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# Film After Authority: the Transition to Democracy and the End of Politics

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FILM AFTER AUTHORITY  
THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY AND THE END OF POLITICS

by  
Kalling Heck

A Dissertation Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

FILM AFTER AUTHORITY  
THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY AND THE END OF POLITICS

by

Kalling Heck

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017  
Under the Supervision of Professor Patrice Petro

A comparison of films made after the transition from authoritarianism or totalitarianism to democracy, this dissertation addresses the ways that cinema can digest and extend moments of political transition. By comparing films from four different nations—the Italian *Germany Year Zero*, Hungarian *Sátántangó*, South Korean *Woman on the Beach*, and American *Medium Cool*—in relation to ideas drawn from critical and political theory, this project examines how and why these wildly diverse films turn to ambiguity as their primary means to disrupt the ravages of unchecked authority. By intervening in discussions of aesthetics and politics, this dissertation contends that ambiguous aesthetics has the capacity to help us see the world differently, and is therefore productive for any revolutionary undertaking. Accounting for questions of art and authority more broadly, this project examines the perhaps impossible task of creating a work of art that can at once create meaning and reject its own authority. The significant conclusion of my project, then, is that ambiguity is a coherent response to the end of authoritarian politics, but that its total rejection of authority always rediscovers the difficulties of inaction and ineffectiveness that arise from the assumption that extension and waiting are the only solutions that can yield radical change.

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For Mary

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This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of William Heck.

## INTRODUCTION

### Four Angels

There are at least two versions of Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's *Vladimir et Rosa* (1971, credited to the filmmaking collective The Dziga Vertov Group). The major version to have been distributed tells the story of the group of eight political activists charged for inciting to riot at the Democratic National Convention in 1968. Shot in the aggressive and abstract style that the pair was known for at the time, the film explores the court case but refuses to report on either the case's context or its outcome. It is instead content to vaguely allegorize the trial and to satirize the authority figures for their perpetration of what was surely a farce. Through bold colors, direct address, smash cuts, and general discord, the film, rather than directly rebuking the case, renders the trial totally incoherent, an abstract collage of competing images and dialogue that mirrors the nonsensical charges brought against the defendants.

The second version is remarkably different. The film's chief financier Barney Rosset organized and recorded a screening for two of the defendants from the actual case, the irreverent and sardonic Abbie Hoffman and Jeffrey Rubin, and recorded the results.<sup>1</sup> Displeased with the film, the pair laugh and yell at the screen, mocking its ambiguity and its unwillingness to accurately represent the specifics of the trial. "It's not keeping my interests" Rubin, towards the beginning of the film, posits, his head rested in his hand. "It's ridiculous," he continues, as Hoffman laughs. This version of the film continues by cutting between Godard and Gorin's footage and this new audience of Hoffman and Rubin, the audio of the film heard aloud in the theater linking the two spaces. The longer the film

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Martin, "Barney Rosset Dies at 89; Defied Censors, Making Racy a Literary Staple," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Feb. 22, 2012.



continues, the more frustrated Rubin and Hoffman become. The primary concern of these viewers moves at some point from speculation as to which characters in the film represent them and their fellow defendants—an investigation that quickly leads nowhere—to a discussion of the broader goals of the film. Hoffman at one point proposes, once familiar with the film's style, that the major function of this film is to provide coded messages to The Weather Underground—a radical leftist group—laughing, but refusing details. While Hoffman continues to attempt to decode the film's hidden meanings, Rubin grows increasingly irritated: "The trial was more exciting than this movie" he contends summarily halfway into the film.

The major critique, however, comes via Hoffman, when responding to an unheard question: "Say we had this film made in the middle of the trial, right?" he begins,

We take it around say we organize demonstrations at the end of the trial. We take this film, we show it to a large group of young kids, you know, I don't get the feeling that they would want to like get involved in like a TBA. Or if we showed it at a fund raising party I don't think people would want to give us any money. I mean what could we do with the film? Say if we had it in the middle of...

He is interrupted by the figure who asked the question, escalating the conversation by referring to what was, presumably, an unheard accusation from Hoffman: "That doesn't make him a C.I.A. agent just because his films don't move anybody to do anything. You gotta have a little better connection than that even for my paranoia." After a bit more discussion, the topic is again broached when Hoffman continues, "He serves the interest of the C.I.A. with this move definitely." He is interrupted again, "So is he paid or unpaid?" the figure asks. "Yea, I would say paid" Hoffman responds. "Paid?" "Yea, I mean there's rumors of that."

That Abbie Hoffman accuses Jean-Luc Godard of being paid by the C.I.A. to produce a film so ambiguous that it undermines the political potentials of this trial is striking, but helpful too in establishing the political dynamics of ambiguity. That is, this accusation from Hoffman reveals (with some stress) the distrust that so often meets ambiguity, a distrust arising from the possibility for an ambiguous object to carry messages and meanings that are difficult to gather and even more difficult to control. This problem takes on particular immediacy in moments where political expediency is thought to be necessary. Indeed what Hoffman and Rubin's responses present are exactly the tensions that ambiguous cinema produces in moments that seem to call for a more "engaged" mode of politics, which is the major theme of this dissertation.

For these reasons, I will address here the political potentials of ambiguity, its advantages as well as its drawbacks, by examining the history and trajectory of the cinematic mode that has taken the title of art cinema. I will then explore this category of art cinema in relation to Walter Benjamin's ideas on weak messianism. Ultimately I will strive to show how ambiguity can function as a political category, a topic I further explore in the coming chapters. I undertake this study in the hopes of examining the value as well as the failings of the turn to ambiguity in the context of political turmoil, and I do so by discussing four wildly different films that employ tactics similar to Godard and Gorin's. These films were each made in and around moments of intense political change and consist of Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (1948), Béla Tarr's *Sátántangó* (1994), Hong Sang-soo's *Woman on the Beach* (2006), and Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool* (1969). While this study will largely focus on the political potentials of these films, it is important to also keep in sight the critiques, perhaps those less conspiratorial than Hoffman's, but critiques

that nonetheless contend that these films fail to meet the demands of certainty and direction that their respective contexts seem to mandate.

But first the virtues. Each of the four films addressed here was made after, and in my reading, in light of the transition from authoritarianism or totalitarianism to democracy.<sup>2</sup> Each furthermore turns to ambiguity as a system for contending with this transition. These films in fact map a trend, perhaps a tendency, towards ambiguity in these contexts, a repeating principle that interacts both with the history of art cinema and the unique circumstances of each of these films. Ambiguity, and this is key, in each of these examples is turned to in order to both digest and deflect the effects of a wildly unchecked authority. For many critics contemporary with their production these films are simply “apolitical”. I contend, however, that ambiguity under these conditions is itself a form of politics, as it serves in each of these films as a total rejection of the systems of authority that have so recently in each of these cases been deposed, a gesture that ideally likewise bars the possibility for their return. But, within the spectrum of authorities here rejected falls each of these film’s own capacity to present a coherent idea, for any clearly articulated concept must be built upon a system of meaning and argumentation derived from a hierarchical structure, which is to say an authority. This rejection of authority takes ambiguity as its corollary, and it is this recourse to ambiguity—so central, as we shall see, to the history of art cinema—which produces an anti-authoritarian politics despite the barriers to meaning that it presents. In my view, this ambiguity is essential to global art cinema and, as this study will prove, furthermore linked to an anti-authoritarian stance.

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<sup>2</sup> The distinction between authoritarianism and totalitarianism is important here, and will be discussed in depth in the first chapter. But it is for the moment sufficient to note that I think of these as related but different systems of governance, and that these differences are to be found primarily in their respective relationships to authority.

The specificity of this project is derived in large part from the differences, in addition to the obvious similarities, between these films. This is to say that the four films examined here and their respective contexts allow for views of remarkably different manifestations of this trend in post-authoritarian art cinema. They all turn to ambiguity, but it is the fact that each represents a different relationship to authority and democracy that makes them valuable. The chapters here have been arranged to showcase the respective distances from the core of a straightforward turn to democracy after a period of authoritarian or totalitarian politics. The case of *Germany Year Zero* is then the most unified example of post-authoritarian cinema; its rejection of authoritarian politics and hopes for democracy are more straightforward than my other examples, and as a result this film affords the space to speak about authority and democracy more broadly, and to indeed clarify each of my significant terms (authority and democracy included). Tarr's *Sátántangó* troubles Hungary's transition from totalitarianism by bringing into play the idealism specific to Hungarian communism and the subsequent disappointment at its demise, a disappointment that was enflamed by the rise of democratic capitalism but also served to provide an avenue to consider the potentials of a significant economic and political transition. The chapter pertaining to Hong-sang Soo and South Korea furthers still disappointment by directly challenging the relationship between democracy and capitalism, and in so doing recalls some nostalgia for South Korean authoritarianism while still resisting its return. Finally, *Medium Cool* and the United States serves as a kind of counterpoint or reversal of some of these conditions, and is the far afield of these analyses; made under democracy, this film asks what it might look like for a nation to transition to authoritarianism, and how cinema might serve to resist such a change.

This is not to say that these are the only films or contexts that might fit this study, but this selection of films is uniquely suited to map the contours and degrees of this repeated turn to ambiguity in light of the deposition of an unchecked authority. Other examples—Chile, India, Poland, to name a few—are likewise available and certainly no less valuable. But these four films and contexts and the distances between them help to focus this study, allowing it to address intersections between authority, democracy, and cinema from a useful set of perspectives.

What these films together constantly push against is the insurmountable boundary between the political project of anti-authoritarianism and the means by which a particular meaning can be derived, directed, and universalized. The exchange between Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin illuminates some of the tensions I am describing. Hoffman's concern for direction and intention might go unmet by Godard and Gorin's film, but these filmmakers' insist on rejecting the very systems by which direction and deliberation are formed, leaving them unwilling or unable to address Hoffman's demands without violating their own dedication to radical anti-authoritarianism. What is advantageous about the approach employed in *Vladimir et Rosa* is to be found in its relationship to possibility. Each of the films discussed here stands on the precipice of a new kind of governance, and each strives to allow an extension of the time before this new formation is cemented. What these films offer is a total rejection of the authoritarian principles that in each case resulted in some form of devastation, but what they refuse in the same gesture is the production of a new path away from this same devastation. Indeed, as Rubin and Hoffman rightly point out, *Vladimir et Rosa* presents no particular rejoinder to the wildly anti-democratic trial that it represents; it is in this refusal to respond that it finds its unique energy, its ability to point

towards injustice. But to never have this gesturing verified, to never see a particular point made or position taken is always also frustrating, and this is the impossible dynamic that political ambiguity provokes. The four films discussed in the following chapters also take up this dynamic. Rather than asking us to see anything in particular, they ask us to look and to look again, but they never exactly explain how or why we should look, or what we should hope to find. This is the structure of ambiguity; it pulls us always in multiple directions at once, presenting the possibility of meaning but never fully producing the conditions of its arrival.

But what this ambiguity provides is a vantage from which to (re)view the devastated world, from which to see what the world is and, perhaps, how to move forward in the hopes of claiming a new solution to the misery that authoritarianism can yield. Each film here has a strong relationship to some avenue of cinematic realism, as each asks the viewer to witness and assist in ameliorating what they have seen, assimilating these experiences into their own solution to the problems of unchecked authority.

It is fair to criticize the intense atomization that this process causes. These films offer no recourse to the needs of agreement; they focus instead on an individual spectator and their capacity to see in these images new and different things *by themselves*. These films provide no system whereby these visions might be made universal or might produce some outlet into deliberation or unification, which is at least in part Rubin and Hoffman's critique. Furthermore, since the early post-war period, the forces of global capitalism have offered up exactly these kinds of claims to openness and possibility. Indeed, it can be argued that these forces are now so deeply ingrained within our systems for rendering and evaluating meaning that the forces of global economics will inevitably be the first things to

fill these kinds of openings, and will regardless benefit from the disorder and difference that they produce.<sup>3</sup> These critiques will factor heavily into the chapters that follow. The focus of this introduction, though, is to bring into view the relationship between ambiguity, cinema in the art house tradition, and politics, and to argue that the turn to ambiguity in cinema made in moments of political transition, moments that connect all of the films here, has a coherent current: it serves as a cogent rejoinder to the effects of unchecked authority by undermining its own capacity to create a singular and unified meaning. Where this capacity lies is to be found in the aesthetic tradition that art cinema offers, an aesthetic tradition that is rooted in an anti-authoritarian wish.

### Global Art Cinema

Ambiguity is a central theme in the tradition of art cinema, the origin of which is often linked to some of the films discussed here. As early as 1979, David Bordwell argued that what we think of as art cinema is in fact a relatively stable category, what he calls a “distinct branch of the cinematic institution,” that is unified by a particular set of formal qualities and viewing habits.<sup>4</sup> For Bordwell this category has a rich and diverse history, but came into its modern form after World War II and in light of the expansion of Hollywood and its dominance over film culture, beginning, notably, with the Italian neorealists.<sup>5</sup> It is in fact the deviations from classical cinema that began to mark the contours of the art film, in particular the loosening of causal relationships.

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<sup>3</sup> This will be discussed at length in both chapters one and three, but I’m thinking here of Zygmunt Bauman’s argument pertaining to liquidity operating as the new form of authority: Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> David Bordwell, “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,” *Film Criticism* 4, no. 1 (1979): 56.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Along with these loosening of patterns of linear causation, the art cinema is defined in this model by way of its strong relationship to realism, what Bordwell calls a “commitment to both objective and subjective verisimilitude.”<sup>6</sup> Bordwell traces this category of realism to André Bazin’s emphasis on deep-focus, long takes, and camera movements, and to the resultant dedication to experiences of unbroken time and space. But what Bordwell is careful to note is that the interaction between photographic realism and the foregrounding of the author that is found in Bazin’s work creates a tension that largely contributes to art cinema’s unique qualities: “The author is the textual force ‘who’ communicates (what the film is *saying*?) and ‘who’ expresses (what is the artist’s *personal vision*?).”<sup>7</sup> According to this formulation, the understanding of the author as master of meaning is to a degree illusory (in its supposed uniqueness) and also industrial (in that it became the tool to sell a film in the absence of genre and stars).<sup>8</sup> The subsequent art film mode is largely organized around realism as determined by the expectations brought about by the rhetoric of verisimilitude, but this realism must also always be ruptured, and it is these ruptures that are then used to constitute “authorial commentary,” which can then be unified and reproduced to present an oeuvre.<sup>9</sup>

For Bordwell there is then an irreconcilable tension at the heart of art cinema:

Verisimilitude, objective or subjective, is inconsistent with an intrusive author. The surest signs of authorial intelligibility—the flashforward, the doubled scene in *Persona*, the color filters at the start of *Le Mépris*—are the least capable of realistic justification. Contrariwise, to push the realism of psychological uncertainty to its limit is to invite a haphazard text in which the author’s shaping hand would not be visible.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 60.



To summarize: the qualities of realism and intrusive authorship are incommensurate, presenting an irreparable tension at the heart of these films. The solution to this problem, in the case of art cinema, is therefore ambiguity. In Bordwell's reading, the art film initiates a series of responses that first demand a reliance on realism and, once that response has been exhausted or interrupted, a reliance on authorship—particularly via style. As he puts it, "Whatever is excessive in one category must belong to another."<sup>11</sup> This trait is best exemplified by the tendency in the art film to rely on an open and ambiguous ending: "With the open and arbitrary ending, the art film reasserts that ambiguity is the dominant principle of intelligibility, that we are to watch less for the tale than the telling, that life lacks the neatness of art and *this art knows it*."<sup>12</sup> These endings, in other words, signify a direct link between the film and one's experience outside it: "The ambiguity, the play of thematic interpretation, must not be halted at the film's close."<sup>13</sup> Bordwell notes, however, the variations, departures, and disruptions at the heart of this category, and likewise discusses the way that, even as of 1979, the category of the art film seemed to be changing.<sup>14</sup> More recently, scholars have returned to the this category, now more likely referred to as global art cinema, in the hopes of mapping its boundaries and discussing its now seemingly even more persistent presence.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Bordwell contends that the more extreme category of "modernist" cinema was beginning to disrupt the otherwise stable category of art cinema. I must contend that this is where I depart from Bordwell regarding this topic, the differences between these categories evades me and I think of it as much more useful to think of art cinema as a broader category, albeit one still defined by a tradition of ambiguity. For a thorough explanation and taxonomy of art cinema and its relationship to modernism see: András Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Mark Betz has notably united what he finds to be the dual considerations surrounding art cinema: its status as “formal-aesthetic” category, which he associates with Bordwell, and its concurrent status as a national-institutional category, an argument that he locates centrally in Steve Neale’s 1981 essay, “Art Cinema as Institution.”<sup>15</sup> For Betz, it is in fact the connection between these two divergent approaches that he finds significant:

Bordwell and Neale present two different approaches to art cinema as a distinct category of film style and production, one aesthetic and one economical/institutional. But it is their similarities rather than their differences that have proven most abiding: that art cinema is fundamentally opposed to Hollywood cinema; that it constitutes a European response to Hollywood; and that its richest vein appeared in the postwar era, especially in the 1960s.<sup>16</sup>

The history of global art cinema is closely aligned with a need to draw a distance from Hollywood, particularly in the postwar period, and this need led to the assumption of a “national” identity drawn along the lines of language and culture.<sup>17</sup> But, as Betz notes, “At the same time, art cinema circulates internationally as a specialized or niche sector; it functions as ‘a mechanism of discrimination’ for a particular class of audience existing across nations.”<sup>18</sup> It is indeed this tension that constitutes global art cinema as a definitional mode. Its realistic, or what Bordwell would call verisimilar, qualities arise at least in part from a need for a national orientation. When combined with its attempt to find a non- or counter-Hollywood narrative and aesthetic approach, as well as a greater emphasis on politics, this realism provides global art cinema with its unique set of principles and qualities. For Betz, who focuses on the *European* forms of global art cinema,

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Betz, *Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 13. Betz focuses on the legacy of the 1960s, particularly the tumultuous period surrounding 1968.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

One of the striking features of modern European cinema is precisely the circuit it sets up between the spaces it frames, the time in which it sequences them, the places of its characters as viewing subjects, and the spectator, who is not so much a recipient of a unified/temporal text as a participant in a disunified one. These spaces are not generalized but very specific—and, by the time of European art cinemas proper, very urban. They are spaces of collision between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. They signify a burst of infrastructural modernization that radically reoriented how the modern subject works, lives, and perceives her positioning in the metropole of the new Europe.<sup>19</sup>

Here Betz touches on the political potential of art cinema. By virtue of its emphasis on the shifting urban landscape and particularly those effected by political and economic change, art cinema took as its goal, to generalize, examining the changes underway in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Coupled with the disunified spectator that Betz mentions—the spectator asked to participate in the construction of meaning but provided with no protocol for unifying the results of their participation—global art cinema took and continues to assume a form that is oriented towards reenvisioning the path forward for a world faced with oppression, existential malaise, outright annihilation, and change at every turn.

Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, in their collection on global art cinema, broach some of these same concepts, providing a kind of summation of the unique structure and orientation of this mode. According to Galt and Schoonover, global art cinema is at its core a “mongrel” category, an “unreliable label” that gathers a diverse and flexible collection of ideas and objects. For Galt and Schoonover, “Since the term ‘art cinema’ has always simultaneously invoked industrial, generic, and aesthetic categories, a current reckoning of

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 38.

the field exposes otherwise unseen geopolitical fault lines of world cinema.”<sup>20</sup> It is, in fact, this mongrel status, this unreliability, that allows global art cinema to address questions of globalization. They contend that,

Art cinema has from its beginnings forced a relationship between the aesthetic and the geopolitical or, in other words, between cinema and the world. Thus it is the critical category best placed to engage pressing contemporary questions of globalization, world culture, and how the economics of cinema’s transnational flows might interact with trajectories of film form.<sup>21</sup>

For Galt and Schoonover, then, it is global art cinema’s unique construction as both national and transnational, both domestic and global, that provides it the vantage from which to reflect on globalization.

Of central importance to this discussion, however, is the way that *form* in global art cinema is positioned to reflect the concerns of globalization as a kind of aesthetic response. Giving the requirement that ambiguity mutes overt meaning by virtue of its refusal to take a clear position, it must be form that carries with it the implied critique of authoritarianism. It is through aesthetic experience where this common lack of trajectory is so often registered, where slowness, restraint, and extension can be felt and subsequently given an outline. Qualities central to the history of global art cinema—the long take, deep focus, extended camera movements, qualities that have in fact taken on new degrees and extremes in recent years—gain new significance when one realizes, as I contend here, that they are rooted in a history of anti-authoritarian politics.<sup>22</sup> This can be seen most notably in

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<sup>20</sup> Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, “Introduction: The Impurity of Art Cinema,” in *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, ed. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> These qualities are most famously outlined in André Bazin’s essay “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema.”

the approach of the Neorealists, where aesthetic ambiguity and a rejection of authority are most closely paired, and it is from this point where this tradition can be traced. It is important to note, however, that it is only when taken in context that this ambiguity can be located and evaluated. This project therefore heavily relies upon a methodological approach that pairs formal analysis and contextualization, as it is only through the combination of form and context that the ambiguity on display here can be stabilized and read, given shape and used to find a particular understanding of these films.

Galt and Schoonover go so far as to define the entire category of global art cinema by virtue of its uncategorizability, contending that,

The lack of strict parameters for art cinema is not just an ambiguity of its critical history, but a central part of its specificity, a positive way of delineating its discursive space. We propose as a principle that art cinema can be defined by its impurity; a difficulty of categorization that is as productive to film culture as it is frustrating to taxonomy.<sup>23</sup>

I would add to this very compelling definition that this frustration arises not simply from the difficulty of its categorization—surely Hollywood cinema as a category presents these same difficulties—but from the fact that ambiguity functions as its major structuring principle.

It is this tradition of ambiguity that here plays a central role, a tradition that arose during neorealism where it served as an aesthetic reflex, responding to the failures and destructions of fascism. Indeed if global art cinema takes neorealism as one of its major historical origins, as all of these theorists claims that it does, then it must be for the tradition of ambiguity—arising of course from the tension between aesthetic verisimilitude and authorship as Bordwell would insist—that it reinforced. This context is important to

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 6.

understanding the thrust of global art cinema as a whole, because it helps to flesh out and provide insights into the origin and course of this category. The central role neorealism played in its development imbued art cinema with an anti-authoritarian push, albeit one that only occasionally regains contact with a project similar to that of the neorealists. Given this background, ambiguity serves not only as the unifying quality of global art cinema but also the center of its political project. If, as Bordwell claims, global art cinema is necessarily ambiguous, it therefore always holds within it some anti-authoritarian promise arriving via the role that authoritarianism played in its development. The goal of this study, then, is to find again the moments where this central ambiguity constitutive of global art cinema reconnects with its anti-authoritarian grounds, and to discuss how the approaches and qualities that constitute this mode of cinema have grown and changed over time.

It must be noted that this is not, indeed cannot be, an auteurist project. If, as I contend, the dismantling of authority is at the core of art cinema's style, then it would be unacceptable to reinstitute a new authority to override the old, now under a different name. Auteurism, while perhaps a significant element of art cinema's industrial model, nonetheless troubles the political project of anti-authoritarianism, what with its central orientation around rejecting authority. Whether this authority is political or authorial is of little importance here, as this ambiguity serves to at once equate and summarily reject all forms of authority.<sup>24</sup> This study will not claim that it is Rossellini's or Tarr's goal to occupy a central space of authority in order to make these films valuable. Instead, it argues the

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<sup>24</sup> It is notable here that both and all forms of authority return in remarkable ways. Authorial intention returns in deviation and, as per Bordwell's dynamic, actually becomes the major tool of analysis for these films, and political authority returns in these absences of meaning as a kind of suspended force that can finally put an end to all this seeming indifference, its significance kind of growing in its absence.

opposite: their capacity to remove themselves from a central position is what makes these films truly and finally anti-authoritarian, and, in light of their contexts, political. Their status as global auteurs is, then, a bit ironic, as they must forever walk a line between asserting themselves and disavowing their own presence. This is in fact the structure of global art cinema. In the chapters that follow, this project will consider what form of analysis is appropriate for films that resist the authority of authorship and politics, asking ultimately whether the rejection of authority and the turn to ambiguity is a fruitful path for achieving the anti-authoritarian goals of each of these films.<sup>25</sup>

### Messianism

In order to discuss the political underpinnings and potentials of this history of anti-authoritarianism in global art cinema, I now turn to mapping some of its available outcomes. As Schoonover and Galt note, the art cinema spectator is asked to withstand and occupy a series of contradictory positions: “Aesthetic distance is called for, but the rigor of distanciation is constantly crushed with an emotive bodily response and a virtual engagement with the other.”<sup>26</sup> The art cinema spectator is asked both to assume a position of distance and thoughtful analysis while simultaneously being compelled to witness and feel for the imperiled situations of people and locations on the screen.<sup>27</sup> This follows from the tension between verisimilitude and ambiguity outlined by Bordwell, but it also places

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<sup>25</sup> An auteurist discussion of the anti-authoritarian roots of global art cinema would be an interesting and valuable project, but it is not within the purview of this study.

<sup>26</sup> Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, “Introduction: The Impurity of Art Cinema,” in *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, ed. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 8.

<sup>27</sup> For an in depth of this process of “witnessing” and its relationship to global art cinema, see: Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

this audience in a kind of impossible bind: unable to locate a coherent trajectory for response or to fully rationalize the events on the screen, this viewer is left to *wait* and, subsequently, to think. This is the position, I contend, of messianism.

This is not the messianism of progress and perfection that might come down and alleviate the needs of the faithful in a kind of cleansing blast that disintegrates the detritus and inadequacies of a fallen world, but the “weak” messianism—that most often associated with Walter Benjamin—that disrupts perfectionism and attempts instead to find value in brokenness and an always just out of reach outside. Sociologist Danielle Celermajer outlines the distinction between these two forms of messianism. She begins by first discussing the former, more conservative and religious, form: “Teleological, perfectionist, potentially violent in their sacrificial logic, messianic programs seem to be precisely those that dissolve, conceptually or literally, everything false and imperfect into the path towards the final end.”<sup>28</sup> This vision of messianism contends that a judgmental but more or less known and perceivable force is waiting with rewards for the good and destruction for those who did not obey the always-available set of orders it had established. Celermajer, however, contrasts this form of messianism with that of Benjamin’s: “In contradistinction to a messianic trajectory that must purge the imperfect to secure its end, Benjamin suggests a wistful messianism that tenderly attends to the discarded fragments of history in their brokenness. Indeed, it is precisely in the truth of brokenness and careful attention to it, that authentic hope lies.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Danielle Celermajer, “Unsettling Memories and the Irredeemable,” *Theory & Event* 19, no. 2 (2016), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/614365>.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*



For Celermajer, this secular messianism, what Benjamin calls weak messianism, provides a radically different approach to politics, one that rejects both social democracy and fascism in a single gesture on the grounds that both are oriented towards perfectionism and progress driven teleologies, particularly in relation to time. As Celermajer notes, “Like fascism, social democracy conceives of time as empty, homogenous and progressive, teleologically drawn to a perfect end and thus, implicitly, harboring a type of violence.”<sup>30</sup> Weak messianism, however, focuses on the interruptions that might disrupt this teleological trajectory, fixing its gaze not on a progressive future, but on the possibility for change within these disruptions. For Celermajer, this different relationship to time and history is best found in Benjamin’s description of the angel of history, a figure inspired by Paul Klee’s 1920 print “Angelus Novus” and discussed in Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” In this essay Benjamin describes the figure of an angel pushed backwards through history by the winds of progress, facing always away from the path it is traveling, its gaze fixed on the destruction that progress leaves in its wake. According to Celermajer,

For this angel, messianic power lies not in bringing about the perfect future—that is the work of the impersonal, faceless wind of historical progress or the eruption of the transcendent into history that humans might passively await or aggressively accelerate. His weak messianic power comprises gazing with full presence on the broken past. Unlike historicism, where all moments and experiences are integrated into the victorious movement forward, or metaphysics that leaps out of the fray, the angel pauses in the midst of ontic being and brings consciousness to the moments that are excluded from the victor’s narrative.<sup>31</sup>

All this looking back upon wreckage begs the question of the productive potentials of this staring at and suffering with destruction itself. Unable to stop, how can this angel hope to

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

proceed to actually address what it sees? Like the cinematic spectator, the angel is bound by time to forever see and then be pushed forward, never freed to stop and attempt to ameliorate the damage that it registers. For Celermajer, the potentials of this process are to be found in the ways that this weak messianism asks us to look back on suffering not to find something in particular, but because it disjoins the gaze from progress and asks us to find something different altogether: “We exercise our weak messianic power only when we truly separate that act of presence from any instrumentalism—when we renounce any reason for being present to the reality of the suffering of the other except being present to the reality of suffering of the other.”<sup>32</sup> The potentials of this being present are therefore never exactly potentials at all, only attentiveness and hope; hope in its most radical form: hope that only searches to see everything, and in that seeing perhaps glimpse something different than what it suspects it can see, something new. For Celermajer, “Precisely insofar as it is *useless*, suffering is capable of shattering the closure of the subject and undoing its theory of history.”<sup>33</sup>

The process outlined by weak messianism is valuable in its capacity to separate us from progress and perfection and in so doing to allow new histories and paths through them to emerge. For Celermajer, these openings provide new access points for radical reconfigurations of ethics. In my view, these openings are also useful in their ability to allow new and different futures for political arrangements to appear. Indeed, as the following chapters will show the messianic gaze of each of the film’s discussed here looks back at a particular type of catastrophe and with a particular type of wind blowing it forward. The destruction wrought by authoritarianism is on literal display in each of the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

films I analyze, and the immediately available, ready-to-hand, solution in each case is always a form of market-oriented democracy dedicated to rebuilding in the name of a globally oriented market driven future.<sup>34</sup> But these films disrupt this process. These films are in their own rights angels, *angeli novi*, four angels, each looking backward as it is swept forward through time. What each sees, and through cinema allows us to see, is destruction, always wreckage of some sort or another. But always within this wreckage there lies the spark of something new, the possibility for something remarkably different than this path that seems so immovable. These angels nonetheless stare and in so doing hold out for the hope of some new arrival, for this is always the hope of messianism: That something new might come. If, according to the approach of weak messianism, we only look hard enough something new might arrive, some new vision, something else altogether.

In recent discussions of art cinema, “slow cinema” has become a topic of some emphasis, and each of these films fits to some degree into this category.<sup>35</sup> What this slowness produces in each of these examples is the space for thought, the aforementioned gaze that constantly retreats even as it produces the possibility for renewal. This dynamic connects the films discussed here; each slowly examines a post-authoritarian world, but each also moves away before this examination can yield anything in particular. As does Benjamin’s angel, these films look backwards as time forces them forward, never quite capable or willing to make an attempt at altering the direction of these winds, for any attempt to do so would require a gesture of authority, and would violate the dedication to openness that each of these films demands. This is, then, an impossible dynamic, an

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<sup>34</sup> The chapter on *Medium Cool*, which maps a possible turn towards authoritarianism, is the only exception here.

<sup>35</sup> See for instance the edited collection *Slow Cinema*: Tiago De Luca & Nuno Barradas Jorge, *Slow Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

absolute negativity that withdraws from any meaning that is other from dismissal—no alternative can ever be offered here because these films must always move away from their own objects of discovery. This impossible negativity reorients these films, placing emphasis on aesthetics at the fore of the experiences that they produce. Indeed, it is this focus on aesthetics that orders these films' politics; the capacity of aesthetics to ask us to reorient ourselves to difference, to encounter and evaluate new kinds of objects and impressions is in essence what brings these films most closely to their goals. As through this process the proposed hierarchy on which authoritarianism is predicated is denied and replaced with a new horizon of political potentials, one in which difference can be accounted for and politics renewed.

There is a danger here of stumbling into the argument that ambiguity in art escapes ethical considerations, a path that might lead towards the kind of *l'art pour l'art* claims that have been rejected since at least Walter Benjamin. Martin Jay maps just this tradition, evaluating the myriad assertions that the aestheticization of politics has been used to justify brutal acts of violence by authoritarian regimes. He ultimately sums up these critiques by positing that, "The disinterestedness that is normally associated with the aesthetic seems precisely what is so radically inappropriate in the case of that most basic of human interests, the preservation of life."<sup>36</sup> I will not go through each of the critiques outlined by Jay here, but it is important to indicate how I am thinking of the relationship between ambiguity, aesthetics, and authoritarianism so as to at least avoid critiques of my work for lionizing art for art's sake, which is surely not my goal. The ambiguous art in this study does not aestheticize politics, it does not work to justify brutal behavior by

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<sup>36</sup> Martin Jay, "'The Aesthetic Ideology' as Ideology; Or, What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics?" *Cultural Critique*, no. 21 (1992), 44.

habituating it, nor do these films render violence beautiful and in so doing justified in whatever their means or effects. The ambiguous art in this study does just the opposite; it dehabituates seeing and asks its audience to think with and about what is being displayed.

Theodor Adorno's views on aesthetics and its relationship to society are likewise important to any discussion of ambiguous art. For Adorno, difficult, ambiguous art is valuable in its capacity to spur critical thought. According to Astradur Eysteinnsson, Adorno's emphasis on the reluctance of art to adequately communicate, its noncommunication, is why it is at all significant. For Eysteinnsson, the key to Adorno's take on art is to be found in its capacity to elide rational thought:

[Art's] social context is that of an ever-expanding, monolithic capitalist society, moving toward a system of total exchange as well as total rationality, which is equivalent to absolute reification in matters of social interaction. It is a system in which the very notion of meaning has become wholly contaminated with the capitalist ideology of total exchange. In the face of this human debasement, art's basic mode of resistance is in a sense that of opting out of the system's communicative network in order to attack it head on from the "outside."<sup>37</sup>

From this vantage, art that refuses communication is uniquely capable of addressing society thanks to its being the only thing removed from it. In regards to my project this is quite a compelling set of claims, but it is also troubling. It begs the question of how art is to be taken up, how noncommunicative, what I call ambiguous, art is to find its way back into politics without becoming rendered useless by rational forces shot through by fallen, pernicious logics. For Adorno, "By avoiding contamination from what simply is, art expresses it all the more inexorably."<sup>38</sup> What Adorno describes is how art can get at reality with greater precision by virtue of its avoiding the, for him, detestable rational world, but

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<sup>37</sup> Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 41.

<sup>38</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 19.

how it can enter back into that world, not to mention change it, remains unclear. How ambiguous art can critique society is a significant topic here, but how these critiques can reenter the world is my major theme.

Each of these films slows down cinematic narrative and arrests us in and with aesthetic experience, the fixed gaze of the camera striving to produce slow explosions of difference. It is this experience of aesthetic difference where these films find their strength. The hope of these films is that encounters with unforeseen arrangements will demand that we see something new, something that might shock us and in so doing ask that we think about what it is that we are seeing. The capacity of aesthetic experience to shake us from a ready to hand relationship to the world that we are encountering and to request that whatever new experience is presented be assimilated into what we already know is the heart of this argument. The slowness of these films then exacerbates this process, allowing aesthetic differences to emerge and to multiply. As we stare, unmoored from narrative and trapped within a film unwilling to say anything in particular to us, at the ruins—literal and otherwise—brought about by unchecked authority, we are asked only to occupy and support this gaze, to take it and to use it, to see anew and to be ourselves slowed, to be examined by it and to examine along with it. These films are the eye of the storm of political transition, the vantage from which we can see the events that otherwise seem to happen with such speed and rage. This is the task that finally renders art cinema aesthetically coherent: it asks us to wait and see but never provides any order or operation for what is experienced.

This tradition finds its origin and its most valuable form in these moments of transition, where things are on the precipice of change and where, finally, cinema can offer

a rejoinder to the tumult of the world outside the theater. These films and the aesthetic approaches that they employ slow things down and ask their audiences to think anew about the path by which the winds of history carry them, and ultimately whether the ready-to-hand solutions that appear are indeed the ways that are best to take. They do this, though, while adamantly refusing their own capacity to tell us what they think of what is happening. This is their gift and their curse, forever asking us to watch and to wait.

My first chapter focuses on Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* in order to more specifically address issues of authority, authoritarianism, and ambiguity as it pertains to the conditions of Post-World War II Berlin, all as borne out by the aesthetic approach of this film. What makes *Germany Year Zero* unique in regards to other neorealist films is the difficulty of its national origin, that is, its having been shot in part in a rubble reduced Berlin and in part in Rome (where its interiors were largely filmed). This confused spatial arrangement likewise confuses the national identity of this film, and allows it to move from a form of nation building—the task that is often taken, by many accounts, in other neorealist films—to a larger discussion of the ways that cinema is capable of responding to authoritarianism; the ways that the vacuum left in the gap found in the center of the transition from authoritarianism to democracy can be extended and, perhaps, used to produce the space for new and novel political arrangements.

The second chapter builds on the first but focuses in particular on the developing aesthetic qualities of anti-authoritarian cinema. Here, I focus on post-Soviet Hungary, and in particular on Béla Tarr's *Sátántangó*, an over seven-hour film that was produced during the transition from communism to capitalism in Hungary. This film directly addresses the effects, hopes, and difficulties of this transition but, for the purposes of this study, it is the

aesthetic approach of this film that is of particular value. Consisting of extremely long tracking and still shots, this film, famously, extends the time of each event to drastic and demanding proportions. Fitting clearly, and quite notably, into the slow cinema moment that has developed throughout the tradition of art cinema and has taken on new emphasis starting in the late 1980s, *Sátántangó* extends each moment and demands that its audience endure its extreme slowness. Given the context of a post-totalitarian tradition, this aesthetic approach takes on new qualities. The endless watching and waiting here serves to extend the moment of transition, slowing its pace so as to allow—as with *Germany Year Zero*—new formations to take shape. Where this chapter differs from the first, however, is in the extreme demands it makes on its audience; indeed it asks them to suffer with and against *boredom*, a quality that it uses to disrupt the coherent divide between audience and film.

If *Sátántangó* and *Germany Year Zero* provide something of a relatively unified vision of post-authoritarian or -totalitarian cinema, the topic of my third chapter, the South Korean film *Woman on the Beach*, presents a significant departure. Made well after South Korea's authoritarian government was deposed and replaced with a democracy, and indeed made in relation to—if not the spotlight of—the immense rise in popularity of the South Korean “Hallyu” (the popular media explosion also known as the “Korean Wave”), *Woman on the Beach* deploys some of the qualities of post-authoritarian cinema outlined in the first two chapters, but it does so in such a way that greatly broadens the spectrum of what these qualities are capable of challenging. Through its restrained style, extended conversations, and deplorable-yet-reflective major characters, *Woman on the Beach* expands the degree of critique wide enough to reject democracy as readily as the other films reject authority. This



film disavows its own authority and introduces ambiguity in such a way as to reject meaning, but it also is careful to show the damages wrought by democracy when paired with capitalism, particularly as it regards the way that this combination incentivizes brutality and self-obsession. Democracy and capitalism, this chapter contends, greatly rewards people willing to invest in their own genius particularly if they are simultaneously willing to take advantage of the gaps in meaning and authority inherent to democracy. In this way, the film provides the position from which to evaluate how capitalism relies upon the same evacuation of meaning that both *Germany Year Zero* and *Sátántangó* celebrate. However, *Woman on the Beach* renders this critique from the position of having relatively recently experienced the damages of authoritarianism. *Woman on the Beach* is perhaps the most radical of the films discussed so far, as it dismisses both authoritarianism and democracy in a single gesture, and yet, like *Germany Year Zero* and *Sátántangó*, provides no alternative—producing the most extreme emptying of meanings, and perhaps subsequently the most hope of any of the films addressed here.

Finally, the fourth chapter rearranges these conditions so as to discuss anti-authoritarian cinema made in a different context altogether. *Medium Cool*, directed by notable American cinematographer Haskell Wexler, was shot at and around the political actions surrounding the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Consisting of both fictional and documentary footage, the film mingles a narrative familiar in contemporary global art cinema (particularly to those acquainted with *La Dolce Vita*) with footage shot at the convention. Taken inside and, more significantly, outside the convention venue, this footage clearly shows the intense police response and police violence that met the protestors. This chapter uses this film to discuss the potentials of anti-authoritarian

cinema in a moment of a perceived transition from democracy to authoritarianism. That is, this chapter reverses the trajectory of the earlier films I discussed and evaluates *Medium Cool* in the hopes of understanding the role anti-authoritarian cinema—and global art cinema more broadly—can play in combating the rise of oppressive centralized power. *Medium Cool* is unique amongst these films in that it shows an authoritarianism taking shape within a democracy, and therefore provides a wealth of insights into how cinema is suited to respond to these conditions.

Throughout this dissertation, I strive to both articulate and evaluate a longstanding trend in global art cinema—a trend that has largely shaped post-war filmmaking. Furthermore, this study shows how the elusive qualities that are so central to global art cinema in fact constitute something of a coherent political project. These qualities circulate around both narrative and, particularly, aesthetic ambiguity, which are bound up with multiple approaches to anti-authoritarianism. Ultimately, the political potential of these films is to be found in their hope that in and through their ambiguity something new might be discovered, some new way of thinking about the changes that are taking place. This is the political potential of ambiguity.

## CHAPTER 1

### Authority Year Zero

Chief Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels put heavy emphasis on the relationship between art and politics, in fact equating the two and furthermore fixating on the central role of art in constructing his idealized vision of a public unified around the Nazi party. According to Goebbels, “Politics, too, is an art, perhaps the highest and most far-reaching one of all, and we who shape modern German politics feel ourselves to be artistic people, entrusted with the great responsibility of forging out of the raw material of the masses a solid, well-wrought structure of a *volk*”.<sup>1</sup> The key to Goebbels’ claims here is the relationship between raw materials and the solidity of a unified body or “*volk*.” For Goebbels, and indeed the totalitarian enterprise that he represents, the function of art (and for him its compatriot: politics) is to bring into being a cohesive and singular formation that can function and move with unified purpose. Indeed, as Rainer Stollmann observed, one of the primary functions of Nazi art seemed to be the unification of the inchoate actions and events of a national social life into a coherent and singular body.<sup>2</sup>

Given this context of an attempt at constituting an art dedicated to a unified front, the post-war cinema of Roberto Rossellini—and in particular his *Germany Year Zero* (1948)—takes on a very particular series of significations. It was Rossellini’s goal, this chapter contends, to undermine the centralized, unified and ordered totalizing principle that Goebbels’ vision relied upon, and to replace it with a return to the inchoate raw material that the Nazi’s so wished to tame and direct.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Rainer Stollmann, “Fascist Politics as a Total Work of Art: Tendencies of the Aesthetization of Political Life in National Socialism,” *New German Critique* 14 (1978): 47.

<sup>2</sup> Rainer Stollmann, “Fascist Politics as a Total Work of Art: Tendencies of the Aesthetization of Political Life in National Socialism,” *New German Critique* 14 (1978): 47.

Susan Buck-Morss too touches upon this thrust to make a coherent and legible whole in Nazi art. Speaking of Leni Riefenstahl's seminal Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1935), Buck-Morss proposes the following: "The mobilized masses fill the ground of the Nuremberg Stadium and the cinema screen, so that the surface patterns provide a pleasing design of the whole, letting the viewer forget the purpose of the display, the militarization of society for the teleology of making war."<sup>3</sup> Again, a body is built around a coherent, and in this case pleasing, series of images that unify a group of subjects and direct them to action. In opposition to this reading of Riefenstahl's cinema, *Germany Year Zero* proposes no pleasing pattern; it pushes the audience to pay attention to the circumstances on display but without the ordering function upon which Nazi cinema so heavily relied.

This chapter proceeds by introducing the film and exploring the openings to contingency and chance that *Germany Year Zero* proposes. I will then move to an analysis of the specific status of the ruin in Rossellini's film and the way it orients audiences toward a particular (and perhaps productive) relationship to time and rebuilding. I will follow this discussion of the ruin with an examination of Karl Marx's own figuration of the inchoate masses and their historical formation into a public. Finally, this chapter will end with an investigation of the failures and drawbacks of Rossellini's dedication to openness—focusing in particular on the way that the intense marketization that has come to be called neoliberalism began to take advantage of just these claims to openness and change.

Ultimately, this chapter is the most clear and direct example of a post-authoritarian response of any of the objects discussed here, but it is in the nuance of this particular film and the way that it navigates the circumstances that contributed to its stance against

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Inaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (1992): 38

authority that the ways that post-authoritarian cinemas produce unique systems for encountering and subsequently countering authority are revealed.

### Germany Year Zero

*Germany Year Zero* is the third entry in what is commonly referred to as Roberto Rossellini's war trilogy. Shot in Berlin and Rome, the film fits squarely into (what might be called the later portion of) the post-war Italian film movement known as "neo-realism." At once an exemplary figure (in terms of the deep-focus, location based aesthetic principles of the movement) and an outlier (in terms of its concern with coherent nation building) of neo-realism, *Germany Year Zero* provides a glimpse of rubble strewn post-war Berlin that fulfills much of the documentary/narrative promise that this movement hoped to provide. But what is truly valuable about this film, I propose, is its reluctance to present a particular answer to the problems that it poses. It is this reluctance that allows this film to question after not only what is to be done with rubble reduced Berlin (and the post-war world more broadly), but also what might be valuable about occupying a space that is yet to be rebuilt, and occupying a politics that is yet to take form.

Marsha Landy defines the "major project" of neo-realism as "the demystification of the ideology and practices of fascism."<sup>4</sup> She posits of this relatively loose grouping of post-war Italian films, "In their content, they explored authoritarianism; bureaucracy and power; violence; consensus and conformity; the oppression of works, and passive obedience to tradition, the law, and the state."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Angelo Restivo, borrowing from

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<sup>4</sup> Marsha Landy, *Fascism in Film: The Italian Commercial Cinema, 1931-1943* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Benedict Anderson, argues that “neo-realism can be looked at as... an attempt to create an imagined community to replace the (equally media-constructed) imagined community of the fascist period,”<sup>6</sup> and he further traces the origin of this moment to “the collapse of a coherent national narrative that could be taken as meaningful by Italians.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed Restivo argues that *Rome, Open City*—the first of Rossellini’s war trilogy—“allegorizes the birth of the aesthetic of reality out of the bankruptcy of the fascist aesthetic,”<sup>8</sup> and that, “It is with *Paisa* [the second of this trilogy] that the new aesthetic seems to have achieved its full realization.”<sup>9</sup>

Of course, after *Paisa* and at the end of this lauded triptych lies *Germany Year Zero*. Whereas, for Restivo, the first two films of this trilogy serve as “a picture of the nation in the radical process of *becoming*,”<sup>10</sup> *Germany Year Zero* relocates this process to a new locale, Berlin. Because of this move this film, rather than presenting a new imagined community, produces the moment before this imaginary, and questions after the damage that the process of imagining might entail. Its *demystification*, to return to Landy, surely concerns fascism (and authoritarianism more broadly), but it levels its critique not merely on the basis of the particular brutality of fascism, but on the unavoidable damage caused by the exclusions inherent in any political arrangement. This is not to say, of course, that the differences of particular political configurations are flattened, nor that democracy and fascism are equated here, but this argument does contend that the particular vision of the world presented in *Germany Year Zero* shifts the elsewhere defined neo-realist project from

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<sup>6</sup> Angelo Restivo, *The Cinema of Economic Miracles: Visuality and Modernization in the Italian Art Film* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 24-25.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

the reevaluation of the Italian national identity to a more abstract politics that accounts for authority more broadly. The vantage of *Germany Year Zero*—looking backwards as it does from a recently enacted democratic moment to an authoritarian one—provides a unique opportunity to envision the potentials of a moment after an authoritarian regime but before democracy.

Whereas *Rome*, *Open City* and *Paisa* are clearly located within the borders of Italy and, as notes Restivo, concentrate on a particular reimagining of that nation, the locale of *Germany Year Zero*, Berlin, helps in expanding the purview commonly associated with neo-realism (Italy) and the forging of a new national identity that it so commonly connotes. The unusual production process of this film—its interiors being shot in Rome and its exteriors in Berlin—serves to elide national specificity, and in so doing it envisions a *world* after authoritarianism, allegorizing the rubble of Berlin and broadening its perspective. This is a film, then, that allows for the thinking of political claims and political difference at the moment before it can concretize into something new, before a coherent narrative has taken hold. Its confused national allegiances help to extend the moment of contemplation by holding the ordering functions of narrative at bay and in so doing disrupting the possibility for a clear and singular reading. The asking of the question of whether this film is about Italy or Germany, then, guarantees a pause that the film strives to occupy, and the reluctance to produce an answer or a closure to this pause is one of the many systems whereby *Germany Year Zero* refuses to render a particular political project or solution.

But this reluctance to render a coherent answer to its political concerns also leads many to posit that Rossellini's work (broadly) is better thought of as apolitical. Indeed, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith notes that much of the praise for Rossellini, particularly that of the

critics of the *Cahiers du Cinema*, lionized the director on the basis of “aesthetic grounds” and, as Nowell-Smith states, “His neo-realist trilogy stands aloof from the politics of the resistance and postwar reconstruction.”<sup>11</sup> Nowell-Smith posits that, for those who find Rossellini to be lacking in terms of a politically or ideologically clear stance, “Rossellini’s great misfortune... was to be born into a world that was too political.”<sup>12</sup> Much of the grounds for this apolitical understanding of Rossellini’s cinema are based on Andre Bazin’s positioning of him as a “spiritual” filmmaker.<sup>13</sup> But Nowell-Smith contends that it is in fact Rossellini’s political identity that unifies much of his work.

For Nowell-Smith, Rossellini’s politics are derived from a kind of intuition that does not map cleanly to the guideline of a postwar neo-realist and anti-fascist left. For Nowell-Smith, “In a world marked by non-communication, suddenly something would be communicated, a flash of insight enabling the audience to see what these characters themselves saw or maybe were too blind to see, or enabling the characters themselves to go forward from an impasse.”<sup>14</sup> It is this idea of non-communication that is punctuated by sudden clarity that, for Nowell-Smith, serves to guide Rossellini’s project.

But this discussion posits that Rossellini’s cinema, at least as it pertains to *Germany Year Zero*, is concerned not with the spirit or power of communication, nor with the overcoming of its difficulties. What is invaluable about *Germany Year Zero* is its

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<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, “North and South, East and West: Rossellini and Politics,” in *Roberto Rossellini: Magician of the Real*, ed. David Forgacs, Sarah Lutton and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Andre Bazin, “In Defense of Rossellini,” in *What is Cinema? Volume 2* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1971), 93-101.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, “North and South, East and West: Rossellini and Politics,” in *Roberto Rossellini: Magician of the Real*, ed. David Forgacs, Sarah Lutton and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 11.



presentation of a damaged world that finds the very prospect of communication troubling. As Sandro Bernardi argues of the landscapes in *Germany Year Zero*, “The picture that Rossellini tries to give us is that of a world destroyed, whose shattered monuments are no more than the ruins of a culture swept away by an infernal ambition.”<sup>15</sup> The world on display in this film is one destroyed by what Bernardi calls “the catastrophe of ideology”, a world ruined by dark attempts to orient meaning in a particular way.

Karl Schoonover argues that Rossellini’s war trilogy—*Rome, Open City* and *Paisa* in particular—facilitate a politics by engaging its characters, and indeed its audiences, in a certain style of looking. For Schoonover, “By placing ocular witnessing at the center of their narratives, these films seem to transform seeing from a passive state of consumption into a powerful means of moral reckoning.”<sup>16</sup> For Schoonover, this positioning engenders a specific global view and in so doing “these films promote a universalist conception of human compassion by reifying a particular response to violence as the exclusively moral one.”<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, according to Schoonover, this system solidified a particular response to fascism that unified divergent critiques and addressed them outward in the hopes of supporting the Marshall Plan and other forms of international aid.<sup>18</sup> Schoonover is speaking, though, primarily of *Rome, Open City* and *Paisa*, whereas *Germany Year Zero* defies this reification of a particular violence and instead leaves unarticulated the “appropriate” moral response to the violence that guides this film. What differentiates

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<sup>15</sup> Sandro Bernardi, “Rossellini’s Landscapes: Nature, Myth, History,” in *Roberto Rossellini: Magician of the Real*, ed. David Forgacs, Sarah Lutton and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 55.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 111.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-8.

*Germany Year Zero* from its predecessors, then, is that, through its spatial and narrative ambiguity, it refuses the figuration of a particular plea and instead questions after how to proceed at all; providing and attempting to expand an opening, an indeterminate moment, whereby actions (and responses) are left in stasis.

It is this stunted moment, this pause, that this chapter will focus upon. I argue that this reluctance to forge a particular, this open-endedness and “apolitical” moment of non-communication, serves as a politics all its own. Indeed, that the film refuses to render a particular future and insists instead on decay is exactly what makes it a political film, for through these pauses and disruptions *Germany Year Zero* throws into doubt those who might present a solution. It questions after, that is, the authority that might propose to solve its problems, and in so doing brings into light its own relationship to authority and the possibility (always fleeting) of democratic art. Authority is of particular historical significance to this film by virtue of its having been made in two countries, Germany and Italy, who were in the throes of a change from, respectively, totalitarian and authoritarian systems to democratic governments. This argument is complicated, though, by the relationship that art (and the meanings that it at times enfolds) has to authority itself. What this film can be said to ask after, then, is not only what to do when authority fails, but how a film can be made without reinstating authoritarian logics.

### Authority

In the final shots of *Germany Year Zero*, Edmund, the thirteen-year-old protagonist of the film, looks out of what was formerly a window (and is now simply an opening) of the demolished building that he currently occupies. Across the street he sees the apartment

where his family—along with a number of other families—currently resides. He watches as a small truck pulls up and quickly learns what it carries: a well-stacked collection of coffins. Edmund continues to look as the truck's drivers enter the building and then exit carrying another coffin; they place it with the others and then leave. After staring again briefly at his destroyed home, Edmund carefully hangs his jacket from an errant metal pillar.

Disillusioned as he is, and as he has carefully been shown to become, by the prospect of existence in post World War II Berlin, Edmund slides down the stanchion to a lower level of the building. He then takes a final brief look again at his family's apartment; framed against the rubble, he is shown gazing out on a world that has been reduced to amorphous gray masses of concrete.



He then closes his eyes and jumps from the building. The artificial speed of his fall—created by the lowered frame rate of his descent—lends the jump a kind of oneiric quality that only aids in fostering the understanding of war torn Berlin as a rubble strewn alien world. The film ends with his body being found a few seconds later by a woman walking by.

What Edmund had just witnessed, and what indeed caused him to make this jump, was his elderly father's body being removed from his apartment. Earlier in the film, Edmund, under the advice of a previous teacher, had poisoned his bedridden father in the

hopes of allowing his remaining family—himself and his two much older siblings—to more easily survive. “Stop this now, you can’t change things,” was the advice he was given by Henning, the aforementioned former teacher, “Everything isn’t about you and your selfishness. Afraid that daddy will die! Look at nature. The weak are destroyed so that the strong survive. *One must have the courage to let the weak die.*” The manipulative Henning, one of the few characters of the film who is directly associated with the Nazis, has presented the destructive rationale that this film strives to critique, but what here is emphasized are the parricidal and survivalist strains of his Nazi values. His status as Edmund’s former teacher and his allegiance to the Nazis—he had, according to some earlier dialogue, wished he had been more critical of Edmund’s parents when they avoided entering him into the Hitler Youth—make clear his role as surrogate for the doctrines of the Nazi party. But Henning, in addition to being a Nazi, is also presented as the only figure that provides Edmund with any system by which to survive in this world. Henning’s reliance on black market profiteering and, disturbingly, what seems to be the collecting of young boys for the pleasure of the strange mansion owner off of whom he lives escapes Edmund’s youthful appraisal of this teacher, and so he heeds his advice and engages in a very deliberate plot to kill his own father.

The value system that Henning represents, though, comes unbound as the film progresses. Indeed when Edmund returns to him after committing the murder in order to confess (or perhaps report back), Henning immediately becomes furious. “I didn’t tell you to do anything you little monster!” he yells as he slaps Edmund. “People will find out you’ve been coming alone here. I never told you to do such a thing! Never!” At this Edmund snaps and runs off, beginning the journey that will culminate in his suicide.

To proceed with my analysis of this exchange it is perhaps best to discuss theories of authoritarianism. Writing in 1959 and concerned in many ways with the same historical moment as Rossellini, Hannah Arendt delineates the idea of authoritarianism, and in so doing brings to light her concerns for living in a world free of the hierarchical structures and calls to an abstract source of power that this governmental system entails. In arguing its structure, Arendt is careful to differentiate authoritarian systems of power from totalitarian ones. For Arendt,

The source of authority in authoritarian government is always a force external and superior to its own power; it is always this source, this external force which transcends the political realm, from which the authorities derive their 'authority,' that is, their legitimacy, and against which their power can be checked.<sup>19</sup>

For Arendt, then, it is always the call to some kind of outside and unquestionably correct vision of the world, be it supported by religion or, as in the case of the Italian fascists, tradition, which accounts for the authoritarian government's ability to render particular judgments.

Given that we are talking about a precise moment, it should be noted that Arendt differentiates Mussolini's Fascism from Hitler's totalitarianism. Arendt notes of Mussolini that,

His one-party rule was, in a sense the only one [amongst Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin] still intimately connected with the multiparty system. He carried out what the imperialist-minded leagues, societies, and "parties above parties" had aimed at, so that it is particularly Italian Fascism that has become the only example of a modern mass movement organized within the framework of an existing state, inspired solely by extreme nationalism.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 467.

<sup>20</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1973), 259.

The distinction, then, is that Mussolini's Italy worked within the boundaries of a previously established state, pulling it towards its extremes but still relying on its formerly negotiated and relatively coherent outline.

By contrast, Arendt defines totalitarianism, which is, to her, exclusively a more recent occurrence and is better exemplified by the nations governed by Hitler and Stalin, as cutting itself off from national traditions and providing a novel governmental form that is much less coherent. To Arendt,

Wherever it rose to power, it developed entirely new political institutions and destroyed all social, legal and political traditions of the country. No matter what the specifically national tradition or the particular spiritual source of its ideology, totalitarian government always transformed classes into masses, supplanted the party system, not by one-party dictatorships, but by a mass movement, shifted the center of power from the army to the police, and established a foreign policy openly directed toward world domination.<sup>21</sup>

This difference amounts to a distinction between a call to tradition and the efficacy of one-party rule (for the authoritarian state) versus the creation of a new (and terrifying) ideological unity (that of totalitarianism).

Likewise, there is a difference in structure for these two systems. Whereas totalitarianism is structured like an onion—with a leader at the center that is insulated by layers that, to the outsider, seem to decrease both in power and extremism—authoritarianism is better described as a pyramid. For Arendt, this structure of authoritarianism is as follows:

The pyramid is indeed a particularly fitting image for governmental structure whose source of authority lies outside itself, but whose seat of power is located at the top, from which authority and power is filtered down to the base in such a way that each successive layer possess some authority, but less than the one above it, and where precisely because of this careful filtering process, all layers from top to bottom are not only firmly integrated

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 460.

into the whole but are interrelated like converging rays whose common focal point is the top of the pyramid as well as the transcending source of authority above it.<sup>22</sup>

Arendt's distinctions between totalitarianism and authoritarianism are helpful in revealing how Rossellini's film presents its Nazi characters in such a way as to critique Italian authoritarianism more than the German totalitarianism. Henning, rather than presented as a monstrous ideologue with an unflinching certainty in his beliefs, is presented here as wavering, weak and primarily concerned with maintaining his bureaucratic position. This point is proved by the way that Rossellini presents the relationship between Henning and Edmund.

Henning is situated as a point of authority above Edmund, but through this diffusive structure Edmund still feels empowered to take the admittedly extreme action of killing his father. His is not the ideological certainty of a denouncement obsessed Nazi youth, but a de-individualized fascist in search of an authoritative system through which to reproduce a hierarchical structure. But Henning too is only located as a piece in a greater power hierarchy, as the mysterious wealthy pedophile for whom he works and whose presence is only ever seen in the periphery is constantly deferred to as the seat of authority for Henning's economic, moral, and even pleasurable concerns (Henning is, after all, hinted to be a pedophile himself, although his desires are never consummated). There is, then, a deferral of authority in play here that signals upwards, towards some greater source; rather than presenting Henning to be a totalitarian, self-justifying layer, he is only a transmitter of authority, and his cowardly reaction to Edmund's following his advice reveals that the seat of power that he at first appears to occupy is in fact centered

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<sup>22</sup> Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 468.

elsewhere. This is not to say that Rossellini's film serves to draw the same distinction between totalitarianism and authoritarianism as Arendt, but that his understanding of this moment anticipates Arendt's claims. Whether a critique of Germany or Italy (or whether, for this film, these distinctions are even available) is not at issue here—and indeed the disassociation of these two countries from each other is complicated by the film's confused and confusing relationship to the national. Instead, the value of Arendt's conception of authoritarianism is helpful because the film's depiction of power seems to match this arrangement in certain ways, and deviate from it in others (as we shall see).

Henning's failure to defend his advice is further caused by the general failure of authoritarianism in this context. For Arendt, religion, tradition and authority are the central triumvirate that holds together power structures—be they authoritarian, monarchical, or democratic—and in the absence of any of these three factors the other two inevitably crumble as well.<sup>23</sup> The failure of this interconnected structure for power leads to Henning's disavowal of his own views, as his ability to justify the power structures that he attempts to reproduce fails him totally. His supposed authority is immediately revealed to be merely hollow claims to a higher power that cannot call to any system of justification other than force.

For Arendt, though, a world without authority too creates a variety of problems:

If I am right in suspecting that the crisis of the present world is primarily political, and that the famous "decline of the West" consists primarily in the decline of the Roman trinity of religion, tradition, and authority, with the concomitant undermining of the specifically Roman foundations of the political realm, then the revolutions of the modern age appear like gigantic attempts to repair these foundations, to renew the broken thread of tradition, and to restore, through founding new political bodies, what for so

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 492.



many centuries had endowed the affairs of men with some measure of dignity and greatness.<sup>24</sup>

For Arendt, this triumvirate grants politics a unified and, more importantly, externally justified body whereby meanings can take shape and decisions subsequently made. But it must also be noted that this is one of the few moments in this essay where Arendt divorces the terms “authority” from “authoritarianism,” as here “authority” seems to describe a process whereby decisions and actions are deferred to a higher figure in the hierarchical arrangement, and ultimately to a greater external authority with some (illusory) capacity to render meaning, but this arrangement alone, for Arendt, does not constitute authoritarianism.

The crisis of the post-war world, for Arendt, is derived from the failure of these three factors to maintain a hold on the world and negotiate a transcendent value system.<sup>25</sup> The revolutions that she speaks of fail to take hold, then, because they fail to establish anything other than an unmoored authority and are therefore always left open to the possibilities inherent in disagreement and difference.<sup>26</sup> For Arendt, without access to a stable claim as to a general truth authority can never find purchase. These fascist and totalitarian movements are attempts to create and centralize their own authority in response to these conditions, but their failures are revealed in the aggression with which they figure their claims to authority. They know, that is, that their truth claims are unstable and as a result they overcompensate and, what’s much worse, lash outward in attempts to reaffirm their authority through violence and control.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 501.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 496.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 502.

## Ruins

*Germany Year Zero*, however, deviates from Arendt's pessimism towards the post-authoritarian world and instead presents the crisis at the end of authority as one valuable to the reformation of these countries. The failures of authoritarianism—and the horrors that have been unleashed by the ascension and subsequent destruction of this mode—are displayed here, and the potential effectiveness that this kind of authoritarianism had promised has been reduced here literally to rubble. In effect, *Germany Year Zero* argues the necessity of the crisis that comes at the end of the authority by focusing squarely on the horrors that authoritarianism has wrought. One of the primary ways that it establishes this unique orientation to the absence of authority is through its emphasis—indeed its insistence upon—ruins.

In order to address the ways that ruins function here to create a particular temporal relationship to the origins and effects of the war, it is necessary to begin by exploring how ruins were defined by two significant thinkers of the topic: Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel. Benjamin discusses ruins in a number of ways; one of the less examined occurs in his essay "The Storyteller." In a moment where he addresses and describes the perhaps lost artisanal qualities of storytelling Benjamin proposes: "One can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way."<sup>27</sup> This is to say that storytellers are craftsmen of sorts due to their undertaking the basic task of forming from human experience something like a particular—Benjamin says "unique"—

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<sup>27</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 108.

arrangement from the unorganized mass of unmolded experience. There are then two states at play in Benjamin's model for storytelling: first, the state of raw experience and, second, the story drawn from that raw experience and which arranges it into a coherent model. We can think of the quote from Goebbels that began this discussion, I think, as a kind of dark variation on this same process of forging particularities from an unmolded mass.

Benjamin continues by introducing a third state of experience so as to provide a useful extension for this model for storytelling. He says of this task of organizing experience into story: "It is a kind of procedure which may perhaps most adequately be exemplified by the proverb if one thinks of it as an ideogram of a story."<sup>28</sup> Benjamin brings in the figure of the proverb to further concretize the task of the storyteller, and it is this third model that produces the most clearly delineated explanation of experience. The story becoming proverb exaggerates the storyteller's capacity to distill experience down to a coherent singular concept, and Benjamin indeed goes so far as to connect these storytellers to teachers and sages for their shared capacity to present and communicate concepts.

But it is in the figure of the proverb that we find the point of interest for this discussion. Benjamin continues: "A proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a happening like ivory around a wall."<sup>29</sup> Benjamin proposes this metaphor so as to account for the ways that a proverb, as an extreme distillation of a story, brings coherence to experience. But it is the figure of the ruin that complicates this passage. It is worth noting here that in German Benjamin uses the word "Trümmer," which, in addition to "ruins" (in the German it is plural), can translate

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

to “fragments” or “broken pieces.” These alternative translations heighten the metaphor in use here as they parallel and in fact amplify the relationship that proverb has to story. The translation of “fragment” emphasizes the fact that the proverb is itself ruinous, its presence indicating that the story—and furthermore the experience that the story has filtered—has broken apart and what remains is a simplification that holds only a shattered section of the original. This distinction in fact tells us a lot about what, according to this logic, a ruin is: a fragment of a whole that holds within it some semblance of a former state but that fails, due to its highlighting only a single part, to account for the entirety. A proverb, according to this passage, is not simply a distillation, but a distillation that occurs only at the site of disintegration of a former structure, a ruin. The errand of this discussion is to reverse this analogy. The task at hand is not to ask “how is a proverb like a ruin?”—as indeed Benjamin proposes an answer to this question—but “how is a ruin like a proverb?”, and, furthermore, what it means for a ruin, or an image thereof, to take this status as proverb. Rossellini’s *Germany Year Zero*, this project contends, too takes up this task.

In *Germany Year Zero* there are many ruins—one might even say that there is nothing but ruins—but in one particular sequence the status of the ruin as fragment is emphasized, and indeed complicated. When early in the film Edmund, acting under orders from Henning, is enlisted to sell a record to some allied troops, the damages caused by authoritarianism, and the necessity of never turning back, are made totally clear. In this scene Edmund demonstrates the qualities of the record by playing it aloud on a small player. The sounds of the record begin to echo through the ruined building that the group occupies. The speech by Hitler that the record contains confuse, at first, the small boy and his elderly guardian strolling nearby, who look up, surprised.



The image quickly leaves the particularity of this ruined building and a wide, high angle shot of the demolished city is presented. A slow pan reveals more and more demolished structures, before finally panning up towards the sky.



The speech, arguing at this point the need for the German people to “raise up,” ends again with the elderly man and child slowly walking off screen as Hitler concludes by yelling about the victories that await.

This moment serves to concretize the film’s pessimism towards the post-authoritarian world while simultaneously presenting the crisis at the end of authority as one valuable to the reformation of these countries. The failures of authoritarianism—and the horrors that have been unleashed by the ascension and subsequent destruction of this

mode—are displayed here, and the potential effectiveness that this kind of governmental approach had promised has been reduced here literally to rubble. To return to Benjamin, then, what is distilled in these images and calcified into proverb is the terror that Hitler has unleashed. But not only the damage that has been done to Germany survives in these images. These ruins too point towards the similar ruins produced elsewhere by this same conflict. These downed buildings and the hateful speech that here accompanies them point backwards to the war to produce a relatively straightforward denunciation, and Edmund's later actions—particularly his poisoning his ailing father at the behest of Henning in the name of securing more rations for his family—are also condemned in this gesture.

The juxtaposition of Hitler's speech with the wrecked buildings serves as an effective if obvious criticism of his monstrous actions, but too haunting this scene is the question of how to rebuild. Arendt ends her discussion of authority with a flourish:

To live in a political realm with neither authority nor the concomitant awareness that the source of authority transcends power and those who are in power, means to be confronted anew, without the religious trust in a sacred beginning and without the protection of traditional and therefore self-evident standards of behavior, by the elementary problems of human living-together.<sup>30</sup>

This film asks what is to be done with *and* without authority, but it asks it from the perspective of the damage that efforts to reinscribe authority have wrought. That is, this film functions to force the confrontation that Arendt predicts; it asks how is one to see and understand the problems of living-together, but it asks these questions from the literal view that Edmund occupies just before he jumps. His is the high angle view that looks down upon rubble, the very rubble caused by others' attempts to answer these same questions

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<sup>30</sup> Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 502.

through a reclaiming of authority, attempts that have led to levels of destruction never before seen. The title of the film asks where to go from here, but the “here” is a zero point, a point where the triumvirate of authority, religion and tradition has been broken apart from every side and has been reduced to the worthless waste of a misguided attempt to render the world coherent.

In light of Benjamin’s metaphor, then, it becomes clear that something like ambiguity has crept into the easily read proverb that these ruins provide. The distillation and renunciation of Nazi ideas and practices is clear, but another quality of ruins and their coherence is that their relationship to a no longer available former glory necessarily stands them apart from the past. In light of this record and these wrecked buildings, Edmund’s approach to reconciling his family’s needs through a single brutal decision appears simply outmoded, a ruin as repellent as the views reproduced on the record that he attempts to sell. But what arises in these moments is the questions of humans living together, how to account for others and how to produce meaning without re-erecting the hierarchies of authority that have here so recently been deposed. This is all to say that these ruins also point forward, albeit to an unfigured future. These bombed out landscapes indicate how ruins, like proverbs, can point towards their own boundaries, in this case how they can motion towards some other way of living-together that can produce different kinds of structures and different forms of logic.

As Svetlana Boym notes, ruins tend to propose particular visions of both the future and the past. According to Boym, “Ruins make us think of the past that could have been and the future that never took place, tantalizing us with utopian dreams of escaping the

irreversibility of time.”<sup>31</sup> In the case of *Germany Year Zero*, where asking what could have been is a dark question, it might be better to think of these ruins as signifying a dystopia avoided. The terrifying path so narrowly escaped figures the ruins here as a kind of relief; rather than cement the loss of a positive future, these ruins provide a devastating but in a way triumphant background. These are after all in a sense the ruins of fascism, so the future that could have been functions here as a kind of dark specter.

This is to say that the ruins of *Germany Year Zero* never haunt us with former glories, and the only future they signal towards is one we are glad to have avoided. But with these collapsed spaces there persists human misery, and this film suggests that it is within these miserable circumstances that something like the ruinous potential of fascism can rise again—as best evidenced through Edmund’s actions. This is effectively the dynamic of the film: a renouncement of the fascists and a kind of sad relief at the depths of destruction here in the heart of fascism. But accompanying this there is a profound sadness for those occupying what is no longer a hospitable space. The question that arises in light of this intolerable dynamic increases in line with the acceleration of Edmund’s demise: what new structure can arise to account for what we have seen here? What kind of building can be built to house these characters, and how might it dissuade future returns to violence? This film is, of course, either unwilling to or incapable of answering these questions. It instead suspends them, creating a gap that seems to interrupt the inevitable project of rebuilding by proposing and dwelling upon the question of how to proceed.

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<sup>31</sup> Svetlana Boym, “Ruinophilia: Appreciation of Ruins,” *Atlas of Transformation*, <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/r/ruinophilia/ruinophilia-appreciation-of-ruins-svetlana-boym.html>.



In a different examination of the subject, Benjamin touches upon the ruin's capacity to disrupt the apparent unity and coherence of historical progress. According to Benjamin, "In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the progress of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay."<sup>32</sup> Given the context of Mussolini's obsession with the glory of Italy embodied by the splendor of the Roman past, the location of Berlin functions here as a deliberate riposte. There is no irresistible historical victory to Rossellini's Berlin, only misery, failure and death.

It is precisely this gap between the question of how to proceed after such destruction and the subsequent production of an answer that this film attempts to extend. If the ruin serves here to provide a vision of history predicated on destruction rather than progress, then it also highlights the possibility of differing directions for renewal. For Benjamin, the ruin also serves as a reminder of the constructedness of history, of its failures and its missteps.<sup>33</sup> It is within this dismissal of inevitability and the potential turn to something radically different where optimism and opportunity persist.

Georg Simmel discusses ruins at length, and in particular highlights their capacity to produce a relationship to time that draws attention to the array of options available in the present. While Simmel distinguishes the ruins generated by human destruction from those that result from time and what he calls nature, elements of his ideas on ruins are nonetheless useful in the case of *Germany Year Zero*. According to Simmel, "Between the not-yet and the no-longer lies an affirmation of the spirit whose path, it is true, now no

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<sup>32</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London & New York: Verso, 1998), 177-178.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

longer ascends to its peak but, satiated by the peak's riches, descends to his home."<sup>34</sup> For Simmel, the ruin has the capacity to place those who encounter it in a position focused on a present defined by a fallen past and a failed future. By virtue of their serving as an emblem of a given course that has crumbled away—its goals exhausted or, as in this case, thwarted—ruins renew the possibilities for seeing and exploring different paths and methods for existence.

Simmel puts the moment of the ruin in opposition to what he calls the “fruitful moment”—the time when the riches that predate the ruin are still in sight.<sup>35</sup> This presentation of ruined spaces from *Germany Year Zero* exemplifies just this dynamic. The ruinous moment has arrived in full force, and here it is presented as direct counterpoint to the “fruitful moment” perceived—and indeed reproduced in the form of the record—by Hitler and his cronies. What takes shape, thanks to this juxtaposition, is a widening of possibilities. The vacuum created by such spectacular hatred and its resounding defeat creates a ghostly figure that gestures outward towards reconfiguration, but Rossellini refuses to give this figure form, to configure a path forward. What he produces in this absence of clarity and figuration is an abstract form of hope, the possibility for difference and change but a refusal of its direct representation.

Simmel continues with a final summation of his views on the ruin: “The past with its destinies and transformations has been gathered into this instant of an aesthetically perceptible present.”<sup>36</sup> Rossellini strives to present his ruins as *all present*; they reject the past, its failures as well as its legacy, and refuse a future. This endeavor finds its full force in

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<sup>34</sup> Georg Simmel, “The Ruin” *Essays on Sociology, Philosophy and Aesthetics*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 262.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

this sequence's juxtaposition of the mad grasp for glory (the speech on the record) and the destruction that it has produced (the ruins). In this moment past and future are simultaneously negated. For Simmel, in the ruin "such profound and comprehensive energies of our soul are brought into play that there is no longer any sharp division between perception and thought."<sup>37</sup> And it is this capacity to crystallize the present while simultaneously severing its relationship to the past and denying its future that is key for Rossellini's film. Here is a film in which all elements, including the very spaces that the characters occupy, transform experience into a unified question: how is one to proceed in light of this destruction? This is the proverb that has been produced, the experience that has been distilled. But it provides no easily assimilable message. *Germany Year Zero's* quandary stands as unanswered and perhaps unanswerable, a coherent point that proposes no particular rejoinder. What Rossellini is trying to do is make *seeing* political, and it is his refusal of a cogent and particular approach that produces this condition. Hence the meaning of the title; this is year zero, where perception and thought collide.

### After Authority

But this film does more than thematize these concerns; instead, it asks after them on the level of its very grounds for constructing meaning. That is, this film refuses to render any particular solution, it neglects to signal towards how "Germany Year One" might look, and it instead ends only with a further counter to the resurfacing of any authoritarian rule. Rossellini, the "author" to whom we might ascribe credit, recognizes his own status as authority and outwardly works to undermine this position.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

This can be seen, for instance, in the long sequence where Edmund is seen at play in the rubble. After he admits his murder to Henning, Edmund, dejected, wanders the streets. During this extended sequence he is shown in a long take playing near what appears to be a destroyed statue, the skeletons of buildings loom (as always) in the background. This image fades fully to black and another fades slowly in. This second image presents Edmund in a silhouette, perhaps shown against a body of water, a dark railing separating him from the background.



This grainy shot, combined with his playing in the rubble, presents a moment that gestures towards an interiority but refuses to provide it, it stands on the edge of meaning but keeps it at bay. This image serves to undermine its own meaning, negating any coherent understanding of Edmund's subjectivity by abstracting his understanding of the world—and even his own surroundings. This is to say that the answer to Edmund's turmoil, the coherent moral that will provide him with a way to understand the world and to again take part in it, is refused. Instead, what is presented are images that tend towards the impossibility of meaning, for meaning here would inevitably come from an authority, and it is just this authority that this film so vehemently denies. Rossellini's film, then, strives to connect the authoritarianism of Mussolini's Italy with the authority rendered in any act of

authorship, and it is through this process whereby this film begins to critique the very systems of judgment that render art coherent and capable of presenting meaning.

The restraint in *Germany Year Zero* on display here is indicative of the film's greater attitude towards resolution, for the presentation of a particular meaning would also serve to assert a new master of meaning, and therefore a figure of authority. Given that this is a film about the damages authority can inflict, to present a solution (a positive future or even a dystopic hellscape) would be to seize a role that would undermine the film's central concerns. This presents, of course, an impossible conundrum: how can one speak without presenting a masking that disrupts other avenues of thought? How can one live, to return to Arendt, in a political realm without any universalizing, self-evident truths?

Karl Marx rubs against this same problem in his *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. In a striking chain of declarations, Marx digs into the systems through which capitalism serves to normalize and subsequently perpetuate itself. By outlining a series of increasingly brutal laws that, in essence, illegalized "vagabondage" in England and France—a process through which labor became instituted as morally as well as economically productive—Marx broaches a discussion of minimum and maximum wages. Imbricated throughout this discussion, though, are some of Marx's more significant thoughts of the linkage between productive labor and the will.

Marx begins these thoughts by excoriating the historical developments that led to some of capitalism's now invisible disciplinary maneuverings: "Thus were the agricultural folk first forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded and tortured by grotesquely terroristic laws into

accepting the discipline necessary for the system of wage-labour.”<sup>38</sup> Here Marx sums up, in rather fiery terms, the process that the laws he has just described delineate. That there is a historical trajectory that has culminated in the workers being forced into this position is no surprise, but the system by which this was accomplished—the process whereby the workers were forced to “accept the discipline”—is of particular import. Marx continues shortly thereafter, “The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws.”<sup>39</sup> Herein lies a fragment of a discussion of how capitalism comes to constitute a particular subject. That capitalism is a system that reinforces itself, first, through laws and, second, through the trace of these laws—now forgotten—into an arrangement of tradition and habit is what allows this system to perpetuate itself without need for force. As Marx contends, “The organization of the capitalist process of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance.”<sup>40</sup>

Thanks to this process, “Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases.”<sup>41</sup> The rest of the time, the self-evident codes of conduct that this schema has produced in effect keep everything in check, and they minimize the need for force or, really, any strenuous intervention. However, during earlier stages of capitalism, Marx is careful to note, this self-evidence is not yet set and it is up to the state to use force

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<sup>38</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume 1* (London: Penguin Books 1990), 899.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

to institute these future norms (as in the case of the laws against vagabondage mentioned above).<sup>42</sup>

Of particular importance to this discussion, though, is Marx's use of the term "free and rightless" (*vogelfrei*) to describe those who initially provided the conditions that these laws correct. The free and rightless proletariat are those who, having been recently forced from their agrarian practices but not been absorbed into the urban workforce, are free insofar as they are "outside the human community and therefore entirely unprotected and without legal rights."<sup>43</sup> The task of these laws, then, was to quantify these new editions to the urban setting and to provide them with a directive that yielded increased production.

*Germany Year Zero* explores this same moment; what is to be done, it asks, with a subject who occupies a space outside the strictures of this forgotten code, and how can a society rebuild from a zero point where these restrictive systems no longer hold sway. What Marx's vision of the free and rightless affords this discussion is a system whereby the political concerns that I located in Rossellini's work can take form. For Marx, of course, the free and rightless are a grouping that exists before the assimilation of these people into the capitalist system. This assimilation takes the form, in Marx's account, of a set of arbitrary and forgotten laws that call to an *a priori* and stable set of external values, that is to say that Marx's absorption of this group into capitalism assumes the hierarchical logics that Arendt's account of authoritarianism supplies. For Arendt, the absence of authority brings about a range of problems for modern society, but for Marx the absence of authoritarian logics brings about a very different set of concerns.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 896. (In Footnote)

The free and rightless are free in the sense that they provide an outside to not only capital, but also society in general. The agrarian societies that the free and rightless arose from were not the privileged holders of an otherwise impossible freedom; instead, the “freedom” that this state entails arose only as a result of being forced halfway into a new relationship to governance and economics. That is, the “freedom” of this state serves as readily as a restriction as it does an advantage. The other half of this term, the rightlessness, clarifies this dynamic. The free and rightless are free in the sense that society has no system to account for these individuals and their actions, and this freedom means that they are also restricted from engaging in the social contracts that might allow these people to subsist. Marx is positing, then, that the outside of capital, the position of the free and rightless, is no viable system of escape, for any freedoms that it affords are always tempered by the inability to guarantee any consistent social arrangements.

To be free and rightless is to potentially occupy a transitional state. That moment between, where a figuration is yet to take place and where the people that occupy this state are not yet absorbed into the capitalist (or any other) apparatus. What the free and rightless represents is a kind of indeterminate grouping that can recombine in any of a variety of formations. For Marx, of course, the assimilation of the free and rightless into capitalism was a brutal and deleterious process, but the persistence of this transitional moment also implies the potential for a return, a new transition where a new configuration is available.

The term free and rightless then serves a double purpose here. On one register it reveals how the brutal and destructive effects of capitalism directly and deliberately, in Marx’s account, operate to generate a subject position conducive to capitalism. But it also



grants a vision of an indeterminate moment where any of a number of potentials are available. In this moment, though, the advantages that the ability to organize and decide provides—perhaps the advantages granted by hierarchy and authority—are erased, and the rights that the social order might produce are hollowed out and rendered ineffective.

This state between is exactly the zone that Rossellini's film, I propose, strives to occupy. Where the ideas that *Germany Year Zero* presents deviate from those of Arendt and Marx, then, are in its attempt to extend this moment, to think through the indeterminate stage and try to sustain the very space of transition. Before a space can be rendered knowable, before, perhaps, foreign aid can arrive to help in determining how Italy is to be reconstructed, before the logics of authority can take hold, there is that moment where no course has yet been taken. This time, this pausing and taking a breath, is what Rossellini's film attempts to figure, and this attempt to extend this pause comes via Edmund's consistent failure to constitute an understanding of the world. To be clear, this in-between moment coincides with the postwar world at its most desolate (the time, in very real terms, before aid has arrived), but it is also the moment brimming with the most potential.

When Edmund carefully hangs up his coat, slides down the stanchion, and jumps to his death, this delay is ended. A decision has been rendered, and his course for figuring the world has been (rather pessimistically) determined. But death here is not simply one of a number of outcomes: it is the only option that seems to persist in resisting. After Edmund killed his father he asked, "Is he free now?" What he was asking after, it now seems, was whether the course that Edmund himself had tried—and failed—to navigate had finally been negated; whether the authority that Edmund had attempted to muster had really

finally been disproven; whether the Nazi logics that Henning and his actions represented had indeed finally been separated from the authority they claimed to hold.

The starts and stops that the film presents, its criminal logics and cowardly missteps, seem to signal towards an attempt to find (or re-find) some way to shape the world, but its refusal to figure a positive future (there is no heroic martyr here) stands as a direct attempt to think through the democratization process that awaits. The pessimism that concludes this film signals the degree of destruction that must come before any extensive rebuilding, as well as the agony it is to live as free and rightless. To assimilate into an arbitrary arrangement that will, far in the future, come to account for meaning or to die and, hopefully, persist in a freedom outside of the social is the decision that Edmund is forced to make, and it is this decision, at a moment when it is more than ever available, that is too what concerns this film.

The difficulties that a forthcoming democracy holds—where and how decisions are to be made and actions are to be taken—haunts this film. The discovery as to whether the world can persist without authoritarian logics and how one is to find meaning in this landscape is the task that occupies Edmund. But to make meaning on film too implies some knowledge that is otherwise unavailable, some authority to which the film's makers have some kind of access. For *Germany Year Zero*, the question posed is not only how to proceed in a world without authority (and whether such a task is possible), but also how to make art that can attend to and extend the tenets of democracy, a difference that distinguishes Rossellini's project from that of Arendt and Marx. The solution, here, seems to come via a return to ambiguity, an unwillingness to take a stance or to render a solution. This film, I contend, participates in an active engagement with just these questions. What it means to

stop at the moment before decision and whether one can proceed in this stoppage is the question at hand, and the answer as to how meaning is to come and fill these empty streets again is what this film is so generously unwilling to provide.

### The End of Openness

But what becomes visible thanks to our remove from the world of 1948? If we take the goals of this film to be radical change and an opening for the constitution of something remarkably different, then it is difficult to call this film a success. The opening that Rossellini here strives to provide and the refusal of figuration that he heroically produces never did generate radical difference. Instead, what came to fill in the openings and gaps of Rossellini's year zero was a new a very different form of authority, one defined not by its unified solidity and ease of identification, but characterized instead by fluidity and an ability to escape opposition.

While Rossellini's approach as outlined in this chapter might well serve as a coherent and perhaps effective response to a calcified and crushing authority, it might likewise be called shortsighted in regards to the potential formations of capitalism that could, and indeed did, begin to form in the years following the war. What Rossellini did not foresee, that is, is the possibility of a kind of capitalism that counters—or indeed thrives upon—the openness and uncertainty that his film proposes.

In *Liquid Modernity* sociologist Zygmunt Bauman outlines the ways that dedication to openness and contingency has been reabsorbed into the logic of capitalism. For Bauman, many of the oppositional thinkers of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in particular those unified under the loosely arranged banner of “critical theory,” were writing against the

overwhelming terror of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. These governmental and institutional arrangements were constituted by solid controlling systems of thought set upon shattering individuality and difference. They included a range of foes that extended from the Fascists to the Fordists, forces that sought to establish control of society in the name of efficiency and profit.<sup>44</sup>

Rossellini's film, as this chapter has shown, is exactly in line with this mode of critique. *Germany Year Zero* strives to cede control, and in so doing to withstand the onslaught of hierarchical order and authority that the Nazis and Fascists sought to impose. Rossellini's cinema stands in clear opposition to the climate that culminated with World War II, what Bauman calls a modernity defined as "a sworn enemy of contingency, variety, ambiguity, waywardness and idiosyncrasy, having declared on all such 'anomalies' a holy war of attrition; and it was individual freedom and autonomy that were commonly expected to be the prime casualties of the crusade."<sup>45</sup>

But the authority that developed in response to attacks like those of Rossellini's harnessed for its own advantages just the kinds of relationships to contingency that Rossellini lionized. Bauman's description of this new modernity, which, for him, is indeed the modernity that persists today, consist of two primary qualities:

The first is the gradual collapse and swift decline of the early modern illusion: of the belief that there is an end to the road along which we proceed, an attainable *telos* of historical change, a state of perfection to be reached tomorrow, next year or next millennium.<sup>46</sup>

Far from the old logic of ceasing and building a moment and a movement, Bauman's postwar modernity is that of the ruin, the fresh beginning that promises no particular

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<sup>44</sup> Bauman, 25

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 29.

outcome other than potential and contingency. Bauman's modernity is that of the "collapse... of complete mastery over the future—so complete that it puts paid to all contingency, contention, ambivalent and unanticipated consequences of human undertakings."<sup>47</sup> And it is in this denial that this new modernity and *Germany Year Zero* collide; these are both oriented towards freedom, contingency, towards an inchoate becoming that holds within it the possibility for something new.

Bauman's modernity, however, uses these openings to produce something entirely counter to Rossellini's hopes, and indeed critical theory's championing of justice and equality. According to Bauman the second significant characteristic of this new modernity is:

The deregulation and privatization of the modernizing tasks and duties. What used to be considered a job to be performed by human reason seen as the collective endowment and property of the human species has been fragmented ("individualized"), assigned to individual guts and stamina, and left to individuals' management and individually administered resources.<sup>48</sup>

The second of Bauman's characteristics of contemporary modernity—what is elsewhere called neoliberalism and is qualified as the thrust for total privatization of the economy and the subsequent capacity of the logic of rationalization and privatization to come to account for human decisions in every aspect of life—preys upon, and is indeed uniquely suited to consume, just the kinds of hopes that *Germany Year Zero* encapsulates. The openness and freedom to choose and reconfigure that serves as the heart of Rossellini's film is built on the unsteady trellis of chance and difference, and the neoliberal logics of privatization, individualization and uncertainty transform this openness into an

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

opportunity to produce a lifestyle of individualistic, flexible labor under the destructive rhetoric of freedom.

As Bauman notes, it is indeed this rhetoric of freedom that has in fact come to constitute the available set of outcomes for political discourse. For Bauman, this change in contemporary society “has been reflected in the relocation of ethical/political discourse from the frame of the ‘just society’ to that of ‘human rights,’ that is refocusing that discourse on the right of individuals to stay different and to pick and choose at will their own models of happiness and fitting life-style.”<sup>49</sup> This is not to say that the projects of human rights are not worthwhile, but that they are consistently being sectioned off from projects that pertain to society’s capacity to change things for the good, a process that has been deliberately developed to counter political approaches predicated on contingency and change—ostensibly, and by many accounts minimally, appeasing them without radically altering the grounds of society. This creates a system whereby the responsibility of government is restricted to acknowledging and, at its most aggressive, helping society at large to recognize the rights and values of previously alienated or unrecognized individuals. What is lost in this—at times very noble and valuable—process is the hope that there is something other than marketplace unity as the endpoint for any and all identities. Human rights, as the term suggest, signifies a world where every human is free to take part, but it here loses hold of the idea that the grounds of society are contestable. The openings that Rossellini provides, then, are in the contemporary moment reabsorbed into a capitalist system through acknowledgement, and in this process stripped of their revolutionary wish.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

The freedom to choose that *Germany Year Zero* offers—the ending of authority signifying the opportunity to rebuild society in any of a number of new ways—with its adamant insistence about freezing this moment of choice and projecting it back to an audience strived to produce a cogent and valuable instant of freedom, but it is freedom itself that has since become problematic. In the eyes of the statistics-based society that has developed after this moment of unbound authority that culminated in postwar cinema, “The loose, ‘associative’ status of identity, the opportunity to ‘shop around,’ to pick and shed one’s ‘true self,’ to ‘be on the move,’ has come in present-day consumer society to signify freedom.”<sup>50</sup> The freedoms that flowered in the wake of Hitler and Mussolini, these freedoms that accompanied such misery, which haunted Edmund to his death and which through the image of the ruin proposed an infinite range of possibly, are maintained and in fact encouraged under neoliberal capitalism. In this new world Edmund’s choices remain his own, he can be a Nazi or a progressive or something else entirely. He can be all of these things and none of them, as long he does not demand any sort of rethinking of the grounds of the market. What is particularly pernicious about this new arrangement is that this capacity to radically reshape the structure of one’s identity at any moment reinforces the freedoms of individual expression, but it is just these freedoms that have been coopted by the logic of the market. Ultimately, in any of Rossellini’s fissures and openings the first thing to come in and fill the gap must, in the contemporary moment, always already be individualized, market oriented freedom, for it is just the ideas of “freedom” and “individuality”—indeed the central ideas of Rossellini’s quest—that have already been corrupted.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 87.

The world that has overtaken the ruins so prominently figured in Rossellini's film has built no monuments to itself, for it must slip away from any calcified formations. This is a world where the figures of authority have ceded control, as Rossellini foresaw and indeed tried to facilitate. But what has taken the position of the traditional authority is no less pernicious, and many times more elusive. What has filled in the openings that Rossellini sought is a market based logic unmoored to tradition and immune, thanks to its liquidity, to contestation. Bauman places the roots of this liquidation as far back as Marx, but Rossellini's approach and context crystallize the problem of fighting this new modernity. Rossellini's film sought, to use Bauman's terms, to "melt the solids" of concretized hierarchical order in the hopes of allowing other formations to emerge, but, as Bauman notes, "The melting of solids led to the progressive untying of economy from its traditional political, ethical and cultural entanglements. It sedimented a new order, defined primarily in economic terms."<sup>51</sup>

It is this logic of pure economy that haunts, as I will return to in chapter three, the style and narrative of Hong Sang-soo's films, but its origin is here made visible in Rossellini's cinema. If it is a response to authoritarianism that generated these circumstances, then indeed the rejection of authority present in Rossellini's film created exactly the conditions upon which neoliberalism preys. The economic logic that fills the gaps of freedom and the potential for change is furthermore nearly impossible to locate. Rather than the monumental structures of authoritarianism, the neoliberal logics that came to respond to its collapse functioned as an "absentee-landlord," looming just around every

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 4.



corner but always just out of sight, unconcerned with the conditions of its property except in so far as it effects the bottom line.<sup>52</sup>

This new modernity is reliant on the perpetual disappearance of its own authority, it refuses a structured position but always lurks at the bottom of any arrangement, consistently undercutting the possibility for organized critique by constantly obscuring the object that would be opposed. If *Germany Year Zero* refused to figure its oppositional stances in the name of contingency, it neglects to account for the possibility that the inchoate unfigured void that it champions could come to reinscribe the misery and oppression that had previously been the domain of unbridled authority. But the question of how to oppose this unfigured mess remains very difficult to ascertain. Rossellini's heroic resistance, his refusal to name a way forward or to figure an opposition to be dispatched, tragically finds itself complicit with the wishes of the new modernity: openness and indecision have become a tool for a new kind of oppression.

Given the hindsight of some 70 years, Rossellini's bind feels nearly impossible to overcome. On the one hand his project—melting the rigidity of authoritarianism in the name of the possible—is a valuable one, and his insistence on refusing to figure the path towards a more just society is a cogent and valuable decision that makes sense given the then contemporary conditions. The downside of this approach, and what time has revealed to us, is that the forces of consolidated capital and inequality are all too capable of reorganizing and taking hold of these openings—a process that seems to have taken place, and indeed continues to accelerate, in the time since Rossellini's film.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 13

Indeed moving forward just some 45 years, to just after 1989 and the end of a clear alternative to capitalist democracy, provides a striking example of a filmmaker attempting to produce a similar set of themes. The post-Soviet world—and the particularities of Béla Tarr’s disjointed and unidentifiable representation of Hungary—provides a valuable vantage from which to probe problems similar to those examined by Rossellini, now with an eye turned to the aesthetic response made available by the failure and failing of a new, but not altogether unrecognizable, form of authority. This is the subject of my next chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Image That Waits

45 years after Rossellini's neorealist trilogy concluded, a 45 years that spanned a heated period of conflict between economic policies and their often brutal representatives, Hungarian filmmaker Béla Tarr returned to the central themes of *Germany Year Zero*. The cinema of Tarr, who was equally concerned with the project of resisting authority, produces two important expansions to Rossellini's project: first, Tarr's cinema—and in particular *Sátántangó*, which will be discussed here—extends, in a quite literal sense, the aesthetic qualities that support my claims about anti-authoritarian art cinema. The takes in *Sátántangó* provide unbroken and extended swaths of time that generate a kind of waiting that pushes forward the political approach—or apolitical approach or perhaps political inapproach?—that I located in Rossellini's film. That is, Tarr's long takes serve to *extend* the refusal at figuration that Rossellini demanded. These takes crystalize the aesthetic dimension of these two director's relationship to possibility, and indeed possibility's failures.

The second of Tarr's additions to the topic of cinema and its capacity to reject authority arises from the time that has passed between these two films. If *Germany Year Zero*—somewhere in its unfigured cone of potentiality—still proposed as a possibility the capacity for communism to aid in the rebuilding that might lessen misery, *Sátántangó* has jettisoned this possibility entirely. Having survived it and its seeming conclusion, Tarr's cinema rejects communism. This difference is responsible for the hopelessness and confusion that underwrite *Sátántangó*, but as the strength and scale of its hopelessness

increases, this chapter contends, so too does the luminosity of hope—its light seeming to intensify as its possibility recedes.

This chapter will begin by outlining the film and some responses to it. It will then briefly explore a connection between the functions of the long take proposed by seminal film theorist André Bazin and Tarr's own views on habituated vision. This chapter will then proceed by discussing the specific significance of this film in regards to the historical circumstances of post-authoritarian Hungary. Next, I will discuss the concepts of waiting and boredom, their political potential and their specific relationship to this film. This chapter will then transition into a discussion of two recent books on Tarr's cinema and how these provide different directions for analysis, ultimately exploring how politics interacts with waiting and proposes possible paths for and barriers to political change. Finally, this chapter concludes with an examination of the ways that hope and waiting interact, and the forms of action that this film both produces and denies.

### Ambiguity and the Long Take

In the forward to *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas*, an edited collection on film in post-Soviet Europe, Dina Iordanova outlines the two common understandings of the paths taken by post-Soviet countries in the wake of the revolutions of 1989. According to Iordanova:

Some of us, mainly based in the social science disciplines, maintain that, once emancipated from Soviet tyranny, the countries of the former Soviet bloc promptly readjusted their political and economic course and soon caught up with the democracies of old Europe, joining a position where they always belonged, historically and culturally. Others, mainly from the humanities

camp, focus their attention on the hiccups, the failed enthusiasm, and the disillusionment.<sup>1</sup>

The function of this chapter will be to forge a gap between these binary appraisals of post 1989—or better yet, to explore how these two understandings are functioning in relation to each other. Indeed, this chapter argues that these hiccups in what would be an otherwise continuous transition serve not only as a symptom of the reentry of post-Soviet nations—and, for my purposes here, Hungary in particular—but actually allow for a space for thinking through the function and formation of the democracies in question. The key to these hiccups and failed enthusiasms is their relationship to *waiting*, the moment just before figuration when the particularities of action are yet to fully take form.

In order to achieve this goal, I focus on Hungary in the early moments of post-Soviet transition. Tarr's *Sátántangó*, released in 1994 but produced throughout the early 1990s, allows the kinds of waiting that generate the disillusionments that Iordanova describes; it produces these moments, though, not in the hope of generating a nostalgia for a lost Soviet past, but in an attempt to slow the transition at hand, in arresting its momentum, asking the film's audience to contemplate one last time the coming democracy in this moment just before it enters into view.

According to Iordanova: "The more effectively one deals with change, the more likely one is to thrive, management wisdom has it. Just like the natural world, societies and individuals encounter changing conditions that are beyond their control; successful adaptation to change is crucial for the success of the enterprise."<sup>2</sup> Iordanova labels this attitude to change "change management," and argues that it describes an "approach to

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<sup>1</sup> Dina Iordanova, forward to *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas*, ed Anikó Imre (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), XV.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

shifting individuals and groups from a current to a desired state, empowering stakeholders to accept and thrive in an environment that has not settled quite yet.”<sup>3</sup> *Sátántangó* produces a disruption in this process of “change management.” Without any return to its totalitarian past, this film critiques the adaptation process that looms in Hungary’s future. The “desired state” that here is being acquired is, throughout this film, being put into question, but in such a way that figures no particular alternative.

Throughout its over seven hour unfolding *Sátántangó* follows, amongst other things, the progression of a group of roughly a dozen occupants of a rural Hungarian town. These people, members of something like a community farm, pool their money and give it to the mysterious Irimiás (Mihály Vig) in the hope that he will find them a new place to live and work. The film is often thought to serve as a thinly veiled allegory for the collapse of communism and the failed (or failing) promise of capitalism,<sup>4</sup> and Irimiás best embodies this reading: he disappears and reappears throughout the film, propelling the actions of (some of) the townspeople with what turn out to be false promises and corrupt negotiations. There are, of course, various asides—the all too authentic torturing of a cat at the hands of the child Estike (Erika Bók) serving as the most notorious—but the plot of the film moves in such delayed sputters that it very quickly becomes difficult to map any particular reading to the character’s actions.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Manohla Dargis, “Finding Beauty in the Miserable and the Mundane,” *The New York Times*, last modified January 11, 2006, [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/11/movies/11sata.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/11/movies/11sata.html?_r=1&).

What is perhaps most often noted about *Sátántangó*, though, is the length of its takes. Varying in length but averaging about two and half minutes,<sup>5</sup> *Sátántangó* has become famous not only for its celebrated status as a major figure in the history of the festival circuit, but as something of an initiation or legitimization piece for cinephiles—surviving its length and difficulty signaling a dedication to art cinema and serving as a kind of shorthand for a truly dedicated cineaste. These long-takes vary in their accompanying movements, some remaining absolutely still, others having elaborate crane and or tracking shots that move the viewer through various spaces. When asked about the reason behind the length of these takes, Tarr highlights their status as different from the images to which viewers are habituated. To Tarr, “The people of this generation know information-cut, information-cut, information-cut. They can follow the logic of it, the logic of the story, but they don’t follow the logic of life.”<sup>6</sup> For Tarr, then, the habituated structures of film style have come to interfere with something that he calls “life.” What constitutes “life” for Tarr is never made totally clear, but what is valuable about these takes, for Tarr, is their relationship to a kind of seeing less dominated by film tradition, a looking that allows for something other than what is generally made available.

Bazin was too rather fond of long-takes shot in deep focus, and he spoke at times in terms similar to Tarr’s about them. Putting them in opposition to the “tricks” and “cheats” used by practitioners of montage, Bazin, in his “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” takes Erich von Stroheim as the ultimate filmmaker in terms of the unbroken, long-take. What these takes allow, for Bazin, is a “laying bare.” To Bazin, “In these films reality lays

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<sup>5</sup> David Bordwell, “TANGO marathon,” *Observations on Film Art*, last modified October 22, 2006, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2006/10/22/tango-marathon/>.

<sup>6</sup> Phil Ballard, “In Search of Truth: Béla Tarr Interviewed,” *Kinoeye* 4, no. 2 (2004), <http://www.kinoeye.org/04/02/ballard02.php>.

itself bare like a suspect confessing under the relentless examination of the commissioner of police.”<sup>7</sup> The “close look” that the unbroken take affords, then, allows a situation where the film offers up “reality” to the viewer, a system through which the film sacrifices its narrative hopes in the goal of letting the audience *see*.<sup>8</sup> But what is it that can be seen differently in the image for these two thinkers?

According to Bazin, shooting in depth and without cuts, “Brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality. Therefore it is correct to say that, independently of the contents of the image, its structure is more realistic.”<sup>9</sup> Reality is, according to Bazin’s purview, purely achieved through aesthetic means. This is not to say that the narrative contained in the image is irrelevant, but that the audience’s relationship to the image—their belief in it, so to speak—is derived through aesthetics; the actions of the characters are available for contemplation, but only as *content*, a set of qualities unattached to the presentation of reality.

Bazin addresses the value of this particular set of aesthetic characteristics by explaining the role that the viewer is encouraged to play in light of the persistence of the unbroken take:

While analytical montage only calls for him [*sic*] to follow his guide, to let his attention follow along smoothly with that of the director who will choose what he should see, here he is called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice. It is from his attention and his will that the meaning of the image in part derives.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> André Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” in *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 27.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.



Herein lies the key to Bazin's supposed "ontology" (which is never quite that): the viewer of these films that he so treasures is called upon to make some amount of choice in these moments, asked to participate in what is to come. But this process is realized not through effecting the unspooling of the film, but through deciding one's own relation to the images; examining them and writing, so to speak, an understanding of these moments. As Tarr puts it in response to being asked about the reason for his extend takes: "Because I see the story as only just a dimension of life, because we have a lot of other things. We have time, we have landscapes, we have meta-communications, all of which are not verbal information."<sup>11</sup> For Tarr too these shots open up a new space of some sort, a space for choice or change, a space that is unadorned with ready-to-hand knowledge, and that the audience must therefore assimilate into their understanding of these images and events on their own.

Of course, this is nothing new. That Bazin and Tarr unite in something like an understanding of the long-take is no surprise. What is valuable, though, is the political ramifications of these images given their particular historical moment. What these figures describe is an image of, or that generates, a viewer free of the governing boundaries of habituation, a kind of ideal mode of total democracy—a freedom to choose that allows more choice even than the world itself, a democratic image alleviating the need for the authoritative figure (even that of the artist) to come forth and orient one's vision. But, of course, this ideal always vanishes. It does so with every cut, or with the raising of the lights, or when action occurs and a course is taken—either in us or in the film. To return to *Iordanova*, the disillusionments of the careful transition to democracy are, thanks to Tarr, becoming visible; indeed, the easy, habituated choice that looms as inevitable is never here

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<sup>11</sup> Phil Ballard, "In Search of Truth: Béla Tarr Interviewed," *Kinoeye* 4, no. 2 (2004), <http://www.kinoeye.org/04/02/ballard02.php>.

contradicted nor even exactly critiqued, but the time before it is extended. The return to the past of old Europe is pushed aside for just a second (or maybe a little over seven hours), and the viewing audience is left to linger, however briefly, with these images but without authority or habit to guide them.

A particular moment in *Sátántangó* helps to articulate this process. In the often discussed opening shot the credits relent to a slow fade from black revealing an incredibly muddy yard in front of a barn that looks very much like a run-down factory.



The only movement, at first, is the rain falling into the muddy puddle in the foreground. Slowly, cows emerge from the building and meander around the yard. The camera tilts slightly, keeping the cows centered as they move. Suddenly, from inside the pack one cow mounts another, the two struggle and charge around the yard and then the cow dismounts, blending instantly back into the crowd. A single cow then reemerges, walks towards the camera and pauses at the side of the frame. The camera tilts slightly again as two more cows come forward, one stops and looks at the camera, and then rejoins the herd as the pack heads to the left of the frame.



That camera tilts again and then begins to track with the herd, revealing that, rather than a fenced area, this seems to be the town square. The camera continues to track, following the cows, but buildings slowly begin to separate the cows and the camera. At one point in its journey the camera displays nothing but a solid wall consisting of a mixture of brick and cracked concrete. But it continues, and the cows return. The camera seems to totally lose track of the herd, though, as the number of buildings in the foreground increases, visiting with the cows only briefly in the spaces between structures. On the sides of two buildings a pair of seemingly arbitrary grey numbers appears—sixty-three, seven—referencing some process or count the significance of which the audience is never alerted to. The camera finally finds some open space again, and too refinds its herd, now accompanied by some chickens.



This position holds as the cows slowly exit through an opening between two buildings in the far background. One chicken is all that remains when the image finally fades back to

black. This blackness holds and a narration begins that again explains the layout of the town, now over the black screen.

This establishing shot of the town is presented in a seven and a half minute unbroken take. Given its position at the start and its depiction of the town that occupies much of the film, it has come to serve for many critics as something of a primer for what is to come. According to David Bordwell:

The first shot, now famous, was a stunner. Cows wander through the churned mud of a village square, amble slowly to the camera and then drift to the left, the camera sliding along with them. Eventually they shamble into the distance. All the while, hollow, bell-like chords throb on. Great cow ensemble performance and a dawdling, slightly ominous introduction to a strange world: I was ready.<sup>12</sup>

For Bordwell, then, this is an introduction to the style and the world of the film. For Peter Hames, however, there is also something like an authorial purpose to this opening. To Hames:

The film begins with a much-quoted opening scene in which cows move from a shed towards the right of screen. The camera moves with them, tracking alongside to take in walls, outhouses and hens. The whole sequence is accompanied by haunting and reverberating sound. A narrative title informs us that the whole town has been cut off by the bog, mud and the incessant rain. "The news is that they are coming," announces a title. The narrative voice is that of the doctor, who watches events and records them from his desk at the window, the film returning to him at the end as the narrative begins again.<sup>13</sup>

For Hames there is an implied connection between the doctor's gaze and this shot. Furthermore, there is some conflation of the doctor with the director—his watching and recording of events coming to account for our view—and, given that this opening narration

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<sup>12</sup> David Bordwell, "TANGO marathon," *Observations on Film Art*, last modified October 22, 2006, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2006/10/22/tango-marathon/>.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Hames, "The Melancholy of Resistance: The Films of Béla Tarr," *Kinoeye* 1, no. 1 (2001), <http://www.kinoeye.org/01/01/hames01.php>.

is directly from the novel on which the film is based, between the story's respective authors. For Manohla Dargis, finally, there is a connection between this opening and a sardonic comment about the film's characters that comes to inform a reading of the narrative events. Dargis writes:

The opening scene, which seems calculated to weed out fainthearted viewers, tracks a herd of cows as they meanderingly exit a barn and enter the muddy yard of the near-desolate village, with its cracked building walls and prodigiously strewn trash. As he does throughout the film, Mr. Tarr shoots this luxuriantly paced scene in long shot, using his beautiful framing and richly gradated black-and-white tones to find beauty in every miserable and mundane corner. In time, we meet the town's other slow-moving inhabitants—men, women and, notoriously, a young girl—none of whom appear more evolved than the wandering cows.<sup>14</sup>

To Dargis, then, this opening serves both as an establishment of directorial style and as a system to orient the audience to the forthcoming actions of the characters, not to mention their seeming resemblance to this group of cattle.

As this short sampling shows, the coherence of this scene in regard to any set of particular meanings is difficult to map across different viewers. Whether establishing a world to be occupied, declaring an authorial imprint, or orienting the viewer to the forthcoming narrative (or all, none or something other than these things) this film is, from its very beginning, establishing some degree of ambiguity, as evidenced by these divergent readings. Ambiguity is, for Bazin, the major and most valuable result of the long-take, deep focus style on display here. For Bazin, ambiguity is of importance because, "The uncertainty in which we find ourselves as to the spiritual key or the interpretation we should put on the

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<sup>14</sup> Manohla Dargis, "Finding Beauty in the Miserable and the Mundane," *The New York Times*, last modified January 11, 2006, [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/11/movies/11sata.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/11/movies/11sata.html?_r=1&).

film is built into the very design of the image”.<sup>15</sup> It is this design that gives the viewer the aforementioned ability to interpret, and subsequently some access to a democratic process, at least as it pertains to meaning.

### Hungary Year Zero

But the case of *Sátántangó* and its relationship to democracy far outstrips simply the discovery of the intended meanings of these images. It is the relationship to a particular moment in Hungarian politics that makes this film of particular value. As John Cunningham notes in regards to the climate of post-Soviet Hungary: “Politically, Hungarians may have hoped for a period of steady acclimation to the process and practices of representative democracy. What they got instead, with the first decisions of 1990, was a right-wing government composed of an unstable coalition... which lurched from crisis to crisis.”<sup>16</sup> This political turmoil is represented in the narrative of this film primarily through Irimiás’ series of promises, lies and persistent returns, but it is more significant in regards to the film’s aesthetic approach. The lack of a clear purpose or governing principle paired with the extension of sight into an unfigured and nearly but never quite visible future positions the viewer in a unique mode of *waiting*. Indeed, the plethora of responses that *Sátántangó* offers but never endorses and its outright refusal to integrate its extended moments into a narrative produce a system that posits waiting as a coherent stance in relation to the peaks and valleys of the political transition that this film seems so intent on discussing *without ever discussing*. And by virtue of this waiting being structured into the film the audience is

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<sup>15</sup> André Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” in *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 36.

<sup>16</sup> John Cunningham, *Hungarian Cinema: From Coffee House to Mutliplex* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), 143.

asked to sit and wait with it—free to interpret but with ideas never verified, wait never summarily ended.

As Cunningham makes clear, the period of Hungarian film beginning in the 1960s and culminating in 1989 was far and away the most fertile period for Hungarian cinema, but it was not altogether undone by the change in economic systems.<sup>17</sup> Much of the state apparatus responsible for funding filmmaking actually persisted into the late 1990s, and there was surprising continuity between the available forms of funding under both systems of governance.<sup>18</sup> There was, however, in the late 1980s serious anxiety about the availability of centralized film financing, as the deeply challenging cinema of figures like Tarr would now be forced to compete in the world of popular cinema.

Accompanying these anxieties was the much more widespread disillusionment with the transition to capitalism. Hungary had entered a recession that straddled the transition and the lack of immediate economic renewal under capitalism led to a serious reduction in enthusiasm for a new market economy. This recession included “inflation standing at 23 per cent, about three million people living at or below the poverty line, the highest foreign debt of any Eastern European country and unemployment just below 400,000 and rising.”<sup>19</sup> In addition, the newly held election, which people had hoped would help the nation transition into a stable market based economy, resulted in a right-wing coalition of unstable allegiances.<sup>20</sup> Hungary, then, shifted from one unstable economic arrangement to another, gaining in the process deep debts, a very high rate of unemployment, and an increasing rate of inflation. The source of this economic downturn is, of course, difficult to

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

pin to a tidy source, but the steady decrease in quality of life that bridged communism and capitalism nonetheless helps to situate *Sátántangó*'s brutal pessimism, and its distrust of both economic systems.

This film's melancholy and general distrust, evidenced best perhaps by Irimiás' actions, demonstrate a particularly insightful example of what Alexei Yurchak, in his *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, describes as the unique blend of idealism and failure that carried the late Soviet moment into the transition to capitalism. For Yurchak, the moments before and during the transition carried with them what he calls a "curious paradox," which he says is characterized by the fact that "the system [communism] was always felt to be both stagnating and immutable, fragile and vigorous, bleak and full of promise."<sup>21</sup> It is this paradox that brings light to Irimiás' actions, and furthermore to his readability as an allegory for disillusionment with both capitalism and communism. Irimiás' promise of a return to a community farm proposes exactly what the residents of the town know to be already failed, but it also provides the possibility for a return to a past that, if miserable, at least held with it the perhaps imaginary ideals of community and equality. But his capitalist leanings, his taking their money and promising positive returns on their investments, proposes exactly the opposite: if capitalism here might produce a positive future of another sort—that of prosperity and abundance—it does so at the cost of any claim to community and collectivity.

Irimiás, then, stands at the crossroad between communism and capitalism, his is the vantage from which both systems become finally legible, their promises apparent their failures palpable. It is this impasse that Tarr hopes to extend, and his system for completing

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<sup>21</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until, It Was No More* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 4.



this task is the extended take. The moment of decision is here extended to its limit. But, unlike in the case of *Germany Year Zero*, the availability of a positive future through a coherent path has all but vanished in the case of *Sátántangó*; Rossellini found a future predicated on a radical break from authority and Tarr here agrees, but where Tarr departs is in the limits of this break. Whereas, for Rossellini, communism was within the range of available futures, for Tarr it has been rejected, at least in any recognizable form. The horizon has shrunk, and with it the strange optimism that Rossellini produced. Tarr's openness, his spaces of contingency and attempts to make available what is radically new, are then both more devastating and more desperate than Rossellini's, for his wish seems all but unattainable. Under this unflinching and all-encompassing pessimism Tarr's *Sátántangó* finds itself in an inescapable bind and it is left only to wait, to wait for something to appear in the spaces of possibility it creates, to wait for something, finally, to arrive and produce some structure to carry us forth.

### Waiting (With Boredom)

Siegfried Kracauer explored the value of waiting by putting this concept in relation to his views on spirituality. For Kracauer the modern world is arranged in such a way as to make waiting an afterthought, a non-productive and therefore obsolete state out of line with the world's emphasis on labor and productivity. Kracauer's essay "Those Who Wait" thinks of the problems that a lack of waiting can cause in specifically religious terms. To Kracauer, for the modern urban subject—the subject doomed to "linger in the void"<sup>22</sup> of

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<sup>22</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, "Those Who Wait," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 135.

urban anomie and metaphorical suffering<sup>23</sup>—there are three available responses when faced with the possibility of religion. First, there is skepticism “as a matter of principle,” represented by the subject who turns his back almost arbitrarily from the matter at hand, taking as eternal truth their own status as skeptic.<sup>24</sup> Second is the subject Kracauer dubs “the short-circuit people,” those who dive headlong into the decisions that they face, short-circuiting what Kracauer finds to be the potential value of their choices by arriving too quickly and too easily at their spiritual conclusions.<sup>25</sup> For Kracauer, it is these short-circuit people who are prone to zealotry. To Kracauer both halves of this pair of opposed responses produce extremism. However, the third response to the problem of the spiritual in the modern world, and the one that Kracauer finds to be of particular value, is that of waiting. For Kracauer waiting presents something of a state of productive indecision. As Kracauer argues, “One waits, and one’s waiting is a *hesitant openness*, albeit of a sort that is difficult to explain.”<sup>26</sup> It is this “hesitant openness” that is of political value to the cinema of Tarr, and its accompanying status as being “difficult to explain” that accounts for the kind of deliberate ambiguity that is essential to Bazin. This difficulty of explanation is derived from the fact the wait is always also a moment of indecision, a space where decision is halted allowing potential to spread out in every direction.

This waiting is also necessarily durational. As Kracauer explains, when thinking of this waiting “one ought to think primarily of those people who have tarried and still do tarry in front of closed doors, and who thus, when they take it upon themselves to wait, are

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 138 (emphasis in original).

people who are waiting here and now.”<sup>27</sup> This is to say that once a decision is rendered the waiting is ended, and its productive value becomes lost as it is placed in the past, figured, in retrospect, as just an intermediate state—an irrelevant interval. But it is when one is *in* the waiting that it is of value, when it pushes at the possible and before it is rendered knowable. Temporally, then, this waiting is never in the future or past, we never did wait and we never will, we only wait while and with waiting, and forget this waiting when it has passed.

Kracauer continues, “The actual metaphysical meaning of his [the one who waits’] attitude rests upon the fact that the irruption of the absolute can occur only once an individual has committed himself with his entire being to this relationship. Those who wait will thus be as hard as possible on themselves, so as not to be taken in by religious need.”<sup>28</sup> This waiting, for Kracauer, is also then an avoidance, those who wait must continue to wait until they can suffer no more, until the need to not wait has passed and something other than waiting finally arrives.

Indeed, Kracauer cautions against the ending of the wait too soon: “Maintaining the furthest possible distance, they [those who wait] almost make it their ambition to be pedantic and somehow cool, as a means of protecting themselves against flying embers.”<sup>29</sup> It is these flying embers that Béla Tarr so carefully encourages his audience to avoid. The tangential and immediate turn to a decision too soon, the disruption of the wait that might prematurely end it before its advantages can arrive. The questions as to whether any of the three readings of Tarr’s cows can be settled upon or whether a return to old Europe or

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

nostalgia for old communism can be found in these images, these are the burning embers that become available in this film's unfolding. But none of these burning embers ever fully arrive in *Sátántangó*, and their audience is left only to wait. During this waiting, for Kracauer, the one who waits can never relax, the one who waits must maintain a "tense activity and engaged self-perception."<sup>30</sup> Hence the absolute reduction of habitual ease in Tarr's takes. Tarr's cinema is never quite that of Andrei Tarkovsky, to whom he is so often compared,<sup>31</sup> because the beauty never exactly carries the viewer away, instead they are always left waiting, waiting for the next cut—an event which, despite all the waiting, so often arrives abruptly—or the next action.

But Kracauer ends his essay on a strange note, and in a way that addresses the difficult decisions as to when it is appropriate to stop the wait. Kracauer's conclusion is presented as follows:

Must it be added that getting oneself ready is only a preparation for that which cannot be obtained by force, a preparation for transformation and for giving oneself over to it? Exactly when this transformation will come to pass and whether or not it will happen at all is not at issue here, and at any rate should not worry those who are exerting themselves.<sup>32</sup>

For Kracauer, finally, the waiting is a preparation for something that is to come, but also an awareness that it might never arrive. The nature of the transformation offered always treats waiting as unfigured, and its point of arrival must always remain vague exactly until it arrives, for once it takes form the wait is finished.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, András Bálint Kovács' discussion of Tarr's long takes in: András Bálint Kovács, *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2013), 56-59.

<sup>32</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, "Those Who Wait," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 140.

In *Sátántangó* there are, of course, disruptions that interrupt the wait, but they are always met with more waiting. Never does the transformation quite arrive—and never does it offer its audience a course of action. What *Sátántangó* aspires to do is maintain a state of waiting, a perpetual asking of its audience to pause and think before the coming democracy can arrive. What separates Tarr's film from the art house tradition that it so clearly claims is its unique position as an artifact of a transitional moment, a moment when waiting was of such great importance to Hungary's transformations. This film asks its viewers to think through this change, it signals towards it but never clearly articulates its concerns. But its length also asks that the audience suffer, that they stare and wait as the cows meander, or worst still, as a cat is tortured in the name of nothing but a misguided claim to authority.<sup>33</sup>

But a film that deliberately demands to open up an expanse of waiting suggests a striking orientation of viewer to object. The viewer, suffering the demands of the wait, is left with a relatively slim scope of direct responses, leaving—or perhaps disregard or rejection—being of course the most available, and indeed it is this response that perhaps accounts for the relative disinterest from Tarr's domestic audience.<sup>34</sup> But the important question here is what does it mean to stay? To endure all seven plus hours of Tarr's film and indeed to enjoy it, as many audiences claim to do? This sustained wait is best qualified under the term *boredom*. That is, in order to wait, to truly wait in the sense that Kracauer and, for me, Tarr demand is to be bored. To disjoin the positive outcome from the

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<sup>33</sup> The character, Estike, echoes throughout the torture sequence the words that, presumably, her father speaks as he beats her.

<sup>34</sup> The domestic disinterest in Tarr is relatively well documented, see for instance: András Bálint Kovács, *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2013), 172.

experience of stillness and to dwell in a state of total indirection, this is what it means to wait and its only coherent response must be boredom.

In her book *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity*—a masterful discussion of boredom’s history and unsteady relationship with both philosophical and empirical methods of approach—Elizabeth Goodstein outlines boredom as such: “Boredom isolates, individuates, even as it blurs the world gray. A confrontation with nothing, then, or Nothing, or something like it. Perhaps just a name for what cannot be named, an encounter with the limits of language. An experience without qualities, with the deficits of the self masquerading as the poverty of the world.”<sup>35</sup> For Goodstein boredom individuates and renders a limitless gray—a world perhaps found concretized in Tarr’s films. But boredom also mistakes this grayness, or perhaps displaces it. In boredom the world outside appears gray and bland, but this blandness and indistinction expand past the boundaries of the image, they are also felt inside—to be bored is to feel that you are yourself as gray as the world that you see; one’s self feels as tired as the object on display. In this way, boredom confuses the boundary between inside and outside. Goodstein continues: “In boredom there is no distinguishing in here from out there, for this world in its failure to engage collapses into an extension of the bored subject who empties out in the vain search for an interest, a pleasure, a meaning.”<sup>36</sup> It is this emptying out that makes room for the wait, that produces the space for openness—true indifference and impartiality are boredom’s qualities, it is constituted by absolute distance but also already the failure to distinguish self from image.

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<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

For Goodstein, the rise of boredom is tightly tied to the effects of industrialization, and results from what she calls the “democratization of skepticism in modernity.”<sup>37</sup> Boredom, for Goodstein, results from a crisis of meaning brought on by the secularization of society and the constant appeal to the vagaries and vicissitudes of “progress” as the motor for modern urban experience. According to Goodstein in boredom, “The definitiveness of the loss of traditional frameworks of meaning registers in a hollow emptiness of self.”<sup>38</sup> If it is in the absence of meaning where waiting finds its value, where politics opens up to possibility and where change can find its most extreme forms, then boredom must be the state that characterizes this wait.

Another term, patience, seems to be likewise valuable for approaching the wait, but what separates boredom from patience—and indeed renders boredom the more radical response—is to be found in the way that the subject is oriented. That is, whereas boredom confuses inside and outside and brings the object of boredom in close relation to the subject, indeed so close that the two become confused, patience maintains a distance and a direction in relation to the object. The difference here is that between waiting *with* and waiting *for*. Where boredom waits with the, in this case, film, patience waits for it; for it to offer up its value and for this value to be subsequently accepted or rejected by the viewer. Boredom is then surely the more messianic of the two, as in it the contract implied by patience is replaced with instability, and perhaps also the more idealistic. But it also offers more—more options and, potentially, more and greater difference. In light of Tarr’s context, his equating and confusing of both available economic options and perhaps proposing that both seem to offer no promise other than misery, boredom becomes the far

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 398.

more alluring of these two responses. There is, for Tarr, nothing to patiently await, only boredom offers the radical difference of completely unhabituated viewing that he demands.

Patrice Petro, in her book *Aftershocks of the New: Feminism and Film History*, also discusses the politics of boredom, and she does so by connecting boredom to the seemingly antithetical category of history. As Petro notes, boredom is typically thought of as inconsequential and therefore unassimilable to history, she summarizes this typical conception of boredom as such: “A time without event, when nothing happens, a seemingly endless flux without beginning or end.”<sup>39</sup> History, on the other hand, typically categorizes and collects things of particular consequence, as Petro puts it, “History, by contrast [with boredom] is commonly understood to document that which happened—a series of events or, at least, moments thought to be eventful, which suggest that something occurred (rather than nothing at all).”<sup>40</sup> Petro’s project, in contrast to these traditional conceptions of boredom and history, is to connect these seemingly incommensurate terms, and film and photography become the lever for this connection. That is, film and photography open up—in a particularly Kracaorian mode—a space for reflecting on the industrialized spaces depicted precisely because they present boredom as a historically situated mode of experience. That is, boredom itself is the subject of the images that she finds to be of value. We have boredom now, the photographic arts seem to say, because of our current relationship to the industrialized world.

Boredom, for Petro, is the state of experience in which distraction—for her, as well as Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, the definitive state of experience for the industrialized

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<sup>39</sup> Patrice Petro, *Aftershocks of the New: Feminism and Film History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 57.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.



urban subject—is reflected back through photography and turned into an object for scrutiny. Petro proposes this model as such:

The cultivation of boredom... discloses the logic of distraction, in which newness becomes a fetish, and shock itself a manifestation of the commodity form. To reverse the slogan of the Russian formalists, *boredom habituates renewed perception*, opening up the potential to see difference that make a difference, and to refuse the ceaseless repetition of the new as always-the-same.<sup>41</sup>

For Petro, boredom, as cultivated through media, is a historically situated mode of experience that is valuable in its ability to make visible the repetitions of sameness and furthermore the possibility of difference.

If, as Benjamin posited in his *Arcades Project*, “Boredom is the threshold of great deeds”<sup>42</sup> it is because, as Petro puts it, “Hidden in the negativity of boredom and waiting... is the anticipation that something (different) might occur.”<sup>43</sup> There are, I think, two particularly significant portions of this quote that are of supreme importance for understanding the political potentials of boredom. First is the negativity, and it is indeed this quality that separates boredom from patience. For boredom to shatter the repetition of the new and the tyranny of sameness it must be felt as a negative quality, as a form of dissatisfaction with what is being observed. This negativity is of course also boredom’s drawback, as it brings about the potential for dismissal. But what I figure here as creative boredom must push up against its own failure in order to propose the possibility of difference. This is why the indeterminate is of such value to boredom, and indeed the divide between non-event and event (or boredom and history) becomes of such

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in: Patrice Petro, *Aftershocks of the New: Feminism and Film History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 66.

<sup>43</sup> Patrice Petro, *Aftershocks of the New: Feminism and Film History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 66.

significance. In order to produce the possibility of difference, the barrier between event and non-event must be dissolved, and it must become clear that any particular moment could be rendered eventful. Hence Tarr's own emphasis on disrupting habituated viewing: what appears of little interest is exactly the thing that is capable of asking us to think again. Of course, in this total attempt at disrupting habituation, what events *are* valuable—and will subsequently be selected for history—also becomes indeterminate.

The other important portion of the above quote is the placing of “different” inside parentheses. The problem that this parenthetical proposes is that the act of singling something out as different always necessitates a figuration. That something occurs is of course inevitable, but its labeling as different—unique and thus historical—is exactly the kind of figuration and subsequent habituation that signifies the end of waiting, and therefore the arrival of something in particular. Greeting and verifying the moment of difference, then, remains the impossible juncture of the wait and its accompanying subject position: boredom.

*Sátántangó*, as I've previously discussed, runs up against this same problem of ending the wait, but it furthermore refigures this discussion of boredom by virtue of its historical orientation. Tarr's film, of course, has a remarkably complex relationship to change and the potentials of new political arrangements, as is most clearly evidenced in its distrust of the legacy of communism. If, for Kracauer, Goodstein, and Petro, the function of boredom serves in revealing the fissures and arbitrary arrangements of capitalism's complex and seemingly natural mechanizations, Tarr's film reactivates this wish, but without the cogent alternative that haunts these other critiques. If indeed Benjamin's famous claim that “boredom is the threshold of great deeds” proposes the clearest

summation of boredom's potential, Tarr's cinema is of particular value in highlighting the hidden assumptions of this quote. "Boredom is the threshold of great deeds" for sure, but always just that threshold, and never quite more. Through the semi-coherent maneuverings, ramblings and dances of its characters, *Sátántangó* stands on this threshold, but never quite enters.

The aesthetic approach of Tarr—his tracking shots along with the overwhelming grayness of his photography—strive to produce boredom and waiting, but to do so in such a way as to reduce the distance between audience and image. As Goodstein notes, part of the structure of boredom is the confusion of inside and outside. What this confusion yields is a profound and total disenchantment with oneself and the world, the only available response to which is a call to reconfigure, to think anew about the world that has produced this disenchantment on the screen and in one's self. This is Tarr's aim, and this is the potential of boredom. But, as will be explored shortly, the limits of this approach always and immediately haunt this film, for it becomes impossible in this waiting and its boredom to ever *do anything*—as any *thing* always ignites these flammable images, burning away all their potential at the very site of any particular arrival.

### Democracy and Contingency

What the viewers of this film await is not some religious awakening, but a forthcoming political change, a change that seems inevitable but that regardless must be thought, for thinking is the only way to attempt to determine and condition its arrival. But as the cows meander across the screen, what becomes available that has been otherwise withheld? Are the cows a communist collective or a cadre of capitalist consumers? Are they

the characters that are to come or the vision of a world that has been left behind? And what of their exit? Is this emancipation or slaughter? And how can we ever tell? These are the questions that this film offers up but refuses ever to fully form, and is farther still from ever answering.

Two recent books on the work of Tarr expand on this waiting process by figuring, respectively, the end of waiting and its perpetuation. Their titles alone, when put in relation to each other, question after this process. The first, *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes* by András Bálint Kovács posits that politics are never the direct concern of Tarr, and that his films actually work to create a vaguely “Eastern European” space that is never particular to Hungary.<sup>44</sup> The second, *Béla Tarr, The Time After* by Jacques Rancière, argues that Tarr’s films open up access to a new kind of temporality that allows for a new kind of relationship to the material world.

Part of Kovács’ project is to show that Tarr’s films are coherent across his directing career, and not easily sectioned into two periods, as other critics so often do. He explains that Tarr’s films “can in no way be regarded as political,” but they do function in delivering a hopeless vision of small-town Hungary.<sup>45</sup> To quote Kovács:

The narration is slow; the environment represented is poor, shabby, dirty and run-down; and the stories’ atmosphere is bleak. The characters are sad and frightened; they often suffer and often cause others to suffer; nobody in any of these films smiles or laughs; and nobody is cheerful. The visual atmosphere is dark, with no colours. The stories do not develop, just turn in circles, and there is no hope in them for anybody.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> András Bálint Kovács, *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2013), 97.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-173.

Given this attitude, Kovács—who in fact finds a lot of value in the films, if perhaps they are to him not upbeat or useful in terms of politics—spends the majority of his analyses arguing for the coherence of Tarr’s oeuvre in terms of a particular style and categorizing Tarr, in particular his tracking shots and long-takes, in relation to earlier European directors. For Kovács Tarr’s films function to generate something of a unified stance by virtue of their appearing historical without actually ever presenting anything particular. Due in large part to their strange relationship to location shooting (the exteriors often connect far disparate locations through cuts that appear to conjoin them into a coherent space), Kovács posits that what Tarr and his crew want to achieve is “the forming of this mixture of historical, social and political signs into a vision that shows neither national characteristics nor particular signs of a period of time any more specific than the end of the twentieth century.”<sup>47</sup> For Kovács, Tarr ultimately does this through connecting far removed spaces and by depicting “a landscape which was very typical of a region, yet remained unspecific as regards concrete space and historical time.”<sup>48</sup> Through this, Tarr is able to represent a generalized “Eastern Europe” that is knowable to a wider audience, a presentation that brings into view a kind of universal particular, a specific impression that accounts for the audience’s understanding of these films which takes the form of “the image of the underdog, the image of a helpless life.”<sup>49</sup>

Whereas Kovács paints Tarr as a kind of sculptor of hopeless (and disjointed) spaces, for Jacques Rancière Tarr’s cinema opens up new hopes and grants access to a different kind of time. Like Kovács, Rancière pushes back against the idea of separating

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Tarr's work into two distinct periods. According to Rancière, "From the first film to the last, it is always the story of a broken promise, of a voyage that returns to its point of departure."<sup>50</sup> What this circular structure allows for Rancière is remarkably different from Kovács' closed circle of coherent meaning rendered universal. For Rancière, what is key to Tarr and what he uses these films to set forth is a kind of essential grounding for his ideas on "realism." According to Rancière,

The essence of realism—contrary to the program of edification known by the name of socialist realism—is the distance taken with regard to stories, to their temporal schemes and their sequences of causes and effects. Realism opposes situations that endure to stories that link together and pass from one to the next.<sup>51</sup>

Rancière uses Tarr's films, then, to deploy a logic of realism, but his is a realism that pushes out narrative and instead asks that images be felt and sensed.

Some degree of narrative disruption—in Rancière through distance and in Kovács through spatial distortion—obviously connect the two thinkers, but Rancière's ideas are useful in describing how the pauses that these films present function to figure a politics. Where Kovács finds *Sátántangó's* ambiguity disruptive to any political project, for Rancière it is exactly this ambiguity that allows for politics. According to Rancière, the disjuncture between narrative and form that Tarr provides generates a rupture that serves to produce a new style of seeing. For Rancière, "In order to exploit the breach [between narrative and reality] offered, it is already necessary to loosen the constraint that binds the arguments of stories to the exposition of 'problems,' the existence and domain of which are defined by

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<sup>50</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Bela Tarr, The Time After*, trans. Erik Beranek (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2011), 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

the power of the planners.”<sup>52</sup> While Rancière is referring explicitly to Tarr’s work during “the thaw,” this point still holds for Tarr’s post-Soviet films. The emphasis on “problems,” or what might also be called direct political issues, on which other film’s might rely is avoided here in favor of something else, something that disrupts the planning of a new (or old) society; a waiting that resists the reduction of these images to paths forward and instead exhibits what Rancière continually refers to as “reality.” Rancière’s term for what Kracauer might call waiting is “the time after.” To Rancière, “The time after is not the morose, uniform time of those who no longer believe in anything. It is the time of pure, material events, against which belief will be measured for as long as life will sustain it.”<sup>53</sup> This vague category resembles in many ways Kracauer’s notion of waiting, but it elaborates on it by turning to *materiality*, to a connection between the spaces of the film and the characters who occupy them. Rancière titles his chapter on *Damnation* (1988)—Tarr’s film previous to *Sátántangó* and which shares many of its characteristics, except of course its length—“The Empire of Rain,” and in so doing highlights the connection between the characters and the world that they inhabit, and furthermore the way that Tarr’s takes disrupt narrative action and instead ask the audience to think about puddles and concrete in the same way that they do about the actors repetitious movements. Rancière goes so far as to use this materiality and repetition to launch a kind of ontology of cinema. As Rancière explains, “cinema’s proper task is that of constructing the movement according to which these affects are produced and circulated, the movement by which they are modulated according to the two fundamental sensible regimes, repetition and the leap into the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 9.

unknown.”<sup>54</sup> Given this ontology, Tarr serves for Rancière as von Stroheim did for Bazin, his cinema affording exactly this process of repetition that is punctuated by a sudden leap.

For Rancière, the repetition and the possibility of the leap generates what he calls a “gap” between the actions that the narrative contains and the spaces of this world. According to Rancière, “It is in this gap that cinema constructs its intensities and makes them into a testimony or a tale about the state of the world that escapes from the dismal record of the equivalence of all things and the vanity of all action.”<sup>55</sup> What is allowed to emerge through this gap is a moment where tale and testimony collide, where the problems of politicking fall away and the potential for change opens up. When meanings melt and reform, and ultimately reassemble within and with time, material spaces—the mud puddles, the decayed buildings—allow for new connections to arise, but never to fully take form.

What Tarr’s cinema allows, finally, via Rancière, Kracauer, and Bazin, is a way to contemplate what Jacques Derrida calls *the democracy to come*. In discussing the idea of an impending but unfigured revolution that is rising on the horizon but not having yet arrived in any particular form, Derrida writes,

As paradoxical as it seems, it is in this unleashed overflowing, at the moment when all the joints give way between form and content, that the latter [the coming revolution] will be properly its “own” and properly revolutionary. By all logic, one ought to recognize it by nothing other than the excess of this untimely dis-identification, therefore by nothing that is. *By nothing that is presently identifiable. As soon as one identifies a revolution, it begins to imitate, it enters into a death agony.*<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>56</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 144 (italics added)



For Derrida, the possibility for radical change must always arise from nowhere and it immediately dies once it is recognized. This is also the structure of the democracy to come.

To quote again from Derrida:

The idea, if that is still what it is, of democracy to come, this 'idea' as event of pledged injunction that orders one to summon the very thing that will never present itself in the form of full presence, is the opening of this gap between an infinite promise... and the determined, necessary, but also necessarily inadequate forms of what has to be measured against this promise.<sup>57</sup>

Derrida too locates a gap, but now it is between the infinite promise of a forthcoming democracy and the delimited now against which this future is weighed. Once this future has arrived, once the revolution is measured or the democracy has come, the future must escape and spread out again, not as utopia but as infinite set of unfigured potentials. Derrida continues: "The affectivity or actuality of the democratic promise, like that of the communist promise, will always keep within it, and it must do so, the absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart, this eschatological relation to the to-come of an event *and* of a singularity, of an alterity that cannot be anticipated."<sup>58</sup>

The trouble, of course, with the messianism that unites Kracauer, Derrida and, for me, Tarr is its dedication to externality and its subsequent faith in the arrival of forces that will come to correct the suffering and chaos that Tarr so eloquently proposes. This messianism figures Tarr's film as hopeful; its grey, mud soaked streets glow with the availability of change. But it also undermines the capacity for human action, as it becomes an external presence that looms just out of reach that promises the refiguration that these grey spaces demand. If Rossellini wished for new modes of political action, Tarr's cinema distrusts any and all responses; it undermines the collectivized as well as individualized

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

responses to human misery and demands something so different that it finds itself incapable of depicting even a viable goal for what is to come.

Herein lies the tension at the heart of Tarr's film. The promise of political change persists, but it is accompanied by a total failure to render that change. In fact, this failure is necessary for the potential to persist, as it is only in failure where messianism can find its full force. The messianic wish at the heart of Tarr's cinema requires misery and a refusal of positive outcomes, as it is in these conditions where hope can fully emerge. The goal is to deny figuration so as to maximize the role of the constitutive outside from which possibility can finally arrive. This presents an impossible bind, one even more restrictive than that of Rossellini for whom collectivity still loomed as a positive prospect.

The final shots of *Sátántangó* are of particular importance in this regard. The doctor, having arrived home, finally, after being awoken by and subsequently checking on the church bells that he had thought dormant, shuffles through the papers on his desk, all the while muttering about how he has misrecognized the sound of the ringing bells. The rain batters his windows as he, increasingly agitated, digs through his belongings. The camera is placed at the rear of his small room, a window in the other end creates a strong silhouette making his actions difficult to immediately decipher.



It quickly becomes clear, however, that the doctor is removing the objects from in front of the window and placing them in a box, which he then places off to the side.

The doctor then walks to the right of the frame and opens a door. The door, located in the foreground, totally obscures the frame and blocks nearly all light from the window, leaving only an obscured image of the doctor's hand now very close to the camera. The doctor proceeds to partially close the door, removing much of the obstruction and revealing half the frame, which is sporadically occupied by the doctor's silhouette. The doctor, inexplicably frustrated, throws things from the closet through the frame, stopping only to place large boards—perhaps cupboard drawers—neatly against the chair that occupies much of the revealed frame.

Finally, satisfied with the amount of wood slats he has collected, the doctor moves the shelf pieces to the side of the chair and begins to clear the furniture from in front of the window. Gradually, it finally becomes clear what the doctor has been preparing. He places the first shelf board over the lower quarter of the window and nails it to the wall.



Next the second and, as the light from this single source begins to be extinguished, the third—meticulously nailing each board as he proceeds.



Upon placing the fourth board the darkness overtakes the frame entirely, leaving only the sound of the doctor's hammer. But, as this hammering proceeds a faint light directly in the center of the frame persists, the product of a slight gap in the boards. The covering and reopening of this slight opening tracks the doctor's movement. The sound of the rain persists over this nearly totally black image until, finally and without explanation, the tiny sliver of light is covered, perhaps the film has faded to black or perhaps he has finished the task of boarding the window shut. The difference here is imperceptible. A heavy exhalation is heard. Exhausted, the doctor presents his monologue about the rains in October, a monologue similar but not identical to one presented at the start of the film—what followed the cows and that provided what little explanation there was of this rain-beaten town. Then, finally, the credits appear over the blackness, with no system to distinguish their space from the blackness of the now totally dark interior of the house.

Through the figure of the doctor this film extends to its limit an attempt to keep the discussion at hand in the present tense, never producing a conclusion to the events depicted and the allegories they reach toward. For Pier Paolo Pasolini, the long take signified cinema's capacity to reproduce an open and endless present—an incomplete continuous mode that can only be synthesized after its completion. According to Pasolini, "The substance of cinema is... an endless long take, as is reality to our senses for as long as

we are able to see and feel (a long take that ends with the end of our lives); and this long take is nothing but the reproduction of the language of reality, in other words it is the reproduction of the present.”<sup>59</sup> This open-ended present, for Pasolini, is totally flexible and available for change, and it is only on the occasion of its ending—in cinema through the cut, in life through death—that this openness can be systematized and subsequently offered up for meaning. For Pasolini, these openings are valuable, but they also hinder expression. As he proposes, “As long as he has a future, that is, something unknown, a man does not express himself.”<sup>60</sup> This is to say that one’s life cannot be summarized and used to produce decipherable qualities until it has ceased, and for Pasolini this is likewise the case for cinema. But in cinema this finality is—perhaps—less devastating: it arrives at the moment of every cut, at the always temporary severing from the current tense and the institution of a new stretch of time.

In light of Pasolini’s claims, when the director shuts out his lights and makes room for the credits, the cut is avoided or at least masked. Obviously, the film eventually ends, but this gesture serves as an attempt to perpetuate what Pasolini refers to as the substance of cinema, its ability to proceed without returning to reflect on the moments it has produced until everything has come to a conclusion.

Mary Ann Doane approaches this same relationship between take and cut, but she poses this dynamic as an “invitation” to change. For Doane, “The long take is a gaze at an autonomous, unfolding scene whose duration is a function of the duration and potential waywardness of events themselves. Its length situates it as an invitation that is abruptly

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<sup>59</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Observations on the Long Take,” *October* 13 (1980): 5.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

cancelled by the cut.”<sup>61</sup> For Doane, what happens during a long take is a clearing of space for possibility to arrive, for change to accept the invitation and to attend. But this dynamic also creates a kind of paradox, a situation in which change is encouraged, but also where it becomes impossible to tell if it has arrived, indeed one can never say when the invitation has been accepted and the cut can be enacted in order to make change legible.

For Doane, then, there is an “intolerable instability” at the heart of cinema’s relationship with time and the present.<sup>62</sup> To Doane, “The image is the imprint of a moment whose particularity becomes indeterminable precisely because the image does not speak its own relation to time.”<sup>63</sup> In the case of Tarr’s conclusion, it is the unwillingness to cut, to stop and produce something, which accounts for and enacts this “intolerable instability.” But this resistance to speaking for itself also serves as the mechanism for its rejection of authority. To stop, cut, and subsequently speak its own system and its own set of directives would amount to an authoritative gesture, and furthermore one that would dismiss the radical opening to change that this refusal of figuration presents. It is this termination that this film resists.

For Doane, this opening to changeability is most clearly evidenced in early cinema, but the objects that she lionizes also produce systems for rendering coherent this inchoate relationship to time. Her objects form a kind of dialectic between pure openness and its ordering, a conflictual relationship that she names “cinematic time.” To Doane,

The unreadability and uncertainty concerning the image’s relation to temporality and to its origin are not problems that are resolved—they are, in face, insoluble. But they are displaced through the elaborate development of

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<sup>61</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*. (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 224.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 162-163

structures that produce the image of a coherent and unified 'real time' that is much more 'real' than 'real time' itself. The resulting cinema delicately negotiates the contradiction between recording and signification.<sup>64</sup>

In the cinema that Doane highlights there is a vacillation between rational and irrational modes, between openness to contingency and the production of structure. As the history of cinema progressed, for Doane, it was this contingency that was forced out by the increasingly structured and manageable systems of cinematic representation. Tarr's cinema—and in particular this ending—attempts to negate this history and to indeed locate a cinema even more extreme than that Doane finds so valuable. This ending attempts, that is, to erase totally the systems of evaluation and meaning that elsewhere in the film tended to emerge. If, say, Irimiás' actions produced something of a cogent yet never quite fully locatable allegory, a return to an always escaping but somehow also available meaning, this ending strives to eradicate these meanings entirely; to produce nothing but the wait, and indeed to turn that wait back onto its audience in the form of boredom. It asks those who watch to become those who wait, to occupy this now totally inchoate space that has finally severed the boundary between audience and image, placing both in the darkness, both inside, the window closed, the cut denied.

### Conclusion

*Sátántangó* offers its audience a democracy to come. It waits, and with this waiting it keeps this messianic hope in its sight. The hope that a future will arrive, but the awareness that once it does it will already be compromised. When, in this final shot of the film, the doctor slowly boards up his windows—and with them the light that illuminates this

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 163.

scene—this wait is perpetually continued. Rather than summarily recap or finally provide a final rejoinder, this film ends with a waiting all its own; the doctor waits with us, in the dark and without hope for any particular outcome.<sup>65</sup> This is how this film, finally, presents a politics. Waiting here has become an imperative, a system for elongating the hope that transformation carries but always immediately extinguishes. It waits and so do we, for what none of us are sure, but with the unfigured spreading of potential before us. Rancière ends his chapter on *Sátántangó* and *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2001) with two short sentences: “They do not speak of hope. They are hope.”<sup>66</sup> Waiting allows for the hope that politics requires, a messianic hope for something to come, but that always slips away at the moment of its ending, a hope that we can wait for, but that never quite arrives. Its hiccups and disillusionments, to return to my beginning, are therefore also its promise.

It is this capacity for the simultaneous and contradictory deployment of both fear and hope that provides this film with its unique disposition. But these conflictual processes also map the film’s politics, allowing it to serve as a beacon for change but also to immediately recede—a triumph of potential, but a failure of figuration. When the doctor summarily boards himself into his space and sits quietly as the credits role this position of complete failure that creates complete hope is finally cemented.

The doctor may have lost his function as figure of surveillance, but he has instead assumed the same position as the remainder of the characters in the film. By sitting in darkness he has finally and definitively acquiesced to messianism. He has revoked his own

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<sup>65</sup> I toyed with placing a comma in this sentence and, as I found both forms accurate and valuable, I decided to place another version of this sentence here: “the doctor waits with us, in the dark and without hope, for any particular outcome.”

<sup>66</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Bela Tarr, The Time After*, trans. Erik Beranek (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2011), 61.



capacity for vision and retreated into a world of pure darkness. This position, and indeed that occupied by the characters that put such faith in Irimiás, is the pure position of hope, a hope unbridled from the actual, but a hope that can only arrive in a moment of absolute misery. The trouble with this kind of hope is that its rejection of easily available outcomes in the name of a more radical alternative provides no system to ameliorate the misery that gave it rise in the first place. This is too the problem of pure un-habituated sight that Tarr lionizes. Like the darkened house that the doctor occupies, aesthetic formations—ways of seeing or perhaps being seen—are essential to producing a unified and available politics, without them hope may spring eternal, but not in a way that can directly produce the components needed for coherent change.

This dynamic is perhaps best exemplified by the infamous scene of Estike and her cat. After a seeming eternity of Estike torturing her cat—rolling onto it, striking it, repeating harmful names and phrases that she has heard from her family at it, and finally shoving its head into a bowl of milk laced with rat poison—Estike carries the cat, rigid in death, to a local ruin. Upon arriving, Estike too takes the rat poison and lays down to die with her stiffened pet. As the camera lingers the narrator presents Estike’s interiority, explaining that it is at this moment that she realizes the connection between all the events of the town, an “indescribably beautiful meaning” that bridges these characters.



Here death is figured as the extreme form of waiting, the ultimate way to escape the world and secure the expansion of external messianic forces. But it is also the moment of realization, the moment where meaning finally becomes available. Estike here goes too far, hers is the position that just surpasses the doctor's self-imprisonment. Estike crosses the threshold of waiting and extinguishes, finally, the capacity to react to the meaning that only now arrives; the wait has ended and meaning has arrived but not *in time*. Indeed, the waiting that this film produces must never lose track of time, of how long the wait has lasted and what it is that is being waited for. Waiting here is bound between two poles: the end signaled by action and the continued wait that crosses the threshold into death. Both of these extremes produce conclusions, but neither is capable of verifying with any certainty that the wait has succeeded. The rigidity of Estike's cat concretizes this example. Waiting refuses seeing and movement, it pushes against death. But death, despite its similarity to the wait, must never arrive, for once it does it renders form and rigidity, as it has with this cat's corpse. Rather than the openings and availabilities of the wait, Estike's death concludes and closes the state of possibility. The wait must remain on the precipice of this extreme; it must resemble death but never fully allow it.

For hope to burn its brightest it must come as close as possible to death without ever quite finding it.<sup>67</sup> It must retain some possibility to act but remain in a state of maximal delay. The doctor's darkened room is the place of possibility, but it must still keep time. Waiting then becomes a kind of activity all its own, it is conscious and alert but never quite fully articulated

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<sup>67</sup> I will return to the topic of death, and its relationship to hope, in Chapter 4.

Finally, to push forward upon this opening up to hope, my next chapter proposes still more refusal and rejection. Hong Sang-soo's *Woman on the Beach* (2006) relies on the traditions of ambiguity but in such a way as to level a critique at democracy, and in so doing jettisons the major bulwark against authoritarianism, with truly devastating results. For Tarr's cinema a hope remains that something will arrive to reunite the world, but for Hong that hope is dead.

## CHAPTER 3

### The End of Authority, the End of Democracy

*Sátántangó* displayed a distrust for communism while simultaneously rejecting its capitalist alternative. In so doing, it produces a profound ambiguity as to what economic system might alleviate the misery the film so clearly brought into view. Hong Sang-soo's *Woman on the Beach* furthers this distrust. Hong's film adds to the list of rejected arrangements democracy itself, and it accomplishes this task by drawing and evaluating the kind of individual that the unique pairing of democracy and capitalism can produce. But this film levels its critique not with measured distance, but from within the boundaries of its own rejection. That is, *Woman on the Beach* delineates the kind of subject best suited for success under a neoliberal capitalist democracy and then proceeds to critique this figure, but it also refuses to remove itself from the scope of its criticism. The film's consistent equating of the main character with the writer/director and its opening to an autobiographical reading generate what can only be described as ambivalence—a kind of cold unsureness regarding its own subjects that derives from a distrust of the filmmaker's own authorial perspective. This is complicated by the fact that ambivalence is perhaps also one of the qualities that this film seems to reject, creating a deadly circuit of rejection and return that rhymes with the characters' own actions.

Repetition here is key, as Hong himself seems to return to the same set of circumstances in many of his films. Attempting to perform the difficult task of diagnosing himself and his moment from within, *Woman on the Beach*, like the other films discussed thus far, never quite arrives at a coherent conclusion, remaining instead content to repeat its actions in a kind of endless loop of self-critique and self-recrimination. These repetitions

are another characteristic of a post-authoritarian cinema. South Korea's authoritarian past haunts this film, and a response to these conditions disallows this film from ever positing a coherent political alternative. All the while, however, this film helps to illuminate the ways that democracy and capitalism work together to reward individuals that understand that the openings in meaning that the conditions of democracy under capitalism can produce provide opportunities to escape punishment for brutal and totally self-interested actions. This dynamic crystalizes the circumstances of this turn to ambivalence, for it is exactly the lack of alternatives that leads again and again to the reoccurrence of and reflection upon the same set of actions—a set of actions that, as I shall explore shortly, result in dissatisfaction but produce no coherent available alternative.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I first describe responses to the film and the literature that surrounds it, particularly as it pertains to the film's political appeals (or lack thereof). I then move into a discussion of the historical context of Hong's film, focusing on its relationship to the more overtly political films of the 1980s and early 1990s, commonly referred to as the "South Korean New Wave." Following this, I provide a formal analysis of *Woman on the Beach*, examining in detail its reflective qualities and its relationship to language and language's failings. I then move into a discussion of how *Woman on the Beach* critiques democracy, ultimately exploring how the unique combination of democracy and neoliberal capitalism combine to constitute a particular—and particularly destructive—subject. I next turn to the specific circumstances of South Korean capitalism in order to explore the relationship between contemporary economics and Hong's palpable ambivalence to it. Finally, I conclude by exploring how Hong's film is positioned to critique

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<sup>1</sup> Excepting of course the return to authoritarianism, the possibility of which will be discussed closely shortly.

neoliberalism broadly, and the role of ambivalence in leveling this critique. This discussion emphasizes how, in the South Korean context, this example post-authoritarian art cinema rejects *democracy*, in addition to authoritarianism.

### Viewpoints

*Woman on the Beach*, Hong Sang-Soo's seventh film, was released in 2006, the year after the economic peak of what has been dubbed the Hallyu, or Korean Cultural New Wave.<sup>2</sup> This year marked a significant downturn in what had been unprecedented export earnings for Korean cinema and is, in retrospect, commonly qualified as the first step in a dramatic decrease in the economic health of South Korean film exports that has only recently been reversed.<sup>3</sup> Hong's cinema, though, lies to a degree outside the economic peaks and valleys of South Korean mainstream cinema. Along with Lee Chang-Dong's films, Hong's films map what Kyung Hyun Kim calls a postpolitical moment in South Korean cultural production. This is evidenced by a move towards interiority and the crisis of meaning constituted by the "withering of political agency" after a period of intense political engagement.<sup>4</sup> This reading is corroborated by a number of critics and theorists who contend that Hong's cinema is concerned primarily with interiority rather than politics, as exemplified by critic/blogger Acquarello who offers that, "Hong exposes the subtly

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<sup>2</sup> The "Hallyu" should not be confused with the realist and politically minded strictly film-based New Wave of the late 1980s.

<sup>3</sup> Kyung Hyun Kim, *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Golden Era* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

imperceptible (but revealing) acts of despair that momentarily betray the human soul in crisis”—noting how it is questions of existence, not politics, that define Hong’s cinema.<sup>5</sup>

Kim posits that pleasure—rather than the overt political concerns that occupied the directors of the late 1980s and 1990s—is what concerns Hong and some of his contemporaries and that breakdowns in communication are what primarily occupy Hong’s films. He argues that Hong’s brand of cinema “strips away the thin veneer of reason and decency that covers every social network and shows, through his indignant, socially inept characters, that miscommunication is not the exception but the norm in everyday interactions between people.”<sup>6</sup> According to Kim, this stripping away of reason and decency offers up the arbitrariness of language and in so doing disrupts nationalist discourses. Likewise for David Scott Diffrient, “The slipperiness of selfhood and the ontological trickiness of naming” are “pivotal” for Hong’s cinema.<sup>7</sup> The breaking apart of meaning and language that has come to define Hong’s work, is, for these critique, not overtly political, but it nevertheless serves as a motif that, according to film theorist Akira Lippit, is political in that that it arrives “at the other end of politics.”<sup>8</sup>

But, while Lippit too utilizes Kim’s categorization of Hong as post-political to draw his point, his argument takes a distinct turn when it claims that Hong’s cinema forms “lines of inquiry, communication, defense and escape.”<sup>9</sup> These lines—lines of similarity from film to film, lines that take the form of questions posed between characters, lines of vision, and

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<sup>5</sup> Acquarello, “Where are the Snows of Yesteryear?: Hong Sang-soo Searches for Lost Time in *Woman is the Future of Man*,” *Senses of Cinema*, October 18th 2004. [http://sensesofcinema.com/2004/feature-articles/woman\\_future\\_man/](http://sensesofcinema.com/2004/feature-articles/woman_future_man/).

<sup>6</sup> Kyung Hyun Kim, *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Golden Era* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), 125-126.

<sup>7</sup> David Scott Diffrient, “South Korean Film Genres and Art-House Anti-Poetics: Erasure and Negation in *The Power of Kangwon Province*,” *Cineaction* 60, (2003): 62.

<sup>8</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, “Hong Sangsoo’s Lines of Inquiry, Communication, Defense, and Escape,” *Film Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2004): 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

literal lines that appear in the film—produce, for Lippit, all kinds of connections but, as Lippit is careful to note, “The lines never seem to connect the point of origin with its intended destination.”<sup>10</sup> For Lippit, this excess of lines creates chaos and pushes Hong’s films always to the precipice of violence: “The questions that traverse Hong’s films indicate a breakdown of the lines (through a proliferation of lines) that separate order from disorder; a collapse that leaves Hong’s world rife with nervous disorders, failed personal relations, and an anxious democracy.”<sup>11</sup>

For Lippit, these lines of communication that so often take the form of questions are also simultaneously lines of escape, systems that serve to evade blame, guilt and or punishment by turning things around or reconstituting the situation.<sup>12</sup> But these escapes always return to haunt the characters, for these lines, “Never reach their destination; they disappear somewhere in route, only to reappear again elsewhere.”<sup>13</sup> Rather than simple explorations of those who successfully depart and deceive, Hong’s cinema, for Lippit, “is not one of limits and ends, but of repetitions, returns, and resumed lines.”<sup>14</sup>

These lines, for Lippit, serve to connect and separate the characters, always pushing outward with the possibility of unity but also, from the other side, separating them from each other.<sup>15</sup> Lippit, writing in 2004, explores Hong’s first four films, but the trends that he locates continue, and, in my view, find their crystalized form in Hong’s 2006 film *Woman on the Beach*. In a scene that I discuss, the lines of discussion here find their most literal form in a drawing by the main character that serves as both its own line of escape and,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 27.



simultaneously, an attempt at an emancipatory ideal. The line that is drawn both serves to connect and to deceive and hence is the ultimate example of Lippit's proposed trope.

Where my argument departs from Lippit, however, is in the degree to which politics plays a role in constituting the grounds of our understanding of Hong's cinema. Lippit is evasive when it comes to Hong's political position, but he does bookend his discussion by saying at the start that Hong's cinema occurs "at the end of and after politics. After the end of politics, at the end of the political lines that traverse and constitute Korean history, at the other end of politics."<sup>16</sup> And, at the end, "the 'postpolitical' nature of Hong's cinema and Hong's era comes not so much with the end of politics but with the unending nature of his politics, with the endless politics that continue to come after the end of politics."<sup>17</sup> Lippit's understanding of Hong's cinema seems to figure politics as a kind of structured absence, indirectly represented but immediately significant through its neglect. But this postpolitical-and-therefore-arriving-at-politics mode is troubled by the haunting and insightful claim quoted previously in which Lippit describes Hong's cinema as producing an "anxious democracy." Through this depiction of a troubled and troubling view of democracy, the film arrives at politics not through absence but directly, and indeed with vitriol. It is through a critique of democracy that this film creates a space for rethinking politics, but it does so in such a way that refuses a reinscription of the authoritarian logics that it wishes to leave behind. To make this point, it is important to place Hong's film historically in a particular transitional moment.

## History

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 29.

In 1987, after over 25 years of military rule, a wave of long-suppressed democratic enthusiasm swept through South Korea, leading to the first direct presidential election in years and ultimately—after the presidency of military figure Roh Tae-woo—to a civilian government beginning in 1993.<sup>18</sup> Pacing this politically spirited moment was an equally politically minded film movement: the Korean New Wave. Afforded a space to operate within the South Korean filmmaking landscape thanks to changes in the national censorship restrictions and the funding allowance to independent producers in 1988, this set of politically-minded films arrived with the new democracy and were primarily produced by figures steeped in the activism of the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> Darcy Paquet describes the unifying principle of this film movement as “a commitment to using the medium of film to push for social change” and further argues that “the turbulent political events of the late 1980s called out for a cinema that engaged with the defining issues of the day, and shed new light on Korea’s troubled past.”<sup>20</sup> This New Wave movement is responsible to a large degree for building and otherwise expanding a cine-culture in South Korea, which eventually led to the boom of the 2000s; but as a politically-minded and in many ways oppositional cinema, it started to decay in the mid 1990s.<sup>21</sup>

As Michael Robinson has argued, what concerned the films of the New Wave was the weight of history and politics in the democratizing moment. Robinson writes, “For forty years cultural life and production had been weighed down by the heavy responsibilities of

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<sup>18</sup> Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves* (London & New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 20.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> For much more on the politically minded cinema of the 1980s and its unsteady partnership with mainstream politics, see chapter 1 of: Young-a Park, *Unexpected Alliances: Independent Filmmakers, the State, and the Film Industry in Postauthoritarian South Korea* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

national cultural preservations, resistance to authoritarian politics, and the ambivalent discourse centered on the debate about a true Korean culture and the assault of Western popular mass culture.”<sup>22</sup> Robinson goes so far as to say that in this politicized moment, by virtue of the ubiquity of political pressures, “There was little room not to be political.”<sup>23</sup> Hong’s cinema, of course, lies far outside this clearly historically bounded period and is instead found in a moment when the economic crisis had been beaten back—albeit at the cost of increased labor demands and decreased access to full-time employment—and South Korea’s status as economic and cultural power had been established. For Robinson, in the contemporary moment that Hong occupies, the need to adhere to political “master narratives” had lessened and a new kind of cultural production emerged. As Robinson points out, “Something has clearly changed within the cultural industry in South Korea. The failing grip of the old master narratives has loosed new energies and made new synergies possible.”<sup>24</sup> For Robinson, this lightness and newly allowed freedom grants the films of the 2000s the ability to “laugh both with and at themselves,” and to struggle with the past in new and dynamic ways.<sup>25</sup>

But the directors who contributed to the boom of the early 2000s also had a complicated relationship to contemporary politics. As Park Young-a explores through the example of the Korean Independent Filmmakers Association, the simultaneous transition to democracy and the turn to an emphasis on cultural production led to a series of unstable alliance between filmmakers of the “democracy generation”—those whose politics were

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Robinson, “Contemporary Culture Production in South Korea: Vanishing Meta-Narratives of Nation,” in *New Korean Cinema*, ed. Julian Stringer and Chi-yun Shin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 24.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

forged during the anti-authoritarian movement of the 1980s—and the seemingly contrary forces of a government committed to transitioning South Korea to a global economic presence.<sup>26</sup> For Park, much of the success of the South Korean cinema of the 2000s came about as a direct result of attempts by the governments of the late 1990s and early 2000s to mobilize the democratic generation and direct them towards the reconfiguration of the South Korean economy.<sup>27</sup> Referring to these newly minted alliances between the independent film world and the government, Park posits that “This emergent cultural field reflects a foundational shift in South Korean society, especially in its cultural production, in that the rigid boundaries that separated the state and political activism, corporate conglomerates and independent artists, filmic spaces of resistance and spaces of upwardly mobile, middle-class consumption, and local and global cultural realms have increasingly blurred.”<sup>28</sup>

It is this turn that accounts in part for the apparent lack of politics in Hong’s cinema. As these previously perceptible boundaries blur, so too blurs the clean path towards political critique, making oppositional spaces difficult to discern. As a member of this democratic generation, Hong’s films began to appear just at the moment of this absorption of the radical into the mainstream, and his critique accounts for and is in turn accounted for by this transition. Without a clearly defined inside and outside—a stable authority and those excluded by its mandates—Hong’s cinema finds itself unable to separate from the sphere of its own critique and as a result turns to ambiguity as the only available avenue for avoiding the total implication of its own creators.

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<sup>26</sup> Young-a Park, *Unexpected Alliances: Independent Filmmakers, The State, And the Film Industry in Postauthoritarian South Korea* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient in fact place Hong and his close compatriot Lee Chang-dong as latecomers to the Korean New Wave.<sup>29</sup> But they then deviate from positioning Hong as a political filmmaker, instead reproducing the argument that Hong is “apolitical” because he is dedicated to the “social” and only arrives at politics obliquely.<sup>30</sup> Chung and Diffrient focus on narrative, in particular what they label the “cubist” process of Hong’s cinema. The sputtering starts and stops, the repetitions, and the capacity to switch from the point of view of one character to another, according to Chung and Diffrient, “Disables the fundamental impulse of narrative.”<sup>31</sup> Politics, for Chung and Diffrient, is arrived at through the aporias made in this negative narrative trajectory. As they put it: “Because his films exude a textual instability based on narrative repetition, and disjunction, they force us to recognize the contradictions and nonconsensus of a society intent on denying its internal disintegration. In doing so, all three films show Seoul, its surrounding environs, and its inhabitants to be scattered remnants of their former selves.”<sup>32</sup> Chung and Diffrient are speaking here of Hong’s first three films, *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (1996), *The Power of Kangwon Province* (1998), and *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (2000). But *Woman on the Beach* too shares much of this narrative paralysis. Where my analysis departs from Chung and Diffrient’s is in the premise that what is revealed in these sputterings is urban inhabitants who are “shattered remnants of their former selves.” Indeed, central to my argument is the idea that a return to some great

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<sup>29</sup> Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient, “Forgetting to Remember, Remembering to Forget: The Politics of Memory and Modernity in the Fractured Films of Lee Chang-dong and Hong Sang-soo,” in *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema*, ed. Frances Gateward (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 116.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

and powerful past is haunted by the legacy of authoritarianism—a difference that reinforces the film’s pessimism and the radicalness of its demand for change.<sup>33</sup>

For Chung and Diffrient, Hong’s cinema serves as “an attempt to rescue ‘meaning’ from a modern milieu by way of repetition and variation,” and these authors proceed to use this goal to link Hong’s cinema to folkloric narratives—in particularly Korea’s Pansori tradition.<sup>34</sup> What this reading neglects, however, is the possibility that revealing meaning in all its contingency is just as valuable as rescuing it, and it is the possibility of both reclaiming and destabilizing meaning in a single gesture that makes Hong’s cinema unique, political, and always so obstinately ambivalent.

Moon Jae-cheol takes a more pessimistic stance in relation to the newness of contemporary South Korean cinema. For Moon, “Today... social contradictions are no longer treated as the subject of film, and a director’s historical consciousness or recognition of current social situations is no longer an important virtue.”<sup>35</sup> Of this new attitude, Moon writing in 2006, contends, “The self-identifying consciousness of history or reality is weaker for today’s directors than for New Wave directors. Even the directors called auteurs show a different consciousness from that of the New Wave directors whose desire for newness originated from criticism of premodernity, ahistory, and commercialism.”<sup>36</sup> To Moon, what compels these new filmmakers, of which Hong is explicitly included, is the

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<sup>33</sup> This distrust of authoritarianism is particularly true for figures like Hong Sang-soo, people whose political ideas were forged in the fight for democracy in the 1980s. Authoritarianism, of course, for others continues to haunt South Korea in a different way, and has returned with force of late thanks to the election of Park Geun-hye, Park Chung-hee’s daughter, as the president of South Korea.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 133-4.

<sup>35</sup> Moon Jae-cheol, “The Meaning of Newness in Korean Cinema: Korean New Wave and After,” *Korea Journal* 46, no. 1 (2006): 40.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

search for newness—particularly as it pertains to technology—in the hopes of engaging their (in large part international) audiences.

Whether, then, a new lightness that allows new freedoms, as Robinson argues, or a thirst for technological novelty that effaces politics, as Moon implies, it is clear that what distinguishes the South Korean cinema of the 2000s from its 1980s and early 1990s antecedents is a distance that was previously unavailable. But counter to some claims as to the apolitical nature of 2000s cinema, *Woman on the Beach* and the films of Hong Sang-soo more broadly engage in politics directly, in a way that might be more aptly described as working in line with the New Wave. What is different is that the political circumstances to which Hong wishes to respond are themselves more slippery and evasive than were those of the New Wave directors. His cinema, I propose, engages directly with its political moment in a way that critiques *democracy*, arguing, in effect, that democratic principles, when coupled with modern capitalist conditions, give rise to a particular subject that is unsustainable and, ultimately, deleterious. What complicates this critique, however, is the historical position of Hong's films; that is, he levels this critique of democracy knowing full well the dangers and damages of authoritarianism, and with the deliberate goal of avoiding the reinscription of these authoritarian logics.

An immediate difference between Hong's film and the others previously discussed in this study is the distance between the film and the events that position it. Both *Sátántangó* and *Germany Year Zero* were made within a few years of their respective revolutionary moments and directly inhabit the transitional moments that spread out from the significant events that they refract. *Woman on the Beach*, however, arrives anywhere from fourteen to eighteen years after the end of authoritarianism in South Korean—

depending on where one locates this ending—well after even a generous accounting for a transitional period.

This film is in fact far enough removed from the initial turn to democracy that it comes after a series of financial downturns and during a moment of relative prosperity—especially for the South Korean film industry. This distance is actually one of the primary factors governing this film, for it is this distance that allows *Woman on the Beach* to expand its critique to include the democracy that has replaced South Korea's authoritarian past. If *Sátántangó* and *Germany Year Zero* still hold tight to the possibility that democracy might alleviate their concerns, *Woman on the Beach* turns its ire on democracy itself. It is this distance between event and critique that allows this film to widen its claims and to, finally, pull democracy into its list of failures. It is because of this distance, then, that this film finds the space to delimit and complicate the assumption that democracy will arrive and obviate the need for further inspection. As I will show, *Woman on the Beach*, without returning to authoritarianism, figures democracy as a potentially pernicious system whereby authority is reconfigured to serve the individualistic capitalist subject, who is intent on asserting its position as progenitor of meaning but with no particular project in mind, beyond cultivating a new and novel authority.

This chapter examines Hong's film through a series of ideas drawn from thinkers from Western Europe and the United States, but I think it is important to pause one last time to address the specific relationship to authoritarianism that makes the South Korean context unique and allows this film to make such a novel claim as to the limitations of democracy as well as authoritarianism. As Kim notes and as I've discussed, South Korea in the 1980s was torn between two poles: "It was a period of political inquietude when



millions of people marched in the streets protesting the military rule and the complicit role of the United States in sustaining dictatorships in South Korea. It was also complicated by the fact that economic prosperity enabled millions to found their middle-class identities in the boulevards, shopping malls, and high-rise apartment buildings that mushroomed throughout Seoul.”<sup>37</sup> In South Korea, authoritarianism and the comforts associated with a rapidly improving economy are uniquely linked, a pairing that persists and manifests itself in films that express nostalgia for authoritarianism.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike the cases of Italy or Hungary, South Korea’s relationship to centralized authority is tinted by the possibility of authoritarianism being suited for economic success. This linkage is tied closely to some of the economic decisions made by Chung Doo-hwan, president of South Korea during the 1980s and Park Chung-hee’s successor as leader of South Korea. As Kim notes of the differences between these figures, “Chun differed from his predecessor, Park, at least on one account by recognizing the importance of leisure and consumer spending as the crucial engine of capitalism and the comfort pill for the masses to temporarily forget the dispossession of their voting rights.”<sup>39</sup> It is this difficult set of conditions that led, at least in part, to the specific ambiguities that concern Hong’s film. Given this relationship between authority and prosperity, the paths for critique are complicated. Whereas, in the case of Béla Tarr, the relationship to authority is linked to economic failure and, in the case of Rossellini, to national shame, the South Korean example of authoritarianism is linked to rapid and striking economic improvements.

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<sup>37</sup> Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004), 18.

<sup>38</sup> Again, the election of Park Geun-hye comes to mind.

<sup>39</sup> Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, 19.

The angry young men that Kim finds to be prevalent in 1990s South Korean cinema arise from these conditions. Having achieved their democratic goal but experiencing economic recession in the 1990s, the figures that Kim highlights lash out in response to a perceived state of powerlessness. For Kim, “Youth violence—sometimes explicit and disturbing—was surely redemptive and cathartic like those pictured in other emergent national cinemas of the West and Japan during the post-World War II era, and the compulsion towards inwardness and self-destruction tendered and imagined a pure form of male subjectivity.”<sup>40</sup> Kim counts Hong’s characters amongst these self-destructive males and notes that the director went to college and his politics were largely formed in the conditions of the relatively prosperous and authoritarian 1980s.<sup>41</sup> Hong’s turn to ambiguity and his extreme ambivalence as to the actions and abuses of his characters must be seen in light of this political trajectory, a path that greatly separates this film from the others discussed thus far. Authority here is suspect but so are its alternatives, as it is authority that in the case of South Korean politics bought with it prosperity, and its absence economic failure.

### Woman on the Beach

Near the beginning of the film, shortly after arriving at the off-season resort that contains the majority of the film’s action, the film’s protagonist Jung-rae (Kim Seung-woo), a successful film director suffering from writer’s block, his colleague Chang-wook (Kim Tae-woo), and Mun-suk (Ko Hyeon-jeong), the woman Chang-wook has invited to the resort and later Jung-rae’s love interest, begin a conversation that sets the tone for much of

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 131.

this film. After inquiring about the price of a room at the resort, the trio discuss their lodging options as they stand looking at the sea.



The topic quickly changes, however, as Jung-rae takes the opportunity to “compliment” his two companions on their actions thus far. Having heard her music in the car ride to the resort, Jung-rae explains that he really likes Mun-suk’s musical style because it sounds like she is an ordinary person, and that he appreciates her music’s amateur feel. He then moves to Chang-wook who, he declares, he admires because he brought his girlfriend with him even though he is married, which he says indicates that Chang-wook really trusts him. Mun-suk responds by indicating that she is not Chang-wook’s girlfriend, which Chang-wook bristles at. Chang-wook, offended, argues with Mun-suk as Jung-rae laughs, enjoying the spectacle.

Much of the film is built around this kind of sniping, generally coming from Jung-rae. In fact, Jung-rae’s ability to use his position of power and the admiration of those around him to undermine and generally irritate his companions is the primary way in which he achieves the romantic results that he seeks. But what is notable about his tactics is the way that they are depicted with a distanced tone of ambivalence; it is never made clear whether Jung-rae knows what he is doing. At times it seems that he is oblivious, at others he is clearly being devious, and at other moments still he seems to be a genuinely compelling

figure who is simply speaking earnestly, and as the film proceeds all three of these different readings become increasingly confused. His seemingly accidental detonation of Mun-suk and Chang-wook's relationship surely pleases him, but it is never made clear the degree to which he can be thought of as orchestrating these events.

This uncertainty is heightened by moments where Jung-rae seems to be genuinely charming and thoughtful, much of which revolve around his ideas as a filmmaker. Immediately following this early exchange, for instance, Jung-rae makes the first substantive description of his idea for the film that he has come to this resort to write. The three, now standing on the beach, discuss Jung-rae's film idea, which he has titled *About Miracles*. As he mentions this title the camera pushes inward, tightly framing the three characters.



After being prompted, Jung-rae explains the film:

A man visits to a foreign beach and stays at a hotel, and in his room he plays Mozart on his CD player. Then he leaves his room and hears the same music on the elevator. He walks out of the hotel, than takes a turn at the corner, and on the street is a clown. He's doing his mime to the exact same music. It's an incredible coincidence, but this man doesn't think it's a mere coincidence. He wonders why he heard the same music three times, and he concludes that if he can find the reason why this happened, he can unravel a secret to the world, and he's obsessed with that thought. So he starts tracking hints. For ten years. First, he begins with info about the clown, the women he likes, his preferences, everything down to the speaker's brand in the hotel elevators.

After being briefly interrupted, Jung-rae concludes: “In the end he finds this very thin string that links everything. I think that might be hard to get across, people only believe in things that are very sound. But that string, even if he finds it, well it’s something like a soul. There is nothing bodily, it’s very, very light.” After a brief pause, Jung-rae asks if it is an interesting idea, and his small audience responds with silent bewilderment. Finally, Mun-suk, smiling, says that she doesn’t quite get it, but that Jung-rae “has a way with words,” and that she likes people who are eloquent.

Moments like these will be repeated throughout the film: Jung-rae renders a puzzling but nonetheless compelling thesis or idea, finds that his audience is confused but regardless impressed, and then uses this confusion to his advantage, here attempting (and as we learn succeeding) to entice Mun-suk through a display of his supposed genius. Whether this description was merely a lever in an elaborate plan or a sincere explanation of his idea for a film is never verified, but this same kind of performance by Jung-rae is seen over and over throughout the film. His goals always remain ambiguous, but as the film progresses he begins to use this same system to escape punishment for his actions. Indeed, he justifies whatever brutal decisions he makes through an explanation that is at once compelling and unique, but that always also allows him to escape blame and critique. Here, he has escaped any recognition of his backhanded compliments by moving the discussion to his idea for a film, and later he repeats this pattern over again, albeit in increasingly dire circumstances. It is in fact his capacity to render these ideas that justifies the perception of his artistic genius, and he uses this perception to achieve whatever selfish goal he has in mind and to subsequently evade any repercussions. His explanation that “People will only believe things that are sound” is largely his justification for much of his behavior: if the

world only respected his genius and the difficulty of his claims, he seems to say, it would find his actions to be justified.

The trouble of his stance and what causes this tone of ambivalence is that the arguments that he makes, the justifications for his actions, are always convincing; that he might be right. Here, coincidence has brought these three together, and he seems to be indicating that further actions taken by them at this beach are merely a product of their following these mysterious threads that lead them from one place to another. This is at once a striking and compelling declaration and also a validation for whatever actions he might take next. Given the reflective status of this film—it is about a director on the beach writing a film about the beach, presumably made by a director on a beach who at one point wrote a film, the one we are seeing, about a beach—it becomes even more unclear how Jung-rae's ideas are to be received. Whether compelling explanations of concepts or subtle tactics to win the interests of those he addresses, these little asides are the fulcrum of this film and imbue it with its palpable ambivalence. It is these asides and their constitutive uncertainty that mark this film as critique, as they reveal the ways that the characters of this film, and in particular Jung-rae, are capable of escaping punishment by deploying an understanding of the world that is at once subtle and thoughtful, but also possibly illusory, just a sleight-of-hand that allow for escapes and further abuses. The conditions that allows for these evasions are constituted by democracy when paired with capitalism, a system that rewards those who champion uncertainty in the name of deception, those who claim genius but always on unstable ground.

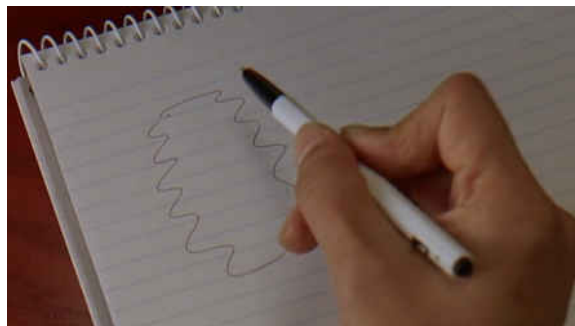
The plot of *Woman on the Beach* is surely recognizable to those familiar with Hong's work. The film is broken into two parts. In the first, Jung-rae, Mun-suk, and Chang-wook go

to the aforementioned resort in the town of Shinduri. At the resort Mun-suk and Jung-rae have an affair that leads to Jung-rae, the next day, acting aloof and backing away from their now pending relationship by escaping back to Seoul. In the second half of the film, however, Jung-rae begins to regret his actions in regards to their relationship and returns to the resort in the hopes of rekindling their romance. Upon arriving and after attempting to contact Mun-suk, Jung-rae has a brief affair with another woman, Sun-hee (Song Seon-mi) to whom he is attracted because of her perceived resemblance to Mun-suk. Mun-suk arrives at the resort unannounced and discovers the affair, but Jung-rae firmly lies and, for the rest of the film, refuses to admit to the second relationship—a stance which becomes increasingly absurd as the film progresses. Finally, Jung-rae, having alienated both women fully, returns to Seoul with a completed treatment for his screenplay—a script presumably based on these same romantic entanglements and which is perhaps this movie that we are watching.

What this synopsis neglects, of course, is the style of the film. Consisting primarily of single take sequences of characters speaking, this film consistently undermines its melodramatic thrust and instead allows its characters to relentlessly defend their actions. This can be seen in the above scene when Chang-wook needlessly becomes frustrated with Mun-suk for explaining that they are not a couple. “Do we have to have sex to be boyfriend and girlfriend?” is his retort, providing further information for Jung-rae’s now obvious plan to subvert their relationship and further alienating Mun-suk, who responds by saying that yes, they do, and then asking Jung-rae for confirmation. Shot in a single long take with an unmoving camera, this exchange illuminates how this film simply allows its characters to defend their actions endlessly, giving them enough rope, so to speak, to subvert each of

their decisions. As a result, these characters become increasingly unsympathetic and at times outright intolerable.

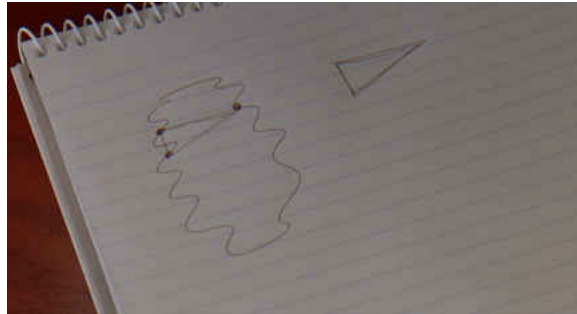
Another moment exemplifies both Hong's style and his relationship to ambiguity and ambivalence. Late in the film Mun-suk asks Jung-rae outright if he has slept with Sun-hee. Persisting in his lie, Jung-rae argues that he interviewed her to get an understanding of the character he is writing based on his relationship with Mun-suk, but that nothing further happened. Attempting to change the subject, Jung-rae asks Mun-suk if she heard his earlier confession in which he admitted he was deeply disturbed by her acknowledging that she slept with foreign men while abroad. While she had seemed to be passed out drunk during the confession, she here admits that she was in fact conscious. His semi-apologetic final response unfolds via a discussion of what he calls "images." According to Jung-rae, his obsession with purity and Mun-suk's refusal to accept his denial are merely "images" that were imprinted on them by others. In explicating this idea of images he draws a squiggly line on a pad of paper, a drawing that Hong emphasizes with one of the few inserts of the film.



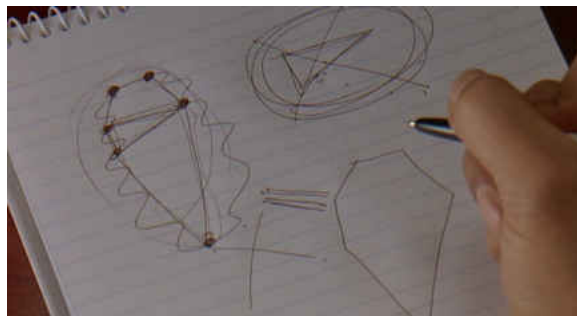
Jung-rae defines this squiggly line as the "real thing," what, for him, is constantly changing and infinitely curving. He then adds three points and connects them. Pointing to the new triangle, he argues that this is the "image that recurs." He then moves the triangle and,



isolating it on its own, redraws the three points to explain how they comprise an image via three distinct imaginary objects: the foreigners face, the foreigner's penis, and their sexual position as suggested by his experience with porn.



Once these three points are set, he explains, they come to correspond with the bad image that he cannot escape. This bad image, the triangle, then comes to overpower the original unknowable event (the squiggly line). Finally, adding some more image-dots to the original squiggle—these signifying fond moments—Jung-rae draws a new shape, one that might better represent his experience with Mun-suk.



However, this image, he claims, is too unusual and, despite it being a better representation, is too hard to understand. He ends by saying that, despite the difficulty of this last shape, they must try their best to see it rather than default to the triangle. A cut back to Mun-suk reveals that she is impressed and that his attempts to dig himself out of trouble have for the time being succeeded.

Referring to this sequence, critic J. Hoberman notes, “At one point, the irate Joong-rae [*sic*] draws Moon-sook [*sic*] a diagram to illustrate his convoluted mental processes. The joke is that it’s the most baffling image in this immaculately constructed movie.”<sup>42</sup> This is to say that this sequence generates a variety of problems that trouble its interpretation. What Jung-rae calls for, at first, is a model whereby images come to form new shapes and subsequently new perceptions. The problem with Jung-rae’s model is that these shapes remain shapes and thus will always fail to account for the potentials of the things they claim to represent. For Jung-rae, there is no way out of this bind, only the softening of some of its jagged edges via the introduction of new shapes—themselves, of course, full of jagged edges of their own.

The other problem that haunts this scene is the question of its sincerity. Jung-rae has utilized this explanation as a system for escaping Mun-suk’s questioning. She has here confronted him directly with the question of his sexual tryst and this explanation is to some degree an attempt—and ultimately for the time being a successful one—to avoid her accusations. To be clear, Jung-rae has developed, or at least outlined, this system as a way to convince Mun-suk that she has been overcome by previous images, but she is *correct*, and her easily deduced conclusion is actually on the mark—a fact of which Jung-rae is, of course, well aware. This model then holds a double meaning: it is a system to escape ready-made meanings and to confront the boundaries of the perceptual system, but it is also a way to avoid confrontation and to escape the implications of one’s actions. The question that this scene suggests is this: how can one determine whether Jung-rae is sincere about

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<sup>42</sup> J. Hoberman. “Sea Change: Sand, Surf, and Everything Comes Undone in Hong Sang-soo’s *Woman on the Beach*.” *The Village Voice*. Jan. 1st 2008. <http://www.villagevoice.com/2008-01-01/film/sea-change/>.

his model or if the system for coming to knowledge that he outlines is merely a ruse? And, furthermore, how and why does this distinction matter?

The dynamic that Jung-rae activates is best phrased as the interaction between the power and potential of a productive openness and the avenues for retreat and deception that this openness makes room for. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari produce one of the more effective lionizations of openness and its potentials. In discussing the topic of “the smooth and the striated,” Deleuze and Guattari propose that the act of bringing contours and form to any indeterminate or “smooth” operation (an idea, image, memory, or piece of knowledge) inevitably brings about a brutal process whereby certain ways of interacting with the operation are excluded. As Deleuze and Guattari posit, this process of “striating,” or giving concrete form,

Is an operation that undoubtedly consists of subjugating, overcoding, metricizing smooth space, in neutralizing it, but also in giving it a milieu of propagation, extension, refraction, renewal, and impulse without which it would perhaps die of its own accord: like a mask without which it could neither breathe nor find a general form of expression.<sup>43</sup>

The content of this claim is that any particular arrangement—of politics, of aesthetics, of thinking—always produces an outside, an exclusion that, through the repetition of this striating process, can be corrected over and over, always creating new exclusions but moving, however slowly, towards inclusion. It is the procedure that they call “deterritorialization” that governs this process, pushing on these recently erected barriers between inside and out and asking what can kinds of reconfigurations are necessary and available. The space between coherent modes, or what Deleuze and Guattari call a smooth

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<sup>43</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 486.

or indeterminate state, is the space of pure potential, but this smooth state is not actualizable. While full of promise, it has no structure of its own to make it material or coherent. The smoothness, then, must always call forth a particular configuration—a reterritorialization—that produces another set of contours, a knowable arrangement that can be acted upon or in relation to. The trouble with this arrangement is that it must be restrictive, delimited, and cogent, and it must therefore produce an outside, a negated section that makes new demands on the inside.

For Deleuze and Guattari this back and forth is a cruel process that always leaves something out. But it is also a model for change and creation. That is, through this slow process something like a gradual but substantive change is constantly underway, and throughout these developments new exclusions can constantly find their voice and make demands on the reconstituted whole.

Jung-rae's doodles gesture towards this same model. His attention to shapes and the need to rearrange them so as to account for difference and divergence adheres closely to Deleuze and Guattari's ideas. The ideal Jung-rae procures, new shapes that are less familiar but that better account for his experience, matches Deleuze and Guattari's model for change and the way that habituated formations must be pulled apart and reconstituted. But Jung-rae's actions too serve to illuminate the dark side that underwrites this system: the possibility that this model for openness and reconfiguration also proposes an available out, a mechanism to obscure one's true intentions and/or circumvent processes and arrangements that might condemn or otherwise punish, or at least make one be held accountable for, a set of actions.

Jung-rae's actions then enable two perspectives that point in totally opposite directions: They at once serve as a sincere attempt to break apart regressive or restrictive modes of seeing, but also renounce nothing in particular and propose the possibility of new understandings of the world in order only to provide avenues for escape. That is, Jung-rae reserves for himself openings to back out through and denies to other the path to pursue him. This is the dark brilliance of Jung-rae's actions throughout the film. Jung-rae critiques society but never quite verifies the critique that he renders. Never gives specific structure to his concerns nor indicates how they might be leveraged to bring about any particular change. His critiques only serve to mystify his actions, and, given the particular moments when he voices these claims, their major function seems to be misdirection. His arguments serve the purpose of providing an avenue for escape, an escape that winds a path through the language of inclusion and acknowledgement. *Woman on the Beach* occupies much of this same position. This is a film capable of both acknowledging Jung-rae's accuracy and his capacity to propose substantive arguments for change, but it also and ultimately eviscerates him for using his intelligence in the name of deception. Like Jung-rae himself, this film does not altogether trust the system for slow and incremental change that it supplies. Or it trusts it and it does not. It sees Deleuze and Guattari's model for change as available but also lacking—as a conditioning mechanism that produces a deceptive subject as much as a real model for politics. It is this tension, this thinking of this model for change as both productive and deceptive, that yields the ambivalence that structures this film.

### Critiquing Democracy

*Woman on the Beach* affords a view of the modern, upper-class subject as constituted by the transformation from authoritarianism to democracy. In order to support this proposition, it is necessary to bring into this discussion how democracy, despite its myriad clear advantages, when coupled with capitalism in its modern mode serves to constitute a particular, and particularly troubled, subject position.

In his “The Eros and Ambitions of Psychological Man,” Stephen Gardner levels a critique of democracy and the kinds of tensions it produces. For Gardner, the key to this critique is his locating of the “psychological man,” a particular subject constituted by the circumstances of democracy. Gardner argues,

By removing or crippling the old formalities and conventions of social life, democracy creates a culture in which individuals are supposedly free to relate to each other simply as such—pure individuals or pure “natural” beings, as it were. This idea of nature evidently presupposed the total socialization of man, but in a way unlike any other society. Believing that they are children of Eden, these “emancipated” democrats act out the latest script written for them by popular culture.<sup>44</sup>

For Gardner, then, the separation of authority from its hierarchical structure and any claim to a greater, outside knowledge produces a desiring figure convinced of its own genius, but one that is no less guided by the circumstances of its political and economic position.

This figure is what Gardner locates in the psychological man, which he defines as “an individual who is morally detached from communal order and rendered, at least in his own psyche, the free agent of his desires, the demigod of his Eros and ambitions.”<sup>45</sup> Gardner defines this subject by asking us to, “Imagine a character who is neither outside nor above the social order (like a mystic or a monk) yet not at home within it, a social yet a-social

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<sup>44</sup> Stephen L. Gardner, “The Eros and Ambitions of Psychological Man,” in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*, ed. Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2006), 228.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

individual, able neither to transcend society nor to identify with it.”<sup>46</sup> Gardner’s psychological man maintains a distance from society, not in the name of some ascetic principle, not because of a wholesale dismissal of any particular quality of the modern world, but because this subject perceives the social as having nothing to offer. But this subject is unable to fully disconnect; instead, the subject is stuck in a middle space, neither all in nor out, bound by social restrictions but not believing in them, trying to shirk authority but unable to muster a coherent alternative (or even a critique).

The grounds of Gardner’s model for the psychological man are based upon an understanding of the capitalist subject under democracy being guided by the desire to emulate the positions and actions of those that they feel are successful. Indeed, for what Gardner terms “democratic desire” mimesis is key, but this particular kind of desire is found not in the qualities of desire itself (whatever these might be), but “in the cultural exigencies of democracy.”<sup>47</sup> This is to say that the central ideals of democracy, when combined with capitalism, beget a kind of competitive desire as a result of the mimetic process of seeing and emulating one’s fellow free beings in a kind of endless loop of self-fulfillment that refuses any external claims to authoritative boundaries or to any set of goals that pertain to anything other than one’s self.

For Jung-rae, this relationship to one’s image of other people finds its logical extreme in the figure of repetition. Jung-rae’s rejection of Mun-suk and his subsequent replacement of her with a woman he finds reminiscent of her figures his desire as the attempt to replace some perceived absence with the very object that he himself rejected. Jung-rae’s seeming understanding of the “images” that force him to repeat his own actions

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 230.

reveals his status as to some degree self-aware of his own psychological dynamics. But his initial and obvious locating of his desire in his friends' romantic interest and, in the second half of the film, his perception of having lost a potential wholeness, locates his actions squarely in the cycle of endless repetition of desire and rejection. Jung-rae's desire is the desire of the Other, and what's more *he knows it*. What eludes him, as Gardner might say, is the degree to which democracy, and the qualities that it engenders, are responsible for this knowledge.

In this moment, when he draws this shape and escapes, for a time, his punishment he is not merely presenting a viable alternative to seeing the world, he is also (or perhaps only) finding a way to justify a set of behaviors. But it is important to note that these behaviors are not what he necessarily condones, for there is no coherent argument on his part that serves to defend them. What is most striking about this moment, and this film in general, is that Jung-rae has no particular interest in reconstituting society in a new direction, no particular moral position or any emancipatory spirit. He is incapable, it seems, of identifying with the figure, Mun-suk, that he defies, but he holds no particular belief system that is any different from that figure's. The only thing that makes Jung-rae unique amongst the characters in this film is an unwavering confidence in the persistence of his own genius, which, for him, justifies any decision he makes to deceive and abuse others.

Whereas the malaise of, say, Antonioni's protagonists or Marcello in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* seems motivated by an attempt—however unsympathetic—to find an understanding of their place in the world, Jung-rae seems engaged in no such search. His is not a quest for the finding of meaning, but is instead an attempt to shirk the burden of meaning altogether. He holds no particular point of view, but he rejects wholesale the



world with which he interacts. His attempt to constitute something new—what is here the expansion of shapes and the subsequent expansion of images—connects him, perhaps, with, to return to Bauman, “Liquid Modernity:” the ability to recede into the fractures of meaning that poststructuralist thought offers in an attempt to navigate one’s surroundings. For Bauman, “The present-day situation emerged out of the radical melting of the fetters and manacles rightly or wrongly suspected of limiting the individual freedom to choose and to act. *Rigidity of order is the artifact and sediment of the human agents’ freedom.*”<sup>48</sup> The attempt to expand shapes is accounted for in the case of Jung-rae’s by a kind of thoughtless pursuit of freedom for freedom’s sake, an empty revolution that holds no particular wish for change. Speaking of the absence of revolutions in the contemporary moment, Bauman states,

If the time of systemic revolutions has passed, it is because there are no buildings where the control desks of the system are lodged and which could be stormed and captured by the revolutionaries; and also because it is excruciatingly difficult, nay impossible, to imagine what the victors, once inside the building (if they found them first), could do to turn the tables and put paid to the misery that prompted them to rebel.<sup>49</sup>

Jung-rae’s task in presenting his model for thinking of the world is to do exactly what Bauman presents as pernicious. He plans here to remove the control desks and hide the building that constitute his treachery, and in so doing to remove any system whereby Mun-suk might level an argument.

The South Korean context strongly encourages this reading. The intense modernization that South Korean underwent in the 1970s and 1980s was overseen by violent authoritarian rule, but unlike in the case of the authoritarian Italian or totalitarian

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<sup>48</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

German governments of the 1940s, the arrival of democracy in South Korea was not punctuated by intense destruction. As a result authoritarianism in South Korea avoided a connection with the depths of depravity and guilt that are associated with the revelations of the conclusions of World War II. There is then an available nostalgia for authoritarianism that is unique to these conditions. The possibility that a centralized and hierarchical authority could alleviate some of the insecurities and destructive tendencies that compel Jung-rae contributes to the ambivalence on display here, but it is tempered by the memories of violence that accompany these hierarchies. This is to say that the competition, doubt, insecurity, and self-obsession of Jung-rae offers the possibility for an authoritarian response, but this path is in this case blocked by the violence that marked authoritarian South Korea. Without, then, either authoritarianism or democracy offering any respite from crisis, what can be done in light of the critique that Hong has offered? Jung-rae never attempts to assert his own response to the gaps in certainty that he locates and takes advantage of. *He just wants to get away with things*, and he is happy to use the openings in meaning inherent to democracy to achieve this goal. He is the figure of ambivalence that only South Korea's context can provide: he mistrusts democracy as much as authoritarianism. One offers brutal hierarchies, the other brutal horizons, and neither is particularly strongly linked to wellbeing.

Jung-rae's actions propose a critique of the openings provided by certain avenues of critical theory as readily as they lionize these same openings. That is, Jung-rae recognizes the contours—or perhaps the potential negative outcomes—of calls to openness like those voiced by Deleuze and Guattari. But he also recognizes that, in the milieu that he occupies, this emphasis on inclusion also provides a series of outs that he is happy to take advantage

of. This film, given my readings, stand as both a celebration of openness while also acknowledging the paths for escape that this same celebration always—and in this case quite literally—draws. The question remains though: can this film do both of these things at once? Can it celebrate and critique the same set of availabilities simultaneously?

For Bauman, the history of critical theory was predicated on the coherence of a centralized authority to push against and the modern crisis of critical thought has arisen in response to the absence of this authority.<sup>50</sup> But this is not the same as saying that the anti-authoritarian methods of old are no longer valuable. It simply means that their effectiveness—which itself was always in question in the first place—has diminished. This is exactly the problem that *Woman on the Beach* strives to illuminate. Its purpose is not the rejection of Deleuze and Guattari's project, but instead a striving forth that recognizes its failures and difficulties when it comes to contemporary capitalist democracy. And it is the relationship to authority that concretizes this film's line of critique. For Hong, authority would provide the cogent inside that an outside could then push against, but that inside has disappeared and with it the availability of leveling a call for a new reconfiguration. What is there to reconfigure, this film seems to ask, if all the methods for locating and constituting an authority have been rejected in the name of democratic capitalism?

*Woman on the Beach* illustrates how critical thought, at least in the Deleuzian mode, is not an unassailable methodology. In fact, this film shows how its methods can and have been assimilated into neoliberal capitalism, and how market logics have incorporated fluidity, inclusivity and openness into their own systems of self-justification.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 25.

The self-reflection implied in Jung-rae's shapes is indicative of the transition to democracy that haunts this film. Jung-rae's actions conflate reflection with defense. The borders that line the self are the focus of his theory of the world, his attempts to expand them, and to allow others to expand theirs, is his goal, but his purpose remains veiled and, perhaps, incoherent by virtue of his ulterior motives. According to Gardner, the psychological man "entered into the twilight zone of modernity, the realm of ambivalence and ambiguities that ensue when every fixed point of reference is dissolved into the sheer interplay of individuals in a culture that can no longer sustain its origins."<sup>51</sup> For Jung-rae the fixed points that might account for the shapes that he draws are what need to be liquefied, a point that he explicitly makes in his drawing and redrawing.

The capacity to create and represent this explanation for ideas and memories and their becoming calcified is surely a democratic gesture and a repudiation of a centralized authority, as it was for Deleuze and Guattari. But the available interpretation of Jung-rae's actions as the justification for an elaborate lie with only escape and further deception as its ideal outcome dissipates the clarity of his actions and brings into view the way that democracy can be reduced to a tool to justify unethical behavior. Democracy, for Hong, cuts both ways, it is viable both for liberation and for manipulation by destructive forces, hence his ambivalence.

This ambivalence extends too to the precarious position of the women in this film. For Freudian theorist Juliet Flower MacCannell, democracy has positioned its subject in remarkably new and different ways. For MacCannell, "Our 'collective' logic—our naïve belief—is that we no longer have a superego, that *It* wants nothing. If we look more deeply,

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 236-7

however, we find that, in the wake of the democratic revolution in governance, what has been done away with is only the recognizable parental function of the super ego, and its best part.”<sup>52</sup> The *It* that MacCannell refers to, the superego or big Other that constitutes social standards and judges our actions, has, for MacCannell, not been erased in modern democratic society, but has been refigured. Where the symbolic figure of the father had traditionally held this position, he has been supplanted in the modern world by the figure of the brother. In what MacCannell calls post-oedipal society, the traditional patriarchy has been replaced with the figure of the brother, a figure that assumes the same position as did the father but now in the name of a democratic and equal world. This regime of the brother, rather than actually diffusing meaning, creates a range of problems. Speaking of this figure of the brother, MacCannell says,

Agent and sole heir of patriarchy’s most negative features, he creates as many false leads and artificial ties as he needs to cover his destruction of his real familial roots and relations. And he thus absolves himself of any obligation toward them. He does not have to fill the father’s role any more responsibly and positively than the tyrant had: he is only acting, after all. It is he who is a pro forma father, without a communal or global species-saving goal, a despot, a mute sovereign, the (only) one who really enjoys.<sup>53</sup>

That is, in modern democracy the superego has not been deposed but remains the center of orientation for the rules and values in place. But the form of this superego has been transferred from the figure of the father, the violent but obsessively protective tyrant, to that of the brother, a figure that makes claims to freedom even as it institutes brutal rules. The brother, unlike the father, enacts controls in the name of equality and self-governance, and has therefore shirked much of the protective principle that constituted the father in the

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<sup>52</sup> Juliet Flower MacCannell, *The Regime of the Brother* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 11.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

first place. In this new order, the brother has supplanted the father as the organizing principle for our social order but this figure is no less destructive. Its major difference is that it is justified by the rules and values of democracy rather than those of traditional society; that is, it asserts its position by virtue of its relationship to freedom and self-governance, not hierarchical control.

The regime of the brother is then much more deceptive than that of the father, as it occupies a position that modern society pretends does not exist—self-governance, after all, supposedly subverts the need for this figure. As MacCannell outlines, women in this new regime, those who had the most to gain in the deposing of the patriarchal order, actually find themselves in a heightened position of precarity. For MacCannell, “The thought that he [the brother] becomes a man only by comparison with and difference from his equal but different ‘other’ is never admitted. He suppresses his sister’s specific desire—for equal access to identity—making it the basis for his law, his rule. The brother seizes the sexual ‘symbol’ in a power grab rooted in his own inability to accept a mere genital difference as the foundation of his ‘identity’—and of hers.”<sup>54</sup> In this way the woman in the regime of the brother must bear the brunt of the brother’s insecurity, his need to justify his position of power by something other than simply his similarity to the father. Deep down, the male in this arrangement knows that he has no particular reason for his central power, but he must overcome this insecurity by virtue of his differences, of which gender becomes paramount. Under the logic of the regime of the brother male domination reinstated is, now with a heightened animosity for women that results from the knowledge that the power granted to men is arbitrary and constituted only by their capacity to wield it.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 26.

MacCannell's description of the status of the authority in modern democratic society goes a long way in explaining the otherwise incoherent actions of Jung-rae in his treatment of Mun-suk. At once demanding her approval and, once securing it, rejecting her, Jung-rae uses Mun-suk's feelings towards him as the measure of his self-worth, and his ability to reject them as the means by which he proves his genius and therefore his central position as master of meaning. Mun-suk, who is at times no less manipulative than Jung-rae, is admonished and ultimately rejected for acquiescing to Jung-rae's demands. She is unable, it seems, to make the right move, for any position she takes will feed back into Jung-rae's game of acceptance and rejection. This film's distrust of democracy and its depiction of the damages of a society dedicated to the fiction of self-governance is helpful, then, in revealing the way that the supposedly self-made genius capable of organizing the world is constituted mainly by difference, and therefore necessitates gendered exclusion and violence in order to reaffirm these positions of power.

MacCannell's take on the structure of power in democratic society is valuable for again critiquing democratic capitalism, but like this film in general it can't help but produce ambivalence, as, much like in the case of *Woman on the Beach*, the traditional society that this new regime has arisen from is no better. This ambivalence refuses outright dismissal, as democracy in even this representation holds within it the positive potential to be evaluated and hopefully changed. The shapes that Jung-rae previously outlined and their ability to be rewritten represent just this kind of democratic potential, and *Woman on the Beach* does not wish to replace it outright. What confounds this position is the question of what is to be done with distrust, with the possibility that the malleability of ideas that democracy engenders can be abused and destroyed, and furthermore that capitalism

encourages and rewards those who wish to escape through democracy's gaps. As in the case of Jung-rae's explanation of memories and ideas, democracy is at once a valuable and coherent arrangement that takes into account the capacity for humans to differ and diverge. But in its horizontality it also produces the room for deception, the opportunity to disrupt, overrun and most importantly to take advantage of the decentralization of meaning and authority that democracy demands. Capitalism furthermore rewards these kinds of disingenuous actions.

### The Market

The topic of the capacity for market logics to undermine the Deleuzian deterritorialization process is perhaps best addressed by putting it in relation to critiques of neoliberalism. Such critiques have grown in strength and precision as the forces of market capitalism have continued to ascend in recent years. As David Harvey puts it, "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade."<sup>55</sup> This simple definition illuminates some of the issues that haunt Jung-rae. The capacity of individual entrepreneurs totally unfettered by regulation and free to pursue any new system for increasing gain is figured, in *Woman on the Beach*, in terms of relationships. But what becomes clear thanks to Jung-rae's maneuverings is the degree to which this logic of "free" entrepreneurship that neoliberal capitalism demands can devastate human interactions when translated from its original

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<sup>55</sup>David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.



context as a market principle.<sup>56</sup> The ways in which neoliberalism has moved from the market and into other contexts has produced much—but certainly not all—of its devastating effects. As Harvey posits, neoliberalism “has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way of many us interpret, live in, and understand the world.”<sup>57</sup>

The damages of neoliberalism and its failure to account for those on the wrong end of its ever widening income divide are well documented.<sup>58</sup> The damages, however, unleashed on those who stand to benefit from neoliberal logics are less often discussed. As Harvey effectively notes,

Those thoroughly incorporated within the inexorable logic of the markets and its demands find that there is little time or space in which to explore emancipatory potentialities outside what is marketed as “creative” adventure, leisure and spectacle. Obligated to live as appendages of the market and of capital accumulation rather than expressive beings, the realm of freedom shrinks before the awful logic and the hollow intensity of market involvements.<sup>59</sup>

It is this “hollow intensity” that best describes Jung-rae’s actions. Left to pursue some vague “freedoms” that yield only incoherent and irrelevant gains in his quest for proof of his genius, Jung-rae attacks each human encounter as though a potential financial victory.

Through the character of Jung-rae Hong Sang-soo strives to address neoliberalism from the angle of those who might favor it. His film denounces neoliberalism’s failings not for the damage that it does to those who might benefit from the services it cuts and the

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<sup>56</sup> Market restricted neoliberalism, I should add, is an equally significant concern, if not the topic of this discussion.

<sup>57</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>58</sup> See, for a particularly useful explanation: Mark Blyth, *Austerity: the History of a Dangerous Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>59</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 185.

income gap that it creates, but because of the ravages it proposes too to those who might stand to benefit financially from its principles. Jung-rae's actions are severely limited by the corrupt and incoherent "freedoms" neoliberalism creates—the freedom to get ahead and conquer at all costs, the freedom to proceed without regard for the ramifications of one's actions, the freedom to constitute one's own authority and to proceed with no regard for providing any justification other than the (supposed) absolute truths of action, genius and individuality. This is so say that this film is at its core suffused with the logics of neoliberalism, but its reflective and ambivalent depiction of these events also creates the distance needed to evaluate them. This film, then, is a bit like Jung-rae's own explanations of his actions, it at once levels, by virtue of its disdain for its own characters, a critique, but also benefits from its claims to ambiguity and genius.

But the specifics of South Korean neoliberalism help to account for the particularities of Hong's critiques. As Jesook Song notes, the neoliberal practices of flexible labor have disturbingly combined in the South Korean context with the claims and wishes of the leftist movements of the 1980s. According to Song,

Radical socialist movements that led to the end of the South Korean fascist capitalist state (1960-87) not only promoted the emancipation of the suppressed working class, but paved the way for the liberalization of the economy and the emergence of individual rights discourse. This transition to liberalization ushered in the neoliberal capitalist logic of individual responsibility and flexibility after the Asian debt crisis.<sup>60</sup>

In South Korea the initial leftist conception of freedom of labor was predicated, as elsewhere, on the emancipation of workers from the brutal conditions of the workplace, in particular factories, but was quickly coopted by the market-minded government of post-

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<sup>60</sup> Jesook Song, "Between Flexible Life and Flexible Labor: The Inadvertent Convergence of Socialism and Neoliberalism in South Korea," *Critique of Anthropology* 29, no. 2 (2009): 141.

oppositional South Korea. For Song, in the wake of an oppositional politics, a harmonious relationship between the state and the citizens was presented as viable, and the mass demonstrations of the past were presented as harmful to regular and reliable business practices.<sup>61</sup> Ultimately, for Song,

The flexible and self-sufficient labor subjectivity that South Korean leftist intellectuals devised to counter the late-developing authoritarian state and Fordist capitalist production is not effective in defying neoliberal governmentality and post-Fordist capitalist production. Unwittingly, the flexible subjectivity has become subsumed in the new system of capitalist production and the state control of labor.<sup>62</sup>

Song's discussion serves here not only to lay out the neoliberal practices of flexible labor that seem to factor into Hong's films, but also to explain how these qualities are uniquely grounded in the change from an oppositional politics to a post-political moment, exactly the same moment that ended the run of the Korean New Wave directors.

This film presents through the character of Jung-rae an individual positioned by the South Korean neoliberal transition. Jung-rae is a figure whose labor and leisure time are inextricably linked, indeed to such a degree that his leisure activities are not only subject to marketization but have become indistinguishable from his labor. In fact, the justification of his actions as contributing to his screenplay writing process—the system by which he helps himself and others to make money—is what allows him to act so brutally towards the other characters in the film. As long as it is in the name of genius, Jung-rae's maneuverings seem to assert, any set of actions is allowable.

Hong's film illuminates the way that flexible labor and the disintegration of a labor-leisure divide encourages any set of actions that might generate economic success. This is

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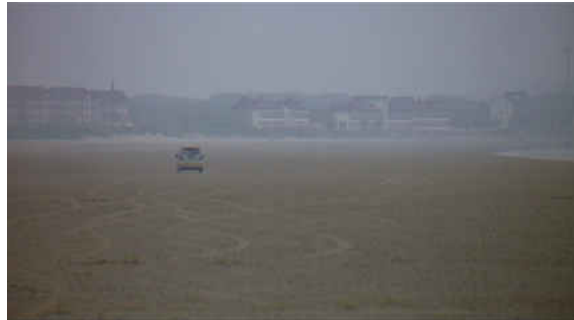
<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 152.

exactly the process by which neoliberalism begins to absorb aspects of life other than just the narrowly defined category of “the workplace.” The question of how to overcome this set of pressures, however, is much more difficult to answer. If Hong implicates Jung-rae then he also must be implicating the South Korean film industry in which the genius and flexibility of a figure like Jung-rae is so richly rewarded. And too within the purview of this indictment, then, must of course be Hong himself, the figure to whom Jung-rae is so obviously related. How then does one escape this loop of increased monetization, and furthermore how does one render a critique from the position of being rewarded by this very process? Its being so clearly imbricated within the system it wishes to denounce leaves this film at an impossible juncture. How, it asks, are we to proceed?

Take, for instance, the final scene of the film. After Jung-rae departs—admitting to his ride that he has written his script (presumably based on these events) during his short stay at the resort—the film leaves him on his drive back and returns to Mun-suk, still at the resort. She wakes up in the room where she has just had her most recent, and most destructive, row with Jung-rae and walks, slowly, to the hotel’s front porch. Surprisingly, she receives a call from Jung-rae, who coyly asks her again if she is still interested in him. She responds by jokingly asking if she should find a new man that resembles him and then firmly explains that she does not repeat mistakes. They agree not to meet and she hangs up. She next sees Sun-hee, hands her a wallet which she had found under the bed in Jung-rae’s room and departs, joyfully. In a mysterious final scene, Mun-suk drives away from the resort across a beach. But, as she finally leaves the location, her car gets stuck in the sand. Two men arrive from off-screen and offer to help her by pushing her car free of the sand.

They push, briefly, and ultimately succeed in freeing the car. She thanks them and they leave, and so does she, in her car, smiling; and so ends the film.



This final sequence refocuses the dramatic thrust of the narrative. Whereas Jung-rae, in his call, attempts to continue in his unceasing repetition of his self destructive and oddly competitive actions, Mun-suk clearly indicates that she will continue in a new direction, as she does not repeat mistakes, or so she claims. Whereas Jung-rae has reasserted his genius and succeeded in what he needed to do in order to continue in his repetitions, Mun-suk drives off into an uncertain future, thanks to the help of a pair of men that seemingly expect no compensation. I would hesitate to call this ending hopeful, as it provides no particular solution to the problems that the film has unearthed nor any positive horizon that might alleviate the concerns that haunt the film. This point is solidified by the fact that, after being helped free of the sand, Mun-suk's car makes a subtle but clear 180° turn and ends up heading in the direction from which she initially departed. This character's perspective, as a result of this turn, is left ambiguous, as is the perspective the audience is to have in relation to her. Throughout the film her outbursts and general pettiness mirrored Jung-rae's, but her ability to overcome these concerns is *at least* left open, if never in any way verified.

It is this reluctance to clarify that anchors this film's critique. Whereas for Rossellini and Tarr, ambiguity served as the opening necessary to produce a perhaps individuated but nonetheless radical difference, in the case of *Woman on the Beach*, ambiguity is valuable in its capacity to undermine *its own* meanings. Ambiguity here is paired with ambivalence—a system through which the authorial perspective refuses to render apparent its own understanding of what is on display—in order to undermine authority altogether. In this way, this film generates a unique perspective whereby ideas are deployed but never confirmed, they kind of bounce freely but are never arranged into a coherent whole.

This non-confirmation is then key for this film. If *Woman on the Beach* feels a little freer to produce meaning than did, for instance *Sátántangó*—as is evidenced by the former's willingness to reject certain decisions and actions—its rejoinders are not any more structured or clear as a result. This is because each point it deploys—the possible efficacy of authoritarianism as well as that of a radically open democracy—remains unconfirmed. However, thanks to this non-confirmation, this film also renders perhaps the most eloquent critique of authority of all the films discussed in this dissertation: a mystifying negation of its own authority, and subsequently authority at large. What results, however, is a crushing ambivalence, a total dedication to indecision figured as a final and total rejection of any of a variety of political possibilities. Through this system this most damning critique of authority also manifests as itself a rejection of its own ideas. A gap opens here: how can one say anything, do anything, without some turn to authority?

In a particularly revealing moment the crisis of authority that this film's characters undergo is made with striking clarity. About half way through the film, after the characters

have left the resort and returned to Seoul, an intertitle declares that two days have passed. After the intertitle, Jung-rae is shown climbing on some dunes near a beach that, we learn shortly, is back at the resort in Shindori. He stops abruptly as he sees three trees, his back to the camera as he seemingly studies them.



After a few seconds he kneels in front of the trees three times in what appears to be a prayer.



After the third bow the camera pushes in on him, cuts to a shot of the trees, and then back to Jung-rae, now in close profile, his head resting on his hands. "Please help me," he whispers, as he drools and clenches his face, indicating that he is crying.



A cut back to the dunes reveals Jung-rae, now walking leisurely and leaving a voicemail on Mun-suk's phone as though the sequence of his prayer before the tree never happened.

What has happened here? This sequence stands out in that it shows Jung-rae in what has to be taken as deep introspection and regret, but once it disappears he returns to his regular abuses in the second half of the film. This sequence is the only one that indicates any guilt or indecision on the part of Jung-rae, but the film refuses any return to this kind of display of emotion. Jung-rae's later actions are in no way disrupted by this brief interlude. The appeal to some religious order or structure of authority is hinted at here, but Jung-rae seemingly dismisses this brief episode. Is religion an authority that is capable of ordering these events and providing Jung-rae with a hierarchy that can help allow some solution to the lack of authority in his life? The distanced camera and abrupt cut away from this sequence refuses to substantiate this reading, and the sequence is swept away as the film moves back into a close analysis of Jung-rae's maneuverings.

This sequence is valuable in that it seems to push hard on the problems that haunt the actions of its characters, but too because it returns with no answer. It proposes the possibility of solution—something like a traditional authority—but refuses to articulate it fully. And how could it? What amounts to a solution here must also always simultaneously



register as a failure—as must be the case when authority is negated, for with it departs the capacity to verify.

This pulling away from a straightforward critique is also embodied in Jung-rae's status as the director's surrogate. At the end of the film his completed script is based, it seems, on these very experiences, and it is therefore fair to assume that his film will look something like *Woman on the Beach*. Are we to think, then, that his will be a film that critiques these characters, as did Hong's? Is Jung-rae too planning a Stephen Gardner-esque evisceration of the subject under democratic conditions? And, conversely, can we then assume that Hong's life bespeaks some experience similar to this new script? Does Hong himself evidence some of these same qualities?

This film is historically situated in such a position as to require the kinds of problems that this ending produces. Located in a moment free from the "weight" of politics, and maintaining the distance it requires to toy with the past, this film presents its critique of the modern democratic subject, but always with an eye turned backwards to a moment when authoritarianism was the arrangement, and with an understanding of the damage that this arrangement can bring about. Hong's ending, coupled with the confusion as to the viability of Jung-rae's expansion of shapes, performs its critique of democracy in such a way that brings into question a particular moment without implying the converse (in this case, authoritarianism). What this gesture supplies, then, is an argument that refuses to figure a viable alternative, and in so doing simultaneously refuses its own status as master of meaning, it denies its own position as authoritarian figure capable of presenting something new.

Hong's is an anti-authoritarian cinema; it refuses even its own expertise and leaves the audience stranded in its ideas with no recourse to any kind of closure. This film critiques democracy, but brings in to question its own critique, and in the process forces its audience to struggle with these ideas. The demolition here finally pertains as much to authoritarianism as it does to democracy, for, while it shows the terror at meaning that democracy might create, it targets with equal accuracy the authoritarian past it so vehemently wishes to reject and centers this targeting by implicating the filmmaker within its zone of denunciation.

Hence the impossible aporia with which the film ends. Mun-suk's driving away serves as a cogent, if clichéd, attempt to forge ahead towards an unpaved, open horizon—a path that, given her smile, we are led to believe she is happy to be on. But what can we make of this smile? Particularly given the film's ambivalence, this smile as readily suggests irony as it does hope. Perhaps the future she heads towards is no less devastating than the past, or the present—she has, after all, headed back the way she came. Perhaps Mun-suk's hopes are naïve, and the film is articulating that the kind of optimistic openness that she embraces will only lead again to one of the subject positions that the film so vehemently rejects. *Woman on the Beach* takes advantage of its unique historical position and declares as its project an exploration of how ambiguity and ambivalence erode meaning. Whether the openings declared in this film's conclusion amount to hope or failure, however, likewise becomes undecipherable. Whether Mun-suk's journey into the horizon is rendered here as viable or dismissed as too inarticulate and uncertain to resist cooptation by contemporary capital is offered up here to ambivalence, another meaning overwhelmed by its shattering gaze.

If *Germany Year Zero* held firm to the availability of a positive but as yet unfigured future, and *Sátántangó* disintegrated the readily available options for change but held too to hope as a fulcrum from which change could arise, *Woman on the Beach* tests these assumptions, particularly with respect to the possibility of hope. Hope, here, is brought into question as the film turns on itself and seems to eradicate the possibility for a positive future altogether.

To put this another way: by constantly undermining its own authorial voice, this film renders readability impossible, but it also overturns the Deleuzian dynamic whereby instruction falls away in favor of pure potential, and as a result critiques the capacity for creation rather than simply reproducing attempts at creating openings. What remains after all this turning is a series of negations, a crashing of meanings that points away from possibility and towards what must be described as a dialectic. Every position that is proposed in this film is turned on its end, each's weaknesses being exposed. But this is not to say that each proposal for a positive future is rejected outright—each is negated as itself an entire trajectory, but this turning always leaves behind some residue, the salient markings remaining in a kind of reduction that indexes some qualities of what has been reduced. This is a process that, as is discussed shortly, is best named thought. Thanks to this structure, Hong's cinema offers up a kind of methodology—a posing and position that generates argument but that never totally adheres to a cogent project. What is left of each cogent point—whether it is illuminated by Deleuze and Guattari's views on creativity, Gardner's on democracy, capitalism, and authority, MacCannell's on patriarchy, Bauman's on liquidity, or the critics of neoliberalism's take on contemporary capitalism—after each

has been turned and dismantled is the germ of an idea that still holds the spirit of each approach.

These negations and diminishments do not amount to a coherent political agenda, but they do allow the particularities of this case to speak back to each of the ideas under discussion. This is, perhaps, an ineffective approach to political realities—and it is no doubt rather cynical—but it does digest a range of availabilities and holds tight to the rejection of a single, coherent approach as a way to reconstitute a democratic subject. What arises thanks to this constant turning is a kind of detritus of ideas, a series of detonations that leaves behind the ruins of a cogent response. Whether these ruins amount to a productive approach remains unclear, but the project of cobbling together something—anything—coherent from this rubble remains available. What would happen, this film seems to ask, if we were to build upward from these oppositional and irreconcilable groundings? Could a politics be built that unifies these approaches? These questions are what this film proposes, but in the spirit of anti-authoritarianism it refuses to produce a response.

*Woman on the Beach* finds itself in the same impossible position as the other films I discuss in this study. It stands amongst ruins but finds itself incapable of proceeding. *Medium Cool* too locates this juncture, but in the context of a remarkably different series of events, and furthermore in direct relation to the violence that these aporias can produce. It is to this final film that I now turn.

## CHAPTER 4

### Force, Hope, and Death

Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool* (1969) is the clear outlier in the group of films I am analyzing. Made in 1968 and shot in large part at or around the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and its surrounding political demonstrations, *Medium Cool* was *not* made in or after authoritarian rule. It is not my intention here to denounce the U.S. as authoritarian, nor to indicate that authoritarianism can exist in some kind of covert form. This might very well be the case, but it is not my focus. Instead, I examine the approaches employed by a filmmaker who *perceived* the infiltration and reproduction of an authoritarian presence. This topic is of particular importance since it allows a glimpse of how a film might rush to a cause early in its development, and how in so doing it might differ from, or connect to, the other films included in this study. *Medium Cool*, then, shares with my other examples a preoccupation with authority—both the ways that it is reproduced and the ways that it can be resisted.

One of the primary differences that separates this film from the others I have discussed is its profound distrust of media. What *Medium Cool* rejects is neither economic nor governmental authority, at least not in the traditional sense. Instead, it rejects the literal means by which it might render its critique: that is, a critique in and through the media. A distrust of the media and its perceived proclivity for making coherent and knowable events that might otherwise present something remarkably different from what we expect is one of the major concerns of this film. The way that this film renders its critique of media representation while also attempting to itself produce something like an anti-authoritarian stance is central to this examination.

In this chapter, I begin by contextualizing this film historically and philosophically. I then explore the aesthetic philosophy of force as proposed by Christoph Menke, and in so doing examine how this film's connection to force, its unique relationship to and own understanding of a kind of unordered but nonetheless palpable power, works to render an anti-authoritarian politics. I then turn to the topic of death, discussing how death and hope interact and how the unique dynamic between them provides this film with a system to render an argument that finally and fully rejects systems of authority that might otherwise command meaning. Finally, I examine the context of politics in 1968, positioning *Medium Cool* within contemporary political movements and exploring the role that art and art films play in regards to the political conditions of massive youth based demonstrations and strikes. Ultimately, my goal here is to explore how film interacts with governance, and how authoritarianism can be met, comprehended, avoided, and perhaps reaffirmed through rejections of authority and the ambiguities that arise in its absence.

This chapter is largely concerned with distrust: distrust of government and distrust of the capacity of mediation to evaluate the failings of a centralized ruling force. Through its unique aesthetic approach, *Medium Cool* reveals a palpable suspicion of the events and figures that it examines, but it does so with equal doubt as to its own capacity to give form to meaning. This film, like my other examples, pushes back against authority via the path of ambiguity, but it does so from another vantage point: that of fear of a developing authoritarian presence. How to simultaneously reveal and reject authority, and how to do so through a medium that the film explicitly rejects, is the question that *Medium Cool* provokes.

## Contexts

*Medium Cool* follows John Katselas (Robert Forster), a news photographer, through his personal life, in particular his exploits at upper crust parties and subsequent romantic affairs. Intertwined with these activities, though, is John's increasing awareness and interactions with the social movements of the late 1960s, particularly through his role as a news photographer. John remains more or less indifferent to the issues and events that he is asked to record on assignment for the news. But when his reporting takes him to the neighborhood and eventually to the home of Eileen (Verna Bloom) and her son Harold (Harold Blankenship), John begins to take an interest in the events that he had previously ignored. Initially in pursuit of Eileen, John's growing romantic interests eventually culminate with his gaining a much stronger connection with the political demonstrations of 1968 in Chicago. It is important to note, however, that neither John nor Eileen become significantly involved in these demonstrations; instead they seem to mainly distrust them despite the role these events increasing play in their lives.

1968, of course, contained a number of worldwide political movements, particularly the May 1968 strikes and revolts that shut down France for weeks in protest of the conservative politics of Charles de Gaulle. The events in France reverberated globally, instigating and escalating social movements around the world. Of these, the anti-war political movements of the United States in the 1960s are paramount. Sharing many of the characteristics of their French equivalents, the United States' political movements were likewise largely associated with a youth culture concerned with what appeared to be a principally and increasingly authoritarian government hell-bent on deflecting communism globally at all costs. Of course, principal to the costs of the United States in the fight against

communism were the very young people so opposed to this war, as the universal draft demanded that many of those who rejected this conflict fight and die in it. As in France, the anti-war American movements of the 1960s were predicated on disrupting the affairs of a government that cared little for those whom it was willing to demand so much of. The demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago were one of the culminating activities of these anti-authoritarian youth events. Robert Kennedy's assassination, which happened only six months before the convention, left the Democratic Party in disarray; these circumstances led to the primary being contested, with the anti-war Eugene McCarthy and the more hawkish vice-president Hubert Humphrey as the remaining figures. Despite anti-war candidates McCarthy and Kennedy receiving eighty percent of the primary vote, Humphrey, the more conservative and supposedly responsible and "tested" of the remaining candidates—and the contender who maintained lineage with Lyndon B. Johnson's war-time presidency—received the nomination thanks to his performance in caucusing states, even though he did not enter any primaries.

This result was not totally unexpected, but the nomination of the pro-war candidate inflamed the anti-war movement's fears and furthered the disenfranchisement of anti-war activists that had escalated throughout the decade. This was a nation, it might have seemed then, dedicated to war more than it was dedicated to democracy, an authoritarian system predicated on violence, the certainty of its economic system, and securing a global market place at all costs. The idea of democracy, that citizens of the country had the right to choose between a range of candidates in the name of having their interests represented, seemed to dissolve with the decision to nominate Humphrey, as the role of the country in Vietnam and



indeed in other anti-communist wars seemed to be, thanks to both presidential nominees being for it, no longer under debate.

*Medium Cool* culminates, famously, in documentary footage shot around and inside this convention, but it narrativizes this footage by placing Eileen at the center of the protests in search of her son. During Eileen's search, John, having lost his job after losing his temper upon hearing the news that his footage had been repeatedly provided to the FBI in advance of its broadcast, meanwhile navigates the inside of the convention as a free-lancer.

The film's final sequence is generally the focus of most analyses, and this discussion will focus on it as well. What remains striking about this scene is how harrowing it appears; police violence is quite literally on display in this film, as is the striking size and military might of Chicago mayor Richard Daley's police force. But what is similarly striking here is the strange novelty of the narrative properties of this footage. Eileen's navigations of the crowds and the extended takes of her interacting with both demonstrators and police remains unique, and indeed seemed to have baffled both parties at the time—particularly the police, who, oddly, allow her to cross barriers and otherwise disrupt their attempts to pen and later abuse the demonstrators.

Ethan Mordden, in a book for which he borrows the film's name, places *Medium Cool* at the center of the post-studio era of the 1960s. According to Mordden, "By the late 1960s, movies spoke intimately yet pandemically to their various publics. Film no longer regarded itself as a church, an enforcer of the received social values, normative above all, but as an agent of transformation, often defiant of the ruling interests."<sup>1</sup> *Medium Cool*, for Mordden,

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<sup>1</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Medium Cool: The Movies of the 1960s* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 241.

fits this defiant mold: “The film is made of antagonisms—generation war, class war, race war, the Vietnam war, even the war of the moral free-lancer against the reckless Corporation, and of course the war of the camera with its subject.”<sup>2</sup> But, for Mordden, all of this warring and aggression met—for him productively—with the fragmentation and disorder that arrived with the end of a coherent authority. Continuing with the church analogy, Mordden contends, “This marked not merely a separation of church and state, but a reformation that broke the church up into many sects, each free to challenge or support the relevant wisdoms.”<sup>3</sup> Mordden continues by presenting a list of films that map to different views on the generational conflict, but he carefully leaves *Medium Cool* off these lists. And he does so rightly as this film’s politics are difficult to decipher. That is, it wears its distrust openly, but it is hard to gather exactly what it says outside of its myriad rejections and refusals. This difficulty poses a number of questions: what is to be made of a film so deeply invested in politics but that refuses to render a coherent platform? That is, why not make John and Eileen political activists? Why, instead, is this film careful to delineate their distance from, and inability to identify with, the demonstrations and protests that it depicts? What good is a film about politics but without politics?

Toward the end of *Medium Cool*, Eileen and John, at this stage a couple, attend a nightclub. Suddenly departing from preparations at the convention center, this sequence begins with an abrupt intertitle that reads, mysteriously, “AMERICA IS WONDERFUL” in bold, red, white, and blue capital letters.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 241.



But this text is promptly replaced with a dissolve in which the letters and the blackness that surrounds them are supplanted with footage of people dancing at a nightclub. Abstract images turn out to be reflections that announce Eileen and John's entry into this space. The pair walk through cavernous hallways illuminated in different colors as snippets of dialogue are overheard from the oblique figures whom they pass by. Finally, they arrive at the dance floor. The band on stage, clad in flower patterned fabric and with psychedelic images projected behind them, plays as strobe lights provide glimpses of the violently dancing crowd. John and Eileen navigate this crowd, walking through without taking part. A previous romantic partner approaches John on the dance floor, says something we can't hear, and John and Eileen leave abruptly.

In a film full of odd and awkward sequences this one stands out as perhaps the strangest of all and serves well to illustrate the barriers to analysis that this film presents. John and Eileen's motivation for coming to this club remains as indecipherable as their total unwillingness to interact with those in attendance. What is communicated, though, is a clear ambivalence in regards to the other people at the club. It remains unclear whether this sequence was presented to setup—perhaps critique?—1960s youth culture, to show the shallow underside of the youth movement's political edge, or simply to indicate how John and Eileen are simply unaccustomed to interacting with people younger than

themselves. All that is made clear in this sequence is Eileen and John's awkwardness and unease. They surely are not those who would have fun at this club, we can gather once the sequence has concluded, but it is never revealed why they had decided to attend in the first place. The irony of the title card too loses its teeth in light of this ambiguity. "AMERICA IS WONDERFUL" is the bridge, here, from an empty convention center which will soon be full of high-minded presidential rhetoric that will subsequently be dwarfed in importance by the police/protestor clashes happening outside to a full nightclub where people dance to songs—perhaps themselves ironic—about smoking weed in San Francisco. If the initial available reading leads us to see the vapid, self-indulgence of 1960s youth, then this is perhaps revealed on the faces of John and Eileen. But what generates this ire and what role does it play in the subsequent police violence? These dancers are not figures at this moment deeply engaged in radical change, but John's life is indeed not any more purposeful. The meaning of this sequence, like the title card itself, hangs in the air, somewhere between unearned cynicism and under-thought sincerity, and this is indeed largely the tone of this film. It distrusts what it depicts, but it conversely feels something of great power and sincerity spilling from this very thing it distrusts. This is how this film depicts these political actions, and, as we shall see, how it views the media more broadly.

It is suspensions of judgment like these that this film strives to create. What separates *Medium Cool* from films like *Z* (Costa-Gavras, 1969) or *The Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo, 1966)—films also about significant political events—is the incoherence of its politics, and its ambivalence about political currents. On the other hand, what separates it from *La Dolce Vita* (Fellini, 1960) or John Schlesinger's *Darling* (1965)—films about wealthy socialites and their melancholic escapades—is the film's direct association with

political events. Herein lies the unique quality of *Medium Cool*. It is a political film without politics and, conversely, it is a film about melancholy and celebrity, but one that explodes with direct images of political violence, images that indeed render its critique of success insignificant. *Medium Cool* is like, to take the opening of *La Dolce Vita* as example, if Marcello Mastroianni's Marcello Rubini character were to pilot his helicopter into 1968 Paris or 1968 Chicago. It is a film that uses the tools of art cinema in pursuit of political commentary, but it at the same time veers from this goal just before its arrival, content instead to simply extend forward, incapable of producing the distance required for mannered critique but likewise unable to produce the direction needed for a more direct politics. This unique configuration, I contend, is exactly what allows this film to reject authority as efficiently as it does. To further support this point it is necessary to look at the contemporary responses the film engendered.

For Roger Ebert, writing in 1969, *Medium Cool* signified a radical shift in the way that American films interact with their audience. Aligning the film with *The Rain People* (Coppola, 1969), *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969), *Alice's Restaurant* (Penn, 1969), *Midnight Cowboy* (Schlesinger, 1969), and, particularly, *The Graduate* (Nichols, 1967), Ebert explains that the significance of *Medium Cool* lies precisely in its refusal to separate documentary from fiction. Ebert contends of the various events of the film: "They are all significant in exactly the same way. The National Guard trips are no more real than the love scene... All the images have meaning because of the way they are associated with each other."<sup>4</sup> Wexler, for Ebert, looks closely at the characters and arrangements and, "Sees not the symbols but

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Ebert, "Medium Cool," *The Chicago Sun-Times*, Sep. 21, 1969.

their function.”<sup>5</sup> For Ebert, this associative vision is totally novel for American cinema. Whereas previous films would present narratives that developed characters and foreshadowed their eventual actions, *Medium Cool*, for Ebert, skips the foreshadowing and explains how the immediate presence of people and events interact, and indeed does so on a massive scale. For Ebert, the freedom of Wexler and his contemporaries to do this was predicated on their audience’s familiarity with cinema, with our ability to “understand cinematic shorthand,” as he puts it.<sup>6</sup>

The cognitive process outlined by Ebert is striking for its teleological assumptions. Because we’ve seen John Wayne, he contends, we can imagine the narrative gaps that this film inevitably opens and closes thanks to a series of tested assumptions, a procedure that brings to mind the gestalt process. This process lessens the need for a coherent narrative flow by relying on the audience, already familiar with the traits and tropes of Hollywood cinema, to draw the missing connections and in so doing to proceed as though the narrative were more traditionally arranged. For Ebert, the entire plot of *Medium Cool* relies upon these tested assumptions, and what this approach creates is a cinematic short-hand that allows the director to focus on images that surprise or shake us. What I see in this film is precisely the opposite. What is valuable about *Medium Cool* is its ability to disrupt this associative process, or at the very least its ability to ask us to reevaluate it. When John and Eileen enter and leave the club we can intuit some of their motivations, but the film’s reluctance to fill in these gaps is precisely what is useful—it asks its viewers not to reproduce the meaning they have seen established elsewhere, but to risk not understanding at all. Rather than functionalize the narrative, *Medium Cool* makes it

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

dysfunctional; things fall apart, they fail to work, and they leave us with no explanation as to why. This is a film, then, in a state of disrepair. The gears of the industry to which it belongs have ground to a halt, and it, like this film, lingers in a state of suspension. Characters do things, but why is never made clear. This, too, is the attitude this film takes toward the police and, to a degree, the protestors. Rather than outline either side's concerns and then weigh in on them, this film shows these events as though no explanation is available.

Wexler, of course, was no nihilist, and his political concerns are well outlined by his later films.<sup>7</sup> But what he chooses to address in *Medium Cool* is not the contours of an argument about America's authoritarian turn. Instead, he leaves this meaning open without verifying it. In what serves as a truly anti-authoritarian gesture—in the sense that it rejects authority more directly by denying its own—Wexler refuses to establish narrative coherence for the events he depicts, and in so doing he largely disables his own capacity for routing a path through these turbulent images. This is evident in the previously discussed scene set in the night club. The reasons for John and Eileen's abrupt arrival and departure and the function of this sequence in terms of its narrative contribution are met with an ambiguity that is mirrored by the depiction of the space of this disorienting nightclub. What Wexler proposes here is an explanation of the capacity of cinema to escape meaning, rather than its ability to contain it.

In his review of the film, Vincent Canby touched upon some of the issues outlined so far, but for Canby these conflicts amount to negative qualities. "The story of the gradual emotional and political awakening of John Cassellis [*sic*]," he writes, "is somehow dwarfed

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<sup>7</sup> Wexler went on to make a variety of politically minded documentaries.

by the emotional and political meaning of the events themselves, which we, in the audience, experience first-hand, rather than through the movie protagonist.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed where this move appears abnormal, as Canby posits, is in the way that the experience of the lead characters does little to illuminate the deeply disturbing events that surround them. This disjunction, however, creates a novel viewing experience, one in which the viewer is asked not to come to understand events through the perspective of a coherent narrative, but to reject that narrative in the name of an extended relationship to disorder. Canby continues, “This is a fundamental problem in the kind of movie-making that attempts to homogenize fact and fiction, particularly when the fiction has the oversimplified shape of nineteen-thirties social protest drama and the fact is so obviously of a later, more complicated world.”<sup>9</sup> Canby’s claims as to the qualities and complexities of both fiction and fact in the 1960s versus the 1930s ring rather hollow, but his concerns about the homogenization of fact and fiction remain valuable. Canby continues this line of thought: “The shock of *Medium Cool* comes not from the fiction, but from the facts provided Wexler by mayor Daley, the Illinois national guard and the Chicago police.”<sup>10</sup> For Canby there is a sense of the impact of this film being unearned, the sense that its power is derived not from working the characters through something in any recognizable fashion, but from the impact of these events and those who perpetrated them.

Judgements of quality aside, for this study Canby’s observations provide a significant example of a film engaging with politics in a novel way. Rather than interjecting a narrative perspective into some issue or event, as the aforementioned *Z* and *The Battle of*

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<sup>8</sup> Vincent Canby, “Medium Cool (1969): Real Events of '68 Seen in 'Medium Cool': Haskell Wexler Wrote and Directed Movie,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 28, 1969.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



*Algiers* might be said to, *Medium Cool* does the opposite, interjecting a significant event into its, admittedly slight, narrative perspective. The footage of 1968 Chicago, then, serves as a kind of disfiguration, a rupture that renders a relatively inconsequential narrative powerful, but provides no direction for this power to take. Indeed Canby, despite his distaste for the film, is careful to recognize this power: "The result is a film of tremendous visual impact, a kind of cinematic 'Guernica,' a picture of America in the process of exploding into fragmented bits of hostility, suspicion, fear and violence."<sup>11</sup> Canby here compares *Medium Cool* to Picasso's famous painting that, it is often contended, serves as a response to the bombings of the village of Guernica by the axis-backed nationalists during the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s, connecting the two as pieces of art that are said to digest political turmoil. Finally, Canby ends on a particularly mysterious note: "*Medium Cool* is an awkward and even pretentious movie, but, like the report of the President's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, it has an importance that has nothing to do with literature."<sup>12</sup> The report referenced here was a large-scale explanation of civil disobedience, particularly as it pertained to African Americans, commissioned in the 1960s by Lyndon B. Johnson's government. This report advocated for the improvement of social services, particularly housing, as a solution to the demands of civil rights and the unrest that accompanied those demands. This report serves as an interesting comparison for *Medium Cool*, which is by no means strapped with the responsibility of producing solutions to the problems it depicts. But the comparison is telling in that it signals to some non-arts based power that this film seems to hold, as does the mysterious assertion that this film has nothing to do with literature.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

What Canby seems to be suggesting is some relationship to non-representative power, some ability to produce unmediated access to these events. This film serves, for Canby, as a *report* on the events that it depicts. Whereas narrative, in this analogy, is indirect, this film—despite its refusing to produce a coherent object or solution—is nonetheless direct, like a kind of commission designed to reproduce and distill the variables of an issue. I'm not sure that I agree with Canby's claim that this film can have no relationship to literature, but the judgment that he locates—that this film is a narrative disaster but that it is nonetheless powerful—is exactly the reason that I too find *Medium Cool* of interest. To address this power, I transition now to a discussion of the images depicted here, and indeed the mysterious hold of unmitigated force.

### Force

At a pivotal moment in *Medium Cool* John and Eileen stand watching a television show. The show, a special on the lives of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy, is never shown, and is represented here only in light cast on the characters' faces. "Jesus, I love to shoot film," John interjects as the two stare at the television. "Do you feel it?" he continues, holding his hands towards the out-of-frame television set.



“X-rays, is that what it is? Does it grow hair? Is it vitamins? Can you feel violence?” “I don’t know what to think,” Eileen responds, “It seems like no man’s life is worth anything anymore.” On this point John turns to Eileen, then continues, “You see, the media’s got a script now, by the numbers. Flags at half-mast. Trips cancelled. Ball games called off. Schools closed. Memorial meetings. Memorial marches. Moments of silence. A widow cries, and then she says brave words. More moments of silence, then the funeral procession.” Dripping with disdain, John smirks then continues, “A lot of experts saying how sick our society is, how sick we all are. The script is a national drain-off. People says, ‘Yeah, yeah, we’re guilty. We’re bad.’ Cause a lot of people are afraid. They’re afraid. The Negroes are coming to tear up their stores, burn neighborhoods, so they have this nationwide, coast-to-coast network serial called ‘Mourn the Martyr.’ Nobody’s really on the hook, you see?” John approaches a nearby window, now looking out. “When the script is finished and Tuesday comes around or Saturday and national drain-off week is over, everybody goes pretty much back to normal. Normal this, normal that. You know, normal.” In the background as the two stare, confounded—Eileen at John, John out the window—the televised speech continues, now with the monumental, “Free at last, free at last, thank god almighty free at last!”

What is striking about this brief scene, and what is corroborated by John and Eileen’s anguish, is the degree and object of this pair’s frustration: frustration at the media’s proclivity for, in John’s opinion, rendering clear and normal the world shattering events that had become so routine by 1968; but also frustration at the undeniable power of the images that the television provides. It is in fact this very dynamic that is the source for John and Eileen’s turmoil. The trajectory of this film serves as an attempt to explore and perhaps alleviate this conflict. How, *Medium Cool*, asks, is a film to use and extend the

power of the image without simultaneously reducing the events it depicts to easily understood platitudes? How is it able to show anything without rendering into knowable terms the effects and circumstances that it reveals? And how is it to deliver information and ideas without suturing the wound that events like this create? This film strives to answer the question of how film can produce politics that serve as a radical break from the normalcy and restrictions of the world that we occupy.

The system by which this film pursues these questions is through its use of documentary footage at the Democratic Convention, an event during which an estimated 25,000 police clashed with the 10,000 demonstrators. The primary frame this film uses to present these events is Eileen's search for her lost son. Shown navigating increasingly violent and inchoate spaces, Eileen, dressed in bright yellow, walks in and out of protest activities and police organization.



But what renders these images most striking is her seeming disinterest. Eileen, dressed and framed so as to contrast with both protests and police, navigates these conditions as a kind of outsider, unconcerned with the actual protestors and cops except in so far as they divide her from her son. In one striking moment she even crosses a police line, for some reason the cops assuming her to be different from the crowd. The effect of this framing mechanism is to create a kind of ambiguity as to the actions being depicted. It is through this ambiguity

that *Medium Cool* positions its attempt to render this significant course of events. What this ambiguity provides is a kind of distance, but also its opposite, an undeniable power and immediacy. That power also felt by John in the light of the TV. This power is the force of these images.

In *Force: A Fundamental Concept of Aesthetic Anthropology*, Christoph Menke pursues what he feels is the central question of philosophical aesthetics: “How to conceive of the indeterminacy of the beautiful, as an effect of the imagination, in view of its overwhelming power.”<sup>13</sup> *Medium Cool* connects with Menke’s project through the way that both are centrally concerned with this “overwhelming power,” but this film joins this energy to the specifics of the protests in 1968 Chicago, and furthermore to the perceived authoritarian response that they engendered. To be clear, what Menke will provide for this discussion of *Medium Cool* is the language and ideas for how to conceive of the film’s relationship to radical politics, but this is not to say that I believe that these texts engage in an exploration of the same project—far from it. *Medium Cool* is deeply concerned with the power of images, but is confounded by the constant counter tendency of their being reabsorbed into knowable forms for viewing the world, forms that this film indeed finds to be venal and destructive.

Menke uses the concept of imagination to push upon the boundaries of the parent category to which it belongs: the sensible. For Menke, “The imagination belongs to the domain of sensibility, for it is incapable of endowing its idea with any representational capacity or its images with any cognitive capacity.”<sup>14</sup> According to Menke, who draws upon

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<sup>13</sup> Christophe Menke, *Force: A Fundamental Concept of Aesthetic Anthropology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Descartes, “sensibility” is defined in part by its relationship to imagination and indeterminacy, but also by its difference from “intellect”—the domain of rational thought and activity. But Menke presses upon this divide, ultimately contending that, “The intellect requires the resources of the imagination... yet for this to happen, imagination must be brought under the guidance of the intellect. The intellect must have command over the imagination.”<sup>15</sup> Menke has thus far examined and clarified the dynamic between intelligence and imagination, but he begins to trouble Descartes’ claims when he writes: “The imagination is anarchic and undisciplined, and that is why it not only must be—but also can be—subject to the guidance of the intellect in its methodical progression. *But why is external regulation necessary?* On its own, the imagination is always unpredictable; it does not pursue its own direction; thus it can be directed at will.”<sup>16</sup> This is the conflict that haunts *Medium Cool*: how can imagination—an unrationalized and indeterminate movement that still holds within it some connection to thought—persist without always surrendering its power to the rationalized and “active” realm of the intellect, a realm that in this example is perceived to be bankrupt and shot through with a growing authoritarian strain?

The specifics of this problem are realized through *aesthetics*. For Menke, “Aesthetics is a different way of *conceiving* sensibility. It is not merely a reevaluation of sensibility, although it is that, too, because it involves a redescription of sensibility. Aesthetics is a way of thinking that conceives the indissoluble indeterminacy of sensibility in conjunction with its internally guided, principled activity.”<sup>17</sup> For Menke, aesthetics takes from the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, emphasis added.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 11.

imagination the inchoate madness of the sensible world, but orders it in some kind of way that follows a semi-systematic guide, allowing it to function autonomous of the intellect. Menke continues: “The sensible is radically indeterminate because its generation of ideas cannot be reduced to self-conscious and self-controlled acts, performances of methodical operations of the intellect. At the same time, the ideas generated by the senses are neither a mere confluence of causal effects nor a haphazard and arbitrary play *but an internal, though unconscious, operation belonging to the imagination.*”<sup>18</sup> Aesthetics is capable of eliding the rational world while still maintaining the capacity to produce ideas and coherence. As Menke puts it, “The program of aesthetics aims to think about sensibility as a phenomenon beyond the Cartesian alternatives of self-conscious actions and causal mechanism, of self-guidance and haphazard projection. Indeed it must reconsider these very alternatives and reconceptualize our ideas of knowledge and action, of play and imagination.”<sup>19</sup>

In order to further explore this problem of aesthetic experience’s relationship to any concretized form of knowledge, Menke reactivates Leibniz’s bifurcation of aesthetics into two primary “aspects”: faculty and force. The first of these aspects, faculty, allows us to “grasp the things around us adequately, although not consciously and methodically.”<sup>20</sup> This first aspect is defined by Menke as, “The faculty of engendering sensible cognitions that are as indeterminate as they are adequate.”<sup>21</sup> Never quite rational, the functions of aesthetic experience defined by faculty nevertheless have some organizational drive, one governed by an “internal principle” whereby things are ordered and rendered coherent, even if never

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

quite fully readable. The second aspect of aesthetic experience is the drive that pushes in just the opposite direction. Menke defines “force” in this way: “The force propelling an ongoing transformation of the unconscious ideas that constitute us.”<sup>22</sup> According to Menke, what provides a glimpse of force at work is the sensation that “there is an efficacy or power to these perceptions that far exceeds that exercised by the judgments of the intellect, a power that draws us into an infinite ‘sequence’ of images engendered by and transforming into one another that confounds the intellect.”<sup>23</sup>

The idea of force as described by Menke brings cinema into view. The sequence of images that constantly melt into one and another and seem to link in a way that surprises and confounds the capacities of cognition is perhaps best described by the incoherence of cinematic experienced as a kind of reverie. But cinema too always reproduces and relies upon the forces of faculty—the capacity for it to be contextualized and experienced as a reproduction of coherence, what brings to mind the logic of continuity. Never fully organizable into a coherent set of repeatable principles, continuity takes up some kind of generalizable logic, some kind of “internal principle” that is never exactly fully available but always familiar. This is the way that cinema reproduces meaning or, at least, presents itself as readable. There is the constant puncture of force with faculty, and this is the model for experience that cinema reproduces.

What confounds John about these images is whether force can be maintained without its descending back into faculty. He is haunted by the “efficacy or power” of the filmed image, and indeed the way that it “far exceeds that executed by the judgments of the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



intellect.”<sup>24</sup> He loves shooting film, but can never exactly explain why, as indeed this explanation would always fail to account for the force of the images, or worse yet work to defuse it. The distrust that this sequence finds in faculty, for John, has two aspects of its own. First, faculty is feared to reduce the power of the image in that it might function to transform force back into practical material, to reduce the capacity to shake and disturb, to nullify the image’s relationship to raw, inchoate, indeterminate power. But what frightens John more about faculty is the way that its organizing tendencies reinstitute the corrupt and anti-democratic principles that governed these events. He agrees, of course, in the tragedy of the deaths shown in the television special titled “Mourn the Martyr,” but it is when these events are rendered *meaningful* that he comes to distrust them. John’s response is then one of profound disillusionment. John’s wish, it seems, is to relegate everything to force, a state “without normative substance”<sup>25</sup> where faculty is avoided altogether. This is the wish of a true skeptic, of one who is truly disenchanting, one that wishes for something radically different, anything that might fundamentally upset how we organize the world. But what this wish betrays is also hope, and indeed hope in its most potent form—a radical hope dedicated to absolute difference.

This radical hope is also deeply messianic; it provides no outlet for activity, but it holds within it absolute potential. The sequence of Eileen navigating the protests of 1968 Chicago, then, takes on a new form. Where these images identify with the political agenda of the protestors is not in the particular platforms of the anti-war movement—although they do of course to some degree identify with these—but in the very incoherence that these images and events offer.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 40.

What little contextualization exists arrives primarily in the form of John's navigating the convention itself—a privilege he has been granted due to his role as a photographer. Of course, this contextual information is perhaps already provided by the promptness of this film's release. It was initially distributed on the one-year anniversary of the events it depicts. Regardless, while obviously focusing on the overwhelming police presence and, ultimately, police violence that took place, this film nonetheless refuses to align itself with the protestors. Indeed *Medium Cool* is unwilling even to explore the platform of these demonstrators. What the lack of clear allegiance in this semi-documentary footage produces is a kind of inchoate and unpatterned depiction of these brutal proceedings. Indeed, even continuity is tested, as most of the sequence is shown through the use of full shots or unestablished close-ups of Eileen walking through the protest activities, and what cuts it does contain appear irrational. This refusal of a clear perspective results in horror at the police violence against the demonstrators as the only immediately available response.

What this footage strives to produce is force, the unmanaged flow of material that withstands order and reproduces the power that John felt emanating from the television. For Menke, "The aesthetic force... turns against its own expression, transforming it into another. The aesthetic expression is, therefore, as initially antagonistic as the aesthetic force itself."<sup>26</sup> This internal antagonism is on display in *Medium Cool*, for it wishes to reproduce force as force, without betraying any recognizable standards or norms. But this is an impossible task, as the systems of organization always reassert themselves—they must for any footage to "travel" and "arrive" at any destination, both figuratively and materially. This pushing towards its impossible task is also an emblem of the film's

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 44.

extremism. It holds tight to the hope that whatever form aesthetic experience does take will be strikingly new—somehow organized in such a way as to overcome the brutal reductions that John attempts to reject.

Force, then, is here figured as radical politics, an attempt to resist to such a degree that any possibility for organization must always arrive in the form of total departure from the expected and available outcomes. As Menke contends, “In the operations of aesthetic force *nothing* realizes itself.”<sup>27</sup> And it is exactly this nothing that yields ambiguity. What this radicalism, this attempt at total force, signals, however, is the wait. Waiting here becomes the only response that can continue to leave open the possibility for total and unexpected difference. Given the circumstances of the time, including the rising police violence and what appears to be the systematic elimination of those that oppose it, absolute aesthetic force remains perhaps the best available response; a wish made when there is no hope, as this is exactly when hope is most available. But what this solution faces is the specter of absolute inaction; such is the bind of messianism, which holds that most opportunity for change is totally unverifiable, indeed totally incoherent and totally impossible to generalize, and the only way to usher it in is to wait for it, never to encourage its arrival. What is lost in this case, then, is the play between force and faculty that constituted, for Menke, the aesthetic process. Indeed this film ultimately finds again the trouble of imagination; it has no outlet towards reflection, no system by which order might be generated and allow something like cognition or change to arrive. The film, in this way, meets its goal, it persists in its messianic wish, but this wish must always be just a wish.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

A final quote from Menke is instructive, here on innovation: “It [innovation] does not happen as a consequence of reasons, as a realization of purposes I already have, but because my forces are alive in an unknown situation, before an unknown object.”<sup>28</sup> This is the gift that art can provide, the vantage from which it can look back on us. What John finds in these images—in the colors they cast toward him, the force with which they press upon him—is the possibility of the unknown, the hope with which they irradiate us. But this hope must find its way back into faculty, for the only alternative is an inactionable and incoherent eternity, or worse yet the possibility for the arrival of something far more devastating than what we have. John’s dream and what too must be the dream of this film is also a nightmare, force without faculty, unknowability that uproots order, a waiting asymptotic with death.

### Accidents

At the end of the film, John and Eileen, having finally found each other in the crowd, escape downtown Chicago in a news station wagon. Shown riding home and listening to the escalating protests at the convention site on the radio, John and Eileen exchange troubled glances as the radio report declares the accelerating police violence. Finally the radio report dissolves from the chaos of the convention coverage to a clearer report, more likely recorded in a studio. “The victim was identified as former Channel 8 news cameraman John Katselas,” the report explains. “Katselas was taken to Michael Reese Hospital where he is reported to be in critical condition. Cause of the accident is under investigation. A woman companion, not yet identified, was dead on arrival,” it continues. During this report the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 90.

exterior of John and Eileen's car is shown. Upon cutting back inside, however, the radio report returns to the erratic coverage of the protest. The report elucidates the bloodshed caused by the police response to the demonstrations, and all the while the camera pushes forward, towards Eileen's shocked face.



As the camera zooms the intermittent glare reflected on the windshield caused by the breaks in the tree cover begins to increase.



Using the over exposed, almost white image as a kind of fade, the film cuts on the white to show John, himself totally blown out by the glare, in a matching close-up.



The film continues to cut between the two as the amount of glare likewise increases. The image is increasingly obscured as the white intervals overtake the characters' close-ups.

Abruptly, the sound of tires squealing breaks their concerned gazes. The camera wheels wildly, then cuts between an approaching tree, close-ups of John and Eileen, and a broken car-window until a crash and then a scream are heard followed by darkness. The radio report covering the protest continues over the black. Finally, another car is shown driving by, its driver leaning out the window.



The camera pans with this car and reveals the news station wagon that John and Eileen had been driving, smashed into a tree. The onlooker continues to slowly drive by as a child in the back seat leans out and takes a photo. An abrupt cut—the last of this film—shows another angle of the wreck.



The onlookers gone, John and Eileen's car is shown now in a wide shot, aflame. The camera zooms slowly out, the soundtrack still consisting of radio coverage of the demonstrations at the convention. The camera begins to pan; as it does other voices—presumably

demonstrators—begin to overtake the radio broadcast. “The whole world is watching,” they chant as the camera pans left. The chant increases in volume as a new subject is revealed, another camera with its own operator. The new camera pans, slightly behind the pan of our view, and points directly into this frame.



A zoom takes us into the lens of this new subject, pushing forward into the black square that, presumably, returns the gaze that has produced this image. As the black square of the new camera’s lens overtakes the frame, serving as a kind of fade to black, the credits appear.

This final sequence is notable for many reasons. Its abrupt and overwhelming cynicism helps to situate this film clearly in the pessimism of the New American Cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s—*Easy Rider*, another significant early entry in this cycle, had been released only roughly a month before, and shares an ending in which the main characters are abruptly killed and a piece of automotive wreckage concludes the film. But formally the scene is striking. The use of glare to interrupt the close-ups of the characters before the crash creates a similar effect to what appears when a camera runs out of film, and prefigures the conclusion of the subsequent film *Two-Lane Blacktop*, in which the film stops and then appears to burn in front of the projector. This appearance of a “roll out,” as

it is called, strives to reveal the film to be artifice, a series of fictions set to a documentary score. The chant of “The whole world is watching,” however, complicates this analysis.

As was established in John’s monologue about television reporting, this film distrusts, or at least strives to complicate, the rhetoric that reproduces the idea that the media has the capacity to represent the world-rending events of the 1960s without reducing them to repetitions of already known, and necessarily conservative, truths—events that include the demonstrations at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Its previously declared distrust of images makes this final sequence significantly more difficult to interpret. The chant, “The whole world is watching,” often met the appearance of news cameras at demonstrations of the time, and the repetition of this phrase in Chicago is clearly the product of news coverage prominently appearing at the demonstrations. Protestors chanted this particularly often in regards to moments of police aggression and/or violence, indicating to the police force that they can be held accountable for their violent actions as a result of their now being recorded proof of their activities. *Medium Cool* is not so sure about this possibility. The film here indicates that the qualities of the moving image do not so clearly map to accountability. As this sequence indicates, images are in fact quite malleable. The fast and aggressive editing of the crash in particular notes the capacity of cinema to clearly present an event without ever directly showing it. There is no doubt about the occurrence of this accident (in a narrative sense) despite direct evidence being totally absent. Fiction, in *Medium Cool*, is absolutely available, what it finds more difficult to produce is fact. Indeed the juxtaposition of “the whole world is watching” with images of a camera itself presents a puzzling series of images: on one hand reaffirming the capacity of the camera to record—the second camera serving as a kind of reminder of the presence



and proliferation of images. On the other hand, however, this sequence seems to be questioning the roles this camera can play in events such as these.

The cameras—the one recording and the one that is being recorded—in fact at once reproduce the hopeful and disillusioned dynamic that John had previously declared and that this film in general posits. The reproduction of images is, hopefully, capable of redistributing truth and accountability, but it is this same reproduction that haunts the capacity of these images to *do* anything. When the cameras face each other it brings to mind a kind of hall of mirrors, indeed the cascade of reproducible images that all seem to undermine each other are, this film contends, exactly and only the kind of images that cameras can reproduce. This sequence and its culmination with the other camera poses a long and increasingly complex series of questions: what can we say about this final sequence? And what do the images that this second camera presumably records say about us? Is this a call for an audience to interact and ultimately take action in response to what they have just seen? If so, what does it ask us to do in regards to this film, and what part of the film does it have in mind? Are we here looking at ourselves? Or are we looking at the media that would record and witness, rather than act upon, tragedies such as these? Or are we outside the media? Is this camera recording us? The other camera? Nothing at all? And are these all the same thing?

These kinds of questions about media and action and images reflects John's monologue back on the viewer, but it never quite verifies what it has established. It values images in their force but distrusts their faculty. What it grants, then, is the annihilation of meaning that accompanies the utter confusion of this ending. When the camera looks into the lens of its compatriot/competitor, it registers nothing. In response it zooms, looking

closer and closer, indeed as closely as it can. But it finds only blackness, the closer it looks the more the blackness increases, a blackness that can only consume the film as it has the frame in a kind of total irresolution. Like *Sátántangó*, *Medium Cool* concludes with the obliteration of visibility, and in this obliteration it finds again its capacity for force or, as John might put it, its capacity for love. But, again, what of the other camera, the one that turns to, at once, this film and its audience. What does it see? When it zooms into our lens, what does it find? Blackness? But blackness is something, it is, at the least, the image unexposed, the possibility for a new image, the possibility that John and Eileen might return—*Medium Cool 2*—or that there is something important still to be found within the lens of the camera.

## Death

Speaking at a moment not at all far removed from the production of *Medium Cool* and the events that it depicts, philosopher Jean Baudrillard discusses what are a similar set of difficulties when it comes to reproducing, articulating, and critiquing the culture of late capitalism. For Baudrillard, the fight against the oppressive forces of capitalism had met a series of dead-ends because many of the approaches of 1960s radical politics had misidentified the nature of their target. According to Baudrillard

You can't fight the aleatory by imposing finalities, you can't fight against programmed and molecular dispersion with *prises de conscience* and dialectical sublation, you can't fight the code with political economy, nor with "revolution." All the outdated weapons (including those we find in first-order simulacra, in the ethics and metaphysics of man and nature, use-values, and other liberatory systems of reference) are gradually neutralized by a higher-order general system. Everything that filters into the non-finality of the

space-time of the code, or that attempts to intervene in it, is disconnected from its own ends, disintegrated and absorbed.<sup>29</sup>

For Baudrillard, the order of late-capitalism has developed a relationship to the symbolic in which the lines between signifier and signified have been drawn and redrawn so often that the signifier prefigures the supposed connection it is said to have to reality. This creates a network of empty linkages that claim to present reality but in actuality constitute it, pointing always to its own hollow linkages as proof of its grounds. This unmoored, free-floating scaffolding creates a system whereby traditional methods of resistance are from their inception incapable of reconstituting a new order; they are incapable of contributing or signaling to another order of things because they no longer have any ground that can escape the destructive forces of late-capitalism. To this situation Baudrillard poses a question: “Is there a theory or practice which is subversive because it is more aleatory than the system itself, an indeterminate subversion which would be to the order of the code what the revolution was to the order of political economy?”<sup>30</sup> To this Baudrillard posits his own tentative response: “Perhaps death and death alone, the reversibility of death, belongs to a higher order than the code. Only symbolic disorder can bring about an interruption in the code.”<sup>31</sup>

Given John’s previously stated interest in taking on and subverting the “code” through which images and events are reconstituted and absorbed by a knowable system—the system, for him, of hegemonic order and sanctioned grief reproduced through funeral footage—this ending sequence, its turn to death as the final rejoinder, is of major

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<sup>29</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications), 3-4.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

significance. Death serves as the only outside to the code of continuity that covers over the reception of events. Death as the experience of utter rupture in the order of things. This is a kind of death that can arrive and interrupt the codes, it is not JFK's death, or RFK's or MLK's, but death as experienced by John and Eileen. This ending is then only satisfying for these two characters as for us their death is simply reabsorbed back into a knowable system of images. Hence, the significance of the radio broadcast that prefigures this accident; over this broadcast we hear how the random tragedy that has befallen these two is already being rendered in coherent terms. And indeed the specifics of this broadcast are valuable: John, of relative fame and notoriety around the city, is recognized, but Eileen, who remains anonymous to the broadcasters, remains unidentified. The forces of power, through John, are already at work reproducing how we should feel about his death—womanizing wealthy cameraman dies after convention—without, of course, the turn to a more radical politics or a critical attitude towards current events finding its way into his eulogy. Eileen, having had less financial success, falls totally out of view.

Baudrillard continues evaluating the function of death by remarking that, "Every closed or metastable, functional or cybernetic system is shadowed by mockery and instantaneous subversion (which no longer takes the detour through long dialectical labour), because all the system's inertia acts against it."<sup>32</sup> This is to say that a system designed to be totalizing and entirely available for inspection and that is insulated from its outside by efficiency and certainty, is overturned most easily by its disavowed outside, what is always its failure: death. Baudrillard continues, "This is the fatality of every system committed by its own logic to total perfection and therefore to a total defectiveness, to

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

absolute infallibility and therefore irrevocable breakdown: the aim of all bound energies is their own death.”<sup>33</sup> For Baudrillard, systems that present themselves as total inevitably fail because of the vehemence with which they deny the very possibility of that failing, of an outside that they absolutely disavow. The refusal of this outside means that it will only return with greater precision, at some point undermining the system’s functioning. And, for Baudrillard, this undermining must present itself as death, as the radical disruption that totally subverts a principle, turning over its functions and proving its inadequacy. Death opens up a fissure in the otherwise stable façade of modern rationality, and in so doing points always to its limits. This, for Baudrillard, is why “the ever increasing fascination with the catastrophic, the accident and the assassination attempt: reason itself as pursued by the hope of a universal revolt against its own norms and principles.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed death is the one subject that reason cannot strive towards addressing. Fascination with catastrophe, for Baudrillard, is evidence of a society’s reversibility; this is not a subject that can be investigated, and that is what makes it so fascinating.

Baudrillard’s major intervention here is not the deployment of the way that death haunts and undermines total systems—this is no doubt a significant topic, but it is not his emphasis. His intention is instead to focus on the ways to combat these total systems, and death is simply one way of doing this. According to Baudrillard, “Things must be pushed to the limit, where quite naturally they collapse and are inverted. At the peak of value we are closest to ambivalence, at the pinnacle of coherence we are closest to the abyss of corruption which haunts the reproduction of signs of the code.”<sup>35</sup> Hence the impossible

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 4.

bind that John recounts: all his systems for defense and critique are reduced only to the code for understanding and evaluating media images. And hence too this film's turn to this abrupt ending, this ending where any system for making meaning clearly fails, and where these cameras turn to look at each other, only to be met with emptiness in return, an utter blankness that refuses to tell us anything more.

Baudrillard contends that "Simulation must go further than the system. Death must be played against death: a radical tautology that makes the system's own logic the ultimate weapon."<sup>36</sup> Rather than deploying a cogent critique or a constructive retort to a system's qualities, the most effective response to the total system is to push it towards its own extremes. The approach whereby *Medium Cool* mounts its attack on a government that it depicts as increasingly violent and threatening is not to point out its flaws, but to escalate them. The shallow, image obsessed John doesn't find a solution in the radical politics of the 1960s, he in fact finds that route as unwelcoming as the world he fights against. Instead of building a system to identify with the demonstrators, *Medium Cool* further distances itself from the world, content to observe this seeming disintegration of order and to reproduce it through images—what can be loved but also should be distrusted. The film's solution, then, is neither to point out the order whereby images find meaning nor to attempt to present images unavailable to that order. Instead, *Medium Cool* responds by reproducing the system over again. Hence again the radio broadcast that prefigures the crash, these images will be rendered knowable. In this way a random event will become meaningful, but the function of the code will be to render these meanings in a very strict way, it will absorb them into its system.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

Baudrillard labels one way to disrupt this system of absorption “pataphysics,” what he defines as “a science of imaginary solutions.”<sup>37</sup> It is through the process of producing “the extreme limit of simulation” whereby the boundaries of a system can finally be viewed, and perhaps reversed.<sup>38</sup> This film presents the absolute limit of the violence on which the system relies—for Wexler a major marker of a growing authoritarianism. This is a system of pure media reproduction that locks in an ideology simply through the multitudes of mirror like reproductions that contain it, a media environment with such control and centralization but almost no platform. When, earlier in the film, John lost his job, it was because of his refusal to authorize his footage for government inspection. This moment crystalized John’s project: his simultaneous love and distrust for images is finally placed explicitly against its use as a tool for stabilizing and reproducing power. This is the pataphysics of this film: that the moving image holds within it some mystical power that exceeds its ideological potential, a kind of asignifying thrust whereby the images can amount to something that overwrites perspective and captures something new. And it is the reproduction of images—highlighted by the dueling cameras at the end but also the protest footage itself—that trouble this project, that reveal it to be just an imaginary solution, one with no substance or coherence but that nonetheless contains something of significance, a solution that, even its failing, helps us see something of the boundaries of the system. This is the appeal of a pataphysics, it reveals something in its own failing, and in so doing, hopefully, points to its own reversibility and, finally, to the reversibility of what it critiques.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

For Wexler, the kind of death that Baudrillard describes is literalized. John and Eileen's abstract collision—the cause of which is never presented to us—arrives and punctuates the narrative of the film, breaking apart its already disruptive order and offering up the possibility of its own failing, the possibility that it too only locates the same order that it tries to disrupt, the order that puts tragedy in its place and denies the possibility for something new. But, to be clear, it is its doubt that allows this film to critique these totalizing systems. Wexler's film can be said to align with Baudrillard's ideas, and the system that produces its own outside that it wishes to dismantle is indeed American democracy threatened by authoritarianism. An American democracy in particular predicated on order and economic prosperity. This is not, as was *Woman on the Beach*, a total rejection of the concept of democracy, but a rejection of a democracy that seems to be trending towards authoritarianism, for it is authoritarianism—its mixture of violence and certainty—that is total and self-justifying and that most clearly pushes against the invisible boundaries that Baudrillard discusses. This film tries to photograph its own death, tries to figure an outside to the systems of organization that it is itself trapped within. Its solution, though, can only ever be blackness.

The totalizing system at play here is constituted by the belief that what is happening in the U.S. around 1968 is a revolt against a hierarchical logic that points upwards towards a supposedly legitimate and perhaps universal authority that accounts for the range of available political arrangements. What this film pushes against is the specter, to whatever degree present, of authoritarianism.

A Global 1968



In May 1968 in France there were riots and strikes on a massive scale. Starting in the universities and spreading eventually though much of the country, in the range of nine million workers across all fields of employment took part in the strikes, halting France altogether for weeks. As Kristin Ross explains,

May '68 was the largest mass movement in French history, the biggest strike in the history of the French workers' movement and the only "general" insurrection the overdeveloped world has known since World War II. It was the first general strike that extended beyond the traditional centers of industrial production to include workers in the service industries, the communication and culture industries—the whole sphere of social reproduction. No professional sector, no category of worker was unaffected by the strike; no region, city, or village in France was untouched.<sup>39</sup>

Largely a response to the conservative government of Charles de Gaulle, May 1968 has become famous as a beacon of both the possibility of radical change and its failings. The later because, according to many accounts, the French 1968 movement failed to bring about major political reforms, and conservative forces even managed to further consolidate power in its wake. Regardless of its effects, the modern conception of May 1968 in France, as Kristin Ross argues, is that of a non-violent and relatively benign series of events that have merely mapped the transition "from an authoritarian bourgeois state to a new, liberal, modern financier bourgeoisie."<sup>40</sup> Ostensibly muting its political aspirations, Ross contends that May 1968 now serves as a kind of mere teleological transition from a pre-democratic moment to a modern capitalist democracy, an essentially toothless undertaking that simply prefigured modern France. Ross, of course, pushes back against this trajectory, and instead focuses on an attempt to question the official story of May 1968 in the hopes of re-finding

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<sup>39</sup> Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 3-4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

some of its radical potential. Ross proposes her project as follows—I shall here quote it at length because, I think, it resonates well with *Medium Cool*:

The paradox of May's memory can be simply stated. How does a mass movement that sought above all, in my view, to contest the domain of the expert, to disrupt the system of naturalized spheres of competence (especially the sphere of specialized politics), become translated in the years that followed into little more than a "knowledge" of '68, on the basis of which a whole generation of self-proclaimed experts and authorities could then assert their expertise? This moment swept away categorical territories and social definitions, and achieved unforeseen alliances and synchronicities *between* social sectors and between very diverse people working together to conduct their affairs collectively. How did such a movement get relocated into defined "sociological" residences: the "student milieu" or "the generation"?<sup>41</sup>

These are the problems that confound *Medium Cool*. Having seen the world changing events that took place in the U.S. throughout the 1960s, *Medium Cool* asks how the protests that it records are to avoid the reduction that Ross attributes to 1968 in France; that is, how are they to avoid being taken up by the forces who might solidify and stultify their effects? How can they do what John hopes moving images can do, present something new, without falling again into a teleology of democratic-capitalist transition?

Ross' solutions to this problem follows two trajectories, on the one hand tracing the legacy of May 1968 in France through the actions and ideas of philosophers and activists that it helped to inspire and, on the other hand, examining the practices of those who participated in these events. Her main assertion is that the events of May 1968 represent, "Above all else a massive refusal on the part of thousands, even millions, of people to see in the social what we usually see."<sup>42</sup> *Medium Cool* is of value in its striking degree of refusal. John's distrust of the ways that images are ordered and this open and ambiguous ending

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 7.

refuse the status of this film as progenitor of meaning or prominent talking piece. Instead, the camera turns itself on itself, turns itself inside out, and refuses its status. This film then stands with the movement it depicts as resoundingly refusing to see the social in the rigid, predetermined ways that might deploy a cogent rejoinder, renunciation or clear rendering of the events it depicts. Instead, it stands in refusal.

Ross uses the example of the art students who occupied their university in order to address the function of the arts during the May events themselves. For Ross, the incommensurability between politics—defined broadly as the contestation of some order—and culture was essential to the movement. “The failure of cultural solutions to provide an answer, the invention and deployment of political forms in direct contestation with existing cultural forms, the exigency of political practices over cultural ones” was, for Ross, definitive of the 1968 student movement.<sup>43</sup> Hence, for Ross, the students, who produced signage and slogans usable to the movement only in regards to *continuing*, without attempting to orchestrate any direction. Speed became the mode of artistic critique here, not articulation. This idea is of particular importance in understand the conclusion of *Medium Cool*, as it maps a way of thinking about the political function of art. Politics in this view functions as the name for a contestation against a calcified order and the function of political art therefore becomes either engendering or spurring this contestation. What art can’t do is bridge the fissure that this contestation creates, for if it were to do so it would then take the form of governance, and would cover over its role as site of rupture. This reconfiguration of the roles of art in regards to politics then favors openings over closings, and engagement over resolution. For this model of art to function it

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 15.

must always push against the principle of meaninglessness; it must strive to make us see *something* but never tell us *how* to see it. This is a very difficult dynamic to maneuver, as it demands art neither function as example nor ever as authority. Art must remain between, it must ask us to rethink the social, but never quite tell us how or why. It must refuse, and in this refusal renounce too its own form.

This category of art then becomes very difficult to locate, and furthermore generates a strange set of question: can a political artwork exists outside its context? Can it be made to deliberately *do* anything? Can it account for its own outcomes? This is all to ask, what can political art *say* in contexts like these? For Ross, and perhaps too for Wexler, the answer must be *nothing*, for to speak a meaning is to redact its use as object calling only for something new. *Medium Cool* magnificently enacts this problem in its conclusion. It keeps at bay the forces that might render the political events it depicts meaningful and understandable; but this keeping at bay is always also its failure, as a refusal of meaning is too a refusal of coherence, understanding, and autonomy. Art is always just supplement here, helping us to look but never telling us what to look for. Like the ending of *Sátántangó* or Jung-rae's escapes in *Woman on the Beach*, *Medium Cool* pushes up against the void of its own meaninglessness, but its direct presentation of political violence highlights the stakes of this dynamic. What are we to do now? Having seen this film and understood, perhaps, what it has shown us, what available avenues for response does it engender?

Alain Touraine likewise discusses the student movements of May 1968 in France, albeit from a different perspective. For Touraine, the movement had two distinct sources from which it drew its strength, and these generally stood opposed to one and another. The first of these arrives from those, like Claude Lefort and Edgar Morin, who lionize the

disruptive and anarchic elements of the movement. Touraine represents these views by saying that, for these thinkers, “The movement is defined by the capacity to transcend its own objectives” and, “Is defined less by its objectives than by the type of community that it creates.”<sup>44</sup> Touraine associates these types of thinkers with the university, and I think it is how we can define *Medium Cool*. For this film, the value of the political movement that it depicts is not to be located in its adherence to a particular set of principles; its value can instead be found in the simple perpetuation of its position of rejection—it seeks only to maintain an opposition to authority. In Touraine’s words, *Medium Cool* strives to locate an “antisociety,” what is defined through its opposition to a dominant order, not through any allegiance to a particular set of goals or principles.

But, as Touraine notes, this antisociety also produces its own set of problems. For Touraine, the rejection that propels this kind of movement, “Either leads to marginality or ends by overturning the social order, but it is impotent in the face of the political problems of governing and directing society.”<sup>45</sup> This is to say that this kind of anarchic social movement constantly rubs against the inability of an agenda-less arrangement to present a coherent response to the problems that they are rallied around defeating. This is too a criticism of *Medium Cool*, for, as we have seen, its turn to disruption over and above coherent critique is productive, in a sense, for the project of depicting the effects of a violent government. But where it stumbles is in its capacity to produce a unifying alternative to the problems it finds.

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<sup>44</sup> Alain Touraine, *The Post-Industrial Society*, trans. Leonard F. X. Mayhew (New York: Random House), 89.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

Pushing against the antisociety mode is what I shall call the *definitional* aspect of these movements. Less aligned with the universities—for which Touraine has many concerns—the definitional pull strives to clearly articulate its oppositional points and produce an alternative. As Touraine indicates,

In the United States, the movement at Berkeley and Columbia cannot be separated from the struggle against the Vietnam War and the black revolt; in the socialist countries, the student action was part of the struggle against Stalinist or post-Stalinist techno-bureaucracy; so, almost immediately, the major concern in France was the union of students and workers against the Gaullist regime and capitalist society... The struggle constantly moved out of the university faculties and developed in the streets, led by students and young workers who were more and more at one with each other.<sup>46</sup>

For Touraine it is when these definitional and antisociety drives meet that a movement can begin to attempt to be broadly effective. At once concerned with self-expression and predicated on building a community determined by its opposition, but also keeping track of its definitional aspirations and its real visions for a different kind of society, governance and economy, these two kinds of social movements are prepared to begin to level critique *and* replace it with a new vision for society only when they are incorporated in equal measures. It is the capacity to both oppose order via solidarity while maintaining a staunch relationship to openness and also give oneself over to the capacity of a new collective to constitute something in particular that these youth movements at their best represent. *Medium Cool*, however, refuses the second half of this equation, it demands openness but provides no recourse for the reconstitution of society, and in this regard nobly fails, as it must, to actually bring about the change that it indirectly demands. This film is the site of contestation but never its solution, and in this way this way it is political.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 90-91.

The danger here is always the slipping back into authority. *Medium Cool's* own capacity to reproduce order is disavowed in the name of an opening to potential but—apart from the failings of saying nothing in particular—this approach always also leaves available the possibility for a new authority to approach, to rise from the darkness or take hold of these openings. For radical openness, despite all its rejections, always provides the room for the very thing it rejected to reemerge, for negative forces to find new shapes and to take hold of the ambiguities to which films like *Medium Cool* cling. For within its eternal openness and adamant waiting is to be found radical difference, but also the repetition of the same and indeed perhaps also something worse. *Medium Cool* is a film about and enacting *force*, but what it lacks is *faculty*. This is its major problem: in order to say what it wants, it must say nothing at all; it must be adamant in its ambiguity, and in this way it must always fail. Its attempts to render politics, to chart a course through all this tumult and unrest and to provide something like a précis for these events, something that might make them understandable, manageable and that might point towards something else must always come up empty. It must fail, fail at coherence, fail at narrative, fail at filmmaking, and fail at politics. For to not fail would be to do exactly what it resists. This is the impossible bind of *Medium Cool*, and this brand of anti-authoritarian art cinema broadly defined: it must all always fail, and in doing to open up the possibility for something else, something new.

## CONCLUSION

### The Possibility of Action

Each of the films discussed in this project rejects authority in the name of revolutionary politics. As I have shown, by rejecting all authority, even and primarily the filmmaker's own, these films must turn to ambiguity. The difficulty of these films is constituted by this turn, because the embrace of ambiguity as politics means that there is no guarantee that anything new will arise. The positive outcome of this gamble is that these films might result in thought, thought about politics and about the possibility to realize something different; the negative outcome is that these films remain absent of meaning. There are therefore risks involved in these undertakings: the risk of irrelevance, the risk of inaction, the risk of appearing to say nothing at all.

In *Germany Year Zero*, when Edmund finally gently hangs up his coat and jumps from the opened side of a bombed Berlin building to his death, openness is extended to its limit. The impossibility of his situation, the unbearability of his available avenues for action, has exhausted him and us, and the only system that can leave open the possibility for total difference is to be found in the film's refusal to make a decision as to the responsibility and orientation of his violent acts and the status of his punishment. So he must jump, and thanks to this jump this film makes its refusal; with anger it declares that it will not resolve the political future of Edmund's world. Edmund's future is closed, but the possibility for different political outcomes remains open. Likewise, in *Sátántangó* when the Doctor finally boards himself into his home, he too makes the decision to preserve openness; here, ironically, he accomplishes this by confining himself to his drab house, resigned to inaction. Alone in his mud soaked town, the Doctor demands that we act just like him, that we watch



as the denizens of this town slowly leave, and then that we watch as he finally closes out all light. Alone in his, and our, inaction, the film asks whether refusal is a path towards change, but it refuses, as it must, to answer this question. Indecision, or perhaps the raging against decision, is complicated by *Woman on the Beach* as Jung-rae's model for how the world might engage differently with knowledge and decision is directly stated. But this film's ambivalence toward Jung-rae's claims, as examined through the possibility that he might just be using them as avenues for escape, complicates their validity. When this film ends, Mun-suk points her car towards what might be a positive horizon. But in so doing, she gets stuck in the sand and, as a result, heads back the way she came. The film likewise traces this path between the appeal of openness and the possibility for decision, now with palpable frustration as to how openness to change can be manipulated. Finally, at the end of *Medium Cool*, when John and Eileen die abruptly in a car wreck and the twin cameras turn on each other with such dramatics, this openness as refusal is once and for all codified. The dueling cameras, which bring into question the capacity of media to withstand and represent refusal, finally find in each other only a black screen, thus signaling the possibility for difference that relies on the absolute negation of the means and methods for representation. In this most extreme dedication to openness, this mode of anti-authoritarian cinema finds its limit: a dedication to difference that blocks its ability to say anything at all.

These chapters have been arranged to broaden the scope of rejection as each proceeds: First, authoritarianism is rejected, then the economic corollaries of capitalism and communism are dismissed, and finally even democracy is put aside. These rejections signal towards some kind of positive alternative, but, as each of these endings makes clear,

they always refuse to picture it, some refusing to picture anything at all. Each less declarative than the last, these films always come near to meaning but never quite arrive. This is the fulfillment of their anti-authoritarian wish, but it also amounts to a position of indecision. This ambiguity renders any reading of these films unstable.

The dark rejoinder to these refusals is to be found in the possibility that their hope in a positive future might be overturned, for ambiguity not only renders these films without content, but it also presents opportunities for cooption. A dedication to total openness is not only ineffective, it also makes these films available for unforeseen actants to take as their own. That is, the forces of power in the world today, in particular the forces of neoliberal democratic capitalism, can point to just these fixations on ambiguity and say “this is us too”—they can claim also to maintain a radically open status, and can take ownership of the creative powers of contingency and ambiguity. The dynamic that allows for this cooptation on the part of powerful and in particular market oriented forces is particularly pernicious given the likelihood that in moments of openness the prevailing forces of power will likely be the first things to come to fill these openings, so long as the piece fits.

The task of the forces of contemporary authority and control is to create a dominant ideology that is as malleable and aleatory as the avenues of ambiguity and anti-authority that might critique it. Hence, the current structure of the ideology that accompanies neoliberalism results in a worldview open to inclusivity, but one that also takes for granted the unassailability of capitalism and the market, a rationale whereby all methods of thought are justified by their closeness and similarity to the market. It is perhaps the capacity to render an anti-authoritarian critique silent and ineffective by beating it to its

own arguments that has made neoliberalism so effective—we simply have no system by which to reject it.

These films then fight against authority, but they present no rejoinder for the new kinds of authority that have taken root in our post 1989 world. This is not to say that these films failed, but to question whether their methods are the right ones for today. What now remains for a cinema dedicated to combating the rise of unchecked authority? Is authority even the problem anymore? And, finally, if these films are representative of global art cinema broadly defined—particularly in regards to their embrace of ambiguity as well as its failings—what is the role of this tradition of cinema in any attempt to combat dishonest and destructive forces in the world? These concluding remarks will proceed by following a different path for evaluating the potentials for the style of cinema addressed here: what I contend is that where these films find their use is not in their capacity to produce meaning, but in their ability to serve as a catalyst for producing thought. But the thought they produce is of particular value; it is a style of thinking that provides, ideally, the space for a unified political project, one that is not aleatory but rooted in a general claim for the well-being of a society. What these films might do is provide the grounds by which thinking might arise, but might also find its way into action anchored by a unified politics—in these contexts a politics built around the needs of the dejected, misguided, or otherwise imperiled characters that each film presents.

For Hannah Arendt the traditional relationship between thinking and action has been reversed in the modern world, leading to myriad problems in the relationship between thinking and politics. Traditionally, Arendt notes, “Thought was conceived as the most direct and important way to lead to the contemplation of truth. Since Plato, and

probably since Socrates, thinking was understood as the inner dialogue in which one speaks with himself [*sic*]... and although this dialogue lacks all outward manifestation and even requires a more or less complete cessation of all other activities, it constitutes in itself a highly active state.”<sup>1</sup> In this arrangement, thought functions as a personal interchange in which different avenues and options are considered and, through an inner dialectic, the thinker prepares to behold truth, despite its possible non-arrival.

If these films strive to produce a window upon contemporary events in the hopes of opening the possibility to see something anew, and if their ambiguity refuses any artificial conclusion that might disrupt this process of renewed vision, then one way to look at these films is as serving to provide avenues for thought. That is, they offer up a series of familiar looking but otherwise difficult to order images and ask that the audience arrive at some understanding regardless of a readily available meaning, and in this way they ask for thought. They ask that a viewer reconcile these images with their understanding of the world, an interchange that relies on the hope that the viewer might find in them some new idea or perspective. The particular subject of each film here is the topic of political transition, and ideally each provides the space for a dialectic that can yield to some conclusion, in this sense they are films that inspire thought.

Thinking in this way is not distinct from action but is in fact a specific form of action, one that calls forth a whole category of subsequent actions, those known as “work.” As Arendt explains:

Thinking and working are two different activities which never quite coincide; the thinker who wants the world to know the ‘content’ of his [*sic*] thoughts must first of all stop thinking and remember his thoughts. Remembrance in this, as in all other

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 291.

cases, prepares the intangible and the futile for their eventual materialization; it is the beginning of the work process, and like the craftsman's consideration of the model which will guide his work, its most immaterial stage.<sup>2</sup>

This cinema of transition asks us to think and hopes to serve as the beginning of what might later be called work, or rather the rebuilding of things that results from thought and that can help turn these insights into material change in the world.

But in the modern world, which for Arendt is the world after Galileo, the function of thought, and of philosophy in particular, has been radically altered. For Arendt, "After Descartes based his own philosophy upon the discoveries of Galileo, philosophy has seemed condemned to be always one step behind the scientists and their ever more amazing discoveries, whose principles it has strived arduously to discover *ex post facto* and to fit into some over-all interpretation of the nature of human knowledge."<sup>3</sup> In the modern world, for Arendt, the domain of truth is thought to be addressed only by science, and philosophy is left either to attempt to understand or critique the epistemological underpinnings of science or to attempt to address current conditions with clarity but without any appeal to any overall solution. As Arendt notes, speaking again of philosophers,

In both instances, whether they looked upon nature or upon history, they tried to understand and come to terms with what happened without them. Obviously, philosophy suffered more from modernity than any other field of human endeavor; and it is difficult to say whether it suffered more from the almost automatic rise of activity to an altogether unexpected and unprecedented dignity or from the loss of traditional truth, that is, of the concept of truth underlying our whole tradition.<sup>4</sup>

For Arendt the process of thought leading to material change has been seriously diminished in the modern world. This is because in order for thought to *work*, to bring

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 90-91.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 294.

about anything in terms of change, there must still be the possibility of truth, the possibility for an idea to be found that holds within it some claim for a universal solution to the problems that the world faces. The value of thought is further illuminated in its difference from contemplation. For Arendt via Plato, thinking is a highly active process, but it is also the preparation for beholding truth, whereas contemplation is the stillness that accompanies truth's arrival, the state of being with the universal.<sup>5</sup> But without a claim to truth this system loses its motor, the work that might arise from thought fails to materialize, or materializes only as personal creative endeavor, as hobby.<sup>6</sup> Thought in the modern world can never become work because work must hold within it a reason for its being that carries some claim for its worth in society; today only science can make this claim.

Without a claim to a universal truth, the work that derives from thinking cannot find purchase, cannot be justified as a project undertaken for a general good. The thinking provoked here has, under Arendt's views, no possibility for finding its way out of the cinema and into the world. Ernesto Laclau, in his essay "What do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?," offers a possible out to this bind. Speaking of Rosa Luxemburg's model for how class struggle finds unification in moments of intense opposition, Laclau posits that, "In a climate of extreme repression any mobilization for a partial objective will be perceived not only as related to the concrete demand or objectives of that struggle, but also as an act of

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<sup>5</sup> It is for this reason that I think that the current category of contemplative cinema is a bit of a misnomer. This is a cinema that demands an active mind, a mind engaged in thought rather than the passivity of contemplation.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 128.

opposition against the system.”<sup>7</sup> In this way politics built around the struggle against an oppressive system finds its unity not through compromises between competing ideas, but by virtue of their common identity as oppositional. For Laclau, this relationship allows for unity where it would otherwise be unavailable, and not as solidarity with other issues, but as the formation of a unified struggle that does not distinguish between its constitutive parts. Laclau continues, “Luxemburg’s argument is that a revolutionary mass identity is established through the overdetermination, over a whole historical period, of a plurality of separate struggles. These traditions fused, at the revolutionary moment, in a ruptural point.”<sup>8</sup> In this way, a revolutionary program builds a unified platform not in spite of its differences, but because these differences no longer appear to be differences at all. A natural seeming process that covers over difference in the formation of a unified category, this process makes the need for a general truth irrelevant as unity is taken for granted in a process that “simultaneously asserts and abolishes its own singularity.”<sup>9</sup>

For Laclau, this process is build around the capacity of what he calls “the empty signifier” to aid in unification. The role of the signifier in this scenario is to serve as the fulcrum for fusing different ideas and platforms, and the reason it must be empty is because the less it holds the more valuable it is as a vessel for a unifying principle. These empty signifiers appear at the outset to be fully formed, if perhaps vague, words or concepts, but they have the capacity to be refilled with a promise that overcomes difference and in fact serves as a nodal point. Terms, like “liberty” for instance, which call forth a set of ideals but provide no particular map or discrete set of principles are thus taken up and re-

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<sup>7</sup> Ernesto Laclau, “Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?,” in *Emancipation(s)* (London & New York: Verso, 1996), 40.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

authored by a cause, and in this way they serve as unifying forces that propel a movement forward. They can do this because their relationships to their signifieds are adrift, because they are in the first place ambiguous.

The films discussed here share many qualities with these empty signifiers. Necessarily empty of meaning, they take the form of an empty vessel that can be pushed in any number of directions. Like an empty signifier, *Germany Year Zero* maintains a link to the world of recognizable things and occurrences, but this link is tentative as the film at times complicates, as I've discussed, its relationship to its spaces and events. It resists comment and disallows particularity, it cannot be said to "have any form of representation of its own," as Laclau puts it.<sup>10</sup> Emptied of meaning, it waits to see what might happen in or to its ambiguous aesthetics, and waits to see who might take them up and why. All the while it asks for thought, thinking that might turn successfully into work once its truth claim has been restored. In moments of transition, when these films ask for us to think, they do so at a moment when their empty status also lends them to be used for the cause of opposition. Like "liberty," *Germany Year Zero* is vague enough to be a catalyst for the unification of a cause. The plight of Edmund, for instance, is capable of speaking to different groups in different ways, but the general need to alleviate his misery is just enough to potentially allow for divergent approaches to be unified. In this way, and in the right context, differing approaches to politics can find their unifying point, their commonality as opposition. This is a film that can ask for a form of thought that has the possibility for unification, and it can do so because of the combination of narrative and aesthetic ambiguity with verisimilar photography. This is the possibility of art cinema.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 42.



This proposal I've presented here is speculative, and the possibility of these films finding this renewed form of thought is slim. But this potential is nonetheless valuable in examining the work that these films can do, and examining what the art cinema form has to offer to politics. For Laclau, empty signifiers, in addition to being filled up, can also be used up:

If 'workers' struggle' becomes the signifier of liberation as such, it also becomes the surface of inscription through which *all* liberating struggles will be expressed, so that the chain of equivalences which are unified around this signifier tend to empty it, and to blur its connection with the actual content with which it was originally associated. Thus, as a result of its very success, the hegemonic operation tends to break its links with the force which was its original promoter and beneficiary.<sup>11</sup>

Through this process, the empty signifier fills with meaning in moments where it takes on this universalizing project, but in the long term regains its empty status once more. Once the groups that it had brought together have lost their unification point and have fallen apart again, their item of alliance again appears different, or even irrelevant, to each now distinct grouping. Anti-authoritarian cinema of this type can too slip into and out of a cause. What appears to have lost any link to action can find its claim to truth again, and just as quickly truth can be lost. The films discussed here are not stable in their resignation to inaction. The thoughts they encourage can again find their purchase and this is because they so clearly reject meaning, because they are so resigned to emptiness.

These films, of course, have each been made at exactly the wrong moment to find uses as empty signifiers. Each, with the exception of *Medium Cool*, has been made after their oppositional moment, immediately after they might stand opposed to a centralized power and might find their unified potential in the concerns of those who resist this power. But, as with the empty signifier, it is always a surprise what concepts will be taken up to speak to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 45.

newly unifying forces. This is a cinema of waiting; it is a cinema that finds its politics not through its own actions but through a spurring of thought that might generate action. Ultimately, for it to be political, ambiguous cinema must place its hope in the possibility that one day the thoughts that it encourages will find their use in the world. That these films will find their universalizing functions is another messianic wish, and its arrival is always unexpected.

The anti-authoritarian cinema that I've discussed then holds within it two potentials: first, it is a space of thought, an object through which ideas can be measured and weighed. It demands a dialectical mode of interaction because it refuses to ever verify any particular set of ideas. It provokes us with verisimilar images that are at once locatable and escape location, and speaks of particular events without ever exactly commenting on them. In this way it incites thought and, later, remembrance. The specifics of the thinking that these films encourage are likewise of value. Each is dedicated to thought in times of change, and in this way strives to prepare viewers for the possibility of a new politics, a new cause that can arise from the thoughts that are provoked. Whether this thinking will find its way into work, however, is in question, as for these thoughts to find their outlet in work they must be justified by a claim to truth.

This is where the second potential of this mode of anti-authoritarian cinema steps in: as ambiguous, empty objects these films open up the possibility for renewed unification. These films provoke the viewer to think, but also provide the possibility that their emptiness might be taken up, filled so to speak, and used to bridge difference in pursuit of a unified claim. This combination of propelling thinking while also remaining empty is a product of ambiguity, and is central to the history of art cinema. The capacity to reproduce

images that claim a relationship to reality, what might be called verisimilitude, but to also remain ambiguous is what makes art cinema political. Its emptiness, its refusal of meaning, is why it is valuable. Here, in these moments of transition, art cinema is most adamant in its rejections, and as a result finds its most radical form of hope. Provocations for thought without the structure for molding it, emptied husks that hope for renewal, these films are anti-authoritarian by virtue of the fact that they offer nothing at all.

**Kalling Heck**  
Curriculum Vitae

**EDUCATION**

- Ph.D., Media, Cinema & Digital Studies, Department of English, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, February 2017
- Ph.D., Screen Studies, Department of English, Oklahoma State University, 2009-2011 (Transferred)
- M.A., Film Studies, Department of Communication, University of Miami, 2009
- B.A., The Evergreen State College, 2005

**PUBLICATIONS**

**Book Chapters and Journal Articles**

- 2017 “Christian Mungiu’s *Beyond the Hills* and Austerity Politics.” *The New Romanian Cinema: A Reader*. Ed. Christina Stojanova and Dana Duma. Forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press
- 2017 “Authority Year Zero: Roberto Rossellini at the End of Politics.” *Screening the Past* (Under Review)
- 2017 “Movies in the Middle: Cinephilia as Lines of Becoming.” *For the Love of Cinema: Teaching Our Passion in and Outside the Classroom*. Ed. Rashna Richards and David T. Johnson. Forthcoming from Indiana University Press

**Invited Contributions**

- 2017 “Repetition and the Leap Into the Unknown: On Rancière’s Realism.” *Lumen Journal II* (2016). Forthcoming 2016
- 2015 “Love’s Paradox.” *In Media Res*. March, 2015  
<http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2015/03/30/loves-paradox>
- 2013 “Criticism After Authority: The Dissolve at the Milwaukee Film Festival.” *Thinking C21, the Center for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Studies Blog*. October, 2013  
<http://www.c21uwm.com/2013/10/10/criticism-after-authority-the-dissolve-at-the-milwaukee-film-festival/>
- 2012 “Cinephilia Without Medium.” *In Media Res*. December, 2012  
<http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2012/12/13/cinephilia-without-medium>

**AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS**

- 2015 James A. Sappenfield Fellowship, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee
- 2014-2015 Distinguished Graduate Student Fellowship, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee
- 2013 James A. Sappenfield Fellowship, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee
- 2011 Chancellor’s Award for Applicants, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee
- 2009 Dean’s Stipend Enhancement for Distinguished Applicants, Oklahoma State University

## CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- 2016 “Messianism and the Art Cinema Form.” Film & History Conference. Milwaukee, WI. October
- 2016 “The Project of Boredom: Dissatisfaction in/at *Sátántangó*.” Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Atlanta, GA. March. Also Chair
- 2016 Panel Respondent, *Consumption*. Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference. Milwaukee, WI. February
- 2015 “Force and Hope in *Medium Cool*.” World Picture Conference. Toronto, CA. November.
- 2015 “*Beyond the Hills* and Austerity Politics.” Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Montreal, CA. March
- 2015 Panel Respondent, *Against the State*. Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference. Milwaukee, WI. February
- 2014 “Rossellini's Berlin: *Germany Year Zero*, the Politics of Ruin.” Midwest Modern Language Association. Detroit, MI. November
- 2014 “Authority Without Vision: *Sátántangó* and the Politics of the Long Take.” Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Seattle, WA. March
- 2014 Panel Respondent, *Commodity Culture and Collapse*. Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference. Milwaukee, WI. February
- 2013 “Authority Year Zero: Ambiguity and the Politics of the Vogelfrei.” World Picture Conference. Toronto, CA. November
- 2013 “The Obsolescence of Authority: Questioning After Democracy in the Cinema of Hong Sang-soo.” University of Pittsburgh Film Studies Graduate Student Organization Conference. Pittsburgh, PA. October
- 2012 “Movies in the Middle: Cinephilia as Constant Becoming.” University of Pittsburgh Film Studies Graduate Student Organization Conference. Pittsburgh, PA. November
- 2012 “Smoothing the Striated: Rethinking Deleuze and Guattari through Phil Solomon’s *Still Raining, Still Dreaming*.” Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Boston, MA. March
- 2011 “Bazin/Düttmann: A Repositioning of Bazin’s Ontology.” World Picture Conference. Toronto, CA. October
- 2010 “Consensus, Parataxis, Eisenstein.” World Picture Conference. Stillwater, OK. October

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

**University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee**, Graduate Teaching Assistant, 2011-2016

### Instructor of Record

- \*History of Film 2: Development of an Art, 1945-Present (Film Studies/Art History 206)  
A lecture sized survey of the history of global cinema after 1945
- \* Introduction to Comedy (Film Studies 212)  
A survey of the history and theory of the American comedic cinema tradition
- \* Introduction to Entertainment Arts (English 111) (2 Sections)  
An introduction to cinema, television, and digital media analysis
- \* College Writing and Research (English 102) (2 Sections)  
A course focused on introducing students to research writing
- \* Introduction to College Composition (English 101) (4 Sections)  
A basic writing class focused on rhetorical analysis and critical interpretation
- \* Introduction to College Writing and Reading (English 100) (3 Sections)

A developmental writing class focused on rhetorical analysis

Teaching Assistant

- \* Introduction to Entertainment Arts (English 111)  
Assisted Dr. Benjamin Schneider, led weekly one hour discussion groups, graded

**Oklahoma State University**, Graduate Teaching Assistant, 2009-2011

Instructor of Record

- \* Introduction to Screen Studies (English 2453)  
An aesthetics based media studies course that introduced students to visual analysis

Teaching Assistant

- \* Introduction to Screen Studies (English 2453)  
Assisted Dr. Meghan Sutherland, guest lectured, led discussion group, graded

Writing Center

- \* Writing Center Studio Supervisor
- \* Writing Center Tutor

**University of Miami**, Graduate Teaching Assistant, 2007-2009

Teaching Assistant

- \* Assistant to Dr. Christina Lane  
Assisted Dr. Lane in preparation for her 500 level Film Studies course
- \* Assistant to Dr. Andre Riemann  
Assisted Dr. Riemann in preparation for her 500 and 100 level Film Studies courses

## **RESEARCH, CENTER, AND SCHOLARLY PUBLICATION WORK**

### **The Center for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Studies**

Deputy Director, Spring 2017

Project Assistant, Fall 2016

### **University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee**

Assistant to Dr. Nigel Rothfels, Summer 2016

- \* Assisted in the editing of the collection *Birdsong* for submission to Penn State UP

Assistant to Dr. Sooho Song, 2016-2017

- \* Assisted in research and editing

## **WRITING PEDAGOGY, TEACHER TRAINING AND ADMINISTRATION**

### **Assistant Coordinator for Mentoring and Professional Development, Writing Program**

**Administration**, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2013-2015

- Competitive position carrying a four-course teaching release
- Assisted in the training of incoming teaching assistants through the planning and facilitation of weekly instructor meetings as well as classroom observation
- Assisted in the professionalization and pedagogical development of new teaching assistants through the development of a research forum
- Organized and assisted in leading the week long new composition instructor orientation

### **Presentations and Workshop**

- 2015 “Developing In-Class Activities Using the Assignment Sequence and Goals and Outcomes.”  
New Instructor Orientation 2015-2016, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. August
- 2014 “Articulating and Maintaining a Controlling purpose.” New Instructor Orientation 2014-  
2015, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. August
- 2014 “Conferences: Getting Your Foot in the Front Door.” The Center for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Studies  
Graduate Workshop Series, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. March
- 2013 “Articulating and Maintaining a Controlling purpose.” New Instructor Orientation 2013-  
2014, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. August
- 2012 “Developing In-Class Activities Using the Assignment Sequence and Goals and Outcomes.”  
New Instructor Orientation 2014-2013, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. August

## COMMITTEE WORK

*Composition Advisory Committee*, 2013-2015

Conducted observations and evaluations of new English Composition instructors  
and prepared reports for new instructor files

*Committee to Determine 2015-2017 Composition 101 Reader*, 2015

Proposed and selected texts for the required English Composition Reader

*Committee to Determine 2013-2015 Composition 101 Reader*, 2013

Proposed and selected texts for the required English Composition Reader

## PROFESSIONAL EXHIBITION EXPERIENCE

2008 The Film Forum, Intern

2008 The Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, Intern

## REFERENCES

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