" of alienation begins in the tragedy of the earlier film and comes to its redemptive conclusion in the latter. Unable to adjust to their real world circumstance in the first film, the characters eventually learn, through their alienation, to come to terms with their new selves by the latter film. L'avventura starts the adventure which ends in L'eclisse.

Against the "tragic ending" of L'avventura, where Claudia and Sandro reunite only to "retreat" into their former roles, surrounded by the "melancholia" of negative alienation, Moore proposes the example of Vittoria and Piero at the end of L'eclisse. In the latter film, the characters disappear at the end of the film, recalling Anna's disappearance from L'avventura, but in a different way. Moore argues,

Vittoria's disappearance, or alienation, from the familiar recalls Anna's, and indeed Monica Vitti plays both Claudia, the woman who substitutes for Anna in Anna's life, as well as Vittoria, who returns to

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Z. Moore, "Eclipsing the Commonplace: The Logic of Alienation in Antonioni's Cinema," Film Quarterly 48, No. 4 (1995) 30.

<sup>16</sup> Moore 23.

complete the quest as a victorious Anna, the woman who finds what she wants.<sup>17</sup>

The victorious character is the one who seizes her own authenticity, who comes to terms with her new self on the horizon of her own death. According to Moore, Vittoria, following and improving upon Anna, “becomes a radical individual” because she refuses the crowd and sets off on her own path, for herself.<sup>18</sup>

Alienation has a positive effect, according to Moore, because alienation as negation functions as an “event promoting aesthetic progress in the face of novel experience.”<sup>19</sup> Antonioni’s films show the transformative power of alienation to bring his characters closer to recognizing and registering the changes the world has brought about for them. Negative alienation, what most critics have interpreted Antonioni’s films to show, leads to “individuality and contemplative isolation.”<sup>20</sup> Positive alienation, the interpretation Moore asserts, leads to “correspondence and community.”<sup>21</sup> Realizing their disjuncture with outdated modes of existing, through positive alienation, some characters are redeemed by refusing the outdated and by “keeping in touch with the nebulous, obscure, and actual character of reality which is the source of our historical novelty and renewal.”<sup>22</sup> The new self escapes melancholia by seizing the opportunity of alienation through a more complete

<sup>17</sup> Moore 27.

<sup>18</sup> Moore 28.

<sup>19</sup> Moore 22.

<sup>20</sup> Moore 26.

<sup>21</sup> Moore 26.

realization of what that alienation offers for the self, a more authentic being in community of correspondence.

This correspondence and community, though, is the most dangerous instance of totalization, of false response, according to Levinas. It is most dangerous because it is the interpretation that most closely resembles a response on the surface yet fails because it returns the ethical relationship to a relationship with an outside term. This emphasis on correspondence conquers the ethical relationship precisely because it makes the self and the other secondary to another term. Such “correspondence and community” founded in a shared worldview or goal is precisely what L'avventura shows leads to further alienation without response.

Being open to the other does not mean the self and the other co-exist. In fact, they cannot. The appearance that they do co-exist is the false community. The fact that they do not co-exist is what allows for ethics to come into play because the difference between the self and the other is what makes ethics possible. This difference between them is precisely what Levinas argues opens the self to the call of the other, the fact that the time and space between the self and the other creates in the self an obligation to respond to the other.

In a 1982 interview, Levinas stresses the importance of difference for ethics and the false connection of correspondence for ontology:

In Heidegger, the ethical relation, the Miteinandersein, the being-with-another-person, is only one moment of our presence in the world. It does not have the central place. Mit is always being next to . . . it is

---

<sup>22</sup> Moore 29.

not in the first instance the Face, it is zusammernsein [being-together], perhaps zusammenmarschieren [marching-together].<sup>23</sup>

Pointedly here, Levinas breaks with making ontology primary in two ways. First, he spells out his ethical and temporal separation from Heidegger. Since Levinas will always talk about the relation with the other as one of being after or being-for-the-other, he rejects the “being with” that Heidegger posits as the first instance of existence which must be overcome. For Levinas, the self and the other are never together. They cannot co-exist. Therefore, the first instance of being, mit (with) with its denotation of reciprocity, which Heidegger proposes as a crisis to overcome, simply never occurs. “Being with” is an existential impossibility for Levinas. Beings are for themselves (sometimes in the guise of being for an outside term which returns them to themselves) or for the other. Secondly, Levinas also spells out the ultimate consequence of this crucial separation. Concerned as he is for responding to the links between philosophy and genocide, Levinas connects Heidegger’s martial metaphor of troops “marching” with what he sees as the inevitable outcome of ontological philosophy. Levinas links the sound of soldiers marching with the oppressive rumble of being, both on a metaphorical and real-world level. Because of this link, he cannot locate the consolation in mit that Heidegger does. For Levinas, the first connection is always the ethical connection. This connection without correspondence, without co-existence (and without the fascist

---

<sup>23</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia UP, 1998) 116.

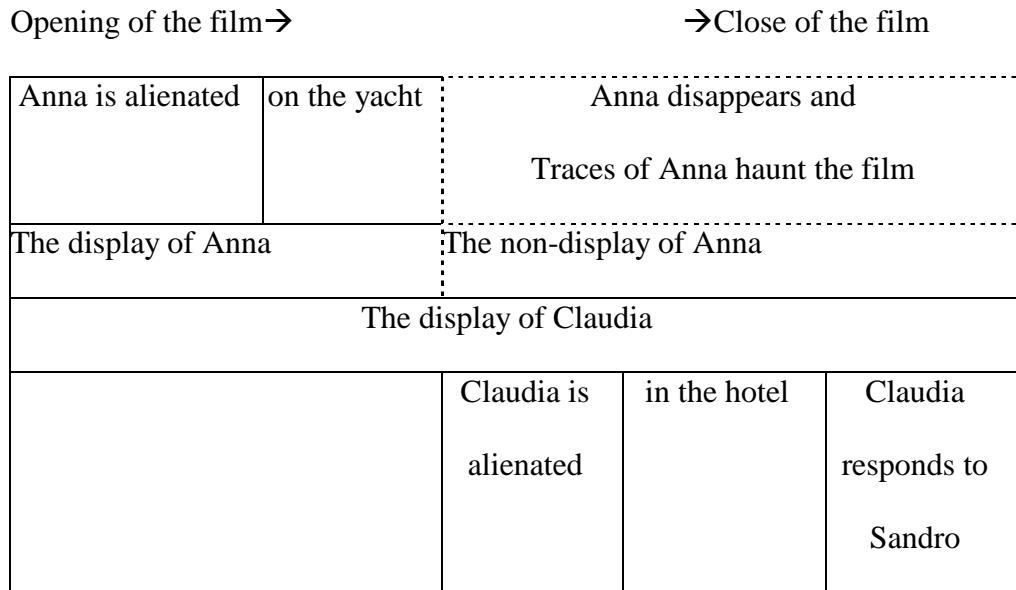
overtones), is what interrupts our anonymous existence and, therefore, is better than being.

### A Levinasian Lens

L'avventura certainly establishes a world in Existential crisis. Yet, it does not limit itself to displaying only one side of that crisis or one way of reacting to that crisis. Characters are alienated from one another in crowds, in response to their surroundings, and in their inability to let nature be around them. However, at the same time as the film displays this more Heideggerian understanding of the Existential crisis calling for characters to strive for their authentic being, it also displays a world in which solitude and further isolation do not lead to a way out of this crisis. It does not stop at the level of critique, though. While L'avventura displays how this quest for authenticity fails, it also displays an alternative route that more fully responds to the alienation of Existential crisis. At the same time as the film critiques this Heideggerian reaction to alienation, it also asks spectators to consider more carefully a Levinasian response to alienation. Seeing L'avventura through a Levinasian lens means seeing both paths and resisting centering either.

Anna and Claudia are characters who are thrown into similar circumstances, but who react to those circumstances in different ways. In the final moments of L'avventura, the film asks spectators to see the full weight of Claudia's open response to Sandro as an ethical response to the alienation of the situation. The film juxtaposes this open response and its effect upon Claudia and Sandro with Anna's earlier alienation and isolation.

Schematically, the story of L'avventura as the story of Anna and Claudia can be sketched out as follows:



The full significance of these two story lines becomes clearer when spectators maintain the integrity of each one, when we see Anna's role through the whole film. Spectators can more fully see the ethical in the film if they attend to the traces of Anna that continue to haunt the film and refuse to relinquish their place in it, and consider Claudia's story alongside those traces. In this light, Anna's story is the cautionary tale, and Claudia's is the detailed examination of that cautionary tale.<sup>24</sup>

L'avventura begins with Anna's alienation and Existential crisis almost overwhelming her, and emphasizes her distress and final reaction to this alienation on board the yacht and on the island, just before she disappears from the film.

---

<sup>24</sup> In light of this cautionary tale concerning existence, it is also possible to read a secondary cautionary tale in regard to the film. As much as we might simply like Claudia and dislike Anna from the start, we must remember that we do not meet them on equal footing. Anna is already at the edge of the abyss and about to return to herself when we first meet her. Claudia is far behind her and the abyss. We only see Claudia closer to the abyss by the end of the film, and only for a few moments, before she turns away from the abyss.

Spectators meet her at the opening of the film, when she disagreeably departs from her father to join the others on the late-summer holiday. She leaves with Claudia to meet Sandro at his apartment and then proceed to the boat. Anna and Sandro hardly speak to one another when they meet after having been apart for a month. Instead, they ignore Claudia—who walks across the street to wait for them—and have sex. Afterwards, the three of them must rush to the dock to meet the boat in time.

The next morning everyone slowly awakens on the yacht, and spectators are introduced to the other couples onboard. Except for Claudia, who is not in a romantic coupling, no one seems happy, and most of their time is spent trying to distract themselves from their boredom. They flirt, argue, complain, and pontificate at one another. Suddenly, near one island, the idea to go swimming strikes them, and Anna jumps in while everyone else is still debating whether or not it is a good idea. They stop the yacht and most of the other characters dive in after her while Corrado rows to the island in an inflatable dinghy.

Just as suddenly as she dived into the water, Anna begins to scream about an approaching shark. Everyone else panics, hollers advice at her, or swims to her aid. All the swimmers return to the yacht, and Anna and Claudia go below deck to change out of their bathing suits. There, Anna offers Claudia one of her shirts, but Claudia declines to accept it. Anna begins to giggle and laugh. Then, she tells Claudia that there never was a shark in the water. Anna says she made it up. After Claudia changes clothes and leaves, Anna slips the shirt into Claudia's bag.

---

Everyone disembarks onto the volcanic island, where some scout ancient ruins or sunbathe while Anna and Sandro walk to an isolated ledge to discuss their relationship and planned marriage. It is here that Anna comes to the edge of the abyss of her Existential crisis. It is here that spectators see her for the last time.

The discussion with Sandro is marked by Anna's desire to talk, to be heard and understood, and by her desire to be alone. The discussion, emblematic of Anna's situation, takes place on a ledge overhanging the sea and is composed primarily of medium and close-up shots or medium two-shots. In these two-shots on the edge the characters barely make eye contact and more often look away from one another. They argue about the meaninglessness of their relationship and their impending marriage. They speak but do not listen. They stand at a distance, play with stones on the rocks, or stare out to sea or at the cliffs overhead. They do not touch, at least not beyond Sandro's fondling, clutching, and groping. Anna does not touch Sandro. Near the end of the scene, two others from the party climb over some rocks in the background, without Anna and Sandro noticing them. Eventually, Sandro lies down and falls asleep. The scene dissolves, with Anna's head disappearing more quickly than Sandro's body, to a shot of the cliffs meeting the sea. No one sees what happens to Anna.

This sequence displays Anna's alienation and her desire to be alone. As she says to Sandro on the cliffs, "I'd like to be by myself for a while." When he asks how long, she says days, two months, three years might not be enough. From the moment she departs her house at the start of the film, Anna is on a quest to be alone, to escape from the crowd that puts demands on her. She leaves her father, despite his

implication that he would like her to stay and keep him company. She avoids eye contact with Sandro when they are in bed together. She pulls away when he tries to lean on her on board the yacht. Then, she tries to swim away from everyone and pushes Sandro away when he attempts to rescue her from the shark. She asks everyone except Claudia to leave her alone when they are changing clothes, and is barely able to say a word even to her best friend after everyone else leaves the cabin. Finally, on the island she directly asks Sandro to let her be alone. Anna is not physically cut off from all the others, as Claudia is in the later hotel scene, but she is already alienated from them and quickly isolating herself from them.

Two moments within this sequence appear to run counter to her desire to isolate herself, though. When Anna attempts to give Claudia a shirt and when Anna tells Sandro they need to talk, she seems to be making contact and resisting her isolation. However, although they do appear on the surface to counter her desire for further isolation, in the end, these two scenes show how far from responding she has already become. When Anna tries to give Claudia the shirt, it is not as if she is sharing it or even giving it as a gift. Rather, Anna's facial expression and gestures in this instant make it plain that Anna is trying to disappear, trying to give herself away by giving remnants of herself away. As well, when she tells Sandro they should discuss their relationship, she is not opening a conversation to hear what he is thinking or even to help him. She tells him that she wants to end their relationship. Her statement that they should talk is a declaration and a way to begin disappearing from him and the others.

From the start, she antagonistically interacts with others in what seems to be an attempt to shock herself out of her alienation. When she meets with Sandro, she immediately has sex with him, ignoring Claudia, who is left to close the door to Sandro's apartment. She seems finally to express some tenderness toward Sandro when she tells him to sunbathe on the boat, but even then her suggestion becomes more an order—one that guarantees less interaction between them. Then, without waiting for anyone to join her, she dives into the water and swims away from the boat. She begins to scream about the shark attacking her in what seems more an invocation of the shark attack. It is as if she were hoping for a shark attack at that moment so that she will be killed or so that others will stay out of the water and away from her. She then tries to shock Claudia when she tells her about the shark. Finally, she talks with Sandro until she realizes none of these tactics is addressing her isolation. Her only recourse seems to be for her to turn completely away from the others and fully into herself, to strive toward her authentic self.

In many ways, Anna's story in L'avventura is also the story of the alienation Claudia suffers. However, after Anna disappears, L'avventura shows the consequences of Anna's disappearance and more closely examines Claudia's suffering as she nears the abyss Anna crossed over earlier. The display of Claudia's story up to the abyss not only parallels Anna's, though; it also delves into more detail about the Existential crisis underlying the story. Claudia's story is Anna's story seen under a magnifying glass.

Near the end of L'avventura, there is a sequence that begins in Claudia's room at the luxury hotel, where she is unable to sleep, and ends just before Claudia

discovers Sandro on a couch with another woman, Gloria Perkins.<sup>25</sup> This display of Claudia connects with the display of Anna before she disappears because both sequences display a cinematic illustration of the Levinasian perspective toward the Existential crisis. Most of all, this sequence involving Claudia best illustrates the Levinasian perspective toward being which he calls the “horror and panic” of the anonymous existence of “il y a”—the “horror and panic” of the existence without existent of “there is.” Because of this, the sequence repeats much of what happens with Anna but explores the crisis of alienation as it works below the surface, bringing much of what’s below the surface to the screen.

The sequence in the hotel is particularly marked by its silence, a silence made even more noticeable by the echo that marks it against the muted background music, a silence that becomes almost audible as a rumbling. In many ways, this emphasis on silence is a prominent example of the new cinematic language critics claim L'avventura inaugurated. The silence highlights the cinematic “dead time” Nowell-Smith mentions and Peter Brunette explains, “massively slows things down and makes the viewer attend to the resonance of visual and aural details that are usually lost in the sweep of the narrative.”<sup>26</sup> The world of the film is emptied, except for the rumbling and the echo of footsteps and doors opening and closing in the hotel hallway. This is the empty space of the film, the space where freedom is supposed to

---

<sup>25</sup> For another version of a similar hotel, consider L'année dernière à Marienbad, (dir. Alain Resnais, 1961), which considers many of the same themes as L'avventura but from an almost opposite position as the focus is on characters who almost create the truth of themselves by narrating that truth. They tell themselves into existence. The characters in L'avventura speak less as the story progresses. They do not narrate the truth of their existence but quietly become absorbed into the background, until the final moment when a gesture (not words) brings the two characters together at the end.

<sup>26</sup> Brunette 29.

flourish as characters come to an awakening or authenticity apart from the noise of the crowd. This silence, however, is also the field that the echo haunts. The echo, the ultimate sound of a voice which returns to itself, to the economy of the same, comes to dominate the film and signals the threat of anonymous, alienated existence which pervades the film. With each step Claudia takes down the hall, the sound of her footfalls returns to her. At the same time as this space appears to open to freeing characters, this echo reminds spectators of the coercive return of the same inherent in the attempt to exit the Existential crisis. The self becoming more free or more separate from the crowd only returns to the self like an echo returning down the emptied hall.

Claudia cannot fall asleep, so she passes the time walking the room, sitting at a desk, writing numbers on a magazine page while counting the seconds aloud, and staring into the distance from her window balconies as a train is heard somewhere off screen. Time accumulates. Isolation leads to further isolation. With each accumulated second, Claudia's Existential crisis grows more intense. Visually, the space is emptied of people, but the soundtrack hints continuously of the outside world and people from whom she is separated. Calls from the outside repeatedly prick at the silent rumbling of her existence, but she does not respond to them.

Then, Claudia leaves her room and runs down a long, silent hallway; her footsteps and their echoes are the only sounds. Reaching Patrizia's room, she asks after Sandro, but no one has seen him. To no avail, Claudia tries to explain her fear

---

and uncertainty to Patrizia. However, Patrizia is also alone and can only think of herself; therefore, she accuses Claudia of acting “melodramatic.”

Finding no response to her situation and failing to respond to anyone else’s, Claudia returns to her self and runs back down the silent hallway to search several of the hotel’s open areas. After looking through a lobby, a bar, and a dining room, Claudia discovers Sandro with another woman. Shocked and unable to speak, Claudia runs from the room, making unintelligible sounds.<sup>27</sup> This is the point in the film where Claudia most closely approaches Anna’s situation. At this point in the hotel, Claudia faces the same alienation as Anna did after the discussion with Sandro on the island. At this moment, Claudia returns to herself as Anna did earlier, and like the echo, Claudia returns only to her self. At the end of the scene, Claudia returns to the solitude, to return, like the echo, to the self, like Anna on the island. From the Levinasian perspective, she returns to the search for epistemological certainty or ontological certainty. She seeks to uncover the reason for her dissipated relationship with Sandro. She seeks to extricate herself from the crowd of the world in search for a more authentic being in solitude, a solitude that can lead to her escape from the limits of society.

---

<sup>27</sup> L'avventura refers here as well to Claudia’s anonymous existence in that her solitude impedes her ability to speak precisely because it impedes her ability to relate. Levinas asserts, “Ethics occurs. . . across the hiatus of dialogue, not in the content of discourse, in the continuities or discontinuities of what is said, but in the demand for response” (*Ethics and Infinity*, 12). Ethics finds discourse, makes it possible by acknowledging the remainders in dialogue which make dialogue possible. Ethics is not the present meaning of the content, but the very pauses and remainders in conversation which make it possible and, eventually, intelligible. Levinas is arguing here that dialogue signifies ethically here in the spaces between words, phrases, sentences, and statements, rather than in those words, phrases, sentences, and statements themselves. This is the formula he will develop further in his later work on the relation between Saying and the Said, the interdependent relationship between the words and the pauses between them which signify ethically.

This solitude, in Levinasian terms though, cannot lead to an escape. It can only lead to a fuller alienation, as the non-display of Anna (or the display of the traces of Anna) reminds spectators of the film. Anna may have fled, but the traces she leaves behind show that she has not escaped. As Robert John Scheffler Manning explains,

For Levinas, the self does not initially find in Being potentialities for itself either to actualize or to escape from.

What the self finds in Being, according to Levinas, is its weight, the heaviness of Being that weighs upon the self and enchains the self to itself.<sup>28</sup>

Like the time accumulating on the page where Claudia writes the numbers and the waves of the echoes reverberating in the hallway, Claudia's existence weighs upon her despite her attempt to run from the scene to escape her existence. This escape is no escape without the force of responding to the call of the other to interrupt Claudia's isolation.

Levinas argues that because being is a solitude and is not a gift but a burden, ontological thinking can only reach as far as this solitude but not respond beyond the self. Because the death of the self is its focus, ontological thought cannot exceed the self. This experience of existence as an inescapable solitude is what Levinas calls the experience of the "il y a"—the anonymous existence of "there is"—that is horror and panic rather than a gift.

---

<sup>28</sup> Robert John Scheffler Manning, Interpreting Otherwise Than Heidegger: Emmanuel Levinas's Ethics as First Philosophy, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1993) 31.

Levinas rejects Heidegger's notion of the generosity of being which can be found in the German "es gibt" ("geben" means "to give"). Levinas finds existence to be a horror and a panic rather than a gift. For Levinas, the fact that the French "il y a" is not rooted in "giving" makes the "il y a," a more appropriate description of existence.<sup>29</sup> Levinas rejects what he sees as the German Idealism of Heidegger's interpretation, condemning that Idealism's failures with regards to both World War II and the Holocaust—a condemnation Antonioni might also share, considering Fascism's destructive effect on Italy during World War II.<sup>30</sup> Existence for Levinas is not generous but, rather, like an echo, "a noise returning after every negation of this noise. Neither nothingness nor being."<sup>31</sup> For Levinas, "there is neither joy nor abundance" but, rather, "horror and panic" in anonymous existence.<sup>32</sup> There is horror and panic over being and not anxiety over nothingness. This horror and panic is "the impersonality of the 'there is.'" It is the fact that existence is impersonal, that it is an existence without existent. The "there is" of existence, like the echo in the hallway or the non-display of Anna, is the "silent rumbling" of existence which

<sup>29</sup> For extended studies of the "Il y a" in Levinasian and other contemporary thought, see Jill Robbins, Altered Interpretation: Levinas and Literature (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999), especially pages 91-116 and Simon Critchley, Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature (London: Routledge, 1997), pages 31-83. For Robbins and Critchley the question driving their investigations circulates around the very "ethico-metaphysical consequences" (Critchley 81) of radical alterity. In these studies, the question over the good/bad, high/low dichotomies so crucial to Levinas remains central as both thinkers propose speculating after what this non-hierarchical Levinas might look like.

<sup>30</sup> For a recent publication in English of one of Levinas's statements linking National Socialism with Liberal Idealism, see his "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism." Originally published in Esprit in 1934, the article was translated by Seán Hand and appeared in the 1990 issue of Critical Inquiry, 17 (Autumn 1990).

<sup>31</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and Infinity: Conversations With Philippe Nemo, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985) 48.

<sup>32</sup> Levinas, Ethics 48-49.

continually returns and which will not allow an exit.<sup>33</sup> Responding to the call of the other interrupts alienation and anonymous existence. Without responding to the call of the other, Claudia can only exist anonymously. She can only become more isolated, more like Anna, because she refuses to be for-the-other in this scene.

According to Levinas, existence is a solitude precisely because the breakup of being into beings is what makes our experience of existence possible. This is precisely why beings cannot co-exist and why, from the start, a community of correspondence is an ethical impossibility.<sup>34</sup> Beings come into being through ruptures in being. Or, more accurately, Beings are the ruptures in being. The things that exist are not separate from existence. There is not existence (like a billiards table) and then things that exist (like the billiards balls). The things that exist are the folds or breaks within existence (like the pockets in the table). The pockets in a billiards table are cut from the table itself. Beings are not separate from being. Therefore, beings are, by definition, separated from one another because they are ruptures in being. They cannot co-exist in space and time. The mere presence of other beings, no matter how overwhelming, the very over-population of the planet, does not interrupt our solitude. As Stone puts it, “Each conscious being is first alone, existing in solitude. That so many other beings are also alone does not alter the

<sup>33</sup> Levinas, Ethics 48.

<sup>34</sup> Such a community is possible and politically potent, of course, but not ethical. Such a political community must be called to account to questions of ethics. This is a major point for Levinas in such places as his essay “Politics After!” from *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994). The arrival of politics after ethics parallels Levinas’s argument that the self always arrives after the other. Because the self and other do not co-exist, the other cannot become dictatorial or even coercive, along the lines of the Heideggerian mit.

solitude of each.”<sup>35</sup> In Levinas’s words, “I touch an object, I see the other. But I am not the other. I am all alone. . . . One can exchange everything between beings except existing. In this sense, to be is to be isolated by existing.”<sup>36</sup> As spectators can hear and see, Claudia is alone in the visual and aural realms of the frame in this scene.

Claudia is alone in her room despite the noise outside. She is alone because the door is closed and no one else is in the room with her. This is not the solitude of existence, though. Claudia is isolated because she exists. Claudia is not isolated because she is alone in the room but because she exists separate from other human beings. She cannot share the exact time and space of another person. She may touch someone else or see someone else, but she cannot be someone else. This is the solitude of existence. Even in a crowd, she would be isolated, just as spectators see Anna throughout the first third of the film, and just as we see Claudia when she is threatened by the men in the town square in Noto. Being surrounded is not necessarily being for anyone else. Claudia is alone in her room and alone in her self. A change in Claudia’s being is necessary, not simply a change in location in the hotel. She would remain isolated even in the full lobby of the hotel. She remains alone when she encounters Sandro and Gloria and returns to her isolation down the hallway. This is what, in a slightly different context, Levinas calls, “the tragedy of solitude,” the self “riveted to itself.”<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Stone 10.

<sup>36</sup> Levinas, Time 42.

<sup>37</sup> Levinas, Time 57.

In the crowd or alone, a person remains isolated as long as she remains with or next to the other person in a situation of reciprocally being with one another. This is the false community of being-with, the false community focused on the outside correspondence. She cannot see the other and respond to the call of the other if she is standing side-by-side, marching straight ahead precisely because this correspondence is “an association of side by side, around something, around a common term and, more precisely, for Heidegger, around the truth.”<sup>38</sup> The intermediary term, such as the truth, the Volk, or the commune, would interfere with responding to the other person because, rather than responding to that uniquely other person, both people would be trapped responding only to that intermediary term or else the community would break down.

Facing the other person and responding to the call of the other—not “with” the other but “for” the other—would interrupt Claudia’s anonymous being and interrupt her solitude. In rough and almost Lacanian terms, it is as if turning toward the face of the other is what precisely gives a face to the being who turns.<sup>39</sup> Turning toward the other, responding to the call of the other, is what puts a face on anonymous being. This response, argues Levinas, would interrupt Claudia’s

<sup>38</sup> Levinas, Time 41.

<sup>39</sup> As Simon Critchley argues, there is nothing to prevent us from seeing the formal connection between Levinasian and Lacanian ethics. Both thinkers structure their ethics around an encounter with an other who defies my understanding while demanding my response. However, Critchley warns, this shared structure has significantly different objects and outcomes. He cautions against equating what they most seem to share—an ethics formed in relation to a desire for the other by reminding us of the differences between Levinas’s metaphysical desire and Lacan’s (Freudian) sexual desire. (“Das Ding: Lacan and Levinas,” Research in Phenomenology, 1998, Vol. 28, 72-90.) Furthermore, because the other does not order me to respond but calls me to respond, to be-for and not to follow along with, any analogy between these desires fails to take the full weight of Levinas’s disagreement with Heidegger into account.

isolation and call her into being-for-another rather than being isolated in the horror and panic of existence, of alienated existence concerned only for its own being-toward-death.

Perhaps the most incriminating instance of correspondence or mit (being with) in L'avventura takes place when Claudia and Anna are changing clothes on board the yacht. Side-by-side in the act of changing, with their backs toward spectators, the two women change from their swimsuits. Despite repeated attempts by these friends to talk with one another, no conversation ensues. They start and stop questions; they stammer through explanations; they fail to respond to one another despite their spatial and assumed emotional proximity. There is even a moment when Anna reaches toward Claudia, as if to caress her, to open toward Claudia, but Anna reaches out in a halting gesture and withdraws her hand at the last instant. Anna does not touch Claudia. She returns to herself, sitting alone for a moment after Claudia leaves the cabin.

From a Levinasian perspective, spectators see both Anna and Claudia in their Existential crisis here. And, we see their paths running parallel after Anna disappears from the screen. At the same time as spectators see Claudia's experience of anonymous existence, we experience the traces of Anna's experience. Anna's disappearance from the screen allows for the film to depict, through non-display, the first instance of her existence, the anonymous existence of the "il y a" for the other characters and the spectators of the film to experience. Through this non-display, L'avventura challenges cinematic expectations by emphasizing the active role of what is absent and yet able to affect the story more than what is present. The traces

of Anna signal the anonymous existence in which all the characters exist. These traces are the display of the isolation any of the characters could fall into, should they fall into the quest for authentic being.

The display of Claudia and the non-display of Anna allow the film to show the outward appearance of the world of anonymous existence within the Existential crisis and the anonymous existence that lies behind it. Against so many traditional interpretations of L'avventura, Claudia does not replace Anna. She cannot. Anna still exists, even if she has died. This is the most difficult uncertainty to leave unanswered in the world of this film. The film repeatedly calls on characters and spectators to guess at Anna's situation. Nevertheless, whatever Anna has done or whatever has happened to Anna, no one can tell. Yet, she cannot fail to exist in this Umwelt. The traces she has left behind are the motivating factor behind the remainder of the film because the search for her drives the film forward, even if only tangentially. As much as Anna would remove herself from the crowd to strive for a more authentic existence, she cannot escape her anonymous existence. Her anonymous existence remains because authenticity cannot overcome anonymous existence, as the traces Anna leaves behind signal through the remainder of the film. Claudia does not replace Anna because Anna disappears, but Anna's traces remain to signal her first, anonymous existence that remains.

### **The Noise of Absence**

The crisis of anonymous existence and alienation Anna and Claudia experience is represented, in part, by the sequence on board the boat and island and then again by the sequence in the hotel. L'avventura shows the two women in

parallel situations. It also shows how they react differently to those situations. On the one hand, Anna argues at the beginning of the film that she wants to get away. More time away from Sandro, her father, her circle of acquaintances, and the encroaching world would allow her to achieve her authentic self. She pursues the Heideggerian route. On the other hand, Claudia, at first, seeks to join in the crowd, to be accepted by the acquaintances and correspond. After she is in an affair with Sandro and spending more time with the yachting party, she sees that this corresponding fails to interrupt her isolation. In the hotel, she comes to the edge of the abyss, about to follow Anna's steps. At the last moment, though, she turns to respond to someone, despite his betrayal, and pursues a different route. She pursues the Levinasian route. She goes beyond the crowd, and beyond the self, toward being for-the-other.

Whereas spectators see Claudia's experience of anonymous existence, we see only traces of Anna's anonymous existence. Significantly, though, all of the other characters are the same as Anna. Were any of them to take the same route as Anna, the route of separation in search of the free and freely acting authentic self, they would also suffer the same fate as Anna. Seeking their authentic being would further isolate and alienate them in their anonymous existence. This non-display is the absolute force of L'avventura. A character who disappears early on in the film remains the central reference point of the film. Anna remains the central "character" of the film as traces of her haunt the rest of the film. This oscillation between the display of Claudia and non-display of Anna, this Seeing between the Seen and the

not Seen shows the relevance of a Levinasian lens. L'avventura shows us how seeing is responding.

Through her disappearance from the screen, her depositioning, Anna becomes the traces through which the other characters must move and exist.<sup>40</sup> Because she is deposed from the central position of the screen, she becomes the key witness against the quest for the authentic self. In her attempt to remove herself from the narrative and its influences, her traces become the motivating factor of the narrative for the others. Her disappearance provokes their search and the subsequent abandonment of their search. They follow rumors of her to the police. They follow headlines about her or chase after women who resemble her. They even avoid each other, once they have grown to fear her return. Certain point-of-view shots in the film, especially in the empty town Sandro and Anna visit, even hint to spectators that she may be the eyes through which we are watching the film. The further she is from the crowd, the deeper she falls into it.

In this way, whether or not her removing herself from this story is a conscious act, her disappearance serves only to deepen her existence within it rather than bringing about her authentic existence outside of it. Because spectators cannot verify her fate outside of the film, we cannot establish with certainty Anna's intentions or predicaments. We cannot know, even if we were to concoct some far-flung fantasy, if she has stolen away on a boat, for example, and landed in a new life in Southern California, now completely removed in every thought and deed from her past. What

---

we are left with are traces of Anna, and it is precisely this lack of a verifiable answer, of any verifiability in regard to Anna, for spectators that bears witness to the fear and anxiety of the character of Anna in the film. Being deposed from the screen space, she gives a deposition to the other characters and spectators. She is the witness in absentia. She witnesses to the fact that the horizon of her own death fails to free her from her isolation. Even if she were dead, her traces would continue to exist. Seeing Anna's failed attempts and the traces she leaves behind, whether she is conscious of them or not, reminds spectators of the very traces they would leave behind should they attempt to remove themselves from the community of the world. At the very least, seeing that she cannot know if she has broken free, reminds spectators of the very impossibility of breaking free. Or, we are at least reminded of the uncertainty we would have of ever knowing if we could break free. We might even believe ourselves free of a certain life and yet leave behind as many traces of ourselves in that rejected world as Anna does. Like her, we would become the very center of the world from which we had intended to free ourselves. This is the dilemma that confronts Claudia in the hotel, suspended at the abyss, at the point of her turn toward further isolation or response.

With Claudia, the difference between anxiety and fear is key. Anxiety retains an existentially primary status because reactions to it remain unverifiable. In contrast, fear offers the possibility of escape because we can either evade or defeat what we fear. In the film, all the characters fear the shark in the early swimming

<sup>40</sup> To be deposed is to be removed from high office and to give testimony under oath. The deposed queen is one who is removed from her throne and one who bears witness or delivers a written statement that bears witness.

scene and leave the water. They all fear the storm and the dangers of the island and seek shelter. The shepherd reminds them to be fearful of the crevices on the island or they might fall to their deaths. He asks if they have looked for Anna in the crevice behind his house, where he lost a sheep sometime earlier. Claudia fears having an affair with Sandro and tries to put as much space and as many other people as she can between Sandro and herself. In Taormina, the pharmacist's wife fears her unreliable husband of three month's infidelity, and guards against it. Claudia fears the mob of men who leer at and surround her in Noto, and so she moves back toward the hotel entrance and the relative safety of Sandro's company. In that same scene, as she turns back toward the entrance of the hotel, though, she stops and runs into a paint shop across the piazza because she fears that Anna might be the woman following Sandro down the hotel stairs.

Heideggerian anxiety, like Levinasian anonymous existence and the "il y a," because it does not come from an outside entity but is the experience of existing, does not offer the possibility of escape. Anxiety is the anxiety over one's self and the authenticity of one's self, for Heidegger. One can neither evade nor defeat one's self. Thus, anxiety's effects are more devastating. For Heidegger, the quest for authentic being is a direct reaction against anxiety. Because authentic beings confront their anxiety directly, they are liberated from their anxiety. However, it is precisely at the level of anxiety that Anna remains even though she chooses to follow this route. Through the non-display of Anna trapped in her anxious alienation, then, L'avventura shows spectators how the return to interior anxiety can only remain

interior. The interruption of anxiety, of the “il y a,” indeed, can only come from the outside, according to Levinas. L'avventura’s non-display repeats this lesson.

Anna’s attempt to free herself returns her to the alienated isolation of being. It does not offer her a route outside and beyond existence. It does not even offer an interruption of isolation precisely because she seeks her freedom from a wrong premise. Because she seeks her freedom from the community she wrongly imagines herself too much with, her quest is doomed to failure from the start. Traces of Anna haunt this film because this Umwelt cannot be undone so easily. According to Levinas, escape is not a possibility because,

there is not “something.” But this universal absence is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence. It is not the dialectical counterpart of absence, and we do not grasp it through a thought. It is immediately there. There is no discourse. Nothing responds to us, but this silence; the voice of this silence is understood and frightens.<sup>41</sup>

Spectators and the other characters in the film experience traces of Anna as this absence that is unavoidably present. She is the apparition (slightly more than a shadow even in the beginning of the film), which never quite materializes, never quite comes into view. Eyewitnesses mistake many women for Anna, and eyewitnesses constantly point toward her just as she disappears from the camera and the searchers. Anna’s presence is only in the past. In the present she is always

---

<sup>41</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “There is: Existence Without Existent,” The Levinas Reader, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 30.

already absent. Defying even the spectatorial apparatus of cinema and the preconceived notions of the cinematic experience, her existence in the film is as a boat engine, an echo, a rumor, contradictions, a Palermo newspaper headline, vague clues, a pharmacist's fantasy, a pharmacist's wife's nightmare, or the possible attachment we might make for a point-of-view shot, as in the "deserted" village.

Claudia is precisely at this point of divergence, at this interstice in the hotel scene. Her own fears are revealed to be her own anxieties. Will a further isolation remedy either? Anna fears the crowd and retreats. Claudia at first fears the crowd and retreats as she runs back to her hotel room. However, in her retreat the silence of the hallway echoes the silence of Anna's absence, and Claudia returns to the crowd, returns to Sandro and opens herself toward him. Her response interrupts her isolation at this moment. Responding to Sandro by opening herself to Sandro at the end of the film interrupts her fears and anxieties.

### **Wakefulness**

Claudia is at the edge of the abyss in the hotel. Like Anna, she is fully within her solitude and about to turn away from the horror of the anonymous existence only to find herself more fully within it. The horror of this moment recalls Levinas's writings on Hamlet and Macbeth and his allusions to Shakespeare throughout his career, allusions which he says are motivated by his belief that "sometimes it seems to me that the whole of philosophy is only a meditation on Shakespeare."<sup>42</sup> At this edge of the abyss, Claudia is like both Hamlet and Macbeth in that she realizes, in the

---

<sup>42</sup> Levinas, Time 72.

end, the horizon of her own death fails to provide more than a return to anonymous existence. Further isolation would only lead her to Anna's situation.

In his own discussions of Shakespeare's Hamlet and Macbeth, Levinas comments that the playwright's use of ghosts and other hauntings has not only been a tribute to his time or to the original material of the tragedies.<sup>43</sup> According to Levinas, the ghosts allow Shakespeare

to move constantly toward this limit between being and nothingness where being insinuates itself even in nothingness, like bubbles of the earth ("the Earth hath bubbles"). Hamlet recoils before the "not to be" because he has a foreboding of the return of being ("to dye, to sleepe, perchance to Dreame").<sup>44</sup> (33)

As Hamlet says in act three, scene one, lines sixty-three through sixty-eight:

To die, to sleep—  
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay there's the rub,  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause; there's the respect  
That makes calamity of so long life:<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> For extended interpretations of Levinas's use of Shakespeare (especially Hamlet) see Robbins, op. cit. and Rob Eaglestone, Ethical Criticism: Interpretation After Levinas (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1997). See also Chapter Four of this study for more on Levinas's use of Shakespeare and the ethics of Oshima Nagisa's cinema.

<sup>44</sup> Levinas, Time 33.

“To be or not to be” is exactly not the question for Levinas because it is impossible to experience the “not-to-be.” Anna cannot not exist. Anna can never experience her own death, only the death of someone else. One’s own death is not the problem. Rather, the question is the return of being, the haunting that will come after the death and the sleep. The rub is the dream (nightmare) that returns after death. The Prince of Denmark fears this return, after death, of anonymous existence. Despite Hamlet’s warning, Anna was only able to return herself to the realm of anonymous existence when she attempted to free herself from the crowd. Anna may well have died; however, that death does not relieve Anna of the crowd. This is what Claudia experiences throughout the film and where she finds herself once back in her room. Learning from Hamlet and Anna, Claudia realizes that her own death will not mark her own exit from existence. If she leaves the crowd or dies, Claudia will not be free of the crowd. She will haunt the crowd just as Anna haunts the crowd.

The lesson is the same with Macbeth. Levinas argues that,

In Macbeth, the apparition of Banquo’s ghost is also a decisive experience of the “no exit” from existence, its phantom return through the fissures through which one has driven it. “The times have been, that when the Brains were out, the man would dye, and there an end; But now they rise

---

<sup>45</sup> William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Prince of the Danes, eds. G. Blakemore Evans, et al., The Riverside Shakespeare 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997) 1183-1245.

again . . . and push us from our stools. This is more strange than such a murther is.” “And it is over with” is impossible.<sup>46</sup>

Again, the horror does not come from the danger of death but rather from the return of being. It is the return of being, the return from what was thought to be a possible escape from being, that “horrifies Macbeth.” It is not that murder is horrible or that Macbeth’s own crime indicts him here. Rather, Levinas is responding to the dead end of a self riveted to its own death as the horizon of its being. As long as the horizon of being remains the death of the self, “and it is over with” remains impossible. As with anxiety, interior reactions can only remain interior. According to Levinas, the turn toward the death of the other, the only death we can experience, teaches us how responding to the other interrupts our isolation.

This horror of the anxiety over anonymous existence, over the return after death, as Levinas tries to illustrate it, is the wakefulness of the insomniac. Like Claudia, the insomniac cannot fall asleep. In the hotel, the wakefulness invades Claudia’s room and drives her from that room. Whatever the cause of her wakefulness, once in it, she loses control of this wakefulness. She is willing to count and record the numbers on a watch to try to overcome it. Time passes. It marches on, and Claudia exists. Or, in a very awkward construction, time passes through, marches on; existence persists through Claudia, despite Claudia. At this moment, Claudia turns toward the other person, responds to the other in a gesture that would interrupt her isolation.

---

<sup>46</sup> Levinas, Time 33-34.

The horror of this wakefulness drives Claudia from her room and down the hall toward Patrizia's. Once there, Claudia reveals her fear of Anna's return, a fear not unlike Hamlet's or Macbeth's:

Claudia: Patrizia, I'm afraid.

Patrizia: You're telling me. I have nightmares . . .

Claudia: I'm afraid Anna has come back. I feel that she has come back, that they're [Anna and Sandro] together.

At first, her fear was that Anna would never return. However, now her experience of Anna's absence has turned into an experience of Anna's anonymous existence. Claudia is not afraid of Anna's return but of the impossibility of Anna ever leaving.<sup>47</sup>

At this point, the hotel scene fully displays the fear and dread Levinas describes coming from the experience of anonymous existing. The “rumbling silence” of the “il y a” has returned despite Claudia’s best efforts to expel it. The night of existence refuses to let up and admit a moment’s peace to Claudia. She feels the very weight of her isolated existence like the sound of a seashell pressed against the ear. The utter silence of the sequence and the constant return of that silence which pervades the aural space of the screen as Claudia runs down the hallway emphasize this weight. This silence echoes, reverberates, rumbles, despite the fact that there is no sound beside her footsteps on the hard floor. The longer the quiet of the scene continues, the louder the very absence of sound grows.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> A similar anxiety haunts Alfred Hitchcock’s films, especially Rebecca (1940), Vertigo (1958), and, especially, his film from the same year as L'avventura—Psycho (1960).

<sup>48</sup> This treatment of silence, and of the relationship between silence and noise, is only one of the bridges between Antonioni and the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky. Many lines can and have been drawn between Antonioni’s and Tarkovsky’s work, especially Andrei Rublev (1966-1971),

Claudia is like the child Levinas speaks of, who is sent to her room but still hears the rumbling of the guests below, a rumbling like the sound of a shell placed over the ear. She runs down the hall to Patrizia's room and, in a tone recalling Macbeth's, explains that,

A few days ago, I died at just the thought that Anna might be dead. Now I don't even cry. I'm afraid she might be alive. . . .

Claudia no longer fears death. Here, it has ceased to be the Heideggerian horizon of being—the totalizing event that gives human beings their authenticity. Rather, it is the return after a possible death that holds the “horror and panic” for Claudia. She faces the anonymous existence of Anna as an anonymous field of forces and states simply that she is “tired of being like this.” As Levinas notes, arguing against a Heideggerian understanding of heroism in the face of death, ““To be or not to be’ is a sudden awareness of this impossibility of annihilating oneself.”<sup>49</sup> Despite her attempts to eliminate herself from the world, Anna’s actions only reinforced the very “too-much-with” of her existence. They have also reinforced Claudia’s awareness of

Solaris (1972), and Stalker (1979). See, for example, Tarkovsky’s Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin: U of Texas P, 1996) as well as Donato Totaro’s review of Tarkovsky’s Sculpting in Film-Philosophy Internet Salon vol. 4 no. 4, February 2000, online <<http://www.film-philosophy.com>>. Even more interesting are the points which can be drawn together between Levinas, Deleuze, Antonioni, and Tarkovsky via the philosophy of Bergson and his theories of time and space which haunt all these thinkers.

In addition, Antonioni’s cinema connects many issues of presence and absence to the filmic gender relations Kaja Silverman highlights in terms of the ““auditory sphere’ or ‘aura’” (98) she discusses in The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana UP). Coming from a framework built in relation to Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Silverman is concerned with the aural filmic construction of discursive dependency and authority in terms of the inside / outside opposition and role of “a sonorous receptacle” made to seem necessary (and feminine) by the “dominant cinema” (99). Working through the feminist psychoanalytic theories of Julia Kristeva, Silverman begins to unfold a challenge to this hierarchical binary which serves to subdue women’s voices via such tools as the maternal voice, Kristeva’s choric fantasy, and the leaving behind of words.

<sup>49</sup> Levinas, Time 73.

her own existence, and the similarity of their experiences. Claudia, too, is too-much-with. Our experience of Anna's absence illustrates the fear that Hamlet and Macbeth have of their own existence. Like Hamlet, Macbeth, and Anna, Claudia experiences this Existential dread.

In the end, this is the world of L'avventura, the world of Anna and the non-display of the traces of Anna, of her present absence. This is the world of Claudia's present absence as well, an experience of Anna's absence and Claudia at the edge of this abyss. In this world of the film is constituted "the dark background of existence" and "the monotonous presence that bears down on us."<sup>50</sup> This is the horror of existence—the horror of the inescapable field of the present absence. By the end of the film, the horror of the traces of Anna frightens Sandro and Claudia almost to the point of inaction.

### A First Gesture of Ethics

Contrary to most critics of L'avventura, I argue that the film does not end tragically but hopefully.<sup>51</sup> However, this is a difficult hopefulness, an interrupted hopefulness, a hopefulness seeing the oscillations between hope and tragedy. After she discovers Sandro on the couch with Gloria Perkins, Claudia stumbles from the room and flees the interior of the hotel. After ashamedly hiding his face from Claudia and then acting with disgust toward Gloria, Sandro also flees the interior of the hotel. We see Claudia and Sandro outside the hotel, separated (avoiding one

<sup>50</sup> Levinas, "There is" 32.

<sup>51</sup> Nowell-Smith also argues against a negative interpretation of the ending of the film. He states that it ends without a final judgment, and that this open ending makes the film a radical break from the expected cinematic language of the time.

another at first) and crying. In the final moments of the film, Sandro approaches Claudia and sits on a bench near where she is standing. We see a close up of his face and the intensity of his tears. Then, we see Claudia move toward him, hold the corner of the bench, look at her own hand while she hesitantly opens and closes it. Suddenly, she reaches out and caresses the back of Sandro's head. A light note sounds on the soundtrack. Then, the camera pulls back, and we see Sandro on the bench, with Claudia beside him, caressing his head, and a brick wall and Mount Etna in front of them.

In his earlier work, such as in Time and the Other, Levinas posits a relation with the other person which interrupts the anonymity of isolated being and the totality of knowledge: the caress.<sup>52</sup> He points out that what he describes as the ethical relation brought out of alienation might be called "love" but that he fears too many misunderstandings of this term. Instead, he proposes that the caress, the open-handed response without reciprocity might be a gesture to interrupt the self's isolation. The caress, as opposed to the grasp, refuses to return the self to the self. It opens itself to the suffering and death of the other because it does not secure anything for itself. It goes out to the other without guarantee, without expecting the reciprocity of co-existence. The caress is the self coming after the other, opening toward the future of the other, from a different time and space than the other, offering itself, if only for an instant, for the other. For this reason, the caress is tied to the ethical as a hopeful opening toward the other person. This is the hope at the end of

---

<sup>52</sup> For a powerful elaboration of the complexities of this metaphor, complexities Levinas himself notes but does not develop later in pages 89-90 of Time, see Luce Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel

L'avventura. It is not final and totalizing in its openness to the other person. Rather, it is an open-handed gesture connoting vulnerability and receptivity. The self that caresses another person responds to the other without the security and horror of solitude. The self that caresses “constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks” and, denying reciprocity, is the “anticipation of this pure future [avenir], without content” that is the open relation with the other.<sup>53</sup> In the final closing and opening of Claudia’s hand, spectators see her indecision at the brink. Then, as she opens her hand and touches Sandro, she turns toward him. Claudia does not take Sandro’s hand. They do not hold each other’s hand. Rather, as she reaches out toward him, she exposes herself without knowing what will come of this caress.

As Susan Handelman points out, Levinas is different from other philosophers of alterity, in that his critique of metaphysics and ontology continues to carry with it “an-other reason.” What he wishes to interrupt is not reason but a certain bias within reason, a bias of placing the self before the other and denying the very difference at the heart of reason. In other words, according to Handelman, Levinas opens “reason to the command of the Other.” Reason opens in the face of alterity. “Already of itself ethics is an ‘optics.’”<sup>54</sup> It is not an either / or here. Ethics is already seeing. It is a movement toward the better; it brings to light the good that is not yet, l'avenir. Seeing is not the opposite of the Seen. Seeing comes from within the Seen, yet calls

---

Levinas On the Divinity of Love,” Trans. Margaret Whitford, Re-Reading Levinas, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991) 109-118.

<sup>53</sup> Levinas, Time 89.

<sup>54</sup> Levinas, Totality 29, qtd. in Handelman 182.

the Seen into question. Seeing does not propose a new Seen to replace the old Seen. Rather, Seeing makes responding possible by Seeing between the Seen and the not Seen.

What comes, of course, is Claudia and Sandro's return to the world and the interruption of the caress—the interruption of the interruption. This is the very instant of the ethical that is always only instantaneous and always immediately reconsumed by the world, by ontology and epistemology. Opening to the other person is better than being for oneself, but it is only temporary, always only temporary. To fall into correspondence would be to fall out of responding. To presume any response to be adequate would be to reduce the other to the same again, not respond to the other. Therefore, responding is always reabsorbed. Every new instant calls for a new response. The other changes, calls for a new response at every instant. Only a new response, at every instant, from just behind the time of the other interrupts anonymous existence again. Time does not cease. Existence does not cease. The self responds to another who is constantly pulled back into the world. The self is constantly pulled back into the world behind the other. In the film, the barriers that fill the screen at the end remind us of the temporary nature and immediate reabsorption of Claudia's response. Although Claudia reaches out to caress Sandro, this gesture cannot overcome being. This gesture can only interrupt being. As Claudia opens toward Sandro at the end, she is also confronted by a railing, a brick wall from the top to the bottom of the screen on the right and Mount Etna in the distance on the left. At the same moment as her caress responds to the other person, the world around her returns her to the crisis. There is no settled

escape, only a continual l'avenir that calls for a new response, that calls us to respond with horror or hope. With horror comes ontology and interpretation. With hope comes ethics and response.

The jeopardy of the final shot of the film magnifies the challenge of responding because the final image opens toward spectators and calls them to respond to the caress and its reabsorbtion. At the end, L'avventura denies spectators direct access to Claudia and Sandro. The back of the bench partially obstructing our view and the fact that we do not see Claudia and Sandro's faces cautions against too quickly responding and thinking our response adequate. Just as the film reinforces the problems of authenticity through the traces of Anna, it also reinforces the false community of safe answers by refusing to let us see for sure at the end.

### **A Return to Anna?**

This chapter reposes Anna at the center of L'avventura. Seeing the film, though, brings to light the violence of my own interpretation. Just as the end of the film refuses to give spectators a final, secure view of things, this chapter refuses to rest secure in its interpretation of the film. Responding to L'avventura, and to Anna, cannot come to a close. In the moment of responding to Anna, I have also interpreted her, spoken for her, returned her to the situation of anonymous existence. This is the effect of remaining settled in one's accounting of the film. Arguing that Claudia fills in the space Anna vacates denies Anna's unique existence and returns her to the same of anonymous existence. Just as much, though, recentering Anna denies Anna's unique existence and returns her to the same of anonymous existence.

Both return to interpretation in the end. Anna haunts this film as the absent center of the story. She is and is not the center of this film.

This is the lesson of the ethical and the avenir of the opening toward the other person, that it is better than the ontological or epistemological. Between the Seen of Anna's nothingness and the Seen of Anna's centeredness, the ethical evokes Seeing Anna's absence, between nothingness (a lack to be filled) and centeredness (a filled lack). Claudia's caress opens toward the other but is consumed by the walls this new relation faces. The absence of Anna demands spectators respond to her without totalizing her, yet this demarcation of the very nature of this demand returns her to the same. This is what Levinas will eventually term the difficult freedom of ethics, being called to respond without ever being certain of the appropriateness of your response. This, too, is where I think L'avventura takes us in the end—not to a final freedom as seen in L'eclisse or even a complex ambiguity as in Blow-Up. Rather, I would argue that the arc of Anna leads to the non-totalizing scenes in Zabriskie Point and The Passenger, not just stopping at L'eclisse or Blow-Up, precisely because the later scenes in Zabriskie and The Passenger bring uncertainty to the fore and yet undercut that uncertainty at the same time. Even if we are certain we do not understand the final chapters of the “trilogy,” Antonioni’s later films make that uncertainty even more uncertain. In L'avventura any statement about Anna after she disappears is a speculation about Anna. In the later films we are not even certain if we are uncertain when we respond to the exploding house at the end of Zabriskie, and we cannot respond to the David Locke / spy character at the end of The Passenger because we are never sure if he even existed in the film in the first place.

Where we are left in these films is between decisions, a between which challenges us to respond to the avenir without ontological or epistemological touchstones.

If “to be or not to be” is the unethical question par excellance for Levinas, then, Antonioni’s reworking of the existentialist situation, “to see or not to see” must also fall short. It must also fall short unless “to see or not to see” connotes a different kind of seeing, one reconstituted to Seeing as responding to the Seen and the not Seen. It would be better, ethical, to ask how one can “see and not see,” where not seeing interrupts the dominance of the seen at each step along the way in the cinema. In fact, is it not the oscillation between seeing and not seeing that is Seeing? Here, responding to cinema takes place in the flicker between the dark and light rhythm of the Maltese cross in the projector. To see and not to see is Seeing, where Seeing interrupts the Seen at every step along the way to deny the Seen its dominant position in an interpretation. We guess but must never know what happens to Anna. This is one aspect of the cinema of Pedro Almodóvar, at least as that cinema responds to the difficult relation between the pornographic and the non-pornographic cinema discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Three:

On the Verge of the Pornographic<sup>1</sup>

Male and female created He them

—Genesis 1:27

Very schematically: an opposition of metaphysical concepts . . . is never the face-to-face of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination.

Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system.

—Jacques Derrida

Hard-core pornography demands the certain belief of its spectators more than any other cinematic genre. As Linda Williams writes in Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”, “the genre of pornography...works hard to convince us of its realism.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, “the very conventions of pornography work to enforce a

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter, with a different focus, appeared as “Pedro Almodóvar On the Verge of a Pornographic Space,” Cineaction 47 (1998): 36-44.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Williams, Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible” (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999 (1989)) 185.

realism similar to that of documentary film.”<sup>3</sup> Pornography’s constitution is tied to showing what cannot be shown—the uncontrolled reaction of sexual pleasure—what Williams terms the “frenzy of the visible,” and to confirming spectators’ certainty in what it shows. In order to refute its own uncertainty and instability, hard-core pornography demands the absolute disavowal of spectatorial skepticism by binding itself to a supposed mimetic display. Pornography shows us real, live sex (or, at least, real, filmed sex). Like pornography, Western philosophy also demands the certain belief of its thinkers. As Emmanuel Levinas asserts in Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, “A philosopher seeks, and expresses, truth.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, “for the philosophical tradition of the West, all spirituality lies in consciousness, thematic exposition of being, knowing.”<sup>5</sup> Philosophy’s constitution is tied to showing the truth behind being—the essence of what is—what Levinas terms the “totality” which reduces difference to sameness, and to confirming thinkers’ certainty in what it knows. In order to refute its own uncertainty and instability, logocentric philosophy also demands the absolute disavowal of skepticism by binding itself to the certainty of the epistemological drive. Such philosophy shows us the real, live truth (or, at least, the real, written truth). Both pornography and philosophy must refute skepticism because it challenges the constitutions of their truth claims. Both

---

<sup>3</sup> Williams 203. In addition to linking pornography’s constitution and display to that of documentary film, Williams also describes the connections between pornography and two other cinematic genres. She links the sexual numbers and narrative structure of early feature-length pornography to the song and dance numbers of modern era musicals and compares the fluidity of spectatorial identification in horror films to that of contemporary sadie-max pornography.

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991) 23.

<sup>5</sup> Levinas 99.

pornography and philosophy work against the radical doubt of skepticism. Therefore, the pornographic and the philosophic are bound to one another in this opposition to skepticism. However, this relationship only begins to describe the full import of the pornographic.

This link between the pornographic and the philosophic, by their mutual denial of skepticism, also allows for reviewing the relation of the pornographic to the non-pornographic. Despite an accepted hierarchy, drawn out in public debate in favor of the non-pornographic, it is the relation between the two genres that has dominated definitions of each. The interdependence of these genres is made explicit by a survey of Hollywood production code battles, studies pointing to the negative social effects of pornography, and “moral” documents which invoke the pornographic against itself—such as the now infamous Meese report (described by some as sufficiently pornographic to be a paperback bestseller).<sup>6</sup> While increasing the amount of pornography in the public sphere by openly discussing the content of

<sup>6</sup> The Production Code Administration (the Hays Office) was the first Hollywood regulatory code. Established in 1922, the Hays office was the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America’s attempt at self-censorship in the hopes of averting outside intervention. The revised Production Code (overseen by Martin Quigley and Joseph Breen from 17 February 1930) led to further restrictions on sex and sexual innuendo, but not violence, in motion pictures. In 1968 Hollywood dismantled the Production Code Administration in favor of the MPPDA ratings system—a variation of which is in current use.

A recent study of the negative effects of pornography, Pornography: The Production and Consumption of Inequality by Gail Dines, Robert Jensen, and Ann Russo (New York: Routledge, 1998), directly confronts studies such as Williams’s which argue that the contemporary mainstreaming of pornography may have positive effects on how men and women view sexuality. Against Williams and others, Pornography asserts that pornographic films are invading the suburbs and bringing with them more social inequality by exacerbating the relationship between pornography and sexual violence and abuse. Pornography does not supply a close reading of the content or context of any pornographic print or non-print text to support these claims.

The Meese Report, published in 1986, which stated bluntly that “pornography is degrading to women” supplied volumes of explicit data without considering the full context for a single image or depiction it included.

“obscene” films, these battles, studies, and documents also demonstrate the impossibility of separating the two genres of the pornographic from the non-pornographic. These studies quote the pornographic to show how close the non-pornographic has come to its other and how this infection has degraded the non-pornographic. Ironically, though, these presentations repeatedly demonstrate the very quotableness of the pornographic, and, thus, its link to the non-pornographic, while also reinscribing the non-pornographic’s higher position by a displacement of what it is not.

The cinematic non-pornographic is more acceptable in the public sphere as long as it either denies the pornographic out right or is obvious in presenting a moral tale that reveals sexual deviancy and that deviancy’s solely negative consequences. Non-pornographic films on the verge of the pornographic punish their sexually “liberated” characters (especially women) for their liberation in order to justify their sexual displays after the fact. Such non-pornographic cinema as “road to ruin” films and “sex hygiene” movies from the 1930s are two examples of cinemas which cling to the verge by, in the end, showing the disastrous effects of unbridled sexuality. Red Lights (1930?) displays mad youth trapped by the pitfalls of sin. Fools of Desire (1930? (1919?)) tells the tale of secret passions leading to the sickness and shame of venereal disease. High School Girl (1935) depicts the taboo subject of teen pregnancy outside of marriage. Obsession films are the current inheritors of this display, with such films as Fatal Attraction (1987) and Basic Instinct (1992) presenting two of the most popular examples. In such cases, by showing and then

warning against deviant displays, the non-pornographic quotes the pornographic while disavowing it.

The non-pornographic needs the pornographic in order to gain its own legitimacy by always being able to “show” that it is not the pornographic. In fact, it has even been suggested that if the pornographic appears more explicit and more violent than previously (a debatable consideration), it is in direct response to the encroachment of various production codes and the production of the non-pornographic.<sup>7</sup> As the non-pornographic incorporates more of the pornographic, the distance must be kept. Thus, the pornographic must display something more deviant from the non-pornographic as the non-pornographic encroaches. As well, to meet certain censorship codes, the pornographic must remain obvious. To do so, it must incorporate, at times, the sexist and abusive elements it is charged with exploiting. So that it must never be accused of trying to “pass” for the non-pornographic, the pornographic must make its display (and advertisement) intentionally and explicitly indecent. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the pornographic is pushed by the non-pornographic and the production codes toward its “violent” and “degrading” depictions. In the end, the pornographic and the non-pornographic remain disrupted and disruptable due to their very dependence upon one another. Neither concept exists without the other. They are interdependent, and one always has to be defined in terms of the other.

---

<sup>7</sup> Eddie Muller and Daniel Faris, Grindhouse: The Forbidden World of “Adults Only” Cinema (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1996) 14.

In this way, the relation between the non-pornographic and the pornographic mirrors the relation between philosophy (as the quest for truth) and skepticism (as the disavowal of the possibility that quest). In the end, the pornographic is not so closely linked to philosophy and knowing, but to skepticism and the disruption of certainty. The pornographic refutes the truth claims of the non-pornographic as the skeptical refutes the truth claims of the philosophic. This relation shows how the non-pornographic, despite its position of social authority, is contained as the negative opposite of the pornographic. The non-pornographic lacks a name of its own. At the most complex, the pornographic is the absence of the non-pornographic, and the non-pornographic is the absence of the pornographic. At the bare minimum, the name of the non-pornographic is absent, and this absence highlights the non-pornographic's dependence upon the pornographic. This interdependence opens the space for pornography as counter cinema.

We are only on the verge of describing the full import of the pornographic, though. For, as interdependent as the pornographic and non-pornographic are, they are never face-to-face. The pornographic and non-pornographic are never, as Derrida writes, two oppositional concepts facing one another—never in an ethical relation of response but, rather, always, as Levinas writes, in the rhythm of the return to the same in the guise of truth. The pornographic and the non-pornographic are always on the verge of returning to their “proper” places in the hierarchy, where the pornographic is assimilated under the non-pornographic. While the uncertain interdependence between them remains open, though, the cinematic remains open to Seeing, to questions of the ethical within skepticism. The non-pornographic’s

authority comes from its separation from the pornographic. However, this separation is always fluid and uncertain because both sides gain something from this relationship. And this uncertainty opens the very space for an ethical relation between the pornographic and the non-pornographic that refuses to return them to their proper hierarchy in the guise of the truth. This uncertainty refuses assimilating the pornographic under the totality of the non-pornographic.

The pornographic tropes the titles of the non-pornographic in films such as Field of Wet Dreams, Planet of the Babes, or Beach Blanket Bango for many reasons, including name (mis)recognition and comedic distraction. Hardly is this ever a one-way street, though, as films such as Peeping Tom (1960), The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946 and 1981), 9 1/2 Weeks (1986), Bound (1996), Exotica (1994), and Secretary (2002) trope the explicit display (or the promise of it) and the narrative structure of the pornographic. Through their own exploitation / exploration of the pornographic, the non-pornographic gains publicity, notoriety, and auteur status for their composers. Exhibiting and hiding the tropes of sado-masochism, pornography, and voyeurism has always been a part of the non-pornographic / pornographic relation. Put another way, the interdependence of these two has always found itself marked by what Marcia Pally calls “the pornographic process” of “illicit viewing.”<sup>8</sup> In this study, though, we can begin Seeing this pornographic process of illicit viewing as an ethical, non-totalizing response to the totalizing force of the non-pornographic. Seeing is this illicit viewing.

---

<sup>8</sup> “I Witness, Eye Confess,” Film Comment, March-April 1985.

As Derrida warns, that there are “two” genres legitimates (or is used to legitimate) the existence of two hierachalized genres. However, the instant of uncertainty in the pornographic calls the divide between the pornographic and non-pornographic into question. The skepticism in questions such as “How can they do that?” or “That can’t possibly work,” and the confrontation “That’s gotta be painful” in the light of performed pleasure tropes opens the certainty of the pornographic and the certainty of the divide between the two genres into question. The pornographic demands the certain belief of its spectators, but its tropes of pleasure and surplus deny that certainty. The pornographic demands the absolute disavowal of spectatorial skepticism, yet its constitution makes that disavowal impossible.

For example, Rocco’s Reverse Gang Bang confronts spectators with the improbability (if not physiological impossibility) of numbers as one man copulates to climax with ten women partners in one gang bang, as both male leads do in this film.<sup>9</sup> Amateur performances over twenty or thirty minutes appear unbelievable. Subgenres focused on gigantic breasts and penises always generate discomfort. The banal pleasure of perversity becomes overwhelming as oral, anal, fetish, and bizarre sex become the most commonplace and expected pleasure on the screen in films such as Fetish: 2001. The very constitution of the display of sex in these films produces uncertainty because of the fact that it is “right there in front of viewers.” The

---

<sup>9</sup> Most pornographic actors are paid per “money shot,” at a rate of \$500-\$1000 each for 1-2 shots per film each day.

impossible confronts spectators because it is happening at every moment along the way.<sup>10</sup>

The pornographic opens to spectatorial skepticism the moment it confronts sexual or physical limits (real or imagined) within its supposed mimesis.<sup>11</sup> Because it depends so totally on denying uncertainty, the slightest gap in its mimesis opens wide. The displayed mimesis of the pornographic recalls the problem of filmic display espoused by Pepi in Pedro Almodóvar's first feature, Pepi, Luci, Bom, y otras chicas del montón (Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap<sup>12</sup>, 1980): "In addition to being yourselves, you'll have to act yourselves. Reality always looks artificial." The impossible is put on display at every moment in pornography. At least it is in a certain "modern porn" dated from the publication of three books in the 1650s or since the beginnings of modern cinematic pornography since the invention of cinema in the late nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> This study takes up from the different but

<sup>10</sup> This uncertainty regarding fantastic and improbable (if not impossible) sexual displays and performances increases with the recognition that they are, indeed, displays and performances. Hard-core pornographic movies are movies, despite their objections otherwise. They are edited and manipulated representations, complete with personnel and technologies to heighten their realism. "Stunt dicks" are actors who stand in when primary performers cannot maintain their erections or ejaculate on cue. Of course, only the erect or ejaculation penis is edited into the scene. Fluffers are male or female crewmembers who help actors maintain erections between takes. Camera angle, makeup, and strategic shaving is employed to highlight and exaggerate penis or breast size. Artificial lubricants, oils, and ejaculate (often a mixture of egg whites and dish soap) are commonly put to use on sets, especially in close-ups. Of course, post-synchronized sound (and parodies of it) has been on the mainstays of pornographic (and non-pornographic) production from its first feature-length ventures.

<sup>11</sup> This is related as well to our uncertainty of fantastic choreographic and performance scenes in musicals or extraordinary physical accomplishments in sporting events. The fact that some studies, such as Hard Core, have linked pornographic and musical narrative structures is in no way gratuitous since in so many ways both genres rely on the fantastic in their narrative compositions.

<sup>12</sup> Sometimes translated as Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom.

<sup>13</sup> In A History of X: 100 Years of Sex in Films (Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 1999), Luke Ford summarizes the sociologist Berl Kutchinsky's remarks that little has changed since the first modern

related writings of Linda Williams and Luke Ford and the filmmaking of Annie Sprinkle (especially her 1999 Herstory of Porn: Reel to Reel). It examines what this pornography does, not to define it as a separate genre, but to show how its production has always functioned alongside its other. It does so to show how they both have been defined in opposition, particularly an opposition in regard to certainty and uncertainty.

To ask, as Derrida does in Memoirs of the Blind “Do you believe this [vous croyez]?”<sup>14</sup> is to set the opposition tumbling and to open spectators to Seeing, to the non-assimilative ethics the opposition works to film over. Once the question is asked, the spectre of uncertainty is let back out of the box to show up the uncertainty

pornography. According to Ford, “themes of lesbianism, sodomy, seduction, multiple copulation, flagellation, and sadism dominate” (12). As well, the earliest pornographic films from the turn of the twentieth century display sex acts arranged via narrative tropes highly recognizable today. There is little difference outside of the fact that, as with non-pornographic films, the length of features and the use of sound has increased as technology has allowed. Despite calls for separating pornography into distinct taxonomic periods, thorough historical surveys reveal that, other than in length of film, earliest pornographic films differ little from contemporary ones in what they display and how their narratives are arranged.

For one such call for separating periods of pornographic production see, for example, Eric Schaefer, “Gauging a Revolution: 16mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature,” Cinema Journal 41.3 (2002) 3-26. Schaefer carefully describes the feature films of the late 1960s through the early 1970s, and his premise that the rise of 16mm film technology led to changes in the production of pornographic feature films by reducing the costs of such productions. However, Schaefer’s assertion, like that of other critics, that earlier film was either less explicit in its display or developed in its narrative (always flimsy but present) does not correspond to the sexually explicit films from the early 1900s. Like Schaefer, Williams also draws out distinct differences between periods of pornographic production: photo series and primitive cinema establishing early display codes and images of female nudity, stag films focusing on “the meat shot” of female penetration, feature-length pornography of the 1970s-1980s concentrating on “the money shot” of male ejaculation, and the more recent “interactive” pornography of CD-ROM and the internet. Williams, too, summarizes the genealogy of pornography in a way that brackets more connections between early and later films than it allows. Yet, it does provide a substantial study of the “use” of pornography and where sexually explicit film has been tied to the sex industry and where it has not. While citing the use of stag films to excite potential customers at brothels, Williams also notes how feature-length films have much less relation to the sex industry because they are constructed more for mixed public consumption or home use. Although there have been different historical movements within pornographic cinema, as there have been in non-pornographic cinema, taxonomic differences are not as clear and definite as some have declared.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993) 1.

of the divide between pornographic and non-pornographic. Here, in a reading of several “between films” directed by Pedro Almodóvar the ghosts are let back into the forefront, at least for an instant, on the verge of the import of the pornographic.

### **Forewarn**

The dry thesis of this essay is that Pedro Almodóvar’s cinema refuses to play by the rules. Rather, it enacts a Derridean double writing, a double filming, by its repetition of pornographic tropes in non-pornographic films (if we continue to allow these uncertain categories founded on instability to stand separate for the moment).<sup>15</sup> In this process of context switching or border crossing, Almodóvar’s cinema challenges the role of the tropes in the first context as well as the second. By this double gesture of refilming and erasing Almodóvar’s cinema remains on the verge of the pornographic and the verge of the non-pornographic. Thus, by inhabiting this space between the pornographic and its other, the non-pornographic, Almodóvar’s cinema questions the opposition of the concepts of the pornographic and the non-pornographic and opens the space of uncertainty between the two. What is at stake here is that this blurring between the pornographic and non-pornographic incites spectators to a form of skepticism rather than identification. How are we to believe? In what are we to believe? At least, it evokes a skepticism otherwise than an identification that still takes place but is not allowed to remain fixed in place. This is

---

<sup>15</sup> This is a transplanting, not unlike the organ donor issues his later films draw up. See, for example, *La flor de mi secreto* (The Flower of My Secret, 1995) and *Todo sobre mi madre* (All About My Mother, 1999). Although much less concerned with direct references to the pornographic, both films deal conspicuously with mistranslation, transplantability, partial sexual reassignment, and issues of authenticity. As one character, La Agrado, puts it in *Todo*, “It costs a lot to be authentic,” mocking any claim to natural authenticity.

a spectatorship that responds to cinema in terms of doubt as much as in terms of certainty. This is ethical spectatorship of response other than identification and epistemological grasping which would return the other to the same under the guise of truth. Otherwise than its representational mimesis, cinema functions as well in terms of its failure to represent convincingly. This failure is the opening of an ethics of the cinematic.

Doubt and certainty dance a non-dialectical jig here that I have termed the relation between Seeing and the Seen. Otherwise than the Seen of the fixed epistemological search for an answer that returns difference to the boundaries of the original question, Seeing puts the original question under investigation through a skeptical response evoked by the gaps in the cinema. The Seen evokes Seeing through the gaps as Seeing questions the assimilative intent of the questions of the Seen. They are interdependent, as Seeing arises out of the gaps in the Seen, and is assimilated again by the Seen at every instant. Seeing interrupts the Seen, if only for an instant, and then recedes into the background as epistemological drive of the Seen returns. “Will they save the planet?” is answered epistemologically by the end of the film in terms of the outcome in regard to the planet. The skepticism of Seeing denies the questions from the start, only to then be denied itself by the visual and aural display presented before it. Seeing is opening to believing but never arrives there because Seeing always already doubts what it sees. Thus, believing is suspending Seeing.

Films such as Matador (1985-86), Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios (Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, 1987), ¡Atame! (Tie Me Up! Tie

*Me Down!*, 1989), and *Kika* (1993) reproduce specific, highly recognizable (even stereotypical) tropes from feature-length mainstream heterosexual pornographic cinema precisely to demonstrate the very cinematicality of these tropes.<sup>16</sup> These films display the “disembodied” female voice in sex scenes, the closure of “pornotopic” space, the separation of narrative and numbers, fetishization, and the “money shot” to emphasize the very fact that they are visual and aural cinematic communication not unlike the iterable “written communication” Derrida describes in his essay “Signature Event Context.” Their very portability and transference emphasizes not their essentiality but their cinematicality.

In reproducing and demonstrating the cinematicality of these representative elements, Almodóvar’s films disallow any easy, monocular reading in terms of an epistemological investigation of the real or their mimetic competency.<sup>17</sup> Mimetic

<sup>16</sup> These elements are in no way defining instances of the essence of the pornographic but accepted and in some ways exaggerated instances from an imagined pornography—especially that tied to the “Golden Age” of pornography from the 1970s through the early 1980s. These are common links between films marked as pornographic, which continue to hold sway in discussions concerning what pornography was and is. However, these lists are always problematic because of they assume a causal relationship which does not apply. See, for example, even sympathetic lists from Ford, Williams, Eithne Johnson, “Excess and Ecstasy: Constructing Female Pleasure in Porn Movies,” *Velvet Light Trap* 1993: 30-49, and photographic survey *Women by Women: Erotic Photography* edited by Peter Delius and Jacek Slaski with an introduction by Sophie Hack and Stephanie Kuhnen (New York: Prestel, 2003).

The history of these elements is made especially complicated by the fact that the most recognizable ones are those which have been most delineated and attacked by different censors of pornography. In fact, it is not at all certain that these elements were ever dominant or primary before censors began delineating them. Some books on pornography describe these now key tropes as necessary to the production of pornography, but most of these analyses come late to the conversation. In fact, Walter Kendrick, in *The Secret Museum: Pornography and Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987), suggests that pornography has no essential qualities. Pornography may never have relied on these particular constructions had censors not highlighted them in the first place. Indeed, it is possible to speculate that these tropes might have disappeared without so much attention. The question returns: what might pornography look and sound like had it never been censored?

<sup>17</sup> This reproduction is also related to the reproduction of body part transplants in his later films and the reproduction of the organ-donor training films that inhabit spaces in both *La flor* and *Todo*. That almost the exact same scene of preparing an organ donor training film occurs in both films is a further

theses, in terms of spectatorship founded in representation and epistemology, fail here because the question focuses on the cinematic function of the tropes of the pornographic. It is no longer a question of the veracity of the images presented but of the cinematicality of the tropes involved in producing cinema that demands while denying skepticism. This study responds to textuality and cinematicality and to acts of writing and filming rather than representations and characterizations. In so doing, this study pushes the critical boundaries in another direction as well by emphasizing the relation between cinematic genre and the epistemological and the cinematic and the ethical.

For Derrida, iterability, with its possible etymological link to the Sanskrit itara (other), has always been one of the connections between repetition and alterity that is capable of producing an overturning of the metaphysics of presence and its hierarchical oppositions.<sup>18</sup> Iterability and repeatability play an essential role in this undoing of reified essences because they demonstrate inherent linkages rather than separations. One of the crucial elements of these films is that the reproductions are never simple citations that quote their other genre identically; rather, they are refilmings of those elements that further demonstrate the constructed filming of pornographic as well as non-pornographic elements. Thus, they enact a displacement of not only the hierarchy but also the system. Seeing cinema questions the system as well as the immediate hierarchy. In questioning the systematization which would cover it over in the Seen, this cinema calls us to encounter Seeing behind the Seen,

---

mark of Almodóvar's concern with cinematic iteration and its opening up of questions regarding cinematic display.

but only through the gaps which fail to fully erase Seeing within the realm of the Seen.

### **Pornography as Counter-Cinema**

Throughout the last twenty years, writing on pornography has effectively contested the dominant spectator theories of the 1970's and 80's. More recent theories argue against the binary opposition of the active male gaze working on the passive female object of photography and cinema. Such work as Laura Kipnis's<sup>18</sup> reading of Hustler magazine as politically subversive, Linda Williams's discussion of the links between the genres of pornography, musicals, and horror films, and Berkeley Kaite's<sup>20</sup> discussions of the link between pornographic tropes and difference, and the arguments against the monocular vision of pornographic tropes in the July, 1997 special issue of Wide Angle on pornography all challenge the earlier premises of the pornographic as simplistically exploitative in its representative and non-representative moments. In fact, as these arguments continue to demonstrate, the very rhetoric of representation is quite removed from the staged, complex cinema of pornography.

Kaite especially considers the problematic that female porn models are almost never shown completely undressed. Thus, they are never simply bare bodies objectified. By examining their costuming and placement as props in the space of

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, "Signature" 315.

<sup>19</sup> Laura Kipnis, Ecstasy Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender, and Aesthetics, foreword Paul Smith (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993). See especially her essay "(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading Hustler" (219-242). This essay was later retitled as "Disgust and Desire: Hustler Magazine" in her 1996 book Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America (New York: Grove) 122-160.

the visual field, Kaite argues from the position that “pornography is about textual, transgressive bodies” and that these bodies are “set into discourses of seduction and difference, although the boundaries of difference are continually transgressed.”<sup>21</sup> These bodies are always more like La Agrado’s body in *Todo sobre mi madre* (All About My Mother, dir. Pedro Almodóvar, 1999). La Agrado, a name that crosses simple linguistic gender guidelines with its masculine ending but feminine article, is so named for “her” ability to make everyone agreeable, by possessing both breasts and a penis.

Kaite’s rendering of the visual language of pornographic images in linguistic terms is a study of fetishization in contemporary pornographic photographs (with some film commentary) conspiring to seduce through a dressing up of models “in the fabric of culture’s desire”<sup>22</sup> and shows that desire working in complex and paradoxical ways. Kaite asserts that a close reading of the actual photographs—and their contents of photographic breasts, anality, the gaze, and the shoe and jewelry—(in series or individually) shows how “the pornographic body confounds the boundaries of sexual difference.”<sup>23</sup> In a way, what is represented back to the supposedly masculine viewer of heteroerotic photographs of women is the construction of those photographic bodies into markers of masculine desire. Masculine desire, thus, is represented back to masculine desire under the garb of feminine desire. The pornographic body displays the singularity of phallic desire

<sup>20</sup> Berkeley Kaite, *Pornography and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Kaite 33.

<sup>22</sup> Kaite 33.

rather than a differently associated duality or multiplicity. Hence, in terms borrowed from Luce Irigaray, it recreates the sex which is one by framing and editing the sex which is not one.

This argument focuses on the construction of the “pornographic body” as something that is not real and does not give immediate visual access to the real. Rather, Kaite’s analysis shows, the pornographic body is most often “an ambisexual masquerade”<sup>24</sup> in which feminine and masculine desire are exchanged precisely in the manufacture of the photographic pornographic body. The photographed female model is visually the full revelation of the feminine at first glance. However, its seemingly full revelation also possesses qualities that undo that first glance. It transgresses femininity. Pornographic photography links the unity of the single, erect breast, stiletto heel, or emitting anus to the unity of the penis. It assigns the power of the gaze to the female or feminized model who looks back and “wants it” from the supposed masculine spectator. Thus argues Kaite, the pornographic body “flirts with a dissolve around the ‘sexual fix’; it teases the critical edge of the great gender divide. . . . A simulated ambisexuality threatens the anatomy of binary structures which proportion gender identity on one side or the other.”<sup>25</sup> This simulated moment simulates the movement between the image and the referent to reveal the “referent has gone missing.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed Kaite’s study directly challenges the assertions of simplistic, immediate, fixed gender identities. It also directly challenges any such

<sup>23</sup> Kaite 87.

<sup>24</sup> Kaite 43.

<sup>25</sup> Kaite 43.

representations in pornographic film and their attempts to refer in a unitary, static manner. Finally, Kaite's study also offers a reading of the inscription of pornographic bodies that proposes pornography as a textual challenge to oversimplification of any codification of gender and sexuality in general.

These complicated relations are drawn out in Almodóvar's universe filled with transvestites, female impersonators, and characters that deny simple naming along gender lines. Leocadia (feminine) goes by the name Leo (masculine) through most of La flor and writes under the pseudonym Amanda Gris. That name, Amanda Gris, is then taken over by Angel, editor of the Culture section of El País when Leo is no longer able to write the Gris romance novels. In Tacones lejanos (High Heels, 1991) Femme Lethal, the female impersonator who claims to be the "real" Becky on posters refuses to state whether "he" is male or female when questioned. Judge Domínguez later reveals that he has played Femme Lethal and Hugo in order to play his own informants in cases he has handled.

Thus, mimesis and verisimilitude are less important, and statements such as "the feminist critique [of pornography] focuses on the role of pornography in a system of sexual subordination and the oppression of women" miss the point.<sup>27</sup> Arguments founded in representation of an exploited woman's body cannot easily locate what exactly is being represented since Kaite argues that it is the very rhetoric of the pornographic on the screen, rather than bodies, that correspond to the extra-filmic universe. In other words, the theories of pornography grounded in

---

<sup>26</sup> Kaite 44.

<sup>27</sup> Dines, Jensen, and Russo 5.

explanations of women objectified and subordinated assume too much when they assume these are women on the screen. What is represented is the pornographic body in all its photographicity or cinematicality, all its challenge to epistemological measures of mimesis. Likewise, in Kipnis's terms, it is the fantasy of the pornographic genre that is represented, and answering “where exactly is the subject (the fantasizer) within the fantasy?” is never easy but always erroneously simplistically assumed.<sup>28</sup> It is always an erroneous assumption because fantastic desire does not function this simplistically, argues Kipnis (and Kaite in different terms). Fantasy, desire, and representation may set scenes, but do not function along straightforward, direct, or literal paths.

The pornographic body challenges all levels of definition and delimitation of the body, whether medical, political, or cultural. It even could be seen as a reopening of debates around the very creation stories as told in the book of Genesis and the difficulty in translating, understanding, and responding to Western “foundational” definitions of male and female bodies. The pornographic, as Kaite describes it may very well be a response to Genesis 1:27:

God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God did he create it,  
male and female did he create them.<sup>29</sup>

In all these places, the body is more complicated due to the very repeatability of its presentation, its iterability, its cinematicality, than its mimetic presentation.

<sup>28</sup> Kipnis, Bound and Gagged 196.

In one way at least, this turn toward the pornographic body recalls Emmanuel Levinas's discussion of eros. Eros is a break from the Same, from the structure of knowledge, and is one instance of the relation to the other that breaks with the structure of the subject comprehending the other as an object of knowledge. Contrary to the tropes which suggest love is knowledge—a suppression of alterity—Levinas offers that the erotic “is a relationship with what forever slips away.”<sup>30</sup> It is neither direct nor straightforwardly encompassing. Loving my partner is not “having” him or her. The erotic, then, is the relation with the feminine, not only, because the feminine is other to a masculine being because of a different nature but also because alterity is in some way its nature. Alterity is not an attribute of the Other but is the relation in regard to the other.

According to Levinas, this ethical relation the feminine calls for is a relation with alterity and mystery founded on a withdrawing, not a grasping. It is founded on an absence in opposition to the movement of consciousness that does not invoke fixed, monocular images of fixed, monocular sexual bodies. Perhaps, here too, the referent has gone missing.

Perhaps, on the other hand, all these allusions to the ontological differences between the masculine and the feminine would appear less archaic if, instead of dividing humanity into two species (or into two genders), they would signify that the participation in the masculine and the feminine were the attribute of every human being. Could this

---

<sup>29</sup> Genesis and Exodus: A New English Rendition, trans., with commentary and notes by Everett Fox, (New York: Schocken, 1990) 14.

be the meaning of the enigmatic verse of Genesis 1.27: “male and female created He them”?<sup>31</sup>

Like Kaite’s thesis away from fixed boundaries around pornographic desire and pornographic bodies, Levinas’s point here is to break with the Seen image of the female as the other. Otherwise than the possession, power, and relation of knowledge of the Seen, Seeing enacts a movement between masculine and feminine like he describes here. The uncertainty of the fixed structure, the skepticism at what we are seeing is not a relation to knowledge, not an epistemological dead-end. Rather, this ambisexuality, like this attribute of every human being oscillating between the masculine and feminine, enacts the folding of the skeptical within the philosophical, reiterating, repositioning, reproducing through the cinematic, the ethical within the spectatorial.

Seeing is disbelieving in the Seen. The Seen disregards that uncertainty at every step along the way, overwhelming Seeing and returning it to the other side of the relation. Every moment of recognition, then, is also always a moment of skepticism. The cinematic reproduction that makes recognition possible marks the very uniqueness of each prior / succeeding cinematic instance. The recognition of the Seen depends upon a play of the same. The unique would not correspond; thus, it would be unrecognizable. Therefore, never wholly unique nor separate, or else unrecognizable, each cinematic instance opens to this very relation between Seeing and the Seen.

---

<sup>30</sup> Levinas, Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP) 67.

## A Pornographic Romantic Fairy-Tale

In speaking to the question of the pornographic in ¡Atame!, which some have argued is his most directly pornographic film, Almodóvar (who has written at least one adult audience book<sup>32</sup>) stated that, “Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! is almost a romantic fairy-tale, but many people attacked it because they took it for precisely the kind of sado-masochist movie it isn’t.”<sup>33</sup> Here Almodóvar speaks directly to the binary opposition between a romantic fairy-tale and a kind of sado-masochist movie, challenging viewers who place ¡Atame! easily into one category or the other. In fact, this film works precisely at that verge between the romantic and the pornographic—the divide so often evoked in definitions of one genre against the other. It is, very often, the lack of romance and surplus of sex that is cited as the primary characteristic of pornography while it is the lack of sex and surplus of romance that is seen as definitive of the romantic comedy.

¡Atame!, however, is a refilming of both genres, blurring the concepts of defining either category as it reproduces the pornographic within the romantic, and vice versa. In so doing, it opens the between, showing the divide between genres to be much more permeable than sometimes argued. What is held as steadfast is opened to doubt here as the spectator is asked to disbelieve in the Seen for the sake of Seeing. This is especially shown through the scenes involving Marina in the bathtub with the toy scuba diver, the pornographic film of Marina’s earlier career as a

<sup>31</sup> Levinas 68.

<sup>32</sup> Patty Diphusa y otros textos (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1991). Patty Diphusa and Other Writings, trans. Kirk Anderson (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992).

“porno actress” watched by Maximo Espejo, the director of the horror film within the film, and the sex scene between Ricky and Marina after Ricky returns from the failed drug deal. At a glance, ¡Atame! suggests it will follow the logic and epistemological structure—a structure founded in teaching and revealing the truth that cannot be shown—of the mainstream pornographic film in two ways.

First, from the early, shielded, scene between Ricky and his woman psychiatrist its narrative is established in terms of sex as exchange for other actions. Here, giving sex is a way of thanking and / or rewarding others which quotes a good number of pornographic films where goods or services, especially groceries and other deliveries, are bought and paid for with fellatio, cunnilingus, or some other sexual activity.

Like the larger topic of the pornographic body, this pornographic economy of exchange is not tied to simple active / passive roles in these scenes. Often the case is that the seller is paid off by allowing him or her to perform oral sex on the buyer, thus rewriting fulfillment away from any simplistic definition based on achieving sexual climax, away from epistemological discoveries of showing what must not be shown. An economics of ejaculate is not necessarily invoked. Giving oral sex is often tied to the pleasure of giving goods or services. For example, in “delivery boy” scenes, the groceries are often paid for by offering the boy a female roommate to perform cunnilingus on. And in the film Traci Takes Tokyo (1986), Traci Lords plays a consultant to the Japanese adult film industry who is paid for her expertise in producing sexually arousing pornography. Her payment for her active education of

---

<sup>33</sup> Frédéric Strauss, ed., Almodóvar on Almodóvar, trans. Yves Baignères (London: Faber and Faber,

the director and cast of the film is that the “virgin boy” is allowed to lose his virginity in a scene with her—a scene which in itself struggles to hold to simple demarcations of active / passive roles, who gives / receives sex, and who has / takes virginity. These separations become even more difficult to assign as Lords pushes the “virgin boy” out of the frame at the end of the number and finishes the scene playing with his ejaculate. This film and many others work along this refusal of even simple economies of exchange.

Second, ¡Atame! also appears to turn toward the pornographic structure of an initiation narrative, starting with the scene of Marina in the bathtub, with its full frontal nudity and implications that she is enjoying the scuba diver toy swimming against her pudendum and then vibrating between her breasts. If ¡Atame! were to follow this pornographic logic, it would move from this view of the lonely, frustrated woman masturbating alone because she is too inhibited to expose her self to another person, to her encounter with a surprise mentor who serves as her sexually “mature” initiator, to ever more complicated and taboo experiences with larger numbers of partners, to a final orgy event which would serve as her coming out party where she takes over as the initiator of some newly discovered ingénue. Thus, if it followed this pornographic narrative line, ¡Atame! would be a window on the world of Marina’s rise in sexual and psychic power as she overcomes her earlier inhibitions and eventually sees all the pleasure they had kept her from attaining.

This narrative strand is left off by the film, however, when Marina exits the bath, leaving the scuba diver toy to bang against the side of the tub. This marina

(shore, seacoast; marina) is well endowed with and knowledgeable of marina (seamanship, nautical art, marine, sea affairs). She is not simply a port of call but is also capable of taking the helm in sexual acts and in relationships, as we see later in the film. As well, this narrative has already been undercut by our being told previously, through the dialogue between the director of the film within the film, Maximo Espejo, and an interviewer, that Marina has been a drug addict and a porno actress. Despite Maximo's demand that neither of these facts be spoken of again by the interviewer, this revelation has undercut the premise that Marina is an uninitiated sexual ingénue—a requirement for the narrative logic of growing knowledge and the accumulation of partners described above. Furthermore, as Marina later states to Ricky, she is not alone and lonely, as he would have it. Despite what he claims to be the reality, she has two families (a biological one and a movie industry one) which chase after her throughout most of the film. The situation actually appears to be more that Marina is too surrounded, suffocated at times, by her admirers as well as her families (not necessarily two distinct categories, of course). Therefore, as certain pornographic premises are reproduced in the film they are also edited from it. The hints and set-ups are there on one hand but just as quickly removed by the other.

On a narrative level, then, ¡Atame! breaks with an epistemological structure while refilming the tropes underlying it. In this story, Marina appears on one side of a fixed opposition, only to break with that mold. She participates as a pornographic body, ambisexual in her portrayal and desire, as well as in the masculine and feminine. Thus, her play between enacts the play of Seeing and the Seen. Between certainty and uncertainty, between easy categorization and ambiguity, Marina's

character calls for an ethics through her disavowal of the fixity of the oppositions founding the structure.

Where the pornographic does come into ¡Atame! most pointedly and seemingly fixedly is in the mise-en-abyme scene where Maximo Espejo sits watching a segment from one of Marina's earlier porno films. Despite his wife's requests that he do something with her (his wife), Maximo sits in a room alone, entranced by the image of Marina having sex on the screen. Here, too, though, the pornographic is shown and not shown at the same time. Viewers of ¡Atame! do not see more than the face and upper torso of Marina on the small screen; however, spectators' full view is of the spectator within the film and his fixation on the visual image of the porno film. This maximo (great, chief) espejo (looking glass, mirror; a glass which shows forms reflected) in this scene inscribed with the aural track and partial image of a pornographic video reveals not only the iconography of the pornographic actress as pornographic body miming the tropes of sexual ecstasy while she fondles her own breasts but also an image of a pornographic spectator.

In Hard Core, Linda Williams argues that one of the difficulties of pornography has been how exactly to show pleasure and especially the pleasure of the female characters. One of the important elements here is inscribed in the aural track, according to Williams. It is the aural track and the disembodied female voice moaning and crying out during the sexual scenes which

may stand as the most prominent signifier of female pleasure in the absence of other, more visual assurances. Sounds of pleasure...seem almost to flout the realist function of anchoring body to image,

halfway becoming aural fetishes of the female pleasures we cannot see.”<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, it is arguable that this aural element signifies the pornographic in general more than any visual image of penetration, engulfment, or male or female ejaculation.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, as much as this scene in *¡Atame!* refuses full disclosure of the visual elements of the pornographic video Maximo watches, it fills the aural space with the pornographic “aural fetish of female pleasures we cannot see.”<sup>36</sup> The pornographic imposition of the moans from the video challenges here the speech of Maximo and his wife, who are not having sexual intercourse in the scene, for aural priority in a radical juxtaposition of the visual and the aural. Thus, the scene further challenges the monocular privilege of the fixed (obvious) visual in the film by setting this competition into play.

By placing the spectator and the porno video in the film while at the same time denying those pornographic tropes the domination of the scene, *¡Atame!* further challenges the conceptual divide between the pornographic and non-pornographic. At its most pornographically obvious, it is difficult to judge what to believe or where to pay attention. Here, *¡Atame!* is the most open to the movements of Seeing rather than the monocular stasis of the Seen

<sup>34</sup> Williams 122-3.

<sup>35</sup> For one instance of this privileged trope of pornography see the X-Files television show episode where the character Mulder is seen watching a video with a soundtrack filled with moans and cries. It is supposed that he is watching a pornographic video—a habit often alluded to for this character. Yet, when spectators see the image on the television screen, the video displays killer bees attacking screaming and moaning victims.

<sup>36</sup> Williams 123.

As well, the image of Marina in the video is made more complicated by Kaite's reading of the image of the female breast in pornographic photographs. Here, as Kaite's survey notes of other pornographic films, while Marina fondles her breasts only one breast is visible at a time. While Marina is lying on her back, the first breast with erect nipple is shown as the second is covered by her partially open blouse. Then, the first is covered by her hand as she rolls on her side, showing the second. These separated breasts in the diegetic space, argues Kaite, are a construction of the pornographic ambisexuality of the female model. The singular breast is "part of a spectacular articulation of the body which re-presents femininity in partially phallic terms."<sup>37</sup> The singular breast with its erect nipple is coded away from the femininity of breasts, a history of which Kaite discusses, and toward the phallic in an economy which transforms "natural flesh to fetish."<sup>38</sup> This transformation, then, is a partial phallic endowment of the breast, argues Kaite. This scene is not simply a revealing of the female body but is a pornographic refilming of the female breast into new terms—terms which, according to Kaite, question the very simplistic bifurcation of genders. From the earlier scuba diver toy to the single, erect nipple, then the phallic is picked up and discarded, only to be picked up again, as Marina continues to participate in this ambisexual movement of the pornographic body. Therefore, what the scene questions is the position of the spectator here. Kipnis's question regarding the undecidability of identification returns. Where exactly is the subject (the fantasizer) within the fantasy?

---

<sup>37</sup> Kaite 40.

Unable to move from his wheelchair and unable to reach Marina, due to her refusal of his advances as well as to her kidnapping by Ricky, Maximo is restrained to a space where he is only allowed access to Marina's image and voice. (His wife does not enter this space as she speaks to him from the doorway only.) Furthermore, since the image from the porno video questions the very gender role of sexual initiator Maximo strives to put himself into, it challenges Maximo's position as director of anything, let alone his sexuality. Confronted by the image of Marina's erect nipple and his own inabilities, Maximo's isolated space signifies what Maximo is not in comparison to Marina. It is in the "most pornographic" moment of the film, then, that the gender-power nexus is most problematic, most breaking with the Seen put under pressure by Seeing.

This looking glass, as well, is thrown up against the spectator of ¡Atame! and works to return the gaze on Marina's body in the tub, slightly distorted by the screen of the water, and the presumed pleasure of Marina's face as she laughs while taking the bath. As much as that earlier scene hints at the possibility of a pornographic narrative line, this scene reflects that presumption back at the spectator of ¡Atame!, placing, after the fact, the spectator in a space adjacent to Maximo. If the earlier scene sutures the spectator into the logic of the pornographic narrative, this later scene of Maximo watching unravels that first suture. The possible suture of the first scene functions through the pornographic trope of, first, the scuba diver toy against the pudendum and then between the breasts of Marina and then, second, the signifier of Marina's sexual pleasure in using the toy—her face with its growing smile and

---

<sup>38</sup> Kaite 40.

eventual laughter. The “guarantee” to the spectator is not only in the image of the sexual contact, but also in the codified image of the woman’s face and the sound of her voice.

This later video scene doubly questions the pornographic trope of the earlier one, however. On one level, by showing the spectator, Maximo, watching the porno video, by revealing that there is a spectator to that film and, thus, to the earlier scene by correlation, it reveals the cinematic reproducibility of the pornographic scene and its possible spectator positioning. By revealing the spectator later, it alludes to a spectator sooner. As well, the disjuncture of the soundtrack of the porno video, the disjuncture of the tonal quality of the Marina’s moans with the rest of the video’s soundtrack, effectively reveals the post-synchronous recording of the sound and the illusion of that particular sound as a signifier of pleasure. Thus, it introduces the problematic that if Marina’s pleasure in this scene is a pornographic trope, then her pleasure in the earlier one might be one also.<sup>39</sup> In this way, the earlier scene’s pornographic inscription of a textual body is put under erasure by the latter’s pornographic filming and unfilming of a cinematic body. Therefore, the filming of the second body draws out the filming of the first body while at the same time refilming the pornographic troping of the first body by reproducing it in the video. Marina’s body is both the pornographic body and its other, underwriting and erasing

---

<sup>39</sup> Post-synchronous sound and the play it allows are common tropes of Almodóvar’s films. As well, this joke is carried over to such non-pornographic films as The Favor, the Watch, and the Very Big Fish (1991), where two characters meet and fall in love while dubbing the sound for a pornographic film.

the structure of the pornographic tropes throughout the film, opening the film to a radical uncertainty of Seeing.

This filming and unfilming of the signifiers of cinematic pleasure also comes into play in the scene between Marina and Ricky after Ricky's failed drug deal (a scene which almost earned the film an X rating, and thus distribution problems, in the United States).<sup>40</sup> While being the main sex scene of the film, in terms of the romantic narrative of the two lovers eventually recognizing their emotions for one another, it is also a subversion of the codes or pornographic tropes, from within a sex scene. As has already been noted, Marina is not the uninitiated and is more than capable of taking control of the sex act as she is the one who says she will insert the penis into her vagina and eventually takes the "top" position. As well, the pain of her being penetrated does not guide the care that must be taken. Rather, it is the pain of Ricky, who has been beaten by the drug dealers, and his sore-covered body, which dictates the position and pace of their act. In further refilming cinematic signifiers of pleasure, the typical domination of the female voice on the soundtrack<sup>41</sup> is reversed as it is Marina who speaks most of the dialogue in subdued tones, while Ricky screams and moans out loud in pleasure and pain. And, against the realm of visual assurances of pleasure, both male and female, it is when she feels Ricky inside of her that Marina states she remembers him and recognizes him. As he has commented, his "cock" is the only thing his assailants left alone, yet his "cock," either penetrating-being engulfed or ejaculating, is not what is shown (neither in the

---

<sup>40</sup> Strauss 102.

opening shots nor in the shots of the mirrors over the bed) to signify pleasure.

Rather, pleasure is re-inscribed in the pleasure of tactile contact and expressed via the dialogue of recognition on the soundtrack. At each point along the list of pornographic signifiers of pleasure, then, this scene refilms the trope. The scene quotes (mirrors) the pornographic almost trope for trope but reworks each trope almost to the point of erasing the pornographic in this scene. As Almodóvar has said, many people took this film “for precisely the kind of sado-masochist movie it isn’t.” This statement does not deny the sado-masochist movie it is. It corrects those who saw it and believed it could be easily placed in a seemingly known category while it was all along rewriting the very conventions that work to define such categorization.

Do you believe this? Yes. No. The minute the question is raised, the structure opens toward an infinity at play between these two answers. Uncertainty is precisely what cannot be allowed. Or is it? Perhaps the very definition of alterity as the distance in time between these two answers, is the definition of the skeptical question. Perhaps the very question should be situated between the poles of the pornographic and non-pornographic as these genres participate in this infinite questioning. They are in need of one another’s difference, in need of the continued asking of the question. Perhaps it is on this very doubt that these genres are founded, and this is what Almodóvar teaches us. Perhaps this is what the cinematic teaches the ethical and the ethical teaches the cinematic. This is a foundational uncertainty, then, never permanent, but always at play. Not only the pornographic is uncertain, is

---

<sup>41</sup> Williams 123.

ambisexual and refuses the monocular. Rather, the cinematic founded in this regard (gaze / care) it demands of spectators, depends upon this unsettling questioning.

### **Breaking the Binding**

Along with these internal reflections, ¡Atame! also turns the looking glass to other Almodóvar films and other considerations of the linking of the pornographic and the non-pornographic. The porno video scene in ¡Atame! also returns to the opening sequence of Matador where Diego, a torrero who has been prematurely retired from bullfighting because he was gored, masturbates while watching slasher videos. In ¡Atame!, Maximo is the director of low-budget horror films similar to the ones Diego, the director of a bullfighting school, is watching. Here, these films highly concerned with mirror images intersect. Like almost all of Almodóvar's male characters, both men are wounded, Maximo by his stroke and Diego by being penetrated by a bull's horn, and both men are shown as the spectators of videos within the films, mirroring the spectatorship of the films. Like the porno video scene in ¡Atame!, this slasher video scene also challenges monocular cinematic gender alignment. Both video scenes open both films to further questions concerning spectatorship that Carolyn Clover asks in Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film and Paul Julian Smith does in “Pornography, Masculinity, Homosexuality: Almodóvar’s Matador and La ley del deseo.”

¡Atame! refilms Almodóvar’s immediately preceding Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios, challenging any monocular interpretation of Almodóvar’s work in general. If, in part, Mujeres displays the story of Pepa’s apartment as a woman’s

space of renewal and transformation once men are removed from it,<sup>42</sup> then ¡Atame! comments on the solitude and danger of such a space which can be easily invaded by a kidnapper—although the kidnapping also becomes complicated by Marina’s statements to her sister, Lola, that she has fallen in love with her kidnapper, Ricky. Being tied to a position is never an easy situation with Almodóvar. Unlike Pepa’s apartment, Marina’s is the space of her attack and confinement in a way that mirrors how Mujeres, by its very success, is the film which led to a binding of Almodóvar by interpretations which tried to resolve the dilemma of whether he was a “woman’s director” or a “misogynist.” By challenging the very elements of Mujeres’s seeming empathy for women’s lives in a Spain disbanding more barriers as it moves past its dictatorial history after Franco’s death, ¡Atame! works to return viewers to Mujeres for another interpretation, reopening that “first” film and the seeming opposition between the two.<sup>43</sup>

Of course, women on the verge of a nervous breakdown are always just that, women on the verge. As in the Spanish title, they are women “at the border.” They remain at the limit, never quite crossing out of the bounds of the social, cultural, and

<sup>42</sup> See Peter William Evans, Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown (Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios), BFI Modern Classics (London: British Film Institute, 1996). It might be more accurate even to refer to the Spain of Almodóvar’s cinema as “post-Warhol.” In the introduction to his adult audience book, Patty Diphusa, Almodóvar remarks that it was Warhol’s visit to Madrid in the early eighties that made the first cracks in repressive Spain’s armor. After hosting Warhol, Madrid, or at least Almodóvar’s segment of Madrid, could not go back.

<sup>43</sup> For Almodóvar, this period might be described as “post-Warhol,” rather than “post-Franco,” as he writes in the introduction to Patty Diphusa that the early 1980s were, for him, a period linked to Andy Warhol’s time in Madrid and Almodóvar’s life “in a permanent Warhol factory” (x). Almodóvar, who was often introduced as “the Spanish Warhol,” asserts that his own female characters, especially Patty, are cousins to the misled women in Warhol’s films and share much with these and other American creations: Divine, Holly Golightly, and Fran Lebowitz, for example. Interestingly, it is now possible

personal breakdowns surrounding them. As well, according to Peter William Evans, the men also inhabit this space “if not of nervous breakdown then at least of structural fatigue”<sup>44</sup> as they now (after Franco and the influence of Warhol and with the rise of feminism, socialism, and psychoanalysis in Spain) face a society unwilling to accept a continuation of unquestioned patriarchal hegemony. The point here is that in Mujeres, as in other Almodóvar films, the space of the challenges comes at the limit, at the outer margin. Its confrontations with codifications touch at the edges or boundaries of the system it works to displace in a never permanent overturning that would return to the logic of the system.

Pepa, the central woman of Mujeres, is a character abused by men in the film, and the film’s comical portrayal of that abuse would seem to leave the film open to attacks of misogyny. At the same time, however, it can be argued that the women in Mujeres are “presented as warm, attractive, feeling, sympathetic individuals, infinitely superior to the cold and calculating men who take advantage of them.”<sup>45</sup> The difficulty does not end with the narrative, though, as the cinematography and visual portrayal of Pepa also breaks with monocular closure. One scene, especially, highlights this play between Seeing and the Seen. While she is changing outfits, Pepa asks her admirer Carlos to avert his eyes. At first, the camera is tied to Carlos’s point of view as he looks at her before she undresses. However, as he turns away as she disrobes, the camera moves to a longer shot with no specified internal point of

---

to speak of a growing post-Almodóvar cinema arising in such films as Y tu mamá también (2001) and Lucía y el sexo (2001), which combine such misled and misleading female characters.

<sup>44</sup> Evans 36.

view of a semi-nude Pepa changing clothes. The gaze denied in the narrative becomes immediately the gaze enacted by the camera position. Spectators see what Carlos does not when the camera shows the spectator what, for propriety's sake, must not be shown. This is the oscillation between poles that Almodóvar's cinema plays at, opening toward the alterity between the pornographic and the non-pornographic.

### **A Farcical Pornographic Tale**

Four years after ¡Atame!, and following the production of Tacones lejanos, Kika marks a return to investigating the disruption pornography causes when placed beside the non-pornographic. Although Almodóvar's cinema is not considered hardcore pornography by most, it has learned a good deal from the pornographic and has integrated that difference to question non-pornographic cinema, most notably in the “money shot” in Kika.

The dual-pathed story of this film is quite traditional (and related to the romance narrative of ¡Atame!) with its separate protagonists finally meeting in the end. One story line follows the adventures of a tabloid television show host, Andrea, who travels around Madrid with a camera mounted on her head so that she can shoot any scenes which may be of use. The other traces the police search after an escaped male pornography star / rapist, Paul Bazzo. Both these story lines circulate around, Kika, a make-up artist who lives with Ramón, a lingerie photographer, and whose cleaning lady, Juana, is really Paul Bazzo's sister. The stories arcs collide when the television host arrives on the scene of the attempted police capture of the

---

<sup>45</sup> Gwynne Edwards, Indecent Exposures: Buñuel, Saura, Erice & Almodóvar (London: Marion

pornography star / rapist while he is attacking Kika. Two of the tropes Almodóvar refilms here are the text-spectator positioning of the subjective camera and the “pornotopic” space of the “money shot” in pornography.

Since he shows us portions of selected scenes through the head-mounted camera, Almodóvar makes literal the notion that camera placement and image is often located in imagined character position and hence viewer positioning. Here, Kika displays the supposed suturing that takes place in the spectator’s head. Like the video-viewing scenes in jAtame! and Matador, these mounted-camera scenes in Kika challenge any simple reading of the cinematic (spectator-film) relationship. By displaying shots taken through this camera and then displaying the woman with the camera mounted on her head, this film makes the machinations of the suture system plain while at the same time revealing within the film a portion of the physical apparatus and the symbolic link that has dominated classical mainstream cinema. According to traditional suture theory, shot one gets its meaning from shot two as shot two reveals who was looking in shot one. However, in addition to making this ideological suturing of the classical style literal, Kika also problematizes suturing by often reversing the order of the signification of the shots. By sometimes showing the woman with her camera first and then showing the shot through the camera, the film questions the temporal logic of the suture sequencing.

As with other examples, though, this play is always at the verge of the structure, always an oscillation that never works simply to replace that prior logic with a “new” opposition under the same logic. Rather than return to this same,

Almodóvar's cinema suspends the system, if only for an instant, in the way skepticism suspends philosophy and ethics suspends ontology. The Seen always returns while Seeing suspects its dominance and makes it suspect.

In addition to this play with traditional identification, there is also a play with the pornographic through Kika both reproducing and altering the pornographic within it. The sequence in which the police fail to apprehend the escaped pornography star / rapist<sup>46</sup> while the camerawoman arrives at the apartment building is telling. In one section of her book The Future Of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis (1989) Constance Penley discusses the visual iconography of pornography and especially "the closed world of the typical pornographic scene"<sup>47</sup> where all else is removed and where the space of the frame becomes tighter and tighter as the sex scene continues, usually ending in the close-up on the ejaculating penis or (and sometimes as well as) on the face of the moaning woman, signifying her pleasure in the "money shot."<sup>48</sup>

One example of this "pornotopic" closure of space, in another film on the verge of the pornographic, comes in the fellatio scene in Nagisa Oshima's Ai no korida (In the Realm of the Senses, 1976). Here Yoshizo (a.k.a. Kichizo) Ishida lies

<sup>46</sup> This split persona of the character recalls the entire double handedness of Almodóvar's cinema as well as the debate over his position as a "woman's filmmaker" or misogynist. It is precisely this treatment of the rape scene in the film that earned it an NC-17 and then an Open rating from the MPPDA, severely limiting its distributions and almost financially ruining the film.

<sup>47</sup> Constance Penley, The Future Of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989) 84. Walter Kendrick and Linda Williams also discuss this closure of pornographic space in some films as an image of sexual utopia in pornography or "pornotopia," where the problems of the world, which are problems of sex, can be resolved through better, uninterrupted sex (Williams 147).

on the couch smoking as his lover Sada Abe fellates him until he ejaculates. As a part of its attempt to push “obscenity” beyond itself, Korida follows the inscribed structure that as the pornographic narrative logic is followed toward the horizon of the signification of the ejaculating penis, space is further and further limited to a concentration upon the contact of organs or mouth and organs. All outside the world of the bodily contact is seemingly removed, as the close-up is followed until the frame is filled with the image of ejaculate flowing out of the mouth of the woman and back onto the penis, reproducing the pornographic logic. Like the opening scenes of ¡Atame!, one of the folds of Kika is its reproduction of this iconography until the very moment of the money shot itself, challenging the definition of the money shot as well as assumptions about the logic of pornographic space.

In the sequence of the money shot, the pornography star / rapist arrives at the apartment where his sister, Juana, is working as a housekeeper. Since he is desperate for food, money, and sex with a woman, Juana makes a deal for him to leave in the promise of sex, twice, later. Recalling differently Marina’s statement to Ricky in ¡Atame!, Juana demands, “tie me up,” and knock me out while you rob the place. Once he has restrained her in the kitchen and knocked her unconscious in this Spanish farce, though, he cannot resist the other woman, Kika, sleeping in the bedroom. Almodóvar’s focus on being bound and the possibilities as well as limitations that can come from bondage reappear here. As well, his filmmaking’s internal referencing and undoing is signaled again as Juana speaks the same words, “tie me up,” to her brother as Marina did to Ricky. In the “second” film, though,

---

<sup>48</sup> See Linda Williams’s discussion of the money shot as attempted signifier of female pleasure in

Juana's desire is to produce a scene for Paul and the police, so that Paul can escape, and she can maintain her position in society. In the first, Marina's request / demand to be bound by Ricky comes late in the film, after she claims to have fallen in love with him. She says she cannot control herself and asks to be tied down to insure that she will not leave while he is out of the apartment that has served as her cell. In this way, Marina asks to be held in her position precisely so that she can maintain her position.

The camera follows the pornography star / rapist into the smaller spaces of the apartment and into the bedroom where he fondles and then mounts Kika (asleep beneath a painting of a nude) while she remains asleep. Still a farce and a pornographic scene, the close-ups continue until Kika is awakened by the rapist on top of her. She resists, but he threatens her with silverware (recalling the pocket knife Angel "wields" in his attempted rape of Eva in *Matador*) and tells her that he is trying to beat his own record of coming four times without pulling out. The camera closes in on her face as she asks him please to hurry.

In order precisely to hurry him along, Kika begins to moan and reproduce the aural and visual tropes of arousal. Through the scene, then, her actions oscillate between directly resisting the rapist by hitting him and yelling at him and performing the pornographic arousal in order to end the ordeal. Kika oscillates between directly resisting the assault and turning her body into the pornographic body to produce in the rapist the codified, predicted result of the male ejaculation which would end the scene. The film's cinematic deconstruction of the pornographic, then, challenges the

role of the pornographic by refilming the pornographic scene, revealing its underlying construction of the signification of pleasure. The cinematic body can be copied precisely because it is filmed. Kika's performance reproduces the trope of the naturally always ready and able male pornography star, the illusion of the sexually potent rapist, the always aroused and desirous female sexual partner, and the seemingly transparent link of sexual activity and woman's pleasure in pornographic cinema.

The sequence also raises questions about this relationship between the filmic and the real as Kika challenges the rapist's deluded statements about his sexual ability and irresistibility. The rapist asks Kika if he is any good, explaining to her that he is always highly complimented on the sets of his pornographic films. However, Kika responds, "This is not a film . . .this is an authentic rape." Recalling the Belgian artist René Magritte's painting, L'usage de la parole I (1928-9), this statement, within the film dialogue, questions the logic of non-contradiction by being nonsensical and sensical simultaneously. For the spectator this is another filmic rape and not an authentic one, therefore, a filmed sex scene the same as in any pornographic film. However, for the speaker of the lines of dialogue, it is not a film but an authentic rape, and, thus, not the same as any pornographic film. Both on the level of the signification of pleasure and on that of differentiating the cinematic from the non-cinematic, Kika challenges any monocular judgments, calling for a response that is otherwise.

While cinematically reproducing the pornographic here (and questioning the separation of the pornographic from the non-pornographic), Kika also refuses its

tropes by expanding the space of the money shot. While the rape continues in the bedroom, the camera leaves the space, revealing the voyeur (the spectator within the film again, like Maximo) on the balcony across from Kika's and his telephone call to the police at the station. The film cuts to that station and an extended conversation concerning feeling time and killing time. The sex scene continues as Paul Bazzo is still raping Kika, but the camera is not closed in on Kika's face or any small space in the room. Rather, the simultaneous inactions of the police station fill the screen. The police do arrive at the apartment to rescue Kika from the rapist, and after some effort they manage to pull the actor / rapist off her. He runs to the balcony ejaculates over the railing. The sequence then cuts to the street below and the arriving camerawoman who looks up toward the sixth-floor balcony and the commotion only to be struck in the face by the ejaculate from above. The pornographic logic of the closure of space is shattered as the money shot takes place across a cut which signifies a space of seven stories between the penis and the face of the woman. Through this farce the film is able to both reproduce pornographic iconography of the closure of space and the money shot while also undoing both at the same time. The actor in this film ejaculates onto the face of a woman; however, the spacing and editing involved are different from the pornographic trope. Here reproduction and dissimilitude come simultaneously.

### **Cinematic Displacement**

Because it challenges spectator positioning, reproduces and undoes the suture system, and refilms the tropes and iconography of pornography the cinema of Pedro Almodóvar challenges and displaces the pornographic and the non-pornographic,

showing how both genres are bound in a relationship of difference. The above comparison with Oshima and Korida is by no means neutral. Oshima himself claimed with Korida to be producing a pornographic film, “a film of sexual organs and sexual intercourse”<sup>49</sup> which would challenge hierarchic systems of division and classification. Like Almodóvar, Oshima has been a director questioned by censors and critics for his treatment of sexuality and pornography.<sup>50</sup> And, like Almodóvar, Oshima’s stated intention for reproducing the pornographic has been to overturn the binary opposition between “obscenity” and “art” to show that “‘obscenity’ does not exist to begin with. Both directors in Derridean fashion, then, practice an overturning of their confronted opposition. However, it is in their second steps that they differ.

Oshima’s practice during the production of Korida was concerned with pushing obscenity to the limit of its definition. This film, according to his accounts, is a challenge to the definition of obscenity by producing something more obscene than anything yet produced. Korida is a film that broke taboos, and as he states, “A film that broke taboos was, to me, a pornographic film.”<sup>51</sup> By pushing the limits ever further with each production, Oshima implies a testing and eventual overturning of obscenity so that pornographic film can be taken seriously: “Only thus can ‘obscenity’ be rendered essentially meaningless.”<sup>52</sup> Oshima’s intention then, while

<sup>49</sup> Nagisa Oshima, Cinema, Censorship, and the State: The Writings of Nagisa Oshima 1956-1978, trans. Dawn Lawson, ed. and intro. Annette Michelson (Cambridge: MIT P, 1992) 260.

<sup>50</sup> See Edwards’s discussion of the influence of Korida on Matador on page 165.

<sup>51</sup> Oshima 260.

overturning the opposition between art and obscenity, leaves the system—the logic of oppositional binaries—intact. His pushing of obscenity to its limit does not counter the actual separation and hierarchization between art and obscenity, but rather attempts a neutralization of “obscenity” by making it (and the taboo associated with “obscenity”) disappear.<sup>53</sup> However, with the system still intact, as soon as obscenity is pushed to its limit, defined through its history, that history changes to incorporate the new limit as a moment within its limit and thus calls for yet another pushing of the limit. Oshima’s strategy can push the limit continually or exit the debate completely, but both strategies result in leaving the original system in place.

One way of responding to Almodóvar’s cinema, though, (as I am proposing) is that it works toward a general displacement of the system through an opening toward alterity. This opening comes by confusing the boundaries between art and obscenity, between uncertainty and certainty (if we can allow these terms to stand for the moment), by producing the one within the other and vice versa. Thus, this cinema opens toward alterity by destabilizing the binary opposition of the aesthetics of art and the ethics of obscenity. By demonstrating the cinematicality of both the artistic and the obscene through their quoting, Kika, ¡Atame!, and other films by Almodóvar show the interdependence of both. By misquoting, these films also perform an undoing of the very constructs of these tropes and thus show the construction at their origin. These films do more than they show on the surface. Neither art nor obscenity has an essential quality here, but only a quality of

---

<sup>52</sup> Oshima 261.

<sup>53</sup> Oshima 261.

opposition which relies upon its other in order to formulate itself. Seeing between the Seens remains bound between them as it binds them to one another. Thus, the general system of this production of the artistic and the obscene opens around this boundary which rigorously refutes conclusion—the conclusion of the film or auteur in *Kika*, for example, or the conclusion of the spectator in *¡Atame!* or *Mujeres*, for example. Thus, this suspension of conclusions in general signals displacement of the cinematic conclusion in general in a rigorous non-allergic reaction to the other, a relation of not inscribing the suspension of conclusion under the rubric of the same and, thereby, bringing it to its conclusion.

Almodóvar, like Derrida, then works against certain models of certainty, through a different mode. He marks the cinematic tradition in a fashion not unlike Gregory L. Ulmer writes that Derrida marks the philosophic tradition. As Ulmer remarks about Derrida's writing other than Lacan in response to Poe's "Purloined Letter,"

Against the transcendental reduction's ideal of tradition as the "repetition of the same," of history as a transparent medium and translation as univocity, Derrida proposes to capitalize on the equivocity and consequent errors and accidents that send all dispatches on a possible detour to the dead letter office.<sup>54</sup>

What we see here, then, is how the cinema of Almodóvar strategically inhabits the space between the pornographic and non-pornographic to expose the

---

<sup>54</sup> Applied Grammatology: Post(e)-Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1985. 150.

very difficulty in separating them and how reliant upon one another they are. It is not that far from the way that Derrida will explain the relation between competing metaphysical concepts and Levinas will explain the relation between skepticism and philosophy. The relationship between the pornographic and the non-pornographic runs parallel to that between skepticism and philosophy. As skepticism is the gadfly to philosophy, so is the pornographic the gadfly to the non-pornographic precisely because the first term in each is the non-founding ground to the second.

This relationship recalls discussions of what is often deemed as the very birth of film (in regard to Eadweard Muybridge's series photography from 1877-1885) in series images of nude women in motion.<sup>55</sup> Its earliest birth pangs, outlined in work such as McNair, Muller and Faris, Slade, and a recent article by Douglas Keesey, which takes a decidedly different tack from that given here, are not so far from us today. Historically one might look at the most recent releases of non-pornographic (?) films dedicated to telling tales of facets of the pornographic (?): Porn Star: The Legend of Ron Jeremy (2001), The Fluffer (2001), or Boogie Nights (1997) and Shooting Porn (1997). Or one might consider the rise of the pornographic (?) within non-pornographic film (?) highly influenced by Almodóvar's project from the start: the Mexican Y tu mamá también (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2001) or the Spanish Lucía y el Sexo (Sex and Lucia, dir. Julio Medem, 2001). The two have always danced, but

---

<sup>55</sup> The latest printing of Linda Williams's book on pornography has for its cover a section of one of Muybridge's series. On this cover, the classic birth of cinema is marked to stand in for that which must never be shown, the pornographic. The pornographic on the cover of a book on pornography is impossible; thus, the pornographic from a text generally considered for its historical rather than pornographic place is reiterated in its stead.

the lead has changed with each set and sometimes from tune to tune. To misquote Levinas here

The non-pornographic is not separable from the pornographic, which follows it like a shadow it drives off by refuting it again at once on its footsteps. Does not the last word belong to the non-pornographic? Yes, in a certain sense, since for cinema Seeing is exhausted in things seen. But the pornographic in fact makes a difference, and puts an interval between Seeing and the Seen. Pornography is refutable, but it returns.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> The original Levinas quote from Otherwise Than Being reads, ‘Philosophy is not separable from skepticism, which follows it like a shadow it drives off by refuting it again at once on its footsteps. Does not the last word belong to philosophy? Yes, in a certain sense, since for Western philosophy the saying is exhausted in things said. But skepticism in fact makes a difference, and puts an interval between saying and the said. Skepticism is refutable, but it returns.’ (168).

## Chapter Four:

### Coda: Oshima Nagisa, Ethics, Justice, and the (Un)Frozen Face

It is extremely important to know if society in the current sense of the term is the result of a limitation of the principle that men are predators of one another, or if to the contrary it results from the limitation of the principle that men are for one another. Does the social, with its institutions, universal forms and laws, result from limiting the consequences of the war between men, or from limiting the infinity which opens in the ethical relationship of man to man?

—Emmanuel Levinas<sup>1</sup>

Should we allow the perversion which fabricates a criminal in the absence of a crime?

—Oshima Nagisa<sup>2</sup>

How are we to reconcile the act of justice that must always concern singularity, individuals, irreplaceable groups and lives, the other or myself as other, in a unique situation, with rule, norm, value or the

---

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, trams. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985) 80.

imperative of justice which necessarily have a general form, even if this generality prescribes a singular application in each case?

—Jacques Derrida<sup>3</sup>

The question here is the question concerning the law. What is the relation of the law in regard to cinema spectatorship? Does the law limit the presupposed war of all against all, or does it limit the possibility of a difficult peace of all for all?<sup>4</sup>

The question of the law is the question of the film Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence (Senjô no Merry Christmas, dir. Nagisa Oshima, 1982) and its reading of the law.

We can state plainly the themes of this film. It is about cultures in conflict. Or, a World War II prisoner of war camp. Or, more general imprisonment, torture, and

<sup>2</sup> Oshima Nagisa, Cinema, Censorship, and the State: The Writings of Nagisa Oshima, 1956-1978, ed. and intro. Annette Michelson, trans. Dawn Lawson (Cambridge: MIT P, 1992) 283.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mythical Foundation of Authority,’” Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge) 17.

<sup>4</sup> I refer to the enactment of the social responsive to the ethical as “difficult peace” to signify its dynamic and uncertain character. To assume we know what “peace” is, from the start, and that it is a goal we can achieve, is precisely to fall back into the epistemological ground Levinas asks us to leave. Following Levinas, peace is difficult because it is founded in each instance of the ethical encounter and not prior to it. Peace is difficult because it does not signify an absence of war but an opening toward the call of the other as the non-ground, the unknown to come in each encounter, that Levinas argues must be the first philosophy upon which social relations are thought. As Levinas states in “Peace and Proximity” from Alterity and Transcendence (New York: Columbia UP, 1999) 131-144, this peace is not “the peace of a humanity that . . . has already decided in favor of the Greek wisdom, which is to await human peace on the basis of Truth (131). The peace Levinas asks us to consider is not “peace preferred to violence” (131), “peace as tranquility or rest” (132), nor peace “consisting in the absorption or the disappearance of alterity” (137), where we agree to disagree and all just get along. Rather, a difficult peace is one which functions “as awakening to the precariousness of the other” (140), consists in “the fraternal way of a proximity to the other, which would not be simply the failure of coincidence with the other, but which would signify precisely the excess of sociality over all solitude—excess of sociality and love” (137). Difficult peace is peace “independent of all appurtenance to a system, irreducible to a totality and as if refractory to synthesis” (137). Difficult peace rejects the primacy of the war of all against all and begins with responding to the unique responsibility of one for the other.

cruelty. Or, more specifically, the reinterpretation of the tale of T. E. Lawrence in the 1962 spectacle Lawrence of Arabia (dir. David Lean). Or, Japanese racism toward Koreans and other groups. Or, death sentences. Or, homoerotic and homosexual relations between men at war. Or, the impossibility of translating one culture to another. Or, the existential angst and personal failures that haunt human beings in an absurd world. Or, the tensions between the “samurai honor consciousness” and “samurai honor culture” still holding sway over Japanese society in the modern period.<sup>5</sup> The film is about all of these ideas, and discussions of each of them would be worthy of some effort.

However, as rich as these topics may be by themselves, they all turn around the relation this film builds with the law (as culture and statute) and the difficult relation between the law and the ethical. They all lead to investigations of right and wrong and further investigations of legal, social, and moral paradigms which question the role of Japanese militarism in the abuse of others.<sup>6</sup> Merry Christmas is a film, which from its opening scene of the rape trial of a Korean guard and Dutch

<sup>5</sup> Eiko Ikegami, The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995) 6. Especially interesting might be to read the film’s characters’ many contradictory statements through the lens of Ikegami’s sociological study. Considering, for example, the complex role of homoeroticism and homosexuality in the film benefits from Ikegami’s judgment that

The fact that the samurai’s honor culture cannot be reduced to a neatly codified formula does not mean that no social code existed. The living form of any honor culture always remains in an indeterminate intermediate position between formula and formlessness. In part, it was socially determined; in part, individually defined. More specifically, though there was always a tacit social agreement on the definition of samurai honor, it could be reinterpreted by a particular individual’s will, physical strength, and strategies in the game of honor. (8, Ikegami’s italics)

<sup>6</sup> Here, the legal, social, and moral are viewed as codes that can be followed and verified. For this reason, they are grouped with the epistemological as rule-governed structures. Morality and the moral are treated separately from the ethical. Morality, viewed as a moral code or a set of rules such as the Decalogue, is associated with legal systems and the epistemological, where right and wrong behavior can be judged in terms of truth claims. This separation will become more refined later in the chapter.

prisoner to its coda when the condemned Sergeant Hara reminds Colonel Lawrence of their Christmas together in the camp, demands judgment from characters and spectators. At every level, the question of Merry Christmas is the question of law precisely because the film always returns to calls for judgments based in epistemological verifiability and the struggle between legal and moral judgments and the ethical.

This question of the law moves in at least two directions. First, what is the relation between Merry Christmas (as an example of director Nagisa Oshima's cinema) and the law in terms of specific legal codes and battles, including early studio struggles and Oshima's latter censorship battles? Here, issues of censorship and the studio and state controls of filmic production are key. Second, and on a broader scale, what is the relation of Merry Christmas to the concept of law (or morality) and law's (or morality's) foundations in epistemological or ethical concerns? How does responding to Merry Christmas help to answer the question concerning the law (or morality) in regard to human relations?

In the end, these two directions converge, and their meeting at a common point reveals the difficulty in separating laws from the law (as a concept). It is at this point that the questions regarding the law raised by Merry Christmas converge with questions of the ethical and the law raised by Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Discussions of the relation between law and repression are in no way limited to the work of Levinas and Derrida, of course. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Stanley Fish, and Drucilla Cornell are a short list of thinkers who have also contributed much to discussions of this relation. However, the work of Derrida and Levinas, especially, allows for a

Responding to Merry Christmas, especially the coda of the film, demonstrates how the law functions in regard to the epistemological by way of an incomplete erasure of the ethical. It is precisely in the coda that this erasure's incompleteness is put on display through the filmic apparatus of the freeze frame of Sergeant Hara's face on the eve before Hara's impending execution by the Allied forces. It is in this way that this freeze frame, as a significant specific example, highlights the force of freeze frames in cinema, as openings in the epistemological through which the ethical is enacted. By their effect of denying epistemological certainty, by denying comprehension, freeze frames open a space for spectators to respond to cinema rather than understand it.

The law is necessary but limited. It is limited by its dependence on the epistemological, by its need to pursue knowledge, rather than the human relation, in order to reach its verdict. According to Levinas, "For the philosophical tradition of the West, all spirituality lies in consciousness, thematic exposition of being, knowing."<sup>8</sup> Within traditional philosophy, with the subject at the center and the world assimilated to that subject, the epistemological death drive, the quest for a comprehensive, acquisitive, assimilative truth, collapses the personal, the social, the singular, and the universal under the law through its quest for positive knowledge

---

movement from law and repression to ethics and a significant discussion of a post-phenomenological ethics that obtains to the cinema.

<sup>8</sup> Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991) 99. Levinas continues in Otherwise:

Western philosophy, which perhaps is reification itself, remains faithful to the order of things and does not know the absolute passivity, beneath the level of activity and passivity, which is contributed by the idea of creation. Philosophers have always wished to think of creation in ontological terms, that is, in function of a preexisting and indestructible matter (110).

and its demand that judgment be made first in regard to the epistemological, effecting an erasure of the ethical. This erasure, which is the foundation of the epistemological, is the endeavor to grasp the nature of the world, to possess the world through knowing it, rather than to be responsible for it. Within the philosophical tradition, the ethical (this being responsible for the other) occupies a secondary or derivative place in regard to the epistemological (the quest to possess the world through knowing it, the concern with acquiring knowledge).

Questions of ethics are not independent of other philosophical inquiry. They depend upon answers to metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological inquiries. And questions of these latter areas of inquiry depend upon the acquisition of knowledge, comprehension—with its root in “prehension” (grasping).<sup>9</sup> Within the tradition, I grasp the totality of the universe in order to understand what it is for me. I hold on to the world; I do not respond to the world with an open handedness. The search for a grand theory of the universe, inaugurated within the tradition, can only be a search for a grand theory of the universe as it exists for me. This totalizing search for what the universe means for me has always occupied the primary position within philosophy while questions of responsibility for the other have had to come after, under erasure.

That erasure is never complete, however, as this film displays, and Derrida and Levinas argue. The erasure of the ethical asymmetrical, nonassimilating relation of the self responsible for the other is marked by a trace in the form of the failure of

---

<sup>9</sup> “Comprehension” from the Latin “comprehendere” (to bind together, unite, hold together, to take hold of, grasp, to catch, to attack, to capture) from “prehendere” (to take hold of, grasp, seize).

the epistemological in the face of its own obligations. The law (or morality) as a social structure for all in relation to all must be based in the epistemological. The epistemological, in order to fulfill its obligation to the law, must found a truth claim upon which the law may judge. However, when the epistemological is shown up to have no truth claim, the absence of this truth marks the space of the ethical which founds the law prior to the epistemological and to which the epistemological is always answerable, yet never able to answer. The ethical, repositioned as the primary area of inquiry, calls the epistemological into question. Questions of the epistemological are no longer independent of other philosophical inquiry. Now, questions of the epistemological depend upon answers to ethical inquiries. And questions of the ethical depend upon the non-totalizing, non-thematizing relation of the self responsible for the other.

This chapter responds to Merry Christmas and its aporia by questioning the epistemological (as ground for morality and law) by way of the ethical. In so doing, it highlights the traditional erasure of the ethical in the film and this erasure in regard to the film / spectator relation. When, at the film's close, all certainty is no longer certain (and even the certainty that "all certainty is not longer certain" is called into question), leaving behind an active skepticism, the law collapses, for an instant, and two characters face each other, on unequal terms: the one the victorious soldier, the other the condemned prisoner.<sup>10</sup> This facing then turns toward the spectator in the

---

<sup>10</sup> This "active skepticism" is characterized by a radical doubt, which doubts even its own doubting. This skepticism radicalizes the philosophical doctrine that absolute knowledge is impossible and that inquiry must be a process of doubting in order to acquire approximate or relative certainty. Its radicalization comes from doubting the impossibility of absolute knowledge and from doubting the teleological and assimilative structure of the "acquisition" of knowledge.

final freeze frame of the film, underlining the need and impossibility of an ethical response otherwise than the law. Under the weight of an ethical query, the epistemological enfolding of the interdependence of ethics and law as it functions in the film's narrative, visual, and spectatorial relations is brought back into play, signifying the possibility the law attempts to write out of human relationships. The law must have its place, but it is impossible for that place to be fixed and remain intact because the very freezing contradicts, and therefore highlights, the law's irreconcilable need to remain fixed and also always be in motion.

In the films directed by Oshima Nagisa, battles over questions concerning the law and human relationships are most often fought on the ground of the epistemological. This battle is most often displayed as the relation between repression and liberation, where repression is always cruel and liberation is freedom from repression and its inherent cruelty.<sup>11</sup> In these films, the law is something to rebel against, and the squelching of that rebellion is what shows up the ultimate cruelty of the law. As necessary and powerful as these issues and films are, they too often remain within the realm of the tradition they would challenge. In the end, they offer a “total criticism” that is politically powerful and sometimes persuasive, but that does not fundamentally challenge the primacy of the epistemological by questioning how it can address the subject’s responsibility toward the other. This primacy of the epistemological is also the realm of Merry Christmas, which does not fundamentally break with the concerns of other films directed by Oshima, but

---

<sup>11</sup> As noted earlier, repression is a term problematized by a number of different thinkers. However, the concentration here on Derridian and Levinasian critiques of the law and repression allow for a response to Oshima in specifically ethical terms.

provides a space for a significantly different consideration of these relations. As with these other films, Merry Christmas is primarily concerned with the law and the epistemological foundation of the law. However, in the final moments of Merry Christmas, the film's address changes in a fundamental way which questions the primacy of the epistemological. As it calls spectators to directly face a condemned character in a freeze frame that will not resolve that call, it highlights the significance of the epistemological erasure of the ethical. Merry Christmas does not break with total criticism but shows up the ultimate shortcomings of total criticism.

An investigation of the epistemological cannot come from simply opposing one verdict to another. To propose liberation as the route out of repression means remaining in the realm of the epistemological. Neither can an escape come, though, through proposing the ethical as the path out of the epistemological. As much as the first route would be no step outside the grasping of the epistemological, the second path would be to step outside the epistemological and no longer be able to address this grasping. The point here is to question the epistemological by way of the ethical through a rigorous response to the gaps left in the epistemological, such as with the freeze frame at the end of Merry Christmas. These gaps signal the shortcomings of the epistemological and, hence, the need for the ethical, which sabotages the stasis of repression.

### **Total Criticism**

---

Total criticism. I don't criticize certain social aspects.

I am critical of the whole thing. Social phenomena are not the object of my criticism.<sup>12</sup>

Freedom is not realized outside of social and political institutions, which open to it the access to fresh air necessary for its expansion, its respiration, and even, perhaps, its spontaneous generation.<sup>13</sup>

Japanese director Oshima Nagisa asserts that he has never taken on specific social structures or specific instances of repression for the sole purpose of calling those structures or repressions into question. His goal has been to investigate repression, in all its forms, at the largest and deepest levels possible. This investigation, he has stated, has taken the form of a total criticism which seeks to argue for a total liberation from repression at every level of the system.

Oshima Nagisa graduated in law from Kyoto University in 1954 and soon thereafter joined Shochiku Ofuna studios, first as an assistant director and then as a director, with his debut Ai to kobo no machi (A Town of Love and Hope, originally The Boy Who Sells a Pigeon), produced in 1959.<sup>14</sup> One year later, in a heated debate

<sup>12</sup> Oshima Nagisa, quoted in Joan Mellen, Voices From the Japanese Cinema (New York: Liveright, 1975) 272.

<sup>13</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriorty, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969) 241.

<sup>14</sup> Arne Svensson, Japan, Screen Ser. (London: Zwemmer, 1971) 78. Svensson notes that Shochiku Ofuna, originally a theater production company, entered film production imitating the American style. During World War II, though, the military authorities accused their productions of failing to be sufficiently national. Their postwar survival hinged on successful melodramas and the production of

over the release and cancellation of his fourth feature-length film, Nihon no Yoru to Kiri (Night and Fog in Japan), he left—or was fired by—Shochiku and began to work independently.<sup>15</sup> In a certain way, Maureen Turim asserts in her 1998 study of Oshima, “All four [of Oshima’s studio] films can be read retrospectively from that moment of political censorship” when Nihon was pulled from theatrical release.<sup>16</sup> That battle mirrors the very battles against repression displayed in all these films. Total criticism confronts repression, offering to replace it with a dynamic liberation from repression.

Why did he make this switch from the law to the cinema? What did he see in cinematic production that pulled him away from the practice of law? The move itself is not uncommon as many Japanese government and business officials have backgrounds in law without becoming lawyers. But here Oshima’s relationship with the law is more complex. As he has stated, his move to the cinema was in part to criticize the repression of the law from the outside. By showing the destructive force of the law to the society that endorses the repressive law, he would be offering that society a route for liberating itself from that destructive force. As well as having a background in law, Oshima also speaks of being active in drama groups and in the

the first Japanese color film, both of which appealed to female audiences. Shochiku aimed much of its production from that time on toward women (91). This, at least perceived, lack of full nationalist fervor coupled with a post-war concentration on the production of “women’s films” would certainly provide a fitting first home for Oshima to hone his craft. Oshima’s anti-nationalistic bent is prevalent in almost all his films. As well, a question outside the scope of this study might consider whether or not it might be possible to consider Oshima a maker of “women’s pictures” in line with directors such as the American Douglas Sirk, the Spaniard Pedro Almodóvar, or the Japanese Kenji Mizoguchi.

<sup>15</sup> Nihon no Yoru to Kiri is named after the holocaust essay-documentary Nuit et bruillard (Night and Fog, 1957) by Alain Resnais.

<sup>16</sup> Maureen Turim, The Films of Oshima Nagisa: Images of a Japanese Iconoclast (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998) 60.

student movement while at Kyoto. That movement, he says in one interview, “was generally a political theme not only for the student movement, but for the political life in Japan as well. There was anti-American xenophobia, a certain patriotism, and an inclination toward the ideas of official Marxism.”<sup>17</sup> Certainly, prior to his graduation from Kyoto, he was actively engaged in studies of Marxism and served as an active officer in the jichikai (student self-government association), participating in at least some political rallies in the early and middle 1950s.<sup>18</sup> Although always politically active, Oshima refused the politics of party dogmatism. He has never joined a recognized political party and has railed against films and political movements he perceives as dogmatic.

His interest in the relation between politics and filmmaking circulates around the complex notion of liberation and displaying that liberation as an overturning of social and legal repression, as a freedom from that repression. As Oshima states in “Perspective on the Japanese Film,”

The new film that I was thinking of at that time [the beginning of his career] consisted of overturning the notion of the “Japanese film” as having common elements that depended on homogeneity. I hoped also to bring forward artists who would make individual films that would in some sense be directed toward the liberation of mankind. Because all of us would be making films in Japan, we would be able

<sup>17</sup> Mellen 261.

<sup>18</sup> David Desser, Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988) 32.

to create a cutting edge of films directed toward the liberation of the Japanese people.<sup>19</sup>

The point here is Oshima's drive toward liberation, a liberation founded on overthrowing the inherited tropes of Japanese "mood" and "atmosphere" as seen in the previous generation of filmmakers, such as Mizoguchi, Ozu, and Kurosawa. Also, this liberation is from the liberal-humanism of these filmmakers and their ties to traditional modes of thought in Japanese culture—irrespective of whether each agreed or disagreed with such traditional thought. And, finally, this liberation is in regard to the legal and social fabric of modernizing Japan, especially where that modernization was tied directly to traditional (repressive) Japanese culture.

Using concrete instances, many gathered from newspaper stories, the films he has directed focus on exposing the cases that have come before social and institutional codes and laws and confronted the limits of those codes and laws. Repeatedly, he has attacked the law by displaying its shortcomings, its cruelty in regard to human relationships. This drive to overcome this repressive cruelty through a liberating cinema is the thrust of total criticism.

In "Perspective on the Japanese Film" Oshima self-effacingly claims, "I wasn't a film lover; it was just that no other company would hire me, so I happened to end up at a film company. But I knew of the existence of the Japanese film based on the films I had seen up to that time."<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, he claims he ended up with the one company that would hire him, one of the three major film studios in

---

<sup>19</sup> Oshima, Cinema, Censorship, and the State 14.

<sup>20</sup> Oshima 7.

Japan at the time.<sup>21</sup> However, later he states that his 1968 film Koshikei (Death by Hanging) “was suggested by a news story. The real incident took place in 1958 and has been the subject of a lot of works, novels and such. But none of them appeared to go into it deeply enough to reveal the core, the inside of the crime.”<sup>22</sup> The inside of that crime, this film offers, is the cruelty of the Japanese police effort to convict an innocent Korean. An effort, which results, in the filmic display in the police reenacting—almost to the point of recommitting—the very crime they accuse the young man of having committed.

Considering this statement and the 1968 production, with their central concern with delving into and revealing the core of a crime, and that the first four of his films were a cycle of “youth films” focused on juvenile crime, it becomes readily apparent that Oshima left law studies and yet continued to study the law. His move was an attempt to critique the law from outside, a position he has sustained in his comments concerning censorship and the need to produce films that push against the limits of censorship in order to overcome it. From the start, Oshima’s cinema relates to an attempt to overcome, to liberate the subject from its repression under the law. However, what this attempted liberation comes up against is the fact that by attempting to overcome the law, these films return to the boundaries established by the law. They push the terms and definitions established by the law but only by returning to those terms to argue with the law according to its own rules. Within the

<sup>21</sup> According to Oshima, the big three were Shochiku, Toho, and Toei (8).

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Donald Richie, Japanese Cinema: Film Style and National Character (Garden City: Anchor, 1971) 137-38.

binary of repression and liberation, repression remains the master term, and liberation remains only non-repression. Repression remains the key term for defining both terms. And, total criticism remains totalizing.

The early “youth films” on which Oshima worked, and with which “most of the New Wave directors began their careers,”<sup>23</sup> were concerned primarily with the relation between rebellion (liberation) and structure (repression). The first three films he directed were Ai to kobo no machi, Seishun zankoku monogatari (Cruel Story of Youth, 1960), and Taiyo no hakaba (Tomb of the Sun / The Sun’s Burial, 1960). All three display stories of youth rebelling against older structures. These films follow in the tracks of the French filmmakers active at the same time and their production of the nouvelle vague, such as François Truffaut’s Les quatre cents coups (The Four Hundred Blows, 1959). They are also linked to the late-fifties films directed by Alain Resnais: Nuit et bruillard (Night and Fog, 1957) and Hiroshima mon amour (1959). As well, they follow the themes of several American films, such as A Place in the Sun (dir. George Stevens, 1951) and Rebel Without a Cause (dir. Nicholas Ray, 1955). These are rebellion films, focused on young men who are “alienated, misunderstood, rebellious but ultimately powerless,...and young”<sup>24</sup> and show how youth in rebellion are destroyed by the system as it recuperates their rebellions. (This theme of the reassimilated rebel—through punishment and / or execution runs through Oshima’s cinema.) These films are filled with failure—the

---

<sup>23</sup> Desser 37.

<sup>24</sup> Desser 39.

failure of the system to respond to large portions of its population and the failure of rebellions to overcome that initial failure of the system.

The gulf between affluence and impoverishment is always visible but never surmountable in these films. The foreground of the stories are the waterfronts, slums, and ghettos of the created subaltern while the background, just visible in the mise-en-scène, is the industrial and economic growth of modernizing Japan. Spectators and the characters who are sacrificed to modernization can always see the new Japan on the horizon but never reach it. The line between these two realms is the social code and the policing (literally or metaphorically) that keeps them apart. The police are always in the middle and embody the law (statute or custom) that separates the two realms. In a manner that will be recalled in Merry Christmas, Taiyo no hakaba, for instance, displays a story in which the law denies the characters access to the larger economy. Denied access, they must create their own economies, such as the buying and selling of human blood, in order to survive. However, this underground economy is illegal, and its very illegality fuels the gang wars for control of the market which leads to the deaths of the rebels. Taiyo's critique of the system is its display of the law creating the crime which serves as the law's justification for existing. The system creates the criminality that its structures police.

Both Taiyo no hakaba and Seishun zankoku monogatari are juvenile delinquency films filled with bars, gangs, and the punishment that must follow on obsession and youthful desire for something more than the systems of repression will allow. These youth are excessive in their desires to satisfy their individual aspirations rather than settle for what was traditionally offered but no longer

available to them, but their excess must always be considered in the light of the excess of Japanese economic expansion on display in the too-far-off distance. In other words, the rebellious—because they are repressed—youth (and spectators) see that the realm out of their reach mirrors the realm of their desires, yet demands that they stifle their own desires in the light of traditional codes. The only economy open to these anti-heroic characters is the underground one that mirrors the opulence of the emerging modern Japan, which is built upon the lower-class labor. These young Japanese buy and sell blood, prostitute and pimp, commit petty crimes, and, as in Seishun, work small graft in the form of extortion scams in the light of the larger graft they are denied by the system. Denied access to the larger economic growth of 1950s Japan, the young couple in Seishun must extort money from would-be johns Makoto sets up in cars around Osaka and then accuses of rape when Kiyoshi arrives on the scene to “rescue” her. They run their scam throughout the film, until after their arrest and release in the end, Kiyoshi is beaten to death by the gang he owes money, and Makoto is dragged to death behind a car she attempts to escape from after sensing that Kiyoshi, now dead, will not arrive to save her.

This mirroring displays the total criticism of the system on both levels. These characters are not celebrated but displayed precisely to show the effects of the Occupation and its aftermath—monopoly capitalism’s brutality reinforced through the State apparatuses of law and order—in Japan. By showing the violence on the “smaller” scale, these films reflect the violence on which the “larger” scale is founded. What is called into question is not only the law’s culpability in the denigration of a large portion of Japanese society, but also the abuse of this lower

portion of society which must commit crimes at one level because it is kept from committing such crimes at another level. Held at the bottom of the rigid social hierarchy by the law, the greed of these characters is not displayed in opposition to the greed of the wealthy, but as a mirror to that larger greed. According to Turim, “Scams will become a trope in many of Oshima’s narratives. They will become textual devices to display logical, if perverse, extensions of capitalist systems of exchange.”<sup>25</sup> In order to erase this abuse, though, the law must assimilate this “underground” economy, through prison and death, so that the mirror of the “underground economy” does not reflect the proprietors of the abuse—the law of the modernizing Japanese economy.

This exploration of youth rebellion / violent social assimilation came to its apex in many ways with the production, release, and pulling of Nihon no yoru to kiri in 1960. The battle between Oshima and Shochiku Ofuna studios over the release of this film prefaces the famous later battles he would fight against the larger social and legal forces of Japan over the censorship of Ai no korida (In the Realm of the Senses, 1976). At first released by the studio in October 1960, Nihon was recalled and shelved after only three days for too directly confronting political issues in a supposedly commercial film. As Turim notes, Oshima had kept the script a secret from the studio heads and was banking on their desires to profit from the emerging young directors they were marketing as the ““Shochiku-Ofuna new wave.””<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Turim 29.

<sup>26</sup> Turim 52.

However, what the new wave of Oshima's Nihon offered was too radical a political indictment for the studio to bear.

Centered on the youth movements in Japan in response to the student movements of 1952-1953 and 1959-1960, this film represents for some critics Oshima's "most complete break with the past" of Japanese film production.<sup>27</sup> It is the dual story of the 1952 Communist student revolt against the AMPO (United States-Japanese security treaty) and the 1960 student protest against the renewal of the treaty. Both protests failed, and these two inter-cut wedding tales display that failure and a further tightening of systematic repression over movements to challenge its authority. Old style communism is linked to the system in this film, and its collusion with the system's return to a feudal repression of student movements and militarism displays how much imperialistic and expansionistic impulses have assimilated the previously rebellious voices. Through the two weddings and their highly structured ceremonies, Nihon contrasts the earlier union of the communists with their later dissolution and eventual assimilation by the capitalist structures. With Nihon, the total criticism of the earlier three films is brought to bear on the very forces most often seen as a possible new future for Japan. The modernization of monopoly capitalism, always out of reach in the background of the earlier films, is brought to the foreground in Nihon. The film ends by displaying the failure of a more accessible modernizing monopoly capitalism to bring about a change in the repressive social structures. Once the previously outside rebels gain access to the

---

<sup>27</sup> Desser 25.

benefits of monopoly capitalism, they are assimilated by it and now have a stake in maintaining the repression they once struggled against.

Oshima prefaced the display of this film in his earlier Seishun, where Makoto's older sister, Yuki, and her lover talk of meeting at the student protests of 1952. By 1960, though, these earlier rebels have become proprietors of an abortion clinic; they are drained of any political or sexual drives save minimal survival. They have abandoned their earlier struggles against repression and become tools in the subaltern economy of Osaka's poorest quarter rather than heroes of any struggle to elevate it. If this disunity and failure of the left is the night that has enshrouded Japan, then the impotence it leaves in its place is the fog that lingers over the mise-en-scène of the film.

Although there remains debate over which of the films Oshima directed is the most successful artistically and politically, his most notorious project (for better or worse) remains Ai no korida, some of the issues of which were then readdressed in its partner film Aino borei (Empire of Passion / The Ghost of Love, 1978). Both films deal with a woman who kills her lover, arguably as a sign of the intensity of their love. Ai no korida is based on the stories surrounding Sada Abe and her lover Yoshizo (Kichizo) Ishida and Sada's arrest in May 1936.<sup>28</sup> After a torrid affair, Sada strangled Kichi during a sado-masochistic sex scene. When police later arrested her, they discovered she had severed Kichi's penis and was wearing it next to her skin,

---

<sup>28</sup> Jitsuroku: Abe Sada (The True Story of Sada Abe), directed by Noburu Tanaka, was produced at Nikkatsu studio a year prior to Ai no Corrida, and is in some ways a superior treatment of the story in regard to its portrayal of Abe Sada, especially in its less deliberately stylized ending.

wrapped in a “furoshiki (cloth for wrapping gifts).”<sup>29</sup> Rosemary Hawley Jarman remarks that “The case became notorious, and remains something of a feminist cause célèbre with its implications that the stereotype of submissive Japanese women is not as accurate as the patriarchal structure of their society seems to suggest.”

Discussions of the film have always circulated around the connections between sexual power and social power and around the explicit nudity and sexuality of the film itself. On the simplest level, the notoriety of the film and its censorship is a result of the simple fact that the version of the story directed by Oshima violates the Japanese law against showing genitalia in a film.

Critical judgment on this film has been split in regard to its position vis-à-vis pornography.<sup>30</sup> The film was banned in Japan, and Oshima was charged with violating the obscenity laws. Oshima has stated that his intention in this film was to push the definition of pornography further than it has ever been pushed, precisely to challenge repressive tenets of the criminal code and censorship. He defeated prosecution on the obscenity charges against him, but the ban on the film was not lifted. According to Oshima, then, this film was a success precisely because it was banned; it is the perfect pornographic film because it cannot be shown.

Both Jarman and Donald Richie have disagreed with the charges (and Oshima’s claim), however. “Oshima and producer Anatole Dauman had agreed to make a hardcore pornographic film.... In all but the strictly mechanical sense, they

<sup>29</sup> Rosemary Hawley Jarman, “Ai no Corrida: In the Realm of the Senses,” Eros in Hell: Sex, Blood and Madness in Japanese Cinema, ed. Jack Hunter, Creation Cinema Collection, vol. 9 (London: Creation Books ,1998) 105.

<sup>30</sup> See Chapter Three of this study on Almodóvar and the ethics of the genre of pornography for more discussion of this issue.

failed—Ai No korida is the least pornographic film possible,” argues Jarman.<sup>31</sup> It is too ecstatic and filled with “deep sexual magic” for it to conform to Jarman’s definition of the pornographic, based in the Greek meaning of pornographos—“the writing of prostitutes”<sup>32</sup>—and the assumed negative connotation of that definition. Likewise, Richie asserts, “in this quite nonpornographic film, Oshima uses sexual scenes not to titillate but to show the naked human being in his pathetic nudity.”<sup>33</sup> No crude pornography, this film is about the deep themes of the Japanese and human condition. It is a film about the struggle between social obligations and personal aspirations, according to Richie.

The director is not concerned with the right or wrong of the situation. He is concerned only with the allegorization of the specifically Japanese character: the difference between Japanese personal and collective character, the ways in which monolithic Japanese society affects its individual members.<sup>34</sup>

This debate is at the center of total criticism. It is the crux of the situation and the boundary against which it always returns. In his forward to Eros in Hell: Sex, Blood and Madness in Japanese Cinema, Jack Hunter explains “Japanese censorship permits (virtually) anything except the depiction of genitalia. Doubtless by default,

<sup>31</sup> Jarman 105.

<sup>32</sup> Jarman 105.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph I. Anderson and Donald Richie, The Japanese Film: Art and Industry, expanded edition (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982) 466.

<sup>34</sup> Anderson and Richie 466-67.

this stringency has nonetheless provided what Western cinema has suffered from lack of: boundaries.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, those boundaries have provided a site for Japanese directors, Oshima in particular, to resist. Without the boundaries, there could be no resistance. Certain directors have produced criticism of the system and challenged specific codes precisely because the system and the specific codes provide something to rebel against.

However, this is the difficulty of these boundaries and the resistance they produce. Throughout these films directed by Oshima, the boundaries require the very resistance they create in order to exist. They are heterogeneous, calling for one another; thus, they require one another. Therefore, liberation from repression, from these boundaries would be a logical impossibility since the code creates the resistance in the first instance. Repression and liberation arise together, like the two sides of a coin. They are co-originary, like law and crime. Law needs crime and crime needs law. This is not to say that criminals need law, but that law creates crime. Crime is a product of law. Thus, pushing the boundary of the law code can only serve to produce a different version of the repression and liberation binary because it cannot function outside the definitions rendered by the law, the definitions of crime which first created the law. Crime cannot overthrow law.

This is the necessary but totalizing return of total criticism as total criticism too shows itself to be totalizing and repressive in regard to the law because total criticism can function only in reaction to the epistemological boundaries erected by the law. Total criticism must check itself against the law and verify whether it has

---

<sup>35</sup> Jack Hunter, forward, Eros in Hell 3.

functioned with the law or against it. The law remains the master term. Despite the fact that epistemology can never answer the question of judgment, of decision making in the instance of the decision, the law always calls for such epistemological verification. Thus, total criticism cannot overturn the law because it is bound to the law's need for verification. Because it is bound to the law in this relation, then, total criticism remains totalizing. In these films, then, this totalizing of total criticism is ultimately put on display.

Remaining within the binary of law and crime allows the law to reassimilate any opposition because oppositionality functions as its binary foundation. Oshima might not be concerned with the right or wrong of the situation of Sada and Kichi, but his cinema is certainly concerned with the right or wrong of the social and institutional codes governing that cinema. By directly challenging those codes, though, Oshima is trapped within the definitions established by those codes. The right and wrong of the social code remains the right and wrong of the epistemological, verified by the inclusion or exclusion of displayed genitalia in the film, for example. Remaining on the level of showing or not showing fails to break from the edict's leveling effect.

The politically motivated films Oshima has directed have always, however, as Richie points out, been “expressed through parable and allegory.”<sup>36</sup> The goal has always been a total criticism overturning repression and not just a critique of the code immediately called into question. The goal is total liberation from repression.

---

<sup>36</sup> Anderson and Richie 466.

Perhaps the most allegorical, most powerful example of total criticism, and in the end the most totalizing of his films is the 1986 Max, Mon Amour (Max My Love). Max is a film which recalls Alain Resnais's 1959 French / Japanese co-production Hiroshima, Mon Amour. Hiroshima is set in Japan and criticizes codes against the taboo of inter-racial affairs.<sup>37</sup> Set in Paris, Max, is a farce about a middle class diplomat family's struggles over the wife's affair with an orangutan. The film is strange, and it is difficult to accept its premise at first. However, through the narrative the tensions of the family become more apparent, and the larger issues of cultural divides and social stigmas come to the fore. Max is certainly an allegorical tale about the trials and tribulations of the middle class, its ennui in an international setting, and the quest for liberation from the stifling repression of social codes and legal mandates.

As he has with so many other film categories, Oshima is working here beyond the acceptable realm of “affair films” and questioning the banality of their presentations by putting that very banality on display. Affairs are so common in the world of the cinema that another film about an affair cannot push the boundaries of spectatorial response any further. However powerful other affair films, even Hiroshima, might push against repressive boundaries, Max pushes that boundary even more by conjuring a story so unbelievable that the film maintains a distance

---

<sup>37</sup> Hiroshima, mon amour is concerned with an inter-racial extra-marital affair set against the occupation of France and the horrendous ordeal of surviving the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. As well, it is interesting to note that Victoria Abril plays a supporting role in Max, who has starred in several Almodóvar films. Oshima has stated his admiration for Almodóvar and has linked Ai no korida to Almodóvar's Matador in several interviews.

from spectators, demanding they question their already-too-easy judgments in regard to affairs in film.

No matter what taboo might be broached by other films dealing with such relationships, even in the best films dealing with “exotic” relationships since Max, setting the film around a story of bestiality pushes the boundaries broached by all films that remain cemented in human / human (even when the number of humans is multiplied) intimate / sexual relationships.

Despite its lack of sexually explicit display on the level of Ai no korida, this film may, indeed, be more shocking, if at the same time that it shocks it did not also undercut its seriousness by way of its comedic elements.<sup>38</sup> This indirect, allegorical route may be getting at something deeper. As Turim describes it, “While not played directly for the perverse pleasure of violating a sexual taboo, the film focuses obliquely, satirically, and intellectually on voyeurism and taboo violation.”<sup>39</sup> It pushes certain social codes in precisely the same way as Ai no korida by going further than any of those codes could initially imagine, without literally violating them. Max is not an attack against conservative values concerning bestiality, but is one thing in the guise of another, attacking conservative values in regard to homosexuality by going further than any conservative code could have imagined. It leaps beyond homosexuality, to make homosexuality appear too tame from the start. Through this allegory the film displays a threat to middle class conservatism by warning just how far things could go. Turim, along a similar line, argues “In a

---

<sup>38</sup> The ubiquitous nudity of the orangutan Max would require further complex responses outside the scope of this discussion.

context in which right-wing advocates of repression link homosexuality to bestiality to condemn both, this film makes the daring move of humorously defending bestiality, using this defense to satirize, between the lines, homophobia.”<sup>40</sup>

In thus pushing the codes of social and cinematic acceptability, then, Max is a direct affront, like Ai no korida, against the repression of social and production codes. Most notably, this “between the lines” comes in conversations / arguments between the husband and wife regarding her intimate / sexual relations with Max. Peter’s sustained doubt and denial in the face of the possibility of Margaret’s actually engaging in intercourse with Max echoes the incredulity of heterosexual partners who discover their significant others involved in homosexual affairs. Peter insists that Max is only a pet and that Margaret simply sits and strokes his fur or cuddles with him. He asks repeatedly if it is true that they engage in intercourse and what it is like. Peter and Margaret have sex on one occasion, and Peter asks if Margaret enjoyed it. She responds in the affirmative, and then he asks if it is better than with Max. Margaret is outraged at his persisting in this line of interrogation. Never satisfied with discourse, Peter seeks visual confirmation in regard to the reported interspecies sex. Peter offers to pay a female prostitute to have sex with Max so that Peter can visually affirm or deny what he questions. Max refuses the prostitute, and finally, Peter demands the visual evidence from Margaret herself and pleads for the opportunity to watch Margaret and Max engage in sex.

---

<sup>39</sup> Turim 209.

<sup>40</sup> Turim 213.

Peter: I have to know. I have to be sure. You know what I would like... to see you while you're making love to him.

Margaret: Why do you insist on watching us?

Peter: To be sure. Because I can't believe that you really do it.

Margaret: Why? Why don't you believe me?

Margaret finally succumbs to Peter's pleas, on the condition that he may only watch through the keyhole. She then warns him again, "I swear to you that you're wrong."

The voyeur then has his question answered, although spectators are denied the display. Spectators see Peter watching, but they do not see what Peter sees.

Peter's epistemological death drive remains in full force until he can have his knowledge verified through a visual means. He cannot believe until he sees. Thus, he cannot believe. He has no faith but only a trust in visual evidence. Peter's desire is for direct, visual evidence that interspecies sex is real. Held to the epistemological, he must know, and he must know visually in order to determine his response. The ethical question of how to respond is dependent upon the epistemological question of the truth or falsity of the evidence. Peter learns the truth of the other, at least the truth of the other as it applies to his question. After he discovers the evidence needed to justify his response, Peter attempts to kill Max. In part, his hapless attempts are the frustrated responses of a bourgeois man almost at wit's end. In part, though, they are also allegorically linked to the overall critique of the film. Like others directed by Oshima, Max displays the ruling power's need to maintain control over the other, by naming it and deciding its place in the world.

Here, the critique may be even more scathing because that ruling power's inability to rule is shown alongside its desire to maintain itself.

The effect of this bestial / homosexual mirror, though, is that it reflects both ways. This parabolic mirror reflects back on itself precisely through its double signification of the bestial, as extreme taboo and caution concerning lesser taboos. It renders homosexuality relatively acceptable by placing same sex relations beside inter-species relations. However, at the same time as it liberates homosexual relations it returns to the logic of the taboo code through its parabolic structural link. It stands that code on its head, but it cannot stand outside the code, despite its attempts. The only way for the trope of bestiality to stand in for the trope of homosexuality is for bestiality to mimic homosexuality, thus, relinking homosexuality to bestiality and returning to the very logic of the social code it first sought to challenge. As it challenges the social code, then, it also reinforces it. Like these other films directed by Oshima, it moves the borders of the definition of taboo, but it cannot overcome the structure of those definitions. To be more pornographic is to remain in the realm of codified definitions of pornography. To be more taboo is to remain in the realm of codified definitions of taboo. In the final instant, this is the totalizing in which total criticism remains.

The difficulty with these films is precisely in their direct assault on the law, which returns them to the realm of the epistemological and fails in regard to the ethical. These are “total criticism” at its best; yet, at its best, total criticism as in Max, results not in an overthrowing of the law but in a repositioning of the boundaries of the law. In the end, they result in displaying the ultimate power of the

law to move its borders in order to contain the very rebellious instances contained within the films. Defined in apposition to crime, law by its very nature is what recuperates itself in the face of new crime. Thus, total criticism, at its best, results in a strengthening of the law it sets out to overcome. Every liberation is a new repression.

This is something Oshima may well know. Liberation itself, Oshima argues in one instance, “doesn’t mean the end of problem solving. To me liberation is the momentary triumph you feel when you succeed in doing something in a liberated manner. You must challenge the new and reach for another liberation right after.”<sup>41</sup> Liberation is not a thing achieved, then; it is a movement that always demands another movement, a process. This is a process brought out particularly in Merry Christmas, a process which also regards the epistemological but in the light of the ethical. Merry Christmas is no fundamental break with Oshima’s earlier total criticism but a carrying forward of its attack on repression. However, Merry Christmas is different because within its attempt at total criticism, the ethical breaks through in a way not seen in other films directed by Oshima. Precisely for this point, Merry Christmas may signal the most important juncture in Oshima’s cinema because of its focus on a total criticism that slips into an inquiry of the epistemological by way of the ethical. In the end, Merry Christmas is not a break with total criticism but the ultimate instance of its breakdown at the very moment when it most strives to totalize.

### **Before the Law**

---

<sup>41</sup> Mellen 269.

Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructable. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exists.

Deconstruction is justice.<sup>42</sup>

The third looks at me in the eyes of the Other—language is justice.<sup>43</sup>

What links the cinema of Oshima Nagisa and the philosophies of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas is a certain concern for the outside and for the ultimate, totalizing failure of total criticism to be able to speak for or from the outside. Like Oshima, the questions of the possibility of speaking / writing from the outside and the relation between the epistemological and the ethical have been of the utmost concern for Derrida and Levinas from the beginnings of their careers. However, for Derrida and Levinas, it is not the outside which founds the ethical that interrogates the epistemological. Rather, it is the relation between the inside and the outside that they will most often consider. According to Derrida and Levinas it is the very heterogeneity linking the inside and the outside which provides the condition for the ethical which questions the epistemological. It is the difference between the inside and the outside which opens the possibility for the ethical. In the cinema, it is this heterogeneity which arises in the freeze frame which provides a space for a

---

<sup>42</sup> Derrida 14-15.

different consideration of these relations. By the freeze frame's very failings from the standpoint of the epistemological, by its very uncertainty, it provokes an ethical response different from the epistemological. The ethical is signaled through the epistemological precisely at this moment. This is a key location for the relation between cinema and ethics.

For Derrida, concerning questions of justice and law, there is no justice outside of law. Justice needs law, both in its conceptual and enforceable permutations. Justice is bound to law in their heterogeneity precisely because justice requires the very boundaries law provides. To decide is to decide between, in the heterogeneous space marked out by the boundaries of law. To decide to kill is to decide between killing and not killing. One cannot step outside these boundaries without stepping into another, different, decision between. This is precisely the space in which total criticism falters, as it attempts to overcome the boundaries without acknowledging how it is recuperated by the boundaries. Without such boundaries, there would be no decision, and without decision, there would be no justice. Justice, always bound to decision making, to decision making in the realm of undecidability, is heterogeneous to the law, but it is precisely because of this heterogeneity that “one calls for the other: they are indissociable.”<sup>44</sup> To decide is to struggle with the undecidable; otherwise, one is following a program or schedule, an

---

<sup>43</sup> Levinas, Totality 213.

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy, eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (New York: Routledge, 1998) 73.

algorithm, calculating and not deciding. The moment of decision, then, is always a moment of madness, irrationality. In a Kierkegaardian manner, Derrida asserts

Decision, an ethical or a political responsibility, is absolutely heterogeneous to knowledge. Nevertheless, we have to know as much as possible in order to ground our decision. But even if it is grounded in knowledge, the moment I take a decision it is a leap, I enter a heterogeneous space and that is the condition of responsibility.<sup>45</sup>

Judgment and epistemology are interwoven; however, their interweaving is what makes judgment founded in the epistemological impossible. Knowing is necessary to decisions, but it is impossible to ground decisions in knowing. This necessary impossibility, which Derrida argues is the condition of ethical response, is at the center of Derrida's concern for the law in "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority.'"

In Derrida's essay, one particular question concerning the relation between law and justice arises: how is general or universal law applicable to singular situations? As well, this question of the relation between general and particular is central to Merry Christmas, and especially the character of Jack Celliers in the film. In The Sower and the Seed, the novel on which the film is based, the narrator states of Celliers "He felt the first necessity of life was to make the universal specific, the general particular, the collective individual and what was unconscious in us conscious."<sup>46</sup> Derrida asks,

---

<sup>45</sup> Derrida 73.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Turim 181.

How are we to reconcile the act of justice that must always concern singularity, individuals, irreplaceable groups and lives, the other or myself as other, in a unique situation, with rule, norm, value or the imperative of justice which necessarily have a general form, even if this generality prescribes a singular application in each case?<sup>47</sup>

In answer to this question, Derrida states he is tempted to turn toward Levinas and the latter's conception of infinite responsibility toward the face of the other. Derrida is drawn especially to Levinas's discussions of infinite responsibility without relief and the heteronomic relation to the other. However, Derrida claims, the difficulties brought on by such conceptual grafting would overwhelm the discussion at hand. Rather, he states that even at this limited juncture between justice and law, we are faced with at least three aporias.

1. A just and responsible decision must be “regulated and without regulation.”<sup>48</sup> In order for law to reach the singular and the general, decisions under it must destroy and conserve it at the same instant. Its general aspect must be destroyed in the face of the singular or it is not a particular decision. Its singularity must not destroy its general aspect or it no longer exists as a code or future guarantee.

2. A just and responsible decision must be undecidable and decidable. If a decision is made by a calculus or program, then it is not a decision but the outcome of an algorithm, which functions by way of a finite number of steps and either / or logic. Thus, the instant of deciding is always an ordeal without reference to certainty

<sup>47</sup> Derrida, “Force of Law” 17.

for certainty would preclude the decision. However, to be just, a decision must be made. The instant of suspense is not just, only the decision is just. Therefore, the decision must be made.

3. A just and responsible decision is always immediate. However, it must remain infinite. A decision interrupts the “infinite information and unlimited knowledge of conditions” that would justify it.<sup>49</sup> However, to defer a decision is not to decide. Thus, the deliberative, epistemological, process which must precede the just decision must continue until all future evidence is exhausted. However, to proceed in this manner would be never to decide, barring an absolute knowledge of the future and what it may bring that has never been imagined before.

Thus, following only these three aporias, Derrida states “Justice remains, is yet, to come, à venir, it has an, it is à-venir, the very dimension of events irreducibly to come.”<sup>50</sup> Justice is bound to the law in the present and the future; thus, justice is always already to come, never exceeded.

With due regard to the sometimes vast conceptual differences between Derrida and Levinas and the ways in which these differences might overwhelm Derrida’s discussion of the relationship between law and justice, there is a link, a complement between them, what might be described as a trace of the other within the one. The relation between “deconstruction” and “ethics” (if we allow for the moment these too-broad concepts to be yoked to Derrida and Levinas respectively),

<sup>48</sup> Derrida 23.

<sup>49</sup> Derrida 26.

<sup>50</sup> Derrida 27.

is tied to the relation between undecidability and responsibility. As Simon Critchley argues in The Ethics of Deconstruction, “Derridian deconstruction can, and indeed should, be understood as an ethical demand, provided that ethics is understood in the particular sense given to it in the work of Emmanuel Levinas.”<sup>51</sup> Deconstruction signifies ethically when deconstruction and ethics are seen in the light of their emphases on the clatural relation between incongruous orders of discourse: being and otherwise than being.

According to Critchley, for Levinas, “Ethics signifies enigmatically, as a determinate pattern of oscillation, or alternation. One might say that ethics signifies undecidably. ”<sup>52</sup> Responsibility for the other is non-thematizable: to be for the other is not to return, to resume, or to reduce. Responsibility is not founded within the epistemological, yet the epistemological signifies the ethical through its very gaps. Responsibility cannot rely upon algorithms without redacting the other within the lines drawn by the self, without editing the scene of encounter. Thus, responsibility remains ungoverned from the perspective of the self, except by the infinite call of the other, which can only be heard and answered, although never completely, between the self and the other. These answers, always falling short, come through the realm of the epistemological as guesses are made, evidence is weighed, responses are offered. However, these epistemological graspings are then immediately recalled by the ethical as each response is shown to fall short. This relation of Saying to the Said

---

<sup>51</sup> Simon Critchley The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) xi.

<sup>52</sup> Critchley 168.

is “the interdependence of irreconcilable orders of discourse.”<sup>53</sup> This relation is the relation between the ethical and the epistemological. Irreconcilable orders of discourse, they remain interdependent.

Similarly, for Derrida deconstruction works by way of a thematization and dislocation of that thematization. According to Critchley,

Two incompressible, yet inseparable, paths are breached by deconstruction: first, the path of ontological thematization, the order of the Said and synchrony, and second, the path of ethical non-thematization, whereby the Said is reduced to its diachronic Saying.<sup>54</sup>

This is the way in which Derridian deconstruction signifies, by locating and dislocating borders between apparently irreconcilable (stable) conceptual frameworks. By showing the absolute necessity of first principles and then displacing these first principles, the formal work of deconstruction relies upon this double movement between the algorithmic and the non-algorithmic.

In other terms, John Llewelyn in Appositions of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas raises the specter that on the surface, undecidability is prima facie incompatible with responsibility. The one seems to exclude the other. How can one respond responsibly to a question unless there is a criterion, rule, or law by reference to which the validity of the answer can be judged?<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Critchley 169.

<sup>54</sup> Critchley 169.

<sup>55</sup> John Llewelyn, Appositions of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002) 17.

Here is the crux of the matter. Traditional frameworks for decision making rely upon such devices as criteria, rules, or laws to justify themselves. Utilitarianism would be the most overt example of such an algorithm. For some, judgment should come as a perfect syllogism, denying uncertainty.<sup>56</sup> Thus, just decisions must be made, in a traditional manner, in regard to a supposed outside touch-point. Against this tradition, Derrida and Levinas would deny the possibility of such an outside touch-point as they both demonstrate how that outside infects the inside from which it is supposed to remain distinct. In other words, they both show how outside guides are never truly outside but, rather, come from one of the two terms engaged in the decision, the self. Thus, the outside touch-point is a return to the self, a halting of the dislocation of the orders of the epistemological.

Therefore, focusing on Derrida's many examples of paradox, Llewelyn argues that undecidability is not contrary to responsibility but inseparable from it. "Undecidability increases responsibility in that it obliges us to make finer and finer distinctions."<sup>57</sup> In the face of undecidability, these distinctions are always already to come, one after another. To decide is to put a stop to these distinctions, to stop deciding. The demand placed upon us by undecidability is what calls us to decide, without the certainty of justifying our actions as enough. There always already

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Cesare Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments* trans. David Young (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986). In this 1764 text of criminology, Beccaria declares that the measure of a crime's severity should be based in "the harm done to society" (17). And the judgement of each criminal case should come to a perfect syllogism: the major premise should be the general law; the minor premise, the act which does or does not conform to the law; and the conclusion, acquittal or condemnation. If the judge were constrained to form even two syllogisms, or if he were to choose to do so, then the door to uncertainty would be opened. (11)

<sup>57</sup> Llewelyn 37.

remains another distinction to make, an ever-widening circle of choices to encounter. Rather than leading to irresponsibility, undecidability opens the possibility of responding. This undecidability is the gap in the epistemological which signals the ethical.

For the Levinas of the 1969 Totality and Infinity, the other comes before me, does not exist in the same time as me. The relation between the other and the self is not one of two species who can trace their lineage to a common genus. Rather, the other is radically other, separated from me by its absolute difference. This difference, however, is not to be thought of as a characteristic or trait the other possesses. Rather, it is the very alterity separating the other from the self which brings the I into existence as responsible for the other.

The difference between the other and the self cannot be subsumed under a common category, such as we are both human beings. Such a reduction can only be an assumption originating from the self, which reduces the other to the same by eradicating the difference which separates us. Rather this difference remains an infinite difference, “inconceivable in terms of formal logic,” according to Levinas.<sup>58</sup>

Levinas traces the path from the self to the I through the encounter with the other.

The I, which we have seen arise in enjoyment as a separated being having apart, in itself, the center around which it gravitates, is confirmed in its singularity by purging itself of this gravitation, purges

---

<sup>58</sup> Levinas, Totality 195.

itself interminably, and is confirmed precisely in this incessant effort to purge itself. This is termed goodness. Perhaps the possibility of a point of the universe where such an overflow of responsibility is produced ultimately defines the I.<sup>59</sup>

The other calls me to respond and in so doing, calls me into the I that gives. This I is produced by the call of the other precisely because when called by the other, no one else can answer this call. If I am called, then I, and only I can answer. In this way, the subjectivity of the I is brought about by the relation between the other and the self. In answering this call, I cannot be the other, I can only be for the other. I must return to the epistemological assimilation in my answering as I respond; however, that answer falls short at the next gap in the epistemological and calls me to respond again. Thus, the uncertainty of every answer calls me to respond again.

The question remains: what might cinema teach us about ethics and ethics teach us about cinema? How might they complement one another? To return to Oshima, if there is a moment in his cinema which works otherwise than the boundaries he has pushed against for so long it comes in the guise of a simple shot at the tail end of one of his more peripheral texts, Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence. The gap in the epistemological which occurs in this final freeze frame signals an entry for the ethical in regard to this film, and the need for a more attentive response to such a gap might be what ethics teaches us about cinema. Although linked with Oshima's other films as total criticism, Merry Christmas remains apart because of its complex display of the law and its final shot which calls even its own complex display into

---

<sup>59</sup> Levinas, Totality 245.

question. As deconstruction is and is not totalization, Merry Christmas is and is not total criticism. Merry Christmas is decidedly different but recognizable and so a potential site for learning more about the relation between total criticism and its other.

### **“To be or not to be”**

Why does the other concern me?<sup>60</sup>

Metaphors for the other abound in Levinas. They do not exhaust the otherness of the other but attempt to provoke the problematic of the ethical within the realm of the epistemological. They are the product of the necessity of writing undecidable Saying in the decided language of the Said. As much as they fail, they are the product of arriving too late to a system which is founded on a first philosophy

<sup>60</sup> Levinas, Otherwise 117. This is the question for Levinas. From his earliest work, this has been the question he has tried to answer: why, if the world as we think it in the philosophical tradition is self-centered, do sacrifice and generosity exist. What makes them possible? For Levinas, the answer to this question comes through thinking ethics as first philosophy. As he continues in Otherwise,

It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity—even the little there is, even the simple “After you, sir.” The unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for all solidarity. Every accusation and persecution, as all interpersonal praise, recompense, and punishment presuppose the subjectivity of the ego, substitution, the possibility of putting oneself in the place of the other, which refers to the transference from the “by the other” into a “for the other,” and in persecution from the outrage inflicted by the other to the expiation for his fault by me. But the absolute accusation, prior to freedom, constitutes freedom which, allied to the Good, situates beyond and outside of all essence. (117-118)

This is, Levinas, goes on to state, the condition of a possibility of communication without correspondence, without constantly seeking certainty or the “coincidence with oneself” (118). In fact, he argues, communication would be impossible if this condition did not exist. If all communication only returned to the certainty of correspondence with oneself, then this would be on the return of echo and no communication. This is the thesis of Otherwise:

To communicate is indeed to open oneself, but the openness is not complete if it is on the watch for recognition. It is complete not in opening to the spectacle of or the recognition of the other, but in becoming a responsibility for him. The overemphasis of openness is responsibility for the other to the point of substitution, where the for-the-other proper to disclosure, to monstration to the other, turns into the for-the-other proper of responsibility.

of the epistemological, thus, they are necessary failures. According to Levinas, “Before all receptivity an already said before languages exposes or, in all the sense of the term, signifies (proposes and orders) experience, giving to historical languages spoken by people a locus, enabling them to orient or polarize the diversity of the thematized as they choose.”<sup>61</sup> In a language which will only fail, precisely because of its thematizing of the non-thematizable, Levinas runs the fine risk of signaling the other while cautioning that the relation between Saying and the Said remains “on the hither side of being and of the nothingness which is thematizable like being.”<sup>62</sup> In the language of the Said, the only language to which we have access, the other is the orphan, the widow, the homeless, the starved, the stranger, the poor. Each inhabits the periphery of the social, is at the border between the social and the anti-social. With each of these metaphors, the other’s place as the impossible peripheral center of the ethical call marks its undecidability within the language of decidability.<sup>63</sup> The other has power over me precisely because the other comes before me defenseless

<sup>61</sup> Levinas 36.

<sup>62</sup> Levinas 109.

<sup>63</sup> On more than one occasion, conversations about Levinas’s metaphors and his highly abstract thinking of ethics have led some to suggest that they are like attempts to describe the color “aldifogoh” (which can only be described “between” other colors people already know) or the musical note “go” which comes between fa and so.

To signal the place of the other is, of course, to risk thematizing the other, and in such terms as Levinas uses, apparently to valorize the other. To say the other is anything, is to thematize the other, and to remain within the grasp of the realm of the ontological and the epistemological. To say the other is a defenseless homeless octogenarian woman or is an African patriarch insisting on female circumcision are both thematizations of the other that fail to signal the place of the other. The other does not exist, cannot be thematized, cannot be valorized; cannot be deprecated. None of these statements denies the possibility of judging the other person or even killing the other person. The other, however, is not marked out by any quality or essence of being. Rather, the relation between the self and the other, the fact that the self and the other remain distanced in relation, is the alterity of the other, neither attribute nor property. As Levinas reminds us in *Otherwise*, this relation “lies behind the distinction between rest and movement, between the being at home with oneself (chez soi) and wondering, between equality and difference” (108).

and calls me to my responsibility, not because of any strength of its own. This centering of the peripheral, of course, is not unrelated to the work of Derridian deconstruction as the movement of the marginal, excluded term to the center of its system while maintaining its marginal, excluded position.

This calling by the centered peripheral is at work as well in the relation between Seeing and the Seen, with their intended links to the ethical and the epistemological, respectively. When considering what cinema might teach about ethics, it is possible to suggest a further metaphor for the other—the freeze frame. The instant of the freeze frame is the cinematic instant which evokes Seeing, which is always already before but covered over by the Seen, which questions the priority of the Seen. As a general instance of the cinematic apparatus, I argue here that the freeze frame, precisely by its signaling of the failure of the epistemological, calls for an ethical response to cinema. As a particular and highly charged instance of this call, I argue that the (un)frozen close-up of Sergeant Hara's face which faces spectators at the end of Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence is an especially crucial example of this apparatus because it makes explicit what is at stake in almost all freeze frames. Like these other metaphors for the other, the freeze frame inhabits a space at the periphery of discussions involving studies of cinema and yet remains crucial to many discussions of cinema. As well, like these other metaphors, it signals the ethical without exhausting it.

The freeze frame is cinema and non-cinema. From the start, the freeze frame is controversial. In one way, its name denotes a framing of a shot and an editing of a

---

shot, while other forms of framing and editing separate framing into one category and editing into another. The freeze frame is between framing and editing. In a second way, the freeze frame, hold frame, or stop frame is simply absent from many prominent film glossaries and sparsely discussed when it is present. Time and again this reportedly cliché ending device is mentioned only to be ignored. Yet, it is a common topic of discussion for many moviegoers because its effect is so often so unexpected, especially if it comes elsewhere than at the end of a film. The freeze frame is between the cliché and the unexpected. Thirdly, when it is defined in standard film glossaries and textbooks, its location between concepts is made apparent. A freeze frame is “a projected yet unmoving motion-picture image, which looks like a still photograph.”<sup>64</sup> It can “dramatically punctuate or emphasize some idea or concept for the audience.”<sup>65</sup> It can stop the action so a shot may be “studied at leisure.”<sup>66</sup> Freeze frames can be used “at the end of a film to suggest a lack of closure.”<sup>67</sup> Or, to sum up, freeze frames “can be used to lengthen a scene, to highlight a point, or for sheer dramatic effect.”<sup>68</sup> In these definition and others, the essential point to the freeze frame is the confusing effect of the uncertainty it carries with it. Its very definition as an unmoving motion picture is difficult enough, but the

---

<sup>64</sup> William H. Phillips, Film: An Introduction, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999) 546.

<sup>65</sup> Ira Kroningsberg, The Complete Film Dictionary (New York: New American Library, 1987).

<sup>66</sup> Virginia Oakey, Dictionary of Film and Television Terms (New York: Harper, 1983)

<sup>67</sup> Steve Blandford, Barry Keith Grant, and Jim Hillier, The Film Studies Dictionary (London: Arnold, 2001).

<sup>68</sup> Ephraim Katz, The Film Encyclopedia, 4th ed., revised by Fred Klein and Ronald Dean Nolen (New York: Harper Resource, 2001).

contradictory descriptions of its effects point toward the questions it raises in regard to the epistemological. It denies closure yet allows for further inspection and emphasis of certain points. It offers dramatic effect and yet emphasizes leisured looking. In every way, it remains between and it signals toward uncertainty.

As well, in a fourth way, the freeze frame recalls the proto-film of some histories which trace the birth of the cinema to the technical manipulation of photographic images in sequence. Linked to both the still image of photography and the moving image of the cinema, the freeze frame is the missing link, a technological manipulation of the filmic apparatus between the cinematic and the non-cinematic, which recalls a, possibly older, filmic border shared between the two. This final point is the controlling idea of the most sustained study of the freeze frame, Garrett Stewart's Between Film and Screen, which argues that the freeze frame is one of two ways cinema highlights its ontology as "a synthesis of photograms."<sup>69</sup> Before anything else, film is a series of photographs in series on a strip of flexible medium, and the two extreme poles of its own referentiality are the filmed photograph, which turns back, and the freeze frame, which turns ahead. According to Stewart, "Whereas in the photopan film may look back to its own origin (and potential cancellation) in the discrete image, working (as in another sense it always does) to contain the image in frame, in the freeze shot the photogrammatic undertext is cast up (cast forward) as the whole screen picture."<sup>70</sup> For Stewart, this casting forward is the radical power of the screen freeze, as it "ends up situated in a curious

---

<sup>69</sup> Garrett Stewart, Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999) 24.

interspace—or phenomenal hinterland—between Deleuze’s influential categories of movement and time.”<sup>71</sup> Unlike the photopan, which works to cancel its origin, the freeze frame remains between on a phenomenological, ontological level. Because of its “betweenness,” then, Stewart pronounces the radicality of the freeze frame for phenomenological considerations of cinema:

More than time lapse or slow motion, more than pixilation or colored filters, more than shifts of focus or tricks of editing, more than anything else the cameraman or the laboratory technician puts in the way of the normative kinesis of projected film, the freeze-frame—precisely because frieze frame—remains the last frontier of film phenomenology, its ultimate affront and greatest challenge.<sup>72</sup>

Precisely because it remains at the edge, on the border, and between, argues Stewart, the freeze frame challenges all phenomenological responses to film and finds them all wanting.<sup>73</sup> In all four ways, then, the freeze frame calls into question the binary between cinema and non-cinema by upsetting either / or divisions and classifications because it inhabits both and neither category simultaneously. It calls for a response other than epistemological interpretation precisely because of its classification as framing and editing of a shot, treatment as unexpected cliché, definition as

<sup>70</sup> Stewart 17.

<sup>71</sup> Stewart 21.

<sup>72</sup> Stewart 118.

<sup>73</sup> Stewart points out that not one of the influential phenomenologists to have studied film has made any significant statement on the freeze frame: Arnheim, Kracauer, Deleuze, Sobchak, Bazin, Barthes, and Cavell have all avoided or relegated the freeze frame to footnotes, at best.

“unmoving motion-picture image,” and challenge to film phenomenology as the ultimate “between” time and movement phenomena.

The specific freeze frame close-up of the condemned Hara’s face which ends Merry Christmas works between categories like other freeze frames. However, when its content is taken into account, its effects are intensified as it makes overt the ethical covertly signaled by all freeze frames. There is nothing spectacular to the final image of the film, and its very simplicity may well signal even more the import of what it displays. In final minute of the film, Lawrence returns to visit Hara on the night before Hara is to be executed by the Allied armies. When he is about to leave Hara’s cell, Lawrence begins to cry. He turns to Hara, salutes, turns, and moves toward the door of the cell. Hara snaps to attention and calls Lawrence to look at him one last time. The camera cuts to Lawrence’s face as he stares back at Hara. The camera cuts back to an extreme close up of Hara’s evenly lit, smiling face, which now fills the screen. Hara’s last words are “Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence.” The image freezes for four and a half seconds as the non-diegetic sound comes returns with the opening notes the film’s theme song. Then the screen fades to black as the song continues into the credits.

Because of its focus on the face of the condemned man, more than others, this freeze frame makes plain what is at stake in all freeze frames. Thus it is similar to all other freeze frames but remains separate in kind and degree. This freeze frame is different in kind from other freeze frames, which may not even be considered freeze frames under certain definitions, because its freezing breaks it from diegetic space and time by breaking with the diegetic soundtrack. The action of the story stops with

the freeze frame, and only the non-diegetic music of the soundtrack continues. This break is different in kind from “freeze frames” which remain linked to the diegesis or narrative, such as the suitcase freeze frame in It's a Wonderful Life (dir. Frank Capra, 1946) where the voice-over narration comments on the frozen George Bailey or the final instants of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (dir. George Roy Hill, 1969) where the image freezes as the outlaws burst from the church doors, but the gunshots of the overwhelming Bolivian forces signal their deaths. These freeze frames, and others which remain linked to their diegeses through the soundtrack, work to emphasize the metaphysics of a story told by angels or the mythology of a story told about outlaws, but they do not work in the same manner to signify the ethical through undecidability as does the freeze frame which ends the coda of Merry Christmas. Linked to their diegeses as they are, these freeze frames cover over the undecidability of their images through their soundtracks.

However, the freeze frame at the end of Merry Christmas is similar in kind but differs in degree in regard to one of the most debated freeze frames in cinema, the close up of Antoine Dionel at the end of Les Quatre Cents Coups. The close up freeze of Hara quotes from the earlier film, which had a significant influence on Oshima’s earlier career, while further emphasizing its own relation to uncertainty. Although individual critics have remarked on the final freeze frame of Dionel as quite definitive, they have rarely agreed on what that definitive meaning would be. For different critics, this freeze frame signals the bleak, indecisive, or uncertain future of the boy. Pushed within the epistemological to apprehend the meaning of this final image of Dionel, at least in this first of four films to focus on his life, the

uncertain and un-ending of this shot is erased in these criticisms. They label the boy a failure or condemn his future before it happens, assuming that this freeze frame must signal the beginning of the end for Dionel. The freeze frame of Dionel differs in degree from the freeze frame of Hara because the former is not linked to the moment of the pronouncement of death. Dionel's story is certainly tragic, but only an assumption of what will come leads critics to align this freeze frame with his execution. Hara's story, though, directly links his freeze frame to the instant of his death, with the possibility that he will be executed very soon after we last see his face. It is similar in kind in that both freeze frames signal the epistemological under investigation by the ethical as they both call for a response which cannot be justified within the epistemological, for Seeing within the Seen. However, what is at stake in the latter is intensified by its story line.

Set in a Japanese Prisoner of War camp in Java in 1942, Merry Christmas weaves together the complicated and complicating stories of the prisoners and guards. Five men are at the center of the narrative: the Allied officers Major Jack "Strafer" Celliers (David Bowie), Colonel John Lawrence (Tom Conti), and Group Captain Hicksley (Jack Thompson), the Japanese camp commander Captain Yonoi (Sakamoto Riuichi), and the Japanese camp administrator Sergeant Gengo Hara (Takeshi).<sup>74</sup> The interdependence of the strands of its story, including its complex flashbacks, makes it difficult to outline Merry Christmas, but some broad strokes will

---

<sup>74</sup> According to Turim, "In its casting of two superstars, the British David Bowie...and the Japanese Sakamoto Riuichi opposite each other, it might seem simply to be pandering to the global marketing practices that now dominate the film industry." However, this casting is part of the film's overall strategy of working against expectations (169). Casting the androgynous Bowie as the heteronormative soldier's soldier and the sex symbol Riuichi as the ambiguous camp commander counters static agendas in regard to gender, sexual orientation, and epistemological certainty.

serve here. The story is also difficult to tell because it is a film which focuses more on the relationships among these five men than on their actions. In part, this emphasis on relationships, rather than actions, intensifies the jeopardy of the freeze frame at the end of the film. Broadly, though, the story circulates around Lawrence, the British liaison between the camp's Japanese commanders and Korean guards and the Allied prisoners. Lawrence lived and studied in Japan prior to the war and speaks Japanese. These traits seem to make him the best candidate for the camp liaison. Because of his background and position, he develops a rigid but respectful relationship with the English-speaking camp commandant, Yonoi, and a genuinely friendly, if not loving and homoerotic, one with Hara. The depth of Lawrence's and Hara's feelings for one another is expressed especially in the coda of the film, when Lawrence begins to cry when he visits the condemned Hara in the Allied prisoner of war camp.

Merry Christmas questions the relation between being and relating from the start. Early in the film, Yonoi is called away from the camp to attend the espionage trial of a recently captured Allied officer, Celliers. At the trial, Yonoi appears entranced by Celliers and attempts to connect with him during the interrogation. Yonoi quotes Hamlet's soliloquy and questions Celliers in English. In the end, Celliers is found guilty and sentenced to death by firing squad. In one of the film's scenes of indeterminacy, Celliers is both executed and not executed. He is put before the firing squad, but the Japanese soldiers fire only blanks. In shock, Celliers replies, "That's a good one." Celliers is then transported to the prisoner of war camp on

---

Java, where Yonoi orders he be attended to and hints that Celliers may have been brought to Java to replace Hicksley as the prisoners' commanding officer. At the same time, Lawrence recognizes Celliers when he sees the Major arrive in the camp and is puzzled by Yonoi's plans for Celliers. Later, Lawrence explains to Yonoi and Hara that he fought with the Major in North Africa, and that Celliers was regarded by most of his comrades as a "soldier's soldier."

From here to the coda, Merry Christmas appears to be a battle of wills between Celliers and Yonoi, with Lawrence, Hara, and Hicksley caught between. It appears to be such because no one is sure what exactly drives Yonoi to treat Celliers alternatively fiercely or with the utmost of care. This questioning drives Lawrence and Hara to investigate their own relationship more closely as well. Although there is no overt homosexual activity shown in the film, "the special relationships between men at war" is a key topic of the film from the start. Homosexual feelings and activities are the primary topic of conversation and challenge among these men, and more than once phallic symbols of power (swords, staves, and bamboo sticks, etc.), stabbings, and debates over bravery and acts of hara kiri play important roles in the film. The question of Yonoi's intentions toward Celliers, especially, and the importance of human relations arises repeatedly as Yonoi asks why Celliers is so disappointing a rival and yet so entralling a challenge.

The pivotal point of the plot comes when the guards discover a radio among the prisoners in the hospital, and Lawrence and Celliers are sentenced to death for bringing the radio into the hospital. Despite their assertions of their innocence, they are condemned to die and isolated from the rest of the camp until their executions.

While locked up, both men tell stories of their past failings and how disappointing they have both been to family, friends, and lovers. The soldier's soldier betrayed his younger brother and has lived his adult life bent on self-destruction. The camp liaison can only recall missed opportunities and an inability to understand why he cannot understand anything that's happened to him.

On Christmas Day, both men are pulled from their cells and brought before Hara. Rather than execute them, though, the drunken Hara plays the part of Father Christmas and allows the two men to return to the general population of the camp. Lawrence and Celliers are ecstatic at this gift, and the next day Hara explains to Yonoi that he had discovered a Chinese prisoner had smuggled the radio into the hospital. That prisoner was executed, explains Hara, who is disciplined for his action.

While suppressing the freeze frame ending, some critics have located the question of Merry Christmas in the flashback scenes. They have debated the strangeness of the positions within the seemingly realist narrative and concluded either that the flashbacks are the weakest or the strongest points of the film. Arguing that the flashbacks are inconsistent and distracting, many reviews have dismissed this film as outside the usual force of Oshima's filmmaking. Arguing for the power of the flashbacks, Peter Bonitzer reads the flashbacks as ruptures which operate contrapuntally to the remainder of the narrative and visual fields and, thus, some of the very best of Oshima's work. According to Bonitzer, "the flashback overturns everything and we find in this moment of greatest disturbance, the greatest

Oshima....”<sup>75</sup> According to Bonitzer’s reading, the greatest Oshima, the total criticism Oshima returns, as the flashbacks overturn the expected structure in favor of an unanticipated, rebellious one. The flashbacks in Merry Christmas operate as total criticism within this film. For Bonitzer, they overturn the larger body as they center themselves. With this return to total criticism, though, comes the return to the failings of total criticism which must remain within the epistemological choice of either / or, precisely limiting the power of the flashbacks to a cyclical relation of repetition and return. At every point where they overturn the primacy of the narrative, they return to the primacy of the narrative by repeating the oppositional structure of the narrative versus the flashbacks.

The freeze frame does not work to overturn the cinematic in general or the larger body of the film here. Rather, it questions the priority of the epistemological. With this freeze frame of the face of the condemned man filling the screen before the spectators, the film alters the register of its criticism precisely by altering its address. In other words, the freeze frame at the end calls for a response (Seeing, linked to justice and the ethical) rather than a judgment (the Seen, linked to the law and understanding). Through this freeze frame the cinematic apparatus calls for a spectatorial response which is otherwise than a judgment tied to a legal or moral code. It calls for a response which does not follow an algorithm but remains without limits. Rather than calling for verification and a judgment which can be verified through a totalizing, assimilative relation based in an outside system which can

---

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Turim 180.

justify limiting responses, it calls for a response from the non-thematizable relation to the other.

On the level of judgment, which always occurs within the epistemological, Merry Christmas certainly invokes a humanism. If it were to remain within this humanism, as Turim asserts, Merry Christmas might be Oshima's total criticism par excellence because this humanism would rely on centering the unified idealism Oshima has spent his career challenging. This centering would strive to resolve the film's undecidability and its call for a response. The humanism of Oshima's total criticism would react to the humanism of the unified idealism Oshima challenges, but both would remain bound within their humanist framework. In Turim's reading of the film, what emerges from the coda, is "clearly humanist" in its statement that both sides in the war faced the same ill-conceived ideology and the same blundering bellicose desires.<sup>76</sup> Thus, the coda sets up an identifiable argument in favor of more and better knowledge of who we are as human beings and how cultural divides, such as between the Axis and Allied powers during World War II, need to be crossed if peace is to be possible. Up to this point, then, the film holds out the possibility of peace and human understanding predicated precisely on a more thorough understanding of one another and the "truth." However, in the final moments of the film, its coda, that very humanism is undone precisely for not being sufficiently

---

<sup>76</sup> Turim 182.

human, for returning to the same, for returning to something outside the human relation to judge the human relation.<sup>77</sup>

Instead of returning to a fixed relation with total criticism and a static humanism, Merry Christmas puts the epistemological death drive under the pressure of the ethical. After the coda, the truth is no longer primary because the freeze frame at the end calls for a response to the human relation and not the human relation to judgment. Through examples of several trials in the film and the visual and aural incongruencies it produces, the film questions that very search for the truth it sets up through one aspect of the narrative. Then, this argument against the primacy of judgment, within the epistemological, is exemplified by its putting the law on trial in the final freeze frame of the film.

The law is the ultimate instant of judgment, and it is the film's questioning of the law, under the ethical, which marks judgment necessary but insufficient. One could argue that the entire film is made up of trials, each narrative segment focusing on redacting human conduct within a code or law. However, no trial in the film appears just. The film does not display any trial as a just measure of right or wrong or guilt or innocence. Rather, all the trials remain on the level of redaction. Each example of putting someone or some system on trial serves only to display the internal logic of the law governing the trial. Judgments are made, always unjustly.

When he is brought before the Japanese military tribunal near the start of the film, Celliers, asks "Exactly what kind of a trial are you giving me?" That question

---

<sup>77</sup> This is Levinas's simple critique of humanism. It is not that he would do away with humanism, but that he sees humanism in need of a relation with the ethical to make it more fully human. As he states in Otherwise, "Humanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human" (128).

questions all the trials in the film: the rape trial at the start of the film, Celliers before the Japanese tribunal, Lawrence with Yonoi and Hara after Yonoi's butler commits hara kiri, and the elided Allied trial of Hara after the defeat of the Japanese forces. When Yonoi first speaks to Celliers at the tribunal, he quotes from Shakespeare, "To be or not to be, that is the question" and then begins questioning Celliers. Hamlet's existential dilemma is exactly the kind of trial that Yonoi gives Celliers. This is the basis of all the trials of the film, and the failing of all the trials of the film. They are all tied to the ontological and epistemological rather than to the ethical.<sup>78</sup>

"You're wrong. We're all wrong," Lawrence says to Yonoi after the Japanese Captain asks Lawrence to explain the ways of the Japanese to the Allied soldiers. Japanese, British, Dutch, Chinese, American, Korean, we are all wrong. "You are the victim of men who think they are right," Lawrence tells Hara at the end of the film. "Just as one day you and Captain Yonoi believed you were right." And this, indeed, is the humanism of which Turim speaks. What unites the human race is its being wrong. National, historical specificity is beside the point in this humanist realm of the film as Lawrence distances himself from these divisions. The quest and attainment of truth would resolve this situation. If only no one were wrong, then Lawrence and Celliers would not have been sentenced to death earlier in the film, and Hara would not be awaiting execution at the end. On the level of a humanist critique, this is, of course, in line with the standards of a theory of human morality based in a shared humanity, shared human knowledge which locates human

---

<sup>78</sup> See my earlier comments on the importance of Shakespeare for Levinas in Chapter Two: Seeing the Ethics of Alienation in Levinas and Antonioni of this study.

understanding at the center of rational and autonomous social, political, and moral systems concerning the truth. This humanism functions in relation to judgment bound to verifiability, within the epistemological, rather than the uncertain possibility of the ethical, of a response in regard to a difficult peace. Such humanism is the best we can hope for under the epistemological but still insufficiently human. In the coda of the film, as Lawrence is confronted by the limits of the epistemological again, spectators are confronted by the limits of the law, which question the epistemological. The very shortcomings of the law, repeatedly throughout the film, show up the very shortcomings of the epistemological to provide sufficient ground for explaining why the other concerns me.

If there is a crime, must someone then be punished? Yes. The circulation around these two poles is made plain, here, in that the law must have its due, despite the epistemological boundaries of guilt and innocence. They are no longer the poles by which the law operates. Rather, it has its own logic, circulating around the binary crime and punishment. If crime is what disturbs the order of the law, then punishment is what sets it right again. However, as Levinas and Derrida both warn, what is at stake here is not the order of the law, but, rather, the law itself. For crime is the necessary other to the law, not the primary term in the binary crime / punishment, but rather the secondary term of the binary law / crime. If there were no crime, there would be no law, for law (in the form of positive or negative edicts) defines itself as the laying out of its other as a limited and knowable challenge to itself. Law needs crime.

---

Furthermore, it is not only at the level of the narrative tropes involving trials and putting the law on trial that Merry Christmas works to question the epistemological by way of the ethical. On the narrative level the trials question the epistemological at every step along the way. In addition, Celliers's "mad" pantomime before his execution and the "mad" pantomime of his non-execution deny the primacy of the epistemological. Understanding the pantomimed motions on screen does not help spectators understand what is taking place in these instances. Additionally, on the aural/ level, the constant image of David Bowie playing a man who sings off key, sometimes wildly, is disconcerting. And, on the visual level, Merry Christmas mixes narrative and mise-en-scène elements incongruently, challenging spectatorial expectations of verisimilitude. The film is beautifully shot, set on a tropical island resplendent with colors the opposite of military gray and army drab. Waves lap the beaches during beatings, hara kiri scenes, and suicides. Bright green leaves and orange flowers wrap the smuggled rations of the hospital prisoners. The white glow of a moth breaks the dark night as it lands on a condemned man's head, as he is buried to his neck in sand and slowly dies.

Repeatedly, the target of the film is the priority of being right. In the coda, Lawrence tells Hara, "You're the victim of men who think they're right. And the truth is, of course, that nobody's right." Here, Lawrence returns to the skeptical investigation of the epistemological. Lawrence takes up the investigation Levinas links to the ethical and calls into question relying on right and wrong as the poles of human existence. What makes this scene crucial cinematically is that it occurs at the end of the film. In a way, it occurs after the film, as it takes place as the coda of the

film.<sup>79</sup> It is the excess, the appendage, that puts the remainder of the film into question. At least, it puts the epistemological quest of the rest of the film into question because Lawrence, too, is indicted by his own statement as the film has revealed his own failings to read the truth and the failings of striving for the truth throughout the film.

Lawrence has rarely, if ever, been right. Even in the simplest of moments, his verdicts are proven incorrect by the next moment of the story. When the guards come to the cells on Christmas Day, Lawrence reassures Celliers that they have come to take Lawrence to his death. Yet, the guards come for both Celliers and Lawrence, and Celliers reminds Lawrence, “How is it, John, you’re always wrong.” Again, at the final confrontation between Yonoi and Celliers, when Yonoi orders all the prisoners to assemble in the center of the camp, Celliers asks Lawrence what this assembly means. Lawrence replies, “I don’t think this is anything. Fairly routine stuff, this. Don’t worry.” If he is to be taken at his word, Lawrence is again wrong. He misreads the moment in the story which is wholly not “routine stuff” as the sick are ordered to walk to their deaths, the prisoners’ commander is about to be executed in front of them, and Celliers rescues the Group Captain by confronting Yonoi and kissing him in front of the entire camp. Celliers is beaten and dragged away, later to be decapitated in reverse as he is executed in the sandpit. Yonoi is replaced by a camp commander who claims he will be less lenient than Yonoi. Finally, Hara, the Group Captain, and the bulk of the prisoners are death-marched off to build an

---

<sup>79</sup> In the driest sense, a coda is a concluding musical section that is formally distinct from the main structure; a concluding part of a literary or dramatic work; something that serves to round out, conclude, or summarize and that has an interest of its own; in Italian, literally, “tail.”

airstrip. What Lawrence judged would be “fairly routine” marks the utter unraveling of the structures that have governed the story line to this point. Nothing is left intact after this “routine” scene.

Additionally, Lawrence’s verdict that nobody’s right suffers the anxiety of all skepticism. It is impossible to pronounce if “nobody” is to include the speaker as well. On the one hand, if Lawrence is leaving himself out of this judgment, then he is repeating the earlier epistemological flaw; he is wrong again and trapped within his own blind spot. On the other hand, if Lawrence is including himself in “nobody,” then he too is wrong, again, and he is right. “Nobody’s right” evokes the skeptical and the paradox that is the skeptical. To say, “nobody’s right,” is to be caught in the oscillation of the skeptical which Levinas asserts opens the relation between Saying and the Said—and here Seeing and the Seen. The aporia of the skeptical gives halt to the epistemological by way of the ethical. The infinite feedback loop of the skeptical evokes the infinite responsibility of the self for the other.

This evoking is crucial. This relation of Seeing and the Seen is precisely an evoking of Saying and the Said, not a documenting of it. The relation between the spectator and the text by way of regarding the ethical questioning the epistemological is not the same as the ethical relation between the self and the other, but an evoking of the ethical that the cinematic relation generates. The skeptical / ethical interrupts the flow of the epistemological. It does not undo it as if it came from the outside to replace it. Rather, it is the non-instant that gives pause to the certainty, or at least the quest for certainty within the epistemological. What is left in the film is a statement

---

which may or may not contradict itself and the freeze frame of a condemned man which cannot answer that contradiction.

Pace Levinas's theories of the aesthetic, especially the role of aesthetic immobilizing of the other, as in statuary, it is precisely the immobilizing of the image at the end of this film which best corresponds to his own arguments in regard to the ethical. According to Levinas, it is the freezing of time in the instant that makes all art into a tragic caricature. According to Levinas, by representing, art reduces the future of the other to the eternal present: a nightmare, prison, caricature, idol, empty interval. He asserts, "Art brings about just this duration in the interval, in that sphere which a being is able to traverse, but in which its shadow is immobilized. The eternal duration of the interval in which a statue is immobilized never finished, still enduring—something inhuman and monstrous."<sup>80</sup> Thus, at least in his earlier writings, all representational art, is totalizing because it condemns those who are represented to an eternal present with no future to come. Levinas totalizes all representational art as totalizing; he succumbs to the totalizing impulse he so diligently critiques.

In this closing freeze-frame, though, the very freezing of the image is what opens the epistemological to questions of the ethical. What challenges total criticism in the film also challenges the dominance of the totalizing impulse Levinas critiques. The relation between the self and the other can only remain non-thematizable as the ground of epistemology is worn away. Hara will be assimilated; his execution in the

---

<sup>80</sup> Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow," The Levinas Reader, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 141.

morning will serve that purpose, but at this instant, this frozen moment, he becomes a face confronting Lawrence and spectators as he smiles into the camera as the camera is sutured into the position of Lawrence exiting through the cell door. Because it would require us to assume, to assimilate all that would come after the freeze frame, the freeze frame signals the stutter step of the epistemological and Levinas's totalization of art simultaneously. Time is frozen, but its freezing opens the image to Seeing and the Seen, to a totalizing and untotalizing relation. This might be what cinema teaches us about ethics. Only by assuming an end to the oscillations of this freeze frame can spectators predict the future to come. Only by assuming an end to the oscillations of this freeze frame can this freeze frame be reduced to the violence of thematization.

### **The Ambiguity of Evidence and the Aporia of Law**

#### **—The Certainty Hypothesis**

The judgment of history is set forth in the visible.

Historical events are the visible par excellence; their truth is produced in evidence. The visible forms, or tends to form, a totality.<sup>81</sup>

Or tends to form. Even for Levinas, this tendency within visible art to totalize is not total. This has been my argument overall with regard to the visible formation of the freeze frame. The visible “tends to form” but is not guaranteed to form, a totality. From the earliest of his works, Levinas has denied a correlation between the ethical and the aesthetic. With the freeze frame of this film and the

---

<sup>81</sup> Levinas, Totality 243.

freeze frame in more general instances, that tendency is denied priority. The freeze frame forms, or tends to form, an opening toward Seeing on the hither side of the Seen.

To widen the context of this discussion and sharpen the difference of the effect of Merry Christmas, I would like to conclude by comparing and contrasting Merry Christmas and the highly influential Japanese film Rashomon (dir. Akira Kurosawa, 1950). The narratives of both films center on trials and issues of loyalty, rape, murder, and testimony. In both films the mise-en-scène functions as contrapuntal beauty framing the pervasive ugliness of the violence of their story lines. And, both Merry Christmas and Rashomon turn around questions of truth and the quest for the truth for characters and spectators. It is in this last category, especially, that their similarity signals their difference.

The difference is key. Rashomon is concerned with the relative perspectives of witnesses and the impossibility of an objective knowledge. As such, it remains within the realm of the epistemological as choices regarding interpretations of the film revolve around either / or distinctions. As David Desser astutely notes, thematically, the film addresses the question, how do we live “in an existential world, a world rendered meaningless by the death of certainty, by the death, that is, of God.”<sup>82</sup>

<sup>82</sup> David Desser, “Ikiru: Narration as a Moral Act,” Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History, eds. Arthur Nolletti, Jr. and David Desser (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992) 59. For Desser the answer to this question comes through a close reading of the cinematic narrative structures of Kurosawa’s 1952 Ikiru (To Live) alongside those of Rashomon. Both films give spectators a meaningless world, he states. However, both also give us the moral answer that heroes in meaningless worlds still choose ethically, “to help others” (65). This reading does not change the first premise, that

The death of certainty renders epistemological subjects uncertain as the ground for their judgment is swept from beneath them. Already, though, the death of certainty signals a relativism which is not a skepticism. At least, it cannot be easily linked to a traditional skepticism which asserts that (1) absolute knowledge is impossible and that (2) better knowledge is only acquired by degree. This is not the relativism of Rashomon, though, not the aporia of Merry Christmas. Following Desser, without epistemological certainty, knowing what is, it is impossible to have moral certainty, right action. Returned to the realm of the “to be,” moral certainty is bound to epistemological certainty, subservient to it. The epistemological retains its place of priority. The simple relativity between one and the other truths of Rashomon does not signal a break with a system, the epistemological, with truth at its center.

In Rashomon, as soon as the testimonies begin to conflict, the film cautions spectators to doubt each of them and the actions they describe. Since the testimonies do not verify one another, the world of the film eschews verifiability. The events of the narrative are no longer certain. However, this uncertainty is certain for the characters and spectators. They know that no one answer will serve to suffice. It is a difference of perspective and not a difference of alterity. As Desser continues, “After being confronted by four conflicting tales, the audience has, it seems, to choose: it must select one story over the others as being true, or, correctly, must assume that all

---

knowledge is relative; it adds the second point that there is still a knowable prescribed action for heroes in that world of relative knowledge.

stories are equally true and false, that truth itself is uncertain.”<sup>83</sup> For Desser, this initial set up is only the beginning of a moral tale, which asserts that heroes confronted by a relative world must still choose to act heroically by aiding others. They must choose to act heroically and not unheroically, where knowing which is which is essential. For Desser, the woodcutter’s adoption of the infant orphan at the very end of the film is the evidence that heroes still act heroically by helping others. As Desser points out, Rashomon evokes a salient moral tale within an existential context. Yet, even here, decisions regarding human relation fall prey to the epistemological in a manner similar to that of total criticism. Rashomon reassures us by telling us that truth is relative but that right action is still possible and laudable. Rashomon’s total criticism returns to the totalizing impulse.

From the perspective of an ethics founded in the condition of the between of heterogeneous space, Rashomon’s morality is a further epistemological point to be made despite the fact that it argues against the seeming theme of undecidability in the narrative. This is precisely the onus for Derrida and Levinas. Moral codes of conduct are unethical because of their reliance on the epistemological as a ground for the ethical. With their priority in the epistemological, such codes cannot avoid totalitarian codification. Decisions are preempted by algorithms, as verdicts must be reached either / or.

Rashomon is a powerful movie that teaches us a good deal about relativity. Yet, in the end, it remains monocular, univocal. There is no decision to be made because we are told from the start that no one version will suffice. We know that we

---

<sup>83</sup> Desser 60.

do not know. In this way, Rashomon is where we are certain that we do not know which answer to choose, but we know there are answers to choose between. Thus, Rashomon returns to total criticism, to overturning, rather than to the work of certain films directed by Michelangelo Antonioni or Pedro Almodóvar. Unlike Blow Up's writing "NO WORDS" and L'avventura's opening between narrative presence and absence and the ethics of alienation, the opening between the generic pornographic and non-pornographic of the cinema of Almodóvar, or Merry Christmas's ethics of the law between the frozen and unfrozen frame of a face, Rashomon cuts short the infinity of the decision before the decision even has its start. We learn that the world is relative, and we are certain of this relativity.

The film is "an existential allegory: God is dead, there are no eternal verities."<sup>84</sup> Of this, the film is certain. Yet, in making uncertainty and the death of eternal verities central to its narrative, *mise-en-scène*, and cinematography, Rashomon returns to the subject of the epistemological precisely by stating that there are no eternal verities. Meaning is relative and evidence is ambiguous. Yet, the film stops short of expressing the radical uncertainty of a skeptical, non-totalizing cinema.

The world is meaningless, and we know it. It alerts spectators to the ambiguity of evidence and ambivalence of judging. Being certain is called into question by "the state of having more than one meaning, with resultant uncertainty as to the intended significance of the statement" and "the existence of mutually

---

<sup>84</sup> Desser 65.

conflicting feelings or attitudes.”<sup>85</sup> Knowing the truth is impossible here, but knowing that it is impossible to know the truth is still knowing. Conflicting feelings or attitudes but not mutually exclusive ones. As complex as it is, this certainty that something is uncertain is precisely what is called into question by the skeptical. In Rashomon, spectators can be certain they do not know. This instance is filled with the ambiguity of the law, but not the aporia of what Derrida terms “justice” and Levinas “ethics.” Rashomon asks us to read the sentence “She helped the man down the block.” Either / or: A woman assisted a gentleman to travel to the end of the block or A woman gave assistance to a gentleman located at the end of the block. Merry Christmas asks us to read the sentence “This sentence is false.” Impossible: If the content of this sentence is true, that the sentence is false, then the sentence is false, which would make it true.

The epistemological is not called into question as with the aporia opened in Merry Christmas. Rather, with Merry Christmas, the impossible comes in the very absence of certainty in regard to knowing, not being able to label even knowing for certain. This is the “point of undecidability.”<sup>86</sup> Spectators are left not with conflicting testimonies but with the face of a condemned man and the inability to judge, while simultaneously called to judge, while called to judge precisely because of the impossibility of justifying judgment. In Rashomon, we are certain we do not know. In Merry Christmas, we cannot be certain what it means to know. Rashomon’s relativism returns all concerns to the realm of the epistemological.

---

<sup>85</sup> C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, A Handbook to Literature, 6th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992) 14-15.

Merry Christmas's skepticism is the effect of the epistemological interrogated by the ethical.

---

<sup>86</sup> Holman 33.

### Conclusion: Seeing Terror and the Seen of Terrorism

We may come to look back on its [Fahrenheit 9/11]  
 hugely successful first week the way we now think of  
 the televised presidential debate between John  
 Kennedy and Richard Nixon, as a moment when we  
 grasped for the first time the potential of a mass  
 medium—in this case, movies—to affect American  
 politics in new ways.<sup>1</sup>

As I stated at the onset, the impetus behind my writing of this study was twofold: my general sense of something more to post-structuralism than I had considered and a seemingly unresolvable question concerning the character of Anna in L'avventura. I could not decide what was missing from deconstruction. I could not decide how to interpret Anna without her being there. I'm not certain if I've resolved the second of these concerns, except to say that I no longer place as much value in interpretation—at least not interpretation grounded in epistemology. And, in the end, that might be the influence of the ethics I have come to appreciate behind Derridean deconstruction linked to Levinasian ethics. Post-structuralist ethics describes why I must respond to the undecidability of deciding, why uncertainty calls for something otherwise than certainty. That ethics cautions me against the violence of certainty and final solutions (offered as origins or ends). Anna remains a mystery for me. “The other remains a mystery for me,” is something Levinas repeated

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Corliss, “The World According to Michael” Time 12 July 2004.

frequently. My regard for Anna remains uncertain. For, at this point in 2004, I see certainty as the problem, not the solution to questions regarding cinema and the post-phenomenological ethical subjectivity it can signal. In fact, in a period defined by the ubiquity of images and the trauma of post-9/11 history, I find ever less satisfaction and consolation in certainty, especially the supposed certainty that seeing is believing. Perhaps this is also the primary concern behind Michael Moore's filmic inquiry into the politics and familial connections of President George W. Bush, Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004). I find assertions of certainty, of good and evil oppositions in particular, to be the refuge of totalitarianism. This is not to claim the high ground for an unexamined cynicism, though. Rather, it is a claim in favor of a skepticism that runs a fine risk. What remains is a healthy, critical, difficult skepticism. This is why I continue to defend Fahrenheit—precisely because it “fails” to come to a certain conclusion. Although the film has been attacked as rhetorically shallow and manipulative or didactic and predictably preaching to the converted, there remains a level at which it refuses to come to a closure around its own assertions. “Was it all just a dream?” the narrator asks. Do you believe this?

Levinas dedicated Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence

To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Levinas, Otherwise v.

In the end, this study is a response to the memory of those who are among the closest to still suffer from the hatred of the other, to the victims who created the events of September 11, 2001 and those created by and yet to be created by the trauma of that event. This study runs counter to such documents as HR 3162: “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act (the USA PATRIOT ACT of October 24, 2001). Such documents of certainty and closure, which as one legal scholar argues, by pretending to predict the future and predetermine which groups will act in which ways, is “sweeping legislature that (among other things) is supposed to insulate the United States against the possibility of terrorist attack.”<sup>3</sup> I question the violence of that insulation, and, as well, the violence of a new world order that regards prevention and disruption of future acts (of any kind it cannot control) as its goal.<sup>4</sup> Michael Moore ends Fahrenheit 9/11 by asking a series of questions about the future of the disenfranchised who enlist in the United States’s military, international relations, and the outcome of the second US / Iraq war. Some have attacked his questions as empty rhetoric serving his sarcastic, self-righteous project of promoting himself and his agenda. Some have attacked the film precisely for ending on a

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan K. Stubbs, “The Bottom Rung of America’s Race Ladder: After the September 11 Catastrophe are American Muslims Becoming America’s new N....s?” The Journal of Law and Religion XIX (2003-4): 122.

<sup>4</sup> See John G. Douglass, “Raiding Islam: Searches that Target Religious Institutions,” The Journal of Law and Religion XIX (2003-4): 111. Douglass argues that the post-September 11 world has turned legal rationale on its head because the goal for law enforcement has become disrupting the future rather than prosecuting the past. Prosecuting the past still matters, but now less than disrupting the future of perceived terrorists, terrorist acts, and terrorist networks.

question he refuses to answer. How could a question about the future work in any other way and still be just?

Enclosed within the boundaries of an answer to such a question, an act like HR 3162, or the rhetoric of absolutism that now governs our age, how can we not call certainty into question?

\* \* \*

She weeps bitterly in the night,  
tears on her cheeks;  
among all her lovers  
she has none to comfort her;  
all her friends have dealt  
treacherously with her,  
they have become her enemies<sup>5</sup>

Tears connect Levinas and Derrida. For both thinkers, tears play a crucial role between blindness and sight, between vision and words, and between suffering and rejoicing. For both, tears play between the lens and the lid of the eye, or come between the object and the organ of vision, even when the tears themselves represent the absolute closeness between people, as in supplication or mourning. How can one see through tears? Between tears? How does Seeing interrupt the Seen always through tears?

In the end, Seeing is “a responsibility which, before the discourse revolving around what is said, is probably the essence of language.”<sup>6</sup> It is the non-ground of

---

<sup>5</sup> Lamentations 1:2.

communication. It is also, at least as far as I have been arguing here, the essence of cinema in regard to its engagement of me as a spectator, an an-archic essence that calls me to respond, thus interrupting the economy of the Seen persisting in Seeing in the world.

Beyond all else, ethical spectatorship is patient. Seeing is patient. To incorrectly paraphrase Levinas on patience, in Seeing a disengagement within engagement is effected—neither the impossibility of a contemplation hovering over history nor irrevocable engagement in its visible objectivity. Between direct engagement and indirect disengagement, the two positions merge. Seeing, the ethical interruption, the demand for judgment, engages spectatorship in this merger between interpellation and objectification. Neither the gaze nor the glance obtains at one moment. Neither is patient enough. Rather, an infinite responsibility to answer, patient beyond any acceptable patience, invokes this difficult freedom I have termed Seeing.

In Memoirs of the Blind Derrida connects skepticism, patience, responsibility, and visual judgment from the start of a conversation that eventually comes to tears. Tears of sorrow or tears of joy? He does not answer, but explains that they are tears that see. Derrida questions whether to believe in these tears, tears that see, and writes, “I don’t know, one has to believe . . .”<sup>7</sup> Do these ellipses remind us of his teardrops? Or, do they return us to the first page of his book to begin patiently again? How do we respond to uncertain teardrops on the page?

<sup>6</sup> Levinas, Beyond the Verse 128.

\* \* \*

Let me conclude with a note on one of the most important films ever made.

Human Remains (dir. Jay Rosenblatt, 1998) is an archival documentary about the everyday, banal, human attributes of some of the most infamous dictators of the Twentieth Century: Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Mao, and Franco. The film details a long list of the mundane and perverse habits of these men. They are afflicted by testicular and stomach disorders. They refuse to bathe. They watch too much television. They are chronically flatulent and molest young girls. They execute others for being taller than themselves. They pride themselves on being superior swimmers and sportsmen. They order the murders of millions upon millions of other human beings. They remain human, neither above nor below the fray. Their connection to everyone of us brings questions of responsibility back into the light. And these questions remain questions. Rosenblatt has stated plainly that “I don’t have answers, but hopefully my films can be catalysts for a deep discussion and a way of reflecting.”<sup>8</sup> Seeing interrupts the Seen, and Rosenblatt focuses that interruption at us.

On many occasions, Levinas explained the ultimate implication of his description of ethics by stating that I am responsible even for the other’s responsibility.

I have previously said elsewhere—I do not like mentioning it for it should be completed by other considerations—that I am responsible

---

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, Memoirs 129.

for the persecutions that I undergo. But only me! My “close relations” or “my people” are already others and, for them, I demand justice.<sup>9</sup>

The other calls me into my unique subjectivity. I am because I am responsible. And, that responsibility goes so far to mean that I am responsible for what harm is done to me. My responsibility comes first. This does not disallow the context of other others. For them, I can and do demand justice. As soon as others come into the picture, I demand justice for them. However, what makes me unique is that no one else can substitute for my responsibility, and, therefore, before questions of justice come questions of ethics. Before I can demand anything I am responsible even to the point of answering that demand. My own response must always remain open, always respond more, even when I feel justified otherwise.

Rosenblatt says of these too-human dictators,

There's no sympathy for these people. They are presented as disgusting individuals, but they are presented as human, and that's difficult for some people. It's more comfortable to look at them as monsters and never go beyond the surface, never look at yourself and your own responsibility for the horrors that take place in the world. Until we take responsibility and accept that part of ourselves, that's the only way we are going to raise our individual and collective consciousness so that we don't give power to people like that. When I

---

<sup>8</sup> Michael Fox, “Jay Rosenblatt’s Excavations of the Psyche” The Independent Film and Video Monthly December 2000, 37.

was a little kid, I asked my grandfather what happened to his relatives. He would say, “Hitler killed them.” “What do you mean ‘Hitler killed them?’” It could never [have been] just one person. It’s the power that that one person gets vested from the collective.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the interruption of certain images can only come by way of uncertain images. Then, the answer to the ubiquity of determined images would be more, less certain, images. Perhaps this is the opening provided by the films in this study and by Fahrenheit 9/11 and Human Remains. Perhaps what Rosenblatt and Moore offer us in their documentaries are fine risks that are never pleased with themselves and the violence of guarantees against what is to come. They are documentaries that call for responses against objective / subjective binaries, thus, opening a further space for more discussions of post-phenomenological ethics. Thankfully, neither offers the certainty of a final solution. Like moments in Antonioni, Almodóvar, and Oshima, these films also raise more questions than they can answer and continue the conversation by again calling spectators to respond no matter how difficult the response.

---

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985) 99.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Fox, 38-39.

### Select Filmography

Pedro Almodóvar

Pepi, Luci, Bom, y otras chicas del montón (Pepi, Luci, Bom . . ., 1980). Director.

Writer.

Laberinto de pasiones (Labyrinth of Passion, 1982). Director. Writer. Producer.

Composer. Production Designer.

Entre tinieblas (Dark Habits, 1983). Director. Writer.

¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto? (What Have I Done to Deserve This?, 1984).

Director. Writer.

Matador (1986). Director. Writer (with Jesús Ferrero).

La ley del deseo (The Law of Desire, 1987). Director. Writer. Composer.

Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios (Women on the Verge of a Nervous

Breakdown, 1988). Director. Writer. Producer.

¡Atame! (Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!, 1989). Director. Writer. Composer.

Tacones lejanos (High Heels, 1991). Director. Writer.

Kika (1993). Director. Writer.

La flor de mi secreto (The Flower of My Secret, 1995). Director. Writer.

Carne trémula (Live Flesh, 1997). Director. Writer (with Ray Loriga and Jorge

Guerricaechevarría).

Todo sobre mi madre (All About My Mother, 1999). Director. Writer.

Hable con ella (Talk to Her, 2004). Director. Writer.

La mala educación (Bad Education, 2004). Director. Writer. Producer.

Michelangelo Antonioni

Cronaca di un amore (Story of a Love Affair, 1950). Director. Writer.

I vinti (1952). Director. Writer.

La signora senza camelie (The Lady Without Camelias, 1953). Director. Writer.

Tentato suicidio (episode of Amore in città (Love in the City), 1953). Director.

Writer.

Le amiche (The Girlfriends, 1955). Director. Writer.

Il grido (The Outcry, 1957). Director. Writer.

L'avventura (1959). Director. Writer.

La notte (The Night, 1960). Director. Writer.

L'eclisse (The Eclipse, 1962). Director. Writer.

Il deserto rosso (Red Desert, 1964). Director. Writer.

Prefazione (episode of I tre volti (Three Faces of a Woman), 1965). Director.

Writer.

Blow-Up (1966). Director. Writer.

Zabriskie Point (1969). Director. Writer. Editor.

The Passenger (1975). Director. Writer. Editor.

Il mistero di oberwald (The Mystery of Oberwald, 1980). Director. Writer. Editor.

Identificazione di una donna (Identification of a Woman, 1982). Director. Writer.

Editor.

Al di là delle nuvole (Beyond the Clouds, 1995). Director. Writer. Editor.

Lo sguardo di Michelangelo (Michelangelo Eye to Eye, 2004). Director. Writer.

Il filo pericoloso delle cose (episode of Eros, 2004). Director. Writer.

Oshima Nagisa

Ai to kobo no machi (A Town of Love and Hope (original title The Boy Who Sells a Pigeon, 1959). Director. Writer.

Seishun sankoku monogatari (Cruel Story of Youth (Cruel Tales of Youth), 1960). Director. Writer.

Taiyo no hakaba (Burial of the Sun (The Sun's Grave), 1960). Director. Writer.

Nihon no yoru to kiri (Night and Fog in Japan, 1960). Director.

Shiiku (The Catch, 1961). Director.

Amakusa shiro tokisada (Shiro Tokisada (The Revolt), 1962). Director.

Esturaku (Pleasures of the Flesh, 1964). Director. Writer.

Hakuchi no torima (Violence at Noon, 1966). Director.

Nihon sunka-ko (A Treatise on Japanese Bawdy Song, 1967). Director. Writer.

Muri-shinju: Nihon no natsu (Japanese Summer: Double Suicide, 1967). Director.

Koshikei (Death by Hanging, 1968). Director. Writer.

Kaette kita yopparai (Three Resurrected Drunkards, 1968). Director.

Shinjuku dorobo nikki (Diary of a Shinjuku Thief (Diary of a Shinjuku Burglar), 1968). Director. Writer. Editor.

Shonen (Boy, 1969). Writer.

Tokyo senso sengo hiwa: Eiga de isho o nokoshite shinda otoko no monogatari (The Battle of Tokyo, or the Story of the Young Man Who Left his Will on Film (He Died After the Tokyo War: Story of a Young Man Leaving a Film as Testament, 1970). Director. Writer.

Gishiki (Ceremonies (The Ceremony), 1971). Director. Writer.

Natsu no imoto (Dear Summer Sister, 1972). Director. Writer.

Ai no korida (Realm of the Senses (In the Realm of the Senses, 1976). Director.  
Writer.

Ai no borei (Empire of Passion, 1978). Director. Writer

Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence (Senjo no merii kurisumasu) (Furyo), 1982).  
Director. Writer.

Max, Mon Amour (1986). Director. Writer.

Gohatto (Taboo, 1999). Director. Writer.

## Bibliography

- Almodóvar, Pedro. Patty Diphusa and Other Writings. Trans. Kirk Anderson. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992.
- Anderson, Joseph I. and Donald Richie. The Japanese Film: Art and Industry. Expanded edition. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982.
- Andrew, J. Dudley. The Major Film Theories. London: Oxford UP, 1976.
- Arrowsmith, William. Antonioni: The Poet of Images. Ed. and Intro. Ted Perry. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.
- Beccaria, Cesare. On Crimes and Punishments. Trans. David Young. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986.
- Blandford, Steve, Barry Keith Grant and Jim Hillier. The Film Studies Dictionary. London: Arnold, 2001.
- Bonitzer, Pascal. “The Disappearance (On Antonioni).” L'avventura: Michelangelo Antonioni, Director. Eds. Seymour Chatman and Guido Fink. Rutgers Films in Print. Vol. 12. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989. 215-218.
- Brunette, Peter. The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni. Cambridge Film Classics. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Brunette, Peter and David Wills. Screen / Play: Derrida and Film Theory. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989.
- Richard Corliss, Richard. “The World According to Michael.” Time 12 July 2004.
- Critchley, Simon. “Das Ding: Lacan and Levinas.” Research in Phenomenology. 28 (1998) 72-90.
- . The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

- . Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity. London: Verso, 1998.
- . Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Deleuze, Gilles. Cinema 1: The Movement-Image. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997.
- Derrida, Jacques. “Force of Law: The ‘Mythical Foundation of Authority,’” Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice. Eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson. New York: Routledge, 1992. 3-67.
- . “Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida.” Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy. Eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley. New York: Routledge, 1998. 65-83.
- . Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993.
- . The Truth in Painting. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990.
- . Writing and Difference. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978.
- Desser, David. Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988.
- . “Ikiru: Narration as a Moral Act.” Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History. Eds. Arthur Nolletti, Jr. and David Desser. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992. 56-68.
- Dines, Gail, Robert Jensen and Ann Russo. Pornography: The Production and Consumption of Inequality. New York: Routledge, 1998.

- Douglass, John G. "Raiding Islam: Searches that Target Religious Institutions," The Journal of Law and Religion XIX (2003-4).
- Eaglestone, Rob. Ethical Criticism: Interpretation After Levinas. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1997.
- Edwards, Gwynne. Indecent Exposures: Buñuel, Saura, Erice & Almodóvar. London: Marion Boyars, 1995.
- Evans, Peter William. Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown (Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios). BFI Modern Classics. London: British Film Institute, 1996.
- Flaxman, Gregory, ed. The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000.
- Ford, Luke. A History of X: 100 Years of Sex in Films. Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 1999.
- Fox, Everett, trans. Genesis and Exodus: A New English Rendition. New York: Schocken, 1990.
- Fox, Michael. "Jay Rosenblatt's Excavations of the Psyche." The Independent Film and Video Monthly December 2000 35-38.
- Handelman, Suan A. "The Torah of Criticism and the Criticism of Torah: Recuperating the Pedagogical Moment." Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age. Ed. Steven Kepnes. New York: New York UP, 1996.
- Hawley Jarman, Rosemary. "Ai no Corrida: In the Realm of the Senses." Eros in Hell: Sex, Blood and Madness in Japanese Cinema. Ed. Jack Hunter.

- Creation Cinema Collection. Vol. 9. London: Creation Books, 1998. 103-120.
- Holman, C. Hugh and William Harmon. A Handbook to Literature. 6th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1992.
- Hunter, Jack. Forward. Eros in Hell: Sex, Blood and Madness in Japanese Cinema. Ed. Jack Hunter. Creation Cinema Collection. Vol. 9. London: Creation Books, 1998.
- Ikegami, Eiko. The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995.
- Irigaray, Luce. "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas On the Divinity of Love." Trans. Margaret Whitford. Re-Reading Levinas. Eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991. 109-118.
- Jameson, Fredric. The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992.
- Johnson, Eithne. "Excess and Ecstasy: Constructing Female Pleasure in Porn Movies." Velvet Light Trap 1993: 30-49.
- Kaite, Berkeley. Pornography and Difference. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995.
- Katz, Ephraim. The Film Encyclopedia. 4th ed. Revised by Fred Klein and Ronald Dean Nolen. New York: Harper Resource, 2001.
- Kaufman, Eleanor and Kevin Jon Heller, eds. Deleuze and Guattari: New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy, and Culture. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998.
- Kauffmann, Stanley. Regarding Film: Criticism and Comment. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.

- Kendrick, Walter. The Secret Museum: Pornography and Modern Culture. New York: Viking, 1987.
- Kipnis, Laura. Ecstasy Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender, and Aesthetics. Foreword Paul Smith. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.
- . “Disgust and Desire: Hustler Magazine.” Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America. New York: Grove. 122-160.
- . “(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading Hustler.” Ecstasy Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender, and Aesthetics. Foreword Paul Smith. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993. 219-242.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.” Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings. 4th edition. Eds. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, Leo Braudy. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992. 154-165.
- Kroningsberg, Ira. The Complete Film Dictionary. New York: New American Library, 1987.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other. Trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia UP, 1998.
- . Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo. Trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985.
- . Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991.
- . “Peace and Proximity.” Alterity and Transcendence. Trans. Michael B. Smith. New York: Columbia UP, 1999. 131-144.

- . “Politics After!” Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures. Trans. Gary D. Mole. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994. 188-195.
- . “Reality and its Shadow.” The Levinas Reader. Ed. Seán Hand. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989. 129-143.
- . “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism.” Trans. Seán Hand. Critical Inquiry. 17:1 (Autumn 1990) 62-71.
- . “Signature.” Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism. Trans. Seán Hand Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1990. 291-295.
- . “There is: Existence Without Existent.” The Levinas Reader. Ed. Seán Hand. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989. 29-36.
- . Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority. Trans. Alphonso Lingis Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969.
- Llewelyn, John. Appositions of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002.
- Manning, Robert John Scheffler. Interpreting Otherwise Than Heidegger: Emmanuel Levinas's Ethics as First Philosophy. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1993.
- Marks, Laura U. The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.
- Mellen, Joan. Voices From the Japanese Cinema. New York: Liveright, 1975.
- Moore, Kevin Z. “Eclipsing the Commonplace: The Logic of Alienation in Antonioni’s Cinema.” Film Quarterly 48:4 (1995): 22-34.
- Muller, Eddie and Daniel Faris. Grindhouse: The Forbidden World of “Adults Only” Cinema. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1996.

- Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey. L'avventura. London: British Film Institute, 1998.
- Oakey, Virginia. Dictionary of Film and Television Terms. New York: Harper, 1983.
- O'Brien, Geoffrey. "Is It All Just a Dream?" The New York Review of Books. 12 August 2004. 17-19.
- Olkowski, Dorothea. Giles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation. Stanford: U of California P, 1999.
- Oshima Nagisa. Cinema, Censorship, and the State: The Writings of Nagisa Oshima, 1956-1978. Ed. and Intro. Annette Michelson. Trans. Dawn Lawson. Cambridge: MIT P, 1992.
- Pally, Marcia. "I Witness, Eye Confess." Film Comment 21 (March-April 1985) 60-61.
- Penley, Constance. The Future Of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989.
- Phillips, William H. Film: An Introduction. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.
- Richie, Donald. Japanese Cinema: Film Style and National Character. Garden City: Anchor, 1971.
- Robbins, Jill. Altered Interpretation: Levinas and Literature. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999.
- Rosen, Philip, ed. Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader. New York: Columbia UP, 1986.

- Schaefer, Eric. "Gauging a Revolution: 16mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature." Cinema Journal 41.3 (2002) 3-26.
- Shakespeare, William. Hamlet, Prince of the Danes. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans, et al. The Riverside Shakespeare. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 1183-1245.
- Silverman, Kaja. The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988.
- Stewart, Garrett. Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999.
- Strauss, Frédéric, ed. Almodóvar on Almodóvar. Trans. Yves Baignères. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.
- Stubbs, Jonathan K. "The Bottom Rung of America's Race Ladder: After the September 11 Catastrophe are American Muslims Becoming America's new N....s?" The Journal of Law and Religion XIX (2003-4).
- Svensson, Anne. Japan. Screen Ser. London: Zwemmer, 1971.
- Tarkovsky, Andrei. Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema. Trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair. Austin: U of Texas P, 1996.
- Totaro, Donato. Rev of Tarkovsky, Andrei. Sculpting in Time. Film Philosophy Internet Salon. 4:4 (February 2000). Online <<http://www.filmphilosophy.com>>.
- Turim, Maureen. The Films of Oshima Nagisa: Images of a Japanese Iconoclast. Berkeley: U of California P, 1998.

Ulmer, Gregory L. Applied Grammatology: Post(e)-Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1985.

Williams, Linda. Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”. Rev. ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999 (1989).

Women by Women: Erotic Photography. Eds. Peter Delius and Jacek Slaski. Intro. Sophie Hack and Stephanie Kuhnen. New York: Prestel, 2003.

Wurzer, Wilhelm S. Filming and Judgment: Between Heidegger and Adorno. New Jersey: Humanities P, 1990.