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IN SEARCH OF LOST SELVES:
MEMORY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN TRANSNATIONAL ART CINEMA

by

Anders J. Bergstrom

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Department of English and Film Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Doctor of Philosophy in English and Film Studies

Wilfrid Laurier University

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In Search of Lost Selves: Memory and Subjectivity in Transnational Art Cinema

Anders J. Bergstrom

Doctor of Philosophy

Wilfrid Laurier University Department of English and Film Studies

2016

This dissertation begins from the position that cinema's ongoing persistence as a specific operation of subjective perception is intimately related to the questions of self and memory it raises. Even as digitization and global capitalism have ostensibly led to the creation of a "post-cinematic" culture, cinematic forms and practices remain inextricably related to the larger (often unacknowledged) metaphysical concerns of the cultures and social contexts in which they continue to signify. These concerns—which include beliefs in perceptual realism, the relations between images and the past, and notions of selfhood—shape both the production and consumption of cinema as a tool which mediates relationships between human beings and between humans and the world. Addressing especially the impact of cinema's role as a materialization of memory, this dissertation makes the case that cinema can enact and materialize the structures of consciousness and that cinema opens the possibilities for crafting an ethical stance toward the world.

Through analysis of examples drawn from contemporary transnational art cinema, including, among others, *The Tree of Life* (2011), *Melancholia* (2011), and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), this dissertation explores the role that art cinema practices play and have played in the constitution of identity, explaining the enduring presence of themes surrounding memory and identity in cinema. By articulating how the notion of *self* is problematized through both the images on the screen and the activity of viewing them, this dissertation explores *how* films communicate the existence of an inner life and *why* particular

filmic conventions continue to persist which carry particular meanings about perceptual experience and the nature of the self. Because memory, a term which integrates the various biological, social, and technological processes which relate the past and present, plays a key role in underpinning the human relationship to temporality, memory's dependence on visual technologies is instrumental to understanding how cinema functions.

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General Introduction

In Search of Lost Selves

An Image of Thought

This dissertation turns on the notion that cinema, to borrow David Rodowick's paraphrase of pioneering film theorist Hugo Münsterberg, is able to represent aesthetically "the spatial and temporal categories that govern mental activity itself: perception, attention, memory, imagination, and emotion" (*GDTM* 18). That cinema can provide an image of what are psychological, subjective processes means that cinema can offer insights into questions about the nature of consciousness, the phenomenology of experience, and identity. The main thrust of this study is that the films under discussion, through their subject matter and formal construction, are chiefly concerned with how human beings construct a "sense of self" through visual and aural memory images. I argue by extension that these films offer striking examples of the way that cinema continues to represent the invisible processes of inner life, the memories, desires, and beliefs upon which contemporary notions of identity are posited.¹ These processes are central to the conception of identity which emerges in the modern, post-classical era, which assumes that humans are in possession of thoughts and perceptions, and that this inner life forms the basis for notions of agency, value, and subjectivity. While such notions are by no means taken as a given in contemporary philosophy, they continue to persist and manifest in various ways in contemporary cultural forms such as the narrative films I examine in this dissertation.

Each film I discuss, in its own way, opens up what I argue is a central crisis or trauma in cinematic representation: how the human notion of self is problematized through both the images

on the screen and the activity of viewing them. Through its ability to represent time and its privileging of the visual, cinema acts as a site of mediation where viewers, that is, the implied spectators of a film rather than any actual ethnographic viewership, can seemingly enter into the interior lives of narrative subjects, whether in memory, dream, other states of consciousness or their absence. Given the prevalence of cinematic metaphors in discussing subjectivity (consider the importance of surrealist images, dreams, or even the flashback² in such discussions), the cinematic experience reminds us of the constructed nature of human identity. Cinema challenges the desire to localize something as central to individual identity as memory as something purely interior and private; memory, as a concept which can variously refer to processes of remembering, media of storage, or collective stories transmitted via traditions in their cultural function, requires some form of materialization.

An emphasis on the material nature of memory has antecedents in the discourse of memory as far back as Plato's model of the wax tablet, which "implies that the images or objects of thought are to some degree material" (Whitehead 17). Such traditions of conceptualizing memory as a kind of imprinting and writing were so engrained in the past of Western culture that historian Mary Carruthers has suggested that medieval culture did not "make the slightest distinction in kind between writing on the memory and writing on some other surface" (30). The films discussed in this dissertation, however, draw heavily on later modifications to the conceptual model for memory, particularly the "equating of identity, self, and memory [by] John Locke at the beginning of the eighteenth century" (Ricoeur 97), which opens the discussion of memory to the impact of temporality and narrative. Implicit in Locke's conception of memory is the fact that the unstable nature of memory might pose a threat to identity. Additionally, the way

that memory narratively configures the past draws attention to the reliability and malleability of any materialization of memory, including cinema.

Cinema has been accused of being illusory and lacking in depth and, therefore, having no deeper meaning or, worse, being deceptive and false. A critique of images more generally can be found as far back as Plato and his parable of the cave, which critiqued the power of images for their difference from ‘Truth,’ i.e. that they are merely semblances, or simulacra that only point to an ideal, absolute truth (349). One hardly needs to subscribe to Platonic idealism, however, to be wary of the power of cinematic images to manipulate and ideologically structure viewers as subjects. Such a critique underpins much of the last half-century of film theory, in its effort to reveal the structuring power of the image. For instance, the underlying ideological nature of the cinematic image is the heart of an Althusserian-Marxist critique of cinema, which insists on the filmic image’s interpellative power, wherein “[w]hat the camera in fact registers is the vague, unformulated, untheorized, unthought-out world of the dominant ideology” (Comolli and Narboni 815). None of these thinkers deny cinema’s power, nor the fact that cinema does in fact signify to the viewer through its visual relationship with the existing world. It is the nature of this relationship, then, that is subject to critique.³ For such a critique, cinema’s importance still lies in its relationship to a *profilmic* reality, that is, as the representation of something that was once present before the camera. Even cinema theories which have mostly abandoned semiotic concepts such as resemblance tend to base arguments over the function of cinema on acts of perception upon which a viewer then mobilizes his or her cognitive powers. The implied empirical basis of such studies suggests that cinema is primarily a realist representation. Nonetheless, so-called realist arguments about the cinema remain rooted in questions of the

ontological basis of the filmic medium; that is, questions over the nature of the relationship between cinema and some prior existing notion of reality upon which it is dependent.

I am focused here on *how* films communicate the existence of an inner life and *why* particular filmic conventions continue to persist which carry particular meanings about experience and the nature of the self. Materially speaking, cinema is rooted in an optical illusion generated by the “persistence of vision” effect of external projections of light upon a screen; in turn, any meaning that is to be found there is based on the perception and interpretation of these projections as representations of time and space. Unlike a language, film has a representative element, rooted in its high degree of resemblance to human visual perception. Despite the illusory nature of these representations (i.e. the persistence of vision effect), no one would deny the fact that cinema does have real effects on viewers. Films are affective, generating primal emotional responses, and expressive, having some kind of signification which must in turn be interpreted. I take a pragmatist approach to the notion of a film language. Film is like language in its expressive quality, that is, its ability to generate new ideas and persuade a viewer. The meaning that a film has is inseparable from the act of interpretation itself. This act of interpretation is shaped by the interpreter’s subjective experience of the world. But what must be emphasized is the fact that cinema does not actually exist independently of the act of observation; the individual frames of celluloid which are moved through a projector and cast upon a screen, or, as is more common today, the shifting images upon a monitor translated from a series of 1s and 0s on a hard drive, are not in themselves cinema. Cinema is what happens in the process of viewing and listening; that is, cinema acquires any meaning it does through the interactions between a viewer and a screen.

Cinema is therefore able to extend across the gap between the interface and the perception of visual appearance and material reality. As Vivian Sobchak notes, quoting Maurice Merleau-Ponty, cinema makes itself sensible to the viewer by means of the “expression of experience by experience” (3). Cinema works because it mirrors the way one experiences the world more generally through the senses of seeing and hearing.⁴ Sobchak’s larger point is that the material by which cinema communicates — the settings, camera angles, subject matter — is as varied as the range of experiences that can be perceived visually or aurally. The “*modes of embodied experience*” — seeing, hearing, movement — make up its building blocks, and the “*structures of direct experience*” — its centering and positioning of the viewing body in relation to other objects — make up its language, as such: “It is this mutual capacity for and possession of experience through common structures of embodied existence, through similar modes of being-in-the-world, that provide the *intersubjective* basis of objective cinematic communication” (Sobchak 5 emphasis original). I therefore argue that cinema goes beyond merely the representation of a profilmic reality and is able to create new arrangements of sensory experience which give rise to narratives of human knowledge. This goes some way to explaining why cinema is not only able to represent the kinds of lived experiences accessible through common sensory knowledge, such as the view of a busy city street, but also those subjective experiences that make up one’s self, such as a sense of disorientation at being bombarded by the busyness of the above mentioned street. The picture one has of one’s self is formed not merely from first order experiences but also from the testimonies of others and the testimonies he or she gives to others, about him or herself, drawn from memory. Therefore, film knowledge, like all cultural knowledge that forms the object of study of the human sciences, is a form of self-knowledge. Per Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*, knowledge has “historical, social, and economic

conditions” and it is “formed within the relations that are woven between men [sic]” (348).

Unlike natural scientific inquiry, human cultural knowledge is not primarily shaped by claims to empirical observation and experimentation, but by the experiences that the researcher brings to the study. As Rodowick points out, “Aesthetic inquiry must be sensitive to the variability and volatility of human culture and innovation; their epistemologies derive from (uneven) consensus and self-examination of what we already know and do in the execution of daily life” (“Elegy” 94). The experience that cinema provides to a viewer goes beyond the act of testifying to the past, but extends to the way that, as per Wittgenstein on language, cinema acts as a public tool for understanding private life. The experience of cinema is as much made up of the memories, feelings, and imaginative material it gives rise to, as it is the literal images and sounds that make up the film and narrative.

The Myth of Total Cinema

My study of cinema in this context prompts a revisiting of Cartesian dualism: the assumption of a dichotomy between mind and world, spirit and flesh, or inner and outer reality, characteristic of much modern thought, which I oppose in favour of a subjectivity rooted in the perception and experience of material memory. André Bazin's account of cinema's ability to construct the past — *indexically* testifying to the existence of objects and past experiences, *iconically* reconstructing them through verisimilitude — is most famously articulated in his essay on “The Ontology of the Photographic Image.” This essay is often cited in support of a representative-realist understanding of cinema. Throughout this dissertation I offer a rereading of Bazin and emphasize the potential ramifications of “The Myth of Total Cinema,” which I see as the essay foundational to Bazin's account of cinema aesthetics, or “how” cinema manifests its

stance toward reality. As film scholar Philip Rosen notes, Bazin approached cinema as a system for ordering sensory information. The films discussed in this dissertation, with their varying uses of digital technology and their portrayal of subjectivity, when put into a dialogue with Bazin's theories, can (to paraphrase Rosen) rescue Bazin's theory from a notion of crude "indexicality" ("Belief in Bazin" 110).⁵ Rosen relates Bazin's identification of the transcendent impulse in artistic representation to the urge to preserve against death: "artistic representation originates in a need to counter knowledge of the inevitable dissolution of the subject (death), by material preservation against decay associated with the passage of time" ("Belief in Bazin" 110). But what is often left out of such accounts, which take the photographic image at "face value", is that Bazin was not merely emphasizing a rational relation between the photographic image and its subject, but was addressing *how* that relationship is, or should be, structured. In essence, "a film manifests a stance toward how humans take stances toward reality" (Rosen "Belief in Bazin" 110). In other words, subjectivity is an essential aspect of the cinematic project as conceived by Bazin:

Recall that for Bazin cinematic aesthetics is a stance toward the real, and toward how one may take stances toward the real. This makes aesthetics an expression of subjectivity facing that which is materially other to itself, objectivity [...] An account of subjectivity was always at the heart of Bazin's ontology of cinema. (Rosen "Belief in Bazin" 114)

An account of cinematic subjectivity in Bazinian terms is then an account of cinematic ethics, that is the structuring of the relationship between a cinematic representation and the world. For Bazin, his emphasis on realism was born out of an ethical stance toward the world, rather than a belief in cinematic idealism. It was for this reason that Bazin praises Italian neo-realism, on account of its "*revolutionary humanism*" (221 italics original), while at the same time

acknowledging that “[i]n art, realism can obviously be created only out of artifice,” and that it is the choices a filmmaker makes about what elements of reality to include or exclude that constitute the “fundamental contradiction” of art (227). This contradiction, between the necessarily subtractive nature of art and the desire for realism,⁶ gives rise to various cinema aesthetics, which are themselves expressions of subjectivity. The “Myth of Total Cinema” essay is foundational to understanding Bazin’s cinema aesthetics, as it encapsulates the contradictory impulse driving cinematic innovation (both technologically and formally), between the desire for a complete realism, “the recreation of the world in its own image” (17), and the aesthetic necessity to make “a choice about what deserves to be saved, sacrificed or rejected” (227).

Bazin’s essay on the “Ontology” of cinema is concerned primarily with the “what” of cinema: what is the relation between a cinematic image and reality? While it may seem counterintuitive, the turn to digital cinema and other developments associated with post-cinematic media and new media discussed in this dissertation in fact bear out Bazin’s account of the “Myth of Total Cinema”; for example, consider how recent films such as *Gravity* (2013) strive for a sense of experiential immersion and verisimilitude by utilizing digital camera techniques that defy what is possible with the tools of traditional filmmaking. Such a cinematic context that insists on a high degree of verisimilitude in representation utilizes all the resources of state of the art digital effects, not to create an unreal world, but to help the spectator more perfectly believe in the reality presented, overriding what Bazin called our “critical faculties” (8).

The debate over the exact nature of cinematic representation can be seen in the various ‘turns’ taken by film theory over the decades, from the language-based theories of Christian Metz, to the Marxist ideological arguments of apparatus theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry, and to one strain of the recent turn to affect, particularly those theories of affect drawing on the

writings of Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze, such as the work of Brian Massumi, Catherine Malabou, and Steven Shaviro.⁷ Drawing on the work of Deleuze's cinema books and Henri Bergson, I share Rodowick's notion that the "image" is itself "the very form of our subjectivity" ("Elegy" 105).⁸ The intervention I offer here is an answer to the question of what the films under discussion add to our understanding of the self. I show how and why films that deal with these topics continue to persist, despite their seemingly anachronistic and self-consciously cinematic forms. That is, I answer the questions about what are these films doing and what their significance is for contemporary film theory and ongoing discussions of subjectivity.

Memory in Transnational Art Cinema

Each of the films discussed in this dissertation reflects a global response to the question of how to designate that specificity of perception and affect which cinema suggests through its treatment of memory and selfhood. After a theoretical introduction to some of the key ideas in this dissertation in Chapter 1, I begin Chapter 2 in the mid-twentieth century Soviet context, with Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1965) and *Mirror* (*Zerkalo*) (1975). While not falling into the categorical context of contemporary transnationalism, these films continue to serve as exemplary and influential works of the expression of subjectivity and memory in cinema. Tarkovsky's films act as responses to various crises of subjectivity that the director acutely felt. This is expressed in the challenge that the titular monk in *Andrei Rublev* faces in constructing a self through art in the brutal world of medieval Russia and in the record of personal experience and expression of the estranged, "alienated" individual of Soviet modernity in *Mirror*. I see Tarkovsky's films as attempting to offer possible answers to a resolution of a crisis, reading them through the lens of Bazin's theories of realism and subjectivity. I argue that this offers the best context in which to

address Tarkovsky's philosophical personalism and the image of the subject that emerges in his films. This image is reflective of Tarkovsky's philosophical and religious understanding of personhood, which in his films takes material form in the icon, as exemplified in the final shots of *Andrei Rublev*. In *Andrei Rublev* and *Mirror* the image of the self, as expressed in cinema as a material form of memory, does not collapse into self-reflexivity as a dead end. Tarkovsky's films, as Deleuze notes, make relationships of time visible and are a manifestation of the importance of time to the human sense of self.

The remainder of the films that I address are all drawn from different branches of contemporary transnational art cinema, in its various global and independent movements in the early years of the twenty-first century. Given the genealogy of discourses on subjectivity, which I outline in Chapter 1, the films I have chosen each engage with some aspect of contemporary theoretical debates on subjectivity in their formal construction and subject matter. The structures of feeling that govern contemporary understandings of selfhood are not in themselves neutral; they have histories, serve political and cultural agendas, and offer images of selfhood. Thus, I have chosen these films for their temporal moment of production, circulation, and reception within an early twenty-first century, transnational art cinema idiom, and for the particular ways that they engage in constructions and deconstructions of selfhood, as outlined below.

Transnational art cinema is a term that I adopt in an attempt to describe how contemporary media circulates beyond national, cultural, and linguistic borders. Transnationalism, in its best sense, challenges the idea that art cinema is delimited solely by its Western expressions. At the same time, the term transnationalism acknowledges film's role in advanced or late global capitalism, and describes the increasingly complex and interrelated role of film production, circulation, and reception in setting the boundaries of art cinema.

Transnationalism appears as a competing category for understanding film and audio-visual media today, alongside terms like “world” or “global.”

In Chapter 3, I contrast Tarkovsky’s views regarding time and the nature of the self to the views of one of his self-declared followers, the “bad boy” of contemporary European cinema, Lars von Trier, and specifically the 2011 film, *Melancholia*. I argue that *Melancholia* offers a counterpoint to Tarkovsky (including some direct intertextual references), while still emphasizing the power of the filmic image to make time manifest; this time-image is particularly evident in the opening tableaux sequence of *Melancholia*. However, in *Melancholia* the cinematic medium offers no escape from annihilation and cannot resolve the crisis of the alienated individual. If the condition of melancholia, with which Justine (Kirsten Dunst) is afflicted, is the negation of the self, then the apocalyptic vision of *Melancholia* repeats and amplifies this negative vision of subjectivity. The filmic depiction of the end of the world is linked in the film to the failure of rational, scientific views of the self, as exemplified in the patriarchal figure of Justine’s brother-in-law, John. The end of the human race is properly unrepresentable, as “Extinction is real yet not empirical, since it is not of the order of experience” (Brassier 238). In *Melancholia*, the end of the world is imagined as the elimination of subjectivity in an act of anti-modernist or anti-sublime nihilism, as Shaviro terms it (“Melancholia, Or, the Romantic Anti-Sublime”). *Melancholia* moves a discussion of any notion of human subjectivity from a description of the self-for-itself toward a vision of the place of the self-in-the-world. *Melancholia* challenges the notion of affect as a new master narrative, and it shows how the privileging of affective forces repeats and reinforces an ideology of presence, in counter-distinction to phenomenological accounts of cinematic experience.

Chapter 4 investigates the possibilities connected with the representation of interior lives in two contemporary American films which stand outside the dominant Hollywood paradigm, either in form and subject matter or production context. Both *The Tree of Life* (2011) and *Upstream Color* (2013) seek to connect larger discourses surrounding human perception and modern subjectivity to the question of how cinema represents interiority and the related question of the possible limits of cinematic representation. Each film offers a portrait of how human beings construct a sense of self through memories (and how cinema constructs memories in the first place), confronting a crisis of epistemology at the centre of American mental life that has haunted American thinkers since the time of the New England transcendentalists, one which involves the place of the human individual in relation to both nature and the cosmos. Each film does so, however, through very different modes. *Upstream Color* utilizes a science fiction narrative to confront the metaphysics underpinning its central character's identities. The metaphysics of presence and causality are disrupted in the film, positing that the characters' respective senses of self are constituted on experiences of which they are fundamentally unaware or have forgotten. Furthermore, *Upstream Color* suggests that a fragmentary, incomplete understanding of the self and a subsequent disruption of human subjectivity are symptomatic of contemporary capitalism. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, through its emphasis on breaking free from cycles of consumption and seeking enlightenment in nature, functions as a key intertext in the film, highlighting and clarifying the film's critical stance towards a metaphysical dichotomy between animal and "higher nature" (206).

The Tree of Life confronts the possibility of transcendence in twentieth-century America in the context of an American religious-philosophical tradition, centred on the individual's ability to discern his or her place in the world. The film continues the use of Malick's most

discernible formal qualities, what Lloyd Michaels identifies as “the grandiose representation of nature and the distinctive employment of subjective voiceover narration” (6). The perceptual effect of these qualities is an attempt to emphasize the definition of the characters’ internal world in relation to nature, and gives the film its intensely subjective feel. My interpretive framework views *The Tree of Life* as a series of images of Jack O’Brien’s (Sean Penn) memories and those of his family members. These sensory experiences serve as a link between the inner and exterior world as conceived in the film, situating Jack’s lived experience among those of the other people in his life. I argue that the film, in presenting its cosmic vision of deep history alongside the invocation of personal memory, makes explicit cinema’s dream of unhindered perspective. Cinema, as a materialization of an intentional perception, becomes the very form of a phenomenological embodiment. The transcendent vision presented in *The Tree of Life* is as ironic as it is hopeful, as it confirms for us that such a vision is impossible outside of the very processes that constitute both memory and cinema.⁹

The fifth chapter shifts from the west to contemporary Southeast Asian cinema, even as it returns to an examination of cinema’s various functions as memory. By comparing the spiritual functions of memory and cinema’s role in modernity, I argue that the Thai film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (*Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*) (2010), and other films by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, illuminates cinema’s link to the preservation of human memory through its exploration of reincarnation. I offer a closer examination of the ways in which Apichatpong’s films offer an image of contemporary Thailand’s particular configuration of the modern. Looking at these films through the lens of global art cinema leads back to the questions about the cinematic constitution of subjectivity and identity, and how Buddhist spiritual practices and belief in reincarnation relate to cinema. I argue that Apichatpong’s films seem to disrupt the

easy categorical distinctions that have constituted human identity in the wake of modernization, including those between rural and urban, the individual and society, nature and culture, faith and reason, and transcendence and immanence. These disruptions challenge standard narratives of secular modernity. Apichatpong's films, particularly through their examination of memory, suggest that cinema is an important participant in the experience of contemporary Thailand and in the shifting, post-secular, world of global capitalist modernity.

Finally, in the last chapter, I look at Tsai Ming-liang's haunted movie theatre in *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (*Bu san*) (2003), and consider narratives of the death of cinema in the context of cinema's function as a powerful and enduring form of human memory. The waning of the cinematic experience seen in Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* reflects the place of cinema in the post-cinematic era, where digitization and global capitalism have decentred the cinematic experience as the dominant mode of cultural memory and dissipated the film going experience. Contemporary manifestations of capitalism tend to reorient cultural consumption along global lines, away from the local and particular and instead toward products that easily cross cultural and linguistic boundaries. For instance, in the early twenty-first century, a larger and larger percentage of the films consumed worldwide each year are Hollywood fare,¹⁰ even taking into account the general decline of the movie theatre as a vibrant centre of urban life in contemporary Asian megalopolises as it is replaced by screen cultures based on the internet and private consumption. I argue that Tsai's characteristic use of long takes and empty spaces forces the viewer to be attuned to the non-linguistic, phenomenological experience of the theatre space, noises, movements, and distractions which impinge upon the viewing body, *both* rational and affective. *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, in its attention to the bodily action of film going, reminds us of the embodied act of viewing itself. Deleuze's description in *The Movement-Image* of "affection"

occupying the space between perception and action might offer a way forward. Affection in this conception becomes the site of a coincidence of subject and object—which allows for cinema to function as an intersubjective “perception of expression” and “expression of perception”, to borrow Sobchak’s description (66). A post-affective cinema, drawing on Deleuze, points the way beyond a solipsistic, auto-affective “perceiving of the self by the self,” and reactivates the link to the world that cinema can be. In this understanding, post-affective cinema does not mean the end of affect, but rather an understanding of cinematic affect characterized by how affect operates in the everyday experience of cinema at this historical moment, a moment in which affect seems central to understanding late-capitalist culture. This helps to illuminate the effect of a film like *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*.

Similar to the appellation French New Wave, the films that fall under the umbrella of “art cinema” encompass different styles and are not formally part of any larger film movement. Rather they draw on various industrial histories, film styles, and forms of narrative self-reflexivity; yet “art cinema” remains joined as a critical category in its thematic and formal interrogation of cinema itself through its narrative choices. Some of these films were shot on celluloid (*The Tree of Life*, *Uncle Boonmee*) despite the widespread availability and ease of digital production, arguably affirming a kind of commitment to a view of celluloid as retaining a special indexical link to reality. Other films were shot digitally (*Melancholia*, *Upstream Color*) and exploit the temporal and visual possibilities of the digital medium to complicate the discussion of cinematic subjectivity.

If cinema is understood as a mediation of the experience of living in the world, I articulate what each of these films suggests about the experience of living in the twentieth and early-twenty-first century through their invocation of memory. Furthermore, I describe each

film's aesthetic choices as an expression of subjectivity. In crafting a stance toward reality, films propose an ethics of being that emerges from their aesthetic choices; these choices are in turn a way of representing aspects of subjective experience. Each of these films was chosen for their engagement with concepts of memory and subjectivity from across the globe and from a variety of national and transnational cinemas. Temporally, confining the bulk of the films in this study to those from the new millennium is suggestive of both the way that the themes of memory and subjectivity persist in cinema into the contemporary era and coincides with the increasingly transnational character of art cinema's production, distribution, and reception, as characterized by the global art house and international film festival circuit—excepting Tarkovsky, whose films were chosen for their exemplary and influential formal and thematic substance, despite being made decades earlier. These films reflect various responses to a crisis of both subjectivity and of cinematic representation, which reflects the way that any stable expression of identity or referential image must repress the differences, contradictions, and tensions inherent in the constitution of the self and the cinema alike. While selfhood is shaped by individual experience, many aspects of selfhood are also constructed from the shared beliefs, stories, and contexts of the communities one inhabits, and thus selves are racialized and gendered, and are situated and emerge in particular class constructs and historical moments. Memory remains the concept that underpins both the self and the cinema, and returns to one a sense of the radical self-awareness that persists in a sense of interiority. This dissertation confirms that cinema's ongoing persistence into the early twenty-first century as a specific operation of subjective perception is intimately related to the questions of self and memory it raises. These films show how self and identity are never stable, and how a tension arises between one's ever-shifting subjective perception and the beliefs and ideologies by which one makes sense of the world. Yet, the interpretive frameworks

and the subjectivities they give rise to remain necessary if one is to make sense of the world. In other words, cinema, vis-à-vis memory, points to the presence of irreducible processes that are essential to subjectivity. Therefore, how these films treat memory confirms the importance that technologies of the self, such as cinema, play in the constitution of identity, and go a long way to explaining the enduring presence of these films.

¹ Here I refer to Charles Taylor's argument in *Sources of the Self* (1989) that the human being's sense of self is "constituted by, a certain sense [...] of inwardness"; Taylor argues that this sense, or "family of senses," is central to conceptions of human subjectivity in modern, that is post-medieval, times (111). Though, as he points out, the notion of inwardness has pre-modern precedents in writers such as Augustine. See Chapter 7, "In Interiore Homine" (127-142).

² See, for instance, Maureen Turim's influential study, *Flashbacks in Film* (1989), where she notes that "the cinematic presentation of the flashback affects not only how modern literature is organized and how plays are staged, but perhaps also how audiences remember and how we describe those memories" (5).

³ See for instance, Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), in which the spectacle mediates social relations via the image as the ultimate commodity form. Debord argues that the image reinforces the alienation of the speaker from the contemplated object and is the inevitable outcome of a Western philosophical project that understands the world primarily through the *visual* faculty.

⁴ Such a concept of cinematic experience is also preferable because it avoids mind/body dualism in its explanation of consciousness. As Bertrand Russell notes in "Mind and Matter," "We know nothing about the intrinsic quality of physical events except when these are mental events that we directly experience" (164). Russell also notes that memory is intrinsically connected to his definition of experience as distinct from mere perception.

⁵ What Rosen rightly identifies in Bazin's work is how the indexical aspect of cinema relies on the viewer's knowledge about how such images are created. Furthermore, the idea that the indexical element of photochemically-produced cinema somehow prevents the degradation of belief or offers a more "trustworthy" account of the profilmic event is explored in Tom Gunning's "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs." See below for more on Gunning's discussion of cinemas' "truth claims".

⁶ In "Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation," Bazin clarifies his definition of realist and realism: "I will thus describe as *realist* every system of expression and every narrative procedure which tends to bring a greater degree of realism to the screen. 'Reality,' here, should obviously not be understood quantitatively. The same event or object can be depicted in several different ways" (228).

⁷ In addition to these theories of affect, it is necessary to note that there exist other branches of the field of affect studies, such as the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Daniel Lord Smail, whose work is rooted in the field of emotions and the work of Silvan S. Tomkins and Paul Ekman. See Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, 2 vols, (1962-63); *Shame and Its Sister: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, (1995).

⁸ On the surface of it, this statement may seem absurd or occularcentric in the extreme. A clarification of what is meant in this case by the word *image*, which Rodowick uses in a Deleuzian sense, is helpful. In Deleuze's usage, rooted in the work of Henri Bergson in *Matter and Memory*, an *image* is any discrete slice of the world, a part that makes up or describes some aspect of the whole. He explicates this understanding in *The Movement-Image* on pages 57-61. Thus, while the *movement-image* is the way cinema expresses the imaging (verb) of movement, the *time-image* describes an image of the temporal. Thus, Deleuze explains that the "infinite set of all images constitutes a kind of plane [*plan*] of immanence" (58-59). When Rodowick then says that "the image is the very form of our subjectivity" ("Elegy" 105), he is essentially saying that we can never take in or perceive the totality of the world. Inevitably, we perceive images of the world (whether images of sound, touch, or time) rather than a totality.

⁹ This is doubly ironic, as reading the memory image in *The Tree of Life* as an intentional expression of perception, to paraphrase Sobchak, affirms the constructed and non-metaphysical nature of the self. This contrasts with the anti-intentionalism that underpins contemporary affect theory, which in turn sees affective processes as free of intention and meaning. Massumi rejects the notion that phenomenological perception can be an intentional act, as when he

suggests that “The act of perception or cognition is a reflection of what is already ‘pre’-embedded in the world [...] Experience, normal or clinical, is never fully intentional” (191). Yet for affect theory, these processes constitute the very basis of identity. Affect, then, or the auto-affective structures that make possible the feeling of being alive—a pre-subjective perceiving of the self—become metaphysical concepts that only reinforce the mind-body divide of the Cartesian self. While I find certain readings of affect to be helpful, this chapter challenges some of Massumi’s bolder claims.

¹⁰ Recent statistics on global theatrical markets back this assertion. As noted in Tanner Mirrlees, *Global Entertainment Media: Between Cultural Imperialism and Cultural Globalization*, (2013): “In virtually every country around the world Hollywood has increased its percentage of films imported by foreign markets over the past 25 years” (175). While this must be understood in the context that an increasing percentage of Hollywood films may still be significantly outnumbered by local fare in some markets (particularly in countries with strong local film markets, such as India or Nigeria), the statistical trend supports the contention that digitization and contemporary media systems are having a significant effect on what films are available to global markets. While Joseph D. Straubhaar, in his article “Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity,” makes a case for “asymmetrical interdependence,” lending local markets some measure of power based on the “active choice” of audiences (261), such a choice is still based on the availability. Straubhaar rightly notes that consumption of comedy and musical programming tends to retain a strong preference for the local, but the article does not take into account the growing tailoring of Hollywood global products for international markets and still leaves room for an investigation of the role of the transnational art cinema in the circulation of local cinema outside national boundaries.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Introduction: Memory and the Problem of the Cinematic Subject

Subjectivity in the Age of “Posts”

The various crises of cinematic identity that I identify in the following chapters can each be expressed as a form of questioning the value of cinematic representation and its claims to provide an objective, totalizing vision of the world. To discuss the structures of cinematic subjectivity means venturing into the contested territory of the subject in contemporary philosophy and theory. Importantly, this dissertation asks the question of why certain conceptual schemas continue to persist in cinema. Additionally, subjectivity relates to all kinds of other questions, such as the nature of consciousness, the phenomenology of experience, personal identity, and the mind-body relationship. How has thinking about the subject and the concept of subjectivity changed? Finally, what is cinema’s role in the deconstruction and re-conception of the subject in the contemporary era?

This dissertation investigates the persistence of such representations of the subject and identity through a period of critical discourses that have been dominated by the so-called “posts;” that is, discourses characterized by the rejection of certain conceptual schemas, ideologies, or, in Foucauldian terms, *épistèmes*. In a postmodern framework, these *épistèmes* have been left behind or discarded or at least come under criticism and suspicion in the study of the human sciences. The first and oldest of these terms is *postmodern*, which, while it has been a contested and ambiguously used term, is necessary to outlining a definition of the others. In critical discourses, to be postmodern is to live after the collapse of the grand narratives born of the Renaissance or

early modern period.¹ This includes the narratives of “Man” as a unified, autonomous subject, utilizing the tools of reason and self-enlightenment. These narratives are what Foucault refers to in *The Order of Things* when he famously proclaims that “man [sic] is an invention of recent date” (422). Thus, to be postmodern is to affirm Foucault’s announcement of the end of the “Age of Man.” Yet, at the same time many of the narratives of the modern still hold significant sway, including the periodizing impulse of “progress” that would cleanly demarcate the past from the present. In many ways, I understand the emergence of the postmodern as a competing mode to ongoing discourses in late modernity.² The observations borne out of postmodernism are closely related to the critiques of structuralist theories of self-sufficiency (e.g. the author or a language as structural models for meaning) and the destabilizing of binary oppositions (e.g. nature/culture) that have come to be labeled *post-structuralism*.

Following from the potential of this challenge to or casting off of the narratives constituting modernity comes the concept of the *posthuman*, a configuration in which the above noted collapse of the narratives of modernity that unpinned the definition of the human prompt a radical rethinking in terms of “what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet” (Braidotti 2)? While posthumanist theory includes the study of digital and biological technologies that might make possible a transhuman mode of being, it can also be understood in relation to the devising of “new social, ethical and discursive schemes of subject formation” that will “match the profound transformations” happening in today’s world (Braidotti 12). In my work, I extend the term to consider cinema a form of posthuman technology, for the ways, discussed in this dissertation, that it opens up new spaces and possibilities for subject formation.

Postsecularism and *post-cinema*, each follows a similar logic in that they follow in the wake of some lost or discarded narrative (i.e. secularism) or the destabilization of some category (i.e. cinema). If secularism was linked to the emancipating narrative of modernity as announcing freedom from religion and superstition, then what does one do with secularism when the overarching narrative of modernity and progressive rationality on which it rested collapses? Can any notion of inevitable secularization survive such transformations? Most important for this dissertation is the challenge it poses to the notion that secularization narratives were ever universal. Likewise, post-cinema asks what comes after cinema in the wake of cinema's displacement by newer media? While this process of displacement has certainly been accelerating with the rise of digital technologies and global interconnectedness, the process includes the broader historical transformations that include the rise of television in the 1950s and the popularity of various internet based media (streaming video, social media, web series) in the contemporary era.

Thus, the destabilization or discarding of the above conceptual schemas precludes speaking of categories such as the subject or selfhood as stable, reliable sources of knowledge. What remains, however, is a conception of memory as a constituent property of experience and, central to this dissertation, an understanding of cinema as a mediated form of memory. This dissertation explores how it is that, despite the varied forms such displacements might take in various times and locations, cinema can nonetheless be understood through the idiom of memory. As discussed in the chapters on films from countries such as Thailand and Taiwan (in Chapters 5 and 6), the prevalence of cinema as a metaphor for the mental processes that constitute us as individuals is in no way limited to a Western context. This suggests a quasi-universality to memory as a kind of mass cultural structure from which to approach subject

formation, whatever forms these might be.³ I argue that the links I make in this dissertation between and across global cinemas suggest that cinema has been and continues to be itself a key participant in the formation of modern and postmodern modes of being, a tool in forging, what Arjun Appadurai calls, “the space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (4). The degree to which widespread modernization and global capitalism have influenced these practices is discussed later in this chapter and remain key concerns of Chapter 5.

If cinematic memories continue to persist as discursive constructs used to frame notions of selfhood and subject formation, even while the conceptions of subjectivity born out of modern thought no longer shape our understanding of the world and values, then the status of cinematic memory either deserves to be rethought or its persistence presupposes the need for a revitalization and rethinking of the concepts of selfhood and subject formation in the contemporary era. In light of the examples and case studies that confirm and deepen the understanding of cinematic memory in this dissertation, I believe that the mode and purpose of selfhood and subject formation can be revitalized in the context of cinema. The problem of cinematic subjectivity is centred around the following paradox: that cinema provides the exteriorization and materialization of the subjective processes of memory at the same time that its structures remind the viewer that the self is disjointed from the world by its own subjectivity. Ergo, one can only know the world through one’s own consciousness, but cinema can enact and materialize that consciousness, opening the possibilities for understanding of new experiences and between individuals. This observation also foregrounds a particular tension around the discussion of the subject in the work discussed in this dissertation: between the rejection of the notion of interiority entirely and the figuring of the self as completely illusory, as in Deleuze, and

on the other hand, the persistence of some aspect of the notion of a subject as a non-constructed basis of ethical action, in the work of Tarkovsky and Bazin, among others.

Reference to a particular subjectivity gives rise to the question of position, which in cinema translates to a particular and literal viewing position or camera position. Likewise, the expression and perception of viewing positions have a role to play in the constitution of one's identity. The modern sense of the human being as containing inward depths, "the sense of inwardness" (Taylor *SotS* ix), is conditioned by the subject's ability to express or perceive such depths. Cinema offers one such expression which in turn is perceived by a viewer. Cinema, while reminding the viewer of the constructed nature of certain aspects of personal identity, especially those grounded in cultural and social aspects, retains a space for an ethical subject that stands in relation to the world on the screen.

The problem of subjectivity is "one of presence to oneself, to a history, an event, a community, an oeuvre, or another 'subject'" (Nancy "Introduction" 5). For Jean-Luc Nancy, "the dominant definition of the philosophical (or 'metaphysical') *subject* is [...] the one proposed by [G. F. W.] Hegel" (6). Here we are distinguishing the "anthropological subject" from the "subject structure" in grammar. Hegel's subject was a rational subject, a *Geist* that acted as the fundamental unity that would resolve dialectical oppositions. For the theorists most closely associated with poststructuralism, such as Derrida or Foucault, the deconstruction of the subject is related to the proliferation of master narratives, the rise of the simulacrum, and the regime of hyperreality that characterize the postmodern era, in contrast to the certainty of presence, identity, and historical progress that characterized much of modern thought.⁴ In Derrida's early work, this is figured as the deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence. In his introduction to the collection of essays in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, Nancy notes that the move away from

the subject as a Cartesian, monadic ego is simultaneously a “[c]ritique or deconstruction of the firmness of a *seat* (*hypokeimenon*, *substantia*, *subjectum*) and the certitude of an *authority* and a *value* (the individual, a people, the state, history, work)” (4). In the wake of this destabilization of certitude, the underpinnings of subjectivity are no longer absolute constructs but must be constantly negotiated, constructed from the beliefs and values of the communities that one inhabits and one’s experiences. For instance, to take one item from the above quotation of Nancy, “a people” is no longer understood to be a stable construction, for instance “the French people,” instead the question of what makes someone French is brought under interrogation, and made up of a number of discursive, performative, and social practices.

In one sense this doing away with certainty opens a kind of freedom, in which individuals are able to negotiate the construction of selves in relation to their societies. For instance, mid-twentieth century existentialist thought inverted the old structure of selfhood by insisting that existence precedes essence, rather than the other way round. The influence of existentialism on the postwar art cinema is well documented, shaping the way that such films engage with the notion of subjectivity.⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre defines *subjectivité* as “la conscience de conscience:” consciousness of consciousness, an auto-affective sense of being able to sense. Subjectivity is the beginning of any kind of truth claim or attempt to think being. It is “the specificity of a being conscious of itself, present to the world and to itself, which has a relationship to itself and for which it’s being is in constant question. This mode of being, specific to man, Sartre calls in *Being and Nothingness*, the for-itself” (Bilemdjian 24). Sartre rejects objectivity in the sense of a non-human godlike view of the world. Belief for Sartre should start from human subjectivity.

Yet, what does one do without a subject of some sort? How do we account for the structures of relations between the viewer and the screen or between the one and the other?

Nancy writes,

[t]here is nothing nihilistic in recognizing that the *subject*—the property of the *self*—is the thought that reabsorbs or exhausts all possibility of *being in the world* [...] and that this same thought, never simple, never closed upon itself without remainder, designates and delivers an entirely different thought: that of the *one* and that of the some *one*, of the singular existent that the subject announces. (“Introduction” 4)

Admittedly, the idea of subjectivity is difficult to escape. As Nancy suggests, the thinking of the *one* presupposes a singular existence, and individuality, a *self*. At the same time, this self is the site of multiple and competing modes of being, which must be negotiated without collapsing the possibility for changes in belief or context into a single identity. Derrida asks, in the same interview with Nancy, “if Freudian thought has been consequential in the de-centering of the subject ... is the ‘ego,’ in the elements of the topic or in the distribution of the positions of the unconscious, the only answer to the question ‘who?’?” (“Eating Well” 101).

There is a link, then, between subjectivity and representation. Representation as an action is reliant on the concept of iterability, or the ability to repeat. Iterability is a key structuring principle of the self: memory is dependent on the existence of a past moment, presupposing that the self is something that is repeatable in time and that it can be mediated through speech, or through writing. In Derrida’s “Signature, Event, Context,” he notes that “the recognizable traits of the classical and narrowly defined concept of writing are generalizable” (SEC 119). This definition includes the absence of the sender, a break with the context of its inscription, and the space between the mark and both the immediate present referent and the “internal contextual

chain” (SEC 120). Derrida goes on to argue that this definition holds valid for the entirety of experience (SEC 120), as there is no experience of pure presence: everything is mediated. Derrida also explores this idea of the lack of presence in his discourse on the contradictory logic of the archive, which has significance for the discussion of memory and cinema. Derrida argues that the archive embodies the need to preserve the past, and that it is “never present in person, neither in itself nor in its own effects. It leaves no monument, it bequeaths no document of its own” (*Archive Fever* 11). In other words, an archive is constituted on the notion of preserving something from the past, not for its own purposes. A technology such as cinema—which in its materialization of memory has an archive function—in “its existence and its necessity bears witness to the finitude of the mnemonic spontaneity which is thus supplemented” (*Archive Fever* 14). What Derrida means here is that the medium of representation is always a supplement to the thing itself and is necessary precisely because of the finitude of any given moment; at the same time this supplementary nature remains the very condition of that moment’s representability.

In other words, mediation is the very condition of possibility for memory. Cinema, in doing away with self-presence, provides the illusion of presence. But it can equally reveal the structuring illusion of the its own mediating process. The self-reflexive possibilities of cinema raise key question about how a form of mediation — including cinematic forms and the way these forms are conditioned by the forces of global capitalism — in some ways control our very capacity for consciousness and selfhood. In other words, while cinema reveals many features of subjectivity to be constructs, there remains an aspect of subjectivity in it that is non-metaphysical and inseparable from the self-other encounter that is instantiated in the act of film viewing.

I argue that the group of films under discussion outline particular shared “structures of feeling,” to use the term popularized by Raymond Williams and alluded to by Shaviro and other

theorists of affect.⁶ First used by Williams in *A Preface to Film* (1954), these “structures of feeling” “characterize the lived experience of the quality of life at a particular time and place” (J. Taylor, “structure of feeling” 670). Williams insisted that this was not some vague “spirit of the age” but rather an expression of the tension between ideology and experience in a particular age, and that such a structure “is most clearly articulated in particular and artistic forms and conventions” (670).⁷ Williams’ term lends justification to the analysis of cultural forms such as cinema as key methodological approach when articulating a description of such structures.

A particular structural tension plays out in the films discussed in this dissertation, between the intangibility of memory—and the attendant impossibility of a metaphysical underpinning for the subject—and the changes that occurs in the experience of viewing a particular film—which has material effects and constitutes a particular relationship to the self. Might these films, which seem to have an asynchronous relationship to the post-cinematic temporality that supposedly guides our era through their clear kinship with the modernist leanings of the postwar art cinema, point to a cinema which still has room for a perceptive, viewing subject of *some* kind? My project is, in one sense, then, an examination of the cinematic response to the question posed by Nancy: in other words, who comes after the subject *in cinema*? Posing his question in a letter calling for papers in the late-1980s, Nancy stated his openness to various ideas about what the abolition of the subject meant for philosophy:

The inaugurating decisions of contemporary thought, whether they took place under the sign of a break with metaphysics and its poorly pitched questions, under the sign of a “deconstruction” of metaphysics, under that transference of the thinking of Being to the thinking of life, or of the Other, or of language, etc. —here all involved putting subjectivity on trial. [...] Everything seems, however, to point to the necessity not of a

“return to the subject” [...] but on the contrary, of a move forward to someone — someone else in its place. [...] In other words: If it is appropriate to assign something like a punctuality, a singularity or a hereness (*haecceitas*) as the place of emission, reception, or transition (of affect, of action, of language, etc.) how would one designate its specificity? (“Introduction” 5)

Nancy’s outline explains why, despite the deconstruction of the metaphysical structure of the subject, my project sees some value or hope in the subjectivities constituted in and through these films. Not because cinema calls for a return to a metaphysical conception of the self, but because cinema, like affect, action, and language, requires that place of “emission, reception, or transition” (“Introduction” 5). This goes some way to explaining why cinema persists in attributing some kind of subjectivity to the affective and expressive structures of the cinematic, or at the very least draws attention to the question of the *who* inherent in the very act of questioning subjectivity. Drawing particularly on Deleuze’s *Cinema* books, I argue that the films under discussion in this dissertation point the way beyond a solipsistic, auto-affective, perceiving of the self by the self and reactivate the viewer’s link to the world. Thus, cinema as a medial practice retains the possibility of effecting a move beyond the dualistic conceptions of subjectivity (including the mind-body divide repeated by certain theories of affect)⁸ that I see as persisting in the various theories of cinematic affect and cognition, even in their most materialist forms.

In other words, I argue, as per Bazin on the “Myth of Total Cinema” that, because of the varying degrees of idealism and cynicism expressed in these films towards the metaphysical possibility of self-knowledge, any whole or totality which would offer a “recreation of the world,” or the inner world, “in its own image” remains out of reach for characters and viewer

alike (Bazin 17). In this sense, while I affirm Bazin's insistence in the ethical nature of the cinematic act (and the attendant need for some kind of ethical structure to underpin it), I want to draw out the affinities as I see them between Bazin and Deleuze, while acknowledging aspects of their thought that remain irreconcilable. As noted in the introduction, Bazin explains that "the guiding myth of the invention of cinema is thus that it will accomplish the dominant myth of every nineteenth-century technology for reproducing reality [...]: a complete realism, the recreation of the world in its own image" (17), even the image of the world of the mind. For Bazin, cinema's subsequent technological developments merely bring it asymptotically closer to the goal that drove its invention and subsequent refinement. Victor Fan has expanded this concept in his study of the Chinese film theory term, *bizhen*, which can be translated as meaning "approaching reality" (18). Fan notes that this term maintains the "distance between the image and reality, [...]" which may help film theorists today work through an aporia that fascinated Bazin himself" (18). This aporia is that while the cinematic image is not reality, it allows the viewer to apprehend an experiential effect as if it were actually present (echoing the paradoxical structure of the archive according to Derrida). This is why Bazin insists that cinema is both intimately linked to reality at the same time that reality is absent in the final image.

Memory and Cinema

Cinema, thus, continues to act as a metaphorical model for memory at the same time as it is one of the materialized sites of the memories that paradoxically constitute us as subjects. Memory plays a key role in underpinning the human relationship to temporality, and memory's relation to visual technologies is instrumental to my argument surrounding the representation of subjectivity.⁹ To paraphrase Rick Deckard in *Blade Runner* (1982), to speak of a person's inner

life is to talk about memories. Memory refers to both the process of remembering, by which an organism retains an impression or link to the past, and a medium of storage, whether neurobiological or “prosthetic,” which is manifested in cultural or technological forms. These forms in turn provide the metaphors for the structures of memory itself, which in the past have included “the library and the archive” and now include computers and hard drives (Van Dijck 351). It is central to the understanding of the self as an individual, since it provides a sense of continuity between present and the past. Continuity of consciousness is what makes the notion of some kind of personal identity possible. This theorization of the function of memory linking identity to consciousness goes back to John Locke, for whom “the self is [...] constructed around the continuity provided by memory” (Whitehead 56).¹⁰ Implicit in Locke’s conception of memory is the fact that the unstable nature of memory might pose a threat to identity. This idea has an influence on the films discussed in this dissertation as well. As Tarkovsky writes in *Sculpting in Time*, “Bereft of memory, a person becomes the prisoner of an illusory existence, falling out of time he is unable to seize his own link with the outside world—in other words he is doomed to madness” (58). And yet, this process of remembering, so central to the constitution of subjectivity, has no real existence outside of technological and cultural materialization. In memory, the very moment of perception becomes materialized (or as Bertrand Russell put it, “experienced”) only when it is related, recorded, and recreated in various media; the notion of repetition inherent in these “re-” verbs testifies to the always already mediated nature of memory. The very particular qualities of cinema as a medium, especially its privileging of visual sensory experience, and the testimony it pays to the existence of past events and objects that were once in front of the camera (this is the argument of cinematic *indexicality*, especially associated with the work of Bazin), means that cinema itself constitutes a form of memory.

Cinema's generation of visual sensory experience also means that it has the ability to generate new memories in a viewer as well as acting as a structure of memory itself. Guiding my treatment of these films' representation of memory is the idea that through cinematic expression we gain a better understanding of the role that memory plays in structuring one's identity and experience. In a sense, as per Tarkovsky, I suggest that cinema as memory provides a link between a limited subjectivity and the outside world, helping the viewer to understand her- or himself and the world.

In her discussion of memory in culture, Astrid Erll suggests that memory "is an umbrella term for all those processes of a biological, medial, or social nature which relate the past and present (and future) in sociocultural contexts" (7). In the context of subjectivity, memory plays a key role in underpinning the human relationship to temporality. Memory is central to an understanding of the self as an individual, since it provides one with a sense of continuity between who one is now and the person one was in the past.¹¹ And yet, memories are not static recordings of the past. Over a century ago, Henri Bergson "refuted a one-to-one correspondence between physical stimulus and mental image to account for human consciousness, instead proposing a recursive relationship between material triggers and the images formed by our minds" (Van Dijck 352). Each time they are recalled or triggered, memories are created anew. Memories only become materialized when they are related, recorded, and recreated in various in technological and socio-cultural contexts.¹² While it is common to think of the brain as the material site of memory (and therefore the seat of the self), recent studies in neuroscience have shown that memories are not located in precise locations or found in individual neurons. Memory, in this sense, is only strictly materialized when it is manifested in a particular act of

remembering or recording. In this materialization we come to understand the relationship between memory and mediation, and the role each plays in structuring identity and experience.

Cinema's relation to memory has been theorized in a number of ways, but has shaped and continues to shape the way that we talk about the constitution of identity in a culture that privileges the visual. In this preliminary chapter I outline a few of the key theories of memory and cinema, how they relate to my discussion of these films, and how I build on or challenge them, since an understanding of the experience of memory in cinema shapes how I understand cinematic narratives to produce, mediate, and/or remediate various subjectivities.

One way to think about the relationship between cinema and memory is to consider Alison Landsberg's description of cinema as "prosthetic memory." In this spectator-focused conception, Landsberg argues that cinema provides "memories which do not come from a person's lived experience in any strict sense" (175). They are memories of images¹³ and sounds that we incorporate into our knowledge of the world, becoming a part of our repository of memories, blurring the boundary between simulation and "reality." What is especially important for Landsberg is the role that memory plays in constituting identity. Commonly, memories are used to validate our experiences (as thought-independent reality). My memory of something confirms and authenticates the fact that that thing happened to me, or that I was present with some *one*, at some *place* or *event*. As I argue below, this makes memory a key element in the theory of subjectivity I offer. Landsberg acknowledges that "memory might always have been prosthetic"—that is, mediated—but she goes on to suggest that the validating function of memory is fundamentally altered by the advent of mass media, including cinema. Cinema acts as a prosthetic memory providing the viewer with the images of experiences via the mediation of the screen. Landsberg emphasizes that these are public images, available for mass consumption.

This means that even the relatively more obscure films I discuss in this dissertation are forms of mass media.¹⁴ In this sense, even an art installation seen by a handful of people participates in a form of mass media.

The implications of Landsberg's argument for the role of mass media in the generation of prosthetic memory draws heavily on Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulations, which, in the age of mass mediation has rendered moot the difference between the authentic and the inauthentic. A Baudrillardian simulation substitutes the signs of authenticity for the actual presence to which those signs are supposed to attest. Baudrillard argues that, with the proliferation of mass media, people's relationship to events has become so mediated that they can no longer distinguish between the real and the hyperreal; as events lose their relationship to a mapable reality, all people are left with are "models of a real without origin or reality" (1). Since memory plays such a key role in the authorization and validation of reality, ideas such as prosthetic memory and simulation become particularly significant in light of the critique of subjectivity central to most critical-theoretical discourse today. This critique is related to concerns over the authenticity of the experiences and representations constitutive of subjectivity. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility," Walter Benjamin outlines the relationship between the authority of a work of art and the conditions of its reproducibility. If "[t]he presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (220), then the dispersion and abolition of presence in the age of mechanical reproducibility marks the end of authenticity. Likewise, the challenges to the existence of an inner self or the presence of authentic memories in post-structuralist and postmodernist thought stem from a similar set of critiques as those applied to cinema. This crisis of cinematic identity is rooted in a critique of representation and mediation more generally. The decoupling of memory from lived experience further emphasizes the loss of

any metaphysical basis for the constitution of the subject. In this view, the subject is a kind of simulacrum, experienced purely in an endless mediation of forms unanchored in a metaphysics of presence.

In Landsberg's utopian view,¹⁵ however, cinema makes available for consumption a variety of viewing positions, or subjectivities, across race, class, and gender, making cinema a powerful tool. In this she echoes Benjamin's claim that mechanical reproduction frees art from its cultic function. While Benjamin is ambivalent about this loss of "authenticity," there is a liberating aspect to this loss. In the context of memory specifically, the loss of a "rightful" origin for memories in a particular bodily, lived experience disrupts the sense of a bounded, unified subjectivity. Poststructuralist theories have often emphasized the loss of this unified subject, but what I find particularly compelling is less the idea of a constitutive loss and more the feeling that the contemporary condition is a hypermediated one of constantly reinscribed, conflicted, and multiple subject positions, where the structures that govern visual culture, especially cinematic structures, become part of the internalized structures of selfhood. The simple dichotomy of subject-object is broken down as we recognize the ways in which the internalized structures of selfhood are mediated through such notions as screen/audience. Consider, for example, how memories are often related as if they were images and sounds, which we re-experience, rather than integral parts of ourselves.

Charles Taylor's concept of the "buffered self" is another helpful concept in understanding the particular epistemic relationship between knowledge of the world and self-knowledge, which governs much of modern (and post-modern) thought. In *A Secular Age* (2007), Taylor argues that the drift toward the conception of a secular society in Western modernity hinges on the emphasis of a perceived distinction between inner and outer self,

whereby all “thought, purpose, [and] human meanings” are found in the mind rather than the world (“Buffered and porous selves” para. 8); this distinction between inner and outer is expressed in these films through their portraits of the inner lives of their characters. Taylor further argues that one corollary of this is that the modern understanding of human sensory experiences, which emphasizes the subjective mental processes of the “buffered self,” has stripped away the exterior world of spirits, demons, and moral forces, a process Taylor calls “disenchantment” (*A Secular Age* 28), in favour of a mind-centred, rational understanding of the world. While this dissertation does not take up directly the question of secularization, many of the processes that accompany secularization are helpful in understanding models of the representation of memory and mind in cinema. In his study of memory in art film and transnational cinema, Russell Kilbourn discusses how this turning inward, which is a common narrative move in the subject matter of a great deal of art cinema and modern literature, represents a kind of repetition of the *katabasis*—the underworld journey of such classical narratives as the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, or the Christian vision of Hell in Dante’s *Inferno*—in a metaphorical, secularized, or psychologized version. The films I discuss, as with their literary antecedents in Proust and elsewhere, compress what Kilbourn describes as “the vertical axis of redemption inherited from Christianity into a decidedly ‘horizontal’ worldview” (31). That is, while the metaphysics have ostensibly changed, the patterns and ideas, which underpin the understanding of the self, are still rooted in the divides between body and mind inherited from Cartesian dualism. What is most important for my study is that the search for identity in these films results in an inward turn, which far from being a rejection of a metaphysical worldview is precisely a metaphysical gesture itself. The rejection of the “vertical” worldview, rather than being a strict avoidance of any kind of metaphysics, results in its replacement with an

existentially inflected view where all human meaning comes from within. What I will show in the discussions of these films is that, following this move, the seemingly anti-metaphysical turn in cognitive studies, affect theory, and many of the various post-structuralisms that make up contemporary theory, often still relies on all kinds of unacknowledged dualities which reinforce an ideology of presence if not precisely a mind-body divide.

This *psycho-katabasis*, or mental-journey, to cite both Kilbourn and András Bálint Kovács, becomes the only basis for self-knowledge in a world that seemingly lacks any kind of metaphysical underpinning. Kilbourn makes the point that:

What an analysis of memory in film should reveal is the degree to which the meaning and significance of the term ‘modern’—and therefore the very status of ‘the modern project’—continues to turn on this crucial issue of a kind of reflexive, avowedly secular ‘faith’ in a repertoire of metaphysical structures that constitute the ironically theological basis of contemporary Western culture. (29)

Modernization, hand in hand with secularization, displaces questions about human consciousness and subjectivity from their traditional purview in religious or spiritual practices into other forms of expression, such as cinema.

In elaborating the relationship between cinema and memory, I draw on Gilles Deleuze’s *Cinema* books as key intertexts in a reflective discourse on the role that the image plays in our experience of memory. As noted above, this discourse goes back to the philosophy of Henri Bergson, a key influence on Deleuze’s cinema books, and also to the writings of Marcel Proust. I contend that in Proust’s conception of the memory image, we can find an anticipation of many of the ways that cinematic images are discussed today. This interest in uncovering and understanding a form of self-knowledge is expressed through these films’ particular emphases on

self-reflexivity and their relation to the history of auto-ethnographic writing. Auto-ethnography is a qualitative form of research, with the writer as participant, and therefore emphasizes a subjective account, which attempts to connect to wider, cultural, social, or political meanings. Two paradigmatic literary accounts of auto-ethnographic writing are Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*) (1913-1927) and Augustine's *Confessions*, each of which has had an influence on films discussed in this dissertation.

The link between Proust's conception of memory and cinematic memory is an important one. In the opening chapter of *Swann's Way*, the first volume of Proust's magnum opus, *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust formulates the difference between "voluntary" and "involuntary" memory, a distinction that has had significant influence on twentieth-century theories of memory. Upon tasting the Madeleine (a small cake made in a shell mold, often consumed with tea and common in parts of France), the Proust's narrator finds his memories triggered of the long past when he used to eat the cake, memories which he had not considered until tasting the cake. Kilbourn notes that "For Proust, as for Bergson, memory is immaterial: the memory as such is not contained within the cake or its flavour; the madeleine is the precipitant or prompter of what for Proust is memory's complete and authentic unfolding" (61). The publication of Proust's text around the *fin du siècle* is paralleled in cinema's transformation of the visual nature of mass media. It is the visual memory that is activated in the eating of the madeleine cake; likewise, cinema's function as memory provides the viewer with a visual memory image. In his essay, "The Image in Proust," Benjamin affirms the generally visual nature of memory in Proust:

To be sure, most memories that we search for come to us as visual images. Even the free-floating forms of the *mémoire involontaire* are still in large part isolated, though enigmatically present, visual images. For this very reason, anyone who wishes to

surrender knowingly to the innermost overtones in this work must place himself in a special stratum — the bottom-most — of this involuntary memory, one in which the materials of memory no longer appear singly, as images, but tell us about a whole, amorphously and formlessly, indefinitely and weightily, in the same way as the weight of his net tells a fisherman about his catch. (202)

Benjamin's description very much resembles an account of the Deleuzian filmic image, which, as a system of relations organized by the filmmaker and interpreted by the film viewer, acts "as a key to everything that happened before it and after it" (Deleuze *The Time-Image* 202). Through its ability to represent temporal and spatial realities, cinema acts as a site of mediation where memories can be technologically reproduced in a reasonable facsimile. What Benjamin identifies in Proust's memory image is the way a part—that is, a discrete part of the past, in this case the taste of the cake eaten one's youth—recalls the feeling of the whole past. The feeling of wholeness, even if it is amorphous and formless, can also be discerned in the films I discuss in this dissertation. Regardless of the expression of lived experience in these films, however, the lesson that Benjamin takes from Proust applies here as well: that "the attempt to evoke this image [of a whole life]" lays bare the impossibility of the project to evoke an image of an entire life and "the discrepancy between literature and life" (202), or, in this case, cinematic representation and lived reality. The highlighting of this discrepancy always remains the primary effect of cinematic self-reflexivity. And yet, phenomenologically, cinematic representation, as per the theories of Merleau-Ponty, Sobchak, and others, operates on the same level of experience as lived reality. The simulacrum of mediations in contemporary capitalism is impossible to escape from despite the cultural desire for authenticity.¹⁶ Cinema, then, straddles a middle-ground, acting to expose the self-reflexive structures of the self at the same time that it is able to

produce elements of our perceptive experience. My approach is therefore neither strictly a realist nor formalist one; I contend that cinema collapses the distinctions between authentic experience and mediation in its effect on a viewing subjectivity.

A (Post)Modern/(Post-)Cinematic Art Cinema

A definition of the modern is required, since the term, in its many incarnations—modern, modernity, modernism, postmodernism—reoccurs throughout this dissertation. As one of the defining technologies of modernity, cinema has been discussed compellingly by many scholars, including Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz, Miriam Bratu Hansen, and Tom Gunning, who build on the ideas of such theorists of the modern as Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and other members of the Frankfurt School, such as Adorno and Horkheimer. Benjamin describes modernity's relation to history in the ninth of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." He describes the angel of history being propelled into the future, facing the past. The angel sees "wreckage upon wreckage" building up in front of him ("Theses" 257); Benjamin calls this accumulation "progress" ("Theses" 258). Benjamin, like many of his fellow critical theorists, saw modernity as associated with the transitory nature of modern life, in particular, the experience of a perpetual accumulation of newness. This is what Baudelaire described in *The Painter of Modern Life* as the feeling of "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent" (25). Cinema can be seen as a key contributor to this constant accumulation. Many other descriptions of modernity focus on the separation of modernity from antiquity, and emphasize the notion that "the idea of modernity always implies that of a break with or departure from something earlier" (Macey 259). That "something earlier" can be "traditional ideas, doctrines, and cultural values" abandoned "in favour of contemporary or radical values and beliefs" (OED). Modernity, in this

sense, implies a break with the past. Cinema has played a significant part in the conception of modernity as a form of historical break. Cinema establishes itself against previous conceptions of aesthetics, technology, economics, society, and politics, contributing to some of the lingering effects of the Enlightenment expectation that science and art would throw off the shackles of the past and promote new understanding and progress. Yet, cinema also provides a space for the critique of these very assumptions. Cinema has marked the revolutionary moments that denote modernity going back to the time of the Lumière brothers' screening of *The Arrival of a Train at a Station* (*L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*) (1895), which linked cinema to new technologies and modes of perception, as well as the promise of mass transportation. Cinema, in a sense, offered the ultimate form of mass transport, taking the viewer anywhere, even into the mind itself. While such a definition of modernity does not cover all that is implied by the term, for the purposes of my argument I want to focus on this relatively narrow interpretive framework.

Cinema theory itself reflects modernity's own tension with its place in history and belief in a radical break with the past. The explorations of cinema's ontology and epistemology discussed above challenge our conception of cinema, suggesting that cinema is more than an art form, and inscribing it into the larger discourses that constitute modernity. Cinema shook established views of the world as part of the larger set of social, economic, political, and cultural transformations labeled "modernization" which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. These include rapid economic growth and industrialization, increased urbanization, "greater geographical and social mobility, the rise of science and technology, the greater importance of instrumental reason, bureaucratic rationality and so on" (Taylor "Problems around the secular"). Cinema offered a rearrangement of schemes of knowledge, particularly those pertaining to how

human beings understand time and space as Kantian categories of knowledge and underpinning modern subjectivity. Hence, cinema's status as a modern phenomenon can be placed alongside such scientific and technological events such as Einstein's formulation of general relativity and the rise of the locomotive (which, in turn, gave rise to the development of "time zones" in the conception of temporality). Early film spectacles focused on playing with the freedom of human perception, emphasizing slow-motion, variable frame-rates, and, eventually, narrative experimentation that cut between various levels of diegesis, even moving between dreams and memories. In Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), the titular projectionist finds himself at the mercy of the cinematic apparatus, showing that even in the silent era, cinema's ability to structure the viewing subject in jarring ways was apparent to both filmmakers and viewers. As Keaton's projectionist demonstrates quite literally, in cinema, the implied narrative subject is often assumed to be identical to the spectator who sits before the cinema screen. As E. Deidre Pribram writes, "concepts of the spectator are inseparable from theories of the human subject" (146). Many of these theories, grounded in psychoanalysis and Marxist theories of ideology, are part of the project linked with the attempt to do away with post-Enlightenment notions of the human subject as a centred, coherent, and metaphysically grounded construction.

I argue in the chapters that follow for a continued discourse on the value of cinema as a tool for mediating the relationships between human beings and between humans and the world. This is especially pressing today, given that much recent work in the area of film theory focuses on new media, digital media, "moving image studies," and the broader spectrum of media objects that make up the corpus of the *post-cinematic*. Film theorist Steven Shaviro uses the term "post-cinematic" in his own work to describe the effect of those media works which typify a world where cinema has been decentred as the culturally dominant medium, first by television

and now by the internet. Post-cinematic further describes the way that filmmaking and film consumption have been radically transformed by digitization and global capitalism. Film production can no longer be understood solely from the standpoint of the classical Hollywood continuity editing system and studio production methods, as digital editing and effects have transformed not only the workflow, but the very way that viewers understand the meaning of the image. As Tom Gunning points out, any “truth claims” about photography or cinema are inevitably bound up in the larger discourses surrounding their use, and always have been. This accords with Bazin’s notion of a viewer’s “belief” in cinema, which is never as naive as many theoretical accounts would have it, and includes the viewer’s knowledge about the origin and mode of producing the images. The discourses surrounding narratives of the ontological instability of film, i.e. “the death of cinema” and the techno-utopian promises of digital cinema, seem to be deeply embedded in metaphysical assumptions regarding digitization and the nature of filmic representation. These assumptions, for instance surrounding the perceived loss of truth value in the wake of digital production and post-production tools, such as more elaborate and convincing visual effects (VFX), suggest that the post-cinematic era is constituted in many ways upon the contemporary viewer’s awareness of the digitization of the filmmaking process as it is upon any ontological change in the nature of the cinematic image. Additionally, what do we make of films that continue to engage in more traditional modalities of production, distribution, consumption, and narrative structure, particularly in the various streams of contemporary global art cinema?

The other aspect of the post-cinematic landscape I want to draw attention to are the ways that digitization and global capitalism continue to shape the experience of film viewing. The post-cinematic era is characterized in part by the shattering of the national and economic

boundaries which have transformed the modes and methods of traditionally regulated film circulation and consumption, through the increasingly economic function of the film festival, the rise of transnational financing, and the theoretically instantaneous access to film consumption experienced by today's viewers (i.e. through Netflix and other online streaming services such as Hulu and YouTube).¹⁷ This is the larger context in which cinema as a distinct medium exists today.

I remain fascinated, however, by the fact that the films that I am engaging with critically, despite dating for the most part from the early twenty-first century, remain rooted not only in traditional cinematic modalities of production, distribution, and consumption, but almost uniformly hearken back to the tradition of modernist art cinema that emerged in Europe and Japan in the postwar era, both in their narrative strategies and their subject matter. In one way or another these films fit comfortably under the label of “global art cinema.” I have found especially helpful the definition of the category “global art cinema” as proposed by Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover in their 2010 collection, *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*. In this conception global art cinema has its roots in the post-war European art cinema. While the term *art cinema* is a broad and capacious one, in their introduction, Galt and Schoonover articulate an understanding of how the term's very ambiguity is central to its definition. Art cinema, in their conception, hinges on its constituent impurity: art cinema has an ambiguous institutional space — it is neither strictly experimental, nor fully within the mainstream of commercial cinema; it has an “ambivalent relationship to location” (7)—thus, we find the term *art cinema* often used interchangeably (though perhaps not strictly accurately) with the term *transnational*, although it is not limited to that particular production and circulation modality which refers especially to the free flow of capital, consumer goods, and individuals

across long-standing national borders. Galt and Schoonover note that, “for most countries [excepting Hollywood fare, Hong Kong action films, and Hindi-language films marketed to the international South Asian diaspora], art cinema provides the only institutional context in which films can find audiences abroad” (7). In English speaking contexts, the effect is that art cinema is often used as a metonym for “foreign language film” (think about the kinds of films celebrated in the ghettoized category of “Best Foreign Language Film” at the Academy Awards). While some of the films I discuss here do hail from a single country of origin and production context, others have varying degrees of co-financing.¹⁸ I find the term global art cinema both descriptive and useful in my approach, for the way it provides a self-awareness of my “non-local” viewing context,¹⁹ and for the way it helps me consider how these films participate in larger cinematic movements on the levels of production, distribution, and reception, while retaining a coherent link to my theoretical interest in their similarities, in formal construction and subject matter, to the European art cinema of the postwar era.

Postwar European art cinema is generally accepted by film historians as bringing to cinema the thematic and formal concerns of early twentieth-century modernist literature, especially the *nouveau roman* of French literature. Some of the characteristics of modernist art include the following: a representation of character—and thus the self—as ambiguous, contradictory, or multiply constituted; an attention to the perception of reality as a constructed fiction; fragmentary or unresolved plots; a “stream of consciousness” style; an emphasis on the metonymic or other less obvious logical links between plot elements; and the rejection of the omniscient narrator. These works, both in literature and film, fostered an awareness of “reality” as a constructed fiction rather than a reflection of absolute truths. Modernist works reflect a notion of art as the creative act of a perceiving mind rather than a reconstruction of some kind of

objective, external reality. Kovács argues for such a thematic and formal understanding of the art cinema, as he considers these features of the modern or, in his account ‘modernist’, art films of the post war era, exemplified by directors such as Antonioni, Fellini, Bergman, and Jancsó. One link Kovács identifies between these various filmmakers and their films is “the fact that they tell stories about *an estranged person who has lost all her essential contacts to others, to the world, to the past, and to the future or lost even the foundations of her personality*. The more radical this person’s estrangement, the more radical the modernist character of the narrative” (66). The question of influence can cause one to fall back upon the intentional fallacy that dominates auteurist readings of cinema, and is of questionable relevance to the phenomena I discuss in this dissertation. However, the fact that I am seeking to describe these films’ formal and thematic characteristics within specific cultural-historical contexts means that intertextual relations to previous films provide a fundamental critical-analytical strategy.

David Bordwell’s definition of art cinema is also worth considering in this context. Bordwell seeks to formulate a schema for identifying the postwar art cinema in terms of its formal traits and narrative preoccupations, in addition to its modes of production and consumption. In his influential essay “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” Bordwell opposes the category of art cinema to dominant Hollywood production modes and narrative conventions; thus, for Bordwell, art cinema is predominantly defined negatively, by what it is not — that is, not Hollywood and not experimental or avant garde. Like Galt and Schoonover, Bordwell identifies the distinctiveness of the art cinema in its ambiguous relationship to commercial film practices. For Bordwell, art cinema practices (the set of conventions and modalities which he defines rather than setting a canon of art cinema per se) can be identified on a basis of such elements as perceptual and psychological realism, a heightened sense of authorial

expressivity, and a loosening of cause-effect linkages. I agree with him in as much as these formal practices strongly link the contemporary art cinema I discuss with their post-war antecedents, but I am less interested in the issue of authorial expressivity, which functions to define an auteur as a creative and commercial force, than with how notions of “realism” are promoted by art cinema practices in these films. As Bordwell contends in his expanded version of the article, such art cinema practices have themselves long been selectively adopted by Hollywood and other mainstream fare, in the search for newer and bigger audiences. In fact, the presence of such art cinema practices in Hollywood features is not something particularly new; many scholars on memory, cinema, and modernity point to Alfred Hitchcock’s 1958 film *Vertigo* as an exemplar of the incorporation of the practices identified above, both thematically and formally, into a Hollywood thriller. Starring Jimmy Stewart and Kim Novak, *Vertigo* must undoubtedly be considered a Hollywood product.²⁰ Nonetheless, it functions as a key film in many studies of memory and subjectivity in cinema and as an important intertext to many works of art cinema that followed it, such as Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962). The formal choices and thematic focuses of art cinema are no less indebted than those of Hollywood films to ideological and philosophical suppositions regarding the nature of knowledge and the construction of a particular mental image.

In *Post-Cinematic Affect*, Steven Shaviro describes his investigation into the post-cinematic as an attempt “to develop an account of *what it feels like* to live in the early twenty-first century” (2). Shaviro’s focus is on films that incorporate elements that have decentred traditional cinematic practices, such as the heavy digital manipulation Shaviro describes in a Grace Jones music video or the structural and ethical logic of video games in the film, *Gamer* (2009). For Shaviro, the feeling these media works generate is not determined by the

Althusserian notion of the superstructure, which presupposes that cinema's ideological effects come from the ability of the cinematic representation to structure a viewing subject, but in the ability of these post-cinematic works to express "a kind of free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today," without being "attributed to any subject in particular" (*Post-Cinematic 2*). As David Rodowick has pointed out in *The Virtual Life of Film*, such post-cinematic and new media works are nonetheless still "imagined from a cinematic metaphor" and that an "idea of cinema persists or subsists within the new media" (viii). In other words, post-cinematic works, as long as they are still rooted in some conception of a moving image and the representation of temporal and spatial properties, continue to participate in a long history of thinking cinematically, at least in their narrative forms.

In the chapters that follow, I discuss films which for the most part remain based in more established cinematic modalities of production, distribution, consumption, and reception, particularly films which can be described as contemporary global art cinema. I argue that these films continue to contribute significantly to the understanding of how it feels to live, not only in twentieth century modernity in which the art cinema is predominantly understood, but into the early twenty-first century. In different ways, these films draw attention to some key questions asked about contemporary cinematic and post-cinematic works by theorists such as Shaviro and Rodowick; for example, the nature of the cinematic medium today and an understanding of film theory as an account of what cinema once was and what it is today. These studies, including my own, can be read as extensions of the question asked by Bazin in the title to his famous book: "What is cinema?", even as they also pose the question of whether the distinctive nature of the cinematic medium is disappearing or undergoing a significant medial transformation which characterizes post-cinematic or new media work.

The challenges to the very material nature of cinema that I identify above, and which are often posed as the defining elements of the post-cinematic break from traditional modalities, can be interpreted as extensions of the same philosophical and theoretical questions discussed at the beginning of this chapter, of the various postmodernisms, posthumanisms, and postsecularisms that have called into question the notion that selfhood is rooted in a stable subjectivity. The question remains as to *why* these films continue to engage with what on the surface seem to be out-dated and unreflective, metaphysical ideas of selfhood and subjectivity, despite the numerous debates about the persistence of the subject and the rise of new master narratives to explain film's power in the turn to neuro-cognitive studies and affect theory. To restate, the crux of the argument is as follows: since cinema continues to act as a metaphorical model for memory at the same time as it is one of the materialized sites of the memories that paradoxically frames notions of selfhood and subject formation even while conceptions of subjectivity born out of modern thought no longer shape our understanding of the world and values, then this persistence presupposes a revitalization and rethinking of the concepts of selfhood and subject formation in the contemporary era. The examples and case studies that follow confirm and deepen this understanding of cinematic subjectivity and memory.

¹ Note, the use of the term "postmodern" in critical discourse is distinct from its use in architecture, for instance, where it refers to a distinctive style in a discrete chronological period. In critical theory, as I suggest below, the postmodern is more of a critical stance than a distinct period.

² See, Judith Surkis, "When Was the Linguistic Turn? A Genealogy," in *American Historical Review* (June 2012), in which she argues that "normative assumptions about the relationship between time and an implicitly European modernity are written into historical and historiographical writing itself" (701). This observation should be kept in mind in any approach and assessment of the various "turns" of theory.

³ I say "quasi-" universality, since a film like *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, while still operating in a recognizable paradigm of memory, expands the limits of memory beyond a single lifetime or existence.

⁴ Certainly, the dominant narratives of modernity came under critique before the rise of poststructuralism. For instance, modernist literature (and the filmic expression of those ideas discussed below) certainly questioned them.

⁵ See, for instance, William Pamerleau, *Existentialist Cinema*, (New York: Palgrave, 2009).

⁶ See also, Richard Grusin, *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11* (2010).

⁷ According to Jenny Taylor, one example of this would be the industrial novels of the 1840s, which were born out of middle-class consciousness during the rise of industrial capitalism. Thus, structures of feeling have cultural, class, and material origins but do not emerge evenly through a culture as a whole (J. Taylor 670).

⁸ As Ruth Leys has convincingly argued, “Massumi and many other cultural theorists present themselves as Spinozists who oppose dualism in all its guises. Yet a little reflection suffices to demonstrate that in fact a classical dualism of mind and body informs Libet’s and Massumi’s shared interpretation of Libet’s experimental findings” (“Affect: A Critique” 455). She quotes a passage from Massumi’s *Parables for the Virtual* in which he suggests that researchers couldn’t find “cognition because they were looking for it in the wrong place—in the ‘mind,’ rather than *the body* they were monitoring” (29). To be fair, Massumi places “the mind” in scare quotes, noting that mind cannot be some separate container of “mental entities that is somehow separate from body and brain” (30). But in his insistence on rooting so-called “higher functions” in the body where they are processed “automatically,” insisting that “the body is as immediately abstract as it is concrete” (31), I fail to see how he hasn’t merely replaced one dualistic structure, “mind/body,” with another, “virtual/real.” Ostensibly, Massumi (as in “The Autonomy of Affect”) resolves this apparent dualism with recourse to a theory of bifurcation between functions, as in the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead. However, as Leys notes in her response to William E. Connolly’s defence of Massumi and others on this topic, the privileging of the body in these theories comes from an equating of “mind” with consciousness (“Critical Response II” 801).

⁹ See, e.g. Russell Kilbourn’s *Cinema, Memory, Modernity* (2010), José van Dijck’s *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* (2007), and, going even further back, Frances Yates’s *The Art of Memory* (1966), which argue in different ways for the always already mediated relation between exteriorized, physical technologies of memory and the notion of internalized, “natural,” neuro-biological memory.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that while Locke’s notion of the “self” (or “person,” as he interchangeably used the term) relies on the function of autobiographical memory, the term “memory” in Locke is not equivalent to “consciousness.” Galen Strawson argues that, for Locke, “Consciousness is not memory” (40), even if the ability to recall a memory “‘from the inside’” is a key aspect of the experience of consciousness and continuity of identity (50). See also Chapters 7 and 9 in Strawson, *Locke on Personal Identity* (2011).

¹¹ In the theories of John Locke, possession of a memory of consciousness allowed for the positing of a “forensic” notion of identity, which aids in the assignment of responsibility and agency to a “self” or “person” (Strawson 42).

¹² In a recent article in the digital magazine *Aeon*, entitled “The Empty Brain,” psychologist and neuroscience researcher Robert Epstein explains that brain is not an information processor, nor does it store data or even memories as we often think and speak of it as doing. In addition to relating some of the newest research into how the brain functions, Epstein focuses especially on how the metaphors used historically to describe the brain have always relied on the various technological and medial technologies of contemporaneous eras, and at times distorted our understanding of it. Epstein argues that our conception of the brain as a computer hinders our understanding today. His focus on medial and technological metaphors makes his argument particularly compelling to the topic of this dissertation. See also Van Dijck, “Memory Matters in the Digital Age,” *Configurations* 12.3 (2004).

¹³ See also, Victor Burgin’s book, *The Remembered Film* (2004).

¹⁴ This point stands for both collective theatrical viewings of feature films or viewings of such films individually, on home entertainment centres, the internet, or even on a smart phone or tablet, as I discuss in Chapter 6. In the case of home videos of vacations, or other recordings one might make to “supplement” and preserve lived experiences, it should be noted that video sharing websites and social media such as YouTube, Vimeo, or Vine are now blurring any distinction that might exclude them from truly mass media.

¹⁵ Kilbourn makes a similar point about Landsberg’s view of prosthetic memory as containing a “positive” political potential (159).

¹⁶ For instance, see Charles Taylor’s Massey Lecture, *The Malaise of Modernity* on the role that authenticity still plays in contemporary society despite the loss of the structuring metaphysics of antiquity.

¹⁷ Although, as a cursory examination of such services shows, even taking into account the black- and grey-market trading of film files via BitTorrent file-sharing media, or the existence of unauthorized streaming sites, an overwhelming mass of cinema from both the past and the current era remains unavailable online or in any digital format. Additionally, such seemingly democratizing technologies, which provide greater access to both classical and global art cinema, nonetheless still serve to privilege Hollywood and mainstream cinema, reinforcing the interests of global neoliberal finance. In one list of the most “pirated” films of all-time, for instance, all were massive box office earners (e.g. *The Dark Knight* [2008]), and the number one film was also the highest worldwide box office earner at the time, James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009) (Ford).

¹⁸ The Cannes Film Festival winning *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, which I discuss in chapter four, exemplifies this notion of the blurry line between national cinema and transnational production. A “Thai film” in language, production locale, and subject matter, the film was financed by a combination of Thai, British, French,

German, and Spanish production houses (Mayorga). Thus, in one sense it would be strange to call *Uncle Boonmee* anything other than a Thai film, yet following a strict definition of the term, it has a clear “transnational” pedigree.

¹⁹ For clear historical, economic, and cultural reasons, none of the films I discuss are local Canadian productions.

²⁰ *Vertigo* has not always enjoyed the ascendant position in the various filmic canons it does today. While the film was not initially well-received by critics, in 2012 it was voted the number one film of all time by a collection of critics and filmmakers in the decennial *Sight and Sound* poll of greatest films, deposing *Citizen Kane* from its long time spot at number one. It’s thematic focus on the cinematic functions of image and memory, as Stewart’s Scottie can be seen as a stand-in for the film viewer, suggests that cinema’s self-reflexive nature holds a great fascination for both artists and critics.

Chapter 2

An Image of the Self: Memory and Subjectivity in the Films of Andrei Tarkovsky

Memory is a spiritual concept! [...] Bereft of memory, a person becomes the prisoner of an illusory existence; falling out of time he is unable to seize his own link with the outside world—in other words he is doomed to madness.

—Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, pp. 57-58

Many people grumble that Tarkovsky's films are difficult, but I don't think so. His films just show how extraordinarily sensitive Tarkovsky is. He made a film titled *Mirror* after *Solaris*. *Mirror* deals with his cherished memories in childhood, and many people say again it is disturbingly difficult. Yes, at a glance, it seems to have no rational development in its storytelling. But we have to remember: it is impossible that in our soul our childhood memories should arrange themselves in a static, logical sequence.

A strange train of fragments of early memory images shattered and broken can bring about the poetry in our infancy.

—Akira Kurosawa, "Tarkovsky and *Solaris*"

Introduction

The notion that cinema can recreate or represent the inner life of the mind, including the mental processes of memory, attention, and association, is not a new one. Some of the earliest developments in film language, from the close-ups of D. W. Griffith's early features to the dreams in Edwin S. Porter's "Dream of a Rarebit Fiend" (1906) were attempts to harness the power of the filmic apparatus to draw a viewer into the story world. The mechanical, "automatic" processes of representation which cinema inherited from photography are often

cited by realist critics as cinema's originary and defining characteristic; for example, in the case of most interpretations of Bazin's "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" discussed in the introduction. Yet, the idea that cinema is able to represent the modes of perceptive experience—seeing, hearing, movement—and can give some sense of their subjective apprehension is central to the rise of the modernist, postwar art cinema in Europe and Japan—a loosely defined cinematic movement driven by changes in the dominance of the Hollywood studio system worldwide and the emergence of new national cinemas. These films and filmmakers insisted that cinema was capable of more than just mechanical representation, and introduced new forms and modes of representing the world, all the better to portray character psychology, existentialist introspection, and the subjectivities of both characters and their creators.

Drawing on the developments of Italian neorealism and following the influence of literary modernism (e.g. the *nouveau roman* in 1950s France), postwar art cinema experimented with temporal shifts and oblique modes of narration that echoed the stream of consciousness narration and spare, personal style of modernist literature of the pre-war years by writers such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, and later Samuel Beckett. Critics such as Gilles Deleuze see the postwar European art cinema as defined, not primarily through its production contexts or subject matter, but through its stylistic distinctiveness; in particular, by what Deleuze calls the "time-image," with its emphasis on long takes and a temporality driven by the links between thoughts rather than movements. In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze describes the time-image as that which is able "to make perceptible, to make visible, relationships of time which cannot be seen in the represented object and do not allow themselves to be reduced to the present" (xii). Deleuze contrasts the time-image to the mere use of the flashback; while the flashback is a useful formal device for marking the temporal structure of a narrative, in terms of representing the full

complexity of memory, as *Mirror* attempts to do, the flashback reduces the function of memory to simple recall. For Deleuze, the time-image contrasts with the movement-image for the way that it attempts to give a more direct experience of time and temporality. In the example of the long take, the freedom of the viewer to direct their sight in contrast to the framing structure of montage provides a more direct experience of temporality. Deleuze suggest that the long take expresses the principles of montage within a single shot as they contain multiple registers of comprehension. In Deleuze's account, the stylistic qualities of the postwar art cinema make it well suited to explorations of temporality and, therefore, to the themes of memory, trauma, and identity, all of which were key preoccupations of European nations after the war. The second world war had left entire societies in ruins, and the soldiers returning from the war as well as the populations of the European countries (and Japan) that had experienced the war first hand were forced to rethink many of their central beliefs, as well as grapple with identities scarred by the trauma of war and changing national and political makeups. These were the societal conditions that made these nations ripe for the emergence of art cinema.

The contemporary films that I examine in this dissertation draw significantly upon the legacy of this postwar European art cinema and its classification as a modernist cinema, not only in formal innovation, but in historical and intellectual contexts as well.¹ However, among those filmmakers who can be seen as both exemplifying and pushing the limits of the innovations and preoccupations of postwar art cinema, the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky looms the largest, having succeeded in transforming the possibilities for the expression of subjectivity and memory in an art cinematic idiom and taking its formal aspects in new directions. Even as the postwar European art cinema was noted for its less-than-straightforward treatment of plot and character, emphasizing a dreamy psychological realism and featuring ambiguous endings,

Tarkovsky's films challenge a viewer even further by focalizing narratives through the character's memories or dreams, thereby encouraging ambiguous readings. As Vida T. Johnson and Graham Petrie note, "Tarkovsky is [...] one of the major stylistic innovators in film" of the postwar era, and yet "his work can pose problems, not just to viewers accustomed to 'classical' Hollywood narrative, but even to many familiar with the strategies employed by the European 'art film'" (xv). Why, then, does Tarkovsky have such a large influence over the contemporary films examined in this dissertation, both in subject matter and style? Why, despite what I will show are significant deviations from the bulk of European art cinema in both guiding philosophy and formal technique, do I maintain an understanding of Tarkovsky is so essential to developing an understanding and account of the concept of memory in art cinema to this day? I argue that, in contrast to many other radically experimental films of the postwar art cinema, Tarkovsky's films offer an image of selfhood that does not collapse into solipsism. Through the treatment of time and memory in these films, cinema is recovered as a link between the self and the outside world. Tarkovsky's films are attempts to go beyond merely the recreation of the objective perception of the world, going some ways instead toward the presentation of the thoughts, memories, and dreams that shape each person's apprehension of the world. In Tarkovsky's own words, it is a move from "narrative causality" toward "poetic articulations" (30). However, it is not an outright rejection of the world. Tarkovsky called his work "sculpting in time" because it is in time that the mental life of memory and the experience of the world both find expression. Thus, in representing the experience of particular times in cinema, the perception of the world and the mental features of memory and thought meet. In offering an analysis and interpretation of how Tarkovsky's films engage with memory and subjectivity, and in suggesting that their spiritual value lies in the portrait of the self that emerges from them, I reference Tarkovsky's writings and

reflections on his filmmaking craft. Tarkovsky's book offers a further context in which to situate his films philosophically. However, a director's word is never the last one on his or her own work, and therefore I want to situate Tarkovsky's statements in *Sculpting in Time* within the context of a given film's style and narrative, not the other way around.² In the end, the arguments I forward are arguments about a relationship between the films themselves and the various subjectivities I see instantiated in and through them. As film scholar Robert Bird writes: "The power of Tarkovsky's films lies not in their capture of the mystical presence of nature or Russia or what have you, but in the way they make the elements of cinema into conditions of the new" (13). It is these conditions of the new that these films productively make possible. These conditions are the source of the films' response to the materialist limits placed upon a spiritual understanding of the self in modernity.

In this chapter, I present a reading of Tarkovsky's films, *Andrei Rublev* (1965) and *Mirror* (*Zerkalo*) (1975). I make the case that his films, and *Mirror* in particular, are exemplary expressions of subjectivity and memory in art cinema's history that continue to influence contemporary cinema. First, I look at how Tarkovsky's films have been situated within the history of postwar art cinema. I identify affinities in both *Andrei Rublev* and *Mirror* with art cinema, including an emphasis on ambiguity and self-reflexivity and the use of the mental journey or interior monologue in constituting the role of the self. I then position Tarkovsky's films as both genealogically and conceptually helpful in explaining the persistence of memory and the self as the subjects of cinematic inquiry. Next, I consider Tarkovsky's interest in Russian Christian "Personalism" by looking at the way that his beliefs about human selfhood are manifested in these two films. I argue that even as modernity—or the variation of modernity experienced in Soviet Russia³—transformed, and in many ways did away with, traditional

understandings of what it means to be a human being and the human being's place in the world, Tarkovsky's films express a desire to thematically and formally wrestle with a coherent, credible image of the self. Echoes of Tarkovsky's preoccupations can be seen in many of the films that I examine in the other chapters, either in the image of the self the present in different religious and socio-cultural contexts or through their representation of the self's negation. I close this chapter with a close reading of *Mirror* and its treatment of memory, arguing for that film's centrality to my understanding of the role of cinematic belief with regard to the self. Throughout, I view Tarkovsky's films through the lens of my own re-reading of André Bazin's film theory, emphasizing the affinities between it and Tarkovsky's work and thought. I suggest that, contrary to readings of Bazin that privilege his ontological "realist" argument concerning cinema, Tarkovsky's films illuminate the "ethical" relation between the film and the world, which forms the heart of his spiritual cinema.

Tarkovsky's cinema is rare in its attempt to illuminate the possibilities of spiritual thinking in worlds—either that of Soviet Russia or the post-cinematic, global capitalism of the contemporary moment—that leave little room for such thinking. For Tarkovsky, the sense of "self" expressed in cinema is a spiritual practice, not in a strictly religious sense of the term, but in so far as viewing practices and filmic language both contribute to what cinema tells us about our most deeply held values and the relation between oneself and the rest of the universe. Careful attention to Tarkovsky's films helps to more clearly articulate the relationship between realist and expressionist notions of cinematic language, which in turn helps us avoid the unreflective metaphysics of most crudely spiritual filmmaking, with its false dichotomies between inner and outer realities, nature and culture, mind and body. Tarkovsky's films remind us that a sense of cinematic realism is not the same as the way that film can give a perceptually accurate vision of

the world or an empiricism founded in its supposed mechanical objectivity. Rather, it is the way that the cinema offers up a sense of the self, which cannot be contained in categories of material or immaterial, since for Tarkovsky such categorical structures cannot contain the cinema as an experience of time and memory. Spirituality in Tarkovsky's sense is that aspect of humanity that asks the "crucial questions of his [sic] existence" (42), for instance of the way that our relationship to the immaterial realities of time is manifested or how we are to set about making decisions about meaning and value in the world. In other words, spiritual cinema for Tarkovsky is a cinema that interrogates the very significance of the world.⁴

Certainly most English language film criticism that deals with the films of Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky is limited by the fact that Tarkovsky's films, and most of the criticism written about them, are in languages other than English, e.g. Russian, Swedish, Hungarian, and French. Additionally, one must consider the specific political constraints on access to archival research, given that five of his seven features were produced in the Soviet Union during the Cold War and his archives remain located in Russia.⁵ As Johnson and Petrie note in the introduction to their seminal English language volume on Tarkovsky, Western viewers almost always operate with a limited "understanding of the specific cultural contexts within which the films [of Tarkovsky] operate" (xiv). Additionally, key articles on Tarkovsky's art remain un-translated into English.⁶ The danger for the English-language Tarkovsky scholar is that the objects of study have been shaped by a tradition that has a different intellectual and cultural history than that in which I, for one, am operating. Beyond the diverging intellectual history of Russia from Western Europe throughout the early modern period, and for much of the twentieth century, official Soviet thought was often diametrically opposed to Western Anglo-American thought in areas of politics, science, and philosophy. Therefore, a Tarkovsky scholar

working in English navigates these films with a framework quite different from the one that shaped the films' production and initial domestic reception. For instance, Johnson and Petrie suggest that Tarkovsky subverts the "narrative categories and structures" promoted by scholars such as David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (xv), not just in terms of an opposition to "classical" Hollywood cinema but also in relation to common understandings of European art cinema. Studying Tarkovsky disrupts a neat binary between Hollywood and Europe as well as the definitions of art cinema that are defined primarily by their opposition to Hollywood modes of production and narration.

Of particular interest to me, given my focus on the way that Tarkovsky's films present the construction of the self in cinema via the representation of memory and other subjective states, is the fact that any such discussions inevitably engage with what Jacques Derrida calls the "text of philosophy" that constitutes the Western tradition of metaphysics (*Margins of Philosophy* 177). As can be demonstrated with reference to his own writings on the cinema in *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky was a filmmaker who was conversant with this "text" through his knowledge of the history of philosophy, poetics, and cinema as promoted in Western canons. That said, to ignore entirely some of the uniquely Russian contributions to philosophical thought that shaped his films would be to miss out on some key insights that can sharpen our understanding of what his films add to the discourse on subjectivity and memory. Tarkovsky's films offer a significant contribution to the history of filmic representations of subjectivity, both in the way that they mobilize film style and narrative to construct their image of the self and through their interaction with Tarkovsky's specifically Russian Orthodox understanding of the self. Tarkovsky had a "strong sense of himself as a 'Russian' artist, the heir to a rich cultural and spiritual tradition that he was determined to perpetuate and contribute to in his own work"

(Johnson and Petrie xv). While paying attention to and respecting Tarkovsky's self-definition within the Russian cultural-spiritual tradition, I want to nonetheless situate Tarkovsky's films within the larger transnational history of filmic representation of the self, while also considering the ways that his films engage with alternative-traditions of interpretation.

To do this means to go beyond a straightforward treatment of the thematic content of Tarkovsky's films and to look at the way they formally manifest such ideas. To paraphrase Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, if the limits of language are the limits of the world, then an understanding of the way that Tarkovsky mobilizes cinematic language is necessary to understanding what these films have to say about the relationship of cinema to the world. By viewing Tarkovsky's films in this way, I am less interested in simply trying to offer a more clear and precise reading of his films, or to penetrate their "difficulty", than in arguing that these films clarify how cinema has shaped and continues to shape our understanding of the self.

Tarkovsky's Mental Journeys and the Postwar Art Cinema

Tarkovsky's films occupy a unique place in relation to postwar art cinema, the history of Soviet cinema, and classical film theory; they articulate an argument critical of the conception of the self in Soviet modernity, while at the same time holding out hope for the full realization of the self in the world. As a Soviet Russian, Tarkovsky's immediate context was the Soviet revolutionary project, which offered one particular manifestation of modernity in its radical break with the past. The Soviet project also promoted the development of cinema as an art form that championed the radical possibilities of a technologically based method of representation. Tarkovsky inherited this tradition of filmmaking, honed in the State Film Institute and Narkompros. This relationship between the Soviet revolutionary project and the cinema did not

go unremarked upon by Bazin, who wrote about the significance of “the Soviet revolution” for cinema when he emphasized the power and legacy of film in representing “a collection of historical events which signal the birth of a new order and a new civilization” (“The Western” 148). In this essay, Bazin suggests that the Bolshevik revolution is an event comparable to the colonization of the American west, in the way that each operates as a kind of guiding myth for the manifestation of modernity in the cinema of each respective nation.⁷ And yet, Tarkovsky’s films offer a very different image of the self than the one that I see as characteristic of either Soviet modernity or the high modernism of postwar art cinema. Bazin, because of his praise of the long-take and depth of focus, has often been framed as a kind of antithesis to classical Soviet film theory, which is strongly associated with montage. Soviet montage was built on the relationship between shots and how meaning was constructed in the contrast between them;⁸ this style was based on how shots succeed one another, not on the elements within the shot. Unsurprisingly then, as John MacKay notes in relation to Bazin’s Russo-Soviet reception, “For all the work that has appeared on Tarkovsky in recent years, we still have surprisingly little rigorous reflection on the relationship between his thinking on cinema and Bazin’s obviously related conceptions” (296).

MacKay suggests redressing the situation by considering Tarkovsky’s writings in their mid-1960s context, at a time when Bazin’s writings made an impact on Soviet film theory. While such a historical project is outside the methodological scope of this chapter, I do hope to illuminate what I see as real affinities between Tarkovsky’s style and narrational strategies and Bazin’s writings. I see these affinities manifested not only in Tarkovsky’s use of the long take and deep-focus, but also in how Tarkovsky’s description of film as an expression of a human attitude toward reality, when properly understood, shares significant features with Bazin’s

concept of realism. It is for these reasons that Tarkovsky's films and writing can be read as part of the 1960s postwar milieu of which the Soviet Union was participating in, characterized by the decolonization process, the Cold War, and the post-Stalin reconfiguration of the Soviet Empire. As noted in the introduction, Philip Rosen reconsiders Bazin's notion of filmic realism as accounting for the subjective. For him, "Bazin's concept of realism entails a special sensitivity to the objective gap between film and reality" (109), and I would argue that Tarkovsky's films demonstrate such a sensitivity and attention to focusing the viewer's attention in constructive ways. Recently, Burke Hilsabeck has offered a new reading of Bazin's "Ontology" essay, where he takes Rosen's observations even further, suggesting that "A realist film for Bazin is one that stands in an acknowledging relation to the object of its description" (39). Rosen and Hilsabeck's re-readings of Bazin both resonate with the way that I see Tarkovsky inheriting the concerns of realism by offering up the possibility through his film style of the revelation, or more precisely the creation, of the self.

While Tarkovsky's films do not necessarily fit neatly into the strictly modernist lineage of many post-war international art films, the European post-war art cinema remains my primary mode of comparison and his films can productively be considered in relation to these other works, in terms of intertextual influence and in terms of their genealogical relations, as Kovács does in *Screening Modernism*. Tarkovsky's films, even taking into account the relative independence of the Soviet film industry from Western influence, are both marked, though not determined, by the legacy of European art cinema and contribute to that legacy in significant ways. Specifically, Kovács argues that Tarkovsky's work was instrumental in introducing modernist film forms into the Soviet Union and that *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) was the first example of what he calls the "mental journey" film in Soviet cinema (286).⁹

However, it is worth pausing to note Tarkovsky's place in the Soviet cinema of the 1960s and 70s, especially considering his role and the prominence accorded him amongst film scholars as a representative filmmaker of that era. Soviet cinema of the 1960s, when Tarkovsky made his first feature, was marked by the effects of the Thaw in the wider experience of Soviet cultural life in the decade. Many accounts of Soviet cinema ignore this period in favour of the Constructivist avant-garde cinema of the Soviet 1920s, the cinema of the perestroika era under Gorbachev in the 1980s, and even the Stalinist cinema. Yet, the cinema of the 1960s participated in a revival of Soviet art in other areas, especially literature. Boris Pasternak returned to literary work and Alexander Solzhenitsyn began his career in the decade (Prokhorov 5). The revival of Soviet cinema in the postwar era combined with the political thaw meant that Soviet films once again received international attention. In 1958, Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes are Flying* (1957) won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, and a few years later in 1962, Tarkovsky's own *Ivan's Childhood* would win the Gold Lion at Venice. These films embraced visual evocation over narrative storytelling while covering themes relating to questions of personal and national identity. For this reason, the Soviet cinema of the postwar era played a significant role in the cultural Thaw of the period and combatting totalitarian ideology.

Like works of postwar European art cinema, Tarkovsky's films are concerned with the situation of the alienated individual of modernity. As I outlined in the previous chapter, the films of the postwar art cinema can reasonably be said to share many of the characteristics of modernist literature, especially the *nouveau roman*, in their representation of the self as a contradictory or multiply constituted construction. In fact, even setting aside for a moment matters of film style and production contexts,¹⁰ one can group Tarkovsky's films with those of Antonioni, Fellini, Bergman, and Jancsó, a list of filmmakers, noted in the previous chapter, that

Kovács closely associates with filmic modernism on account of their thematic treatment of “the estranged ‘modern individual’” (*Screening Modernism* 66). It is worth restating Kovács’s consideration of some of the features of these modern, and modernist, film narratives: namely, “the fact that they tell stories about *an estranged person who has lost all her essential contacts to others, to the world, to the past, and to the future or lost even the foundations of her personality*. The more radical this person’s estrangement, the more radical the modernist character of the narrative” (66). Kovács here offers a compelling definition of the modernist film. Where I see Tarkovsky’s films as departing from the high modernist character of films such as Bergman’s *Persona* (1966) or Alain Resnais’s *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), is that rather than depicting the dissolution of the individual’s identity as an end point, they point toward the possibility of some form of reconciliation, thereby minimizing their strictly modernist tendencies (if we are to follow Kovács’ definition of modernism). For instance, Tarkovsky’s films generally lack the kind of open-ended narrative structure that Kovács identifies as characteristic of the films of Resnais or Alain Robbe-Grillet.¹¹ Even at their most radical, Tarkovsky’s films, such as *Mirror*, present some form of closure—at least for the characters if not for the viewer. For instance, *Mirror* ends by bringing together more than one temporal level into a single shot, which formally brings the film’s rumination to an end. *Andrei Rublev* ends with a series of shots finally revealing Rublev’s icon paintings in full colour.

Kovács gives a detailed account of how he sees Tarkovsky’s films as fitting with many of the trends and traditions popular in European film production during the postwar era, thematically, generically, and structurally. Kovács situates Tarkovsky’s films generically, for instance, in the context of the “travel film,” and its aforementioned subset, the “mental journey” film, genres that remain popular in contemporary European art cinema. *Andrei Rublev*, *Stalker*

(1979), and *Solaris* (1972) each fit the genre of the travel film where the characters undergo a physical journey of some sort. *Mirror* and *Ivan's Childhood* also fit into the travel film genre as examples of the “mental journey” film, as they take the viewer on a journey into the narrating characters’ memories and dreams. The loosely defined generic tendencies of the travel film provide the viewer with one schema through which to interpret Tarkovsky’s films’ more ambiguous and ambitious explorations of narrative structure.

Kovács’s argument involves noting how these trends offer the filmmaker ways to emphasize *narrative time* over and above plot linkages. A travel film or road movie often follows a neorealist notion of continuity, as it is characterized by the use of “long takes, very slow development of the plot, which is otherwise classically linear, and extensive representation of scenes where ‘nothing happens’” (Kovács *Screening Modernism* 128). I would go further and link this particular arrangement of narrative time to Bazin’s praise of the neorealist form in “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” pointing to it as another example of a positive affinity between Bazin’s theoretical writings and Tarkovsky’s film practice. The mental journey, on the other hand, which Kovács identifies as stemming from the influence of the *nouveau roman* (and particularly the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet), constructs its image of the inner life of the character by making associations between different temporal registers and forms of consciousness, such as memories or dreams. Most importantly, with respect to the influence of the postwar art film on Tarkovsky’s films, is that in both variations of the travel genre, plot is not the driving force behind the organization of the film’s images; rather, as travel films or mental journeys, linkages between moments emerge out of space and movement, even as what is prioritized is the representation of the particular lived experience of life in either medieval Russia or the Soviet Union. Thus, *Andrei Rublev* references the Tartar invasion of Russia in the fifteenth

century, while *Mirror* traces the character's family through post-Bolshevik Russian and World War II.

Both of these trends common to postwar art cinema, the travel film and mental journey film, emphasize organizational structures of the world over and above any other narrative functions: first you go here, then you go there; a road leads to a village or one gets lost on the way and ends up at a farmhouse. While it might be tempting to try to pinpoint specific influences,¹² Kovács notes that the appearance of similarly structured films in different countries around the same time does not necessarily indicate the influence of one on another, but is rather an example of how principles of art film style had become widespread enough to generate similar results without direct influence.¹³ This “simultaneity” acts to productively diminish the role of the *auteur* as the sole organizing subjectivity of a film, instead turning the focus of analysis to the specifically shared film aesthetics and emphasizing the multidimensionality of the subjectivities shaping a film such as *Mirror*'s final structure.

While the modernist tendencies in Tarkovsky's films, such as the use of the mental journey, do offer a set of formal characteristics with which to classify Tarkovsky's film style and narrative preoccupations within the postwar modernist art cinema, Tarkovsky's films also diverge from this tradition in certain key ways. The modernist influence is manifested on the thematic level in Tarkovsky's films, something they share with many other works of postwar art cinema, from both Western Europe and elsewhere.¹⁴ Tarkovsky notably diverges, however, from the modernist-influence in *Mirror*. *Mirror* could be compared to the avant-garde using the same language that Bazin used to describe the films of Renoir. In “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” Bazin claims that avant-garde films were whichever films constructed new ways of showing things to the viewer, in the same way that a novelist finds new ways to invite the

readers into the consciousness of the artist. Likewise, *Mirror* constructs new subjectivities expressed in a way that productively expands the vocabulary of cinema. Kovács argues that one of the key differences between Tarkovsky's films, in particular *Mirror*, and other modernist works is that, while the *nouveau roman* (and related mental journey experiments) "reduces everything to the dimension of narrative discourse," Tarkovsky aims to actually recreate a sense of subjectivity in the film: his films are always oriented to some outside reality, or rather, the relation between the viewer and the world. This relation can be found in both the films' relation to history and memory and also in the use of individual shots, particularly the long take. These elements not only emphasize Tarkovsky's affinity with the "realism" of Bazin, but mark the film style and narrative of Tarkovsky's films as having an ethical stance that rejects nihilism in favour of a productive cultivation of selfhood. If "[n]othingness is the only metaphysical category modernism accepts" (Kovács 294), Tarkovsky's films reject this view, even while they participate in many of the same stylistic, generic, and thematic modes. This is why Kovács and others (including Bird) place films like *Mirror* somewhere "on the borderline between the realm of modernism and postmodernism" (394). I would argue that postmodernism, and its relatively slippery definitions, may not be the most helpful way to approach a film such as *Mirror*. The postmodern style is often associated with the rejection of a progressive account of history, the rejection of grand narratives, and the embrace of pastiche. The combining of religious myths with the formal structures of modernism and modernity is often labeled postmodern.¹⁵ I would argue, however, that such a label does not really fit what Tarkovsky is doing in *Mirror*, since Tarkovsky's film neither rejects historical narratives nor embraces pastiche in its self-reflexive approach to the essential myths of Russian history and religion. Such a label fails to take into

account the complex interaction between Russian Christian belief and Soviet modernity that shapes Tarkovsky's films.

Tarkovsky and Personalism

Tarkovsky's films frequently explore how a human being can come to knowledge of his or her own persona, through a growing awareness of the self as a distinct individual. From the dreams and memories that surface in *Ivan's Childhood*, which tells the story of a young boy on the Russian front lines in World War II, to the deep crisis of the soul experienced by the titular monk painter of *Andrei Rublev*, to the act of self-abnegation at the end of *Sacrifice* (1986), in which the main character attempts to strike a deal over his own soul in order to avert a nuclear war, Tarkovsky's films explore the question of the relation of the self to society and the concept of God (as understood in Russian Orthodoxy). Such a question must be considered in relation to the context in which Tarkovsky was making his films, whether in Soviet Russia during the 1960s and 70s while under the shadow of government censorship,¹⁶ or during his last years in the 1980s suffering the pain of exile from his beloved home and filming in Italy and Sweden. While Tarkovsky's participation in the traditions of Russian Orthodox Christianity has a significant influence on the philosophy of selfhood expressed in his films, the films do not shy away from addressing the challenges posed to this tradition in Soviet Russia, nor from those posed by the alienated modernity experienced in postwar Europe. The challenge of forming a spiritual persona in a hostile world is a theme that is present to a differing extent in all his films and one that is explicitly addressed in both *Andrei Rublev* and *Mirror*.

Kovács has persuasively argued that Tarkovsky's films can be considered to a certain extent as expressions of the philosophical influence of Russian Christian Personalism. In

particular, he argues that Tarkovsky's films show an affinity with the writings of the philosopher-theologian Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948), and that Tarkovsky's work represents a "renaissance of [personalist] thinking in a period in which these ideas were clearly unwelcome in the Soviet Union" (Kovács "Andrei Tarkovsky" 581). We know from Tarkovsky's journals that he was conversant with Berdyaev's writings (582), which serve as a relevant intertext in my reading of his films. Tarkovsky's film style expresses elements congruent with a personalistic existentialist philosophy, and specifically the philosophy of Berdyaev. This makes some understanding of Berdyaev's philosophy helpful in understanding precisely what Tarkovsky's films are doing. Personalism, which is loosely defined as any system of thought that sees the personhood of the human (and often divine) being as the primary mode of ontological, epistemological, and axiological investigation, often with a phenomenological or existentialist focus, is an important lens through which to view Tarkovsky's films, even if it is not the only one.

Personalism is existentialist in nature because it is primarily interested in the way that human beings come to an understanding of themselves in themselves, rather than as objects of study in the world. Personalist philosophers¹⁷ have suggested that the subjectivistic (based in an *a priori* pure consciousness) and the objectivistic (purely materialist) conceptions of the human being break down in lived experience. The result is that any conception of subjectivity must be rooted in the concrete existence of the human being in the world. Most expressions of Christian Personalism, in a similar way to existentialism, are predicated on an understanding of the human experience as one of alienation from the external world. However, rather than positing a universal human condition from which to construct a subjectivity, as does existentialism, personalism sees the human soul as divided: partly integrated into the socio-biological world, the

part which is called the individual, and partly alienated from it, the part which is the *person* or *personality*.¹⁸ Within this schema, a person is “not a social, political, historical, racial category: it is an ethical one” (Kovács “Andrei Tarkovsky” 582), constructed wholly in relation to God. Berdyaev believed that the person was the mode through which a human being came into contact with the transcendental. For Berdyaev, “[t]he person exists in the gap of the subjective and objective” (qtd. in Kovács “Andrei Tarkovsky” 588). Thus, for Berdyaev’s particular take on the person, wholeness is not a naturally given or essential part of the human being, but rather the human being comes to an understanding of his or herself in recognizing the insufficiency of the outside world and of an objective view that views the human being as solely the construction of socio-cultural or biological-natural forces.

Tarkovsky's films often represent a conflict within the process of cultivating the *person* as the constitutive element of the self, through their portrayal of the various forces acting upon a human being. These forces may emerge from a social-biological environment or some perceived spiritual or artistic calling. The hostile environments of Tarkovsky’s protagonists—whether they are on the Russian front lines in World War II, in a medieval Russia threatened by pagans and Tatars, on a space station orbiting an alien planet, or at a country retreat during the outbreak of nuclear war—each contributes to the conflict between the subjective work of becoming a *person*—that is a being of dignity and value, capable of free moral and ethical action—versus an individual—an object shaped by nature, culture, and politics—within the film.

Berdyaev was a Russian Orthodox philosopher and theologian who lived in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Russia. He was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1922 and lived out the rest of his life in Paris due to his opposition to the Soviet regime; this was not because he was opposed to Marxist thought specifically—in fact, he expressed an appreciation of

the way Marxism was “pregnant with enormous revolutionary possibilities” (Berdyayev qtd. in Balasubramanian 15)—but because he opposed what he saw as the totalitarian elements of the Soviet state which squelched human freedom and institutionalized anti-Christianity. Still Berdyayev was not afraid of issuing a strong critique of institutional religion. A lifelong nonconformist, much like his fellow theistic existentialist thinker Søren Kierkegaard, Berdyayev criticized the Russian Orthodox Church for its hypocrisy. However, he was attracted to Orthodoxy primarily for what he regarded as its greater freedom, as opposed to Roman Catholicism or Protestantism, and also because of its “Russian-ness”—Berdyayev was a believer that “Russia had a unique mission in world history” (Balasubramanian 18)¹⁹ to preserve and cultivate Christian thought because of its position between the East and West.

Regardless of the merits of such thought, however, most relevant for this chapter is the way that personalism functions as a lens through which to understand Tarkovsky’s film style. Kovács reminds us that Berdyayev is only one example of the many variations of personalist thought; he quotes Emmanuel Mounier: “we call personalist all doctrines, all civilizations that claim the precedence of the person over the material necessities and the collective institutions supporting its development” (qtd. in “Andrei Tarkovsky” 589). Furthermore, Berdyayev argues: “Personality is not nature, but freedom” (qtd. in Balasubramanian 53). In this way, the subjectivity that emerges from the mobilization of film style in Tarkovsky’s films can itself be called personalist, in that it stresses freedom over determinism. I also note here that such emphasis on the freedom afforded the viewer resonates closely with Bazin’s praise of the long-take and composition in depth, over and against the deterministic meanings imposed by montage, as argued in “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema.” This emphasis on freedom is similarly essential to Berdyayev:

[The human being] perceives significance in the situation [in which he or she find his or herself], which he [sic] confronts and reacts to in a particular way. There is a natural world surrounding him. He interprets it in a particular way and puts forth suitable responses. An examination of the activities of a human being will reveal to us the significance which he perceives in the natural world [...] Every one of his activities is an expression of the way in which he takes account of the natural significance of the environment. (qtd. in Balasubramanian 59)

Thus, significance, that is a thing's importance or consequence, is not something that exists prior to the human being's interaction with an environment, but emerges from engagement with material reality. Significance is contextual. It is dialogic, and must be constructed from the engagement of a person with his or her direct experiences. Likewise, in Tarkovsky's films, the freedom the viewer experiences in engaging with the images, as emphasized in the stylistic choices, can be said to expose the very contingency of crafting the person in time and memory.

Andrei Rublev, Tarkovsky's film about the fourteenth century icon painter, is perhaps the most explicit treatment of personalist themes in Tarkovsky's oeuvre. It can be read as a gloss on the insufficiency of the outside world for developing the person and the need for the creative act of the human being to foster an emergent personality. Through its widescreen compositions and use of long takes, Tarkovsky asks the question as to how one can possibly construct a self in the brutal world of medieval Russia and, by extension, the modernity of Soviet Russia. Kovács points out that the historical Rublev would not likely have perceived his own struggle through the lens of a Christian personalism so indebted to twentieth century existentialism ("Andrei Tarkovsky" 585). Thus, the film quite easily lends itself to being read as an articulation of problems that Tarkovsky identified in his own experience, and therefore as a veiled critique of

the Soviet state.²⁰ The character of Andrei Rublev (Anatoly Solonitsyn) must contend with a harsh environment, which includes the scourge of the plague, Tatar invasion, paganism, the temptations of wealth, and the aristocracy. In the film, socio-cultural and biological-natural forces eventually compel Rublev to kill a Tatar to protect a woman, after which he falls into a spiritual crisis over the possible meaning his actions can have and subsequently abandons his art. Only at the end of the film, after witnessing the bell-casting by the young Boriska (Nikolai Burlyayev, who played the titular Ivan in Tarkovsky's debut feature), does Rublev take up his art again, after concluding that the creation of the self must rely on an internal will over and against the harshness of the world.

Kovács suggests that *Andrei Rublev* evokes a dual vision of the world, both material and spiritual. In contrast, I don't view Tarkovsky's vision as being reductively dualistic. Rather, I see it as embracing a personalist existentialist view of the world in which the spiritual is manifested through direct engagement with the material. Therefore, any suggestions of dualism do not serve as an end point of knowledge, with spirit operating as a metaphysical anchor for the material world, but rather as the raw material for the possibility of synthesis. Rublev's taking up of his icon painting once again at the end "serves both a higher ideal (God) and a communal one (Man [sic]) by bringing the two into a truer relationship than had existed in the art of his predecessors" (Johnson and Petrie 89). Petrie and Johnson's suggestion is that Kovács and Szilágyi's Hungarian criticism is able to bring a different perspective to the film than most Western ones, by pointing out that the religious icon is not so much an "act of individual aggrandizement," meant to flatter the painter, but an actual manifestation of the divine (89). Tarkovsky's films engage the viewer in the construction of meaning, maximizing the freedom of form, which, understood in a certain light, can act as a kind of cinematic icon as much concerned with what

the viewer brings to the film as with positing a specific meaning. This aspect of Tarkovsky's cinema is the possible response to the alienation of the individual in modernity: even as the metaphysical anchors of human subjectivity are stripped away, rather than see brute materialism (the human being as object) as the answer, cinema's ability to represent the self through a dialogic, or even heteroglossic, (rather than dualistic) structure offers an explanation of the sense of transcendence that many have sensed in Tarkovsky's films. Particularly, the treatment of memory and the image of the inner life in films such as *Mirror* provide the most complex example of the dialogic self in Tarkovsky's films.

The Mirror of Memory

Mirror reveals the effect cinema, both as an art form and technology, has on the construction of human subjectivity; by Tarkovsky's account, this is what gives cinema a spiritual significance. For him, a person goes to the cinema "for living experience; for cinema, like no other art, widens, enhances, and concentrates a person's experience—and not only enhances it but makes it longer, significantly longer" (63). In this statement Tarkovsky seems to echo Stanley Cavell's statement: "I am present not at something happening, which I must confirm, but at something that has happened, which I absorb (like a memory)" (26). In both statements, film is described as additive, granting the viewer experiences that they could not otherwise have, more like a novel and unlike a play (or live television, which Cavell compares it to). This is no doubt true of many art forms; books and photographs can give the reader or viewer a kind of understanding or a glimpse of something otherwise impossible to experience in a finite lifetime. But *Mirror* is self-consciously a film that attempts to encapsulate that living experience of a human being in time; memory is the faculty by which human beings understand time, and

therefore becomes a central concern of *Mirror*. Told across multiple narrative levels (contemporaneous scenes, wartime, inter war, and documentary footage) and from multiple character focalizations (the mother, the narrator both as adult and child), *Mirror* is a formally complex film and difficult to comprehend in an initial viewing. Part of the challenge is that *Mirror* eschews a straightforward narrative structure, instead presenting its complex image of Russian history through a web of subjective connections: dreams, memories, and various art historical—intermedial relations. As Johnson and Petrie note, “The challenge for the viewer is rarely found in the incomprehensibility of the images themselves, but rather in the necessity to keep re-evaluating what one has seen in the light of new information” (118). Unlike many other films about memory, *Mirror* never straightforwardly relies on changes in film stock to denote flashbacks or dreams. The viewer is denied such stable markers of time: while a move from black and white to colour might indicate a temporal change of some kind, it doesn’t allow the viewer to place the scene or sequence with any consistency in the same temporality. The contemporaneous 1970s sequences, the World War II era, the narrator’s pre-war childhood, and the documentary footage that chronologically moves from the 1930s to 1950s are represented in varying hues from black and white to sepia to variously saturated, colour film stocks. While Tarkovsky would utilize chromatic shifts in his other films, such as *Stalker* and *Solaris*, to mark various environments and their relation to the characters’ subjective states of mind, in *Mirror*, no such (relatively) straightforward schema for temporal organization exists.

A picture of the mental life of the film’s central character emerges, in particular his memories, dreams, and musings upon his childhood and the life of his parents in early twentieth-century Soviet Russia. Eventually, the unseen (as an adult) narrator, Alexei, is identified as the film’s narrative focalisor. Adding another layer of complexity to the film is the way that it acts as

both autobiography—Alexei is, according to the director's own statements, and to the links that can be made between film events and events in his life, a thinly-veiled version of Tarkovsky himself—and biography, recounting episodes from both the life of Alexei's mother and father in the Soviet Union.

That *Mirror* is Tarkovsky's most self-referential film is apparent directly from its brief pre-title opening sequence, in which a television is turned on and the viewer witnesses a Soviet era television documentary in which a doctor uses hypnotism to help a stuttering young man speak clearly. The stuttering young man undergoes hypnosis to overcome his speech impediment and is commanded to speak clearly. "I can speak!" he exclaims, as the film cuts to the title credits. Tarkovsky stated that he rejected outright symbolism in his films, preferring the showing of detail for detail's sake. Symbolism, in such a view, turns the viewer's attention away from the materiality of the world itself, and thus would only serve to increase the alienation of the individual from the world, the very antithesis of the spiritual project of cultivating a persona. This is an anti-idealist notion, in which the world has value in and of itself, rather than merely serving as a veil for a metaphysical register of meaning. Yet, the opening scene of *Mirror* carries with it undeniable metaphoric significance in presenting audio-visual communication, in this case television, as a literal expression of both the filmmakers' and society's ability to communicate. The image of a television being turned on, complete with an obvious shadow of the boom mic visible in the scene—a jab at the low production-quality of most Soviet era programming—reaffirms the role that technology and media have in allowing human beings to speak about themselves, overcoming muteness. Cinema, by metaphoric extension, is the hypnosis that allows human beings to overcome our limitations of viewpoint and subjectivity and offers a new way to speak about their lived experience, representing the logical links of

reasoning through images. Rather than reinforce a naïve belief in a direct link between representation and “reality,” a notion I rejected in the previous chapter, *Mirror* demonstrates the way that the cinematic medium shapes sensation or perception through socio-cultural and historical conventions. As Tarkovsky argues, one of the defining elements of the cinema is “that we perceive the form of the filmic image through the senses” (71), the same senses of sight and sound through which we perceive our daily world of experience. This comment echoes phenomenological accounts of cinema, in which resemblance is one of the central modes through which the viewer perceives the image. This connects back to his rejection of symbolism, since cinema turns the viewer’s attention back to the world.

Mirror further reveals its self-referentiality in the first post-credits sequence in which the camera tracks in on a woman sitting on a fence on the edge of a field. The narrating voice—the as yet unidentified Alexei—places the scene in the time before the war, in the 1930s. A stranger, who identifies himself as a doctor (played by Tarkovsky regular, Anatoly Solonitsyn) walks across a field and has a conversation with Maria (Margarita Terekhova), the narrator’s mother. The adult narrator explains in voice-over how he used to watch a person walking on the road to Tomashino, and muses that if a person would turn toward the house at the bush, it was his father, and if not, “it was not, and he would never come again.” The doctor is not his father, but he does turn at the bush and comes to talk to the mother. As such, the games that a child might imagine organizing his or her reality can be compared to the organizing narrative of the film, which is filtered through the subjectivity of the narrating voice. At one point the doctor asks Maria for a cigarette and she glances back directly into the camera. This moment of direct address leads the viewer to interpret the following shot as a point of view shot, i.e. Maria looks directly at him, both Alexei, who is one of the sleeping children in the hammock, seen in the following shot, and

the camera, and therefore the grown man narrating the scene. In this way, the subjective alignment of the camera with the mother character is achieved through the double-focalization of this scene. This is one example of the kind of “retrospective understanding” that the film uses to construct its sense of coherence (Johnson and Petrie 134). Despite the voice-over from the adult Alexei, the scene cannot represent one of his memories, as he was asleep at the time in the hammock. The presence of the doctor points to the wishes and anxieties of the narrator for his absent father. It is through retrospective understanding that the narrator/director figure is understood to be one of the children, even as they remain distinct narrative entities; that is, the memory is represented not from the “inside,” or a first-person view, which further reinforces a split between consciousness and memory. This subtle form of self-referentiality introduces the multiple ways in which film can frame such “memories,” and reveals how much of the work must be done by the viewer, “forcing the viewer to conduct his or her own reordering, filling in the gaps and constructing meaning on the basis of clues that the director offers” (Johnson and Petrie 134). Cinema makes possible the narration of other lives and subjectivities, but to do so it requires the interplay of the viewer with the language of cinema, a dialogic participation with the film rather than a passive, unambiguous presentation of information. This active film-viewer dialogism points to the way that *Mirror* constructs its presentation of character in an echo (or mirror) of the manner in which human beings actually collect, via the senses, experiences in day-to-day life, continually re-evaluating old experiences in light of new information. As Mikhail Bakhtin notes, “there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future” (*TaMotHS* 170). However, to enter into a dialogue, including with a film is bring old experiences into new contexts. This goes some way to describing the relationship

between the film's presentation of character and its connection to the philosophical concept of person.

Memory, then, becomes a mode of human perception for both the character and the viewer in *Mirror*: both personal memory and shared cultural and political memory. In one black and white sequence, the mother, Maria (sometimes referred to by the diminutive 'Masha') hurries through the building housing a printing press, terrified that something "improper" has been printed in something she has edited. At the end of the sequence, Maria's memory is shown to be faulty: the dangerous misprint was not actually there, but the sequence causes the viewer to enter into Maria's subjectivity at the same time that he or she is invited to question her perception. The preceding scene, a telephone conversation between the narrator and his mother—in which the mother mentions her job at the printing press and the death of her colleague, Lisa, who turns up in the printing house sequence—frames the subsequent sequence at the press, which cannot be focalized as a direct memory of the protagonist and shows how shared stories can become private memories and vice versa.

One of *Mirror*'s most mysterious sequences involves the narrator's son, Ignat, in his father's apartment in the narrative present. In this sequence, objective and subjective experience are intermingled as the immediate past of this Soviet era apartment and Russian history at large are manifested in the apartment; there is a blending of temporal levels that will recur again at the film's end. At the beginning of the scene, Ignat is looking at a book with drawings by Leonardo da Vinci, and when his mother drops her bag he makes mention of the fact that he feels a sense of déjà vu that such a thing has happened before. This is a sly nod to what the viewer will discover later: that the same actor plays both young Alexei and young Ignat: both the narrator in the present and his son in the past. The boy's mother, Alexei's wife Natalia, who in an earlier

sequence we discover is also played by Margarita Terekhova and whose resemblance to the narrator's mother is remarked upon in an earlier scene, leaves him alone, telling him to wait for his grandmother, the older Maria, to come. However, being left alone in the apartment as eerie electronic music swells, Ignat finds a mysterious older woman sitting at the desk and a servant bringing her tea in the apartment. The woman then commands him to pull a volume off the bookshelf and read a passage. The first passage, on Rousseau's opinion on the negative effect of arts and science on human morals, is rejected, and she instructs him to take another volume and to read from a bookmarked page. The passage is from a letter about the separate destiny of the Russian people, in which the writer, identified at the end as Pushkin, describes how Russia's alienation from the rest of Europe during the late-medieval period was a special situation, "preserving us [i.e. Russians] as Christians, while alienating us from the Christian world."²¹ The letter addresses the question as to which cultural traditions the Russian people would look to in constructing their identity as a people. Its reference to the Russian church and the medieval invasions from the east brings to mind *Andrei Rublev*, a poster for which is seen hanging in the apartment in an earlier sequence.

When Ignat finishes reading, there is a knock on the door; upon answering he finds an old woman who says she must have the wrong apartment, but an attentive viewer should recognize her as Ignat's grandmother, Maria, whose photo hangs on the wall behind Ignat as he reads (and who is played by Tarkovsky's real-life mother). While the full implication of (and motivation for) the misrecognition of one's own family member is never fully examined, the failure of memory is dramatized in this brief aside. Ignat returns to the apartment to find that the woman and servant have disappeared. However, a heat ring remains on the table from the woman's cup of tea, testifying, indexically, to the woman's (or at least the cup of tea's) prior presence. Where

did they go? Were they spirits? One thing is certain: they were there. The camera holds on the image of the ring as it fades from the table. The heat ring is in many ways representative of the themes being explored in this scene: the ephemeral nature of experiences, the possibility of misrecognition, the real marks left by the past, and, the experience of Russia as a nation, forging its identity, apart from the world and alone.

Mirror, both in its framing of events and its connections to Tarkovsky's own autobiography, acts as an illuminating example of how the cinema as a technology shapes the subjectivity that emerges from the finished product. Meaning in *Mirror* emerges from a dialogical process between the images on screen and the inner life that they represent. *Mirror*'s structure, which consists of interspersed stories from the narrator's (and Tarkovsky's) life across temporal levels with specific events from Russian history, was in many ways a happy accident, which Tarkovsky and his co-screenwriter Alexander Misharin only came upon in post-production.²² In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky notes that he never took the script for *Mirror* as a finished thing, and that, as a "fragile, living, ever-changing structure," the film was never settled until the moment of its completion (131). While such a comment might be read as emphasizing the primacy of the director's vision behind the final shape of a film, as well as exaggerating the place of the auteur in relation to the meaning of a text,²³ I interpret it as an example of what Rosen explains as Bazin's "belief in the possibilities of subjectivity itself [...] and the potential for freedom" (115), and a key contributor to *Mirror*'s strong effect. The subject of *Mirror* is not limited to the various memories and dreams of Tarkovsky filtered through his distinct filmic style. Rather, the film itself is an expression of subjectivity manifested *through* the very act of creation. Film style, or aesthetics, is, in this case, an expression of subjectivity: that is, a film style that shows preference for long takes and edits shots for the mental associations generated

between shots (one connection to the legacy of early Soviet montage theories) represents an approach to reality that prizes the interaction (or even co-presence) of thought and materiality. Tarkovsky's style is not a purely expressionist one, but a style that is attuned to the way that all perception is subjective even as it is manifested in relation to a material world.

Rosen describes Bazin's account of subjectivity in cinema, paraphrasing Bazin's comments on Bresson's adaptation of Bernanos' novel, *Diary of a Country Priest*:

Bresson's film represents Bernanos' novel—including its style and language—to the spectator, but it does so through Bresson's own style and aesthetics, or "language of cinema." Therefore Bresson's subjectivity is simultaneously made available to us, thanks to his drive to preserve Bernanos' aesthetics—that is, subjectivity—as first encountered in *the latter's* language. In this sense, it is not only the novelistic representation of reality but also the existence and being of subjectivity itself that the postwar avant-garde cinema can engage and embody, with the suppleness of the novel. (114)

In describing *Mirror*, rather than presenting an adaptation of a novel, the film is presenting the viewer with material drawn from Tarkovsky's own memories and experiences and those of his parents. Those memories and experiences are then constituted and materialized through *Mirror's* particular film aesthetics; thus, the particularities of subjectivity are mediated to the viewer through film aesthetics and narrative choices. This is what Bazin meant when he argued, as described in the introduction, that a film language makes subjectivity manifest. And yet, because of the dialogic nature of film, that subjectivity is not only dependent on film aesthetics, but also the dialogic context of the viewer. I would argue that this way of looking at filmic subjectivity avoids a crass auteurism in which the film is solely an expression of the author's unique vision, and rather emphasizes the way that a mode of representation can generate subjectivities. The

subject of the film is not the author or a character's life, or the "unique style" of the auteur, but, per Bazin and Rosen, the problem of representing a particular stance toward the world.

Tarkovsky certainly felt that he was an author, and “that cinema, like any other art, is created by the author. [...] it is his conception alone that finally gives the film its unity” (33). Tarkovsky felt that it is the author's subjectivity that shapes the stance that the film takes to the world. But nonetheless, the viewer plays a key role in this as well. In Tarkovsky's account, film, unlike literature, does not rely as strongly on the audience's previous experiences. Though this seeks to emphasize cinema's unique perceptual relationship with the viewer, it does serve to undermine how cinema is able to utilize dialogism in presenting subjectivity. Tarkovsky emphasizes that the author's “experience is conveyed to the audience graphically and immediately, with photographic precision, so that the audience's emotions become akin to those of a witness, if not actually of an author” (177). I challenge Tarkovsky's somewhat naïve notion of the immediacy of the cinematic image, as all experience is mediated in different ways; therefore, the idea of the viewer as witness, and dialogic participant, underscores the intersubjective nature of the cinematic experience that is key to my understanding of cinematic subjectivity.

Mirror challenges a simple dichotomy between “realism” and self-reflexivity. In *Mirror*'s direct confrontation with the difficulty of translating the sense of self to the screen, in revealing cinema's artifice—that is, “the gap between filmic depiction and the pre-existent” (Rosen “Belief in Bazin” 113)—the film actually gains its sense of realism and authority. One aspect of Bazin's account of “realism” in the cinema that his detractors often miss when labeling him a crude “idealist” is that a negotiation of subjectivity is essential to any theory of realism, including Bazin's. This negotiation is between the position of supreme artistic subjectivity and the desire to objectively observe and present the world. For Bazin this negotiation occurs

between an emphasis on the indexical nature of the camera image and the ethical stance of the camera toward its object. Any ostensibly realist mode is filtered through the various subjectivities involved in the creation and reception of the work of art: this includes the author of a novel, the aesthetic sensibilities of a director, performances of actors, and the particular context in which a film is viewed. In the case of *Mirror*, its sense of realism, that is its account of the world presented to the viewer, simultaneously produces an uncanny, oneiric effect because of its success in presenting an image of the self. The thing viewed is the very material and historical act of constructing a stance toward the world.

Mirror's multidimensional approach to the creation of an image of lived experience is reminiscent of Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, and the related term, *heteroglossia*, in which a text (for Bakhtin, a novel) is always a negotiation of multiple points of view, or literally voices (*Glossia*=*Gk.* "tongues"): it is the necessary presence of difference within any given text. This tendency I see in Tarkovsky's work is one reason why his films have been viewed as spiritual in their transcending of physical and mortal bounds. Bird connects this notion of a spiritual aspect in Tarkovsky's films to the question of film's technological specificity:

[T]echnology has spiritual significance, but also [...] spiritual matters must be seen in the light of technology. Thus, I believe it is possible to take seriously the spiritual claims made on behalf of Tarkovsky's films and to analyze these films on rigorous aesthetic criteria; anything less would be to do them a grave injustice. (13)

I frame this question about the spiritual significance of Tarkovsky's films not in terms of the spurious claims based on the director's own understanding of faith, but rather in terms of the questions that his films raise with regard to the understanding of the subjectivity of the human

being. Furthermore, I have followed Bird's lead in anchoring an analysis of these questions in the formal aspects of Tarkovsky's films.

Mirror is deeply concerned with the way that human beings construct their sense of self from memories. The consciousness of the narrator, Alexei, is what structures the film's various episodes as memories, dreams, or reveries, and from which the viewer's image of Alexei's self emerges. This does align with what we know of Tarkovsky's thoughts on memory as both the only link between a human being and his/her experience of time as a deeply moral or spiritual concern, through which s/he apprehends her/himself. Furthermore, as Maureen Turim has contended, "all film images are memories of their own inscriptions" (246), which refers to the indexical power of the cinematic apparatus to testify to the past presence of objects and events before the camera. *Mirror* becomes a filmic memory of a certain lived experience through its combination of documentary footage—the literal records of actual Soviet cultural memory and shared historical events—and its evocation of a certain emotional and inner experience common to many Russians who lived through the eras depicted, as in the narrated events in Alexei's and his parents' lives. In the introduction to *Sculpting in Time* Tarkovsky recounts how one woman wrote to him, "Thank you for *Mirror*. My childhood was like that" (10). The experience of relating one's own experience of time to the history of a nation and life gives *Mirror* its resonance. In *Mirror*, subjectivity emerges as a process, a negotiation of a relation to history and time.

Memory is what then connects the manifestation of subjectivity in *Mirror* with its exploration of transcendence. In my discussion of memory films in Chapter 1, I noted that Russell Kilbourn compares the journey into the inner life, the "quest for self-knowledge," to the *katabasis*—or underworld journey—in classical and premodern literature: "[i]f memory can be

said to offer a possibility of a sort of temporary continuity between mind and what exists beyond its limits, within it, then the underworld journey in literature and film can be read as a kind of externalization or allegory of this process and the hope implicit there” (31). *Mirror*, in weaving together its various memory images, has been considered by critics as an example of the aforementioned *psycho-katabasis* film, a descent into the mind; Kovács calls it perhaps “[t]he most complex case of reflexivity of the mental journey genre in the modern period” (*Screening Modernism* 111). Tarkovsky links the need to revisit the past in memory to the ability to know oneself, and to his larger interest in the cultivation of the person: “The time in which a person lives gives him [sic] the opportunity of knowing himself as a moral being [...] The human consciousness is dependent upon time for its existence” (*Sculpting in Time* 58). Thus, the weaving of the various memories in the film serves to open the “inner world” to externalization, and therefore offer the possibility of a kind of recovery of the past.

Cinema, as the external representation of memory,²⁴ takes on a spiritual significance here, in the sense that it goes beyond physical or mortal limitations as it acts to preserve an experience of time. As Kilbourn suggests in relation to *Mirror*, “to return to one’s childhood in dream and/or memory, where the *difference* between the past and an image of the past is effaced or collapsed, is to travel to the land of the dead” (80). This interpretation aligns with Tarkovsky’s own observation that “Time can vanish without a trace in our material world for it is a subjective, spiritual category” (58). However, cinema as an instantiation of memory preserves the link between the self and time, becoming a representation of a particular subjective experience of the world. Not all viewers agree that Tarkovsky’s film says something about time through its radically subjective film style. Soviet filmmaker Grigori Chukhrai accused Tarkovsky of narcissism: “He wanted to tell a story about time and about himself. He succeeded, perhaps, in

telling us something about himself, but not about time” (qtd. in Skakov 107). Chukhrai’s dismissal of *Mirror* perhaps shows how the film’s attempt to come to an understanding of the self in modernity through cinema contradicts the rejection of transcendence that informed the Soviet project. Tarkovsky’s cinematic project is grounded in the act of constructing an authentic person, yet it need not leave us with no resort other than metaphysics to make clear the link between memory and any understanding of the self. His observation is that cinema can have a moral and ethical effect on the human being, activating memory, “which sows in him [sic] a sense of dissatisfaction. It makes us vulnerable, subject to pain” (58). It is therefore essential to his understanding of cinema as spiritual, as it provides cinema with an ethical force. The ending of *Mirror* in one sense attempts to answer the challenge of reconciling the different aspects of the self, as understood through memory. Setting aside Tarkovsky’s own metaphysical project in crafting an interpretation, I would suggest that *Mirror* manages to configure a kind of belief in the self that takes into account the crisis of modernity and the possibilities of the cinematic medium.

The image of the self as manifested in *Mirror* is predicated on a peculiar kind of metaphysics. The images that make up the film are impossible to separate from the memories that make up the self-narrating of the film. The image is the “very form of our subjectivity,” as David Rodowick says, and “persists in the cross-roads between our internal states and our external relations with the world” (“Elegy” 105). Such is the ultimate transcendence to which *Mirror* points. Rather than identifying a stable metaphysical anchor, the view of the self that emerges from *Mirror* is one in which the structure that makes up the self—the inner life rooted in memory—“reveals itself only when it collapses under its own weight, that is to say, when experience outstrips the subject’s attempt to contain or capture it” (Bird 127). This outstripping

of the attempt to capture it can be seen in the final sequence from *Mirror*, as I describe below, in which the structuring elements of time and memory lose their underpinning and the multiple temporal levels making up the inner life of memory become intertwined.

This is the transcendent lesson of *Mirror*: that the self is indeed predicated on more than a material view of reality, that it cannot be contained or limited in any way. The organizing subjectivity of *Mirror* is, as Bakhtin notes in his description of the Dostoyevskian novel, not an “objectified image of the hero at all, but rather the hero’s *discourse* about himself and his world” (*Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 53). Thus, the subject emerges in the narrative as the site of constant negotiation of the various images of the hero. In *Mirror*, the person presented can be compared to the Dostoyevskian hero that Bakhtin describes, in that “we do not see him, we hear him; everything that we see and know apart from his discourse is nonessential and is swallowed up by discourse as its raw material, or else remains outside it as something that stimulates and provokes” (*Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 53). *Mirror*, in this Dostoyevskian account, is not a direct apprehension of the metaphysical subject of the author or central character, but rather a witnessing of the experience of history and time in which the subject emerges. This is why describing *Mirror* as a memory-image is so appropriate: the image it gives isn’t direct, but rather anamorphic. The viewer witnesses it through the discourses of mediated memory that cinema makes possible.

In the final sequence of *Mirror* the barriers between the different temporalities of the film are transcended in an eminently immanent way. The sequence begins in the farmhouse of the narrator’s youth. We see Alexei as a young boy walking toward two figures, the mother as an old woman and the sister as a little girl. The boy tells his mother that the stove is smoking and she turns and looks at him confused. The mother’s hair is done up in a manner similar to the way it

was in the beginning of the film, with the younger actress, and she is wearing a sweater and smoking a cigarette, as in the initial post-title sequence at the beginning of the film. From here, the setting switches on a cut to a room where a doctor and two women, who are the visitors from the Pushkin scene—marking this scene with a sense of déjà vu for the viewer, in its sense of repetition of actors—discuss Alexei’s health and the causes of his illness. Adult Alexei (Oleg Yankovskiy who also plays Alexei’s father in the WWII sequences) is finally shown, though only from the neck down. He expresses a desire for happiness and, reaching and grabbing a bird that has been lying on the blanket, says that “Everything will be alright,” and in slow motion the bird flies off. From this the camera cuts back to a sunlit field. After a slow tracking shot over the homestead from the 1935 sequences, the camera settles on the young mother and father. The father asks her if she would rather have a boy or a girl. The question places this short sequence chronologically before all the others. Then the camera cuts to the mother as an old woman walking across a field with the young children again, over the seemingly abandoned (post-fire) ruins of the farmhouse. As they leave the frame, we see the mother as a young woman standing in the middle of the field, watching herself as an old woman and her young children. This final shot literally combines multiple temporal levels by including characters at different ages and from different times. It is at once a beautiful image of the past, literally pregnant with possibilities, and evokes the passage of time and aging.

In this final sequence of *Mirror*, we return to the notion of the filmic image as an icon, and the way that the image places together the past and the present into a single shot. Akira Kurosawa, referring to *Mirror*’s alleged difficulty as a film, suggested that this was not so, since, “it is impossible that in our soul our childhood memories should arrange themselves in a static, logical sequence.” This last sequence marks the film’s move away from a teleological or linear

narrative. Charles Lock, in discussing the relationship between the literary structure of chiasmus and the function of the icon, notes that “to see the text as linear, progressive, and logical is a sophisticated refinement that characterizes modernity: it is a method of reading appropriate to dialectical thinking, to a thinking by representations in which presence is always deferred” (362-63). Similar to how a medieval icon, drawing on the Greek word for “image”, also included graphical characters, that is written words, but placed them into an iconic structure in which they are taken out of their linear context, the final sequence of *Mirror* scrambles the diegetically linear narrative of representational filmic images at the same time that they mirror the opening sequences of the film.

Some critics read *Mirror*’s final sequence as metaphorizing the narrator Alexei’s death, the bird crudely signifying the release of the soul. Regardless of how one views the final sequence, in it, conventional narrative and temporal organization cannot contain or structure the meaning of the sequence; memory is fragmented. The sequence suggests that cinema might offer a way past the challenge to the notion of self in modernity, as the organization of memory in the final scene suggests a different image of the self, an iconic image.

In weaving together personal, historical, and cultural memory, *Mirror* relies on film style and medium specificity as unifying forces. The crisis the cinema engenders in modernity is connected to the way that it affects viewer perceptions of time and space. A film such as *Mirror* challenges conventional views of narrative by dramatizing and visualizing the problem of subjectivity, establishing new viewing practices that shape perceptions of time and space.

The formal organization of time and movement, the mobilization of film aesthetics that gives Tarkovsky’s films their unique approach to subjectivity or stance toward the reality of the self, can be related to Gilles Deleuze’s notion of the “time-image” mentioned at the beginning of

the chapter. As Skakov also notes, *Mirror* “does not obey the logic of flashback or recollection” (132), and, as I have shown, *Mirror* avoids making logical connections between sequences or the causal, linear laying out of a life. Instead what we are presented with, as explicitly depicted in the final shot of *Mirror* described above, is what Deleuze calls “a coexistence of distinct durations, or of levels of duration; a single event can belong to several levels: the sheets of past coexist in a non-chronological order” (xii). *Mirror* exemplifies this non-chronological order of the past, combining the different narrative temporalities of history and memory in ways that are not motivated by a causal relation. In other words, the film’s use of the past is not an attempt to explain the process of subjectivity, to posit an origin for the collection of traits that makes up its central character. What is shown in the image is not merely memory and history as an explanation for the self, but the way that time is so essential to the human sense of self.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have on occasion resorted to using the loaded term “spiritual” in trying to describe the relationship between a film’s particular subjectivity and the way that it offers an image of the subject. These meditations on the relationship of the human being to different temporal and material realities are echoed in the historically religious concern of relating the material to immaterial theological, or metaphysical, concepts. If we are material beings, how do we relate to an immaterial reality? How do we represent material reality in art? The roots of the term “photography” are in the Greek for “light” and “writing,” thus “writing in light”. Cinema adds another dimension, drawing on its (at least in Tarkovsky’s films) basis in the photographic image, *kinema*, “movement” and time. Thus, cinema bridges the material and the immaterial. If the concept of self is a key “spiritual” concept and one that cannot be contained by conventional

categories of material or immaterial, then certainly films such as *Mirror* or *Andrei Rublev* can be considered spiritual. Not because they conveniently illustrate themes of spirituality, but because in their very construction and representation of notions of memory and subjectivity are spiritual practices.

¹ See András Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980*, (2007).

² As Robert Bird puts it: “my inclination throughout has been not to read Tarkovsky’s films through his statements, but to read his statements through his films” (21).

³ Modernity, as the set of cultural, economic, and technological transformations discussed in Chapter 1, has been posited as a particularly European project. See for instance, Habermas. Therefore, Russia and the Soviet Union’s shifting relationship to Europe proper means that rather than being coterminous with European definitions of modernity, a Soviet modernity can be understood as “a particular international modernity,” with its own structures and relationship to other geo-historical modernities. See Peter J. Taylor *Mapping Modernities*.

⁴ In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky quotes Thomas Mann: “a spiritual—that is, significant— phenomenon is ‘significant’ precisely because it exceeds its own limits, serves as expression and symbol of something spiritually wider and more universal, an entire world of feelings and thoughts, embodied within it with greater or less felicity” (qtd. in Tarkovsky 104).

⁵ Tarkovsky’s archives remain in Russia and were sold in a Sotheby’s auction in 2012 to a group of local investors based in the Russian Ivanovo region north of Moscow. The archives fetched roughly \$2.3 million dollars in a heavy bidding war, primarily between the Russian investors and the Danish filmmaker, Lars von Trier (Naylor).

⁶ For instance, Kovács and Akos Szilágyi’s *Les mondes d’Andreï Tarkovski* (1987) is a French translation of the original Hungarian volume, which has yet to be translated to English.

⁷ Consider the role of films such as Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) or John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939) in the history of the respective Soviet and Hollywood film systems, and how each manifests revolutions of film form within particular articulations of the myths of either proletarian revolt or the settlement of the west.

⁸ See the famous “Kuleshov Effect” experiment where the shot following an image of a man’s face shapes the emotional context of the sequence, and thus the narrative.

⁹ *Ivan’s Childhood*’s introduction of such modernist film conventions into Soviet cinema can also be explained by the ‘Khrushchev Thaw’ that occurred after Stalin’s death in 1953, which resulted in the relaxation of censorship and the move toward peaceful coexistence with other nations.

¹⁰ These are two key aspects of the definition of art film as pseudo-generic mode of film practice, as popularized by David Bordwell, which defines it through stylistic and narrative features as well as in opposition to dominant Hollywood production models.

¹¹ See for instance their collaboration, *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961).

¹² In *Screening Modernism*, Kovács compares Tarkovsky’s *Mirror* to the structurally similar film by Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Eden and After* (1971) (390).

¹³ For instance, film scholar David Desser has argued that the Japanese New Wave was not a reaction to and imitation of film movements in France and elsewhere, but emerged on its own at the same time. Consider also the role that a film like *Rashomon* (1950) played in the constitution of the art cinema in the post-war era. See Desser, *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema*, (1988).

¹⁴ In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky, like Eisenstein before him, displays a strong interest in and affinity with Japanese culture and aesthetics. Whether the tendencies of Japanese cinema and literature in the early-twentieth century should be properly considered modernist, or whether aspects of traditional Japanese aesthetics simply share some of the same concerns as modernism with regard to representation and ornamentation, are questions that are explored to some length in the work of pioneering Japanese-film expert, Donald Richie.

¹⁵ This kind of juxtaposition is seen in popular cinema such as *Star Wars* (1977), which combines the modernist design of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and fascist Futurism with the a grab-bag of Christian and Buddhist tropes structured around Joseph Campbell’s monomyth. Another example is Godfrey Reggio’s 1982 film *Koyaanisqatsi*, which, using documentary imagery and other reflexive modernist techniques, offers a critique of modern society

summed up in the Hopi language title translated as “life out of balance”. Both films can be read as “spiritual” but also thoroughly contemporary in their respective moments.

¹⁶ While the aforementioned “Thaw” in Soviet society post-Stalin meant that Tarkovsky faced less interference than he might have in the past, his films still faced state interference over what content was acceptable or unacceptable. For instance, for five years after its release *Andrei Rublev* was barred from screening in the Soviet Union.

¹⁷ The personalistic conception of subjectivity is neatly outlined in “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in Man [sic]” (translated elsewhere as “human being”) by the Cardinal Karol Wojtyła in 1978, just before he became pope, first published in Vol. VII of the *Analecta Husserliana*. Wojtyła was a significant philosopher in the area of theistic personalism and the nature of human subjectivity. I borrow from some of his language in this chapter, as it situates personalism within the history of thinking the subject in Husserlian phenomenology and Sartrean existentialism, rather than the often more mystical and confusing language of other theistic existentialists.

¹⁸ My account of Berdyaev’s unique take on personalism draws primarily on two sources: first, Kovács’s entry on Tarkovsky in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film* (ed. Livingston and Plantinga) and the short English language primer, *The Personalistic Existentialism of Berdyaev*, by R. Balasubramanian and published in 1970 by the University of Madras, India. The publication of such a primer in India is a fascinating legacy of Cold War politics and the relationship between the Soviet Union and India.

¹⁹ Berdyaev’s expression of faith in the unique position of the Russian nation is echoed in the excerpts from the letter from Pushkin that Ignat reads in one sequence of *Mirror*. I examine this scene in more detail below.

²⁰ This might also partly explain why *Andrei Rublev* was banned for five years in the officially atheist Soviet Union (Johnson and Petrie 5).

²¹ The centrality of Pushkin to the conception of a uniquely “Russian” worldview cannot be understated, though a thorough examination of this relation is outside the parameters of this study. Nonetheless, to a Russian viewer, the presence of Pushkin could not help but link *Mirror* to the Russian literary tradition. As Catriona Kelly notes, “Pushkin is still acknowledged as ‘supremely great’ among Russian writers by his compatriots, and this is still likely to strike foreign readers as odd” (1). Pushkin is one of many complex intertexts that highlight the centrality of a unique Russian identity to *Mirror*.

²² See the introduction to a published version of the script by Misharin. Qtd. and trans. from the Russian in (Johnson and Petrie 113).

²³ Such comments also bring to mind the *modus operandi* of Terrence Malick, discussed in Chapter 4, another director whose auteur status has been elevated to cult-like levels among some cinephiles and who has been known to shape his films drastically in post-production. For example, the final 171-minute cut of *The Thin Red Line* (1998) was shaped from nearly 7-hours of footage, leaving some characters entirely on the cutting room floor (Davies *TRL* 49).

²⁴ Kilbourn ends his discussion of *Mirror* by arguing that in the film “memory and filmic representation become indistinguishable,” and that ultimately cinema ceases to be a mere “analogue for memory’s mysterious operation: cinema *is* memory” (83). Kilbourn’s argument hinges on his interrogation of the difference between a “representation of memory” and “memory as representation.” While Kilbourn notes that this raises the danger of “denying the otherness of the past,” his concluding question, “[h]ow *else* can we understand the past except by viewing it through cinema’s hegemonic optic?”, has strong resonances with Tarkovsky’s more metaphysically charged project of the construction of the human person. I might rephrase the question: “How else can we understand *ourselves*?”

Chapter 3

“Nobody will miss it.” Nihilism, Affect, and Subjectivity in Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*

Conscientia scrupulosa nascitur ex vitio naturali complexione melancholica [an over-scrupulous conscience springs from a natural defect, from a melancholic disposition]

—Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 3.4, 2.3, p. 396

Introduction

Lars von Trier’s 2011 film *Melancholia* provides a highly relevant counterpoint to my discussion of Tarkovsky’s films from the previous chapter, serving as a suitable text from which to continue a discussion of the crisis of subjectivity in both cinema and contemporary continental philosophy for a number of reasons. Firstly, von Trier¹ has styled himself as Tarkovsky’s heir, dedicating his 2009 film *Antichrist* to the late Russian director, and incorporating many direct intertextual references to Tarkovsky’s films in his own. A clear example of such referencing in *Melancholia*, is the presence of Pieter Brueghel the Elder’s painting, “The Hunters in the Snow [Jagers in de Sneeuw]” (1565), which is glimpsed burning during one of the sequences of *Melancholia*’s striking prologue. The same painting is prominently featured in Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1972). *Melancholia* is also relevant here for the philosophical counterpoint it provides to the conclusions I drew in the previous chapter in relation to the representation of time, space, and the self in Tarkovsky’s films. The latter are infused with a search for spiritual meaning and value, offering up a cinematic memory-image to remind us of the way the self is mediated in film and through memory. *Melancholia* offers less hope in the possibility of cinematic self-

expression, instead offering one of von Trier's most nihilistic visions, where meaning and value are ultimately of no lasting consequence.

Setting this contrast in philosophical outlook aside for the moment, there are further intertextual and thematic resonances between *Melancholia* and Tarkovsky's final film, *The Sacrifice* (*Offret*) (1986). As Robert Sinnerbrink has noted, *Melancholia* directly shares many concerns and structures with *The Sacrifice*, including themes of "apocalypticism, world-sacrifice, and historical melancholia," even as *Melancholia* imagines a different response "to the imagined experience of a catastrophic loss of world" (112). The similarities between the two films are striking: both films are set in isolated Scandinavian locales, in the homes or manors of the wealthy, European upper-bourgeois (both Tarkovsky and von Trier ultimately express a similar distaste for the bourgeois lifestyle under late capitalism, as I will show in what follows)²; each film maintains a consistent unity of setting (the island and house in *The Sacrifice*, the chateau and estate of *Melancholia*); each film expresses the experience of individuals, rather than entire societies, in response to a possible "end of the world." This is what I refer to below as the uniting of personal experience with cosmological and cultural drama; finally, each film's dramatic unfolding involves those characters' responses to an impending "apocalyptic" event—nuclear war in Tarkovsky's film and the annihilation of the earth by a rogue planet in von Trier's.

Melancholia tells the story of a woman, Justine (Kirsten Dunst), who suffers from an extreme melancholic depression. The film is divided into two parts and a prologue: "Part 1: Justine" recounts the disastrous fallout of her wedding night party, which results in the loss of her job and her marriage to Michael (Alexander Skarsgård), dissolving before the end of the night; "Part 2: Claire," set several months later, focuses on the final days of the immediate family of Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), her son, husband, and sister Justine, before the destruction of

the Earth by the rogue planet, 'Melancholia'.³ The film's narration remains restricted to the Scandinavian estate and lavish chateau owned by Claire's husband, John (Kiefer Sutherland). It remains the location of all of the human action in each of the film's two parts; it is the site of the wedding party and also the "refuge" of the family during the approach of the planet Melancholia. Part 1 opens with a wryly humorous sequence where the wedding couple's stretch limo has difficulty navigating the driveway to the chateau. Leaving the chateau proves even more difficult in the film's second half, as Claire attempts to flee to town with her son and fails to leave the property. The horses kept in the stables also refuse to leave the bounds of the property. The estate's grounds, which include a full golf course, complete with a mysterious "nineteenth hole,"⁴ remains the entire setting of the drama, from which there is literally no escape.

What is it that keeps them from leaving? Perhaps the most obvious allusion is to the chateau in Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), which proves to be, not only impossible to leave, but the place they always already inhabited. (In Resnais' film, e.g. was the woman "A" actually at the Chateau Marienbad last year? Who is the mysterious man, "X," who pursues her?). The allusion to *Marienbad*'s chateau is made even more explicit in one shot during the "Prelude" that portrays the grounds of *Melancholia*'s estate like the ones in Resnais's film. In each film the estate gardens are rendered uncanny by the unnatural lighting of scene: in *Marienbad*, the objects in the garden cast no shadow, while the people do; in contrast, the shot from the prologue of *Melancholia* has garden objects casting a double shadow due to the second light source in the sky from the planet Melancholia. Such intertextual references place *Melancholia* in the genealogy of modernist art cinema I identified in the previous chapters. *Marienbad* is directed by Alain Resnais, from a script by Alain Robbe-Grillet, and is closely associated with the *nouveau roman* of French modernist literature. *Melancholia* self-consciously

associates itself with the legacy of the postwar art cinema, while joining that legacy to the plot of an apocalyptic science fiction disaster.

Melancholia occupies an institutional cinematic space that is for the most part consistent with the kinds of transnational European art cinema that has dominated art houses since the 1990s. Von Trier has consistently embraced features of transnationalism in his films, through the terms of his films' funding, distribution, production, and casting. *Melancholia* features an international cast, including Swedish (Alexander Skarsgård and his father, Stellan), British (John Hurt and Charlotte Rampling), French-British (Charlotte Gainsbourg), American (star Kirsten Dunst), Canadian (Kiefer Sutherland), in addition to German and Danish actors. In terms of financing, the film is a joint Danish-Swedish-French-German co-production. The transnational character of *Melancholia* continues practices of crossing national boundaries that von Trier has embraced for decades.

On a formal level, *Melancholia* has some similarities and some differences from the majority of von Trier's filmography. Not that his films can be easily pinned down to a particular stylistic mode, but *Melancholia* offers a new twist on some of the formal strategies that have shaped his reputation amongst critics and scholars. Von Trier's films have played with different production modes and formal gambits before; consider the "Autovision"⁵ of *The Boss of it All* (2006), the musical interludes of *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), or the stylized, empty-except-for-outlines, sound stage of *Dogville* (2004), or its sequel, *Manderlay* (2005). What is more surprising are the ways that *Melancholia*, for all of its philosophical boldness, is perhaps von Trier's most restrained and formally classical work. As Steven Shavero notes, there is "none of the intimate violence and sexual extremity that we find in such recent 'transgressive' European art-house films [or in] von Trier's own previous release *Antichrist*" (*Melancholia* 6).

Melancholia diverges almost entirely from the principles von Trier himself laid out in the creation of Dogme 95, the film movement most closely associated with von Trier's work. The Dogme 95 movement was born from a manifesto devised by von Trier and his fellow Dane, Thomas Vinterberg, in 1995 in Paris. The manifesto contained a "Vow of Chastity" in the form of a list of rules and restrictions for filmmakers to follow, with the goal of taking back control of film production from studios and returning it to the hands of the director.⁶ Almost none of the films associated with the movement strictly followed the "vow." Even von Trier's only official Dogme entry, *The Idiots* (1998), violates some aspects of the guidelines in small ways (resulting in a director "confession" to such violations). *Melancholia*, on the other hand, follows the typical production values of the bulk of mid-budget Hollywood films, and includes convincing special effects, a genre-inflected plot, Hollywood stars, and non-diegetic music (notably in the repeated use of the "Prelude" from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*). However, apart from the opening prologue, *Melancholia* does follow the manifesto in one aspect: the use of handheld cameras for all camera movement. The camera always seems to be moving, in the midst of action, and the film utilizes a great number of jump cuts and abrupt transitions between scenes, marking one aspect in which *Melancholia* formally fits with von Trier's typical style over the last two decades. These movements seem to clash with the presentation of the staid, upper-bourgeois world the characters inhabit.

Far from a typical end-of-the-world disaster film, along the lines of Michael Bay's *Armageddon* (1998) or Roland Emmerich's *2012* (2009), however, *Melancholia* avoids a "grandiose and sublime spectacle of destruction" and is rather an "anti-spectacular, anti-sublime" film, as Shaviro points out in his book on the film, *Melancholia, Or, The Romantic Anti-Sublime* (6).⁷ The conflation of disaster-film plot with the drama of the European upper-bourgeois has led

some to label the film “capitalist realism” (Mark Fisher qtd. in Shaviro 8), in that the film reflects the growing sense that, as Slavoj Žižek notes in his 2010 book, *Living in the End Times*, “the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point” (x). *Melancholia* refigures the crisis of late-capitalist modernity through a crisis of its main character’s subjectivity, which is manifested in Justine’s depression and the looming end of the world; Justine’s experience is related to the massive upheavals occurring in late-capitalist culture. In this way, the cosmological drama of the end of the world can be figured as a metaphor for crisis in contemporary societies.⁸

This chapter further explores the relationship between cinematic representation and the image of the self. In particular, I want to look at the way depression can manifest in cinema as a kind of non-normative subjectivity. That is, if cinematic forms, which are in turn conditioned by the forces of global capitalism, mediate the subjectivities presented in film, the mediation of a depressive subjectivity can be read as a kind of resistance of the normative forms of capitalism. As explained in Chapter 1, cinema is able to make alternative temporal and spatial states, including internal ones, available for the viewer by constructing the way that we experience the world. Affective responses to mass events, such as the looming extinction in *Melancholia*, are always, in Richard Grusin’s terminology, *pre-mediated*. Pre-mediated events involve the visualization of the future in order to prevent it from becoming the present. An apocalyptic film like *Melancholia* pre-mediate the end of the world, not in order to predict it, but to shape our affective orientation toward such an event in the here and now. Yet, the apocalypse, as I will argue, is distinct from other traumatic events, such as war, in that it results in the destruction of the very structures of meaning that make experience possible.

The End of the World/The End of Capitalism

Apocalypse is a term commonly used to talk about disaster films and scenarios involving the end of the world. As a contemporary short hand for discussions of climate change, global conflicts, the threat of terrorism, nuclear war, or the decay of civilization, apocalypse is often associated with the notion of anthropocentric changes to the world, and even the coining of the term *anthropocene* as a label for this era in which human beings are now the primary force affecting the planet on the global scale.⁹ Selmin Kara describes the term, quoting Dipesh Chakrabarty, as having “to do with the ‘contemporary moods of anxiety and concern about the finitude of humanity’ in light of the current planetary crisis of climate change and human-caused mass extinctions” (5). The word has its origins, however, in Christian eschatology and the literary genres of the first century CE. *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, the final book of the New Testament, is an example of apocalyptic literature, from the Greek verb *apokaluptein*, “to uncover, or reveal,” and gives a vision of the destruction of the earth in the end times which will precede the “revelation” of a new heavens and new earth and the return of Christ. According to Christian tradition, the end times will be fearful and destructive, but everything will eventually be made right. Thus, in this sense of the word, “apocalypse” is a temporal process that the world must experience in order to transcend the current order of things.¹⁰ In contemporary usage, the term is something less like the violent renewal caused by a forest fire and more like the end of the road: that is, it does not end in a post-historical utopia. What is distinctive about *Melancholia*’s vision of apocalypse is the way that it maintains the sense of finitude that characterizes the anthropocene fears, but removes from the equation the centrality of ethical obligation on the part of the human subject by making extinction something that is completely

out of human control. And yet, the film maintains a deep critical stance toward what it characterizes as the patriarchal arrogance of positivist science.

In portraying Justine in the grips of her melancholic depression at the same time as the planet Melancholia threatens the very existence of the earth, the film explores the line separating normal mourning and sadness from pathological melancholia. In Freudian terms melancholia is a kind of failure of mourning (as the successful acceptance of loss), in which a subject fails to properly integrate a traumatic experience of loss into its concept of self and move forward, persisting instead in a narcissistic attachment to the lost object. In Freud's conception, outlined in the 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia," the melancholic fails to move on from the lost object of mourning and the ego itself becomes "poor and empty" (246). In Freud's description of a subject's refusal to move on, the state of melancholia is a resistance of the "betrayal" of mourning, which after a certain amount of time would properly give the object of mourning up as lost. Slavoj Žižek has interrogated the political value of melancholy, which he says has gained acceptance, as "when ethnic groups enter capitalist processes of modernization and are under the threat that their specific legacy will be swallowed up by the new global culture, they should not renounce their tradition through mourning, but retain the melancholic attachment to their lost roots" ("Melancholy and the Act" 658). He goes on to argue that the problem with this is that it enshrines the concept of "anamorphosis," in which a particular gaze is inscribed into some objective feature of an object, (such as a film which pre-supposes an ideal viewing position, as discussed below). In the Freudian-Lacanian model Žižek is describing, mourning works by a process of sublation, whereby the "notional essence" of an object is retained "by losing it in its immediate reality" (659). The mistake of the melancholic then is not in resisting symbolic sublation, but in locating this resistance in the lost object. As Žižek concludes, "[i]n short, what

melancholy obfuscates is that the object is lacking from the very beginning” (660). In my discussion of Justine’s disposition in the film, I consider the earth as the lost object of her melancholy. The melancholic, in mistaking the constituent lack that forms the structure of the object of desire, often adopts a melancholic pose toward objects that are not lost yet, pre-mourning their loss in some way, or rather, mistaking feeling of a lack of desire for the feeling that all objects in the world have been drained of their meaning.

In discussing the role of the post-traumatic figure in late-capitalism in *Living in the End Times*, Žižek draws on the work of affect theorist Catherine Malabou, whose work I take up again in Chapter 6, in particular her claim that “the post-traumatic subject cannot be accounted for in Freudian terms of the repetition of a past trauma” (qtd. in Žižek 312). Žižek posits a role for a detached subject, “a survivor of its own death” (313), in today’s global capitalism. However, *Melancholia*’s more radical move is to portray the trauma of that which cannot be repeated—the destruction of everything, including representation, in which there is no “post”. It is significant that, in the film, the final shot of Melancholia destroying the earth cuts to black once the impact occurs, for there is nothing more for a viewer to witness. To return to a reading of this as the critique of capitalist society, implicit in von Trier’s imagining of the end of the world is the idea that only the death the post-traumatic subject of global capitalism can bring about the very end of capitalism itself. The state of melancholic depression that Justine exhibits can be seen as an attempt to “pre-mourn” the earth, and therefore move beyond the fantasies of bourgeois culture. Furthermore, von Trier’s film links the very limits of cinematic representability, as anchored in the perspectival history of Western art, to the bourgeois structures of capitalism, which remain the institutional conditions of cinematic representation. The structures of capitalism which mediate visual culture, including cinema, can represent the

end of the world only as spectacle, therefore the reality of the extinction of all life is figured as “unrepresentable” in the film, which ends when the world does.

At the same time, the question of representability in the face of extinction or nothingness is not a new one. In "Literature and the Right to Death," Maurice Blanchot argues that literature, and by extension all representation, “is built on top of its own ruins” (22). In other words, to represent by words or images is to risk the danger of exposing a paradox at the heart of all action. Representation makes manifest the absence of the thing being represented. Representation is in this sense a kind of apocalyptic action in that the thing being represented is subsumed by the representation itself. Blanchot anticipates the critique of presence that is taken up later in Derrida (the impossibility of self-presence) and Lacan (the structuring “void” at the centre of the human psyche). Arguably, extinction and apocalypse become the very structuring possibilities of representation, since “everything begins from nothing” (Blanchot 24). If the work of art were already fully present in the artist's mind, there would be no point in creating. Thus, the inability to imagine alternative economic arrangements is the failure of the creative force that resists nothingness.

Melancholia approaches subjectivity from two different perspectives. First, its narrative explores “nonhuman temporalities,” a notion raised variously by philosophers Quentin Meillassoux in *After Finitude* and Ray Brassier in *Nihil Unbound* through their explorations of the roles of primordality and extinction, respectively, as keys to understanding the place of humanity in the world (Kara 3). Eugene Thacker, as quoted by Kara in her essay, describes the relationship between human and non-human experiences of the world with the concepts of the “world-in-itself,” that is the post-Kantian world free of human observers, and in the notion of the “the world-without-us,” a world not only free of human observation but free of humans entirely.

This “world-without-us” follows the logic of the impossible gaze of Lacanian fantasy, which, as Žižek explains, is “the gaze by means of which the subject is already present at the scene of its own absence” (*Living in the End Times* 84). Thus, *Melancholia* from this perspective is an attempt to understand the negation of subjectivity and the speculative imagining of the properly unrepresentable i.e. human annihilation as a metaphor for the impossibility of imagining post-capitalist configurations. Following Brassier, *Melancholia* associates the notion of extinction with a crisis of meaning, the essentially nihilistic problem of epistemological certainty weighed against the human psychological need for narrative resolution.

The second approach I turn to in the face of this narrative of annihilation is the question of the depressive subject. The condition of melancholia, which, in contemporary clinical terminology is also a form of severe depression, with which Justine is afflicted, is framed as the negation of the self, in which the normative cognitive processes of sadness and mourning have failed so as to preclude any other affective sensation. Depression, in affective terms, is a condition that decreases and even negates the affects associated with the perseverance of being. The apocalyptic vision of von Trier’s *Melancholia* supports Justine’s negative vision of subjectivity. Furthermore, throughout *Melancholia*, the filmic depiction of the end of the world is linked to the failure of a rational, scientific view of the self, as exemplified in the patriarchal figure of Justine’s brother-in-law, John. This failure of rational, scientific positivism is also linked to the failure of capitalism, each emerging during the Enlightenment as a response to a re-ordering of the human structures of the subject, in terms of visual perception and economic organization. Capitalism and scientific positivism each prescribe a particular subjective gaze, an anamorphic one (to use Žižek’s terminology), in order to suppress any contradictions or tensions in their systems and which naturalize the paradoxes inherent to their construction. Thus, the

apocalyptic vision of the film, which is linked to the failure of these two systems, leads to a negative vision of subjectivity.

As Ray Brassier has noted, the question of nihilism is intimately bound up with the idea of a “mind-independent reality” (xi) that is not reliant on human existence or notions of value or meaning. The irony is that the rational, scientific worldview that allows for a human being to contemplate a world without his-or-herself cannot simultaneously represent or realize that vision. Like all subjective experiences, even a rational empiricism collapses when interrogated to the limit of its own rationality. This is the lesson of Derrida and deconstruction, that rational accounts of the conditions of possibility are not rational enough to withstand their own critique. The end of the human race is something properly un-representable, as “Extinction is real yet not empirical, since it is not of the order of experience” (Brassier 238). Derrida’s basic argument, as outlined in “The Supplement of Origin,” makes the similar claim that an empirical event cannot be separated from its structural conditions. In other words, what both Brassier and Derrida argue for in different ways is that our conceptions of extinction and apocalypse are a function of human subjectivity. Properly speaking, apocalypse takes place within subjectivity as a necessary limit. In *Melancholia*, the end of the world is further imagined as the elimination of subjectivity entirely. This is a rebuttal to the deeply personalist cinema of Tarkovsky discussed in the previous chapter, in which the possibilities of cinematic representation of time and space provide a constructive basis for the cultivation of personality. Thus, *Melancholia* offers a response to the question of the subject in cinema by challenging normative models of subjectivity and anthropocentrism.

Melancholic Perception

The image of the self in the films of Tarkovsky, described in the last chapter, was founded on the notion that cinema can visually represent the links between the mind and the world, even as Tarkovsky challenged conventional views of narrative in his dramatizing and visualizing of the problem of the self. Each of the films under discussion in this dissertation suggests that human beings construct a sense of the self in part through the perception of visual and aural phenomena; under debate is whether the processing of these perceptions happens on the pre-subjective affective level, as suggested by many of the recent theories of affect, or through a more subjective interpellation, as understood in Marxist critical theory. In *Melancholia*, the claim that cinematic representation can provide an objective, totalizing vision of the world is called into question, both in terms of its value or whether it is even possible. This is, in turn, the source of crisis of identity the film engenders as it poses a challenge to notions of self-presence or self-authoring identity.

Cinematic representation is rooted in an understanding of visual perspective. Semiotic film scholars, such as Christian Metz, argued that film narration denotes a present tense, a “*Here I am*” as opposed to a “*This has been*” (which he, drawing on Roland Barthes, associates with photography) (6 italics original). Cinematic focalization then primarily occurs on the level of the camera and editing, through what it shows or withholds from the viewer, and implies a narrating subject, even if the camera is placed in impossible or “virtual” spaces. That is, cinematic narration need not be limited to characters within the narrative; if anything, cinema often places the viewer in the position of limited omniscience, beyond the perspective of any one character. Cinema, as a scientific and technological phenomenon of late-modernity, was praised for its ability to structure a viewing subject in new and jarring ways, playing with notions of space and

time. This freedom nonetheless implied that the viewing subject was the same as the spectator who sits before the cinema screen. This “ideal” or hypothetical spectator was to be imagined as “perfectly mobile in space and time” (Plantinga 250), and early film theorists such as V. I. Pudovkin suggested that an ideal filmic representation “[strove] to force the spectator to transcend the limits of normal human apprehension” (Pudovkin qtd. in Plantinga 250). Such notions of the ideal spectator become difficult to separate from the notion in screen theory of the viewing “subject,” constituted by and at the mercy of a cinematic “apparatus.” I want to consider these theorizations of cinematic spectatorship in relation to the ways in which von Trier’s film links classical notions of spectatorship and narrative identification to the early modern emergence of visual art that placed the viewer in a centred, privileged viewing position, in an anamorphic viewing position in which a particular gaze was part of its basic objective features. In this sense, cinema can be seen as an art form that opposes the modernist principle that form can be expressive outside of representational or narrative content, requiring particular structures and codes and conventions to express meaning. This is related to the way that cinema mediates forms of perception that mirror our day-to-day experience of the world, but do so even more perfectly. When observed from the proper anamorphic angle, cinema presents a world constituted by and for the viewing subject. *Melancholia*, for its part, expresses a romantic interest in excessive and decorative art. For instance, in a scene in the first half, during the wedding party, Justine finds herself in John’s study and, upon observing his modernist abstract art, she replaces the paintings with prints of earlier Romantic and Renaissance works. The paintings included Brueghel’s “Land of Cockaigne” (1567) and “The Hunters in the Snow” (glimpsed in the prologue), Caravaggio’s “David with the Head of Goliath” (1610), and John Everett Millais’ “Ophelia” (1851-52) referenced in the prologue by the image of Justine floating

in the water holding flowers, as Ophelia does in the painting. Shaviro suggests that this is a rejection of the modernist aesthetic, rightly pointing out that the abstract paintings “are closely aligned with John’s overweening faith in the power of scientific explanation and technological development — not to mention the power he wields with his money”; through their “rationally ordered geometric grids” they “are emblematic of social control and instrumental reason” (*Melancholia* 28). Modernist abstraction is fundamentally a self-reflexive form, drawing attention to the painting as an art form rather than a representation. More important that Shaviro’s unique reading of abstract art, I would also suggest, more importantly, that in this sequence the film is attuned to the way that cinema itself has inherited certain earlier aesthetic conceptions from the history of Western art, such as “the desire of Renaissance culture for the centered representation of any visual field” (Andrew 23). Narrative cinema, due to its visual perspectival nature, is aligned with representative art, rather than abstraction. This desire for totality manifested itself during the emergence of photography as a medium, prompting Charles Baudelaire to lament: “art is losing in self-respect, is prostrating itself before external reality, and the painter is becoming more and more inclined to paint, not what he dreams, but what he sees” (88). In this conception, cinematic and photographic realism was related to the notion that cinema and other photographic arts offered a view of the world that recreated a Kantian world-in-itself, the world as it would be seen free from human observers. Cinema, then, straddles the line between representational art and modernism, manifesting a faith in the power of its technological achievement at the same time that it relies on notions of mimetic realism inherited from photography.

Cinema’s power is conceived of in its approximation of perception freed from the constraints of human subjectivity, which is itself a positioning of the viewer unique to cinematic

perception. Cinema ostensibly offers a totalizing, centering vision, considered a key component of “pure cinema.” Jean-Louis Baudry explains:

The principle of transcendence which conditions and is conditioned by the perspective construction represented in painting and in the photographic image which copies from it seems to inspire all the idealist paeans to which the cinema has given rise. (358)

Baudry sees the idealistic dream of cinema as totalizing vision as partially an inheritance of perspectival representation in art more generally. But rather than see this totalizing vision as an inherent property of cinema, Baudry sees it as “constituted not only by this eye but for it” (360). Thus, as cinema sets up the spectator at the centre of its vision, it ironically reveals this infinite vision as a property of a finite set of operations that serve to constitute meaning for that subject and that subject only.

Despite Baudry’s accusations of Bazin and others penning “idealistic paeans” to the power of cinema, I would argue that Bazin did recognize the illusory nature of this vision. As he writes of the cinematic and pre-cinematic inventors and innovators who contributed to cinema’s emergence in the late-nineteenth century, “In their imagination, they conceived of cinema as the complete and total representation of reality” (15). However, he is very well aware that this is only an imagined or wished-for notion, a structuring fantasy if you will, something which has not yet been, and can never be, realized. The quest for total cinematic representation is asymptotic, always approaching greater and greater sense of “realism” but never achieving totality. Cinema theory has long sought for ways to acknowledge cinema’s own limitations. Tarkovsky in particular, in recognizing the limitations of cinema as being congruent with the limitations of subjective perception, saw cinema as forging a connection between the self and the world. Narratively speaking, the viewer is meant to identify with aspects of the other presented on the

screen. Additionally, the phenomenon of cinematic identification indicates a psychological relationship between viewer and character. This question of identification is closely bound up with the question of subjectivity, which implies the question of from where one speaks, with what authority, and who one is. All of these assume self-knowledge of position, place, and presence. The cinema naturalizes the question of the subject, of the viewer's relation to the diegesis, by presenting a vision constituted for him or her: the view of the ideal cinematic spectator is an anamorphic gaze which "undermines the distinction between objective reality and its distorted subjective perception" (Žižek, "Melancholy and the Act" 659).

Melancholia challenges the notion that the vision on the screen is constituted for her or him. The film presents a vision of catastrophe that ultimately resists any naturalized viewing position and remains meaningless. That is, it resists supporting or legitimizing the viewer's subjectivity through its nihilism. Consider the scene from Part 2 of the film, where, having acknowledged the fact that the earth is doomed and that there is no escape from either the estate or certain annihilation by the planet Melancholia, Claire shares with her sister how she wants to experience her impending doom. She asks Justine if she will sit with her on the terrace, enjoying a glass of wine while the world ends. Claire wants it to be "nice." But Justine denies her sister this, saying of her plan, "I think that it's a piece of shit." Justine is not merely being blunt, she's resisting the banal bourgeois response to the terror of the end of the world. Justine chooses a fantasy that is a pre-capitalist, pre-spectacular one. Rather than enjoy the end of the world as a spectacle to be taken in with a glass of wine, she resists such a subjective view of the world-for-us.

The film asks us to ponder what role or function cinema might have in representing that which is, by definition, beyond the function of the sensible, beyond any sensory experience. In

the absence of any properly constituted subject, how can cinema still productively express any kind of sensibility, let alone one that is not “attributed to any subject in particular” (Shaviro *Post-Cinematic* 2)? How is cinematic expression perceived, not only in the absence of a viewing subject, or any material body, but in the face of annihilation? In *Melancholia*, the juxtaposition of the destruction of the earth and Justine’s melancholic depression outlines the limits of cinematic representability. In this way, von Trier is very pessimistic about the ability of cinema to bring about any kind of real social change, as the conditions of its production are so thoroughly bound up in the structures of capitalism. Even in speaking about the Romantic, anti-modernist tendencies critics have noticed in his film, he says that the film projects “an aesthetic that I would distance myself from under any other circumstances... this film is perilously close to the aesthetic of American mainstream films” (Von Trier qtd. in Shaviro *Melancholia* 26). Von Trier is very aware of his own complicity in the cinematic system of signification. In fact, the film’s criticism of modernism can be read as a criticism of the values espoused by his own body of work. The embrace of annihilation and the self-criticism found in the film function as acts of a rebellious, resisting, melancholic attitude shared by both von Trier and the film, which in many ways defies notions of taste by embracing anachronistic notions of romantic art.¹¹

The role of subjectivity in *Melancholia* cannot be accounted for apart from the film’s depiction of Justine’s depression. While critical evaluations of the film vary, one thing that many critics have praised is the film’s depiction of Justine’s emotional state. As Shaviro notes, “Many people who have experienced extreme depression (a group in which I include myself) have strongly felt that von Trier *gets it right* in this movie. He really conveys a sense of what depression feels like” (*Melancholia* 19). Part 1 of the film, relating Justine’s disastrous wedding reception, shows the way that Justine’s depression manifests as a distinct lack of affective

response. Dunst's performance is carefully nuanced in gesture and manner, bringing attention to her emotional states (or lack thereof) without, as Shaviro notes, pathologizing them. In the second part of the film, her condition reveals itself as in one sense a proper response to the imminent destruction of the earth, in contrast to her sister Claire's neurotic despair. *Melancholia* offers a fascinating account of a crisis manifested by and in response to the presence of a non-normative subjectivity. At the same time, the film moves beyond the strictly metaphorical by asking questions about the way that objects, such as the planet Melancholia, possess affective forces, stimuli which elicit particular reactions, upon viewers.

Depression, in affective terms, is a condition that decreases and even negates the affects associated with the perseverance of being. The apocalyptic vision of von Trier's film reflects Justine's negative vision of subjectivity. Finally, with respect to the film's importance for thinking through a crisis of subjectivity in contemporary cinema is how throughout *Melancholia* the filmic depiction of the end of the world is linked to the failure of a rational, scientific view of the self, as exemplified in the patriarchal figure of Justine's brother-in-law, John. This rational positivist view, in its naturalizing, prescriptive way, is the same one that pathologizes non-normative subjectivities. As Shaviro points out, the film "*depathologizes* depression. For depression is all too often stigmatized as a moral or intellectual failure, a kind of unseemly self-indulgence—this seems to be John's attitude towards Justine" (*Melancholia* 20). Instead, by focusing on Justine's particular reaction to the end of the world the film suggests that depression might be a proper response to such an event.

Accounts of the condition of depression vary greatly from medieval spiritual accounts to early modern conceptions, from Freudian psychoanalytic models to current biochemical explanations. Scholars in the early modern era conceived of melancholy very differently than in

contemporary Western society, where depression and associated states are seen as subjective pathologies that can be ameliorated through drugs and therapy. The early modern conception of melancholy was not that of a psychic state, but was rather rooted in purely physical and definable terms, often racially charged and gendered. Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, the first edition of which appeared in 1621, describes parties affected by melancholy as those "[s]uch as have the Moon, Saturn, Mercury misaffected in their genitures; such as live in over-cold or over-hot climes...are black, or of a high sanguine complexion..." (1.1, 3.2 172). Burton recounts numerous classical accounts of melancholy in his compendium of thoughts on the matter: "[Melanelius calls melancholy] 'a bad peevish disease, which makes men degenerate into beasts'...Halyabbas simply calls it a 'commotion of the mind;' Areateaus, 'a perpetual anguish of the soul, fastened on one thing, without an ague'" (1.1, 3.1 169). Burton's attempt to catalogue the volumes of writing on the subject of melancholy can be seen as the first step in attempting to create a scientific, rational, complete account of the state of melancholy as primarily a physical, physiological state. It is a kind of medical compendium that treats melancholy as a disease. By the time of Freud's, "Mourning and Melancholia," mentioned above, the condition is seen as a pathological failure of normative psychological processes. Freud described the "distinguishing features of melancholia" as "a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment" (244). Freud sees melancholia as a failure of the work of mourning, but he also notes that it does afford the melancholic an insight into "the constitution of the human ego" (247). That is, Freud acknowledges that the melancholic, depressive state represents a unique subjectivity: "The essential thing, therefore, is not whether the melancholic's

distressing self-denigration is correct, in the sense that his [sic] self-criticism agrees with the opinion of other people. The point must rather be that he is giving a correct description of his psychological situation” (247). Freud then is in one sense agreeing with this chapter’s epigraph from Burton: “*Conscientia scrupulosa nascitur ex vitio naturali, complexione melancholica* [an over-scrupulous conscience springs from a natural defect, from a melancholic disposition]” (3.4, 2.3 396). Likewise, *Melancholia* presents Justine as possessing insight into the reality of the situation facing the world, but rather than rooting it in a psychological narrative, it is the outcome of objective truths, which the patriarchal, rational order of her brother-in-law, John, cannot face. It is John who finds the truth unbearable, culminating in his suicide.

The condition of melancholia, or severe depression, in contemporary clinical terminology, is usually portrayed as self-destructive and pathological. The contemporary medical model of depression, as Ann Cvetkovich notes, “holds powerful sway, especially the rhetoric that depression, pervasive though it might be, is manageable because it is a disease that can be detected, diagnosed, and treated. Although significantly bolstered by powerful economic and institutional interests, this common sense understanding has widespread popular appeal particularly because a medical model based on biology relieves people of individual blame or responsibility” (90). While the issue of whether depression is a disease (or whether it should be classified as such) is beyond the scope of this chapter, it does have bearing on how we interpret von Trier’s *Melancholia*. As a reaction to the contemplation of the loss of the earth and her life, Justine’s depressive melancholia is in some regards a more suitable state of mind than the despair of her sister, Claire. Justine’s melancholia is, as Žižek notes in the following passage, a pre-figuring of the loss of the object (the earth) that is to come:

Giorgio Agamben emphasized how, in contrast to mourning, melancholy is not only the failure of the work of mourning, the persistence of the attachment to the real of the object, but also its very opposite: ‘melancholia offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object.’ Therein resides the melancholic's stratagem: the only way to possess an object that we never had, that was from the very outset lost, is to treat an object that we still fully possess as if this object is already lost. The melancholic's refusal to accomplish the work of mourning thus takes the form of its very opposite, a faked spectacle of the excessive, superfluous mourning for an object even before this object. (“Melancholy and the Act” 661)

Even before the Earth is destroyed, the logical certainty of extinction governs Justine's behaviour. Of course, it is only before the destruction that her behaviour matters at all. After all, in a few short hours they, and everything else they have ever known, will be destroyed. So in this sense it is proper to the moment, despite its seeming anticipatory nature. Her depression paradoxically allows her to be the only person who can avoid hysteria, panic, and despair in the face of the disaster. As Shaviro points out, during the wedding sequence, Justine's behaviour is “improper, disproportionate, and excessive” (19), but in the film's second part, “Justine is not worried about the fate of the Earth, precisely because for her the catastrophe has already happened. The end of existence holds no additional terrors; there is literally nothing left to worry about” (*Melancholia* 25). Thus, the film portrays Justine's depression as strangely stoic and appropriate in the second half of the film.

Melancholy and Nihilism

As Brassier has noted, the question of nihilism is intimately bound up with the idea of a “mind-independent reality” (xi) that is not reliant on human existence or notions of value or meaning. The irony is that the rational, scientific worldview that allows for a human being to contemplate a world without his-or-herself cannot simultaneously represent or realize that vision. As I noted earlier in this chapter, “Extinction is real yet not empirical, since it is not of the order of experience” (Brassier 238). At the end of *Melancholia* the destruction of the world is portrayed as ultimately an end to the possibility of cinematic representation, as the film cuts to black shortly after the impact of the planet Melancholia with the earth. In this way, *Melancholia* does link the view of the world with that of a viewing subjectivity, but extinction becomes something beyond subjectivity because it is beyond narration. In Brassier’s view, nihilism is related to the crisis of meaning that results from the truth of scientific explanations of the world. As Brassier explains in an interview with Marcin Rychter,

Over the course of a few centuries, the longstanding assumption that everything exists for a reason, that things are intrinsically purposeful and have been designed in accordance with a divine plan, is slowly but systematically dismantled, first in physics, then in chemistry, and eventually in biology, where it had held out longest. Curved space-time, the periodic table, natural selection: none of these are comprehensible in narrative terms. Such phenomena “are not *for* anything,” there is no metaphysical ordering to their existence. Likewise, the destruction of the earth by Melancholia is also not part of some grand plan, nor is it the fault of anthropocentric meddling. Brassier differentiates the explanatory progress of science from a myth of progress. In his view, mythology is any interpretation of the world in narrative terms. While he acknowledges that the existentialists saw the meaningless of the universe and

saw it as the role of human consciousness to imbue existence with meaning, Brassier feels that the advances of science in terms of explaining human consciousness, while still incomplete, have been damaging enough to abandon the project of meaning. This raises the question of whether we can even have narrative without meaning. As discussed in Chapter 1, Derrida's concept of iterability is the minimum condition of mediation and, likewise, any experience of experience, which requires a sense of temporality, manifested in the functions of memory and anticipation. Therefore, narrative, in minimal terms expressed as the relation between the past, present, and future, is foundational to human experience of consciousness.

Throughout *Melancholia*, the filmic depiction of the end of the world is linked to the failure of a rational, scientific view of the self, as exemplified in the patriarchal figure of Justine's brother-in-law, John. Brassier's interpretation would be that John fails to be rational enough. John is in this sense a carry over of the character of He (Willem Dafoe) from von Trier's previous film, *Antichrist*, who embodies the extreme of "Nietzschean, perspectivist will-to-power metaphysics" (Shaviro 35). But, unlike that film, where the embodiment of male reason is severely punished with genital mutilation, in *Melancholia* this Nietzschean posturing is shown as ultimately cowardly and unable to come face-to-face with the reality in which, as the fox in *Antichrist* notes, "chaos reigns." John cannot face reality and, without the metaphysically useful fiction of the particular narratives of positivist science and capitalism, he kills himself: extinction for him represents a truth without meaning.

What then does Brassier mean when he says to abandon the project of meaning? Where Brassier parts ways with a Nietzschean "will-to-truth" is that, unlike Nietzsche, Brassier doesn't see truth as conflated with meaning. While Nietzsche saw the lack of meaning and deduced that this meant that truth was merely a vagary of human convention, Brassier sees truth as rooted in a

transcendental realism. As he says, “I am a nihilist [that is he rejects the need for narrative meaning] because I believe in truth” (Rychter). *Melancholia* portrays Justine’s nihilistic perspicacity as being rooted a kind of rejection of the will-to-power that drives John or the bourgeois narratives of her sister, Claire. Justine’s melancholic response is a more appropriate narrative which underpins her subjectivity in the face of the extinction of the planet. In a key exchange in the film, Justine and Claire discuss the imminent end of the world:

Justine: The earth is evil. We don't need to grieve for it.

Claire: What?

Justine: Nobody will miss it.

Claire: But where would Leo grow?

Justine: All I know is, life on earth is evil.

Claire: Then maybe life somewhere else.

Justine: But there isn't.

Claire: How do you know?

Justine: Because I know things.

Claire: Oh yes, you always imagined you did.

Justine: I know we're alone.

Claire: I don't think you know that at all.

Justine: 678. The bean lottery. Nobody guessed the amount of beans in the bottle.

Claire: No, that's right.

Justine: But I know. 678.

Claire: Well, perhaps. But what does that prove?

Justine: That I know things. And when I say we're alone, we're alone. Life is only on earth, and not for long.

When Justine tells her sister that “the Earth is evil, we don’t need to grieve for it,” and that “nobody will miss it,” she is not speaking merely metaphorically, nor offering moral condemnation, but literally describing what will happen: no one will be left to miss the planet, or to experience any grief over its loss. By ending the film at the moment of the Earth’s annihilation, von Trier affirms that his cinema offers no escape from such annihilation of subjectivity, and ultimately offers no resolution to the crisis of the alienated individual in the post-Enlightenment era, nor does it offer the possibility of thinking past the crisis of the late-capitalist subject.

This nihilism in von Trier’s films then leads to an end to visual conception under late-capitalism, and at the same time opens up the conditions for the very possibility of conceptuality, of thinking beyond the status quo. Here we find a link once again between the mind and the world in the cinema. Brassier contends that, “[e]xtinction portends a physical annihilation which negates the difference between mind and world, but which can no longer be construed as a limit internal to the transcendence of mind” (229). Thus, the mind, or in the case of cinematic representation, the organizing subjective structure of the image, is not something that can survive the destruction of the world. In the most hopeful sense, this means that the self relies on the structure of the other, or minimally the folding of one’s own memory into perception, some form of *difference*. The destruction of the world extinguishes *difference*. But it is the other, and the relation to the other rather than to the metaphysical structures of the world, that Justine holds on to in the very end of the film, when she creates the cave for her nephew, Leo. Rather than capitulating to a capitalist fantasy, she is attending to the boy’s need and her own need for the

other until the very moment of destruction. It would make no sense to speak of a post-extinction subjectivity, in that “[e]xtinction turns thinking inside out, objectifying it as a perishable thing in the world like any other” (Brassier 229).

Conclusion

Yet, extinction is not yet in the order of our sensible reality. I do not read a film like *Melancholia* as purely a metaphor for the inability to think the end of capitalism, though it does function in that critique. Nor do I fully subscribe to Brassier or von Trier’s assessment of the human situation as ultimately nihilistic. I do believe that films such as this are helpful conceptual experiments. As Richard Grusin explains, the

thinking of mediality in terms of affects is to think of our media practices not only in terms of their structures of signification or symbolic representation but more crucially in terms of the ways in which media function on the one hand to discipline, control, contain, manage, or govern human affectivity and its affiliated things “from above,” at the same time that they work to enable particular forms of human action, particular collective expressions or formations of human affect “from below.” (79)

What does von Trier’s film suggest about how media shapes our desires? How is it helpful to consider Justine’s depression in relation to the depiction of the end of the world? As Rupert Read suggests, “*Melancholia* is a disaster-film that critically reads the desires of the viewer of a disaster-film” (32). This is why Brassier’s conception of the nihilism of extinction is helpful to my reading of the film, by denying the ability of cinematic subjectivity to take an objective, distanced view of the end of the world. Justine, as noted above, in her melancholic, depressive speaking of truth, nonetheless agrees to create the “magic cave” for her nephew Leo. Shaviro

describes Justine's position as that of "a witness to a world from which we have been subtracted" as something that "can only be described paradoxically" (*Melancholia* 39). Justine, "envisages her own exclusion from any possible envisagement" (39). Her melancholia, to paraphrase the Latin motto from Burton with which I began, ironically grants her a "scrupulous conscience," where she is able to face the truth of extinction.

¹ Note that Lars von Trier was born "Lars Trier" in 1956 and only adopted the aristocratic "von" as a film student in Copenhagen. In his account, it was "the most provocative thing I could do" (Björkman 69). He explains that the adoption is not at all uncommon in Jazz music (for instance, "Duke" and "Count") and that he was also inspired by the German directors Sternberg and Stroheim who adopted the title while in Hollywood in the 1930s: "Their 'vons' were entirely made up but that didn't do them any harm" (Björkman 70).

² In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky writes: "Modern mass culture, aimed at the 'consumer', the civilisation of prosthetics, is crippling people's souls" (42). While the bulk of Tarkovsky's films were made in a Soviet context, his indictment of "mass culture" specifically connects to the critique of capitalism in Marxist thought.

³ The notion of the "rogue planet," a planetary-mass body that is not in orbit around a sun and freely travels through space, is an interesting one that has been taken up by pseudoscientists and conspiracy theorists throughout the twentieth- and early-twenty-first century (see for instance the Nibiru conspiracy). A similar plot point drives the 1951 George Pal film, *When Worlds Collide*. Most productively for my argument, the notion of a rogue planet provides a link between the film and early nineteenth-century astronomic theories, surrounding speculations about the make-up of our solar system. Particularly, the irregularities in the orbits of Uranus and Neptune led some, including Percival Lowell, to posit that a ninth planet, sometimes called "Planet X," was disrupting their orbits. In this sense, the planet Melancholia can be read as both the success and failure of John's (Kiefer Sutherland) rational, scientific view, as fleshed out in my discussion of Roy Brassier's conception of nihilism below.

⁴ Note that golf courses are limited to eighteen holes and do not contain a nineteenth. The term "nineteenth hole" is usually referred to humorously as the location of post-game celebrations, such as the bar or the clubhouse's dining hall.

⁵ This process involved von Trier choosing from many dozen fixed camera positions and then turning over control of pans, tilts, and zooms to a computer algorithm.

⁶ A brief summary of the "Vow of Chastity", as found on the Dogme 95 website (dogme95.dk): (1) Only location shooting; (2) No non-diegetic sound or music; (3) Camera must be hand-held; (4) The film must be in colour and not use any special lighting; (5) No optical work or filters; (6) No temporal or geographical alienation, i.e. unity of place and contemporary setting are required; (7) No genre films; (8) Academy ratio, 35 mm format; (9) No director credit.

⁷ Though Shaviro goes on to claim that the film "avoids shock tactics, and does not assault the viewer. It contains nothing transgressive or *outré*—or even ironic" (6), a reading I cannot agree with. While it is true that *Melancholia* lacks some of the extreme violence or sexuality some have come to expect from von Trier, its transgressive nature lies in its extremely ironic portrayal of bourgeois culture and rejection of bourgeois values in favour of nihilism.

⁸ In the fourth entry of the *SEQUENCE* series *Planet Melancholia*, Selmin Kara notes that *The Tree of Life*, a film discussed in the next chapter, "is similarly a cosmological drama" bringing together personal experiences with the cosmic realities of the birth and death of the universe (7). Again, the cosmological drama of the universe in that film, metonymically mirrors the span of its main character's birth, life, and (imagined) death.

⁹ Among film scholars the term "cinema of the anthropocene" has popped up to describe films which address issues of anthropocentric impact on the planet, whether climate change, war, or the destructive forces of global capitalism. Examples of anthropocene cinema are as varied as *Snowpiercer* (2013), *Interstellar* (2014), and *Leviathan* (2012), the film by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel from the sensory ethnography lab at Harvard (not the 2014 Russian film by Andrey Zvyagintsev).

¹⁰ While orthodox Christian understandings of apocalypse focus on making things right—a redemption rather than a rejection of the world—in the early centuries of Christianity *Revelation* was a key text for Gnostic heresies that believed that the world as it is was the creation of a demi-urge and that the apocalypse would reveal this truth about creation and herald the unveiling of the real world.

¹¹ This same self-destructive urge can be read in von Trier's infamous comments at the Cannes press conference for the film in 2011, in which he claimed to have some sympathy for Hitler: "What can I say? I understand Hitler, but I think he did some wrong things, yes, absolutely. ... He's not what you would call a good guy, but I understand much about him, and I sympathise with him a little bit. But come on, I'm not for the Second World War, and I'm not against Jews....I am of course very much for Jews, no not too much, because Israel is pain in the ass, but still how can I get out of this sentence" (see "Lars von Trier Nazi Comments at Cannes 2011," YouTube, 18 May 2011). There is a sense in which von Trier knew he was backing himself into an indefensible position, but could not resist thumbing his nose at the good taste and manners of the reporters at the French film festival.

Chapter 4

The Inner Life of America: Memory, Subjectivity, and Limits of Perception in *The Tree of Life* and *Upstream Color*

The wide plains of my memory and its innumerable caverns and hollows are full beyond compare of countless things of all kinds.

—Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Book X

Introduction

The reminiscences of a mid-century Texas childhood give way to a flurry of images portraying the origins of life on Earth, from single-celled organisms to dinosaurs, in a bold sequence in the middle of *The Tree of Life* (2011). The transition from the recent to distant past is delineated by the image of the protagonist's mother closing her eyes, reminding the viewer that any exploration of big history is ultimately undertaken from a human perspective, and explicitly linking the cosmological drama of the universe with the drama of the individual human. The intrusion of this “origin of life” sequence caused confusion and frustration among some audiences of the film upon its initial release; I personally witnessed multiple walk-outs shortly after the transition to the origin of life montage during each of my theatrical viewings of the film. These viewers came to the film expecting it to be a straightforward telling of a mid-century Texas childhood starring Hollywood movie star, Brad Pitt; instead Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* doesn't merely present the viewer with the story of a man growing up, but rather invites the viewer into that man's head. While many films with cosmogonic themes look outward—consider the “Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite” sequence from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*¹—*The Tree of Life* inverts this orientation, going inward in order to imagine the origin of the universe and exploring the interior life, memories, and daydreams that make the

protagonist who he is. The vast gulf between the origin of life on earth and the smallest moments of a boy's life are brought together in the memories and thoughts of a single individual.

By describing Malick's film as interested in the "inner life," I am suggesting that *The Tree of Life* is engaging the production of a cinematic self, distinct from the memory-image in Tarkovsky in the particulars of its use of voice-over and editing, and more hopeful about the possibilities of human subjectivity than the nihilism of extinction in *Melancholia*. In *Sources of the Self* (1989), Charles Taylor outlines the ways that the contemporary human sense of self is "constituted by, a certain sense [...] of inwardness"; Taylor argues that this sense is central to conceptions of human subjectivity in modern, that is post-medieval, times (111).² *The Tree of Life* produces a picture of its central character's inner life through the cinematic rendering of this sense of inwardness. One might even call *The Tree of Life* a "sensuous" film for the way it connects this feeling of inner life to the experience of the material world.

In contrast to *The Tree of Life*, Shane Carruth's 2013 film *Upstream Color* is much more restricted in scope as it explores the construction of the self through memory and experience. Carruth's film tells the story of two individuals who struggle to reconstruct coherent identities in the wake of epistemological collapse. *Upstream Color* follows the story of a woman who is drugged with a subcutaneous worm that renders her vulnerable to suggestion. Subsequently, she loses everything: her job, her social connections, her memory of what happened to her, in short, her sense of self. She then finds herself drawn into relationship with another victim as they attempt to rebuild their lives and find some form of resolution together. Like *The Tree of Life*, *Upstream Color* explores basic questions about human existence and how humans gain knowledge about the world. Each film affirms the notion that the visible material world is only a part of a larger world which people draw on to find significance and meaning, even if each

person comes to differing conclusions as to how s/he comes to such knowledge. Each film affirms that memory is key to the construction of a subjectivity.

My readings of *Upstream Color* and *The Tree of Life* revolve in different ways around each film's differing formal choices, shaped by the technological changes affecting production modes and narrative experimentation intended to reinvigorate old questions of subjectivity central to cinema. My goal is to situate larger debates over the nature of the self within the specific history of film theory. It is in these films' broader subjective and aesthetic contexts that a picture of a crisis in late twentieth and early-twenty-first century American life becomes clear, and which is of particular interest to this dissertation. In each film, an existential crisis is manifested by the thematic exploration of the conditions of possibility for experience in each era. Finally, I suggest that examining the ways that that these films diverge from normative notions of realism in American cinema, whether through voice-over or narrative and visual ellipses, clarifies each film's stance toward the construction of subjectivity.

This chapter begins by exploring the implicit and explicit invocations of New England transcendentalist thought in Malick's and Carruth's films and relates the above-mentioned crisis to particularly American religio-philosophical positions. I believe that each film can be productively read in dialogue with transcendentalist thought, with the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the case of *The Tree of Life*, and with Henry David Thoreau, particularly *Walden*, in the case of *Upstream Color*. Against this larger backdrop of American philosophical and literary thought, I offer a summary of Taylor's inflection of the secularization thesis, as it offers a link between the New England transcendentalists and the larger arguments over subjectivity referenced in *The Tree of Life*. I then relate Taylor's description of the "detached" and "disenchanted self" to various theoretical models of how cinema represents reality. Finally, I

offer a closer examination of the aesthetics of each film, in terms of voice-over and the use of digital techniques and technologies to explain how each film approaches the characters' attempts to discern their place in the universe.

The Tree of Life makes a connection between knowledge and the meaning of existence, framed by the main character's memories of the untimely death of his youngest brother. I argue that this problem of knowledge is posed obliquely by the epigraph to the film, taken from Job 38:4 and 7: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?...When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" The film's intertextualization of Job is related to both epistemology (knowledge) and axiology (value), and a consideration of the limits of human experience and of the value of an individual human life as weighed against the grand cosmological drama of the universe. Traditional exegesis of The Book of Job emphasizes God's chiding of Job for daring to question his will. Taken in the context of the rest of a film which presumes to *show* the creation of the earth, the use of Job as an intertext also raises the question of how one knows things for which one was not present, i.e. the creation of the universe? Ultimately, the answer is not about knowledge but about difference between something representable, like the world, and concepts like "God" which resist representation. *The Tree of Life* poses a question of the significance of human life. Ultimately, *The Tree of Life* suggests that transcendence is found in the "way of grace" espoused by the main character's mother, through the pursuit of love—"Love builds up"—and proper ethical relations to others, as prized above reason, freedom, and knowledge.³ Ironically, in pursuing love, by the end of the film Jack comes to a greater knowledge and freedom.

The Tree of Life addresses specific questions about the human struggle to relate to the cosmos at large, and to metaphysical concepts such as "God," given a necessarily limited and

subjective viewpoint. For any transcendence of the self that is achieved by the characters in *The Tree of Life* is conceptualized through the paradoxical condition of the impossibility of such transcendence. By expanding its scope of focalization to include a polyphony of voice-overs and special- and visual effects derived images of the origins of the universe, the film points to the impossibility of an atomized, self-sufficient approach to subjectivity.

Upstream Color, on the other hand, eschews any significant use of computer graphics VFX in telling the story of its characters' attempts to reconstruct their identities. Nonetheless, the film's aesthetic is inseparable from its fully digital mode of filmic production. The term digital is often placed in opposition to the term "indexical," heralding the loss of the trace, imprint, or "mold" as André Bazin termed it; digital cinema, in its manipulability, supposedly severs the link between the indexicality of the image and its iconicity, that is, the image's close visual resemblance to the thing represented. *Upstream Color* prompts an interrogation of the absence of authenticity in the digital product in terms of how the story presents the main characters' loss of and rediscovery of self. The film's visual and aural aesthetic register shapes its stance toward the limits of human perception in cinema and challenges the idealistic naturalism of Thoreau; "belief" in the cinema is, following Bazin, the fundamental question of realism. By tackling the topic of the construction of meaning out of sensory data, I argue that *Upstream Color* offers a different take on the question of filmic subjectivity. I believe the film offers support to Philip Rosen's argument dispelling the notion that indexicality, that is, the photochemical process which guarantees the presence of an object before the camera, much as a footprint marks the trace of the foot in the sand, is "the defining difference" for digital filmmaking (314).

Despite their differences, each film nonetheless turns on the question of the representation of the *self* in cinema. In my examination of these two films, I show how cinema

expands the possibilities for perception and at the same time provides the space for a productive interrogation of our relationship with the universe.

The American Religious Subject and Transcendentalism

The Tree of Life frames its representation of selfhood in the context of twentieth and early-twenty-first century American expressions of individual religious faith. The world as interpreted through mainline Protestant Christianity is the framework that its central protagonists are navigating. *The Tree of Life* poses its narrative in religious terms, while *Upstream Color* is a metaphysical science fiction story. In each film, however, the characters navigate a world shaped by an American experience of faith in its various forms. However, rather than taking such realities at face value, the films offer varying critiques of such experiences, such as Jack O'Brien's Augustinian and Kierkegaardian crisis of faith in *The Tree of Life* or Kris (Amy Seimetz) and Jeff's (Shane Carruth) experience of complete epistemological collapse, an experience of transformational social and economic collapse not unlike the experiences often recounted by former cult members.

In his classic study, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of the particularities of American religious experience. James, the pragmatic psychologist, offers an exploration of religion in which he exchanges a discussion of the object of religious devotion for *how* it appears in the subject, that is the “practical consequences” of spiritual experience, which are much more readily available to empirical observation. James affirms a broad definition of religion as those “feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [sic] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (36). The divine in this case may be expressed in

moral, physical, or ritualistic terms. It is a belief in an *unseen* order, of which “sensible” visions are rare.⁴

James affirms an attitude toward metaphysical experience that is significant to the explorations of spirituality in both *The Tree of Life* and *Upstream Color*, one which I suggest is a particularly American attitude to religion. He describes the “Emersonian religion” of the New England transcendentalists as being a good description of a posture in which “personal religion should still seem to be the primordial thing even to those who continue to esteem it incomplete” (35). The experience of American religion in *The Tree of Life*, whether in the more formal creeds of Christianity or in the rapture of nature, is likewise ultimately grounded in the experiences affecting the inner life.⁵

In *The Tree of Life*, the O’Brien family are Episcopalians, the American branch of the Church of England and, of all Protestant sects, the one most closely related in practice to Catholicism. This already puts them at one remove from America’s more puritanical Protestant roots and reflects the autobiographical sources littered throughout the film—Malick is a child of Assyrian Christian immigrants (Michaels 14) and the church featured in one of the film’s key sequences is in fact Malick’s own church and the preacher his own priest. Post-war 1950s America, in which the bulk of *The Tree of Life* is set, was a time of massive ideological and social change, in which families, and especially men returning from war, were displaced from positions of authority, both in relation to shifting cultural norms within family and society and also in relation to notions of God or transcendent reality. While the discourses of American identity in the mid-twentieth century are often predicated on a mythology of America as the most Christian of nations,⁶ its relationship to questions of religion and transcendence is much more complex and fraught than this myth suggests. The relationship between the nation and religion is

affected by the crises faced in the post-war era, in which both the materialist epistemologies of contemporaneous scientific discovery and the collapse of grand narratives challenged a traditional understanding of the individual's place in the cosmos and the very nature of "God." This crisis of American religious identity, i.e. the paradox of America as both exemplar of the secular ideal of separation of church and state as outlined in the First Amendment *and* as divinely appointed by God as a "City upon a Hill,"⁷ may help explain the continuing proliferation of American films engaged with both explicit and implicit religious content in the early twenty-first century, a cinematic corpus that includes controversial films such as Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).⁸ Thus American cinema continues to transmediate religion, working out its relationship to its founding myths and rituals in new ways (Plate 5).

While *The Tree of Life* and Malick's oeuvre as a whole, especially *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *The New World*, have been read in terms of a "Heideggerean cinema" (Furstenau and MacAvoy 180), helping the viewer to ponder the question of "being," I want to turn to the treatment of the role of the individual in *The Tree of Life*. I view the role of the self in the film within the context of America and the constitution of specifically American identities. *The Tree of Life* is both grander and more personal than Malick's previous films, not relying on America's role in a great war or in the retelling of a mythic founding moment in the nation's history, but rather finding its focus in "the good life" of a seemingly ordinary white, middle-class, mid-century American family,⁹ and is framed through one man's relationship to God and cosmos. It is in this distillation of the greater American myth of spiritual identity into the relationship between one man and the world where *The Tree of Life* most clearly shows its affinities with American transcendentalist thought.

The American myth of the autonomous self is very closely connected to the ideas and writings of the New England transcendentalists, particularly the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson.¹⁰ As an American religious-philosophical movement, transcendentalism arose in early nineteenth-century New England as a response to the materialist, empiricist claims of philosophers such as John Locke and a dissatisfaction with institutional Christianity. Expanding on vaguely Unitarian notions (though rejecting the Unitarian desire for historical confirmation of miracles), the transcendentalists, whose ranks included Emerson, his friend Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, among others, were focused on the theme of individual revelation in nature, eschewing reason and embracing a kind of idealism. This idealism, as explained by Emerson in his lecture “The Transcendentalist,” was the very essence of the movement: “What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842” (81). (Emerson contrasted this idealism with what he termed materialism.) While neither the materialist nor the idealist, says Emerson, “den[ies] the sensuous fact” (81), the idealist goes beyond experience and “has another measure, which is metaphysical, namely the *rank* which things themselves take in his [sic] consciousness [...] Mind is the only reality, of which men [sic] and all other natures are better or worse reflectors” (83). The idealism espoused by Emerson and his colleagues “acquired the name of Transcendental from the use of the term by Immanuel Kant” (Emerson 86); that is, Kant’s Transcendental idealism, though later scholars such as George J. Stack insist this is a kind of “misunderstood Kantianism” (439) on the part of Emerson.

While I am not the first to note affinities between Malick’s films and American transcendentalist thought,¹¹ *The Tree of Life* has yet to be approached through this lens. Like Malick’s *oeuvre*, Emerson’s philosophy was hardly a consistent one: on the contrary, inconsistency was one of his foundational principles. As he wrote in his essay on “Self-

Reliance,” “Speak what you think today in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today” (Emerson 138). His dismissing consistency as “the hobgoblin of little minds” is critical for understanding his importance in American culture and the history of philosophy, dispensing with the entire Greek philosophical tradition that insisted on logical consistency. In a sense, Emerson’s radical departure from the philosophic tradition anticipates the postmodern rejection of grand narratives, especially of the Enlightenment thinking of Hegel who’s work centred around the resolution of a dialectic of thoughts and actions into a synthesis. By rejecting synthesis, Emerson affirms that all meaning is already present in the mind.

A series of self-contradictions and paradoxes find interesting analogues in *The Tree of Life*. As a philosopher and writer, Emerson seems to be perfectly suited to Malick’s cinematic preoccupations, as his own writing is full of rhapsodic images of nature, finding as much, or more, value in the asking of questions than in the finding of answers. In much the same way, Malick’s films are known for their use of questioning voice-overs. The use of the enigmatic voice-over has been a repeated stylistic device in all of Malick’s previous directorial efforts, and receives a closer analysis later in this chapter. As Michaels writes, comparing Malick’s signature voice-overs with the images in the films, “Malick’s enduring interest in voice-over now seems evident: he cares for the sheer sound of the human voice as well as its suggestiveness” (10). For Emerson, it is through the contemplation of the world and nature that human beings find knowledge of the divine. In the first paragraph of his first book, *Nature*, Emerson asks the question, “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion of revelation to us, and not a history of theirs [the previous European generations]?” (3). The “us” in question is

both the individual contemplator, but also by extension the American subject in general.

Emerson's denigration of tradition and emphasis on revelation in nature seems to inform Jack's experiences in *The Tree of Life*, though for Jack, in addition to rapture, this disconnection from the traditions of Western thinking and philosophy, from personal-familial connections and national affiliations, seems to bring about alienating and distressing emotions. In fact, if there is a narrative arc to *The Tree of Life*, it is Jack's desire to reconcile his personal experience of transcendence with his desire for the love of his family. The Emersonian tradition clashes in some ways with Jack's Episcopalian upbringing, in so far as the latter preaches a closer connection to a transcendent God through ritual and communion (both in the literal Eucharistic meal and through the maintenance of apostolic succession with the "body of Christ" in the church in its break with Catholicism in the reformation) than many other more symbolist, non-denominational Protestant sects. It is more sacramental and "small-c" catholic in its beliefs than the majority of American Christian churches. Thus, in part, Jack's crisis is over the attempt to reconcile his Emersonian experiences with the community that he has been a part of.

A further connection between Emerson's thought and *The Tree of Life* is in the cosmological, origin of life and the universe sequences in the film. The representation of the origins of the universe and the evolution of life on earth, things beyond the reach of human memory, should be considered in the context of what Emerson calls the "beholding of all things in the mind" (83). In the context of Jack's represented experience, this sequence can be read as his imaging of prehistory. This idea that in the mind's eye of imagination an individual can relate oneself to anything that can be thought of is itself a take on Augustine of Hippo's description in Book X of his *Confessions* of memory as being "full beyond compare of countless things of all kinds," (224). In Augustine's reflection, as in the represented experiences of Jack in the film,

memory can be formed not only of lived experiences but also of things read or recounted to the individual and imagined.

But for Emerson this connection is forged in the individual. Emerson ultimately offers an example of a religious subject shaped by the American experience as one of revolution and independence. His *self* is one whose rejection of the “dry bones of the past” (3), as he calls the received religious tradition, fits in well with the value of autonomy of the self, as it has become defined in modernity, and also with the very American idea that Christianity finds its fullest expression in the current generation’s religious experience. Emerson’s ideas, filtered through a certain strain of German Idealism and Romanticism, are thoroughly modern ones. The self of Emersonian transcendentalism that apprehends God through nature is one that has embraced the Cartesian mind/body divide by privileging the mind’s apprehension of a thing over the thing itself (though, as I will show, Emerson’s friend, Thoreau, acutely felt this tension between the idealist tradition and the pull of nature).

This is the picture of human subjectivity in which American religion finds its origin: a picture of the liberal, modern subject of inalienable rights and privileges, alone before God,¹² a common theme in much great nineteenth-century American literature. According to Andrew Delbanco, “Melville realized, with his great contemporaries Emerson and Whitman and Hawthorne and Thoreau, that the very idea of America entailed an obliteration of the past that placed unprecedented demands on the resources of the self” (13). This removal of the past as a source for the cultivation of subjectivity places a greater demand on the individual self. This demand is reflected in Emerson’s transcendental idealism, which filters everything through the uniqueness of the individual mind. This is the self that is portrayed and interrogated in *The Tree*

of *Life* in its acknowledgement that American individualism places a heavy burden upon human subjectivity.

The transcendentalist aspects of *The Tree of Life* are best illustrated in the way that the film portrays young Jack's (Hunter McCracken) attempt to find his place in the world and as a grown man (played by Sean Penn), to seek some kind of understanding of the life that he has lived so far. The film is structured as Jack's unframed recollections of his childhood—they are not conventional flashbacks, as I discuss below in my discussion of my film's use of voice-over—most often outdoor shots of he and his brothers playing in the yards and fields of their Texas town, and the tangents that they prompt during the film's most radical narrative departures, as when the film offers a vision of the origin of the universe and life on Earth. Nature imagery plays an important role in the film and points toward the existence of something beyond Jack's immediate lived experience while at the same time representing the very condition of possibility for that experience. Put another way, no human being, Jack included, was around to witness the origins of the universe and life on earth, the very cosmological drama that makes the human drama possible. In Malick's film, nature is not merely an object of visual interest, it is the very grounding from which a human being draws his/her experience. Nature emerges from the void, from which, *ex nihilo*, one finds his or her being. For the organizing subjectivity of the film—ostensibly Jack himself—is dependent on this world and contemplates his place in it. In this contemplation of nature, in shots of sunflowers, upward shots of trees in sunlight, and in the ever presentness of the natural world, “Malick restores the spectator's sense, in Cavell's terms, that everything is ‘in front of [our] eyes’ (xxii), awaiting our making sense of the experience” (Michaels 5). *The Tree of Life* would seem to support Emerson's statement that “Nature is so pervaded with human life that there is something of humanity in all and in every particular” (32).

It would also suggest that human life is imbued through and through with nature. Emerson expounds on this particular form of idealism at some length in *Nature*:

Idealism sees the world in God. It beholds the whole circle of persons and things, of actions and events, of country and religion, not as painfully accumulated, atom after atom, act after act, in an age creeping Past, but as one vast picture which God paints on the instant eternity for the contemplation of the soul [...] It accepts whatever befalls, as part of its lesson. It is a watcher more than a doer, and it is a doer, only that it may the better watch. (31)

Emerson's words here strangely echo some of those from Mrs. O'Brien (Jessica Chastain) at the beginning of *The Tree of Life*, as she outlines the lessons that the "nuns taught [her]",¹³ about the way of grace as the best path through life over and against the way of "nature." In her words, grace "accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries." In contrast to the "way of grace," her conception of nature varies significantly from Emerson's idealistic conception of the natural element in the human being. For Mrs. O'Brien nature represents that aspect of the human that is selfish. Although, her comment that, "all the world is shining, and love is shining through all things," suggests that the "way of grace" can still be found in the world, which is confirmed in a strange scene involving one dinosaur sparing the life of another. "Nature" and "grace" seem, for her, to be elements or aspects of all life, rather than dialectically opposing elements. The element of "grace," as Mrs. O'Brien's terms it, does not seem to be exactly coterminous with the grace of God in traditional Christian thought. However, both her "way of grace" and Emerson's idealistic element available to human experience that Emerson stresses acceptance and emphasizes the visual senses, the watching and seeing the possibilities of the world. Thus, Mrs. O'Brien's "nature" isn't the same as the "nature" in which Emerson

anchored his idealistic vision; it would, in fact, seem to suggest the reverse of the possibilities that Emerson found in it. Rather, Emerson's "Nature" has more than a little of Mrs. O'Brien's "way of grace" in it. While the film has been read to support Mrs. O'Brien's dualistic vision, as I show below, Mrs. O'Brien's dichotomy of "nature" and grace is complicated through the film's dialogic structure; while the cinematic subjectivity presented to the viewer suggests Emerson's direct experience of nature, this subjectivity is ultimately problematized by the limitations of cinematic perception. It is only through its limitations that cinema can ever provide an approximation of reality. This is the paradox that Bazin noted in Chapter 1. A complete Emersonian view would be akin to Bazin's "Myth of Total Cinema." *The Tree of Life*'s attempts to forestall and call into question these views at the same time that it wants to leave open the possibility for transcendence.

"Like the worms:" Thoreau's *Walden* and Shane Carruth's *Upstream Color*

The Tree of Life's approach to the self resonates with these aspects of Emerson's New England transcendentalism. Specifically, Malick's film approaches questions of nature and religious practice through the lens of the relation between the individual and the cosmos, in an Emersonian (if not Augustinian) "beholding of all things in the mind" (83), upholding the role that memory plays in such a relation. Carruth's *Upstream Color* is markedly more sceptical toward the ability of the individual to understand his or her place in existence, as seen in its treatment of memory and identity. *Upstream Color* is about two people attempting to reconstruct a coherent identity in the wake of an epistemological collapse. In the film, this collapse is triggered by the presence of a mysterious organism within the ecosystem. If, in Emerson's philosophy, the meaning that can be identified in nature and the world depends on human

perception, on the “transparent eyeball” that sees all (Emerson 6), then *Upstream Color* questions the good of that perception if human beings are fundamentally alienated from the world by their own subjectivity. If the “eyeball” of both the characters in the film and the viewer is necessarily limited—and as I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, all films frame and limit their approach to reality in subjective ways through their deployment of narrative and formal strategies—how can the characters or viewer hope to move beyond a mere intuition of the forces shaping their lives and the narrative? The question of the relation between humans and nature underlies the themes of *Upstream Color* and motivates its intertextualization of *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau’s New England transcendentalist memoir.

In *Walden*, Thoreau writes, “We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies” (206). In this passage, the worm reminds Thoreau of the impurity of our “animal” nature in relation to a “spiritual” nature, an opposition that deeply disturbed him. Both worms and *Walden* play a key role in *Upstream Color*, which tells the story of two people attempting to reconstruct their identities after being brainwashed by means of a subcutaneous parasitic worm. One of the repetitive tasks that the main character performs while under the worm’s spell, in fact, is the transcription and memorization of passages from *Walden*. Some critics have dismissed the presence of *Walden* as mere plot dressing, but in suggesting that human identities might be subject to unknown forces, *Upstream Color* echoes the disquiet Thoreau expressed in *Walden* over the split between an animal and “higher” nature. *Upstream Color* itself suggests that a fragmentary, incomplete understanding of the self, resulting in the disruption of human subjectivity, is symptomatic of contemporary capitalism. *Walden*, then, through its emphasis on

breaking free from cycles of consumption and seeking enlightenment in nature, functions as a key intertext in the film, highlighting and clarifying the film's critical stance towards a metaphysical dichotomy between animal and "higher nature."

Upstream Color is at its core a story about individuals trying to make sense of their lives in the wake of subjective collapse. Kris (Amy Seimetz) and Jeff (Shane Carruth) each find themselves unable to remember how they lost everything, at first attributing their individual breakdowns to substance abuse and mental illness. The film charts their attempt to rebuild their lives together and try to determine what precipitated their respective breakdowns. In its narrative structure and formal choices, *Upstream Color* attempts to represent the way that its characters come to experience reality and organize narratives out of limited sensory data. Similarly, Thoreau sought to subjectively organize his experience of the world in his writing. At the beginning of *Walden* he outlines very clearly the position from which he speaks, offering a radical affirmation of subjectivity as the condition from which any human being must speak.¹⁴ As he reminds the reader on the first page, "it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking [...] Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme [that is, writing about the self] by the narrowness of my experience" (3).¹⁵ In this way *Walden's* radical first person subjectivity is central to Thoreau's attempt to seek solitude in nature away from society, as subjectivity is in this account a purely personal experience, tied to bodily, sensory materiality.

In Emerson's philosophy the human ability to make meaning depends on perception and contemplation. In his *New Yorker* essay on *Upstream Color* and *Walden*, "The Thoreau Poison," author Caleb Crain suggests that Thoreau, rather than seeing the contemplation of nature as the triumph of humanity in an idealistic sense, "was painfully honest with himself that in most cases the spiritual meanings he found were ones that he himself had placed there." Yet, in light of this

failure, Thoreau, therefore, redoubled his attention to the relationship between humans and their environment. He cultivated spiritual meanings through processes of personal contemplation, crafting a stance toward the world that would become one of the most influential legacies of the transcendentalist movement. *Walden* is filled with Thoreau's observations of nature in which he attempts to glean spiritual wisdom. Paradoxically, Thoreau considered the spiritual purity that he sought distinct from what he called an "animal health and vigor" (206). Thoreau noted that he feared that this higher nature in humans was inextricably "allied to beasts" (207). The animal has often served as one element of a dichotomy with which to pin a metaphysical understanding of the human as Thoreau does here in *Walden*, while at the same time he questions what it would mean to withdraw from the animal and remain alive. For Thoreau, the animal is very much a metaphor for the material, earthy aspects of human life, much as nature serves for Mrs. O'Brien in *The Tree of Life*.

Upstream Color also questions the connections between culture and nature, but it ultimately deviates from any clear dichotomy between the human and animal. In dramatizing the life cycle of the mysterious worm through its various hosts—orchid, human, pig, and finally back to orchid—*Upstream Color* thematizes this mysterious organism as embodying the interconnectedness of humans and animal. However, the function and nature of this interconnectedness isn't entirely clear. The fragmentation and dispersal of identity along the worm's life cycle means that, as Steven Shaviro notes in discussing the precarious nature of the individual in multinational capitalism, "there is no way to get beyond one's own limited perspective as an isolated individual" (*Post-cinematic* 53), a condition that very much describes the experience of the individuals in *Upstream Color*. Likewise, the worm functions in the film as

the means of facilitating Kris's economic exploitation at the hands of the Thief (Thiago Martins), leaving her no memory of his brainwashing.

In linking the breakdown of subjectivity to the machinations of capital over the individual, the film challenges Thoreau's dichotomy between human and animal. While Thoreau anticipates the posthuman interest in the ethics of eating meat in the chapter "Higher Laws," this is rooted in notions of ethical perception and an honest appraisal of the animal world.¹⁶ *Upstream Color* is more radical in breaking down the barrier between human and animal and the way that both are at the mercy of capitalist structures. The effects of the worm and its life cycle are exploited to destroy both Jeff and Kris's careers and the very lives that they previously lived. On the one hand, the worm frees them from the concerns of society, something that in *Walden* Thoreau recommends achieving through hard work and self-reliance. In *Upstream Color*, however, personal collapse is intertwined with the perpetuation of both economic systems and the life cycle of a biological parasite. The "animal" nature that Thoreau seeks to expunge has some analogues with the nature of our embeddedness in systems of global capitalism; each, ecological or economic, is "too intricately interconnected to be treated linearly or atomistically" (Shaviri *Post-Cinematic* 52). The animal nature is selfish, concerned only with survival, and yet it is essential to our being. The "animal" nature that Thoreau decries recalls the "way of nature" in Mrs. O'Brien's formulation from *The Tree of Life*, but unlike the "way of grace" that Mrs. O'Brien suggests, *Upstream Color* is sceptical of any attempt to try separate human subjectivity from its embeddedness in systems, either ecological or economic.

Through all of this, in both its narrative and its film style, *Upstream Color* reinforces the idea that the visible, materiality of the world we sense is only one part of a larger world out of which human beings constitute meaning and identity. While the film's science fiction narrative

metaphysically posits that its characters are subject to forces outside the normal modes of perception—for instance the film uncannily connects the worms to the protagonists through the literal hosting of the same organism in the pigs—it is critical of the ability of anyone to move beyond an intuition of things to any kind of transcendent knowledge. The dying out of the animal in us that Thoreau sought in *Walden* is presented as an impossibility in *Upstream Color*.

Upstream Color radically limits our view of its diegetic world, even down to the digital camera aesthetic that it relies upon (as I explain below). Its formal choices, including its consistently narrow depth of field,¹⁷ the ambient digital soundtrack, and oblique narrative structures inform the meanings that the film expresses. The film questions the reliability of the character's interpretations in constructing a coherent subjectivity. Likewise, the very structure of the film forces the viewer to make decisions about how s/he should organize the narrative information, intuiting the connections.

Thoreau's mode of life and his insights were always anchored in his particular subjectivity, rather than in a universal idealism. According to Emerson, Thoreau once said that, "To detach the description from its connections in my mind would make it no longer true or valuable to me" ("Introduction" xxiii). In much the same way that Thoreau sought to subjectively organize his experience of the world in writing, in its narrative structure and aesthetic form *Upstream Color* presents a series of images and sequences in which the viewer must make subjective connections based on her/his limited knowledge and restricted cinematic vantage point. *Upstream Color* strips away Kris and Jeff's knowledge of what has happened to them, so that they are left in a position no better than the viewer's in intuiting the mysterious force that has invaded their lives. The viewer's work of interpretation mirrors the character's work in reconstructing their identities. The act of paying attention, rather than being an

expression of them finally seeing the truth, is what creates a sense of meaning and purpose in the character's lives.

In the film, a character known as The Sampler (Andrew Sensenig), a mysterious pig farmer and electronic musician who removes the worms from their human hosts, is himself an acute observer of the sounds of nature, for his music and his pig farm connect him to the kind of simple labour rooted in nature that Thoreau praised. Crain suggests in his essay that The Sampler could be seen as a kind-of Thoreauvian figure, whose focus on nature cultivates a different kind of awareness. In several sequences The Sampler demonstrates an intimate connection to the people whom he has rescued from the worm, through his connections to the pigs in his care, which remain bound to their human counterparts. In a striking montage sequence, The Sampler is shown as being able to enter into and observe these characters lives, as fragments of memories from the various figures' lives are portrayed on screen when he reaches out to caress one of the pigs. There is a kind of aura that is shared between the pigs and humans who have each served as hosts to the worm, and The Sampler's being attuned to this allows him to enter as it were cinematically into their memories. Visually, this sequence is reminiscent of scenes in other film treatments of memory-in-action, such as when Scrooge visits his childhood memories in Brian Desmond Hurst's *A Christmas Carol* (1951), or when Isak views of his own past in Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957). However, in the case of *Upstream Color*, the "doubled subjectivity" of those films, which represents the embodied self-as-other of the adult subject within the memory-space (Kilbourn 79), is replaced by the figure of The Sampler.

Upstream Color is ultimately critical of the transcendental idealism of Emerson that "transfers every object in nature...into the consciousness" (82), however, even questioning the particulars of the role that memory plays. For instance, Kris's and Jeff's new, post-worm

subjectivities are interwoven in complex ways. As they begin to realize that their memories and experiences overlap in certain details, they are drawn deeper and deeper into one another's lives, until it is difficult to distinguish whose life is whose, or more particularly, whose memories are whose?

Sound is one of the elements utilized in *Upstream Color* to maintain its narrative unity. The ambient electronic music created by The Sampler serves to connect the various characters, as the thrum of the bass in the ground draws the worms to him. In one key sequence Kris says she hears a sound "both low and high," which is then followed by a set of underwater shots showing a decomposing piglet: "a low and seemingly very distant sound"—borrowing Thoreau's language from *Walden* (285). In *Walden*, the chapter titled "Sound" describes the sounds of Nature as signs of Thoreau's solitude and emphasizes his awareness of his surroundings. For instance, the hooting of the owls suggest to him "a vast and undeveloped nature which men have not recognized" (119). Much as Thoreau advocates paying closer attention, that we should be "seers" rather than mere "readers" (105), attention to the sounds of nature in *Upstream Color* is essential to interpreting the sensory effect of the soundtrack on the viewer and making the connections between the various characters.

What we see in the film, through the ways in which it dramatizes the connections between the characters, is a move from direct visual perception of linear links to the forming of affective connections. These connections are rooted in the way that cinema can manufacture and articulate lived experience in sensory ways (Shaviro *Post-Cinematic* 2), rather than through classical modes of editing and narrative. One sequence in the film crosscuts scenes of Kris and Jeff's growing affection and closeness with that of their corresponding pig-hosts in The Sampler's pen, which pair off and have piglets. Shortly after this awareness, Kris comes to

believe that she has become pregnant. However, doctors insist that not only is she not pregnant, but that she is unable to become pregnant due to an internal trauma of which she was unaware. The viewer can surmise that this is perhaps the result of the worm that infected her or The Sampler's intervention in removing it. Yet Kris's pig counterpart on The Sampler's farm has in fact become pregnant and Kris is sensing the changes happening in the pig's body as if it were her own. Has some part of what makes her an individual been transferred to the pigs through the worm? Or do the pigs symbolize an animal materiality from which human beings delusionally believe themselves to be separate? Later, when The Sampler decides to dispose of the piglets by drowning them, the event generates tremendous psychic trauma for Kris and Jeff who barricade themselves in their bathroom and believe themselves to be under some kind of unspecified threat, emphasizing the animalistic defence response of the human being. In this instance, the character's senses of selfhood are threatened by something outside the scope of their rational experience. A comparison can be made here between this experience and the non-conscious, pre-subjective affects described by Brian Massumi and others. Some, like Steven Shaviro, describe these experiences of "[t]he inner, surplus existence of the alluring object" as drawing one "beyond anything that I am actually able to experience" (*Post-Cinematic* 9). Yet, rather than something thrilling and emancipating, the characters of *Upstream Color* experience these affective forces as confusing and frightening.

In *Upstream Color*'s conclusion, all of this interconnectedness becomes a source of great anxiety and fear. It is at this point that the book *Walden* re-enters the story and becomes the thing that helps Kris and Jeff to break the cycle of the mysterious organism. When Jeff recognizes a stray line that Kris mutters as being *Walden*'s famous final lines—"The sun is but a morning star"—it triggers an awareness in them that the breakdowns they each suffered were not merely

the result of substance abuse problems or depression, but something more strange and frightening. While they remain unaware of the Thief, through their connection to the pigs and The Sampler, Kris and Jeff intuit The Sampler's presence and track him down via the music he creates, which seems to unite the victims of the worm. Kris, blaming The Sampler for the trauma inflicted upon everyone, ends up killing him and reuniting with her pig, which ultimately acts as the key to breaking the cycle of the organism. At the end of the film, Jeff and Kris send copies of *Walden* to the other former hosts of the worms and the book operates as a kind of awakening device, a Proustian "Madeleine," which re-triggers their involuntary memories of what happened to them. The film ends on a note in which the pigs and humans are reunited and the cycle of the worm/organism is broken. But even this happy solution is based on misapprehensions.

At the end of the film, even as the viewer shares in the cathartic reunion of Kris and Jeff with their pig counterparts into which the worms which occupied their bodies have been transferred by The Sampler, the particulars of their mysterious connection and the metaphysical grounding of their experiences remain unknown to them. In maintaining a critical stance toward transcendence, *Upstream Color* challenges the metaphysical claims of a cinema that would suggest that seeing is equivalent to understanding. Here we can discern the echoes of Thoreau, who wrote in *Walden* that "our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that that *is* which *appears* to be" (91). Thoreau believed that to live as "Nature" would help one to shed the distractions of society and find "a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*" (92). In *Upstream Color*, however, in contrast to Thoreau's search for a metaphysical basis in Nature from which to find a base level of reality, Kris and Jeff's loss of self is ultimately fruitless and unnerving. Their loss of family, friends, and career do free them from their societal constraints, which Thoreau would read as freeing and positive developments, but they never find

any of the transcendence that Thoreau anticipated. The kind of possible transcendence is rooted in the relationship between the humans and their pig counterparts, which transcends species boundaries and is rooted in the material experiences they have undergone (i.e. hosting the worm).

Upstream Color is ultimately about how human beings deal with crises and make sense of the limited information that they have. The characters are subjected to an experience of which they have incomplete information. Likewise, the viewer of the film has a limited amount of information; due to the ellipses and lack of expository dialogue, he or she must piece together the relationships between characters. One of the anxieties potentially shared between the characters and a viewer of the film is the difficulty of the construction of a coherent sequence of narrative meaning. Following Shaviro's interpretation of Deleuze, this description is applicable to the neoliberal reality we live in, where our actions cannot have large scale effects, and we are at the mercy of mysterious forces which are framed as empirically economic and non-ideological. Like Kris and Jeff, the only actions we are left with are the thoroughly contingent and limited ones.

Ultimately, *Upstream Color* is in dialogue with *Walden*, questioning and revising some of Thoreau's key insights even as it uses the book as a jumping-off point to suggest that disruptions of subjectivity can create a space for the creation of something unnamed and new. In the wake of the collapse of the narratives that have helped individuals make sense of the human emerges the posthuman. Rather than unquestioningly embracing the transcendent or metaphysical, *Upstream Color* portrays as deeply disturbing the notion of something unknown might have control over one's sense of self, a symbiotic reliance upon something beyond the self for the constitution of one's identity. The echoes in the film of the disquiet that Thoreau expressed in *Walden* are equally expressive of a disquiet over the fragmentary and incomplete

understanding of the self, rather than simply disgust at the possession of an animal nature or a desire for purity.

Aesthetics and Ethics of Subjectivity

Charles Taylor offers a further context for connecting the understanding of the self in *The Tree of Life* and *Upstream Color*, in terms of how they grapple with the representation of inner life and the metaphysics of the soul/body divide. Very briefly, Taylor locates the changing conception of the self in modernity in a particular change of sensibility undergone since the Reformation. Taylor describes this change of sensibility as a “disenchantment” of the world, i.e. the stripping of spirits, demons, and angels from the rational understanding of the world and consigning them to the realm of mere fantasy. Taylor says that this “disenchantment involves a drawing of boundaries, an end to porousness in relation to the world of spirits” (*A Secular Age* 137). In other words, the rational mind can shut out the belief in the spiritual by ascribing the same, very real effects, simply to the workings of the mind. When the modern human being feels the presence of deep depression or fear, this is not because of some spiritual factor, but merely a chemical reaction.¹⁸ The two concepts of material and spiritual are separated, and so our responses and solutions to various phenomena change. This disenchantment is a “remaking;” it is not merely the casting off of false beliefs, but a fundamental change in the way that people explain their experience of the world (Taylor “Buffered and porous selves”). More specifically, it is the sense that, in modernity, “we live with a much firmer sense of the boundary between self and other. We are ‘buffered’ selves” (“Buffered and porous selves”). The buffered self is the self that reaches for intrapsychic explanations for experiences of meaning; that is, the buffered self believes that “whatever has to do with thought, purpose, human meanings, has to be in the mind,

rather than in the world” (Taylor “Buffered and porous selves”). This buffered sense of self is similar to the one inherited from Descartes, in that it roots the self in thought, not the physical body, and as such refers back to the foundation of the modern subject, who finds him (or, later, her self)¹⁹ alienated from the world. There is a separation, therefore, of meaning and action: actions themselves do not necessarily speak to inner states, i.e., I can do one thing and yet believe another. Taylor offers a compelling argument for how this shift in modernity came about, a shift that radically undermined the human understanding of the self as subject and how such knowledge is measured. Recall once again the point made in Chapter 1, with regard to Locke, that early modern conceptions of identity were often “forensic” in nature, about attributing agency, cause, and responsibility to individuals as moral agents in society.

How does this connect to cinema? Hanging on all of this is the value of cinema as a cultural artefact. For the buffered self, the connections among fiction, memory, and the concept of the self are bound up in the way that cinema constructs its stance towards reality. Bazin’s work is often spoken of in terms of a strict *icon/index* divide,²⁰ which seems to lead back to a kind of idealism, reminiscent of Emerson or even Plato, where cinema’s testifying to the authenticity of the object before the camera is predicated upon an ontology that borders on the metaphysical. Bazin speaks of the trace of the profilmic object that resides before the camera, which “defend[s] against time [...] to save being through appearance of being” (3). He connects the fact that art offers resemblance to its “primordial function” in embalming and statuary, in the preservation of the appearance of the material body, something I will take up further in Chapter 5. In this account, cinema addresses a complete breakdown of subjectivity, staving off a solipsistic turning inward by testifying to the fact that the object exists outside of human perception.

Both *The Tree of Life* and *Upstream Color* make use of the different technological advantages of digital filmmaking, through the use of digital VFX in *The Tree of Life*²¹ and a fully HD digital camera and digital production mode for *Upstream Color*,²² in constructing their respective stance towards the world. More often than not, discussions about digital cinema have focused on the role of the computer as the generator of imaginary worlds, the simulator of unrealities, particularly in the context of Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking.

While it may seem counterintuitive, the turn to digital cinema and other technological developments associated with the post-cinematic and new media in fact bear out Bazin's account of the "Myth of Total Cinema." Consider how recent films strive for a sense of realism by utilizing digital camera techniques that defy what is possible with the tools of traditional filmmaking. Such representations utilize all the resources of state-of-the-art digital effects, not necessarily to create an unreal or fantastical world, but to help the spectator more perfectly believe in the seemingly plausible world presented, overriding what Bazin called our "critical faculties" (8).²³

The same could be said of how *The Tree of Life* deals with the representation of the self, utilizing VFX and experimental sequences to craft its image of Jack's inner life and imagination. The reality portrayed in *The Tree of Life* utilizes all the resources of digital cinema to create an inner reality of memory and imagination rather than a trip into outer space and back. Thus, in light of digitization, a film such as *The Tree of Life* reminds us how cinema, regardless of whether it is based in a digital or celluloid recording process, presents a "problem for a subject driven to believe in the reality of an image" on screen (Rosen "Belief in Bazin" 109). It reveals the "gap between film and reality" even as it attempts to offer a fuller representation of human

experience (Rosen “Belief in Bazin” 109). Both *The Tree of Life* and *Upstream Color* utilize digital production in ways that go beyond pure “spectacle.”²⁴

The aesthetic strategies of *The Tree of Life* shed light on how Malick goes about trying to evoke the inner life of his protagonist. Voice-over and focalization function to invite the viewer to consider the polyphonic structure of the self portrayed in this film. The juxtaposition of the cinematic elements in *The Tree of Life* goes even further than Malick’s previous films in defying classical narrative expectations,²⁵ exceeding even standard variations on voice-over and chronology, such as contrapuntal narration or the flashback. I focus firstly on the use of voice-over in *The Tree of Life*, since it is one of Malick’s most typical recurring stylistic motifs.

It is my belief, however, that to take Malick’s use of voice-over at face value results in superficial readings of the film’s overarching thematic concerns about the meaning of existence and the relation of the self to others and the world. Though voice-over is one of the signatures of a “Malickian” style, it is one that is most often misapprehended. *The Tree of Life* utilizes a complex focalization—defined here as “the relation between the elements presented and the vision through which they are presented” (Bal 100)—to create a cohesive memory image. *The Tree of Life* adopts a paratactic multivocality as its operative narrative strategy. If there is a central dialectic to Malick’s film, it is not between “nature” and “grace” as Mrs. O’Brien (and the film’s marketing) suggests, but rather between image and sound, the interplay between which spurs the viewer to reconcile diverse points of view. It is the coyness of the voice-over that complicates a straightforward reading of the film as a conflict between nature and grace. Instead, I read the various elements of *The Tree of Life* as grounded in a particular time and place and as successful therefore in creating a cinematic memory image, recalling a Proustian meditation on memory and reconciliation.

Looking at the specific way that Malick employs the voice-over in *The Tree of Life* it becomes apparent how it attempts to reconcile multiple points of view in the inner life of one man. It is worth comparing the voice-over here to its use in his earlier films. The voice-over in *The Tree of Life* is the latest permutation of a stylistic element which, along with contemplative shots of nature, serves as one of his signatures. The employment of this suggestive voice-over undergoes a shift throughout Malick's oeuvre: in *Badlands* (1973) and *Days of Heaven* (1978) the voice-over is restricted to one character, in each case a young female — Holly (Sissy Spacek) and Linda (Linda Manz), respectively; in *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* the voice-over shifts among multiple characters — the members of Charlie Company in the former, and among Pocahontas (Q'orianka Kilcher), Captain John Smith (Colin Farrell), and John Rolfe (Christian Bale) in the latter. However, in each of these cases it could be argued that the voice-over is working contrapuntally. In a basic definition, *contrapuntal narration* functions as a straightforward counterpoint, undermining or contradicting the action presented visually. Contrapuntal narration in Malick's films often serves to define an internal, personal world on screen, lending the films their intensely subjective feel, though I argue below that *The Tree of Life* takes this in a new direction. This understanding of contrapuntal film narration would seem to deflate much of the argument that Malick's use of voice-over is fundamentally uncinematic. Ultimately, the voice-over plays a key role in situating his films beyond classical film narration.

Additionally, this feature of Malick's approach to narration has precedents in cinema history. His use of voice-over in relation to clarifying or dispersing a narrative's focalization has clear parallels in European art cinema, especially the *nouvelle vague*. Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) offers an instructive example for understanding Malick's use of voice-over narration that works in counterpoint to the images presented on the screen. Resnais's film uses a

voice-over that is simultaneously grounded in a particular focalization, that of the unnamed French female actress, but at the same time remains somewhat detached from the narrative context of the images, particularly during the flow of images of post-atomic bomb Hiroshima with which the film begins. Maureen Turim describes the sequence as follows: “A dialogue between two voices about Hiroshima is accompanied by a montage of images in counterpoint” (211)—going on to suggest that the counterpoint between the images and the character’s dialogue in *Hiroshima* infuses the film with its paradoxes, as the experiences of love and war are intermingled. Such a description could refer to *The Tree of Life* as well. That the voice-over can become unanchored from the other diegetically motivated elements of the film, including flashbacks, is one way to link Malick’s films to this alternative tradition of filmmaking and seek examples that help us to understand how *The Tree of Life* produces its meanings.

The function of the voice-over in Malick’s previous films, particularly *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*, is also helpful in clarifying how we should begin to approach the voice-over in *The Tree of Life*. According to David Davies: “In all of Malick’s films, it is notable that the voice-overs present the viewer with a stream of reflective thinking that stands apart from the actions of the characters. It rarely motivates or illuminates those actions” (*Film and Philosophy* 578). Thus, as viewers we should be critical about taking the voice-overs as simple explanations of what we are seeing on the screen. The voice-overs in Malick’s work become progressively less connected to the diegesis of each film, and take a more and more interrogative form. *The Tree of Life* takes the most radical twist yet of any of Malick’s films: rather than simply offering an alternative stream of thinking set apart from the diegesis, the voice-over becomes another element in the text of the film and must be interpreted, not apart from the motivations of the actions on screen, but cognizant of images and sounds both preceding and following it.

Of all of Malick's films, *The Tree of Life* most radically abandons grounding its voice-over in the diegesis, abandoning classical focalization. As mentioned at the start of this chapter, while the opening title screen epigraph from the Book of Job can be read as a response to the sufferings of the O'Brien family and young Jack O'Brien's ("JOB") questioning the nature of God and the universe, on another level the title poses a fundamental problem of focalization: that is, from whose point of view are the following elements presented? The epigraph points the viewer to the limitations of human perception in understanding the events of the universe. The destabilization of the subject comes about through the understanding that the very elements that constitute identities—in particular memories—are not metaphysically guaranteed. In modernist narratives, this problem often manifests itself in the form of false memories, conflicting points of view, and radical self-reflexivity, in which the constructed nature of the narrative is acknowledged. *The Tree of Life* in some ways resembles a modernist text, particularly in its complex focalization, but it is ultimately more hopeful of the possibility of reconciliation.

A closer look at the opening scenes of the film helps clarify this problem of focalization. The first image of the film is a flickering, nebulous light in the darkness, over which an unidentified male voice intones "Brother. Mother. It was they who led me to your door." This is accompanied by the sounds of the ocean and birds. A viewer may later plausibly identify the voice as Jack's, while the ocean and bird sounds look forward to the scenes near the end of the film of the characters wandering on the extra-temporal beach. From here the film shows a red-haired girl, presumably a younger Mrs. O'Brien, and features her voice-over outlining the dialectic of nature versus grace. "No one who accepts the way of grace ever comes to a bad end", she adds, in the following sequence. This is followed by a longer sequence, in which Mr. and

Mrs. O'Brien receive the notice of their youngest son's (Jack's brother's) death, chronologically placing the scene some time after the bulk of main narrative.

The opening scenes of the film immediately highlight the challenge that the film poses to the viewer, who is presented with the task of relating images, voice-over, music, and sound effects, none of which directly interact with the other, even in direct counterpoint. To interpret them, one has to project forward, after the fact, to later scenes in the film. The film's structure seems to demand a second viewing, or alternatively, the viewer must cast his or her memory back to recall the various elements and open the interpretation to misrememberings.

Furthermore, Mrs. O'Brien's contention about those who accept the way of grace is immediately undermined by the delivery of the bad news and the suffering she experiences as a result. One might be inclined to conclude that she is wrong, in assuming that to "accept the way of grace" will ward off suffering.

While some elements of the film admittedly lend themselves to conventional interpretation with regards to focalization, *The Tree of Life* evades attempts to being pinned down with regards to whose memories we are seeing and likewise the focalization that frames the images. One of the most difficult moments comes around the 40-minute mark of the film with the much talked about "origin of the universe" sequence. In this sequence we are privy to the creation of the universe, the coalescing of the earth and solar system out of star dust, and the evolution of life on earth, including plant, aquatic animal, and dinosaur. In addition to the non-indexical nature of many of these shots, referring to the extensive computer generated VFX as well as in-camera special effects, the sequence offers a challenge in terms of how its focalization is presented in the voice over. Viewing the film through Jack's focalization, this sequence could be interpreted as his imagining of the cosmos and his place in it. To interpret it this way imposes

a sense of order and unity upon the film's narration, but the structure of the film makes this reading difficult to sustain. The last image before the creation sequence is Mrs. O'Brien closing her eyes. Are we to interpret it as her explanation? This does not seem to square with her far more naïve cosmology, exemplified in a sequence where she points at the sky while holding young Jack, saying "That's where God lives." Thus, the origin of life and the universe sequence complicates the reading of the film as Jack's memories, potentially detaching them from the focalization of any one character in the film. This highlights the way that memory itself is not something that is purely internal. Memory must be materialized in social, historical, and technological contexts. Thus, the structure of the film suggests that even Jack's memories contain a dialogic element.

How then is the viewer to interpret the highly unconventional operation of voice-over in *The Tree of Life*? Through whom is the narrative focalized, and how do we make sense of it? I suggest that Malick's film is a cinematic memory image and has its strongest antecedents in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (*Zerkalo*), discussed in Chapter 2, Proust's *In Search of Lost*, and the devotional writings of Augustine. It also recalls Turim's description of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*'s "involuntary" flashbacks as "a surging memory image outside the control of the voice, rejoining the voice-over dialogue of the opening sequence" (213). Turim reminds us that such a memory image defies the conventional use of flashbacks, which suggests a clearly focalized, subjective view of the past. Rather, the memory image emerges out of the unexpected links, the seemingly non-diegetically motivated combinations of image and sound which can be found in both *Hiroshima*, and, to an even greater extent, in *The Tree of Life*. Thus, in answer to the question of *whose* memory and *whose* focalization the film is presenting, we might point to the paradoxical operation of "involuntary" memory in Proust. His narrator-protagonist highlights the way that

the subject of the memory (the who) and the object of contemplation (the what, and consequently the vision through which the what is focalized) become mixed: “What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing...” (Proust 52). Thus, the film presents both the memories of Jack O’Brien, and something more.

To return to Benjamin’s statement from “The Image of Proust,” “an experienced event is finite—at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it” (202). The surging memory images of *The Tree of Life* offer the key to both its subject matter and its complex focalization, as the remembered events have access to everything that happens before and after. Thus, the viewer is privy to both the origin of the universe and what appears to be the end of time, that extra-temporal moment of “shining” and “glory” in which all things will be made new²⁶ (Drefus and Salazar Prince 42). This is also alluded to when Mr. O’Brien, in a moment of regret, tells his son: “I didn’t notice the glory.” When the boys ask their mother to “Tell us a story from before we can remember,” the film presents such a story, granting the viewer a seat in the airplane that she rode in as a young woman. The film goes even further in its portrayal of the creation of the world sequence, offering the viewer a story from before *anyone* can remember. This is not a memory from the “inside,” of something that Jack consciously experienced. It’s a memory of a story that Jack has internalized. This memory image allows the viewer to reconcile the diverse points of view that one person can have over the course of a life, including all the stories and events recounted to oneself and added to the fabric of one’s identity. There is a certain affinity here with Emersonian idealism, in which all things are present, “as one vast picture which God paints on the instant eternity for the contemplation of the soul” (Emerson 31).

The Tree of Life, in the grand infinitude that it attempts to encapsulate, nonetheless remains a work that is grounded in a particularity of time and place. Some of the strongest images and sounds are in the film's long sequences set in mid-twentieth century small town Texas. Even in the confrontation with death, as in the sequence when young Jack is forced to deal with the drowning of the boy at the pool, the film intertextualizes the mythologies that have constituted Jack's identity. The voice-over narration which has the young Jack (Hunter McCracken) asking "Was he bad?," and the sermon delivered by the priest during one sequence, are just two of the ways that the film intertextualizes the Book of Job. The image of his mother lying in a crystal coffin recalls Snow White, an image of mortality from his childhood fairy tales. The collective mythologies (in the broadest sense of the word) that Jack brings to the memory image of the boy's drowning death feature elements from both his life and the stories that make up his Western cultural milieu. These collective mythologies are ultimately all that *The Tree of Life* offers as a metaphysical structure for Jack's identity. In contrast, for the characters in *Upstream Color*, another portrait of contemporary Texas life (set in early-twenty-first century Dallas), such collective mythologies offer no comfort or explanatory power, and the characters must struggle to discern meaning from their experiences.

Such intertextuality in *The Tree of Life* recalls the use of historical footage and Russian lore in Tarkovsky's *Mirror*. As explored in Chapter 2, Tarkovsky's film also focuses on a memory image of a man in adulthood recalling his childhood (who is also strikingly fixated on the memories and experiences of his mother). But, while Tarkovsky's film is grounded in the experience of twentieth century Soviet Union and Russian Orthodoxy, *The Tree of Life* foregrounds a specifically American experience of childhood and religion (Episcopalian), in narrating the struggle to discover success and the individual's place in the world amidst it. The

film is certainly interested in situating Jack's experiences among those of the people in his life and against a larger search for his place in the cosmos.

The memory image then serves as the key link between the inner life and the external world. Benjamin noted the similarity between introspective contemplation and such a spiritual exercise in Proust: "Since the spiritual exercises of [Saint Ignatius] Loyola there has hardly been a more radical attempt at self-absorption." (Benjamin "Proust" 212). For his part, Saint Augustine saw the contemplation of the memory image as a stage in the movement towards God, after which such images would be transcended. Augustine's experience of the "vast cloisters" of his memory seems to be alluded to in *The Tree of Life* as well. As Augustine writes: "In it [his memory] I meet myself as well. I remember myself and what I have done, when and where I did it, and the state of my mind at the time" (215). Likewise, in the final sequence of the film, Jack sees himself literally led by the image of himself as a boy. The presence of Jack's past self offers a visual manifestation of the self-reflexive nature of memory, the way that memory makes manifest the difference between the present and the past. Augustine's conclusion is that the mind "is too narrow to contain itself entirely," and, seeking some form of transcendence, that God must be beyond his own solipsistic contemplation of himself. *The Tree of Life* likewise hints that even one man's mind may not be enough, and the final sequence on the beach recalls a scene of resurrection, where the masks fall away²⁷ and all the people from one's life are present. In Pauline language, the ending suggests that, while at present we see "in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (1. Cor. 13.12 *NRSV*). This sequence on the beach reminds the viewer that even this kind of ultimate restitution of relationship is based on a visual ethic, through the presentation of people in particular, material manifestations during their lifetime, including a younger version of Jack himself.

The Tree of Life can be read as a kind of apotheosis of the enigmatic voice-over in the films of Terrence Malick. Even though his subsequent films, *To the Wonder* and, more radically, *The Knight of Cups*, continue his experiments with voice-over and disjunctive editing, neither contains the sheer diversity and grandiosity of images in *The Tree of Life*. *The Tree of Life* is perhaps not a *sui generis* work in its style, given the literary and cinematic precedents noted above; even as it is highly personal in mode, it remains singular in content.

Upstream Color offers a different kind of response to the challenge of representing the subjectivity of its central characters. Rather than reproduce the grand infinity of an inner life in an Augustinian or Emersonian fashion, *Upstream Color* radically limits our view of the world, even down to the digital camera aesthetic that it relies upon. The film's aesthetic choices (a consistently narrow depth of field; digital ambient soundtrack) and narrative structures inform the meanings that the film suggests. Furthermore, the film questions the reliability of interpretations in constructing a coherent subjectivity, through the organization of sense data. The very structure of the film—in dramatizing the relationship between humans and their natural environment, or beliefs, whether social, economic, or religious—forces us to make decisions about how we organize information. *Upstream Color*'s use of digital filmmaking aesthetics in constructing this particular stance towards the world is thus quite appropriate.

Carruth has explained how his goal with the film was to push at the boundaries of how we form identities. He notes that the way the film deals with the collapse of systems of meaning came out of discussions he had with his brother about the 2008 financial crisis—Jeff's job in the film, at a financial firm, echoes this underlying analogue. *Upstream Color* is about how human beings deal with crises and make sense of the limited information that they have. In the same

way, the viewer has a limited amount of information; due to the ellipses and lack of expository dialogue, the viewer must piece together the relationships between characters.

The film's aesthetic choices reinforce this thematic exploration. It is edited elliptically. Scenes will often end before their logical conclusion, cutting to black or to white. Images and dialogue will often repeat themselves in different contexts and situations. Characters express confusion as their memories become conflated and they try to sort out their respective pasts. Meaning tends to emerge out of the structural whole of the film, rather than individual scenes. In its aesthetic choices, the film productively interrogates the notion of "realism" in contemporary cinema. *Upstream Color* seems to posit that the construction of narratives is productive in helping people overcome trauma and find meaning through the fragments of sensory information available to them.

Digital innovations have radically affected such elementary film aesthetics as shot length, framing, camera movement, and editing rhythm, not to mention the relationship between the film image and the profilmic object. It is not a coincidence that in the film, Kris's job, before her encounter with the Thief, is as a special effects artist. Her reconstruction of her life, post-worm, echoes in many ways the act of constructing images that frame the viewer's belief in an image.. However, it is in *Upstream Color*'s relationship to the wider trends in American independent filmmaking that its particular uses of digital filmmaking become relevant. Situating the film within the specific filmic tradition of the American "Indie" movement, associated with the Sundance Film festival,²⁸ is instructive in helping to identify the way its aesthetic promotes a particular relationship with notions of "realism." Independent films in America, both through their subject matter and aesthetic choices, tend to engage in modes of filmic realism, marked partly by the contrast with the artifice and glamour of Hollywood productions. In *Upstream*

Color, the aesthetic decisions, including the choice to shoot on digital and utilize digital sound, determine the subjectivities instantiated in the film. *Upstream Color*'s realism is such that it actually challenges the character's and viewer's construction of a coherent cinematic subjectivity by adopting complex organizational schemas of sense data; that is, the film's lack of a straightforward, telegraphed plot adds to the film's sense of subjective realism.

Upstream Color always makes the viewer aware of the challenges of constructing a subjectivity, whether through its elliptical narrative choices or its limited depth of field and relatively restricted focalization. The question of whether digital filmmaking, in the supposed absence of an index, offers the same perceptive source of sense data for the viewer to construct meanings, I would argue, is rendered relatively moot.

Conclusion

One thing that becomes clear from this examination of *The Tree of Life* and *Upstream Color* is the ways in which they likewise diverge from normative notions of realism in contemporary Hollywood or American independent cinema. While each film utilizes a different mode of representation and different generic practices, each film explores the construction of the self through memory and experience, affirming that the visible material world is only a part of a larger world which we draw on to find significance and meaning, even if each comes to differing conclusions as to how we can come to such knowledge. Each film uses the cinematic medium to explore the drive to believe. Are these films fundamentally about a disappointment with our modern mode of being? Or is there hope?

In his essay on Proust, Benjamin asks the question, "What was it that Proust sought so frenetically?" In recounting a specific subjective stance on the world, as *The Tree of Life* and

Upstream Color do, Proust raised the question of how we remember and how others likewise remember us. As Mrs. O'Brien intones at the end of *The Tree of Life* as the image of the earth being engulfed by a red giant sun fills the screen: "Keep us," "Guide us," "to the end of time." These films prompt a reconsideration of the relationship between the self and the world, by making the viewer aware of the fragility, contingency, and temporality of their own subjectivity.

¹ In a further connection between the two films, *2001: A Space Odyssey* special photographic effects supervisor, Douglas Trumbull, served as a "visual effects consultant" on *The Tree of Life*.

² As noted in the introduction, however, this notion has pre-modern precedents in writers such as Augustine. See *Sources of the Self*, Chapter 7, "In Interiore Homine" (127-142).

³ I am indebted here to Nick Olson's reading of the film, "They Who See God's Hand: *The Tree of Life* as an "Upbuilding Discourse," at the blog *The Other Journal*, in particular the connection he makes between Søren Kierkegaard's "The Lord Gave, the Lord Took Away; Blessed be the Name of the Lord" in *Upbuilding Discourse* and the preacher's sermon in *The Tree of Life*, which quotes from Kierkegaard.

⁴ James admits that this makes such discussion of the object difficult; as Immanuel Kant suggested, notions about the non-sensible, such as "God" or "soul" are "not-conceptions", as "conceptions" in his schema require sense-data. Thus, the logical positivists rejected all discussion of the mystical as unbecoming philosophy. The movement of the New England transcendentalists to some extent attempted to recuperate the idealism of Kant into a more mystical framework.

⁵ American religious experience is often described as "personal," echoing the language of American Evangelicalism (a category which crosses denominational boundaries) in emphasizing a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ," focused primarily on soteriological power of assenting to belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, and an acknowledgement of his active power in the believer's life rather than through the power of sacramental acts.

⁶ See for instance the adding of the clause "under God" to the American Pledge of Allegiance at the urging of President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1954.

⁷ The phrase "City upon a Hill" has its origin in the "Sermon on the Mount" when Jesus shares the parable of salt and light, exhorting his followers to be both to the world (*Matthew* 5:14). Its use in an American context can be traced back to the Puritan colonists and a sermon by John Winthrop upon the ship *Arbella* on its way to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. Winthrop, in outlining the social code they hoped to found their community upon, said: "For wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are uppon us" (Wikisource). This particular phrase, and its notion of America as a Christian exemplar, has been used throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by politicians as diverse as John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama.

⁸ Interestingly, Mel Gibson was originally considered for the role of Mr. O'Brien along with actors Colin Farrell and Heath Ledger, before producer Brad Pitt stepped into the role.

⁹ In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor notes that the turn away from "Aristotelian ethics" during the Reformation marked a shift from viewing the life of contemplation to the "modern, Christian-inspired sense that ordinary life [i.e. life of the family and work] was on the contrary the very centre of the good life" (13).

¹⁰ See Emerson's famous essay, "On Self-reliance," a foundational text for the myth of both the American work-ethic and also the mode of revelation most favoured in American religious traditions. For Emerson, "[t]he other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for the past act or word because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loath to disappoint them" (138). The emphasis on the individual and the willingness to break with the past confirms this text as foundational to American modernity.

¹¹ Lloyd Michaels, in his monograph on Malick, notes that "when looking for influences on [Malick's] sensibility—and everyone has—one might as well call on Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman as Heidegger" (5). Michaels also invokes Emerson's "transparent eyeball" in relation to Malick's depiction of the "isolated individual's desire for transcendence" (4). He also notes that in the only other book-length study of Malick prior to Michaels' (in 2009), scholars James Morrison and Thomas Schur "ignore Emerson completely" (15). Thus, while I am expanding on a

comparison that has been previously suggested, I hope to make connections beyond the American romantic literary tradition and highlight how *The Tree of Life* (released after these publications) connects these philosophies to the cinematic medium.

¹² In *A Secular Age* Taylor suggests that the precise genealogy of secular modernity and protestant religion in European history is somewhat reversed, in that the Reformation triggered many of the changes that came to represent secular modernity in Western Europe, such as the separation of church and state, abolishment of absolute monarchy, etc. In either situation, the two key revolutions of the early modern era, The Enlightenment and Reformation, are inextricably bound up.

¹³ Episcopal and Anglican nuns, though rare in the twentieth-century, do exist. While inconclusive, Mrs. O'Brien's reference does also raise the possibility that she comes from a Catholic background and that her and Mr. O'Brien's marriage is an inter-denominational (Catholic-Episcopal) one.

¹⁴ Cf. the pre-credit sequence in *Mirror* with the TV hypnotist helping the mute boy.

¹⁵ Cf. the origins of this kind of subjective discourse in the *Essais* of Montaigne (1580).

¹⁶ In a comment in her article, "Hunting the Human Animal: The Art of Ethical Perception" Nancy Mayer comments on Thoreau's attitude toward animals, noting that ultimately, "Thoreau doesn't, after all, really have much to say about actual animals" (27).

¹⁷ The film's specific use of narrow depth of field in particular is a common aesthetic choice adopted by filmmakers hoping to capture some of the qualities of celluloid, though often exaggerated by the use of 85 mm and higher lenses.

¹⁸ William James identified a similar explanation for such experiences among his peers in what he called "medical materialization" (21). He insisted, however, that the source of such experiences was irrelevant, as "Scientific theories are organically conditioned just as much as religious emotions are" (21).

¹⁹ One aspect of *Upstream Color* that makes it a welcome addition to such discussions is that its central protagonist is a woman.

²⁰ It is worth noting that the terms "index" and "icon" were imported from Piercean semiotics by Peter Wollen in describing Bazin's theory, but never actually used by Bazin himself.

²¹ As noted above, the "creation" sequences of *The Tree of Life* utilize a combination of practical, digital, and in-camera effects overseen by special effects master Douglas Trumbull, best known for his pioneering work on Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

²² *Upstream Color*'s technical specifics firmly situate it within digital filmmaking practices. Shot on a readily accessible HD DSLR camera, the Panasonic DMC-GH2, and scored with a digital ambient soundtrack created by Carruth on his own computer, *Upstream Color* represents an example of the way that digital technology has expanded the range of options available to independent filmmakers.

²³ The various VFX "demo reels" on YouTube, for films such as *Gone Girl* (2014) or *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), readily demonstrate how digital tools are utilized in contemporary films to create images of cities, airplanes, and the recognizable world of our day to day lives, rather than fantasy spectacles.

²⁴ While the "creation" sequences in *The Tree of Life* are undoubtedly on a certain level 'spectacular', complete with dinosaurs and volcanoes, viewing them as an expression of imagination makes them essential to the construction of Jack's inner life and the meaning inherent in the film.

²⁵ His subsequent film, *To the Wonder* (2012), retains the voice-over and stream-of-conscious editing of *The Tree of Life*, but lacks the temporal scale or any of the elaborate VFX work. *The Knight of Cups* (2016) has subsequently pushed the formal experimentation of Malick's filmmaking further in its use of sound and editing. See Lee Carruthers, "Forged from Ear to Eye: From Ambiguity to a Phenomenology of Montage," Film Studies Association of Canada Annual Conference, University of Calgary, June 2016.

²⁶ It is here that one might read Malick's film as of a piece with some of the Heideggerian concerns that Dreyfus and Salazar Prince address in "*The Thin Red Line*: Dying Without Demise, Demise Without Dying." In Jack's surging memory image he is forced to confront an imagining of his own demise, reflecting some similarities to Private Witt in *The Thin Red Line*. *The Tree of Life* also recalls a very Christian sensibility in the promise of a new heaven and new earth.

²⁷ At one point there is actually a literal shot of masks floating away in the water. This might also be read as a literalization of the passage from Corinthians quoted below, and seeing "face to face," without any kind of mediation.

²⁸ Carruth has a special relationship with Sundance, having won the festival's top prize with his debut film, *Primer*. *Upstream Color* also had its debut at the festival, the premiere showcase for independent American productions.

Chapter 5

Spectres of Modernity: The “Post-Secular” Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul

“Memory is the most faithful of films—the only one that can register...right up to the moment of death. But who can fail to see the difference between memory and the objective image that gives it eternal substance?” — André Bazin, “Cinema and Exploration”

Introduction

The spiritual function of memory in global modernity is a recurring theme in the films of Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul.¹ In the opening of his debut feature, the exquisite corpse-style² narrative *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), a voice being broadcast from a truck-mounted loudspeaker urges the Bangkok public to use one particular brand of incense:

“Whenever you want to worship the Buddha...” This seemingly incongruous juxtaposition of modern consumer culture and traditional spiritual practice is just one instance of the interrelation between spirituality and modernity in Apichatpong’s film work. On the formal level, his work is marked by a distinctively oblique narrative style, characteristic of many contemporary Asian art films³ and eschews clearly delineated conflicts, goal-oriented characters and clear resolution, bearing the influence of experimental film and avant-garde modernism. Furthermore, through their *mnemonic* content (memories, personal or cultural), Apichatpong’s films explore the ways in which Thai Buddhist spirituality is strongly linked to questions about the constancy of memory in cinema and the complexities of the relationship between Buddhist-shamanist spirituality in Thailand and identity formation in a shifting global modernity.

Film scholar Jean Ma identifies one of the distinguishing markers of contemporary Asian art cinema as the “systematic and formally self-conscious engagement of the cinematic medium’s possibilities for mediating an external environment in flux and human experience in transition” (3). The contemporary Thailand of Apichatpong’s films is surely such an environment. The fluctuations affecting contemporary Thailand include a typical litany of the changes labeled under “modernization”: rapid economic growth and industrialization, increased urbanization, heightened geographical and social mobility, increased importance of science and technology, and instrumental reason, all amidst a robust bureaucracy. However, rather than offering mere ethnographic description of such changes, I argue that the cinema, as one of the key art forms of modernity, mediates human experiences of the “religious” in ways that challenge standard modernization narratives, and even takes on roles that were previously enacted in religious practices—these include rituals, visions, conceptions of the afterlife, prayer, and meditation. In this sense, cinema serves as a connection between the individual and offers a larger view of the world that could even be considered transcendent in so far as it offers knowledge beyond the purview of any individual human being.

What Apichatpong’s films reveal, through their unconventional formal practices, is the complicated relationship between secular modernity and spirituality in Thai public discourse. This relationship between spirituality and modernity is juxtaposed throughout Apichatpong’s films, from *Mysterious Object at Noon*, to, what is arguably its most complete expression, in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010). *Uncle Boonmee* recounts the final days of Boonmee (Thanapat Saisaymar), a native of Isan (the mostly-rural North-Eastern region of Thailand) who is suffering from kidney failure. The film charts his last days as he encounters the ghost of his dead wife and the return of his lost son in the form of a monkey ghost. What makes

Boonmee unique is that he has the ability to remember his past incarnations. Over the course of the film Boonmee explores some of these past lives and eventually leads his companions on a trek to the cave where he discerns that his first life began. The story comes from a book that Apichatpong came across when he was living in the Isan, entitled *A Man Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, based on the story of a man who lived at a temple and claimed he could remember his past lives when in a state of meditation. *Uncle Boonmee* offers an ideal case study for exploring how cinema, as memory, can offer a form of reincarnation or continuation of life beyond death. In the context of a specifically Thai Buddhist metaphysics, the preservation of subjectivity is conceived of in terms of the transmigration of a soul from one lifetime to the next, that is, reincarnation. *Uncle Boonmee* treats the representation of Thai Buddhist spiritual practices as equal to the various aspects of modern life in contemporary Thailand. Finally, through its interrogation of the limits of memory and playful pastiche of Thai film genres, such as a horror and melodrama, *Uncle Boonmee* is also as much a film about the legacy of Thai cinema as it is about reincarnation.

The manner in which the relationship between spirituality and modernity is framed in Apichatpong's films is also indicative of the degree to which Thai spiritual practices can be exoticized. To unproblematically speak of Apichatpong as a "religious" filmmaker betrays an Orientalist approach that seeks to conflate "Thai-ness" and Buddhism, as if their equivalence was a given,⁴ echoing Western perceptions of the relationship between rationality and normative models of modernization. The relationship of Apichatpong's films to both Thai and Western cinema is a complex one, which challenges the descriptions of his films as novel objects of art cinema or as exemplars of Thai modernism.

As noted in the introduction, the films I discuss in this dissertation straddle a blurry line between national cinemas and transnational productions. Apichatpong's films are no different. For instance, while *Uncle Boonmee* is a "Thai film" in language, production locale, and subject matter, the film was financed by a combination of Thai, British, French, German, and Spanish production houses (Mayorga). *Uncle Boonmee* is unquestionably preoccupied with questions particular to a Thai context and audience; yet, following a strict definition of the term, it has a clear "transnational" pedigree, as reflected in its financing and distribution. Considering question of reception additionally reveals his film's transnational appeal. Apichatpong's films have consistently received critical accolades and been embraced by select festival and international art house audiences, many of whom lack a general familiarity with some of the specific concerns and practices of Thai culture. His international awards for his film work are numerous, and include the top prize for *Blissfully Yours* in 2002 in the *Un Certain Regard* programme at the Cannes Film Festival, the 2004 Cannes Jury Prize for *Tropical Malady*, and, the prestigious Palme d'Or in 2010 for *Uncle Boonmee*. Additionally, his 2006 film *Syndromes and a Century* became the first Thai film to be entered in the Venice Film Festival. In fact, his films have been readily celebrated among Western cinephiles, in marked contrast to their reception in Thailand where his films have received limited theatrical runs and remain somewhat marginalized.⁵ There remains the question, however, of whether the global art house appeal of his films diminishes their "Thainess?" According to Benedict Anderson, the films have been well-received in the local communities of North and North Eastern Thailand where they are set, suggesting that the problems they have had with the government and Bangkok elite, including censorship and accusations of pandering to Western tastes, have more to do with the internal politics of the country than any substantive concessions to an international viewership.

In fact, their acclaim among Western audiences is often a function of their being considered “difficult” or “impenetrably” exotic. Apichatpong’s films’ have been labeled by many critics as a body of “mysterious objects”: they are wonderfully full of mystery, but it is difficult to penetrate their meaning (Quandt 14). Angela O’Hara argues that Apichatpong’s popularity among cinephiles and critics in North America has to do with an “irrefutable rise in the supernatural and ‘spiritual’ themed films in the mainstream cinema in North America,” and further gestures toward the notion of the “post-secular,” citing Brent S. Plate’s theory that as interest in traditional religion has waned in North America, cinema has “transmediated” religion, which is now found “in a deinstitutionalized, deterritorialized form” (186). Are audiences only interested in Apichatpong’s vaguely spiritualist bent? What elements of his films are audiences latching onto? I suggest that while there is something more substantial to his treatment of spiritual concerns than can be explained by a few minutes of screen time featuring a monkey ghost, the overt spiritual elements are not the primary explanation for his films’ critical acclaim. Such judgments seem to subordinate any particular insights Apichatpong’s films have into the condition of spirituality in modern Thailand to the way that they can *re-present* normative Western models of secularization and subsequent “post-secularism.” I contextualize my analysis in a re-appraisal of secularization theory in light of the film’s critical reception. As James Quandt suggests in his introduction to the first English-language book on the filmmaker, Apichatpong’s films demand closer analysis as “works of great deliberation and intricate design” (15), not least of all because of what they reveal about the role of faith and spirituality in contemporary Thailand.

Apichatpong’s cinema is both spectral, dealing with ghosts and apparitions, and realist, in its picture of day-to-day life in Thailand. It explores self-reflexively how to mediate inner

processes of consciousness, dreams, and mental images through a medium based on exterior visual representation. What I identify as a central preoccupation in his films is the problem of cinematic subjectivity: this problem is centred around the paradox that cinema offers the exterior visualization of interior subjective processes, but that at the same time reminds us that we are disjointed from the world by our own subjectivity, that is, that we can only know the world through our own consciousness. I relate the problem to a scepticism in modern conceptions of the subject with respect to the nature and reliability of human sense perception. The concept of a buffered, disenchanted self, constituted through its own sense of inwardness, and which Charles Taylor identifies with the modern subject, is central to modernity's crisis of epistemology and emphasis on reason. At the same time that the fact that cinema lays bare the way that this sense of self relies on materialization points to the limitations of that view of the self.

Each of Apichatpong's films emphasizes in different ways how spirituality remains an integral part of contemporary Thai culture despite widespread modernization. Recent turns in modernization theory recognize that modernization as a process and set of conceptions is not evenly distributed, nor is it limited to the effect of the colonizing power of Western nations and contemporary capitalism. Modernization in Thailand has its own historical moments that have shaped how Thailand has related to the various changes associated with modernization as a force. The popular account has it that Thailand resisted the full brunt of Western colonization at a time when many of its neighbours (Malaysia, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam) were under French and British rule.⁶ This avoidance of colonialism is attributed to the power and foresight of the Thai kings of the Fifth Reign of the Rama Dynasty in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) at the time instituted a series of technocratic governmental reforms and sought to instrumentalize Western knowledge for Thai purposes. His

goal was “was to defend national sovereignty against expanding European colonialism and to regain the political and economic rights already forfeited. His reforms consisted of measures to unify the Kingdom and to modernize it—in the sense of catching up with the West [...] They [the King and his brothers] established the broad objectives of modernization and then, drawing upon their own exposure to English education and foreign travel, designed programs to realize them” (Stifel 1184).

Thus, modernization in Thailand, while still fraught with notions of progress and Westernization, takes on a different flavour than in countries that underwent the worst excesses of colonialism. Modernization in Thailand, in terms of its relation to the Thai conception of selfhood most relevant to my argument, is deeply related to notions of Thai self-determination and the ability of the local population to control and organize their own negotiation of the processes of modernization. This includes the development of particular Thai bureaucratic practices and the retention of their own religion as deeply integrated into political and educational systems, as demonstrated in the role of the monkhood in contemporary politics and the religious stature still granted to the king. Apichatpong’s films clearly mediate human experiences in the midst of the radical epistemological shifts brought on by modernization. Despite their laconic pacing and revelling in scenes of natural beauty, features not often associated with a pervasive sense of crisis or trauma, Apichatpong’s films nonetheless exhibit a preoccupation with questions of self-representation and Thai identity. In these films, memory is framed as structuring human beings as individuals, and, in the context of Thai Buddhism, points to the way that it can offer a connection to other temporalities and histories (i.e. reincarnation and the transmigration of souls between humans and animals).

In addition to referencing the literal ghosts and spirits populating these films, I turn to Jacques Derrida's use of the term "spectral" as aptly descriptive of those things that are constituted on the line between presence and absence (*Specters of Marx*). I use the term to help describe the relationship between spirituality and modernity, in relation to the difficulty in identifying some originating moment for the establishment of secular modernity in Thailand or, in contrast, some purely spiritual past that was not always already negotiating the place of spirituality. That is to say, such a modernity—either in Thailand or in other countries that follow different patterns of modernization to those of the Western North Atlantic—is "haunted" by the spectral memory of spirituality and of religious practices from supposedly pre-secular eras. Derrida's concept of "hauntology" suggests that certain features or preoccupations of the current moment rely on the trace of previously abandoned or seemingly discredited notions (e.g. Marxism, in the case of the triumph of capitalism). The post-secular, as explored below, is just such a spectral formulation structured on the assumed waning (and then return) of religion and spirituality.

There are two features that contribute to what I describe in this chapter as a spectral modernity. The first is the specific function of cultural and personal memories as they are expressed cinematically, which make visible and manifest the past. This mediation of memory is not a return of a pure absence, since, as argued in Chapter 1, memories are always already the mediated form of conscious experiences. In Apichatpong's films, this involves images of his own memories of Thailand, as well as the memories of his parents, but also the continued mediation of cultural memory and religious practices. The second feature is the role of spirituality and religion in contemporary Thailand, especially the function of the practices and beliefs ostensibly cast away with the arrival of a modern, technologized way of life, the

continued presence of which contradicts a certain narrative of historical secularization. The structuring system of the post-secular reveals the ways secular modernity is ultimately indebted to the systems of religious thought and practice it supposedly supplanted. However, as noted above, Thailand doesn't fit standard narratives of Western secularism displacing religion alongside processes of modernization. Apichatpong's films, in visualizing the paradox of contemporary Thailand, where rapid modernization and traditional spiritual practices live side-by-side, are themselves material traces of the "spectral." My use of the term is an attempt to highlight what Derrida describes as the "non-contemporaneity of present time with itself" (29), descriptive of both the cinematic presentation of memory images in mediating the past in the present moment, and of an organizational structure of history that consigns spirituality to the past, without considering the way it continues to shape and influence contemporary Thailand.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will briefly highlight three points about Apichatpong's films and their relation to Thai religious practice: firstly, I want to examine the normative nature of the term "post-secular," and—rather than unreflectively applying this term, with its weighty Western origins, to Thailand—consider how it might or might not be a useful lens through which to approach the relation of spirituality and modernity in Apichatpong's films. Secondly, I hope to show how the cinematic practices of these films engage, directly or symptomatically, with the question of the post-secular. Finally, I want to suggest that Apichatpong's films might offer a particular cinematic intervention into the debate over the conditions of experience in modernity; that what emerges from a study of these films is a different understanding of the paradox of contemporary Thailand's particular configuration of the modern. Films such as *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Remember His Past Lives* and *Syndromes and a Century* clearly show a different relationship to spirituality than the one assumed by Western theories of secularization. In these

films spirituality remains an integral part of contemporary Thai culture despite widespread modernization. This is the “post-secular” cinema of Apichatpong.

Cinema and the Postsecular

Before turning to an analysis of the films themselves, I want to clarify the larger conceptual problematic at stake in exploring the relationship between spirituality and modernity implied by the term “postsecular.” One question that Apichatpong’s films ask is in what ways have Thai people undergone a shift in how they experience the world in the process of modernization? As I have shown, the patterns of modernization in Thailand counter some of the most common narratives regarding the effects of modernity, for instance that it has inevitably resulted in a decline in spirituality and religious beliefs. As Charles Taylor has persuasively argued, such assumptions about the relationship between modernization and secularization are predicated on simplistic notions of religious practice around the world and a definition of secularity as the simple absence of religion, along with the triumphalist belief that the decline of religion is an inevitable consequence of the collective changes classified under the term modernization.⁷ What most accounts of secularization tend to ignore is the way that these changes penetrate beyond straightforward concepts of rational public discourse and spheres of influence; instead, according to Taylor, these accounts refer to a change in the way that human beings actually experience the world, perpetuated in narratives of secularization. For Taylor, secularization has resulted in the “disenchantment” of the world (*A Secular Age* 28). Disenchantment describes the stripping away of the world of spirits, demons, and moral forces, the “buffering” of the self against them, in favour of a mind-centred world where the primacy of reason has changed the relationship between one’s experiences of sensory input and resulting

knowledge. Even if the felt effects of those experiences operate in the same or similar ways, secularization, in the West at least, has resulted in a radical shift in epistemology, and even ontology, that deeply affects how we understand our relationship to the world. For instance, the experience of depression and melancholia as described in Chapter 3 may manifest in similar felt effects, e.g. lethargy, loss of desire, suppressed appetite, but secularization has resulted in an epistemological shift whereby it is understood as chemical imbalances in the brain, rather than a spiritual crisis or the effect of evil spirits.

My argument here turns not on the absence of spirituality, but rather on the continued presence of the spectre of spirituality in cinema, albeit in a modified configuration. Furthermore, I contend that cinema can potentially act as a bulwark against certain forms of disenchantment, with the viewer's relationship to the image mirroring the believer's relationship to spiritual experiences: that is, "[f]ilm and religion share a set of more fundamental, ontological suppositions" (Brădăţan 2). Both are predicated on the concept of "belief."

The particular configurations of religion in contemporary societies that have gone through modernization has been termed "post-secular," and though I find the term helpful, it deserves some clarification. Jürgen Habermas popularized the term in his discussion of the return of the religious, a part of his interrogation of the "incomplete project of modernity." His use of the term "post-secular order" in recent debates over the role of religion in global society has gained currency among scholars of secularization.⁸ Post-secularization in this formulation describes not a return to some "pre-modern" state, but rather the continued existence of religion alongside the aforementioned process of modernization. However, the question remains how relevant or appropriate such a term is for a society such as Thailand's, where the normative models of secularization and a subsequent decrease in religiosity do not hold (as discussed

above). Indeed, well over 90% of Thais practice some form of cultural Buddhism. Thailand seems to contest the normative notion of what constitutes the “post-secular,” which implies a certain organization of time—of development, history, and memory—that risks missing out on the complexity of religion’s role in modernity, including, for instance, Buddhism’s relative decline or increase in prevalence in comparison to other modes of religious belief and practice in Thailand, such as Christianity and Islam.⁹ Post-secularism of the sort of which Habermas speaks assumes a normative passage through a process of secularization after which religion can return, thus the prefix “post.” José Casanova, in his work into the study of non-Western, non-secular modernities, suggests that the idea of secularization “becomes problematic once it is generalized as a universal process of societal development and once it is transferred to other world religious and other civilizational areas with very different dynamics of structuration of the relations and tensions between religion and world, or between cosmological transcendence and worldly immanence” (12). The logic of post-secularism would seem to extend the assumptions of these generalizations. As Taylor notes in *Rethinking Secularism*, when applying such terms as “secular”, “the name may be the same, but the reality will often be different” (31). Consider, for example, that the role of Buddhist monks in Thai society does not directly parallel the Western example of Roman Catholic monks. Rather than a life-long commitment to monastic orders, it is customary for most young Buddhist men, married or not, to become temporary monks at a local temple; in taking on orange robes during the final sequence of Apichatpong’s *Uncle Boonmee*, Tong (Sakda Kaewbuadee) is not devoting his life to the monastery, but is merely entering for a four-month period to gain merit for his friend in the afterlife, as discussed below. Such a culturally specific context is necessary in interpreting the portrayal of spiritual practices in these films.

At the same time, Thai Buddhism has not remained unchanged during the course of the last century. Both Taylor and Casanova point out that certain aspects of modernity have indeed had an effect upon religious life and spirituality. “All world religions,” Casanova reminds us, “are being transformed radically today, as they were throughout the era of European colonial expansion, by the process of modernization and globalization” (17). The presence of spiritual themes and religious iconography in Apichatpong’s films should be considered in terms of the way that modernity can seem to detach religious systems or practices from their spatial and temporal contexts, as in the case of a Western audience watching one of Apichatpong’s films with little to no understanding of Theravada Buddhism as it is practiced in Thailand. This kind of Western appropriation has long been identified as a danger of cinematic representation more generally. As Bazin wrote about the ethnographic films of the South Seas, which were popular in the late-1920s, “We see the Western mind as it were taking over a far-off civilization and interpreting it after its own fashion” (“Cinema and Exploration,” 155). Thus, one of the goals of this chapter is to put the representation of spiritual practices in Apichatpong’s films into productive dialogue with the ideas of post-secularism and modernity while attempting to present them in their proper context.

Apichatpong’s films focus in particular on the gaps between representation and experience, manifested in a self-reflexive interrogation of subjectivity and identity. One effect of an ostensibly secular modernity is that such an interrogation of subjectivity turns inward, to memories, and other markers of consciousness, rather than transcendent states. According to Kilbourn:

What an analysis of memory in film should reveal is the degree to which the meaning and significance of the term ‘modern’—and therefore the very status of ‘the modern

project’—continues to turn on this crucial issue of a kind of reflexive, avowedly secular ‘faith’ in a repertoire of metaphysical structures [i.e. transcendence/immanence, presence/absence] that constitute the ironically theological basis of contemporary Western culture. (29)

This is the structure of the spectral nature underpinning modernity. Modernization, hand in hand with secularization, ironically displaces questions about human consciousness and subjectivity from their traditional purview in religion and spirituality into other forms, of which cinema is one. In fact, the treatment of spirituality in Apichatpong’s films can be formulated precisely around such metaphysical displacements. This is where cinema and its ability to reorganize spatial and temporal relationships through editing, framing, and other cinematographic techniques mirrors certain spiritual concerns, including, for example, the possibility of human subjectivity beyond death. Cinema’s very concern with such issues—as Mary Anne Doane describes it, “[cinema’s] technical promise to capture time: immortality, the denial of the radical finitude of the body, access to other temporalities, and the issue of the archivability of time” (2)—are fundamental to the role it plays in modernity, ironically mirroring the underlying structuring principles of supposedly obsolete spiritual beliefs such as in life after death or the transmigration of the soul.

In their representation of the paradoxes of contemporary Thailand, Apichatpong’s films might seem to embody a “postmodern” perspective, in the way that they reject the narrative of a teleological progression from “primitive” spirituality to “rational” secularism. Casanova notes that “[f]rom a Western monotheistic perspective, such a condition of polytheistic and polyformic individual freedom may seem a highly novel or postmodern one. But from a non-Western perspective, particularly that of the Asian pantheistic religious traditions, the condition looks

much more like the old state of affairs” (18). It is thus helpful to remember that Apichatpong’s films engage with a different metaphysics than either the one that grounds Western monotheism, or that Western philosophy itself critiques. Rather, Apichatpong’s films engage with and challenge the specific cultural practices of religion through their mediation of experiences of spirituality. Here post-secularism becomes not merely the persistence or re-appearance of past beliefs, but an active way of engaging with the role that religion and spirituality play in contemporary societies. As John Caruana puts it in his discussion of spirituality in the Dardennes brothers’ films, here postsecularism “is not an abandonment of the secular, but an effort to free Enlightenment secularity from the false dichotomies that it sets up between belief and unbelief, faith and reason”; postsecularism “drops the pretence that secular reason is fully rational and transparent while religion ostensibly is driven by an irrational faith” (14). The post-secular then aptly describes Apichatpong’s films, which break down those very dichotomies in their representation and exploration of life in contemporary Thai society.

Sometimes the juxtaposition of the sacred and profane (meaning here, simply, that which is not religious or sacred) in Apichatpong’s films has not been appreciated by audiences, as when Thai censors insisted that shots of a monk playing the guitar and another of two monks playing with a toy flying saucer be removed from scenes near the end of his film *Syndromes and a Century* before it could be commercially screened in Thailand. The reason given by the Thai Office of Contemporary Culture was their need to protect the public from films that would “undermine or disrupt social order and moral decency” (qtd. in Richie). While a negative reaction to censorship is understandable, especially given the seemingly innocuous nature of the scenes in question, perhaps the censorship board accurately discerned something about Apichatpong’s cinema. That is, such a reaction confirms my contention that Apichatpong’s

incorporation of various Thai spiritual practices into his films is not merely a vague addition to the mise-en-scène which lends the setting a sense of authenticity. Rather, Apichatpong's films *do* disorder various categorical distinctions: between sacred and profane, rural and urban, memory and the present. Scenes such as those just mentioned remind the viewer that monks are not especially set apart or different from the average Thai person, as anyone familiar with the constitution of monastic orders in Thailand would agree, and which is made explicit in *Uncle Boonmee*, and that the disavowal of such knowledge is necessary for the proper function of such distinctions. Moreover, Apichatpong's films should remind us that such categorical distinctions, for instance the one between sacred and profane, rely on the structures of representation and mediation that constitute subjectivities more generally.

Uncle Boonmee in particular offers a meditation on the constitution of self-identity, or “Thai-ness”, in modernity. Many scenes in Apichatpong's films play with the notion of subjectivities being constituted through a particular mode of representation. For instance, the spectral form through which Boonmee's wife returns to him in *Uncle Boonmee*—achieved via super-imposition through in-camera effects, rather than any sophisticated digital trickery—comments on the untimely nature of the ghost; she notes that she has “no concept of time any longer,” and that she is in effect frozen, “preserved” as she puts it, in her ghostly form. The simultaneity of various realms, both spiritual and material, in Apichatpong's films is literally achieved through the indexical, photographic aspect of cinema. *Uncle Boonmee* was shot on 16 mm film, the stated purpose of which was to emulate the look of the classic Thai films that Apichatpong watched as a child, the corollary of which is the way that the film avoids digital trickery and reaffirms the ontological function of photography, as outlined by Bazin in the ‘Ontology’ essay. Both the ghostly and the mundane are manifested materially on film in the

same manner. Ultimately, in Apichatpong's films, the ghostly *is* mundane, of the order of everyday experience. If the cinematic image helps us to remember the absent subject, then cinema has the power to manifest a different view of both the technological and spiritual possibilities of modernity. Cinematic representation as a technical process frees memory—and therefore subjectivity—from the corruption of time, a particularly spiritual concern.

A closer analysis of Apichatpong's films helps to clarify how representation, while facilitating the turn inward, is also treated with an appropriate scepticism suitable to modern critiques of subjectivity. In one sequence from *Uncle Boonmee*, portraying one of Boonmee's previous lives, a princess gazes into a pool of water at a youthful image of herself. She questions whether the "reflection is an illusion" or not; the knowledge the viewer possesses—that diegetically she may be a past incarnation of a character we have already met—allows us to conclude that, yes, these images are illusory in so far as they are meant to be understood by the viewer as sensory experiences from Boonmee's past—that is, his memories—which are made present. But this also points to their absence by foregrounding the need for these images to be materially visualized, otherwise they would be lost to the past. Many sequences in Apichatpong's films lack a clearly defined beginning or end and often defy an obvious narrative focalization that would allow the viewer to interpret sequences straightforwardly as flashbacks. *Uncle Boonmee* opens with an epigraph, which reads: "Facing the jungle, the hills and vales, my past lives as an animal and other beings rise up before me." This is followed by a shot of a jungle and rice field at dusk. The camera lingers on a water buffalo, then a farmer and his family. Who, or what, human or animal or otherwise, are we to take as the past incarnation of Boonmee?

Another example of this disordering of narrative sequence is in *Syndromes and a Century* when Dr. Toey chats with the young intern outside at a table; her off-hand mention of a

mysterious glow-in-the-dark orchid is followed by a flashback to the encounter with the orchid seller, Noom, at the market, and her conversation with him at the very same table. This kind of *mise-en-abyme* of repetition marks the film's particular modernist formalism—the repetition of scenes is reflected on a larger scale in the way that the second-half of *Syndromes and a Century* repeats entire sequences and snippets of dialogue from the first-half. The result is the instantiation of spiritual themes of repetition and recurrence at the heart of Buddhist thought into the very structure of the film, which itself comments on questions of memories of past lives, both in a literal sense of earlier eras in one's own temporal lifespan but additionally the belief in the transmigration of the soul from one lifetime to another. Apichatpong's earlier film, *Tropical Malady*, also offers no ultimate stabilization to the question of subjectivity in a shifting global modernity. In its first part, the film tells the story of a blossoming romance between a Thai soldier (Banlop Lomnoi) and a young man played by Apichatpong's regular contributor Sakda Kaewbuadee. In the second half, a soldier alone in the woods encounters a spirit of a tiger shaman. In formal style the film moves from the almost documentary realism of its first half to the timelessness of the jungle fever dream in the second, but the casting of Banlop and Sakda once again in the roles of the soldier and shaman in the film's second part raises questions of identity as it also contrasts the queer romance of the first half with the psychological nightmare of the second. The film additionally challenges the primitivist notion that modernity and its attendant possibilities, such as a queer romance, are essentially more alienating than the frightening spiritual confrontation of the film's second half.

The exploration of the themes of identity and cinematic representation continues in one of *Uncle Boonmee's* most striking sequences. Near the end of the film, after Boonmee's death and funeral, Tong, in his orange monk robes leaves and visits two female friends, Jen (Jenjira

Pongpas) and Roong (Kanokporn Tongaram), in their hotel room, an action in violation of the expected behaviour of a monk. He complains that he can't sleep in the temple, that it's scary, and that he doesn't even have radio or a computer. Jen reminds him that his period as a monk will end in just a few days, but Tong wants to stay and takes a shower. After showering, Tong puts on civilian clothes and Jen invites him to come with her to get some food. Tong looks over to where she and Roong were sitting on the end of the bed watching TV, and is taken aback to see all three of them, himself included, sitting there. Jen takes the stunned Tong's hand and leads him out the door unnoticed by the doubles on the bed sitting next to Roong, who continue to watch the television as the camera stays still on the scene for a few seconds. Such a surreal sequence may seem out of place, but many of Apichatpong's films take full advantage of the cinema's ability to play with the time and space. *Uncle Boonmee's* themes surrounding memory and the existence of past selves are brought into the present diegesis in the doubling of Jen and Tong. Such special effects make it clear that cinema has the power not only to transcend time, but also space, putting the past onto an ontologically equal footing with the present on screen. Apichatpong's film emphasizes the way that technologies such as cinema bridge the gap between our understanding of modernity and a world of spirituality. The spiritual and the material world are not so far apart in Apichatpong's films, and a ghostly doubling of the self might equally offer an opportunity to sneak out of one's social obligations and grab a late night snack as it does to delve into the details of one's past lives.

Memory, Cinema, and Reincarnation

Apichatpong's films engage in what Kovács, in describing the hopes of early French film theorists, calls "the potential to represent not only the external form of physical events and

human actions but also the inner life and the mental processes of the characters” (19). This gesture toward an inner life suggests that the paradox of a cinema both spectral and realist clarifies the question of cinematic subjectivity, of mediating inner processes of consciousness, dreams, and mental images, through a medium based on exterior visual representation. I am not the first to notice the spiritual or “haunted” aspect of Apichatpong’s cinema. Angela O’Hara, in her essay, “Mysterious Object of Desire: The Haunted Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul,” argues that Apichatpong is “*possessed* by the modern melancholia that has infected the arts in the past century in the west” (emphasis mine 180), rightly pointing out that these films play with notions of corporeality, subjectivity, and its allegorization through representation. O’Hara’s invocation of Walter Benjamin, quoting his description of the “haunted realm” as “the abyss which separates imagistic being and meaning” (180), gestures toward the loss of meaning experienced by many in modernity through the loss of an origin, or, as Benjamin called it, the loss of “aura,” which points to the absence of authority in representation in terms of having a fixed interpretation or meaning. O’Hara also notes Apichatpong’s affinity with aspects of a Bazinian ontology of film, and to cinema as the preserver of memory, and thereby she invokes its spectral nature.

Apichatpong’s films certainly share with Benjamin the notion that the absence of authenticity is a key aspect of the experience of global modernity. But, as with Benjamin, the film’s present a deeply ambivalent view of such a state of affairs. Apichatpong’s films allow the viewer to engage with the world of contemporary Thailand as a place where global capitalism takes its own forms, in Thai pop music, factories, hospitals and militarization, at the same time that Buddhist spiritual practices and metaphysics continue to offer a structuring principle for a society at large. The cinematic form that each takes puts them on an equal footing, whereby

spiritual elements such as ghosts, doubles, and ceremonies are not framed as fantasy or any less authentic than any other representation. Thus, cinema in Apichatpong's films reminds the viewer of the mediated nature of all reality, whereby reincarnation or the preservation of memory in cinema is no less authentic than what is offered by either religious practices or the reality of neuro-biological memory. This is why Apichatpong's films are so fascinating in their approach to the realities of Buddhist religious practices or beliefs, manifesting them without an orientalizing gaze, nor holding them up for particular reverence.

Reincarnation, or the Buddhist cycle of rebirths in different lives, is a central aspect of most Thais' engagement with Theravada Buddhist cosmology. In his essay on Apichatpong's films, "Cinema of Reincarnations," Thai film critic Kong Rithdee writes that "the struggle to remember your past life or intimate the next one is very much ingrained in Thai thinking" (124). Kong's essay is about some of the ways that Apichatpong's films address issues of "Thai-ness" and spirituality: Kong suggests approaching Apichatpong's cinema "as a quest, a spiritual quest", and affirms Apichatpong's admission of a specific interest in Buddhism (124). *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* is Apichatpong's most explicit engagement with the concept of reincarnation in cinema to date. While memory is undoubtedly a thematic concern of the film, it is memory that is framed from an uncertain temporality and subjectivity. Maureen Turim describes the flashback as the most straightforward mode of memory in cinema, as it frames and focalizes historical elements in subjectivized ways and structures memories into narrative. The use of the memory image in *Uncle Boonmee* pushes against such an establishment of a clearly focalized past in a flashback. Contrast the shifting memory images of Apichatpong's film with the clearly focalized flashback to Rick's past with Ilsa in Paris in *Casablanca*:¹⁰ this is not just a difference in filmmaking mode—classical Hollywood storytelling vs. experimental international

arthouse—but a different paradigm of memory on film. In *Uncle Boonmee* the images emerge from unexpected links and are difficult to place into diegetic motivation. The images in Apichatpong's films are often motivated by a sensuous languor, with an emphasis on physical sensation over plot-driven action, denying the viewer's desire for a classical narrative progression and resolution. This lack of a clear demarcation or focalization for the sequences featuring Boonmee's past lives is one significant reason that I describe the film as a cinematic memory image rather than a series of flashbacks. The subject of the memory (the who) and the object of contemplation (the what, and consequently the vision through which that what is focalized) become mixed. Apichatpong has said that the original script "was more explicit in explaining which [sequences] were past lives, which were not. But in the film, I decided to respect the audience's imagination" (Press Kit 8). *Uncle Boonmee* is freed, then, from a schema that directs the viewers' attention in prescribed ways, in pursuit of some goal; instead, the object of the quest is the past and the contemplation of the past. Apichatpong's use of the long take also contributes to the film's sense of spatial and temporal unity in which a viewer and the characters are freed to explore at their own pace. This kind of contemplation could be called a cinematic meditation of sorts.

In the Press Kit for the film, Apichatpong describes the real Uncle Boonmee's memories of his past lives as "playing behind his closed eyes like a movie" (7). Apichatpong continues the analogy between cinema and consciousness in his interview with Quandt, where he expresses the opinion that "Our brain is the best camera and a projector. If only we can find a way to operate it properly" (184). Apichatpong's comment is revealing, in the direct analogy he makes between the cinematic apparatus and the way that memories—mediated through cinema—constitute our subjectivities, but also hints at the ethical dimension of cinema, in helping us to find how we

should best live our lives. Apichatpong has often said that his films are drawn from his own memories of Thailand, as well as the memories of his parents. However, his use of memories is complex and multilayered, combining film's ability to represent an image as subjectivized, internal experience, with the notion of "cinema itself *as* memory, or 'meta-archive': [...] the totality of signs and meanings that make up a given culture" (Kilbourn 45). Furthermore, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the quasi-universality of memory is challenged through the belief that memories are an aspect of a singular self. In the film memory can also refer to the memories of past lives, and the promise of lives to come. In this way, Apichatpong's films, through its representation of Thai conceptions of subjectivity, challenge the dominant Western notions of the self as singular. Apichatpong's treatment of memory further marks his participation in a body of "memory films," that recognize that cinema's *mnemic* elements have profound significance for how human beings conceive of their own relationship to the past. As Tarkovsky wrote: "Memory is a spiritual concept! [...] Bereft of memory, a person becomes the prisoner of an illusory existence; falling out of time he is unable to seize his own link with the outside world — in other words he is doomed to madness" (57-58). I am not alone in sensing an affinity between Tarkovsky and Apichatpong, in their emphasis on the role of memory, their use of the long take, and the role of nature in their films.¹¹

Memory, then, is what connects the subjectivities in *Uncle Boonmee* with the film's exploration of transcendence. As noted in Chapter 2, Kilbourn compares the journey into the inner life, the "quest for self-knowledge," to the *katabasis*—or underworld journey—in classical literature (31). *Uncle Boonmee*, in weaving together its various memory images of the titular character's lives and incarnations, can also be considered an example of the *psycho-katabasis* film, a descent into the mind. The weaving of the various memories in the film serves to open the

“inner world” to externalization, and therefore offers the possibility of a kind of recovery of the past. However, in Apichatpong’s film, such a descent into memory is not delimited by the lived experience of a single lifetime. Boonmee’s knowledge of his past lives further connects his prodigious memory with the spiritual function of memory *per se*. Cinema, as the external representation of memory, takes on a spiritual significance here, as it acts to preserve time. As noted in Chapter 3, Kilbourn ends his discussion of Tarkovsky’s *Mirror* by arguing that in the film “memory and filmic representation become indistinguishable,” and that ultimately cinema ceases to be a mere “analogue for memory’s mysterious operation: cinema *is* memory” (83). I would argue that, likewise, *Uncle Boonmee* serves diegetically as a memory of Boonmee’s past but also as a cultural record of life in Isan and the collective stories it represents. Kilbourn’s argument hinges on the interrogation of the difference between a “*representation* of memory” and “memory *as* representation.”

As an instantiation of memory, cinema preserves the link between the self and time, becoming a representation of a particular subjective, or “spiritual” experience of the world. Cinema as memory is invoked in the case of *Uncle Boonmee* as both a record of actual profilmic events captured by the camera, testifying to the presence of actors and landscapes that existed in front of the camera, and as the narrated images of past sensory experiences. Temporally, such sequences in the film seem unanchored from the diegesis surrounding the story of Boonmee’s dying days; they could be arranged in any sequential order. Michael Sicinski argues that “Apichatpong is, despite or even in some cases *because* of his engagement with narrativity, essentially an avant-garde filmmaker” (27), and that this explains the lack of concrete analysis in much of the scholarship on Apichatpong’s work.

Apichatpong's films fit with Bazin's preference for a sense of realism, noted in the introduction. This is the insistence that, as Hervé Joubert-Laurencin puts it, "cinema possesses a very specific, very intrinsic link with living reality" (xii). To praise Apichatpong's images for their realism, noting his affection for the temporal and spatial continuity of the long take and the tracking shot—or the numerous shots from cars and motorcycles as they zoom down country roads—is to make the connection with Bazin obvious, and is deeply connected to the question of film style and how the specific combinations of duration and movement in Apichatpong's films represent the world. In an interview, Apichatpong offers a revealing insight into his own cinematic practice, suggesting that memory "may well be the only impulse! Everything is stored in our memories and it's in the nature of film to preserve things" (qtd. in Kim 134).

Uncle Boonmee offers an image in which a viewer can believe, as Costică Brădăţan, suggests, encouraging the viewer to engage in the act of transcending "the sheer succession of frames you see on screen and inhabit[ing] the complex universe that it opens up" (2). As noted above, the film manifests a stance toward spirituality that places it on a level ground, visually, with the various aspects of modernity. The spiritual realm of Boonmee's past lives and the ghosts that visit him are treated no differently than the mundane aspects of contemporary rural Thai life; similarly, the memories of Boonmee's past lives are presented no differently than his memory of the vicious crack down on Communist groups in Isan by the Thai army in the 1960s, represented in still photographs. The combination of images and narration in the film at times defies a clear temporal sequencing. In a puzzling sequence in the cave, Boonmee recounts a dream in which he says he dreamt of the future, where an unknown authority was cracking down on "past people." When they shone a light on those people, they became images and disappeared. The images that accompany Boonmee's narration are of soldiers dressed in contemporary Thai military fatigues,

sometimes at rest, sometimes capturing figures in ape suits (the same monkey-ghost costumes used in the rest of the film for Boonmee's lost son but appearing even more absurd in daylight). What is the meaning of this dream and the particular combination of narration and imagery? Through their military fatigues the future authority is linked to the contemporary Thai military junta (who have often, and currently do, run the country), and the monkey-suited people are associated with the memories of past and future lives, the people who in Boonmee's dreams have been disappeared; but the costume also reminds the viewer of the role of cinema in manufacturing images through the self-reflexive obviousness of the costumes. Cinema is not only a tool which can capture and represent the past, but shapes the narratives by which one is constituted as an individual. This dream is ultimately about the ambivalence of cinema, which preserves the past, but also reminds the viewer that all forms of memory and identity are ultimately mediated through structures which are not always benevolent. Furthermore, the science fiction element and the use of still photos in the sequence recalls Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), and the way that the main character's captors abuse his vivid memories of the past in order to utilize him as a time traveller which ultimately dooms him in the film's elliptical ending.

In sequences like the one described above, memories of Thai culture and politics are intermingled with Boonmee's past incarnations and representations of the spirits of his loved ones. Apichatpong's desired effect is to highlight how "the film reinforces a special association between cinema and reincarnation. Cinema is man's way to create alternate universes, other lives" (Press Kit 8). The reincarnation of Boonmee's past lives is one example of this association; the alternate future recounted in his dream discussed above is another. Thus cinema has the power to mediate identities over time, from the past even on into the future. What is the effect of this equalization? Does it suggest that the political events are diminished, in their

equation with memory, lost to the past and irrelevant? Or does it instead suggest the vital power that past lives and memories continue to have in Thai society and the power which cinema can wield in making them manifest?

Ultimately, *Uncle Boonmee* is as much a film about cinema as it is about other topics. Each sequence of the film uses a different style of cinema: Thai serials, ghost and monster movies (the red eyes of the monkey ghost recall those creatures from old Thai monster movies where the beasts were shot in the dark to hide the cheapness of the costumes), etc. In one of the final sequences of the film, Boonmee returns to the cave he intuitively was the place of his first birth: “I was born here,” he states, “in a life I can’t remember.” Here even Boonmee’s prodigious memory hits a limit. If Boonmee’s retracing of his past lives is analogous to retracing the history of Thai cinema, as implied in the variety of film styles and genres referenced in the film, then his return to the cave is a return to origins, both the birth of Boonmee’s first life in the cave and of the origins of cinema. Cinema as a particular technology has its origins in Western modernity, in France and the United States, and therefore is bound up with the ways that a foreign technology can be utilized in the creation of such a specifically Thai film.¹² In discussing the origins of cinema, it is productive to read this in relation to the cave of Plato: the original cinema (240-248). Plato’s allegory of the cave is ultimately an idealist allegory, where the images and shadows on the cave wall are only representations of an existent reality beyond the cave opening. The shadows on the walls connect Boonmee’s reveries with the contemplation of reality in the history of philosophy. However, Apichatpong’s film is no idealist paean. As noted above, Boonmee then recounts his dream of the alternative future where an authority cracks down on “past people” and turns them into images. What is often glossed over in accounts of Plato’s cave is that it is not only an allegory of education and the illusory nature of perception, but also the

ways in which our perception limits and shapes our ability to know reality. Of the philosopher's return to the cave from the world outside, Plato writes, "Wouldn't he be likely to make a fool of himself? And they would say that his visit to the upper world had ruined his sight, and that the ascent was not worth even attempting" (243). In Plato's account, playfully narrated by Socrates, experience of something shapes perception and knowledge is a function of language: in other words, mediation regulates knowledge of the world. *Uncle Boonmee* emphasizes that cinema is able to communicate something about the relationships that structure one's visual and aural experience of the world (including thoughts and memories). But cinema still reveals that there is no unmediated reality that is immediately accessible; this need not leave us in despair, however, but rather to recognize that art does communicate knowledge about the world.

One objection to my argument might be the oft-noted affinities with neorealism that critics have observed in Apichatpong's films, which would seem to conflict with the way that his films are also filled with ghosts, spectres, spirits, and the like. Bazin's theories, as discussed elsewhere, offer a way to link the realist style of Apichatpong to the spiritual concerns invoked by the spectral elements of his films. The image of the world that I see reflected in these films is filled with spirits, shamanist possessions of beasts, transmigrations of the soul, and other notions drawn from Thai spiritual beliefs and folklore, dwelling between presence and absence and the blurring of boundaries.

In his Director's Statement from the Cannes 2010 Press Kit for *Uncle Boonmee*, Apichatpong notes some of the ways that he hoped to explore the concept of "transmigration of souls," or the cycle of death and rebirth, through the cinema:

I believe in the transmigration of souls between humans, plants, animals, and ghosts. Uncle Boonmee's story shows the relationship between man and animal and at the same time

destroys the line dividing them. When the events are represented through cinema, they become shared memories of the crew, the cast, and the public. A new layer of (simulated) memory is augmented in the audience's experience. In this regard, filmmaking is not unlike creating synthetic past lives. I am interested in exploring the innards of this time machine [...] For me, filmmaking remains a source all of whose energy we haven't properly utilised. In the same way that we have not thoroughly explained the inner workings of the mind. (5)

It is in this articulation of a particularly Buddhist metaphysics that Apichatpong clearly outlines how *Uncle Boonmee* offers a form of reincarnation or continuation of life beyond death through the "synthetic" or perhaps even prosthetic memories made possible in cinema (as discussed in Chapter 1).

To revisit Bazin's notion in this context, "cinematic belief" is not reducible to displays of spiritual transcendence (in fact, Bazin opposes them), yet the role of subjectivity beyond death is one of the spiritual concerns explored in Apichatpong's films. As Rosen notes, the "paradox of cinematic realism is that the mummy complex, whose desire for the everlasting should be so consonant with transcendence and the spiritual, draws us back to the concrete world" (111). It is in this paradoxical negotiation between cinematic realism and the religious function of reincarnation that the relation between modernity and spirituality in Apichatpong's films comes into clear focus. For while his films engage with the world of Buddhist spirituality, Apichatpong's films also reflect the technological and cultural modernization of contemporary Thailand through the presence of factories, vehicles, and, most conspicuously, modern medicine, as well as pop music and references to Thai soap operas and other expressions of mass culture.

Spirituality in Apichatpong's films includes all the practices and beliefs ostensibly cast away with the arrival of a modern, technologized way of life, but the continued presence of which contradicts a certain organization of history. In visualizing the paradox of contemporary Thailand, where rapid modernization and traditional spiritual practice live side by side, *Uncle Boonmee* is in some ways "spectral," a term I have argued is descriptive of both the cinematic presentation of memory images even as the film challenges an organizational structure of history that consigns spirituality to the past while maintaining its metaphysical presuppositions. Like memory, in its ability to organize temporal experiences, cinema allows viewers to make sense of past experiences, even ones which they themselves did not live through. Alison Landsberg's concept of "prosthetic memory" discussed in Chapter 1, emphasizes cinema's ability to make "available images for mass consumption" (176), images of which the viewer has no lived experience, but which nonetheless play a role in the production of the viewer's identity. Ethically, prosthetic memories can generate empathy by expanding the range of possible experiences available in constituting identity. Cinema as cultural memory emphasizes the role it can play in the transmission of collective stories, participating in the chains of tradition. In its individual ethical function and in its cultural function, cinema fulfills many of the same roles in modernity that spiritual practices—such as rituals, visions, conceptions of the afterlife, prayer and meditation—have fulfilled and continue to fulfill across a wide spectrum of societies, serving as a connection between the individual and a larger, even transcendent, view of the world. In the "Ontology" essay Bazin notes the link between the function of the material preservation of the image in photography and the drive to overcome death; by adding *time* to the "categories of resemblance that define the photographic image" (9), Bazin suggests that cinema goes even further in linking temporal representation, through memory, to a spiritual concern with

the role of subjectivity beyond death. Not only do cinematic images, as photographic records, resemble the thing they represent, they also appear to persist in time, capturing movement and duration. Bazin's comparison between the Egyptian religious practice of mummification and the creation of visual arts, the "mummy complex" central to both practices, is an attempt to describe the desire to "defend against time" (Bazin 3). As Rosen, paraphrasing Bazin, puts it, "artistic representation originates in a need to counter knowledge of the inevitable dissolution of the subject (death), by material preservation against decay associated with the passage of time" (110). In this understanding, it is the function of representational art, including cinema, to preserve likeness, and perhaps more, beyond death.

Cinema makes present on the screen images of the past, blurring the lines between presence and absence, life and death. Beyond representing the afterlife or ghosts on celluloid (or as digital files), cinema itself, its structures and technological capacity, becomes a metaphor for the kind of mental processes that constitute us, including our memories and sense of self as unique individuals. In modernity this desire for the continuation of subjectivity beyond death becomes allegorized and displaced into cinema. In other words, modernization, hand-in-hand with secularization, ironically displaces questions about human consciousness and subjectivity from their traditional purview in religion and spirituality into other forms, such as cinema. It is the cinematic process itself, of photographically capturing the past and presenting visual and aural experiences for mass consumption and contemplation, rather than the content of any given film, that invites a consideration of questions related to consciousness and subjectivity. It is not the presence of monkey ghosts that makes a film spectral, but the very structure of cinematic representation and mediation itself.

Cinema, which literally frames the viewer's stance toward reality, reveals the gap between the objective image of what an audience is compelled to take as diegetically "real" and its experience of reality (Rosen 109). In Apichatpong's films one example of this is the appearance of the ghost of Boonmee's dead wife and then the monkey ghost incarnation of his lost son at the dinner table. In these moments the seeming paradox of a "rational" modernity and Thai spirituality is manifest. Bazin's "Ontology" essay presciently points to one of the most ignored effects of cinema when, in his mention of Surrealism, Bazin notes, "the logical distinction between what is imaginary and what is real tends to disappear" (15). Apichatpong's films share with surrealism this blurring effect between the imaginary and the real¹³; this effect is communicated through the aforementioned eschewing of clear narrative focalization (dreams and memories are not clearly marked as such in the diegesis), as well as the use of in-camera effects. Examples include the dreams and memories discussed above, which lack a clear focalization, but also the use of optical printing to create the ghostly effect of the appearance of Boonmee's wife in the dinner scene and the doubling of Tong and Jen in the film's conclusion. Thus, Apichatpong's film style illuminates the paradox of contemporary Thailand, where rapid modernization and traditional spiritual practices live side by side, making it an excellent example of the post-secular in contemporary non-Western cultures more broadly.

Conclusion

In his essay, "Having an Idea in Cinema," Gilles Deleuze notes the fundamentally temporal aspect of cinema: how film and other forms of art articulate past, current, and future states of being. Deleuze's essay focuses on art as resistance, in a political sense, but also, ultimately, resistance against death. In this chapter, I have looked at how, in expressing the role

of cinematic subjectivity beyond death, Apichatpong's films engage with concerns that have traditionally been associated with the spiritual. This desire can also be framed as the possibility of human subjectivity beyond death, which is part of most religious traditions, including Buddhism, even if in its Buddhist conception such continuity is seen as something to be ultimately transcended. This continuation of subjectivity beyond death is allegorized and displaced into cinema.

With regard to secularization, a post-secular cinema, if we can appropriate the term, can point toward a return of belief, a re-attaching of the conditions of meaning to action and being. Deleuze echoed this need to believe in cinema. In one of his most striking echoes of Bazin, he writes:

The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in the world, our only link. The nature of the cinematographic illusion has often been considered. Restoring our belief in the world — this is the power of modern cinema (when it stops being bad). Whether we are Christians or atheists [or, I will add, Buddhists], in our universal schizophrenia, *we need reasons to believe in this world*. (171-172, emphasis in original).

Cinema provides the viewer with a link to the world in that it functions as a way to grapple with and negotiate the always already mediated sense of reality, especially through memory. Since all one ever really experiences are the mental perceptions of a material reality, all experience, cinematic and otherwise, can be called into question if perception in cinema is ultimately illusory.¹⁴ Instead, what Deleuze and other believers in the power of cinema suggest is that cinema makes visible the structuring relationships of our experience of the world. In the Deleuzian filmic image not only do we have a visual representation of reality, but contained within it are the possibilities and relations to all the other images: images of memory, images of

time, and even images of spiritually thinking the place of the human being in the world. Not all films do this. As Deleuze says, modern cinema, in discovering the power of the time-image and making visible thought, has the potential to do so. I suggest that the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul do this, ultimately guiding the viewer to a notion of belief in the world and reawakening the viewer to the possibilities of contemporary cinema.

¹ Like many Thai people with long names, Apichatpong has adopted a nickname, “Joe,” which he insists people feel free to use and by which he is affectionately referred to by many cinephiles. In this chapter I use his given name, Apichatpong, following the Thai convention by which one goes by one’s given name in formal address. For instance, he would be “*Khun* (Mr.) Apichatpong” as I would be “*Khun* Anders.”

² The exquisite corpse (from the Fr. *cadavre exquis*) is a surrealist technique by which a work is created by each collaborator adding to the whole, either following some rule or with each collaborator only being allowed to see the last piece of the entry. The creation of *Mysterious Object at Noon* followed this process, in which Apichatpong solicited the continuation of a “shaggy-dog story from his participants as he filmed them.

³ See for example, the films of Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang (discussed in Chapter 6), or, Apichatpong’s fellow Thai filmmaker, Pen-ek Ratanaruang.

⁴ Such a conflation of Buddhism and “Thainess” follows the same metonymic pattern identified by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, in which he notes how Islam comes to stand for the Arab peoples and vice versa. While “the East” in Said’s book is synonymous with the near East of Egypt and the Levant, for contemporary filmgoers “Asian cinema” is closely associated with East and South East Asian cinema, especially Japan, China and Hong Kong.

⁵ See Benedict Anderson’s detailed examination of the various cultural receptions of Apichatpong’s 2004 film, *Tropical Malady*, “The Strange Story of a Strange Beast: Receptions in Thailand of Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Sat Pralat*,” in which he contrasts the film’s reception in Bangkok versus North Eastern Thailand (Isan), where the film is set, and, further, in contrast to its Western acclaim. In *Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (Ed. James Quant. Vienna: Synema, 2009), pp.158-77.

⁶ How are we to interpret the occupation of Thailand by Japan during World War II or the subsequent influence of the United States in the postwar period, when Thailand maintained close ties with America in its fight against communism in the neighbouring countries of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam? Suffice to say, while Thailand avoided a textbook example of colonial occupation, such distinctions are never as clear cut as the historical narratives suggest. The notion of “semicolonialism”, as articulated by Tani Barlow, in “Eugenic Woman, Semicolonialism, and Colonial Modernity as Problems for Postcolonial Theory,” from the volume *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Duke: Duke UP, 2005), offers a potential model for addressing such issues in relation to colonialism in Thailand, but is beyond this chapter’s purview.

⁷ See Taylor, “Problems around the secular,” in *The Immanent Frame* (2 November 2007).

⁸ Habermas’s precise use of the term is an attempt to describe the reviving influence of religion in public spheres once dominated by rationalism, particularly Western, nominally secular states and their relation with rising “fundamentalisms”, such as radical Islam. See, for instance, “A post-secular society — what does that mean?” in *Reset: Dialogues on Civilizations* (16 Sept. 2008). See also *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003); and, especially, *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010).

⁹ Despite the presence of other religions in contemporary Thailand, Buddhism has remained a dominant force in Thai society in part through its link to the ruling order. See, for instance, the notion that the “monastic order legitimates the Thai state, a view suggested by the oft-repeated shibboleth ‘nation, religion, king’” (628), Duncan McCargo, “The Changing Politics of Thailand’s Buddhist Order” (*Critical Asian Studies* 44.4 (2012): 627-642).

¹⁰ For those requiring a refresher, in *Casablanca*, soon after discovering that his former lover Ilsa has come to Casablanca with her new husband, resistance leader Victor (Paul Henreid), Rick pours himself a drink as the music swells and he is cast back to contemplate his past with Ilsa. This flashback is focalized as Rick’s recollection, framed explicitly for the viewer through its placement in the diegesis, the motivating actions, and the formal elements (music, soft focus, etc.). In one theorization, the difference between the unfocalized, unmotivated

flashbacks of *Uncle Boonmee* and the flashbacks of is one of institutional production modes: the clear, unambiguous narration of the classical Hollywood cinema versus the formal experimentation and “psychological realism” of the contemporary art cinema.

¹¹ In an e-mail in response to a query by Quandt, Apichatpong admitted that he has only seen *Mirror*, and that while he admires its beauty there is no formal connection between their films.

¹² Records in the *Bangkok Times* suggest that the Lumiere bros. arranged a screening of their cinematograph in Bangkok as early 1897 (Anchalee Chaiworaporn “The Birth of Film Screening in Thailand,” *Thai Film Foundation*). Many early films made in Thailand were Hollywood co-productions, the most famous of which is *Chang* [elephant] (1927), a silent docu-drama about a farmer in Isan co-directed by Merian C. Cooper.

¹³ Additionally, critics have noted in Apichatpong’s surrealist tendencies an affinity with filmmakers such as David Lynch. See James Quandt, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (Vienna: Synema, 2009).

¹⁴ As argued by Bertrand Russell (and other philosophers who have attempted to think past the old metaphysics of a mind and body divide and reattach perceptual experience to the material world). Russell did not believe that we should question all of reality, rather he philosophically argued for a reason to believe in our perceptions.

Chapter 6

On Dissipation: *Goodbye Dragon Inn* and the “Death of Cinema”

Introduction

In this final chapter, I examine the cinematic meta-theme of the death of cinema in contemporary transnational art cinema. I see the persistence of this particular meta-theme surrounding the ontological status of the cinema as raising a question relevant to the overall argument of this dissertation: what is the relation of “the disappearance of the individual subject” in postmodern discourse, as Fredric Jameson terms it (16), to the changes in the experience of film going in the “post-cinematic” era? The post-cinematic as I define it here involves the changes in cinematic practices spurred by the transition to moving images in media other than *celluloid projection* and *theatrical spaces*, the minimal terms of what film scholars André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion have termed “institutional cinema.”¹ These other media including the various forms of television broadcast and transmission, cinematically rendered video games, and more recently, internet-based forms of media on web-streaming services such as YouTube and Netflix. As even a cursory consideration of the origins of television as a mass media in the 1950s suggests, the post-cinematic refers to more than a specific historical moment of transition, but rather to an ongoing shift in patterns of dominance amongst particular image-based cultural practices. Arguably the beginning of the post-cinematic can be dated back to the 1950s and television’s gradual displacement of theatrical cinematic screening as the dominant cultural force in world, and especially American, culture.²

Like other processes of technological and paradigmatic change, the post-cinematic follows different patterns of adoption and negotiation in different locales and in different cultures. As this chapter shows, a nation like Taiwan and an urban area like Taipei have their own relationships to institutional cinematic practices and the emergence of a post-cinematic culture. Rather than suggest a clean break with the past, “post-cinema” is an ongoing process of transformation. I am concerned here with “the *relation* (rather than mere distinction) between older and newer media regimes” (Densen and Leyda). As Shane Densen and Julia Leyda phrase it in the introduction to their new online collection, *Post-Cinema*, these transformations of media practice are:

not just *after* cinema, and [...] not in every respect “new,” at least not in the sense that new media is sometimes equated with digital media; instead, it is the collection of media, and the mediation of life forms, that “follows” the broadly cinematic regime of the twentieth century—where “following” can mean either to succeed something as an alternative or to “follow suit” as a development or a response in kind. Accordingly, post-cinema would mark not a caesura but a transformation that alternately abjures, emulates, prolongs, mourns, or pays homage to cinema. (Densen and Leyda)

I argue that the felt effects of these concrete transformations of media practices and the recent turn to affect in humanities scholarship, mentioned in the introductory chapters, are linked by what I am calling the “dissipation” of cinema. What relation does the change in human understandings of subjectivity have to the changes in the experience of film going that have occurred in the last few decades? The turn to affect theory—drawing particularly on Gilles Deleuze’s cinema books and Catherine Malabou’s account, via Baruch Spinoza, of a human subjectivity constituted by its affects (7)—informs my understanding of what role the bodily

action of film going itself plays in the post-cinematic era. In investigating this notion, I want to further articulate what these various transformations and turns mean for the future of narrative art cinema more broadly and its function as a mediated mode of memory. If the institutional form of cinema, conceived of as the theatrical screening of celluloid images of photographic derivation, is indeed “dead,” what do we make of films that continue to engage in more traditional modalities of production, distribution, consumption, and narrative structure, particularly the contemporary global art cinema discussed in this dissertation?

One obvious manifestation of this theme of the death of cinema is the decline of the movie theatre—such as the one portrayed in Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003)—as a vibrant centre of collective urban life, as cinematic cultures move increasingly to various forms of private cinematic consumption. While much of the discourse surrounding the medial transformations ushered in by digital cinema focuses on the changes in how films and images are manufactured and created, at the same time these changes have radically transformed the experience of film going and film consumption. I argue that these transformations resonate on both the level of the kinds of subjective experience cinema can offer, the perceptive experiences of all areas of life discussed in this dissertation, and the affective experiences of film going itself, explored further in this chapter.

Goodbye, Dragon Inn self-reflexively offers an occasion to consider the waning of the collective experience of institutional cinema in its elegiac portrayal of film going. Set in a run-down Taipei movie theatre on its final night and framed entirely through a screening of King Hu's *wuxia pian* classic, *Dragon Inn* (1967), Tsai's film suggests that post-cinematic medial transformations have contributed not only to cinema's waning as the dominant cultural medium, but to the loss of an understanding of film history and of subjective experience. While the tone of

Tsai's film is tinged with loss and even a sense of nostalgia for a bygone mode of film consumption, I want to focus on what the film suggests this loss means for the affective experience of film going. As portrayed in Tsai's film, the act of film going is not romanticized, nor is the film overly reverential in its approach to film history: much of the film's focus is on the experience of being in the theatre rather than what is on the screen. Given the kinds of film experiences that the film elegizes, what meaning can still reasonably be derived after the move to more private modes of cinematic experience? In what new ways do cinema's affective dimensions continue to function in relation to the subject, and what affective dimensions are lost, given the new formulations of consumption and affective experience in the post-cinematic age?

I argue that these processes can be understood by reading *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* through the lens of two concepts. The first concept, as discussed in the previous chapter and drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, is a borrowing of the term spectral. In the previous chapter I described spectrality as being in part defined by its constitution between presence and absence, disrupting boundaries and borders as well as organizations of time and history. Spectrality can be used to describe those features of present constructions that rely on previously abandoned notions from the past; for instance, the notion of post-cinema, I argue, relies on just such a spectral paradox, as new media practices and technologies rely on cinematic metaphors even as they have supposedly supplanted the institutional cinema as such. Spectrality additionally serves as an apt description of the experience of global modernity in the current era, as the processes of modernization rely on all kinds of unacknowledged and disavowed assumptions: take, for example, notions of technological progress and universal improvements in quality of life that are patently contradicted by the realities of globalization. The fact that technological and paradigmatic changes, including the changes attributed to post-cinematic culture, are not evenly

distributed across societal or transnational lines, nor strictly speaking are they even “new,” as Densen and Leyda note, means that pockets of the past persist long after their supposed expiration date. The ghostly theatre space of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is one such pocket of the past.

The theatre space in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is spectral in its role as an essential urban sanctuary and site of queer desire in Taipei culture and also as a space which preserves a particular view of the past on screen. My reading of the film emphasizes the role of film as an art form with a history that constantly impinges on the present, shaping the meanings and experiences can be derived from it. *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* portrays the theatre as a focal point for the exploration of time, space, and identity, where the “non-contemporaneity of present time with itself” becomes manifest (Derrida *Specters* 29). In the context of Derrida’s words, this non-contemporaneity or “radical untimeliness” is associated with the kind of situation made manifest by the presence of the ghost of Hamlet’s father and his injunction to the young Dane to set right the injustice done by his own murder, the murder which makes his ghostly presence possible (*Specters* 29). Thus, the spectral exists because *the time is out of joint* and the space opens for some wrong to be set right. Can the theatre space be such a space of contestation? In her work on contemporary Chinese cinemas, Jean Ma has argued that presence of a queer spectrality in his films reflects Tsai’s larger political project “that envisions resistant forms of subjectivity through alternative [anachronistic] habitations of the present” (98-99). Tsai himself presents an example of a transnational Chinese identity, as a Malaysian-born Chinese who moved to Taipei in his 20s, marking his relationship to both Taiwanese cinema and the historical legacy of King Hu’s film as ambivalent.³ *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is reflective of both the cinema’s (diminishing) role in the process of globalization and modernization and its simultaneous function as repository of history

and memory. Cinema in this understanding is an anachronistic medium, though not obsolete, as its trace remains in the post-cinematic technologies that follow it. Understood in affective terms, the theatre becomes the site of affective intensities—specifically, a site in which to experience responses to cinematic stimuli which may manifest in expressions of desire, enjoyment, disgust, or surprise, and which may subsequently trigger memories and emotions. These intensities have the ability to disorder normative understandings of the self as possessing a rationally constituted, bounded identity. The disordering is enabled by the way that cinema makes manifest the mediated nature of subjectivity and may result in the recognition that the self is constituted through the work of pre-subjective processes with social, political, or economic origins, or even recognition of the ways in which the origins of the self are never as pure as a singular subjectivity, and may cross national, sexual, and temporal boundaries.

The second concept that I use in my approach to the film is my own, a term I am coining the *dissipation* of the cinematic experience. In its portrayal of a sparse audience, a few of whom are watching the film while others search for different kinds of connection and affective experience, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is attuned to the diminished experience of institutional cinema in the post-cinematic age, even as it inversely focuses on a traditional modality of consumption. The setting of the empty, diminished cinema manifests the way that cinematic modalities have increasingly moved to other medial experiences, leaving the theatre, once the centre of cinematic culture, consigned to the margins of cultural authority. The film offers a meditation then on the uncertain fate of institutional cinema in this new global era through its focus on the pleasures of communal film going and offers a eulogy for the end of a cinematic age. The theatre space of the Fuhe Grand Theater itself works affective impulses upon the occupants of the theatre, not just through the mediation of the screen, but through the embodied action of film going itself. My use

of the term dissipation in this way describes how cinematic practices become both scattered and less communal, but at the same time points to the particular structures of feeling that characterize the affective experience of the postmodern world of global capitalism: these include structures of alienation, of dispersal concomitant with ubiquitous networks, of the financial flows of global capitalism that determine new markets across and in spite of national borders, and of the prevalence of video screens and moving images, both for consumption and surveillance.

I use *dissipation* here in its multiple connotations and associations, which I believe lend the word a descriptive power over the situation *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* portrays. In its most colloquial sense, to speak of dissipation is to describe the process of slowly disappearing or becoming diminished in some way. My usage also draws on the scientific meaning of the word, which describes the loss of energy by conversion to heat. Dissipation involves a loss of the thing in question, its gradually being used up. This sense of dissipation in relation to cinema is suggestive of the diminution of collective film going, which *Goodbye Dragon Inn* portrays. In the post-cinematic landscape, film going is increasingly spread out as viewers consume more and more film alone, either on home video (DVD/Blu-ray discs, for instance) or, increasingly, through online streaming services such as Hulu, YouTube, and Netflix. There is an additional sense to the word “dissipation” in which it describes a waste or a squandering of resources: a loss occurred through carelessness or disregard for the resources at hand, in this case the legacies of film history and the collective undertaking of film going. Descriptive in relation to the post-cinematic is the use of the term dissipation as relating to dissipated or dissolute living: over-consumption, excess, and self-indulgence. The dissipation of cinema is seen in the way that cinematic viewing practices have changed to allow for increasingly private and unregulated forms of film consumption like “binge-watching” (or, perhaps less openly discussed, the

possibility of watching films on your iPhone or iPad in such private places as on the toilet). The public character of the movie theatre, in which being seen going to the movies was to partake in a particular form of modern life, is lost. Formerly public practices, such as film going, become increasingly privatized in the process of dissipation. Likewise, the consumption of particular images of private (or taboo, as in many of Tsai's films) acts become something different when done so privately, changing the character of cinematic consumption. The shared perceptive experience of publicly displayed images of private acts, such as sex, psychological violence, or humiliation, in which the viewer is made to experience the collective discomfort (or not) of the cinema audience reminds one of shared human experiences. The move to private consumption, where such images are increasingly served up for individuals to consume on their own, changes the character of the affective experience, in which the pleasure and pain of other human beings becomes just another commodity.

In this sense of the word, I suggest that the idea of post-cinematic affect can be characterized by an *over-abundance* of cinema.⁴ The idea is that the digital revolution has made cinema more accessible than ever before. However, even taking into account the black- and grey-market trading of film files on services such as BitTorrent or the existence of unauthorized online streaming, a cursory examination of such services shows an overwhelming mass of cinema from both the past and the current era remains unavailable online or in any digital format.⁵ Such seemingly democratizing technologies, which ostensibly provide greater access to the classical and global art cinema fare, nonetheless still serve to privilege Hollywood and mainstream cinema, reinforcing the interests of global neoliberal finance and resulting in the inaccessibility of massive swathes of film history. Arguably this is the larger context in which any notion of film as a distinct medium exists today. Therefore, dissipation is descriptive of both

a *loss* and a kind of *overwhelming force*. I argue then, that as an affective experience, film going has become dissipated in the post-cinematic era, both in terms of the loss of the movie theatre as the site of institutional cinema but also by the loss of certain kind of film history, even as at the same time there is ostensibly a surfeit of cinematic material for easy consumption.

Affect and the “Death” of the Cinema

One of the key notions forwarded in the turn to affect theory in the Humanities, as popularized by Brian Massumi and others, is affect’s ability to “produce ideological effects by non-ideological means” (Massumi 40). Bypassing the old Marxist notion of the superstructure, affect theory suggests that cinema’s ideological effects are found not in the ability of a cinematic representation to structure a subject, but in its ability to express “a kind of free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today,” without being “attributed to any subject in particular” (Shavero 2). The claims of affect theorists and neuroscientists have led to a re-conception of how cinema works, in an attempt to explain how cinema can have real effects despite the deconstruction of subjectivity. Affect theory accounts for cinema’s ability to bypass intentionality and thereby, ideology, defined by Massumi as a both a “common sense meaning as a structure of belief, and in the cultural-theoretical sense of an interpellative subject positioning” (263). Massumi suggests that such forces as cinematic intensities can operate in pre-subjective and inhuman ways: in his terms they are “irreducibly bodily and autonomic” (28). Bolstered by the findings of neuroscience, affect theory turns attention to the neglected role that bodily affective forces play in reasoning and meaning-making. As Ruth Leys describes in her cogent critique of Massumi and others, “What the new affect theorists and the neuroscientists share is a commitment to the idea that there is a gap between the subject’s affects and its cognition or

appraisal of the affective situation or object, such that cognition or thinking comes ‘too late’ for reasons, beliefs, intentions, and meanings to play the role in action and behaviour usually accorded to them.” (443). Are such theories of affect truly something new, or do they merely service the same functions once held by metaphors such as “subconscious” or “unconscious” thought? Such an account of the waning of conscious thought remains deeply appealing as it turns on a description of cinema that avoids placing too much emphasis on the discredited notion of a viewing subject, while acknowledging that any interpretation or meaning making is grounded in an embodied viewing experience. Affect theory and the findings of neuroscience offer film studies a way to speak empirically about the effects of cinema and step away from Freudian psychoanalytic accounts of cinematic subjectivity. According to these theories of affect, the death of cinema, as I will show below, is the death of a subjectivity embodied by Freudian theory and perpetuated by psychoanalytic film theory accounts of the cinematic spectator as consciously or even “unconsciously” interpreting rational representations. As Steven Shaviro describes it, “Our existence is always bound up with affective and aesthetic flows that elude cognitive definition or capture” (*Post-Cinematic* 4). Therefore, the “affective subject” of the contemporary moment is one constituted by the various stimulating flows of media, finance, and the society of control, rather than the translation of conscious, perceptive experiences.

One such deployment of affect theory is found in Shaviro’s book, *Post-Cinematic Affect*. Shaviro adopts Massumi’s account of these presignifying, presubjective forces, and uses them to describe the effects of cinema and offer an account of “*what it feels like* to live in the early twenty-first century” (2). He dubs this process of cinematic expression, as it is currently experienced and practiced, *post-cinematic affect*. Shaviro argues that works which fall under such a paradigm are “*expressive*,” by which he means “both *symptomatic* and *productive*,”

providing a marker of social structures and processes and that such works “participate actively in these processes and help to constitute them” (2). Shaviro states that postmodern culture is characterized, contra Jameson, not by a waning but rather a surfeit of affect. Shaviro quotes Massumi, arguing that “If some have the impression that affect has waned, it is because it is unqualified. As such, it is not ownable or recognizable and is thus resistant to critique” (qtd. in Shaviro *Post-Cinematic* 4). This entire line of critique stems from the “disappearance of the individual subject” in postmodern culture as outlined in the introductory chapter; Massumi and other theorists of the affective turn would specify that what is experienced is a waning of *emotion*, as distinct from affect. Emotion in this conception is the result of an intentional and subjective processing of affective forces. Affective forces are pre-subjective and non-intentional, while emotions are owned, subjective, and have objects. Shaviro argues that this excessive magnification of affective flows disrupts the role of the individual subject, and its experience of emotion; the subject is “thereby constituted through, broader social, political, and economic processes” (4). Coming to understand these processes becomes a key aspect of understanding how cinema shapes and constitutes us as individuals.

However, like Ruth Leys whom I quoted above, aspects of this articulation of affect theory do not entirely satisfy me, as they do not account for the role that narrative continues to play in global cinema. Ideologically focused readings of films are, in the affective account, retroactive narratives created by a rational subject organizing the bodily affective forces that impinge upon them and are often seen as perpetuating master narratives of metaphysics and meaning. Affect is seen as liberating precisely because it cannot intentionally recreate such narratives. What cinema studies requires is a way to describe the function of contemporary media works in a world where digitization and global capitalism have decentred cinema as the

dominant cultural medium and dissipated film going as an experience. This is the post-cinematic landscape that Shaviro describes. Narrative cinema in particular, long viewed as functioning by perpetuating the master narratives, is drained of its function in constituting subjectivity.

However, in light of the acknowledgement of affect's role in the post-cinematic experience, how is cinematic expression to be understood? How does cinematic expression become perceived by a viewing body prior to or absent the constitution of a viewing subject? Is there some way to bridge the gap between the sensible experience of film going and the functional meaning of those things being expressed on screen? Shaviro's "free-floating sensibility," which can be expressed as a decentring or dissipating effect, can be articulated around such a decentred experience, and can be identified in films, such as *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, that take the meta-theme of the "death of cinema" as their distinct idiom.

Affect can offer a way forward, rather than merely swing to the opposite pendulum of a mind-body divide. If affect, as Massumi would have us believe, functions purely as a pre-subjective force, it must also be pre-perceptive, in that perception assumes a meaningful function beyond the mere sensibility of affect. This reinforces the long discredited notion of any meaningful difference between the mind and body, in which a subject is constituted purely through the results of the events to which the body responds and in which it participates. Without perception, it is all too easy to forget that mind and consciousness are also a result of material functions, or to deny the role of consciousness in our interaction with the world entirely.⁶ However, in its best sense, affects can also point the way beyond a solipsistic, auto-affective perceiving of the self by the self, in this case by highlighting the way that the cinematic experience, as an embodied experience of narrative, reactivates the link between the self and the world.

Cinema reminds us that, as Baruch Spinoza's theory of "a subjectivity that does not pre-exist its affects but is, on the contrary, constituted by them" (Malabou 7), the human affective experience is one of outside forces or stimuli impinging on the self. If Descartes was the thinker of auto-affection ("I think therefore I am," is the model of an auto-affective state, where the affects of the mind affect themselves and need no outward, impinging affects to constitute subjectivity; it is self-sufficient in its metaphysics; see also Aristotle's definition of God, "thought thinking itself"), an affective account of the self must make room for the self to be constituted by the perception of outside affects. Here we return to the self/other structure of subjectivity discussed in Chapter 1, where the disappearance of the subject in contemporary discourse nonetheless raises the question of the existence of the other. Derrida, following Baruch Spinoza and Emmanuel Levinas, suggests that the way past auto-affection is "originary 'hetero-affection,' where the subject is primarily and profoundly alien to itself" (Malabou 7). Rather than a Cartesian pure self-presence, the experience of self as the experience of the present is never simply a pure experiencing of some-thing impinging on me, rather there is always a sense of something other than itself.⁷ Thus, the structure of subjectivity is built on a structure of non-self-presence, a result of our existence in time. Derrida calls this minimal requirement of repeatability "the trace." Derrida does not discount that there is an auto-affective dimension to the self (a self perceiving of the self, suggesting multiple temporal orders within the self). But, as Catherine Malabou points out, Derrida critiques the notion that the self is pure in some way, and always present, as a transcendental structure. For Derrida auto-affection is never reducible to some pure state, as there is always an irreducible hetero-affection. Malabou's study, "Go Wonder: Subjectivity and Affects in Neurobiological Times," connects Derrida's ideas to recent developments in neuro-science and affect theory, further arguing that the opening of the self to

affective possibilities (in her account, focusing on those of *wonder* and *generosity*) cannot be a choice of the self. It must be “an ontological movement, impersonal and anonymous,” similar to the affects of Massumi but still a form of perceiving the other (25). In my account, there is a sense in which cinema offers an affective opening, which is not determined by the self, but rather comes from the outside and it is these senses of difference that give one the “feeling of existence” (Malabou 25). A sense of *difference* is foundational to this perception of existence, in that each moment is never pure “intuition” of the moment because it involves the memory of the past and the anticipation of the future (Derrida “The Supplement of Origin” 146). This idea that each moment of perception includes a hetero-affective originary *difference* is one explanation of how cinema works to make visible subjective structures of existence, by presenting the links between past and present visually. The affective power of cinema is conditioned by its ability to manifest time, connecting the themes of memory, subject, and cinema, the binding threads of the various discussions in this dissertation.

In its elegiac tone, a film such as *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* communicates a certain kind of narrative anchored in its particular environment, one that focuses on space and time in a way that is lacking in narratives about more diffused modes of consumption. The film makes a case for traditional cinematic modalities—of distribution, consumption, and, yes, narrative—to act as radical spaces for the expression and constitution of subjectivities. Films such as *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*—or the film discussed in the previous chapter, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*—can be read as offering a challenge to normative narrative construction, through their links to the cinema of the postwar art cinemas of Europe and Japan respectively. Though they may seem to be more attuned to experimentation, they are still narrative films, not, strictly speaking, avant-garde films.⁸ Films such as I am describing, in their asynchronous temporality,

intentionally eschewing the newest forms of digital imagery and harkening back in both style and theme to the postwar global art cinemas, are attuned to a certain affective power of cinema and film going. The notion of the “death of cinema” (more specifically, “institutional cinematic forms”) both engenders a transformation of and results in a loss in the potential of the cinematic metaphor to express human experience.

The Experience of Film going in a Haunted Theatre

I now return to and anchor my argument in an analysis of Tsai’s film. *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*’s almost non-existent plot involves the screening of *Dragon Inn*⁹ on the closing night of the Grand Fuhe Theater in Taipei, Taiwan. What little discernible plot the film has focuses on the work of the theatre’s two employees—a projectionist (played by Tsai’s regular collaborator, Lee Kang-sheng) and a ticket collector (Chen Shiang-chyi)—on a rainy closing night, showing them slowly going about their duties as the movie plays. A Japanese tourist (Kiyonobu Mitamura) enters the theatre seeking shelter from the rainstorm raging outside and finds himself in the centre of an increasingly strange experience of film going. When he later encounters a figure he has just seen on the screen, there is even the suggestion that the cinema itself may be haunted by the figures of cinema’s past. The sparse crowd that occupies the theatre is as interested in the extra-cinematic pursuits of food and sex as they are in the flickering images projected on the screen, mostly with little interest in the importance of *Dragon Inn*’s place in the history of Taiwanese cinema.

Addressing these issues through the question of affect, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* shows the way that the loss of the theatre as a communal affective site shapes the possibilities of the post-cinematic era by offering up a portrait of what is lost in cinema’s dissipation. As Leo Charney

and Vanessa Schwartz observe, “the culture of modernity rendered inevitable something like cinema, since cinema’s characteristics evolved from the traits that defined modern life in general” (3). These traits include: a notion of progress, a sense of the ephemeral, and the radical transformation of the human experience of temporality and history. The post-cinematic landscape, itself in part a product of the forces of digitization and global capitalism, is further characterized by the shattering of national and economic boundaries and the transformation of the modes and methods of traditionally regulated film circulation and consumption.

In being specifically structured around a screening of the 1967 film *Dragon Inn*, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* provides a focal point for such an exploration of time, space, and identity. The film is attentive to not only the cinema’s diminishing role in the processes of globalization and modernization but also to cinema’s simultaneous function as history and personal memory. As Jean Ma has noted, “*Goodbye, Dragon Inn* presents the screening of a film as a central narrative event, mirroring and implicating the situation of its own audience, but also further developing this reflexivity as the basis for a historical consciousness of the cinema and the subcultures to which it gives rise” (100). The historical consciousness that Ma identifies is an awareness of the place of the cinema in Taiwanese history, manifested in the form of King Hu’s *Dragon Inn*, as well as the spatiality of the theatrical space itself as a signifier of the urban relationship with modernity. In contrast, the post-cinematic moves the space for such expressions out of the darkness of the cinema and onto the portable and omnipresent screen, which in its ubiquity is both fragmented and pervasive.

Such changes that are identified with the post-cinematic then enact a change in the experience of modernity in the various urban centres of the world. As James Tweedie points out in his essay on Taipei and the globalization of the city film, “new studies of the cinema and the

city [betray] an awareness that the experience of urban life has changed remarkably under the multiple pressures of globalization” (117). These changes in experience can be seen in the developments in digital technology which have reconfigured the relationship between the cinema and modernity. These developments include the ubiquity of cable television, high-speed internet, and smart phones. The screen culture of the modern Asian megalopolis is defined not by long amounts of time spent in a movie theatre but by people watching YouTube videos on their smartphones while riding the subway, or by the video billboards that seem to cover every building and wall in cities such as Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Taipei. The “cinematic city” as conceived of in classical film theory is defined by different orders of relation between the viewers and screens than it is in the experience of the post-cinematic era, differences between public and private spaces, large and small screens, and different forms of agency in determining the mode of viewing.

In *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, the act of film going is understood as something which is out of time: the emanations from its screen literally come from another era. The theatre itself is decaying and rundown. In one sequence, the ticket collector replaces buckets that fill with the water dripping from the leaking roof. The theatre is a place out of time, out of the past, and as such its temporal existence is coming to an end. To borrow once again from Derrida’s association, in *Specters of Marx*, between the spectral figure of his father’s ghost in *Hamlet* and the young Prince’s own proclamation: “The time is out of joint.” The theatre becomes the space where such a disordering of time takes place. It is a particular experience of presence constituted on absence, that is, it is a presence that points to an absence in that particular space. The images on the screen are present in front of the viewer, but they speak to a specific past in which an object or person passed before the camera. However, in contrast, post-cinematic virtual cameras

are no longer defined by these particular temporal configuration: for instance, video devices have the ability to live stream, radically shortening the distance between filming and viewing and blurring the boundary between film going and surveillance. Shane Densen has described the post-cinematic camera as offering a direct line to our innermost processes of becoming-in-time, transforming the relation of the viewer and the camera to the world.¹⁰ The traditionally conceived movie theatre then, as Tweedie describes it, is “rendered obsolete in an age characterized by new media and consumption habits” (125). This obsolescence is signalled in the film by the nearly empty theatre and the decaying and worn out building of the Fuhe Grand Theater itself.

This physical decay of the theatre is another example of cinema’s dissipation. Dissipation is figured in a post-cinematic context as the move from public, modern spaces, maintained for future generations, to private, dislocated spaces constituted from moment to moment. As Jean Ma points out, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* eschews “any attempt to reconstruct an image of the theater in its former glory” (100), instead giving the viewer a detailed look at the decay and the deterioration of a once vibrant space. To use Ma’s language, the theatre in its run down existence points to the “anachronistic” nature of the theatre as both a site for the celebration of film culture, but also as an important destination for gay men in Taipei (101). The film pays attention to the details of this space, to the seats, back rooms, washrooms, and the projection booth in almost over-sensuous detail. For instance, in one extremely slow take, the film tracks the ticket-collector as she makes her way through the back hallways of the theatre to the projection booth, only to miss making a connection with the theatre’s only other employee, the projectionist. It is in the detailed physicality and long takes portrayed on the screen that the distance between post-cinematic consumption and experience and the one in the film are made manifest. This use of

time and space makes manifest the distance between the self and self-constituting hetero-affective stimuli. Rather than present for us the theatre in its glory, Tsai asks the viewer to contemplate the place of the movie theatre in the contemporary era, and thereby, implicitly, what (reduced, diminished, dissipated) place it might still play in film culture as a whole.

I have repeatedly described the theatre's existence in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* as spectral, in reference to the concept of Derrida's "hauntology," that state of non-ontology in which something is neither present nor absent. "Hauntology" and spectrality are useful in describing the place of the theatre in the post-cinematic era, as "hauntology" suggests that the definition of something in the present moment is founded upon a state of being (ontology) which is no longer present. That is, in Derrida's formulation, the spectral is that which "haunts" the present, by being ever more essential in its absence, much as the "specter of communism" haunted Marx's Europe as it was ravaged by the worst excesses of early-industrialization and capitalism. For Derrida, communism was an absent necessity, called for precisely at the moment of its disappearance from the world stage at the end of the Cold War. Likewise, an understanding of cinema is needed all the more at this moment as its institutional role fades. Cinema, like communism, provides a structure for what should be. In this way, the spectral takes on an ethical imperative. I would say that the ghost of the cinema in this way haunts the post-cinematic era. I believe that in many ways the cinema has a similar relationship of structuration to the post-cinematic. Current technologies are without a doubt indebted to some notion of the cinematic. It's loss or replacement is constituent for the ascendancy of the new media technologies that follow it. While the fact of simply being absent does not make the institutional cinema spectral, the consciousness of what is lost in its disappearance functions as more than nostalgia. There is a sense in which an understanding of the ways that it functions is necessary to understanding the

visual media flows that continue to structure the affective experience of the present moment. As David Rodowick has aptly pointed out in *The Virtual Life of Film*, despite their ostensible difference, post-cinematic technologies and new media works are nonetheless “imagined from a cinematic metaphor” and that an “idea of cinema persists or subsists within the new media” (viii). At the same time, these new technologies displace traditional notions of cinematic time and space: one can now ostensibly watch whenever one wants, pausing and rewinding at will, possibilities which were not possible in the cinema which presaged such new forms of the moving image. At the same time, much of the content consumed in the post-cinematic era has its origin in the cinema: cinema’s past constitutes a great deal of the *content* of the post-cinematic present, in some form. Consider the difference between streaming a long film like *Andrei Rublev* on the Criterion Collection’s Hulu Plus channel on one’s iPad, all the while having the option to pause and resume the film whenever one wants, against the experience of seeing it in a theatre under the historical conditions of its first release in the West. The experience of repeatability is different, as it includes both the experience of sitting in the movie theatre for four hours without a break and the knowledge of the intervening past between its release and today. While it might be tempting to simply attribute the sensible difference to Jameson’s formulation of postmodernity and the flattening of historical experience, there is something else, in terms of the stimuli in the two situations and affective dimensions they result in. For instance, the darkened theatre focuses the eye in different ways that the smaller screen and the viewer has a different relationship to the home environment than to the public space of the theatre in terms of control of environmental factors and interruptions.

Goodbye, Dragon Inn, on the other hand, portrays a cinematic experience of an entirely different order, yet still existing in the context of early-twenty-first century Taipei. The Fuhe

Grand theatre may be having its final night before closing its doors for good, but the theatre itself still serves various purposes both cinematic and extra-cinematic. Tweedie describes the film as being “set in a theater rendered obsolete in an age characterized by new media and consumption habits,” and argues that “the film evokes a space at once sick and ‘haunted’ by the relics of the preceding era, haunted above all by a failure to maintain the utopian promise embodied in the cavernous theater built for a past city and its imagined audience of the future” (124). What was the utopian promise of the cinema? That the huge theatre would be filled with an audience still invested in the experience of film going in a Taipei that has been radically changed by the forces of global politics and economics. Again, this haunting is not entirely dissimilar from the haunting presence that Derrida describes in *Specters of Marx*. It is after the fall of communism, post-Berlin Wall, and in the wake of the proclamations of the end of history and the “triumph” of capitalism, says Derrida, that Marx’s “injunctions” have such a great force. Likewise, the triumph of the post-cinematic over forms of institutional cinema, the “death of the cinema” as the great creative force and centre of urban life, ironically makes the lessons of cinema all the more important. The failure of the theatre itself points to the success of the cinematic metaphor, which is so thoroughly embedded in all aspects of contemporary life. Put another way, the death of cinema is a result of its utter dissemination, its dissipation into all aspects of our contemporary life. The spectre of the cinema continues to haunt the current post-cinematic paradigm.

This particular tension between the decay and loss of the theatre and its ironically continuing importance plays out in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* through the intangibility of the cinematic memories it portrays, and this intangibility mirrors the attendant impossibility of a metaphysical underpinning for the subject in the post-cinematic era. Furthermore, the changes to the way that we experience the viewing of a particular film—which has material effects and

constitutes a particular relationship to the self vis-a-vis the screen—are made manifest in the film’s attention to the details, both pleasant and annoying, of the theatrical experience. The material experience of film going in *Goodbye Dragon Inn* can be seen in the way the various theatre attendees impinge on each other’s personal space, placing their feet in each other’s face, or crowding each other at a bathroom urinal, as the affective forces generate stimuli beyond pleasures emanating from the screen: for the theatre goers, the sensations of touch and smell, of sticky floors or popcorn, that accompany the experience go beyond the visual and aural senses primarily associated with the cinematic.

I see this material experience of film going as being something that is lost in the dissipated experience of the post-cinematic. The post-cinematic disorders the experiences of public and private in new ways. While the home viewing of films can be seen as the privatization of formerly public acts, the film going experience portrayed in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is one of private, intimate moments enacted in public spaces such as the theatre. Jean Ma suggests that “Such a manner of portrayal emphasizes the historicity of the theater, its anachronistic existence as a remnant of an obsolete and marginalized film culture, exemplified on the one hand by the golden age of the *wuxia pian* and King Hu as the reigning auteur of this era, and on the other hand by a subculture of cruising that has marked the theater as a destination for gay men” (101). At the same time that the film offers a requiem for the movie theatre, it represents a kind of “queer nostalgia,” to use Ma’s terminology.¹¹ The thematic visibility of the gay subculture in Taiwan, relegated and repressed until relatively recently in that society, and in Taiwanese films more generally, belies the furtive, dark, hidden spaces of the theatre which are portrayed as the site of queer desire in Tsai’s film. In one sequence, the film illustrates how the theatre space, in its public nature, creates the possibility of private, intimate encounters which are ironically

dissipated in the post-cinematic. In a dark and narrow back hallway of the theatre, the Japanese tourist approaches one of the other patrons with a cigarette, staring intently at him as if wordlessly expressing a desire he himself is not aware of. After lighting his cigarette, the other man comments “Do you know this theatre is haunted? This theatre is haunted,” and after pausing a moment, simply states, “Ghosts.” The Japanese tourist moves intimately closer to the other man, placing his head on his shoulders until the other man leaves. As the stranger walks away, the Japanese tourist states, in Japanese, “I am Japanese.” The entire sequence runs nearly three minutes with only the two exchanges of dialogue. The long take and dim lighting create a space for intimate encounters in a public space, between people who do not even share the same language. The film here also links gay desire with the figure of the ghost. Homosexuality has long been figured as “other,” leading to its representation and figuration as a spectral and phantasmic subjectivity. In *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* spectrality, when combined with the figure of the untimely theatre, links gay experiences to the cinematic space.

A Queer or Spectral Nostalgia and Dissipation

The film then combines the two figurations of cinephilia and homosexuality as being out of time, and belonging to a different era even as they find their full, or at least more diffused, expression in contemporary society. For instance, the ostensible triumph of gay rights in modern societies¹² makes certain kinds of gay experiences obsolete: or, put another way, there is no need to cruise for partners in a dark theatre bathroom stall when one can celebrate one’s desire openly and, in many contemporary societies, get married. Similarly, since cinema is everywhere and always available, why sit in the dark at a certain time and put up with the distractions and discomfort as portrayed in this film? The film makes an analogy between the experiences of

cinephilia and homosexuality. Thus, in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, as Jean Ma puts it, “we encounter a movie theater that is queer in its hauntedness and haunted in its queerness” (101). This hauntedness is portrayed as literal. The aforementioned sequence in which the Japanese tourist finds the fellow theatregoer who asks him, “Do you know that this theatre is haunted?”, in one of the film’s few lines of dialogue, and reinforces this connection between the experience of gay desire and cinema’s past. The ghosts are both literally the figures of cinema’s past on the screen and the figures who find themselves doubled in the seats of the theatre.

Cinematic history is made tangible in the presence of the actors from *Dragon Inn* in the audience, as amongst the sparse audience of the film we find the stars of *Dragon Inn*, Miao Tien and Shih Chun. Their presence in the seats, viewing images of their past on the screen is an example of how the cinematic space of the theatre disorders a simple binary between the viewer and the film, “expanding upon the film’s motif of haunting” (Ma 113). The duplication of the actor’s past and present selves points to the “simultaneity of multiple temporalities within the same locale” (Ma 113), and reinforces the idea of haunting in the film. The film often alternates between shots of the actors faces and views of the actors watching themselves on the screen. These alternating images culminate in an image of Shih Chun quietly weeping from one eye. Jean Ma describes it as “the nostalgic gaze,” noting that it “encapsulates the mood of the film with a remarkable and subtle intensity” (115). Nostalgia in this sense communicates a sense of loss at the same time as it articulates an impossible desire to recapture the past. It is ironically constituted on a longing for past happy moments, which manifest as a yearning or pain which cannot be fulfilled. Thus, the early moderns classified it as a form of melancholy. Pam Cook defines “nostalgia films” as those films which “nostalgically gaze at exquisitely designed period clothes and sets,” at the glory days of the past (5). In staging the screening of *Dragon Inn*, Tsai’s

film does suggest a certain longing and admiration for the work of King Hu and the “high point” of a certain period of Taiwanese cinema. However, as Cook notes, these kinds of films “use cinematic strategies of nostalgia in different ways to question the relationship between past and present, then and now” (5). Cook’s notion of the nostalgia film is helpful in making the point that this kind of film is as much concerned with the present as with the past. In the same way, while *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* celebrates a certain period of Taiwanese cinema’s past, I argue that it is especially concerned with the state of cinema today. Nostalgia films challenge a particular notion of progress in their longing gaze upon the past.

This challenge to the notion of progress is essential to my reading of Tsai’s film and the understanding of cinematic dissipation. While I have argued that the post-cinematic in one sense can be understood as the triumph of the cinematic over all other medial forms, there is a sense in which the particular affective experience of viewing the film in the theatre is significantly different from the normative mode of viewing in the post-cinematic era. What would it mean for stars Miao Tien or Shih Chun to watch *Dragon Inn* nearly forty years later on their own digital device rather than in the theatre, where the simultaneity of the screen image and their presence in front of the screen play differently? How are the public and private experiences different? I would suggest that the experience of an auto-affection (self perceiving of the self), which is always grounded in an originary hetero-affection, is differently configured when one’s own past is viewed in public rather than merely consumed in private. *Goodbye Dragon Inn* articulates an asynchronous relationship with post-cinematic temporality, and points to the unique affective experience of the collective act of film going.

Tsai’s characteristic use of long takes and empty spaces forces the viewer to be attuned to the non-linguistic, phenomenological experience of the theatre space: noises, movements, and

distractions which impinge upon a rational *and* affective body. A sense of the temporal is essential to narrativization, as in temporality's relation to the minimal structuring principle of repeatability or iterability, thus cinema acts as the meeting point of the rational, structured self and the affective structuring forces that I have identified in the film, including desire, enjoyment, an annoyance. *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, in its attention to the bodily action of film going, reminds us of the embodied act of viewing itself, and the way that time and space play out in experience.

I see the role of affect in this film as relating to Gilles Deleuze's description of "affection" in *The Movement-Image*, occupying the space between perception and action. Deleuze writes that affection plays the part of "external movements that we 'absorb', that we refract, and which does not transform itself into either objects of perception or acts of the subject" (65). In other words, affection is not equatable to either the perceived images on the screen or the effects in and of the viewing subject, but something in-between. This affection-image plays a key role in Deleuze's theory of cinema, but is not comprehensive in explaining its effects. The affection-image for Deleuze is found par excellence in the close-up, for example in the image of Shih Chun watching himself on the screen. Here the structuring gap that emerges in auto-affection is made manifest, as affection is not found precisely in the act of viewing the image or in the detail of facial responses in the image that clue us into the emotional effects of the image. The affection-image is described by Deleuze as operating along an axis of wonder and desire; in highlighting this, Deleuze points the way beyond a solipsistic, auto-affective "perceiving of the self by the self," and reactivates the link to the world that cinema can be. This helps to illuminate the effect of a film like *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, which moves beyond the dualistic conception of subjectivity even in its materialist forms.

Goodbye, Dragon Inn draws the viewer's attention to the affective possibilities of the theatre space through its formal construction. The theatre becomes an "any-space-whatever" (*espace quelconque*)—a Deleuzian articulation of a non-determined space, "which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations or the connection of its own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways. It is a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as the pure locus of the possible" (109). The hetero-affective relies on space and time for its structuring of experience through the possibility of difference. We have considered the role of memory and anticipation, but what about the space necessary to experience. Visual auto-affection requires a distance in order to be both the seer and the seen, reminding us again of the irreducible hetero-affection. In other words, the any-space-whatever disrupts the homogeneous linkages that make overlooking hetero-affection possible. For instance, the same way that a mirror makes constituent hetero-affection manifest, giving visual representation to the distance between the self as seer and seen, any-space-whatevers also amplify or manifest a sense of distance that disrupts the sense of wholeness. Deleuze suggests that these any-space-whatevers can be constructed through the use of shadows, as we see in the corners of the movie theatre. It is the construction of depth that the theatre space offers, in contrast to the isolated monad that defines the experience of post-cinematic viewing. In the theatre as any-space-whatever, what is made possible is the space for alternate experiences of history, sexuality, and time. At the same time, in keeping with the post-cinematic affect that we have earlier described, the notion of the individually constituted subject is disrupted.

Dissipation, experienced as the over-flowing of affect, rather than opening up the space for alternative subjectivities, is never attributed to any particular subject at all. What actually occurs in the post-cinematic era is a loss of particular cinematic experiences, even as the sheer

number of cinematic experiences increases. The irony of the post-cinematic is that, through the proliferation of viewing practices, experience becomes more singular, less open to the affective flows of communal experience, and therefore more dissipated. As I pointed out above, Jean Ma suggests that the larger political project of Tsai's films is the envisioning of "resistant forms of subjectivity through alternative [anachronistic] habitations of the present" (98-99). While the loss of the theatrical screening as a focal point could be seen as freeing, as post-cinematic images proliferate beyond the theatre space, the dissipated cinematic experience can actually be quite limiting. This critique of post-cinematic affects, rather than being as reactionary or anti-technological in nature, stems in part from a critique of late-capitalism which dominates and shapes the range of experiences in the contemporary moment.

My use of the term dissipation has hinged on this question of the post-cinematic era, and attendant postmodern condition, being characterized by either a surfeit or waning of affect. The answer to this question will have significant repercussions for how we interpret the radical potential of post-cinematic technologies and how global capitalism continues to shape the potentiality of cinematic experience. As the theatre space wanes as the locale in which the cinematic is primarily experienced, the affective impulses of the cinematic experience will still be experienced by viewing bodies through the mediation of a screen.

Conclusion

The irony of the post-cinematic era is that the sense of loss, the death of cinema, is experienced through the over-whelming proliferation of cinematic images. Cinema as a medial practice still offers us the possibility of moving beyond the dualistic conceptions of subjectivity that I see as persisting in the various theories of cinematic affect and cognitivism, even in their

most materialist forms. *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, in its melancholic nostalgia for both the act of film going and the attendant pleasures and affects of the movie theatre, highlights the loss that nonetheless occurs despite the rich variety of viewing experiences offered by the post-cinematic era. The viewer who watches *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* with a nostalgic eye may miss out on what the film is telling us about our post-cinematic moment. As with Jameson's point regarding nostalgia, in the postmodern world "the sense people have of themselves and their own moment of history may ultimately have nothing whatsoever to do with its reality" (281). The structures of relations that shape the world are radically different. The nostalgia film in Tsai's hands becomes less a longing for past modes and experiences and more a radical re-attunement to the possibilities of the cinematic. A film like *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* illuminates the role of embodiment in the experience of narrative and the productive role that affect can have in shaping such experiences, without overwhelming the sensory body. What attention to the embodied experience of film going, and the way it mirrors the experience of experience itself, bears witness to is that an overwhelming number of choices may result in no choice at all, and an overload of affect might actually result in a loss of feeling. The post-cinematic experience brings with it the loss of a range of affective experiences and articulations of time and space only possible in public settings. Our collective experience of film going is dissipated.

¹ Gaudreault and Marion explore many of the issues surrounding the "post-cinematic" in their dossier entitled *The Kinematic Turn: Film in the Digital Era and its Ten Problems*. For them the appellation "institutional cinema" distinguishes cinema in the sense I am describing it from early cinematic attractions such as the Cinématographe and Kinetograph. In their understanding, "The emergence of cinema, in the sense we understand the term today, dates [...] from 1910s," and note that "Time was required for production codes and norms—and thus interpretive codes and norms—to appear. Or, if you prefer, to be instituted" (6).

² Movie attendance in America dropped dramatically in the post-war era, from a peak of 4.7 billion admissions in 1946, stabilizing at around 1 billion admissions per year in the 1960s. There have been many such studies chronicling this phenomenon. For one relevant example see Michelle Pautz, "The Decline in Average Weekly Cinema Attendance, 1930-2000" in *Issues in Political Economy* 11(2002): 54-65.

³ Likewise, Ang Lee, who has cited King Hu's films as a significant influence on his own *wuxia* film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), can claim a transnational identity, as a Taiwan-born Chinese who later moved to America. In an interview with Roger Ebert, Lee claims, "I was never a citizen of any particular place...My parents

left China to go to Taiwan. We were outsiders there. We moved to the States. Outsiders. Back to China. Now we were outsiders there, too -- outsiders from America" (Ebert).

⁴ There is a commonly held notion that we live in a golden age of film accessibility. While today we can watch King Hu's 1960s Taiwanese classics, such as *Dragon Inn* or *A Touch of Zen*, on Blu-ray in wonderful 4K digital restorations by Masters of Cinema or the Criterion Collection, all in the comfort of our own home, these remain niche products with limited production runs and high-price points. Such facts suggest that the audience for these products remains a small segment of the film viewing community worldwide. Several years ago the Criterion Collection experimented with dual-format DVD/Blu-ray releases, citing the ability to print "small quantities" and reduce waste (Becker "Why Dual-Format?"). The unfettered engagement with cinema history remains the exception rather than the rule. Given the economics of film distribution and preservation, the perceived digital wealth of cinema's past treasures may turn out to be an illusion.

⁵ Research and reporting on the limitations of online streaming and digital access are growing topics. See for instance Wheeler Winston Dixon's book *Streaming: Movies, Media, and Instant Access* (UP of Kentucky, 2013) for a look at the ways that streaming has changed film access, including the challenges to the endeavour in terms of financial viability and to film preservation. Additionally, recent articles have outlined the challenges faced by cinephiles and educators in the streaming age. Film critic Calum Marsh writes in a recent *National Post* article about the challenges posed to Canadian cinephiles by differences in regional access, "There are no silent films on Shomi. There are no screwball comedies, no film noirs, no black and white westerns, no classics of German Expressionism or the French New Wave. The contemporary landscape seems similarly narrow: no films from Romania, nothing from Portugal, nada from Thailand, Turkey or Iran. These are monumental genres and thriving national cinemas. In Canada, online, it's as if they don't exist." A article by Nathan McAlone in *Business Insider* shows that this is not just a Canadian phenomenon, citing a 32% drop in the number of titles available on US Netflix between 2014 and 2016. In a *LA Review of Books* piece, "The New Canon," film instructor Anne Helen Petersen discusses the way that the limitations and ubiquity of Netflix are shaping the canons of film and television with which students are familiar, to radical effect. Clearly there are very real and growing concerns among film preservationists, cinephiles, and educators.

⁶ Galen Strawson recently wrote a piece in the opinion pages of the *New York Times* ("Consciousness Isn't a Mystery. It's Matter." 16 May 2016) on this very temptation to mystify consciousness. He writes that it is not conscious experience that is a mystery, on the contrary, as per Bertrand Russell, it is the one thing that is very familiar to everyone. Rather it is the nature of physical matter and how consciousness arises from it that is the difficult problem. He suggests that the thinkers of this "Very Large Mistake" (that we know more about matter than we do) run the risk of becoming "dualists," suggesting that consciousness is not material, or "eliminativists," denying the existence of consciousness. In my view, affect theory, in its desire to do away with intentionality, runs the risk of "eliminativism."

⁷ This otherness is a function of the way that experience is conditioned by an experience of time, and therefore memory and anticipation, which are functions of an experience's repeatability or as Derrida terms it, "iterability." See my discussion in Chapter 1 about cinema and self-presence in relation to Derrida.

⁸ The question of what constitutes the "avant-garde," is an old one. While usually reserved for non-narrative experimental films such as the work of Stan Brakhage, Bruce Baillie, or Michael Snow, in the postwar film critic circles of Bazin and the *Cahier du cinéma*, the question of what properly constituted the various avant-gardes was a heated one. Bazin suggested that the true avant-garde was the work of a director who pushes or "enlarges" the possibilities of film language and themes. By Bazin's definition, narrative works such as Tarkovsky's or Apichatpong's films could be fairly considered avant-garde, as I suggested in Chapter 2 for Tarkovsky, but here I reserve the term for a more traditional understanding of avant-garde.

⁹ Also known as *Dragon Gate Inn* in some translations.

¹⁰ Densen also suggests that the promise of such images is that they might offer a link to the present in a "post-indexical" world, in what he calls a "post-cinematic realism." Such notions support the idea that cinematic structures are not merely an approximation of memory, but actually are the structure of memory. As alluded to above, digital surveillance cameras are able to make a live recording of events as they happen, allowing for nearly instant recall. Densen's comments were made in a presentation and discussion at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Atlanta, April 2016.

¹¹ Here Ma blurs the line between "spectral" and "nostalgic."

¹² I say "ostensible" to acknowledge the ways in which gay individuals still face opposition and discrimination in society, even in the wake of civil triumphs.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I want to first revisit the assumptions and guiding questions that this dissertation started with. I began by looking at how cinema is able to offer a picture of mental processes including perception, attention, and, most importantly, memory. The central point here, gleaned from the work of scholars and theorists working at the intersection of cinema and memory, in particular Russell Kilbourn and Alison Landsberg, is that cinema is itself an instantiation or materialization of memory. Throughout the dissertation, I have identified the ways that the films under discussion act not just as metaphors for memory, but are themselves forms of memory. Examples of this include not only how cinema can testify to actual past events, as in *Mirror*'s use of documentary footage, but how cinema is a materialization of sound and visual perceptions that can become part of the viewer's memory. I noted how in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, the difference between the focalization of his past lives and the viewers experience of them are no different in what they tell the viewer of the past. However, this builds off earlier observations by the aforementioned scholars: my main theoretical advancement is that because of its status as memory images, film can serve as the material for the construction and framing of our sense of self. This conclusion raises another, more vexing question, that is addressed throughout this dissertation: given the sense that the discourses of postmodernism have done away with master concepts like the subject, why do these films persist in tackling themes of selfhood and identity? In other words, hasn't the post-structural deconstruction of subjectivity, and, subsequently, the turn to affect theory, done away with these structures of thinking? I have argued that the persistence of these themes is precisely because of cinema's essential connection to memory. Rather than emerging from the imposition

of out-dated structures of thinking, these themes manifest in the films because, as a memory, cinema can provide a link between the image of memory and the outside world.

Each of these films problematize notions of subjectivity through the images of selfhood that they construct, to varying degrees and purposes. I have shown how this problematizing need not be a straightforward rejection of notions of selfhood, but can serve as a productive force for considering one's ethical stance toward the world. In the case of Tarkovsky, I see his films as demonstrating the way that cinematic perception is constituted through the same mediated experiences of memory as lived experience. For Tarkovsky, this was rooted in the personalist philosophy he expressed in his films, but is not limited to it. Films like *Mirror* and *Andrei Rublev* portray the self through a non-metaphysical view of ethics, as rooted in a struggle against the cultural and historical forces of the world. In another example, *Upstream Color*, through its narrative and aesthetics, suggests that, even if the visible, material world offers an incomplete framework from which to understand how humans constitute meaning and identity, any particulars of interiority or metaphysical grounding remain unknowable. In contrast, in *The Tree of Life*, Jack O'Brien's crisis of faith reorients him toward the "way of grace" espoused by his mother, and a focus on pursuing relationship rooted in love. Rather than resolve the crisis in terms of establishing a firm source for his subjectivity—the film's aesthetic choices can be read as a self-reflexive consideration of both cinema's and the mind's imaginative and *mnemonic* powers—the choice is framed as an ethical one.

The arc of my dissertation leads to an acknowledgement that the particular structures of feeling, which post-cinematic media communicate and which constitute contemporary postmodern identities, are indeed ones of alienation, of overwhelming networks and flows of information and global capital, even while, at the same time, a hope is held out that cinema can

re-attune us and connect us with the world by revealing those structures. Much as Jean Luc-Nancy describes a deconstructive understanding of self where “a self is made of a relationship *to* self, or of a presence *to* self” (*Listening* 8), these films lead to an understanding that all knowledge is, ultimately, self-knowledge, and originates with human knowers, not objective facts. Rather than plunge one into despair, such an understanding simply reveals a more nuanced understanding of how ontology and epistemology operate in one’s everyday life.

Still, that sense of alienation and disorientation remains the legacy of the modernist postwar art cinema, as it emerged in Europe and Japan, which is one shared genealogical thread among all the films in this dissertation. Within the dissertation the postwar art film provides a framework for stylistic interpretation and a thematic template. At first the picture of an alienated character who has “*lost all her essential contacts to others, to the world, to the past, and to the future or lost even the foundations of her personality*” (Kovács *Screening Modernism* 66) might seem like a relic of the postwar vogue for such characters, born out of the trauma of the war and resulting transformation of the world order, by the end of this dissertation, it is clear that such a description might equally describe the dissipated experience of postmodernity.

The difference resides in the changes in the conditions of production and modalities of circulation and consumption of the contemporary era: the financial, consumerist, and individual flows that define global, transnational culture. Transnationalism then emerges in the dissertation not as a vague categorical distinction, but provides a link between the material of the film and its context of production, distribution, and reception. The increasingly transnational character of cinema only highlights the difficulty or impossibility of assigning a fixed national identity, as these themes manifest themselves in the material representation of the film. For instance, the defining structure of the characters in *Melancholia* isn’t their nationality but their relationship to

global capitalism as members of the upper bourgeoisie. In some ways, it reflects the conditions of advanced or late capitalism (the economic expression of postmodern culture), and the way that media circulate beyond any borders. The benefits of transnationalism as a concept are in its signifying status of cosmopolitanism, and the way it transcends narrow national boundaries which only reinforce the notion of the subject as a given. At the same time, its very name presupposes a concept of the national for it to transcend, which then comes with the anxiety of the authenticity (or authority) such labels carry. Throughout this dissertation transnationalism becomes linked to the processes that have contributed to the destabilization of the subject.

One consequence of the choice of my subject matter that emerges over the course of the dissertation is the revelation of how global art cinema retains a space for a critique of systems and structures—of the subject, of capitalism, of narrative conventionality. It is narrative, not avant-garde; it is distributed through a dedicated system of festivals and “art house” theatres, yet, because of this, still very much a product. As I noted in the theoretical Chapter 1, the very conception of a global art cinema hinges on its constituent impurity, its ambiguous institutional space. The films in this dissertation likewise make manifest the contradictions and paradoxes in the constitution of the self at the same time that they continue to privilege individual identity. As I noted in the introduction, the very challenges that these films raise, and which are often posed as the defining breaks in cinema’s account of itself, can be interpreted generally as extensions of the same philosophical and theoretical questions of posthumanism, postmodernism, and the postsecular.

Throughout this dissertation, I have offered a reading and re-contextualizing of the classical film theorist André Bazin. The recuperation of Bazin from his long time reputation as a crude realist, perpetuated in readings of the “Ontology” essay as being primarily about

indexicality/iconicity, has been championed in the work of Phillip Rosen, Dudley Andrew, Victor Fan, and others.¹ While Rosen et al. do focus on the role that belief plays in Bazin's writing, across this dissertation I have made a renewed case that Bazin should be considered a significant thinker of the role that subjectivity and perception plays in cinema. In terms of how Bazin describes cinema as a manifestation of human subjectivity, cinema can be related to the larger (often unacknowledged) metaphysical concerns of the cultures and social contexts in which it exists. In this sense, I see his work as prescient of certain post-structuralist debates, particularly his articulation of the paradoxes of cinematic realism. Through a revisiting of Bazin's theories, I have articulated a description of how cinema can be constituted on the border between immaterial and material and yet draw us as viewers back to the materiality of the world. As the recent "new materialist" turn in the humanities reminds us, such seeming immaterialities as *information* and *meaning* are nonetheless embedded in material networks, suggesting the enduring relevance of Bazin's insistence on the interconnections of perception and material reality.

In the end, what are we left with in terms of the subject? Following on the heels of the deconstructive turn in the humanities, is the general turn to affect among humanities scholars. The effect of this has been, as Ruth Leys has noted in an interview with Marlene Goldman, "to shift attention from the level of political debate or ideology to the level of the person's subliminal or sub-personal material-affective responses, where it is held [by theorists of affect such as Brian Massumi], political influences do their real work" (668). I have followed Leys lead in linking this shift to a commitment among certain theorists of affect to doing away with intentionality, to making the role of affect or meaning "arbitrary or contingent" (Leys "Interview" 668). While affect and the embodied nature of experience certainly have a role to

play in my dissertation, as I point out in Chapter 6 and my discussion of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, I want to return attention to cinema's role in constructing reasons, beliefs, intentions, and meanings by emphasizing the ethical role of experience and memory. Future lines of questioning may involve probing the effect of such theories that hold action and behaviour as separate from consciousness and control, hopefully reinvigorating a kind of cultural critic of such systems, while remaining informed by any new developments in the field.

Returning to the films themselves that are the subject of this dissertation, they suggest a few things about the desires that continue to guide the postmodern condition, if that indeed remains the appropriate label in a post-affective context: human beings have a desire to be known; a desire to know the other; a desire to understand ourselves and the processes and structures of selfhood; in other words, a desire to be a subject and subject to. The “cinematic” remains a guiding metaphor for screen cultures as-a-whole in the post-cinematic era, emphasizing the perspectival nature of human experience. What we continue to find is that cinema, as a concept, continues to function to mediate the experiences of living in contemporary societies and to illuminate the way that memory structures the relationship between one's identity and the world.

¹ See especially the collection edited by Dudley Andrew with Hervé Joubert-Laurecin, *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife* (2011).

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