The Long Take: A Spectacular Film Realism for the Anthropocene

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This dissertation explores how film realism models and induces an ethical and epistemological posture apposite for the Anthropocene, our current era in which the human species has become a geological force and is increasingly confronted by the nonhuman ecological realities devastated by its actions. I examine the technique of the long take as a heightened expression of what I call *cinema's realist automatism*, or those realist qualities of cinema that make it responsive to our ecologically fraught present; specifically, I contend that, through pairing photographic denotation with onscreen movement, cinema embodies a subject-object interplay that attunes the viewer to nonhuman realities from which she is irreconcilably different and yet to which she is joined in a shared process of becoming. Departing from conceptions of the long take as contemplative and decelerating, I underscore the technique's affective force, embodied most fully in the recent mainstream trend of virtuosic long takes. I develop this theory of the long take over five chapters. The Introduction lays the theoretical groundwork by delineating the subject-object dialectic of cinema's realist automatism. Chapter 1 (the introduction) examines how the long take functions as a spectacular expression of this dialectic, and how the technique can be valuably conceived of as "a shot that is felt as long." Chapter 2 explores how the long take's thematization of cinema's realist automatism receives an additional level of thematization in the series *Black Summer*. I argue that, in pairing virtuosic long takes with the figure of the zombie, whose vacated subjectivity foregrounds abject bodily surface, the show reframes cinema's realist automatism as a surfacing of the world, in which humanly visible surfaces exist in tension with withdrawn, nonhuman depths. Building on this analysis, Chapter 3 investigates how cinema underscores the

limits of the human while, simultaneously, rejoining the viewer to reality's dynamism via the element of motion. The chapter concludes by reflecting on how *Black Summer* counteracts the danger of homogenizing the human posed by theories of posthumanism. Chapter 4 demonstrates that cinema's realist automatism persists even into the digital age and considers how digitality's affordances can actually enhance cinema's eco-critical potential.

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1.0 Introduction: The Shock of the Long Take

In the introduction to their dossier on "Media Climates," James Leo Cahill, Brian R. Jacobson, and Weihong Bao observe that the "moving image's power to stage encounters with natural and built worlds made strange by mediation," despite being the "stuff of film and media theory for more than a century,"[1] has gained new resonance in the current era of anthropogenic climate change and global ecological catastrophe; in reference to this state of affairs, meteorologist and chemist Paul Crutzen popularized the term the "Anthropocene" to describe the way the human species has become a geological force, affecting scales and ecosystems beyond its own. Although such earlier accounts of cinematic mediation—especially the tradition of classical film realism linked to the writings of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer and later elaborated upon by theorists like Roland Barthes—emerged from historical contexts vastly different than the present, their insights into film's technologically mediated defamiliarization of the physical and natural world seem to respond directly to our contemporary moment, in which the increasingly palpable—and palpably devastating—ecological effects of human activity and industry force us to confront the existence of nonhuman realities and our very real, very material interactions with them. Jennifer Lynn Petersen calls this retrospective resonance the "Anthropocene viewing condition," in which present circumstances cause past theories to take on new significance.[2] Film realism, in turn, intensifies the jolt of the nonhuman already induced by the "shock of the Anthropocene," or what

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[1] James Leo Cahill, Brian R. Jacobson, Weihong Bao. "*Media Climates*: An Introduction," *Representations* 157 (Winter 2022): 3, https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2022.157.1.1.

[2] See Jennifer Lynn Petersen, "An Anthropocene Viewing Condition," *Representations* 157 (Winter 2022), https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2022.157.2.17.

Zach Horton describes as "the shock of Western thought confronting its own limits."[3] Even as the present reality of visible environmental devastation[4] "makes new spectators of us all,"[5] retroactively imbuing realist film theories with a heightened eco-critical charge, an attunement to nonhuman reality also already inheres within these theories, doubling back to intensify the viewer's Anthropocene-induced sense of a world that both exceeds and encompasses the realm of the human.

My dissertation examines the properties of cinema that make it well-suited to responding to the Anthropocene, and how the technique of the long take—especially what I call the "virtuosic long take"—expresses this potential. I contend that cinema's unique collision of subjectivity and objectivity inculcates an ecologically mindful posture in the viewer, sensitizing her to the "objective" existence of nonhuman realities apart from her and her "subjective" encounters with them. Cinematic indexicality, in seeming to mechanically denote a world existing "as it is," anterior to and in excess of human creative intervention, posits reality as existing apart from (but also being continuous with) the viewer, and yet this view is always subjectively mediated for human eyes. Simultaneously, the fact that cinema comprises *moving* images unsettles the boundaries of the frame, further foregrounding the contingency of perspective and undermining any sense that the photographically captured reality is fixed and absolute, since any shot or view could just as well have been another. And yet, dynamism is also what rejoins subject to object, human to nonhuman, uniting everything in the shared activity of becoming—a dynamism that

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[3] Zach Horton, "Composing a Cosmic View: Three Alternatives for Thinking Scale in the Anthropocene," in *Scale in Literature and Culture*, eds. Michael Travel Clarke and David Wittenberg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 35.
[4] Hannah Fingerhut, "Extreme weather is nearly universal experience: AP-NORC poll," *Associated Press News*. April 22, 2023, for example, reports that extreme weather events have become a widespread experience, making climate change increasingly difficult to dismiss even by erstwhile skeptics.
[5] Petersen, 19.

cinematic motion thematizes. Cinema's photographic and dynamic nature expands the viewer's sensitivity to nonhuman others by defamiliarizing them. Simultaneously, it posits a continuity between their world and hers, ethically implicating her in their existence and flourishing—given that the world in which she lives and acts is theirs as well—and suggesting that she and they may "be" different but "become" together. Cinema interpellates the viewer as a subject who is at once alienated from and coextensive with the imaged world, both limited by the "frame" of her anthropocentric perspective and opened up to nonhuman reality through the collective act of transformation. I term cinema's capacity and proclivity for foregrounding the dynamic, subject-object interplay *cinema's realist automatism*. Drawing on Stanley Cavell's concept of the "automatism," which Ryan Pierson usefully paraphrases as "historically specific conventions, procedures, and material limitations that help make up a collective sense of what an artistic medium is at any given time,"[6] cinema's realist automatism names the persistence of a realist conception of film across history, evincing a high degree of metastability even after historically and culturally specific variations are accounted for.[7]

The eco-critical potential of cinema's realist automatism has been picked up on by various scholars of eco-media such as Jennifer Fay, James Leo Cahill, Shane Denson, and Chelsea Birks, all of whom have attributed to film and film realism the capacity to subjectively mediate non-anthropocentric realities.[8] My intervention lies in positing the technique of the long take as a

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[6] Ryan Pierson, *Figure and Force in Animation Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 8.

[7] Shane Denson, *Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), drawing on the work of Gilbert Simondon, characterizes metastable entities as those that are open to change and influence but have acquired a provisionally stable form. The concept of the automatism, as an opening up of medium specificity to historical change, could be described as a metastable revision of the latter.

[8] See Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Denson, *Postnaturalism*; James Leo Cahill, *Zoological Surrealism: The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Chelsea Birks: *Limit Cinema: Transgression and the Nonhuman in Contemporary Global Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

heightened expression of cinema's realist automatism, one whose spectacular visibility underscores the eco-critical potential of all film images. The long take is my main object of analysis because it not only exemplifies but *thematizes* cinema's realist automatism. It makes the properties of cinema's realist automatism spectacular, in a way that becomes legible and palpable not only to the academic theorist but to the ordinary viewer, and in an amplified register that befits and mirrors the affective potency of "the shock of the Anthropocene." I formulate the long take as "a shot that is felt as long," with the "shot" part signaling the long take's status as a filmic shot (i.e., as embodying cinema's subject-object dynamic more generally) and the "felt as long" part indicating the technique's heightened affective force, the way it confronts the viewer with the shot's "shot-ness" through sensationally protracted duration. In being thus confronted, the viewer becomes attuned to the subject-object interplay that comprises cinema's realist automatism. The apparatus of cinema, the physical reality being mediated, and the act of mediation itself become accentuated in the viewer's phenomenal experience; she is compelled to not only feel the surface textures of the image (the purview of abstract experimental film) or be absorbed into a narrative world (the domain of mainstream narrative cinema), but to become sensitized to the image-world dialectic itself—a sensitivity to mediation she is then inclined to carry into future encounters with film images, even those that are not (strictly speaking) "long takes." In other words, I locate in long takes a pedagogical potential that, crucially, is not dependent upon paratextual scholarly commentary "explaining" the image's eco-critical significance (even if such commentary remains valuable as a way of enriching knowledge of historical and theoretical context). Rather, *the long take itself* confronts the viewer with the image-world dialectic, inducing an affective and ethical reorientation toward nonhuman physical reality from which a more mindful, eco-critical worldview can emerge.

In my consideration of the long take as confrontational spectacle, I depart from theories and filmmaking practices that valorize the technique for its decelerating, contemplative qualities. Often associated with "slow cinema," a loose genre of art cinema favoring drawn-out, virtually plotless passages marked by a subdued, observational style, these types of long takes aim to induce a meditative awareness of time's passage, offsetting the action-driven, goal-oriented narrative propulsion of mainstream cinema and the accelerated pace of contemporary hypermediated society in general. Such long takes do align with the goals of much eco-criticism, whose aim of expanding viewer perception of the world resonates with slow cinema's subversion of normative perceptual habits, its invitation to stop, look, and listen. James Benning's *Ten Skies* (2004), one of the most famous ecologically themed films of the past couple decades, operates precisely at this intersection. Consisting of just ten shots over the course of 97 minutes, the film utilizes long takes as radical slowdown, a way of drawing attention to aspects of the world (in this case, the sky) typically passed over in day-to-day life and which narrative cinema tends to relegate to the role of "background" or "setting."

While such a conception and practice of the long take does sensitize the viewer to nonhuman realities and hence has great eco-critical potential, it is also relatively rare within mainstream cinema. Typically screened in gallery and university spaces, works like *Ten Skies* are formally radical but also culturally marginal, unlikely (and often unable) to be seen by the vast majority of the moviegoing public. This marginality applies (albeit to a lesser extent) to the work of contemporary slow cinema auteurs like Tsai Ming-liang and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, whose names are known almost exclusively by viewers who follow the festival "arthouse" circuit. In contrast, a different kind of long take has become a formal fad in mainstream narrative cinema. Often tied to action or suspense set pieces, mainstream cinema has seen a proliferation of showy

"oners" over the past couple decades, in which a mobile camera is paired with elaborate pro-filmic staging to generate a sense of choreographic virtuosity, such that both pro-filmic elements and the camera itself become palpable as choreographic elements. From punishing survival sequences in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), *Gravity* (2013), and *The Revenant* (2015); to numerous "single-take" action scenes spanning film and television, such as in *Hanna* (2011), *Daredevil* (2015-2018), *SPL II: A Time for Consequences* (2015), *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), *The Villainess* (2017), *Atomic Blonde* (2017), *War* (2019), *The Swordsman* (2020), *Extraction* (2020), *Don't Breathe 2* (2021), *The Old Man* (2022 -), *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* (2023), and *Extraction 2* (2023); to increasingly numerous, entirely "one shot" films like *1917* (2019) and *Carter* (2022), the *virtuosic long take* has become a stylistic staple of global commercial cinema (Figure 1). In other words, it is *this* kind of long take, I contend, that has the greatest cultural prominence and widest audience reach; it is this kind of long take with which the greatest number of viewers will be familiar and, in having become a formal trope within popular cinema, are likely to encounter in the first place.

Figure 1: Action scenes in *SPL II: A Time for Consequences* (2015) and *War* (2019) exemplify the recent trend of virtuosic long takes in global commercial cinema.

What distinguishes the virtuosic long take from the slow cinema long take is the former's spectacular nature. Aligned in many ways with Tom Gunning's concept of cinema of attractions (it makes sense why *this* kind of long take has become popular within our mainstream, post-

"Spielberg-Lucas-Coppola cinema of effects" regime of blockbuster cinema[9]), the virtuosic long take seizes the viewer with its ostentatious showmanship. Whereas the slow cinema long take demands that the viewer adjust herself to meet its rhythms, the virtuosic long take is designed to wow, sensationally appealing to viewers' proprioceptive intuitions about physical space, weight, and movement. And yet, the virtuosic long take is still a long take. Unlike other formal strategies of spectacle cinema—e.g., what Geoff King calls "impact aesthetic," in which objects rush toward the camera to simulate the feeling of near-collision[10], or post-continuity, in which rapid cutting and flouted visual continuity jolt viewers with a breathless sense of disorientation[11]—the affective power of the virtuosic long take emerges from an insistence upon the camera as a mediation of physical reality.[12] What is shown may be spectacular in itself—an exploding car, a high-octane shootout—but it is always framed by the flamboyant camera that palpably mediates the viewer's encounter with the scene.

From an eco-critical perspective, the popularity and visibility of the virtuosic long take is a double-edged sword. Although more accessible than the slow cinema long take, it has also become naturalized by virtue of this accessibility, such that the simple act of encountering the technique is unlikely to radicalize the average viewer vis-à-vis nonhuman reality. That said, as a

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[9] Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 387.

[10] Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives: Contemporary Hollywood and Frontier Mythology* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 102.

[11] See Steven Shaviro, "Post-Continuity: An Introduction," in *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film,* eds. Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (Falmer: Reframe Books, 2016).

[12] I would argue that impact aesthetic and post-continuity *do* also depend on a sense of the image as a mediation of physical reality: impact aesthetic's impression of crashing *into* and being struck *by* implicitly relies on the film image reproducing the viewer's everyday sense of spatial distance and physical objects, and post-continuity feels disorienting precisely because it scrambles the image's visual correspondence with her ordinary phenomenal experience of physical reality. I explore this idea of cinema's phenomenological correspondence in Jonah Jeng, "The Action Mode: *Mile 22* and the Tension of Hypermediated Embodiment." *Film-Philosophy*, under review. That said, it is the virtuosic long take that most directly incorporates cinema's mediation of physical reality as a central and constitutive part of the spectacle.

technique whose popularization has hinged *on* its status as a spectacular expression of cinema's realist automatism, attunement to cinema's subject-object interplay remains central to the technique's effect. As such, I would maintain that, in its extensive cultural reach, the virtuosic long take sensitizes a wide base of viewers to the dynamics of cinema's realist automatism. Furthermore, "appeal" is a two-way street: the technique makes an appeal by positing a particular vision of reality, but for this vision to be appeal*ing*, to be well-received, it must tap into an existing predisposition within viewers. In other words, at the same time that the long take attunes viewers to film's realist operations, its popularity also points to a realist sensibility *already present within audiences,* which the technique taps. Even as it sensitizes viewers to cinema's realist automatism, the virtuosic long take reveals an audience already sensitized, already receptive and compelled by the tension between subject and object, human and nonhuman.

The virtuosic long take and the slow cinema long take are, in some ways, diametrically opposed. Being that both are long takes, however, they also exist on a continuum. The virtuosic long take, in confronting the viewer with the reality of mediation and the mediation of reality, can lead to the development of a more contemplative posture, in which the viewer reflects on the properties of cinema's realist automatism that have been made so dramatically visible. On the other hand, the slow cinema long take can be conceived of in confrontational terms: it seizes the viewer with its slowness, confronting habituated ways of seeing and attending to the world. This latter example illustrates my investment in the virtuosic long take as not just a technique but an analytical framework that applies to long takes in general. Spectacular long takes, I contend, illuminate how *all long takes are spectacular* in the way they put cinema's realist automatism on display. Although the showy, action-packed, choreographically intricate iteration of the technique is what inspired and most fully embodies this conception of the long take, it also paves the way for a differently

inflected conception of long takes in general; the analyses of long takes I undertake in my dissertation are inflected in this way, even in cases where I am not explicitly analyzing an action-packed "oner." Furthermore, I would argue that this spectacular register befits the "shocking" character of the Anthropocene itself. Even if most virtuosic long takes are not explicitly eco-critical in "content" and remain circumscribed by anthropocentric narratives and points of view, I contend that, simply in the way it deploys cinema's realist automatism as sensational spectacle, these long takes encourage an affective reorientation that is apposite for our contemporary moment. Shifting away from a model of distanced contemplation toward one of visceral, active confrontation, the virtuosic long take forcefully attunes the viewer to the encounter between camera and world.

This forceful implication of the viewer is facilitated by the fact that the camera is typically highly mobile in virtuosic long takes. In *Extraction 2*, it continuously tracks the movements of a small band of characters as they career their way through a prison riot, abscond by car as enemy vehicles pursue, and fight their pursuers atop a moving train (Figure 2); in *Carter*, it circles around fighters during a melee, zips out windows and under cars during chase scenes, and tumbles out of an airplane alongside freefalling combatants. With the virtuosic long take, the camera's status as a physical body "perceiving" the world is foregrounded.[13] Although the long takes in *Ten Skies* do still sensitize viewers to the presence of the camera by virtue of their length, their static setup also downplays the sense of the camera as a physical body. In contrast, the extravagant mobility of the virtuosic long take enacts a sense of filmmaking as embodied perception, a matter of physically moving in relation to the objects and spaces one perceives and perceiving that around which one

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[13] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) famously characterized film as its own phenomenological body, analogous to the viewer's own.

physically moves.[14] In other words, the virtuosic long take more forcefully approximates the viewer's own phenomenal experience, inviting her to discern an analogy between the camera's encounters with the world and her own. In continuing to foreground the camera *as* a camera, however, the long take also continually emphasizes the fact of mediation. Rather than being fully "incorporated" into the long take's phenomenological register—the kind of embodied spectatorial immersion typically prioritized by narrative cinema—the viewer is invited to remain cognizant of the mediated physical reality as existing apart from her, exceeding and circumscribing her movements. Even as the virtuosic long take underscores the "subjective" pole of camera perspective as evoking the viewer's phenomenological situatedness, the foregrounded camera also accentuates the "objectivity" of the captured world, thus sustaining the tension on which cinema's realist automatism is built.

It is this conception of the long take as spectacular, confrontational, and visceral—inspired by the recent trend of virtuosic long takes, but comprising an analytical framework that extends to long takes in general—that I will develop in Chapter 1, with subsequent chapters building upon it by exploring how narrative and thematic elements further accentuate the eco-critical potential of cinema's realist automatism. Before continuing, I wanted to backtrack and discuss several realist film theories that underpin my long take formulation. In the next section of this introduction, I comparatively examine the film realisms of André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Roland Barthes, noting their affinities and tensions and the realist automatism that crystallizes at their intersection.

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[14] Scott Richmond, *Cinema's Bodily Illusions: Flying, Floating, and Hallucinating* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016) gives an account of cinema—specifically, mobile camera movements—that emulate and appeal to phenomenal experience through simulating the sensation of embodied movement. Jonah Jeng, "The Action Scene: *Carter* and Cinema as Stuntwork." *Notebook* at MUBI, September 26, 2022 explores the relationship between extravagant camera movement and embodiment in *Carter*.

Afterwards, I look at the way realist film theory has been taken up by several eco-cinema theorists and how my approach both draws on and departs from theirs.

Figure 2: In _Extraction 2_ (2023), a 21-minute long take tracks "continuously" from a prison break to a car chase to a showdown atop and around a moving train.

1.1 Film Realism

Read together, the film realisms of André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Roland Barthes express a realist conception of film that persists into the present, with each theorist tending to emphasize a different dimension of cinema's realist automatism. In Bazin's writing, we find a film realism that is both iconic and indexical, simultaneously appealing to human phenomenal experience and making an ontological claim about reality as existing apart from the viewer; in Kracauer's account, a materialist emphasis on the alterity of the nonhuman world, which is downplayed in Bazin's relatively "idealist" approach; and in Barthes' work, an exploration of reality's affective force (as mediated through photography and film), its capacity to confront and pierce the viewer. These three strains of film realism collectively crystallize a sense of cinema as both intensely subjective and intensely objective, concerning the viewer's phenomenal encounter with a world that exceeds the frame of her perception. It is this conception of film that I contend is thematized by the long take.[15]

In his essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Bazin famously discusses the realist potential of photographic technology, which forms the basis for celluloid cinema. Unlike creative arts such as painting in which "the fact that a human hand intervened [casts] a shadow of doubt over the image" (i.e., over the image's perceived fidelity as a representation of reality),[16] with the invention of photography, the world became reachable in an unprecedented way. "For the

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[15] Bazin, Kracauer, and Barthes have all attracted renewed scholarly attention in recent years; this broader turn toward their work—especially their realist work—frames my discussion. Furthermore, although the theorists' engagement with cinema is more varied and wide-ranging than the select essays discussed here, these works have been hugely influential in how realism has been conceived in film and media studies and express the features of cinema's realist automatism that are most pertinent to my vision of a spectacular, Anthropocene-era film realism.

[16] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 12.

first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent," Bazin argues. "For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man."[17] Because photography and, by extension, celluloid mechanically registers photochemical inputs from the pro-filmic scene, independently and in excess of the filmmaker's creative control, the resulting image bears a casual, material connection to the captured world. In the terminology of Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs, film is "indexical" because it is a direct material trace of physical reality. For Bazin, the indexical power of the photographic image persists "no matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be."[18] For him, indexicality is psychological rather than aesthetic, concerning the *knowledge* of photographic technology's mechanical nature and the way this mediating mechanism effects an *ontological* shift in the relationship between image and reality. Per the "Ontology" essay, it does not matter how the image *looks*, only how it was formed.

In the "Evolution of the Language of Cinema," however, Bazin seems to have adjusted his stance. Here, he valorizes films that are not only indexical but that "[bring] the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality."[19] He celebrates formal techniques like deep focus and the long take (more on which in Chapter 1) because they reproduce reality's "ambiguity of expression," in which the viewer, rather than being forcefully guided to this or that visual element by montage, is made to sit with a sense of indeterminacy and decide for herself where to look.[20] Implied in Bazin's account is the requirement that the imaged

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[17] Bazin, "Ontology," 13.
[18] Bazin, "Ontology," 14.
[19] André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," in *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 35.
[20] Bazin, "Evolution," 35.

reality resembles the viewer's own. For the viewer to be brought "into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality," the image must reproduce to some extent her everyday phenomenal encounters with the world. Evoked is Peirce's category of the icon, in which a sign morphologically resembles that which it signifies. Furthermore, I would argue that Bazin's remarks in the "Evolution" essay suggest an undercurrent of iconicity already present within the "Ontology" essay. Although Bazin claims that images may be "fuzzy, distorted, or discolored," the concepts of fuzziness, distortion, and discoloration imply a baseline legibility from which these deviations register *as* deviations; for an image to be deemed fuzzy, one must be able to tell what the image is "of." Indeed, Bazin's discussion concerns the *representation* of reality in the arts; for representation to be recognized *as* representation, the referent must be discernible in the representation, such that the viewer can discern a correspondence between the two. Bazin's argument in the "Ontology" essay does permit extreme cases in which the image, despite being fully illegible, is still referentially known to be "of" a particular thing in the world, hence retaining the psychological force of cinema's photographic ontology. That said, especially when read alongside Bazin's other essays that foreground a shot's iconic content as being central to cinema's realist effect,[21] there exists the sense that, for him, indexicality is most powerfully expressed when it retains an element of iconicity, of visual correspondence with the viewer's everyday phenomenal experience of physical reality.

If the "Ontology" essay takes on new light when read alongside the "Evolution" essay, however, the latter is also inflected by the former, especially when joined by some of Bazin's reflections on the relationship between the integral film image and reality's spatiotemporal

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[21] See, for example, André Bazin, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," in *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

unity.[22] Although Bazin's account of photographic ontology presumes a phenomenological component in which the viewer recognizes the imaged world as having been filmed, the phenomenological component is also perpetually framed by cinema's mechanical mediation of physical reality. As I have argued elsewhere, for Bazin, indexicality and iconicity

> are inextricably joined; his film realism hinges not merely on the fact of filmic capture, nor on visual resemblance, but on cases in which *visual resemblance is experienced as being conditional upon filmic capture*, and, hence, as being *indexically and analogically linked to physical reality*. [.....] For Bazin, a shot of a tree both looks like a tree and is a material trace of the tree itself. Through iconicity, the idea of indexicality is expressed; conversely, the idea of indexicality continually frames the viewer's experience of iconicity, positing the image as being "of" physical reality itself.[23]

Bazin's indexicality-iconicity forms the first leg of cinema's realist automatism, establishing the dynamic between subjectivity and objectivity on which my conception of the long take draws. In his account, however, there exists a sense of harmony in which the two poles are ontologically conflated. Reality is taken to be what manifests to the viewer's perception and consciousness, directly and transparently; it is for this reason that Bazin has sometimes been charged with idealism. This idealist slant can be detected at the end of his essay "*Bicycle Thief*," in which, despite insisting upon the medium-specific properties and affordances of film in his other writing, he ends with the aspirational statement "no more cinema."[24] In Bazin's account, cinema is a paradoxical object. It is through the act of mechanical mediation that film posits reality with

[22] See, once more, Bazin, "Virtues."

[23] Jonah Jeng, "Digitality and the Persistence of Realism in *Birdman*." *Senses of Cinema* 104 (2023).

[24] André Bazin, "*Bicycle Thief*," *What is Cinema? Vol. 2*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 60.

unprecedented ontological force, but this reality, in being so emphatically posited, also enhances the fantasy of direct, unmediated access. For him, cinema comprises a means to an end, a way for the viewer to be brought asymptotically close to encountering reality directly. Although this project is fundamentally contradictory, since the reality being pursued only manifests as such through mediation, Bazin's writings downplay this contradiction, evincing what Jennifer Fay calls a "virginal purity" in which the boundaries between viewer, image, and world fade into an Edenic unity.

It is here where Siegfried Kracauer departs most pronouncedly from Bazin. If Bazin seeks to resolve the tension between mediation and immediacy, between the mechanically generated image as affording what Markos Hadjioannou calls the "existential guarantee" of physical reality's existence and the fantasy of dispensing with mediation entirely,[25] Kracauer's film theory foregrounds this tension. For Kracauer, the imaged reality remains deeply and fundamentally alienated from the human observer, its contingency, indeterminacy, and inscrutability foreclosing the possibility of a harmonious subsumption into anthropocentric modes of knowing and being. In Fay's words, cinema and photography are, for Kracauer, "antihumanist technologies that, by defamiliarizing the world, enable us to experience it outside ourselves."[26] Confronted with a world made formidably strange, all illusions of mastery are shattered, replaced by subjects "[dissolving]" themselves "into the substances of the objects that close in on [them]."[27] This "self effacement begets self-expansion"—the viewer experiences a heightened attunement to nonhuman reality and

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[25] Markos Hadjioannou. From Light to Byte: Toward an Ethics of Digital Cinema (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 15.

[26] Fay, 19.

[27] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 16.

the pressure it places on anthropocentrism.[28] In Kracauer's writing, there likewise exists a sense that cinema mediates an "objective" world "subjectively" for human eyes, but, here, the nonhuman confronts the human rather than being subsumed into it. It is this sense of tension and confrontation vis-à-vis nonhuman reality that Kracauer contributes to cinema's realist automatism, counterbalancing Bazinian idealism with what he terms a "material aesthetics"—a film-enabled sensitivity to the alienating materiality of the physical world.

The confrontational affect of Kracauer's theory of cinema is key to my formulation of the long take. This forceful, viewer-oriented address is developed even more extensively in the work of Roland Barthes. Across various essays, Barthes conceives of cinema's and photography's reality effect as a message, a rhetorical act that interpellates the viewer in particular ways. In many respects, his distinction between "denotation" and "connotation"—the former seems to emerge directly from and point to reality itself, whereas the latter comprises second-order meanings developed in the realm of language and culture—aligns with dichotomies seen in Bazin's and Kracauer's writing[29]: Bazin distinguishes between filmmakers who "put their faith in reality" (via techniques like the long take that affirm the ontological integrity of the mechanically generated indexical image) and those who put their "faith in the image" (via the "plastics" of montage),[30] and Kracauer delineates between "realist" and "formative" tendencies in film, with the former inclining toward the material world "itself" and the latter toward the "symbolic" register of narrative and language.[31] That said, denotation and connotation also implicate the viewer in a way these other terms do not, foregrounding the presence of a communicative subject that receives and

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[28] Fay, 180.
[29] See Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
[30] See Bazin, "Evolution," 24.
[31] See Kracauer.

responds to what the film posits. If Bazin emphasizes the iconic-indexical, subjective-objective nature of cinema's realist automatism, and if Kracauer sustains the tension between the two terms while emphasizing the "objective," material part, Barthes shifts weight back toward the subject.

For Barthes, the subject is not a figure of mastery; absent is the sense of ontological fullness from Bazin's account, in which the world seems to reveal itself fully to the subject. For Barthes, denotation *appears* to emerge directly from reality, comprising a "message without a code" that originates from somewhere outside signification,[32] but it remains structured by ideology, hence Barthes' rechristening of denotation as a "denoted-connoted."[33] Denotation exists in the arena of semiotics, unmoored from any definite, ontological relationship to a world outside signification. And yet, even if "deceptively" positing the sense of reality "as it is," denotation has an affective component that Barthes foregrounds; he emphasizes not just the fact of the denotative image, but the "*feeling* of 'denotation,'" the sense of "analogical plenitude" produced in the subject through encountering this image.[34] Although this affect often never achieves conscious recognition—the power of denotation lies in the subject being *not* aware that she has been interpellated in this way, hence departing from my sense of cinema's realist automatism as *sensitizing* the viewer to the mediation of reality—Barthes' account usefully homes in on the affective and communicative dimensions of cinema's realist automatism.

Where his account of denotative affect *does* involve puncturing the realm of conscious sensation—thus directly aligning with my long take formulation—is in his concept of the punctum. In contrast to the studium, which encompasses those received, conventionalized forms of formal and narrative organization that make a film legible *as* a film, as a completed work of art, the

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[32] Barthes, "Photographic Message," 17.
[33] Barthes, "Photographic Message," 22.
[34] Barthes, "Photographic Message," 18.

punctum comprises the material traces of reality's excess that seize the viewer's awareness, destabilizing the studium's illusion of wholeness.[35] Whereas, in Hadjioannou's words, the studium "is a product of a certain cultural training whereby the viewer effortlessly recognizes the ideological meaning inscribed in the image by its creator," such that

> the force of the photographic index—its causal place in reality—is subordinated to the imposed social strategies of the studium, [....] the punctum is a point in the image that disturbs the ideological equilibrium of the studium altogether.[36]

Elaborating further, Hadjioannou notes how the punctum refers to a captured, chance detail or occurrence that

> expresses the contingency of reality; and, by suspending meaning [....] draws the spectator into the photograph, making her or him part of the construction of meaning rather than its passive receiver. It is at this point that the viewer gains a strong existential connection with the perceived image. As language fails to offer a framework for perception, it is overtaken by the attentive reflection triggered by the punctum's disturbance, and the memories, desires, and fears that accompany it. The causal function of celluloid technology elicits a simultaneous involvement of the spectator in the piece of reality made visually present and, by extension, to the world to which she or he belongs as well.[37]

Hadjioannou's explication of the studium-punctum distinction highlights the centrality of reality's affective power—as mediated by the denotative, indexical address of the photographic

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[35] See Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).
[36] Hadjioannou, 21-22.
[37] Hadjioannou, 22.

image—to Barthes' realist film theory. The image does not simply reference reality; it pierces the viewer with it, puncturing the stability of the studium. This kind of heightened affective register is what I believe the virtuosic long take has the potential to achieve. In its spectacular, protracted denotation of pro-filmic space, the technique has the capacity to make more of the captured image punctum-like, potently mediating reality's contingency and indeterminacy.

To recapitulate, my conception of the long take and cinema's realist automatism crystallizes at the intersection of Bazin's, Kracauer's, and Barthes' realist film theories. Bazin contributes a sense of film realism as both iconic and indexical. Kracauer introduces the tension of mediation and how the material world always manifests as radically other to anthropocentric modes of perception and thought. Barthes theorizes the piercing affect generated by this confrontation with nonhuman reality—a reality that, though downplayed in his semiotic account, receives ontological emphasis in Bazin's and Kracauer's writings. Read together, these three theorists of cinema's realist automatism express a sense of cinema as both profoundly subjective and profoundly objective, involving not the harmonious, idealist fusing of the two but a cutting in both directions that confronts the viewer with the fact of mediation as a dynamic, tension-filled process.

In the next section, I want to examine several ways in which film realism has been taken up by eco-cinema scholars, how this turn makes sense given the Anthropocene-era urgency to mindfully engage with nonhuman realities, and how my work builds on theirs.

1.2 Film Realism, Eco-Cinema, and Chapter Breakdown

"Film theory and film studies have only recently rediscovered what is surely most visible

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about film: its entanglement in the world it shoots, edits and projects."[38]

Thus writes Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway in the introduction to their edited collection *Screening Nature*, which charts the presence and significance of the nonhuman environment within film history and theory. This rediscovery of cinema's entanglement with the world—which has occurred largely within the last couple decades—has coincided with a renewed investment in realism, which "attends to those nonhuman elements in which film is bound up, and contributes to seeing, understanding and speaking about cinema beyond the human."[39] Cinema's realist automatism, in subjectively denoting a physical reality beyond the human, has come to feel newly resonant in our ecologically fraught age in which the anthropogenic devastation of nonhuman reality has become impossible to ignore. This newfound resonance has contributed to a shift in film and media studies toward considering film realism's eco-critical potential. For example, in his book *Zoological Surrealism: The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé*, James Leo Cahill examines the eponymous filmmaker's work within the context of interwar France to formulate what he calls cinema's "Copernican Vocation." Referencing the historical shift from a geocentric (and, implicitly, anthropocentric) conception of the universe to a heliocentric one, cinema's Copernican vocation names an analogous de-centering of the human that occurs when the viewer encounters the "anthropologically indifferent gaze of the camera lens," which "purportedly [treats] everything in front of it with equal dispassion."[40] Emerging from the camera's mechanical basis and hence aligning with the impression of objectivity I have posited as being

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[38] Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway, "Introduction: Intersecting Ecology and Film," in *Screening Nature: Cinema beyond the Human*, eds. Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 2.
[39] Pick and Narraway, 2.
[40] Cahill, 20.

central to cinema's realist automatism, this "indifference" enacts a "cosmic 'humiliation'" in which the viewer feels herself "being displaced from the center of the universe and being confronted with [her] 'parochial' perception."[41] Although Cahill emphasizes that this experience of de-centering can, in fact, reinstall anthropocentrism by implicitly presuming that a world without us is still thinkable *by* us—thereby "[supporting] a triumph of *reason* and *technique*"[42]—his powerful formulation of the Copernican vocation names the potential for cinema to effect an expanded, de-anthropocentric perception.

An eco-critical film realism can also be found in Jennifer Fay's *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*, which turns to Kracauer's realist film theory to develop a mode of thought that is attentive to nonhuman reality without subsuming it into "conventional feeling, narrative, and genres of representation."[43] In Kracauer's account of cinema, Fay locates a desire for "nonteleological, highly particularized, and above all estranged modes of perception" that involve alienating ourselves from a world already made alien, already ravaged by various forms of human activity that have rendered the planet increasingly "inhospitable" to both human and nonhuman life. For Fay, this "disinterest"—which resonates with Cahill's account of cinema's indifference and dispassion-—has the potential to "lead to an ethics of seeing in the service of our [human's and nonhuman's] mutual survival."[44] Per Fay, we have already passed a point of no return; the world will only become more inhospitable from here on out. What we can do to mindfully cohabit a "postcatastrophic" earth alongside nonhuman life is to incorporate the alienation of the environment into our own bearings, replacing the voraciously consumptive,

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[41] Cahill, 17-18.
[42] Cahill, 18.
[43] Fay, 167.
[44] Fay, 167.

exploitative posture of capitalist and colonialist extraction with a dispassionate embrace of forms of life radically different from our own.[45] Kracauer's realist film theory, in its vision of cinema as a medium of world-alienation, holds the potential to inspire such a de-anthropocentric outlook.

A similar investment in cinema's capacity to cultivate new forms and ethics of seeing animates Shane Denson's *Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface*, which conceives of cinema as a medium through which the viewer encounters subperceptual, non-anthropocentric realities that are "discorrelated" from human phenomenal experience—i.e., that fall beyond the purview of human concepts and perception. For Denson, this potential lies precisely in cinema's collision of subjectivity and objectivity—"the way that *subjective focus* gets introjected into the space of a filmic image that presents a wealth of worldly detail *in excess of* any subjective synthetic capacity."[46] Although Denson does not emphasize realism as his framework, instead foregrounding the role of sub-phenomenal affect, film realism is an implicit throughline in his work, with the film image's "excess" of "worldly detail" alluding to past theorizations of cinema's realist automatism as mechanically mediating the unmotivated minutiae and contingency of pro-filmic reality. His vision of the material world directly affecting the viewer through the film image draws upon the logic and rhetoric of indexicality so central to classical film realism.

My work shares with these approaches an investment in the de-anthropocentrizing force of cinema's realist automatism, emergent from the medium's collision of subjectivity and objectivity. Similar to how I locate cinema's realist automatism at the intersection of Bazin's, Kracauer's, and Barthes' formulations, my conception of film realism's eco-critical potential is inspired by the

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[45] Fay, 168.
[46] Denson, *Postnaturalism*, 3.

different theoretical inflections of different theorists, from Fay's emphasis on an expanded, alienated perception of the world, to Denson's vision of roiling affect and materiality in which the viewer is caught up, to the cosmological metaphor of Cahill's "Copernican vocation," which aligns cinema with nothing less than a shift in worldview, a seismic, existential reorientation of how the subject imagines herself in relation to her environment. Alienation, affective immediacy, and worldview-reorientation all factor into my dissertation.

My contribution lies in proposing not a total departure, but a different framing and inflection of film realism and its eco-critical potential. Specifically, I propose the virtuosic long take as a valuable object of study on multiple levels: as a heightened, more "mainstream" expression of cinema's realist automatism that makes film's eco-critical potential sense-able to a wider base of viewers; as a symptom of the receptivity and sensitivity to realism already operative within the larger culture; and as a framework for considering all long takes as spectacular, confronting viewers with cinema's subject-object interplay in a forceful affective register resonant with the "shock" of the Anthropocene. This theory of the long take is developed in the remaining chapters of my dissertation. In Chapter 1, I explore in more depth what I mean by a "long take," given that "long" is a highly relative term, contingent on factors such as historical shot-length averages, the length of surrounding shots, and the attention span of individual spectators. I discuss why I believe the long take to be a privileged technique for foregrounding cinema's realist automatism in our current historical moment, which is marked by both a persistence of classicality (in which the materiality of the film image is effaced) and an aesthetic and discursive turn toward post-continuity and affect theory (in which the cinematic specificity of the image *as* an image is subsumed into a vision of amorphous, free-flowing forces and sensations). I contend that the long take resists both tendencies, asserting the presence of the image as a visible, relatively discrete

denotation of physical reality. This chapter also elaborates upon Bazinian iconicity-indexicality by emphasizing the importance of visual recognition to the long take (for the viewer to discern a shot as long, she must register the shot as being long *in relation to* a recognizable object world) and examines how the privileged Bazinian technique of deep-focus photography complements my formulation of the long take (both techniques reinforce a sense of the world as objective, as existing apart from the human subject). Developing a theory of the long take that will frame the analysis of subsequent chapters, this chapter does not always explicitly center the virtuosic long take as its main object of study, but the latter's spectacular ethos shadows my analysis, which continually foregrounds the technique's affective force.

If Chapter 1 develops a general theory of the long take as a heightened expression of cinema's realist automatism, Chapter 2 homes in on a specific case that, in its narrative and thematic content, heightens this expression even further. Through examining the streaming series *Black Summer* (2019-2021) and drawing on the emerging field of zombie theory, this chapter explores what happens when the long take is paired with the figure of the zombie. I contend that both figures exhibit what I call a "surfacing address": a tendency to shift ontological emphasis to visible, material surfaces over against traditional, idealist conceptions of "depth," such as the idea of cognition or emotional interiority. Film's passive, mechanical recording of a spatiotemporally displaced pro-filmic reality leads to an "ontological flattening" in which human figures become unexceptional vis-à-vis their milieu, reduced to "thing[s] among things" that are equally captured by the camera's indifferent lens.[47] With the zombie, generic conventions posit a physical body vacated of agency and will—the human body reduced to pure meat and driven by carnal appetite. This emptying-out of "inner" life and "higher-level" thinking is reinforced by visual cues that code

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[47] Fay, 201.

the figure as being subjectively "lacking," such as a loss of both language skills and responsiveness to social cues (Chapter 3 will discuss the ableist biases that are inscribed in the zombie). Through close-reading a scene from *Black Summer* in which spectacular long takes track the roving of a lone zombie, Chapter 2 argues that, when the surfacing address of film—especially as accentuated through the long take—is made to collide with the surfacing address of the zombie, there results a double thematization of the human body as thingly surface, in which the viewer is invited to discern the human as being always already a part of a general, worldly materiality that precedes, exceeds, and constitutes her.

Chapter 3 directly builds on the theoretical framework and close reading of Chapter 2 by examining how cinema and the zombie not only defamiliarize thingly surface by "making dead" but "bring back to life" through a process of reanimation. With cinema, the surfacing, alienating force of photographic denotation is joined with the element of motion, as enabled by the technology of projection; with the zombie, the decaying and subjectively vacated body is nonetheless *un*dead and moving, impelled by some nonhuman motive force. This chapter argues that cinema's collision of photographic denotation and technologically mediated motion generates a complex phenomenal experience in which visible movement is experienced as being both a property "of" the captured reality and a quality conferred by the cinematic apparatus qua nonhuman motive force—both *immediate to* the world as the viewer phenomenally experiences it and *mediating* a nonhuman vitality that exceeds traditional, humanist paradigms of life and agency, a bothness foregrounded most forcefully by the long take and especially in collision with the figure of the zombie. Identifying this dynamic threshold between subject and object, immediacy and mediation as the hinge of cinema's eco-critical potential, Chapter 3 then moves in two directions: toward a more rigorous theorizing of how, exactly, the human subject can encounter a nonhuman

"outside" when her perspective remains inevitably confined to the anthropocentric "inside," and back toward the realm of human culture to address the concern that theorizations of the nonhuman treat the human as monolithic, effacing historical differences and power imbalances vis-à-vis race, gender, and class. The chapter proposes "outsideness" as an eco-critical concept and posture that acknowledges both the limits of the human and the way we are joined to the rest of reality in the shared activity of becoming. Afterwards, I demonstrate how *Black Summer* counterbalances the homogenizing risk of posthumanism through foregrounding racial difference within an American historical and cultural context—the Trump presidency—during which this precise cultural fault line was highly visible, politicized, and affectively charged.

In Chapter 4, I address the concern that cinema's realist automatism may not bear the affective force that I am attributing to it given that we live in a digital age marked by the severing of image from reality. Within a digital image regime in which all physical, lens-based inputs are first converted into binary code before being seamlessly reassembled into a photorealistic aesthetic—thereby rupturing the material, analogical continuity between capture and display presumed to be the hallmark of celluloid cinema and enabling the image to be manipulated in subperceptual ways—can it still be said that the image "denotes" physical reality? Especially given not just the increased capacity for digital image manipulation but popular knowledge about this capacity (i.e., viewers themselves have become digitally literate and increasingly approach images with the assumption that such manipulations could have occurred), will the long take's foregrounding of cinema's subject-object dialectic still be experienced as a confrontation, as spectacular? This chapter answers all these questions in the affirmative, arguing that cinema's realist automatism continues to frame how film images are engaged with, through both the persistence of photorealism as a dominant aesthetic paradigm and the way expressions of

digitality's medium specificity occur in pointed *departure from* traditional film realism, thereby reaffirming cinema's realist automatism in a "negative" fashion. Having demonstrated the continuing cultural centrality of cinema's realist automatism, the chapter then argues that, when combined with photorealism, digital cinema has the capacity to foreground certain aspects of an eco-critical film realism even more forcefully than its analog forebear. Drawing on the work of William Brown, Deborah Levitt, and Markos Hadjioannou, I contend that digitality affords an increased sense of both the ontological flattening discussed in Chapter 2 and the activity of becoming explored in Chapter 3, and, building on these, encourages an ecological ethics in which the viewer experiences herself as an active participant in the becoming of the world.

As a heightened expression of cinema's realist automatism that attunes the viewer to film's thematization of the subject-object, human-nonhuman encounter; a symptom of the receptivity and sensitivity to realism already present within the larger culture; and a framework that recasts all long takes as spectacular in a register consonant with the "shock" of the Anthropocene, the virtuosic long take and its eco-critical potential have been underexamined. Theorizing the technique as both inviting and enacting a different, more spectacular framing of film realism, my dissertation argues that the virtuosic long take—and, by extension, long takes in general and cinema's realist automatism even more generally—warrants greater theoretical attention in our current, ecologically fraught historical moment.

2.0 A Shot that is Felt as Long

The collision between subjectivity and objectivity as a form of address, between anthropocentrism and intimations of a world that exceeds the human, comprises one of the distinct qualities of cinema's realist automatism, and it is this conception of cinema that underpins the remaining chapters of my dissertation. As discussed in the Introduction, this baseline, subject-object dialectic models a valuable ethic for approaching our era of ecological catastrophe, and, furthermore, has the potential to affectively heighten the "shock" already delivered by the Anthropocene, further sensitizing the viewer to nonhuman materiality. Drawing on the contemporary, mainstream trend of virtuosic long takes, I propose an eco-critical paradigm of the long take that hinges on making the mediation of reality spectacular for a wider base of viewers.

If cinema's realist automatism posits the material excess of nonhuman reality, the long take posits this positing, underscoring what cinema in general "does" through expressing it in heightened form. With the long take, physical reality is posited in a second-order sense; applying the principle of syllogism, we find that, if the long take posits film which posits reality, then the long take also posits reality. That said, what is also posited is the middle term of mediation itself. The long take thematizes not simply physical reality, but the *filming* of physical reality, the dynamic choreography between viewing camera and viewed world. If cinema posits the world, the long take posits the act of engaging with it.

In addition (but related) to the reasons mentioned in the Introduction (i.e., the more mainstream reach and affective force of the virtuosic long take), I contend that the long take's heightened mode of address is valuable in two main respects. The first lies in the entrenchment

and continued dominance of cinematic classicality in global commercial cinema.[48] Despite the

presence of historically and regionally specific variations, cinematic classicality has tended to

entail a suppression of cinema's material excesses—the film image's indexical and iconic

registration of a material world that exceeds any attempt at human structuration—in favor of

narrativized coherence, an organization of images such that viewer attention is focused maximally

around narratively salient elements like characters and props, minimally around everything else.[49]

The "everything else" remains materially and visibly "there" in the image,[50] but the institutional

and ideological dominance of classicality has tended to compel a viewing posture that overlooks

such "extraneous" details in favor of those that correspond most tightly to the broad strokes of

narrative development. Even with the alleged shift to "post-continuity" filmmaking styles and

"attractions" as post-classical theoretical models (more on which momentarily), I would argue that

classicality remains a reigning paradigm that forms, in many ways, a counter-automatism to the

realist one I have outlined. [51] It is not uncommon to hear films continually praised or demeaned

on narrative grounds (the degree to which characters are "well-developed," the presence or absence

of "plot holes," etc.), which, in the mainstream even if less so among film and media scholars,

often takes priority over image-level aesthetics.[52] Within the shadow cast by classicality, an

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[48] Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *John Hopkins University Press* 6, no. 2 (1999): 68, Project MUSE historicizes and "provincializes" the rhetoric and conventions of Hollywood "classical cinema" while simultaneously acknowledging "the generalized appeal and robustness of Hollywood products *abroad*." Without "[resuscitating] the myth of film as a new 'universal language,'" Hansen nonetheless believes that, "whether we like it or not, American movies of the classical period offered something like the first global vernacular." It is this sense of classicality that interests me: classicality as exceeding the bounds of Hollywood but nonetheless remaining to some degree aesthetically linked to it.

[49] David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) links developments in Hollywood film style to the practical task of guiding viewer attention to narratively salient details within the image.

[50] See Kristin Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess," *Ciné-Tracts* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1977).

[51] Lisa Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), for example, notes how the claim that contemporary blockbuster cinema focuses on spectacle over narrative is misguided, since the spectacle remains very much situated within and framed by narrative—i.e., classicality remains operative to a significant degree.

[52] Just one example among many: according to the popular film review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes' summation of their "critics consensus," the film *Speed Racer* (2008)—which Jonah Jeng, "Sidelining Photorealism: *Speed Racer*

aesthetic of photorealism that, in theory, ought to intensify cinema's photographic address and thus point to a materially excessive physical world, instead reinforces the sense of a coherent, fictional diegesis. Drawing on photorealism's invocation of objectivity, of an integral physical world passively and matter-of-factly "captured," classicality "fleshes out" the sense of the diegesis as a three-dimensional physical environment populated by flesh-and-blood characters, all while tacitly continuing to guide attention to only those elements that are narratively pertinent (e.g., through continuity editing principles and compositional strategies that overdetermine which objects, bodies, and movements are noticed by viewers).

Of course, photorealism's positing of material excess cannot ever be fully suppressed; as numerous scholars have pointed out, there exists in all film images a tension between narrative/representation and the materiality of the image.[53] That said, I would argue that the *net effect* of cinema under the ongoing regime of classicality is a subordination of image to narrative. I contend that the long take's thematization of cinema's realist automatism can serve a compensatory function, accentuating the repressed materiality of the image and its correspondence with an excessive physical reality. Back in the fin de siècle when cinema's realist automatism was still new, a sense of wonder often attended film viewings. The natural world—the flow of water, leaves rustling in the wind—was defamiliarized by its presentation as technologically-enabled framed motion,[54] in which the mediating force of the cinematic apparatus was acutely felt (and

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and the Articulation of Digital Visual Effects Labour," in *Media, Practice and Theory: Tracking Emergent Thresholds of Experience*, ed. Nicole de Brabandere (Vernon Press, 2023) has argued is one of the most aesthetically iconoclastic of all recent American blockbusters—"[focuses] on visual thrills at the expense of a coherent storyline."

[53] See, for example, Kracauer; Denson, *Postnaturalism*; Thompson.

[54] See Jordan Schonig, "Contingent Motion: Rethinking the 'Wind in the Trees' in Early Cinema and CGI," *Discourse* 40, no. 1 (2018): https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/discourse.40.1.0030.

even outrightly displayed[55]). I argue that the technique of the long take can restore a degree of this world-oriented wonder and defamiliarization, in such a way where both the material facticity of physical reality and cinema's role as dynamic mediator are foregrounded anew.

This call to return to the film image over against the narrative emphasis of classicality is, in many ways, commensurate with a parallel theoretical trend in film and media studies. Tom Gunning's landmark essay on the "cinema of attractions" helped inaugurate a rethinking of film's origins and entrenched, teleological notions of cinema as being predominantly a narrative enterprise.[56] Per Gunning, early cinema evinced not the forward (goal-oriented) and inward (diegetically self-enclosed) movement of classical narrative cinema, but, rather, tended to present a discontinuous string of sensational sights that directly appealed to viewers in a physicalized way. Within this regime of discretized, moment-to-moment spectacle, the individual image and what it showed was privileged over narrative unity. In concert with developing scholarly interest in body genres,[57] attractions became a popular theoretical model largely in response to the rise of the set-piece-oriented blockbuster in the 1980s and 1990s, and it finds a rhetorical bedfellow in more recent diagnoses of contemporary cinema's alleged turn to post-continuity,[58] in which classical tenets of clear spatial orientation and unobtrusive style are upended. Developing in concert with a larger, new media ecology abounding with different media forms and interfaces,[59] the post-continuity style shares with attractions a disruption of classical forms of absorptive narrative

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[55] See, for example, Gunning; John Belton, "If film is dead, what is cinema?" *Screen* 55, no. 4 (2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hju037 for accounts of how film recording and projection technologies were themselves often put on display in early film exhibition contexts.

[56] See Gunning.

[57] See Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Summer 1991): https://doi.org/10.2307/1212758.

[58] See Shaviro, "Post-Continuity."

[59] See, for example, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999); Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006).

cinema. Both involve discontinuity, medium reflexivity, and image-awareness, and both embody a cinema driven less by narrative's forward/inward movement than by an outward trajectory toward the bodies of spectators.

The seemingly conflictual nature of these two accounts—classicality's persistence as well as its usurpation by a regime of attractions and post-continuity—has been amply addressed, with the most balanced and nuanced accounts acknowledging the existence of both tendencies in contemporary cinema.[60] What I want to propose, however, is that cinema's realist automatism exists in tension not only with cinematic classicality, but also with the rhetorical focus of the attractions/post-continuity turn. Even as my approach similarly resists classicality's emphasis on narrative coherence and integration, I depart from a focus on body and affect that occurs at the expense of addressing the film image's status *as* image.[61] Scholars in the attractions/post-continuity tradition tend to be concerned less with formal structure than with structures of feeling, to read media as being inextricably entangled with the bodies of spectators and cinema as belonging to a larger media ecology into which we are affectively immersed and which, it is implied, it would be futile to try to parse.[62] Walter Benjamin's famous analysis of cinema as a training ground for the "shock" of modern, urban life has become a theoretically foundational text whose analysis hinges on a conflation of cinema and its effects with the affective textures of a

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[60] See, for example, Gunning; Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*; Thomas Elsaesser, "Discipline through Diegesis: The Rube Film between 'Attractions' and 'Narrative Integration,'" in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006)*;* Kristen Whissel, *Spectacular Digital Effects: CGI and Contemporary Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). Miriam Hansen, 72 discusses how "classical cinema," from the outset, united "the modernist fascination with the 'low,' sensational, attractionist genres and the classicist ideal of formal and narrative efficiency." Therefore, it makes perfect sense that the paradigm of classicality can and does accommodate the more recent turn to effects-driven spectacle.

[61] Hadjioannou offers a balanced model of cinema that attends to both affect and denotation, both the image's embodied impact on the viewer and its status as an image that mediates physical reality.

[62] See, for example, Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Washington: Zero Books, 2009) and Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

more general sensory environment.[63] Such accounts, although valuable as theoretical correctives to the overly disembodied structuralism of 1970s film theory and as more macro-level assessments of our contemporary affective landscape, tend to strip cinema of its specificity as an automatism that denotes physical reality. This "generalization" of cinema can be seen in Gunning's counterintuitive conflation of Georges Méliès and the *Lumière* brothers under the same rubric of "attractions," claiming that, despite being ostensibly counterposed, the former's "illusionistic" tendencies and the latter's "realist" ones are more alike than different in their presentation of sensational views for spectators.[64] In Gunning's account, the nature of the spectacle is less important than its status *as* spectacle, as *some* view, *some* image whose significance lies not in *what* is being shown but in *how* the image impacts spectators.

Gunning's intervention is important in its rhetorical emphasis on alternative traditions to classicality that foreground image and body over against classical narrative and attendant modes of mannered, absorptive spectatorship.[65] That said, I believe some of the "intuitive" differences between the cinema of Méliès and *Lumières* ought to be kept in conversation rather than simply treated as negligible. Specifically, even though both "A Trip to the Moon" (1902) and "The Arrival of a Train" (1896) are spectacles, they are spectacular in different ways. Whereas the former is organized around manifestly artificial and fanciful sets and mise-en-scène, the latter derives its spectacular nature from the framed presentation of a recognizable physical and social world in motion. It could be said that the Lumières' film makes a spectacle *out of* familiar physical reality

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[63] See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).
[64] See Gunning.
[65] See, for example, Paul Young, *Cinema Dreams its Rivals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Scott Curtis, *The Shape of Spectatorship: Art, Science, and Early Cinema in Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

via the overt mediation of the cinematic apparatus (and, in doing so, "spectacularizing" the cinematic apparatus as well). In fact, I would argue that even Méliès' cinema depends on spectacularizing physical reality in this way, since it is only against the tacit background of the cinematic automatism's photographic address—its seeming denotation of real, physical bodies in real, physical spaces—that the gestures of artifice register *as* artificial, magical, etc. It is *this* sense of spectacle—of physical reality turned spectacular through the foregrounding of the cinematic apparatus—that interests me and departs from the more generalized, affect-oriented approach of much attractions/post-continuity scholarship. If the long take counterbalances classicality's disavowal of cinematic indexicality by reasserting the materiality of the image, it also counterbalances the attractions/post-continuity tradition's (over)emphasis on formless affect by reasserting cinema as an *image* of materiality, a *denotation* of a physical world that precedes, exceeds, and circumscribes the moment of filming. It is in this space between classicality and post-classicality that I locate cinema's realist automatism, and I believe the long take has the capacity to thematize the structure of this automatism over against the polar extremes, thereby sensitizing the viewer to the dynamics of cinematic mediation in general.

2.1 The Long Take: Visual Recognition and the Feeling of Length

At this point, it would be useful to backtrack and ask the unspoken question: what, exactly, is a long take? Or, to put it another way, how long is long? As John Gibbs and Douglas Pye note in the introduction to their edited collection on long takes, the short answer is that it depends.[66]

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[66] See John Gibbs and Douglas Pye, "The Long Take—Critical Approaches," in *The Long Take: Critical Approaches*, eds. John Gibbs and Douglas Pye (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

The adjective "long" is, by definition, relative; if something is "long," it immediately implies the possibility of "short," as well as an infinitely recursive series of intermediate steps: long*er* than short, short*er* than long, and so on. A long take's longness depends on a variety of contextual factors ranging from the average length of surrounding shots (a ten-second shot, which would register as brisk within a Hou Hsiao-Hsien or Andrei Tarkovsky film, may feel very long when sandwiched between shots of just one or two seconds in length) to the average length of shots within a given historical and cultural context (a ten-second shot is much more prone to register as long within our contemporary, post-MTV regime of accelerated editing versus classical Hollywood, during which shots were on average longer) to the attentional inclinations of different spectators, some of whom may feel a ten-second shot to be long while others may not. That said, all contextual factors considered, there is, in theory, a point past which a long take will register as long for any given viewer, and it is the realm of historical extremes that interests me. In other words, I focus on those more emphatic cases of the long take that, for most viewers across most historical and cultural contexts, would likely register as long. It is these instances, I argue, that have the most potential to thematize cinema's realist automatism; it is these that are most forcefully self-reflexive and, as such, have the greatest capacity to impress this thematization upon the widest base of viewers.

And yet, crucial to these cases is not simply the quantitative number of minutes for which a shot runs, but what is captured in those minutes. Furthermore, the moment one considers the "what," one immediately ropes in the "how": how framing, camera movement, depth of field, and a host of other stylistic factors condition our apprehension of this "what." Here, we enter some thorny territory, since the sheer variety of long takes that exist would seem to preclude the possibility of making any generalized claims about the technique. Gibbs and Pye emphasize that

their collection is organized around case studies of specific instances of long takes, with the reasoning being precisely that a given long take's meaning and effect is inextricable from the specific context in which it appears. In his sweeping account of camera movement in classical Hollywood, Patrick Keating details a staggeringly diverse array of effects achieved by different deployments of the long take, from first-person point-of-view shots that yoke the camera to the literal, physical movements of a character (*Lady in the Lake* [1946] is one example structured entirely around this formal conceit, and one could also extend Keating's analysis to more contemporary iterations like *Hardcore Henry* [2015]), to shots that, in their more machinic, "inhuman" movement, suggest a distinctly nonhuman perspective or tenor (Keating mentions *The Cat and the Canary* [1927], but more contemporary examples abound as well, such as the Steadicam shots in *The Shining* [1980] and *Elephant* [2003]).[67] Most long takes occupy a more ambiguous, oscillating position between subjective and objective registers in which the "style" of a film—the manner in which shots are composed in relation to objects and characters—suggest a tone or way of looking that, to varying degrees, aligns us with the perspectives and/or affects of one or more characters.[68] Some films playfully manipulate cinema's fluid identificational structures, such as in the opening of *Friday the 13th Part II* (1981), which, as Daniel Morgan points out, shifts within a single shot from seeming identification with a will-be victim to the perspective of a potential, lurking killer.[69] A universe of difference separates the long takes in *Caché* (2005)—which evoke surveillance camera footage in their static, long-shot framings and

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[67] See Patrick Keating, *The Dynamic Frame: Camera Movement in Classical Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
[68] See, for example, Daniel Morgan, *The Lure of the Image: Epistemic Fantasies of the Moving Camera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021); Nick Browne: "The Spectator-in-the-Text: The Rhetoric of 'Stagecoach,'" *Film Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (Winter 1975-1976): https://doi.org/10.2307/1211746; and Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The Cinema of Poetry" in *Movies and Methods, Volume 1*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) on the concept of "free indirect discourse" in cinema.
[69] See Morgan.

indeterminate narrative "content"—from the mobile, stitched-together tracking shots in the "single-take" film *Rope* (1948), which, as Robin Wood notes, incorporates the logic of découpage into the "one shot" conceit, forcefully guiding viewer's attention to narratively pertinent details.[70]

Examples proliferate. A long take that dollies laterally—as in *News from Home* (1977) or a famous fight scene from *Oldboy* (2003)—positions the viewer vis-à-vis the filmed world much differently than a panning long take that rotates in place, as found in *La Région Centrale* (1971) or a pivotal moment in *Blow Out* (1981). Broadly, the former camera movement could perhaps be said to "unfurl" a world passing by, whereas the latter tends to posit a panoramic three-dimensional environment around the camera, but even within each category, variations abound.[71] In *News from Home*, the lateral dolly movement, which appears across multiple rhymed scenes, accelerates and decelerates with a halting rhythm that suggests the camera is pointed out the window of a moving car, an interpretation strongly buttressed by the storefronts, passersby, and other vehicles that are visible within the shot. These shots have no clear narrative or dramatic focal point, which, along with the overall film's meandering, essayistic structure, diffuses attention toward would-be "trivial" details: the milling pedestrians, the concrete textures of the captured urban space, the physical position of the camera in relation to these things. In contrast, *Oldboy*'s famous use of the long take has a clear narrative anchor—a fight between the protagonist and a small army of thugs— and the actual lateral movement is comparatively minimal (Figure 3). Coupled with long-shot framing, the net effect of the scene is a counterintuitive physical and affective "distancing" from the violence that casts our hero's revenge odyssey as vaguely pathetic and absurd, comprising the

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[70] See Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited: Revised Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
[71] Jordan Schonig, *The Shape of Motion: Cinema and the Aesthetics of Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) discusses lateral camera movement as a kind of spatial unfurling.

ant-like fumbling of little people in thrall to forces beyond their control (thereby anticipating the film's final twist in which the nature of the villain's grand scheme is revealed).

Figure 3: Lateral tracking shot in *Oldboy* (2003).

As for the 360-degree panning long take, we see a similarly vast gulf of difference between *La Région Centrale* and *Blow Out*. Although both instances of the camera movement are coded as mechanized—in *La Région Centrale* via the sound of beeping and humming on the soundtrack and the occasionally visible shadow of the pre-programmed robotic arm on which the camera is mounted, in *Blow Out* via the unvarying pace at which the camera turns—the resulting effects are highly divergent. *Blow Out* has clear narrative content—the hero frantically searching his office for incriminating evidence that has gone missing—whereas *La Région Centrale* does not. And yet, a lack of pro-filmic "humanness" in the latter seems partially compensated for by the movement of the camera, whose erratic, even playful shifts in rhythm and orientation evince a sense of aliveness. By contrast, the camera movement in *Blow Out* is insistently de-synchronized from the activities of our human hero, who passes into and out of frame such that we only ever get glimpses

of his movements. The ensuing impression is of an unsettlingly nonhuman force operating behind-the-scenes, usurping control of the field of view where, under the regime of classicality, it would typically be the hero who tacitly "controls" the narrative by being the primary object of focus.

And we have only scratched the surface. Not yet discussed are variations in depth of field—e.g., the deep-focus long take compositions of *Playtime* (1967), or the [soft-focus opening of the single-take film *Victoria* (2015)](link) **(warning: clip contains strobing light effects)** that momentarily prevents us from telling what we are looking at, or cases in which depth of field shifts within a single shot, like in a [spectacular chase scene from *Satya* (1998)](link). Passed over are cases in which compositing techniques introduce impossible temporalities within a single shot, like the ["bullet time" effect in *The Matrix* (1999)](link) or an iconic moment in [*Chungking Express* (1994)](link) in which figures in the foreground seem to race by in time lapse while those in the background move in stuttering slow motion. Omitted are the felt differences between [the opening of *Touch of Evil* (1958)](link), which pointedly transcends the human body's earthbound limitations, and the handheld long takes in [*Children of Men* (2006)](link), which, without becoming literal point-of-view shots, hew tightly to the physical movements and limited perspectives of its characters.

This somewhat lengthy excursus into different types of long takes is meant to highlight the overwhelming number of variations that exist (which are never solely "long" but also mobile versus static, distant versus near, inflected by narrative context and the surrounding shots and scenes, etc.) and the fact that any generalized theory of the technique must account for this diversity through considering other factors beyond literal shot length (which, as mentioned, is itself already a relativistic concept). Later chapters will consider long takes in this holistic, expansive way, situating the technique within broader narrative, generic, cultural, and historical contexts and paying close attention to the formal specificities of each long-take iteration.

Bearing in mind this burden of nuance, I want to propose a tentative, general definition of the long take that I believe applies to all the examples mentioned thus far (and, it is the hope, many more besides) and emphasizes what I find most valuable about the technique as a heightened expression of cinema's realist automatism. Put simply, a long take is *a shot that is felt as long*. The "shot" part signals the long take's basis in cinema's first-order realist address: before a long take is "long," it is first and foremost a "take," a shot that, like all shots, denotes to some degree a physical reality that exceeds the human. All shots evincing a "live-action" aesthetic do this to an extent. Even the most photorealism-flouting works of ostentatious artifice, like *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972) or *Speed Racer* (2008), derive their effects crucially from the presence of image elements that look photographically captured and against which their gestures of artifice are "negatively" and dialectically defined; only against the *a priori* existence of cinema's realist automatism do these films register as anti-realist departures. What distinguishes the long take from other shots, however, is that it is "felt as long." The "felt" part is important: against any futile attempt at definitively calculating length in terms of numerical averages, I relativize the long take's longness vis-à-vis viewer response.[72] In my experience viewing each of the aforementioned long take examples for the first time, there was a point past which I experienced the frisson of medium reflexivity: I noticed the shot *as* long, and I realized that this effect was by design. I did not *choose* to attend to the shot's length the way I might consciously scrutinize an image as part of a close-

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[72] Here, I am interested less in empirical accounts of historical viewers who report particular shots as being long and more in a viewer-oriented stylistic framework in which form and affect are tightly entwined (or, rather, in which their entwinement is *foregrounded*, since the two are always entwined). In other words, I am not concerned with whether a given long take was "actually" felt to be long by an "actual" historical viewer (even then, there is no way to confirm the degree of correspondence between *reports* of length and the *felt* length subjectively experienced by the viewer). Rather, I propose an approach that takes as its starting point the premise that long takes are *subjectively* felt to be long, even if the specific thresholds of long(er) versus short(er) may vary from one historical viewer to another. Furthermore, I want to argue that this felt length occurs as a function of film style, which is in turn grounded in cinema's realist automatism.

reading exercise; rather, the shot's longness seemed to burst into my awareness from the outside, seizing my attention as spectacle. And this longness that seized my attention was precisely in relation to the operations of the camera: the continual recording and denotation of the pro-filmic world. When confronted by a long take, one is made aware of both the existence of physical reality and the mediation of the camera, the way in which the former circumscribes the latter and the latter expresses the former. The long take extends the realist dynamics of the film-shot-in-general— which comprises the technique's "raw material"—to the point where the shot's "shot-ness" becomes spectacular. Not unlike Gunning's cinema of attractions, the long take moves "outward" to confront viewers in a physicalized way, but, here, what is sensationalized is cinema's realist automatism and, by extension, physical reality itself.

As shots that are felt as long, all long takes give heightened expression to cinema's realist automatism, but they do not all do this to the same extent. In *Crazy Thunder Road* (1980), there is a scene in which a continuously rotating camera accelerates to the point where all onscreen objects and bodies dissolve into an illegible blur (a similar effect can be found in segments of *La Région Centrale*). Thanks to the shot's earlier moments in which camera rotation speed is slow enough for the viewer to discern a pro-filmic physical environment populated with recognizable objects and flesh-and-blood actors, the later speed-induced blurring still registers as "photographic," as originating from the photographic capturing of physical space. In this instance, I would argue that, despite its shift into total visual abstraction, the shot as a whole still registers as photographic and hence as expressing cinema's realist automatism. Had the long take begun in the realm of pure abstraction, however, then the effect would have been different. If the image had been illegible to begin with, sans any visual correspondence to what Stephen Prince calls the viewer's "real-world

visual and social experience"[73] and Mark Hansen refers to as "human perceptual ratios,"[74] then the technique would have been less aligned with cinema's realist automatism. In fact, I would not consider this instance a long take at all, at least not in the sense I have been describing. Even if, at the level of production, the technique had consisted of unbroken recording for a duration well above the shot length average of the film's contemporaries, this hypothetical instance would not have registered as a long take *for viewers*. Certainly, viewers may feel the duration of watching such an amorphous blur of movement, as one often does when viewing works of abstract experimental film, but this is not the same as viewing a "shot that is felt as long." A shot that is felt as long involves awareness of not just an image that persists, but an image that persists *in relation to* the physical world that it denotes. And for this relation to be legible, the world must be *recognizable as such*; it must correspond to some extent with the viewer's "real-world social and visual experience" and "human perceptual ratios" (see the discussion of Bazinian indexicality-iconicity in the Introduction). Of course, no single person has the same social and visual experience, with various constraints spanning physical ability and culturally- and historically-specific habits of viewing informing how each person perceives and engages with their physical environment. That said, I would argue that, within the century in which cinema became an institution and its realist automatism crystallized, some perceptual and cognitive baselines have tended to hold true for most people: object perception involving the visual delineation of figure and ground, and the phenomenological incorporation of these perceived objects into one's everyday social experience.[75] Chapter 2 will discuss this topic in more depth; for now, it is

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[73] Stephen Prince, "True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory," *Film Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 31, https://doi.org/10.2307/1213468.

[74] See Mark B.N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004).

[75] Scott P. Johnson, "Object Perception" in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of* Psychology, July 30, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.013.62 gives a useful overview of some key theoretical

sufficient to note that one's experience of the world depends on the perception and recognition of objects, and it is this sense of an "object"-ive world that grounds the impression of a shot as a shot, and, by extension, a long take as a long take.

To reiterate: even if a long take is, at the level of production, a literally "long" take in the sense of being quantitatively longer than all other shots that exist, it would still not *in effect* be a long take if it does not visibly and legibly denote a physical reality corresponding with the viewer's "real-world visual and social experience." We can also invert this argument: even if a shot had been composited from discontinuous image elements, whether through masked cuts or digital compositing, if the net perceptual effect is of the continuous recording of physical reality, then this instance would count as a long take, although it would perhaps be more accurate to say a long take *effect*. The long take from *Crazy Thunder Road*, in the way it starts with a relatively lucid framing of physical bodies in physical space and progressively blurs the image as the camera rotates faster and faster, dramatizes the spectrum on which all long takes fall between visual correspondence and visual abstraction.

"Spectra" in the plural would be more accurate: in addition to image resolution as a function of speed of camera movement, there are other factors like shot distance (as William Brown notes, an extreme close-up of a wall renders the wall's would-be familiar contours and textures illegible, thereby abstracting away from its "wallness"[76]), camera angle (a frontal, eye-level shot of a pro-filmic space is more likely to appeal to the average viewer's phenomenal experience than an overhead shot from half a mile above), and camera focus (a long take may be in shallow focus, deep focus, or some shifting combination thereof) that affect how and to what

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developments in the study of object perception. A driving premise of the article is that object perception is central to normative perceptual experience; in Johnson's words, "object perception is the raison d'être of visual perception" (2).

[76] William Brown, *Supercinema: Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), 30.

degree the viewer's attention is guided to the physical world denoted by the camera. Furthermore, it is not always the case that one part of a spectrum will necessarily thematize cinema's realist automatism more or less forcefully than other parts. For example, although the long take in *Crazy Thunder Road* invites the impression that image illegibility corresponds with an abstraction away from physical reality (the progressive structure of the shot, slow then faster and faster, affords the experience of legible photorealism dissolving into pure formal play, an interpretation buttressed by the overall film's interest in showy, experimental formalism divorced from narrative and dramatic motivation), in direct cinema and other filmmaking traditions that attempt to reproduce its stylistic tics (e.g., found footage horror or mockumentaries), less-than-lucid framing and resolution can function as marks of "authenticity," paradoxically affirming the reality of the physical environment it "fails" to fully and clearly capture (Figure 4). In this latter case, the ethos of mediation, of camera people actually having been on site to record the depicted events, in some ways takes precedence over clear visual presentation; within this filmmaking tradition, an "imperfect," murky visual style confers the sense that the filmmaking was unrehearsed and on-the-fly, subject to the same contingency inherent to reality itself. Within such works, a long take may be largely out-of-focus and off-center and still register as long *in relation to* the denoted physical world, perhaps *more so* than if the shots had lucidly presented key actions in a more classical, determinate way.

Figure 4: Visual murkiness as a marker of authenticity in *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).

In this case, the generic mode of direct cinema—which, more than most other modes, is connotatively tied to the idea of filmmaking as physical, on-site recording—makes the clear visual delineation of objects and bodies to some degree *inversely proportional* to indexicality. To an extent, what is more important than the viewer seeing *what* has been recorded is the viewer seeing *that* it has been recorded. That said, I would argue that this relation of inverse proportion only holds "to some degree," "to an extent." Even in extreme cases of the direct-cinema style in which

image-level abstraction approaches the fastest-rotating part of the *Crazy Thunder Road* long take,[77] a realist effect still depends on the viewer recognizing the filmic world as corresponding with her "real-world visual and social experience." For direct cinema's image-level obfuscation to achieve the impression of authenticity that it does, the "content" of the image needs to be legible to some extent. If the denoted reality is not recognizable *as* reality, then obfuscation would not register *as* obfuscation.

2.2 Bazin and Deep Focus

For a long take to thematize cinema's realist automatism via being "a shot that is felt as long," it must appeal to viewer's visual recognition of a physical world. Visual recognition underpins film history's most famous discussion of the long take: Bazin, in "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," describes those films that use long takes in concert with deep-focus photography as "[bringing] the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality."[78] As also suggested by his provocative declaration of "no more cinema" elsewhere,[79] the implication here is that a realist cinema based in long takes attenuates the presence of the image, diminishing the medium-in-itself in favor of the medium as a conduit to physical reality. Crucially, however, this reality is apprehended in and as "a relation" with the spectator

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[77] See, for example, this scene in found-footage horror film *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) in which the diegetic wielder of the film's own camera starts sprinting with camera in hand, causing the image to shake wildly (further obfuscating legibility in the name of conferring a sense of "authenticity" is the scene's dim lighting, which evokes the real-world contingency of "naturally" unreliable on-location light sources). Here, image blur is never total; although the visual field is highly unstable, we are still able to glimpse the recognizable form and texture of trees, grass, and a fellow runner up ahead, all of which subliminally assert the physical reality of the pro-filmic world through appealing to viewers' visual recognition.

[78] Bazin, "Evolution," 35.

[79] Bazin, "*Bicycle Thief*," 60.

who "enjoys" it, and the adjective "closer" suggests that the movement toward "no more cinema" is asymptotic. The ideal is never literally reachable, but it nonetheless illuminates the contradictory realist goal of reaching a reality without mediation and mediating this reality to be viewed.

As discussed in the Introduction, this contradiction is even more forcefully articulated in Siegfried Kracauer's writing. What Bazin offers is a closer consideration of specific film techniques that express cinema's realist vocation. The long take is the obvious example, but he also pairs it with the technique of deep focus photography, which makes all planes of the image in focus. For Bazin, it is not only length of time but depth of space that enables the spectator to enter "into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality"; it is the deep focus long take that most fully emulates physical reality's "ambiguity of expression," the encounter with which generates "a more active mental attitude" in the spectator, who is "called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice."[80] As should be clear from the direct cinema/found footage horror example, deep focus is not always required for a long take to function as a shot that is felt as long. That said, I would agree with Bazin that it is the deep focus long take which—across the greatest number of narrative, cultural, and historical contexts—most emphatically thematizes cinema's realist automatism, because it is the deep focus long take that most fully foregrounds the simultaneously subjective and objective nature of cinema's realist automatism.

It is true that one may—and in all likelihood does—"enjoy reality" in a way that experientially departs from the neutral, homogenized visual field suggested by the deep focus long take, which mechanically registers all pro-filmic bodies, objects, and spaces with seemingly equal dispassion.[81] In lived experience, our attentions shift from task to task and object to object, and

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[80] Bazin, "Evolution," 35-36.
[81] See Fay; Cahill.

each of us affectively and emotionally invests in certain people, places, and things more than others. Physiological perception—the forms and patterns that literally play across the retina—comprises not stable objects but a flux of shifting stimuli; as film theorist and perceptual psychologist Rudolph Arnheim notes in his critique of Kracauer's film theory, a materialist aesthetics would be closer to the world if it evoked the play of visual stimuli that precedes object recognition,[82] or what psychologist Jean Piaget calls a "'sensory tableau.'"[83] In line with this argument, one could claim that a cinema that "brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality" would involve long takes that inflect the "objectivity" implied by the shot's extended duration with "subjective" gestures like soft focus or rack focus that evoke how attention tends, in lived experience, to shift across or isolate parts of the physical environment. At an even greater extreme, one could claim that the long take is not the best realist technique at all, for the perceptual field is, à la Arnheim's argument, marked by heterogeneity, discontinuity, and chaos.

The more extreme argument is easier to counter since we have already postulated cinematic objectivity as a form of *address*. Although Arnheim's realist cinema may more faithfully evoke our *subjective* navigation of physical reality—the abstract experimental films of Stan Brakhage or Len Lye would likely fit his requirements—I would argue that these do not *thematize* the encounter between viewing subject and viewed world in the way I attribute to cinema's realist automatism. Like my earlier argument about how many affect-centered theoretical approaches strip the film image of its specificity as a denotation of physical reality, so I believe a "purely" subjective

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[82] See Fay.
[83] Johnson, 8.

cinema, even if in some sense "truer" to lived perceptual experience, does not *posit* the world and, hence, does not orient the viewer "outward" toward an excessive physical reality.

Addressing the former argument is a bit trickier, since it does seem to collide subjectivity with objectivity in a way that satisfies my conception of cinema's realist automatism. Provided the use of shallow and/or shifting focus does not interfere with the criterion of visual recognition, might the use of less-than-deep focus still align with a sense of the long take as expressing cinema's realist automatism? In fact, might the use of shallow and/or shifting focus together with the long take actually thematize this realist automatism *even more* by heightening the sense of the film medium *as* medium, thereby intensifying the subject-object tension already activated by the long take?

In a moment, I will discuss how the answer to the first question is yes—my extrapolation on the Bazinian deep focus long take actually *does* allow for the use of shallow or shifting focus photography (to a degree). That said, I want to first note that, although a shifting, amorphous, heterogenous visual field is a demonstrable component of lived perception, it does not tend to predominate our *conscious experience* of perception. As Edmund Husserl has taught us, when we navigate the world, what we tend to see first are objects, not hazy sense impressions.[84] Even if we *know* that the impression of objecthood emerges from a more protean, unformed sensory ecology, what we tend to perceive is still determinate physical things within determinate physical space. Even though what "literally" plays across our retinas is jumbled sensory flux, this "bottom-up" registration of stimuli is, as various studies have suggested, made coherent by "top-down" cognitive processes.[85] Lacunae and blind-spots in one's vision are subconsciously "filled in" by

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[84] See Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Penguin UK, 2018).

[85] As Karsten Rauss and Gilles Pourtois, "What is bottom-up and what is top-down in predictive coding?" *Frontiers in Psychology* 4, no. 276 (May 17, 2013): https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00276 note, "bottom-up" and "top-

the brain through a process of statistical inference/prediction,[86] such that the visual field becomes

consciously experienced as continuous and the objects as being both physically embedded and

distinct within this larger continuous field.

It is this sense of the physical environment as a navigable objective space—i.e., an integral,

continuous, concrete physical entity simultaneously apart from and containing the subject—that

attends and frames our conscious, pragmatic, and social lives, and it is this sense of the world that,

I contend, would be most prone to be recognized by the viewer if invoked in image form. Even if

the shallow/shifting focus long take may emulate aspects of lived perception more faithfully than

the deep focus long take, we do not usually "see" our own shifting attention in the way that we

discern a rack focus onscreen. Rather, what we experience tends to be a continuous objective space,

and, although much scholarship has valuably emphasized the disjunctions between the film image

and human vision,[87] I would argue that, even despite these discrepancies, it is the deep focus long

take that most fully thematizes the objectivity of the world. In simultaneously appealing to visual

recognition (our everyday experience of the physical world tends to be of the environment as

objective) and defamiliarizing this sense of objectivity by foregrounding the mediation of the film

camera, the deep focus long take forcefully posits a physical reality that both circumscribes and

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down" comprise two pathways within hierarchical models of human information processing: the former builds "up" from "detailed stimulus information" toward "higher-level" representational constructs, whereas the latter involves these constructs feeding back "down" to affect how lower-level stimuli are processed in the first place. The authors point out that this bi-directional model is reductive, but I believe that, heuristically, the top-down/bottom-up paradigm has value, especially since it seems to correspond with Kracauer's description of film as "'not [aiming] *upward*, toward intention, but [pushing] toward the *bottom*, to gather and carry along even the dregs'" (cited in Miriam Hansen, "Introduction," in *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, by Siegfried Kracauer [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997], vii, emphasis mine). In other words, the top-down/bottom-up metaphor evokes a collision between something akin to Kracauer's "formative" and "realistic" tendencies—between the mediating, structuring force of human language, culture, and representational conventions (top-down) and a material reality preceding and exceeding all of these (bottom-up). I would argue that, like Kracauer's film theory, the top-down/bottom-up model has the potential to activate a realist awareness of the interplay between subjectivity and objectivity.

[86] See, for example, Rajani Raman and Sandip Sarkar, "Predictive Coding: A Possible Explanation of Filling-In at the Blind Spot," *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 3 (2016): https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0151194.

[87] See, for example, Bordwell.

exceeds us, one in which we are embedded but which also extends farther and wider than the eye can see at any given moment.

This idea of reality as a physical, navigable arena vaster than ourselves is presupposed by Bazin when he discusses our capacity to "exercise at least a minimum of our personal choice" in the presence of a deep focus long take, which invokes the sense of the world as a larger-than-us field of potential action within which we have the freedom to look and move where we choose. Complementing the long take's extended duration with a field of view in which every plane in the image is in (relatively) equal focus, deep focus offers the sense of reality as an object apart from us, one that endures regardless of where our gaze falls. We can choose to look at the foreground, or the middle ground, or the background; no matter which we select, what remains palpable is the fact that we could have chosen differently. This *feeling of potentiality* is precisely what constitutes the affective force of cinema's realist automatism, attuning the viewer to the tension between perspective's limitations and reality's vastness.

2.3 On "Triadic" Method

At this point, it is important to clarify that, like with the long take, the "deep" part of deep focus is relative, with the distance between "deep" and "shallow" comprising a continuum rather than a hard and fast distinction. Even if every plane within an image were not in perfect focus, it is possible that enough details across multiple image planes have sufficient resolution such that a *deep focus effect*—i.e., a palpable sense of physical reality as comprising synchronous planes of depth preceding and exceeding where the viewer chooses to attend at any given moment—is achieved. Of course, "enough" and "sufficient" are themselves highly relativistic terms contingent

on individual viewers' attentional inclinations as well as cultural and historical context, but I believe there is a point past which a deep focus effect can be attained for most viewers across most contexts without every plane of depth being in "literally" perfect focus. Furthermore, I believe this deep focus effect can be overdetermined for most viewers through pairing it with other techniques and compositional strategies—the long take being the obvious example, but also depth staging, or what David Bordwell terms "recessional staging": the choreographing of dramatic and narratively pertinent actions "into depth," across multiple image planes such that the viewer's eye is guided from foreground to background or vice versa.[88] These auxiliary techniques can help overdetermine a deep-focus effect even in cases where every image plane is not literally and perfectly in focus. For example, even if one plane in the background of a shot were blurred, extended shot duration could help counterbalance this shallowness of focus by giving viewers more time to notice the existence of multiple planes in the image; this sensitivity to depth can be further enhanced by having a figure running from background to foreground or a projectile being launched into the distance. Furthermore, it could be that a deep focus effect is achieved *more* forcefully in this case than in a "perfectly" deep focus shot lacking the reinforcement of extended shot duration and/or depth staging.

This logic applies to the long take as well: even if a long take were, in terms of literal length, not especially distinct from the shot-length average of its contemporaries, an impression of length can be overdetermined by the shot's pairing with deep focus photography and particular strategies of staging. Deep focus presents a wealth of visual detail denotatively linked to an "objective," physical reality before the camera, thereby encouraging more rapid viewer recognition of the camera's operations and hence of the shot as durational. In other words, I would argue that

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[88] See Bordwell.

the use of deep focus tends to encourage quicker viewer identification of a shot as long, to make a shot *feel* longer. An accelerated attunement to shot duration—and, hence, the possibility of a shot being felt as long even if it might not "literally" be so vis-à-vis shot-length averages—can similarly be achieved through staging. A ten-second shot of a vehicle veering off a road, flipping nine times as glass and metal are flung into the air would likely feel much longer than a classically conventional ten-second tracking shot of two characters walking and talking (Figure 5); the former spectacle and its association with heightened physical risk makes the passing time feel weightier and more pronounced, since each additional second of film time palpably corresponds with a second in which the stuntpeople could have been injured during production or the vehicular choreography could have gone awry (the car might not have flipped the requisite number of times, the pieces of the car might not have been dislodged in a photogenic fashion, etc.)

Figure 5: The manifest danger and virtuosity of this car stunt in *Casino Royale* (2006) makes each passing second of the shot feel weightier.

In other words, the felt physical virtuosity of the pro-filmic spectacle (as a function of the viewer's referential knowledge about what is difficult and dangerous in real life) helps enhance the impression of the shot as long. Conversely, it is the long take—its heightened expression of cinema's realist automatism and the resulting sense of spatiotemporal continuity conferred upon pro-filmic events—that makes the spectacle feel especially spectacular, and, moreover, in a way that underscores the fact of physical reality. The palpably, hyperbolically physical nature of the vehicular stunt underscores the long take's denotational correspondence with physical reality; at the same time, it is also the long take's tacit, denotational correspondence with physical reality that makes palpable and hyperbolic the physical reality of the vehicular stunt. It is this triadic, mutually reinforcing convergence between the long take, deep focus photography, and pro-filmic staging that grounds my conception of the long take and comprises the methodology of my case studies in subsequent chapters. Not all the long takes I look at are in perfect, crystalline deep focus at all times, and not all my examples are quantitatively among the longest vis-à-vis their contemporaries. Nonetheless, I believe they are emblematic of the deep focus long take ethos in the way they mobilize the interaction between these three elements in a way that thematizes cinema's realist automatism.

2.4 Coda: Some Reflections on Ideology and Objectivity

In this chapter, I argued for the value of the long take as a thematization of cinema's realist automatism, which simultaneously addresses the eye of the viewer and posits a physical reality that exceeds it. Given the persistence of absorptive classicality as the dominant regime in contemporary mainstream cinema and, simultaneously, the emergence of attractions and post-

continuity as both aesthetic practice and theoretical model—classicality tends to suppress the materiality of the image, whereas attractions/post-continuity tends to deemphasize the specificity of cinema's realist address—I argued that the long take as a heightened, second-order expression of film's first-order realist automatism counteracts both tendencies, reactivating awareness of the dynamic between subjectivity and objectivity that inheres in all film images. Taking into account the variety of long takes that exist—which vary as a function of narrative, cultural, and historical context, as well as the idiosyncratic inclinations of individual spectators—I posited a tentative definition of the long take as a shot that is felt as long, with the "shot" part pointing back to cinema's first-order realist address and the "felt as long" part describing the technique's affective force, its status as a spectacular expression of this first-order address. I identified the centrality of visual recognition to my conception of the long take, since, for a shot to be recognized as a shot to begin with, the captured world must be recognized *as* the world by the viewer, corresponding with her "real-world visual and social experience." Without visual recognition, the relationship between filming camera and filmed world on which cinema's realist automatism depends would be illegible. Toward developing an account of cinema's realist automatism that incorporates the element of visual recognition, I turned to the technique of deep focus photography, which, after Bazin, I believe pairs felicitously with the long take because, together, they posit a world that is both apart from us and vaster than us. I added the qualification that a deep focus *effect* and a long take *effect* do not respectively require perfect focus in all image planes or quantitatively exceptional shot length, but, rather, emerge from the triadic convergence of long take, deep focus, and pro-filmic staging. My main case study, explored over the next two chapters, investigates the dynamics of this triadic convergence within a specific narrative and generic context (zombie cinema), which, I argue, even further intensifies the long take's thematization of cinema's realist

automatism. If cinema is a "first-order" denotation of reality and long take a "second-order" technique that thematizes the former, my cast study could be described as "third-order" thematization that further foregrounds film realism at the level of narrative.

In closing, I want to address the potentially troubling implications of an objectivity that posits the world as homogenized, evenly valenced, navigable, and existing outside subjectivity, and to discuss why I still believe the long take has value as an eco-critical technique. Positing physical reality as objective (indeed, even as "reality" to begin with) risks occluding the ideological and material forces that inform the presentation of any "world"-view; one of the most valuable lessons learned from 1970s film theory is that there is no such thing as a neutral view or conception of reality. All realisms stabilize at the intersection of historically and culturally specific value systems and technological affordances; one of the historical dangers of cinema's realist address, its ethos of mechanical registration, is that it seems to reproduce the world passively, automatically, and instantaneously, sans human intervention. The temporality of ideological work—e.g., the persistence of anthropocentric visual codes inherited from Renaissance perspective and the incorporation of these codes into the design of film cameras themselves[89]—is elided, thereby encouraging uncritical reception of the photographic image as presenting the world "as it is." Per Roland Barthes, photography comprises a "message without a code": its seeming, material emergence from reality "itself" imbues even second-order connotative meanings with a sense of credibility, the impression of having originated from somewhere outside signification.[90] With film, the added element of motion tacitly reinforces the viewing subject's sense of power

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[89] See Jean-Louis Comolli, "Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field," in *Cinema Against Spectacle: Technique and Ideology Revisited*, trans. and ed. Daniel Fairfax (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).
[90] See Barthes, "The Photographic Message."

over the pro-filmic world (and, via the film image's visual correspondence with her lived physical reality, the world "in general"), her seeming ability to go anywhere and see anything. This "transcendental" subject position[91] conflates precisely the two poles of objectivity and subjectivity that I considered eco-critically valuable only if held in tension; it manifests a world with apparent neutrality, effacing the way this view has been *a priori* composed for the camera and the viewer's eyes. This literal as well as figurative "world"-view (i.e., how the world is seen shapes how it is conceived, and vice versa) has historically had insidious effects, from the reinforcement of colonialist conceptions of space as mapped, conquerable, and capturable[92]; to the construction of space as strategic and "sighted" in a conflation of cinematic and military vision[93]; to the naturalization and universalization of a white, heteronormative, middle-class sense of "everyday life" (the kind most widely and frequently depicted on mainstream screens) at the expense of alternate, minority communities and experiences.[94]

While these well-founded concerns are important to keep in mind, I believe the long take tends to resist such tendencies because it posits objectivity without conflation. It proposes a physical reality apart from the human but, in being a shot that is felt as long, also foregrounds the camera and the act of recording. In other words, at the same time that it seems to denote an objective physical reality, the long take also guides attention to film as a *structuring force*, a selective apparatus through which this reality is made manifest. The long take posits reality through positing mediation, and it posits mediation through positing reality. "Reality" and

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[91] See Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Winter 1974-1975): https://doi.org/10.2307/1211632.

[92] See, for example, Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: RosettaBooks, 2005); Nick Jones, *Spaces Mapped and Monstrous: Digital 3D Cinema and Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

[93] See Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (New York: Verso, 1986); Thomas LaMarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[94] See, for example, Richard Dyer, "Gays in Film," *Jump Cut*, no. 18 (August 1978): https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC18folder/GaysinFilmDyer.html.

"mediation" are kept in tension, thereby countering the illusion of smooth conflation on which imperialistic spatial and visual imaginaries depend.

Figure 6: The "exploded view" effect was popularized by *The Matrix* (1999), a film that (figuratively as well as literally) "revolves" around ever-greater mastery of a virtual environment.

The argument could subsequently be made that foregrounding the long take in itself may *marginally* contradict imperialistic logics but, in other respects, reinstate a sense of anthropocentric power and control that offsets any gains made in the former area. Lisa Purse, writing on the trope of the "exploded view" in which a roving virtual camera is used to restore a sense of synoptic mastery to the viewer confronted with a pro-filmic array of disaggregate visual elements (the trope's namesake is the classic engineering diagram that presents the deconstructed pieces of a contraption as if they were suspended in midair) (Figure 6). In this instance, the long take is noticed by the viewer, but the net effect seems to be a heightened sense of the viewer's (or, in Dan Harries'

neologism, "viewsers,"' a viewer who is also a user in our age of new media[95]) power and control, her haptic ability to move around and physically manipulate the objects before her.[96] Evoked in this mediated rotating of three-dimensional objects is the logic of video games and immersive media in which the viewser interfaces with a mapped, volumetric environment, often to the point of not only moving an avatar through a simulated world but toggling between different views and controlling where the virtual camera points. Although the digital long take does not afford the same level of interactivity as a video game, it could be argued that the technique of the exploded view aesthetically cites gamic interactivity and its incorporation of a self-reflexively mediated aesthetic (it is *through* a movable virtual camera, along with clickable menus and loadout screens, that the user interacts with the virtual world), thus reproducing an analogous sense of viewser sovereignty. In many ways, the exploded view instantiates what Bolter and Grusin diagnosed as contemporary society's obsession with both immediacy and hypermediacy—both a desire to be *closer* to some impression of truth or reality (in new media, the lure of interactivity promises ever-greater, ever-more precise control of a virtual environment completely at the user's disposal—i.e., to which she is *near and engaged* rather than distant and removed) and a proliferation of media forms whose status as media is self-reflexively foregrounded rather than suppressed.[97] The immediacy-hypermediacy tension seems in many ways to be analogous to the reality-mediation tension of the long take, suggesting the ease with which the latter can (and does) become incorporated into the former. If contemporary culture already traffics in fantasies of nearness to reality on the one hand and a proliferation of medium reflexivity on the other, will the long take

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[95] See Dan Harries, "Watching the Internet," in *The New Media Book*, ed. Dan Harries (London: British Film Institute, 2002).
[96] See Lisa Purse, "Layered Encounters: Mainstream Cinema and the Disaggregate Digital Composite," *Film-Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (June 2018).
[97] See Bolter and Grusin.

have the affective force that I am attributing to it? Is there not the risk that the long take's denotation of physical reality will be co-opted for the purpose of reinstating anthropocentric viewser sovereignty within immersive media environments? Might not the long take's correspondence to "real-world social and visual experience," instead of forming the grounds for a more expansive and open-ended engagement with the world to develop, be used to lubricate the viewer's further immersion into virtual worlds in which she seems to be in total control?

My response to this legitimate concern is threefold. The first is to point out that cinema's realist automatism is so culturally entrenched that photorealism continues to be reference points for the design of many (if not most) mainstream video games[98] and digital cinema.[99] Chapter 4 will elaborate upon this argument, but I believe that the persistence of cinema's realist automatism—especially in the heightened, self-reflexive register of the long take—continues to reference a physical world apart from the human, even within a new media regime that centers the viewer as sovereign subject. My second observation is that thematization is not an all-or-nothing affair. It occurs in degrees. As such, although some long takes may posit cinema's realist automatism less forcefully than others, this diminished potency is not grounds for dismissing the long take technique's general capacity to thematize cinema's realist automatism. I maintain that, even if to different degrees, *all* long takes point toward the nonhuman excess of physical reality. And thence to my third and final point: my definition of the long take in some ways already anticipates the above criticism, because it *a priori* requires that only those takes that are *felt as long*—and, specifically, felt as *filmic shots*—count as long takes to begin with. A long take in the

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[98] See, for example, Keith Stuart, "Photorealism – the future of video game visuals," *The Guardian*, February 12, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/feb/12/future-of-video-gaming-visuals-nvidia-rendering.
[99] See Prince; Julie Turnock, *Plastic Reality: Special Effects, Technology, and the Emergence of 1970s Blockbuster Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

age of hypermediacy will have different formal constraints than a long take in the age of classical Hollywood because what is needed for a shot to be felt as long varies depending on historical and cultural context. The contemporary examples that I focus on are, once more, extreme—i.e., those cases that, even *given* the new media context delineated by Bolter and Grusin and the widespread interpellation of the viewser as sovereign by various media, would likely register as long.

3.0 On the Surface of Things

The previous two chapters posited the long take as a heightened expression of cinema's realist automatism. I argued that this technique foregrounds both physical reality and the act of filming—both the "objectivity" of a material universe that exists apart from the human and the *"*subjective" mediation of this materiality for human eyes. In doing so, the long take thematizes the subject-object tension of all film images. I proposed that this thematization hinges on the long take as a shot that is felt as long, a conception that accounts for both the technique's status as a filmic "shot"—a recognizable denotation of physical reality—and the way it provokes a feeling of duration in the viewer, who is subsequently prompted to notice the shot *as* a shot. Because the impression of a long take's length varies as a function of myriad contextual factors, I specified a methodological approach built on what I called "triadic convergence," which involves examining not only the literal length of the long take but its pairing with other formal aspects like depth of focus and pro-filmic staging. This methodology accounts for the fact that, even if a shot were not especially long vis-à-vis the average shot length of its contemporaries, it may still *feel* long if paired with other techniques such as deep-focus photography and depth staging.

Over the next two chapters, I will build on this conception of the long take by examining its deployment within the television series *Black Summer* (2019-2021), which further thematizes cinema's realist automatism by pairing the technique with the figure of the zombie.[100] I contend

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[100] Along the lines of what Caitlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) has argued, *Black Summer*'s status as a streaming series is non-negligible. Unlike the classical film viewer, the streaming spectator views moving images in contexts vastly different than the traditional movie theater—at home within one's living room, for example, or on one's laptop with headphones within a public space—contexts whose specific spatial and material configurations invite and create different kinds of spectators. Furthermore, many of these shows were designed *with* the intention of being viewed in

that the show's preponderant use of long takes, when coupled with the zombie, makes palpable the fact that both cinema and the zombie exhibit what I am calling a "surfacing address": a tendency to posit the materiality of *visible surfaces* over against invisible depths. With cinema, this surfacing address lies in what Siegfried Kracauer identified as film's tendency to "cling to the surface of things,"[101] which eschews Enlightenment valorizations of "higher-level" thinking and human interiority in favor of material things "in themselves," among which the human being is unexceptional. When captured on camera, the human body registers as ontologically deprivileged, "potentially just another thing among things, subject to the technology's indifference."[102] In addition to "surfacing" pro-filmic objects, the automatic nature of photographic registration also sidelines the presumed role of the artist as a creative "mind" operating behind-the-scenes; internal creative processes become subordinated to the external technological operations of the filmic apparatus. With the zombie, surfacing occurs in the figure of a formerly "human" character who has been vacated of all reason and will, leaving behind the corporeal husk of their former self— the human body as pure meat. Cinema and the zombie form a felicitous pair because, when made to collide, they doubly underscore the thingliness of the human body. Film's visual thingifying of the human body finds conceptual affirmation in the spectacle of the zombie, for whom the body as thing is connotatively all there is to see. Conversely, the zombie's defamiliarization of the body's abject materiality is doubly underscored by film's surfacing address, which only captures "surface" elements anyway. Through analyzing a scene in *Black Summer* in which a long take

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these non-theatrical spaces, hence informing the works' formal and narrative construction as well. That said, I would argue that, even after these differences are accounted for, cinema's realist automatism extends into the domain of streaming, which continues to traffic in photorealistic live-action moving images that tacitly appeal to cinema's subject-object dialectic.

[101] Kracauer, l-li.

[102] Fay, 201, herself drawing on Kracauer's realist film theory.

tracks a lone zombie after all conventionally "living" characters have exited the frame, I contend that the figure of the zombie *reframes film's realist address as surfacing address*. I argue that the zombie, when made to collide with a long take, defamiliarizes cinema's surfacing address, which, in turn, accentuates the zombie's own surfacing address, highlighting the figure's own potential as a heuristic device orienting the viewer toward nonhuman realities. In a sense, both cinema and the zombie "surface" by "making dead": both ontologically emphasize outer body over inner life, with cinema revealing the human body to have always already belonged to the general materiality of the world and the zombie implying that this persistent materiality is what enables the decaying body to walk the earth long after the immaterial "mind" or "soul" has departed. And yet, a coming-to-life, an *un*-deadness, is central to both. Cinema's realist automatism, though drawing on the medium of photography, also traffics in the impression of movement, a spatiotemporal past "reanimated" in the present through the playback of static frames. For cinema, the significance of mechanicality lies not only in the technology of the camera—the automatic nature of photographic capture that underpins the creative choices of the filmmaker—but also in the technology of projection, which lends images an ostensible life of their own, an impression of vitality and phenomenological immediacy. Cinema can be—and historically has been—discussed in terms of none other than the *dead brought to life*, a metaphor that resonates with the zombie in obvious ways. The zombie similarly is not merely "dead"; it does thematize the status of the human body as pure meat, but a corpse could do this just as well. What is distinct about the zombie is its positing of *both* the human body's thingly status *and* the process of (re)animation—specifically, a reanimation divorced from humanist conceptions of agency, intention, and will. In the zombie, we find an unlikely figure for vital materialism, which hinges on the notion that nonhuman materialities are animated by forces beyond our comprehension; from a human perspective, the

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things set in motion by such forces appear to be moving "automatically" and "by themselves," in the sense of possessing a vitality radically alien to anthropocentric notions of agency and causality. Both cinema and the zombie embody a sense of re-animation as automatic movement, and I argue that this shared aspect is foregrounded in *Black Summer*'s cinema-zombie collision. Furthermore, I contend that the vital materialist implications of this collision are crucial for our era in which ecological catastrophe emerges from extractive worldviews that treat the environment as a static, passive "standing-reserve" waiting to be tapped.[103] If the "surfacing address" induces defamiliarization, heightening awareness of materiality as being divorced from human agency and intention, re-animation counters the tendency to conceive of this materiality as mute or inert, thematizing the ways in which the world is set in motion by its own vitality, even if we cannot discern or fully comprehend it. I argue that the juxtaposition of these two vectors—materiality as pure exterior surface, nonhuman animating forces as a certain "depth" that defies apprehension— generates a hermeneutic posture wherein all we can do is "read" the surfaces for signs of a different, radically other vitality. I contend that this hermeneutic posture is apposite for the Anthropocene, and that both cinema and the zombie—especially when made to collide, as they are in *Black Summer*—have the potential to inspire this posture. In thematizing the human body (and, by extension, worldly materiality in general) as pure material surface, cinema and the zombie simultaneously emphasize the depths of nonhuman vitality, the animating forces that (to use a filmic metaphor) lie behind-the-scenes and beyond the frame of human reference. *Black Summer*, in placing cinema and the zombie in dialogue, causes this surface-depth dialectic, its vital

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[103] See Martin Heidegger. "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977).

materialist significance, and the hermeneutic posture that ensues to be more forcefully underscored.

The form and affect of the cinema-zombie collision will be explored over the next two chapters, with the present chapter focusing on cinema's and zombie's surfacing addresses (their "making dead" of subjectivist and idealist conceptions of the human-world relation) and the next chapter emphasizing the vital materialist implications of their collision. I begin the current chapter by examining cinema's and the zombie's surfacing addresses individually, looking at how each already reorients the viewer away from Enlightenment conceptions of psychologized interiority toward the thingly materiality of the human body. I explore how cinema's realist automatism simultaneously extends and defamiliarizes our ordinary phenomenal experience of objects, in such a way that guides attention to the dynamics of surface and depth. I then turn to the emerging field of zombie theory to conceptualize the zombie as a surfacing figure, and, afterwards, demonstrate how *Black Summer*'s collision of cinema and the zombie thematizes their shared surfacing structure. Specifically, I close read a scene in which a long take is paired with a lone roving zombie as the chief narrative focal point, sans other "living" characters. I argue that this scene metonymizes the show's larger philosophical project of "zombifying" the human body—of shifting ontological weight to materiality and exteriority—and that this project is inextricable from the series' preponderant use of long takes.

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3.1 Cinema's Surfacing Address

We have already looked at how cinema's realist automatism confronts the viewer with the facticity and objectivity of physical reality, epistemologically and affectively reorienting her toward excessive nonhuman materiality in a way that is apposite for the Anthropocene. Here, I want to explore how the idea of realism-as-objectivity presumes and accommodates a notion of objectivity-as-surface and hence realism-as-surface, and how this sensitivity to surface—and, correspondingly, to depth—characterizes what I am calling cinema's surfacing address.

Reality's objectivity, its existence apartness from us, is expressed through the objects that constitute it—i.e., visually recognizable entities that, in their felt distinctness from the subject, manifest a distance between themselves and her. For an object to be perceived as an object, it must be perceived as existing independently of the subject. Implicit within this sense of distance is a tension between visible surfaces (the side of the object facing the subject) and invisible depths (the object's inside and other side); this *surfacing* of the visible world is a fundamental component of object perception. In everyday life, objects tend not to be thought of as surfaced in this way; they tend to be reflexively incorporated into the subject's phenomenal experience. I argue that film defamiliarizes the surfaced nature of objects by adding another degree of surfacing. Casting its "anthropologically indifferent gaze" onto the pro-filmic scene, the film image alienates the viewer from the objects it captures, introducing a spatiotemporal distance that forecloses the possibility of smooth phenomenological incorporation; as Barthes put it in reference to photography, the "here-now" of the image exists in tension with the "there-then" of the captured scene.[104] Maurice

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[104] See Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) has discussed the way in which filmed objects appeal to the viewer's phenomenological

Merleau-Ponty has shown us that phenomenological experience is structured around potential actions.[105] When action is both appealed to and foreclosed—as is the case with filmed objects, which resemble objects one might interact with in everyday life but are spatiotemporally displaced through filmic mediation—the naturalized subject-object relationship itself becomes defamiliarized. Because these objects lack auratic immediacy and cannot be physically engaged with, the viewer becomes sensitized to the objects as visual, as seen from a distance and a particular perspective. She becomes attuned to the way the side of the object facing her appears (i.e., surfaces) while other parts recede, all as a function of her own situated point of view.

I mentioned that reality's objectivity is expressed through the objects that constitute it. This is true in lived experience, since, in being a part of physical reality herself, the phenomenological subject does not typically perceive reality "itself" as its own, unitary object. Phenomenologically, a sense of distance and distinctness exists only vis-à-vis the objects with which she interacts, not to the general, existential situation in which she finds herself and which might be called "reality."[106] Cinema introduces a different dynamic. Given its basis in mechanical recording, cinema confers the sense that all image elements were equally captured by a dispassionate and indifferent lens. This ethos of passive, technologically mediated indexicality, of "simply"

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intentionality but also frustrate it, preventing her from actually touching or acting upon these objects. As a result, her phenomenological inclination toward the screen is redirected at herself in an act of self-sensing, of sensing herself sensing. This kind of deeply embodied self-sensing effected by the filmic mediation of recognizable objects is precisely the type of heightened, self-reflexive affective response I believe the long take has the capacity to induce (more on which shortly).

[105] See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012).

[106] Certainly, the subject can *conceptualize* herself as being separate from reality—various forms of skepticism and solipsism have attempted precisely this—but, phenomenologically, she remains inextricably situated within it. What makes cinema so powerful is the way it seems to *present this detachment from reality in phenomenological terms*, something Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 67 picked up on when he attributed to photography the capacity to "maintain the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it," a viewpoint that various exegetes of Cavell have linked to skepticism. See, for example, Jennifer Fay, "Surfacing the Inner life: New Sincerity and the Cinema of Appearance," Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference, roundtable discussion, Remote, March 31, 2022.

registering that which was "already there," ontologically unites all imaged objects as being "of" the same physical reality. If the spatiotemporal distance cinema introduces between image and referent intensifies the everyday phenomenological surfacing of objects by prioritizing the realm of the visible, the mechanical nature of recording further surfaces the world, framing not only objects but reality "itself" as surfaced, as being holistically and fundamentally alienated from the viewing subject. In an act of *ontological flattening*, the specificity of particular objects is subsumed into the homogeneity of a uniformly surfaced reality, which itself becomes an object.

Both the surfacing of objects and the surfacing of reality "itself" are key components of cinema's surfacing address. Without objects, reality itself would not be legible as reality. Akin to what I argued about visual recognition in Chapter 1, it is only through the denotation of recognizable objects that reality itself is denoted as reality. A completely abstract, object-less image, even if materially indexing a physical, pro-filmic scene, would not register as being a surfacing *of* reality if it did not contain objects that "flesh out" the visual scene by appealing to viewer's phenomenological intuitions about three-dimensional space (this point will be elaborated upon momentarily, but it is important to reemphasize that surface and depth are dialectically conjoined. Though surface "flattens" the sense of the manifest world, it also tacitly hinges on the assumption of other dimensions that recede from view and "round out" the sense of a world beyond the immediately visible). At the same time, filmed objects would not be surfaced to the degree they are if they did not appear as *filmed*—i.e., as captured by cinema's mechanical, indifferent, spatiotemporally distancing lens that attributes to all captured objects the ontological weight and equivalence of reality itself. In this interaction between recognizable visuality and mechanical mediation, we see a version of the iconicity-indexicality interplay—discussed in the previous two chapters—at work.

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Here, I want to briefly clarify that I am not presuming phenomenal experience to be a timeless universal which film simply "reflects" or to which it unidirectionally "appeals." As various philosophers of technology have noted, our being-in-the-world is always already shaped by our relationship to technology, which comprises not just technical apparatuses but entire "technological" ways of thinking and perceiving that orient us toward the world in particular ways within particular historical and cultural moments. Although human object-perception obviously far precedes the emergence of cinema's realist automatism, it is also undoubtedly the case that, over the past century in which it became the culturally dominant form of visual media, cinema has shaped phenomenal experience in profound ways. In the way it asserts the objectivity of the world through the mediation of a mechanical, nonhuman apparatus, film encourages a worldview—or, in Heidegger's parlance, a "world picture"—in which the object-ness we had already phenomenally experienced is doubly underscored.[107] Films do not posit reality's objectivity only at the moment of their individual viewing; rather, they collectively shift the epistemological horizon of the larger culture, which in turn molds phenomenal experience in subtle, often unconscious ways. Phenomenality may have a bodily basis that seems to precede the "higher," ostensibly epiphenomenal domain of culture, but culture also feeds back "down" to transform the body, inculcating bodily habits that condition how we attend to and assign meaning to the world. Films are not only seen; as an automatism, institution, and cultural force, they collectively encourage *filmic ways of seeing*. This clarification of the film-phenomenology relationship invites analysis in the converse direction as well, which has already been alluded to but bears repeating: just as phenomenal experience cannot be conceived of as a fixed *a priori* that film simply reflects,

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[107] See Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977).

so film cannot be thought of as a technology emerging *ex nihilo* to "affect" phenomenal experience. Although the apparatus theory of the 1970s has been rightly criticized for being overly structuralist and universalizing, one of its still-valuable lessons is the notion that no technology is neutral. As theorists like Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean-Louis Baudry, and others haves shown, even if film technology presents itself as being mute and "scientifically" self-evident, it in fact contains various biases and inclinations in its design.[108] Comolli, for example, points out that film cameras were built to reproduce the perceptual norms of the human eye, and although his analysis importantly extends to the ideological implications of this reproduction, for our present purposes, it is sufficient to note that cameras were, to a degree, historically designed based on visual codes appealing to ordinary human perception. Even though several film theorists have valuably cautioned against equating the camera's eye with our own, I would maintain that there is still a significant degree of correspondence in that film tends to present the visible world as phenomenal and objective. In other words, just as film shaped phenomenal experience, so phenomenal experience shaped film (even as both are shaped by other forces, such as the dominance of empiricist worldviews in the early twentieth century). Film evokes a phenomenal experience already made filmic, and phenomenal experience was always already a reference point for film's design. When I discuss film as appealing to phenomenality, it is under the assumption that the two are always already entwined.

Despite this entwinement, however, and at the risk of stating the obvious, the experience of viewing a film still departs from non-filmically-mediated perception. Especially with long takes that spectacularize the iconicity-indexicality of the film image, cinema's realist automatism forcefully mediates and defamiliarizes phenomenal experience, surfacing the captured world in a

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[108] See Baudry; Comolli.

way and to a degree absent from everyday object perception. This surfacing is what Kracauer was alluding to when he attributed to cinema a tendency to "cling to the surface of things," over against the realm of "ideology or spirituality."[109] For him, photography and film are fundamentally "indeterminate," conveying as they do "unshaped nature itself, nature in its inscrutability."[110] This idea of inscrutability evokes a surface/depth metaphor—inscrutability suggests at once an attempt to read, a surface to be read, and depths of meaning that elude apprehension. Similarly, when Jennifer Fay paraphrases Kracauer's film theory as involving the camera transforming the human figure into "potentially just another thing among things,"[111] the preposition "among" has a horizontalizing vector, seeming to flatten and lateralize the human figure so that it no longer stands out among the array of things of which it is a part. This flattening corresponds to the flatness of the film image, which seems to index the camera's own "flat" gaze (its "flattening" of the visual field into a two-dimensional image in which the unruliness of the third dimension has been suppressed, rendering all elements equally "there" and imaged) but also "flat" in the sense of "impassive" or "indifferent," which resonate with Kracauer's use of "inscrutable."[112] Even though, as Comolli points out, film often reproduces depth effects consonant with and emerging from older visual traditions like linear perspective,[113] it is also the case that film has an affinity for surface, for positing a world marked by the flatness of imaged and inscrutable things.

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[109] Kracauer, l-li.

[110] Kracauer, 20.

[111] Fay, 201.

[112] I do not have space to elaborate here, but I think it would be fascinating and productive to explore what happens to film's surfacing address in the case of stereoscopic cinema, which has historically sought to restore the third dimension of lived space while still retaining the planar logic of two-dimensional cinema. See, for example, Jones; William Paul, "The Aesthetics of Emergence," *Film History* 5, no. 3 (September 1993): https://www.jstor.org/stable/3815145; Kristen Whissel, "Parallax Effects: Epistemology, Affect and Digital 3D Cinema," *Journal of Visual Culture* 15, no. 2 (2016): https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412916654512.

[113] See Comolli. LaMarre went so far as to align these depth effects with what he called "cinematism," or a cinematic mode of viewing the world. See also Chapter 1's discussion of depth staging.

"Things" is a key term for Kracauer when describing physical reality, as when he talks about cinema's capacity to guide us "on paths that wind through the thicket of things"[114]; it is this quote that forms part of the title and epigraph for Lesley Stern's article on cinema's affinity for thingliness.[115] In some ways, "things" is a better term than "objects" for what I am discussing. As Bill Brown points out in his analysis of the meanings carried by "things" across literary and cultural history:

> We look *through* objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.[116]

Things simultaneously appeal to the eye of a subject—i.e., for something to be a "thing," there must be one for whom a thing is singled out as such—and resists incorporation into established circuits of meaning and utility. Objects, in their presumed completeness, identifiability, and nameability, have their place and use; things, on the other hand, both confront the beholder and recede from view, asserting their own reality while denying further specificity regarding what

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[114] Kracauer, 309.
[115] See Lesley Stern, "'Paths That Wind Through the Thicket of Things,'" *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2001): https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344271.
[116] Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 4, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344258. Emphasis on "through" mine.

they are or do. Ellen McCallum put it beautifully when she called things "pronounial."[117] At once indexical and nonspecific, the word "thing," like the pronoun "it," points to a particular entity and can just as well point to something else; a chair, a concept, and a sensation can all equally be "things," provided their chair-ness, concept-ness, and feeling-ness be discarded in favor of their shared status as thingly otherness vis-à-vis the naming subject. A crucial point of resonance between thing theory and my interest in surfaces lies in Brown's account of how objects become things when they break, and of how we look *through* objects and *at* things. The figure of the broken tool was famously characterized by Martin Heidegger as an occurrence that can effect a shift from "readiness-to-hand" to "presence-at-hand"—from viewing a tool in terms of its utility to confronting its material thingliness once its incorporability into larger systems of usefulness short-circuits.[118] For Don Ihde, the phenomenon of breakage inaugurates what he calls a "hermeneutic relation" between subject and object. Where there had previously been an "embodiment relation" in which the object is unthinkingly incorporated into the subject's activity as a prosthetic extension of her being, breakage leads to an object becoming opaque, or at least translucent.[119] Whereas the subject had previously looked *through* the object, reflexively incorporating it into her phenomenologically and culturally predisposed ways of being and acting, she now looks *at* the object, which has become a thing. Things, it can be said, induce an awareness of *surface*, of the plane of contact between subject and world. Whereas the subject's relationship to objects is one of incorporation and familiarity, her relationship with things is one of distancing and

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[117] Ellen McCallum et al., "Things Normally Unseen," Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference, roundtable discussion, Remote, March 31, 2022.

[118] See Harman.

[119] See Don Ihde, "The Experience of Technology: Human-Machine Relations," *Cultural Hermeneutics* 2 (1974): https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537750020030. One example of the embodiment relation is when a habitual driver, rather than perceiving her cars as an object separate from her, kinesthetically feels *with* the vehicle, treating it as a prosthetic extension of her body.

defamiliarization. As Brown put it, things foreground the very subject-object relation itself, which resonates with my conception of the long take as a thematization of the subject-object tension that inheres within cinema and our general encounters with the world.

When I use "objects," it is not against "things." Rather, I believe the two terms emphasize different aspects of our encounters with physical reality. As suggested by Brown's account of how objects can become things and vice versa, I believe the two are categorically contiguous with each other, capable of oscillating from one to the other at a moment's notice. In fact, I think "objects" and "things" could be usefully construed not as entities but vectors—object*ification* and thing*ification*, marked by a continuum between object and thing, wherein a thing can become more "objectlike" and an object more "thinglike." This categorical openness and flexibility motivate my often seemingly interchangeable use of "object" and "thing"—in the same sentence, I may talk about an object's "thingliness," or attribute to things a certain "objectivity." My aim is not to muddy the terminological waters with careless diction, but, rather, to suggest the flexible, multimodal nature of our encounter with physical reality, which manifests itself sometimes as more objectlike (like in ordinary phenomenal perception, which, as Edmund Husserl has noted, is marked by an inability to experience the world *other than* as being composed of objects[120]), and sometimes as more thinglike (as in the initial jolt of encountering a never-before-seen phenomenon in the world, whose startling novelty prompts awareness of the act of seeing itself and the fundamental otherness and excess of reality vis-à-vis our normative categories of reference).

If "thing" offers a sense of reality as other, as a hermeneutic surface that interrupts our attempts at signification and incorporation, what does "object" offer? For me, the value of "object" lies in its invocation of depth, without which, ultimately, "surface" would also not have meaning.

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[120] See Harman.

In fact, I would argue that thingliness-as-surface is already contaminated by objectivity's spatialized address; the moment one points *to* something in pronounial fashion, one also tacitly affirms the existence of some reality *past* it—some beyond, some depth other than what is being indexed. This spatialization is, I would argue, inevitable. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have demonstrated, language is metaphorical in that it is always grounded in human embodied experience, emerging from dispositional qualities of the body that we take for granted; the English phrase "up in the air," for instance, likely draws on the physio-spatial intuition that, if an object were cast high into the sky, it would not be close enough for one to pick up and inspect by turning it around in one's hand, hence the idiom's semantic association with uncertainty.[121] I contend that lived experience similarly informs our understanding of the word "thing," which is inevitably inflected by the spatial logic of ordinary object perception.

Graham Harman, in his "object-oriented ontology," conceives of objects in the world as being both *sensual* (appearing to the senses) and *withdrawn* (receding beyond the purview of sense-ability and knowability). For Harman, reality is made up of objects marked by a certain twoness—the "sensual" object and "sensual" properties on the one hand, and the "real" object and "real" properties on the other. I do not have space to parse the complexities of Harman's argument here, but, broadly, it can be said that, for Harman, the realm of the "sensual" is that which is available to be "sensed" by other objects, the surface manifestation that forms the medium and means by which two objects come into contact with and affect each other. The "real," on the other hand, is the fullness of each object's identity, including the parts that exceed the realm of the sensual. For Harman, objects are fundamentally withdrawn in the sense that the entirety of their being always extends deeper and farther than how they manifest to us (and to each other) at any

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[121] See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

given moment, even if such manifestations are simultaneously all we can ever know about these objects.[122] To assume otherwise would be to slide into solipsism, for which no theory of reality is possible. For him, objects extend deeper than the eye can see and the mind can conceive; they are "objective" in the sense of possessing an independence from human perception and phenomenological intentionality. Harman's conception of objects is broader in scope than mine,[123] but his description of the sensual and the real resonates with my discussion of surface and depth: both concern the dynamic between a medium of encounter and realities that recede from view. If thingliness is valuable in the way it interrupts the ordinary circuits of phenomenological incorporation, foregrounding the indeterminacy and excess of naturalized phenomena, objectivity contributes a sense of the "depths" of reality that exist regardless of whether the human subject is there to perceive it.

3.2 The Zombie's Surfacing Address

Shifting our discussion to the zombie, we find a figure marked by what Sarah Juliet Lauro terms a "semiotic 'prolixity'": an ability and propensity to flexibly signify different things in different contexts.[124] Originating as a figure in Haitian folklore that materialized in response to colonial enslavement, the zombie has, since migrating to the West, come to "stand for" and

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[122] See Harman.
[123] For Harman, immaterial concepts and experiences can also be objects, whereas I am limiting discussion to phenomenal objects, albeit objects whose object-ness is informed by larger ideologies and worldviews.
[124] Sarah Juliet Lauro, "Introduction: Wander and Wonder in Zombieland," in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), ix.

perform cultural work in various disciplines, from allegorizing blind consumerism to embodying psychoanalytic conceptions of desire to animating philosophical questions on the existence of consciousness.[125] Despite these various applications and inflections, the zombie has, since the formative release of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), tended to be associated with a set of fairly stable characteristics: a decaying body, a drive to consume flesh, and a loss of agency and so-called "higher-level" thinking. These three features converge in the way they foreground the abject materiality of the human body, revealing what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes as "the perishable carnality that we hide from ourselves," the fact of "our own thingly existence." For Cohen,

> The zombie is our window to the visceral world to which we have always belonged and into which we are absorbed as food for growth. It is a world we close off from ourselves yet yearn to see. We know that we are something more and something less than human, yet we hide that knowledge from ourselves."[126]

Cohen's language resonates with the surfacing, ontologically flattening work of cinema's realist automatism discussed in the previous section: just as film's "indifferent" lens and fundamental "nonselectivity"[127] posit the captured human body to be just a "thing among things" continuous with the general materiality of the world, so the zombie shows us that we have "always belonged" to the "visceral world," capable of consuming and being consumed and, like any other

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[125] See, for example, Meghan Sutherland, "Rigor/Mortis: The Industrial Life of Style in America Zombie Cinema," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2007), https://doi.org/10.1353/frm.2007.0008; Ola Sigurdson, "Slavoj Žižek, the Death Drive, and Zombies: A Theological Account," in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Jen Webb and Samuel Byrnand, "Some Kind of Virus: The Zombie as Body and as Trope," in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Robert Kirk, "Zombies," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Spring 2023), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/zombies/.

[126] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Grey: A Zombie Ecology," in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 389.

[127] Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body: Theory out of Bounds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993): 31.

organic material, of decaying. Both cinema and the zombie defamiliarize the human in uncanny ways, positing the ontological precedence of bodily materiality over against Enlightenment conceptions of the human as being based in consciousness, agency, and reason.[128] As Lauro and Karen Embry put it,

> The terror that comes from an identification of oneself with the zombie is, therefore, primarily a fear of the loss of consciousness. As unconscious but animate flesh, the zombie emphasizes that humanity is defined by its cognizance. The lumbering, decaying specter of the zombie also affirms the inherent disability of human embodiment—our mortality. Thus, in some sense, we are all already zombies [...] for they represent the inanimate end to which each of us is destined.[129]

James McFarland similarly credits the zombie with effecting a crisis of spectatorial identification, emphasizing that the creature's troubling fusion of human figure and subjective vacancy has ramifications that reverberate out from the psychological to the social. Writing on *Night of the Living Dead*, McFarland notes that:

> The uncanny vacancy of the zombie figure as a version of human self-representation, its troubling fusion of aggression and vulnerability, violence and decomposition, in short, of life and death, called into question audience identification itself as a strategy of cinematic, and beyond this, of social comprehension. The limit to human empathy that appeared when Romero's ghouls staggered

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[128] The trope that zombies must be killed using headshots suggests a lingering sense that zombies might not be totally "thoughtless," brain-dead creatures; there persists the notion that the brain (or even mind) is the center of "life," even among the undead. The possibility of zombies' vestigial humanity is amply explored in Romero's work, chiefly in *Day of the Dead* (1985), in which a scientist attempts to activate past memories and rudimentary human behavior within a zombie. That said, I would argue that, even if there may linger traces of Enlightenment humanism in how zombies have been imagined, by and large, the figure still registers as enacting a pointed shift from "mind" to "body" when compared to conventionally "living" characters.

[129] Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism," in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 397.

out of the Pennsylvania countryside and onto movie screens made the entire process of psychological recognition of the cinematic human being problematic.[130]

Bearing a broadly "human" form while also foregrounding the abject corporeality typically suppressed within humanistic conceptions of the ideal social subject, the zombie effects a crisis of identification wherein usual attempts at empathetic projection only partially succeed and short-circuit as a result. In lived experience, we reflexively project our sense of our own bodily dispositions and capacities (what Merleau-Ponty calls our individual "body schemas") onto other people, such that we tend to unthinkingly conceive of them as subjective "selves" like us and ourselves as "others" capable of being viewed from the outside.[131] This embodied process is the means by which the phenomenological subject identifies with others, and it precedes and underpins all forms of self-perception, social organization, and meaning-making, including Enlightenment conceptions of the cognizing subjective self as the ontological ground of identity. This Enlightenment ideology, however, has tended to retroactively efface embodiment; identification with the other is tacitly imagined as "leaping over" or at least subordinating the realm of the material, ostensibly involving an encounter between two subjectivities rather than two bodies, even though the latter forms a key precondition for the experience of the former. If the phenomenological interchange between two embodied entities comprises a *primary* identification, the seeming encounter between two dematerialized subjectivities might be said to be a *secondary* one that is speciously treated as primary.[132]

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[130] James McFarland, "Philosophy of the Living Dead: At the Origin of the Zombie-Image," *Cultural Critique* 90 (Spring 2015): 30, https://doi.org/10.5749/culturalcritique.90.2015.0022.

[131] See Merleau-Ponty.

[132] My use of "primary" and "secondary" identification is different than Christian Metz's usage in *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1977), but there are resonances. I am talking about phenomenal experience and he about cinema, but, as I have discussed, there are affinities between the two. Metz's primary identification refers to the viewer's

With the zombie, what happens is, I contend, an experience of primary identification that is violently *stopped short* of being subsumed into secondary identification. The Enlightenment subject tends to treat embodied interchange between themselves and the other (à la Merleau-Ponty's body schema) as a mere, taken-for-granted stopover to intersubjective resonance, such that the "subjective" part tends to be the only aspect that achieves conscious recognition (when it is at all). With the zombie, stopover abruptly becomes destination when primary, bodily identification fails to carry over into a secondary, subjective one. Confronted with the zombie, the viewer experiences the first step of phenomenological alignment—the activity of body-schema-projection vis-à-vis a figure that physically appears human—but finds the usual smooth passage to intersubjective resonance blocked, since the zombie connotes a lack of a subjectivity with which the viewer can identify.[133] This experience of affective blockage comprises what I am calling the zombie's surfacing address, which defamiliarizes precisely the "middle," mediating step of the stopover itself—i.e., the material fact of the body which precedes and underpins human sociality and subjective agency. What results is the uncanny experience of a *partial* identification—*both* a

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identification with the image and the camera-perspective it embodies, while his secondary identification refers to identification with characters in the film. Primary mediates secondary; it is through first affectively encountering the image that the viewer can then psycho-emotionally invest in the characters represented within it. Similarly, the realm of the affective and the bodily is primary in phenomenal experience, mediating the secondary emergence of social interchange and a sense of personhood; here, the realm of the social is akin to the world of narrative, with both being organized by codes that turn bodies into subjects. Reframing an argument I made in Chapter 1, classicality's suppression of the image downplays the primary for the secondary, much as, in ordinary social interchange, the primacy of the body is suppressed in favor of the secondary realm of the social. Because cinema in many ways structurally resembles phenomenal experience, defamiliarizing the primary within cinema can lead to the defamiliarization of the primary within phenomenal experience, a process that the figure of the zombie helps facilitate.

[133] This connotation emerges from the viewer's paratextual knowledge of the zombie as a cultural figure with a set of conventional characteristics, but also from the viewer's perceptual encounter with the zombie itself, which bears outward "signs"—e.g., loss of language use, lack of response to affect, missing social cues—that suggest the absence of higher human functioning. See Simon Orpana, "The Spooks of Biopower: The Uncanny Carnivalesque of Zombie Walks," in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 306. This alignment of the zombie with sociolinguistic disability has clear ableist biases that I will address in more detail in the next chapter. For now, it is sufficient to note that the zombie does tend to carry the connotation of subjective vacancy and that this connotation does tend to crystallize at the intersection of the paratextual and the aesthetic.

projection of one's body schema onto the figure of the zombie, which solicits such a projection due to its familiar human figure, *and* a failure of this projection to follow through smoothly into full subjective identification, given the zombie's connotation of vacated subjectivity. In other words, the process of secondary subjective identification "breaks" in the way that a machine might break in Ihde's account, thereby inaugurating a *hermeneutic relation* with the human body and the mechanisms of identification themselves. In short-circuiting the pathway from primary to secondary forms of identification, the zombie effects a felt awareness of the primary *as* primary. Moreover, because the viewer continues to kinesthetically identify with the zombie's human-like physicality even after having been subjectively alienated from it, she is compelled to feel the primacy of the body in *herself* as well.[134] In other words, at the same time that the zombie prompts the viewer to see the human body as material surface, it also sensitizes her to her own status as material surface. In soliciting then interrupting the process of phenomeno-social identification, the zombie throws the whole process into bold relief and inspires self-reflexivity about one's own body as "brute" matter, anterior to and in excess of our status as conscious, thinking, social subjects.

There is, I contend, a resonance between this experience of phenomenological "surfacing" in the zombie and the felt "surfacing" that the filmic automatism confers onto the imaged scene, and I believe this resonance is thematized when film and the zombie are made to collide in a pronounced way. Specifically, I am interested in the pairing of the zombie with the technique of the long take, and how, in directing cinema's surfacing address toward a subject—the zombie—that is already felt to be "surfaced," this pairing induces awareness of cinema's and the zombie's

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[134] In this self-sensing, we find an analogue of the self-sensing that Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* attributed to film phenomenology, as discussed in Footnote 104. Therein lies a key resonance between cinema's surfacing address and the zombie's and a major reason why I find the two to be complementary automatisms.

individual surfacing effects. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the long take, by itself, already foregrounds the material fact of the filmic shot and its denotative relationship to physical reality. This observation can be reframed in terms of cinema's surfacing address: the long take, in accentuating the denotative image, also accentuates cinema's surfacing address, prompting heightened viewer awareness of the camera's affinity for the "surface of things" and, concomitantly, of reality itself as comprising both visible surfaces and withdrawn depths. What the zombie adds is another level of thematization. Specifically, I contend that, in being a figure that is connotatively "all body," all surface, the zombie comprises an apposite figure for cinema's surfacing address.[135] It is as Priscilla Wald said about the pod people from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), who are functionally zombies in their juxtaposition of familiar, congenial human exteriors with the implication of subjectively vacated interiority:

> "Since [Jack Finney's source novel] *The Body Snatchers* was a visual story— a story that connected the deceptiveness of appearances to a horrifying loss of humanity— it was an *ideal vehicle for cinematic adaptation*. Where *The Body Snatchers* described a mental contagion that turned out to be the result of physical possession, the 1956 film showed what that looked like."[136]

With respect to cinema's surfacing address, I would characterize the zombie as a *redundant* figure: confronted by the emphatically surfacing force of the long take, the zombie is asked to offer what it connotatively already does: the material facticity of bodily surface as *all there is to see*. I contend that the zombie possesses a kind of obscene visuality, which, in shifting ontological emphasis onto visible surfaces, seems to present itself *too directly* for the camera's surfacing gaze.

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[135] Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 85.
[136] Priscilla Wald, "Viral Cultures: Microbes and Politics in the Cold War," in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 48-49, my emphasis.

The camera's indifferent lens, equally surfacing all that it captures, suddenly finds itself confronted by a figure that seems to anticipate its own operations. If the camera posits, "surface is what (literally) matters," the zombie seems to respond, "I know." I refer to this contact between two surfacing addresses a "collision" not merely out of idiomatic convention, but because I believe it actually bears the affective jolt of a collision: the zombie does not simply reproduce cinema's own operations in microcosm but seems to "look back" at the camera. In offering up its own bodily surface back in the direction of the camera's own surfacing address, there results a *double thematization* of material surface. I contend that this collisional double thematization, which is most acutely felt when the zombie is paired with the long take, has a rebounding effect, reverberating back out to thematize cinema's and the zombie's surfacing addresses individually. In being confronted by an object that looks back at it, cinema and its surfacing address become defamiliarized; conversely, the already-foregrounded bodily surface of the zombie becomes all the more underscored when caught in the surfacing gaze of the long take.

In the following section, I examine how *Black Summer* stages such a collision between the long take and the zombie, and, furthermore, how this collision is inextricable from the series' larger narrative and philosophical project of "zombifying" the human body—i.e., ontologically de-centering the human so that it becomes just another thing among things, part of the general materiality of the world.

3.3 *Black Summer* and Zombification

Debuting its first season in 2019 and the second in 2021 and riding the wave of pop cultural

interest in zombies catalyzed by the blockbuster success of *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022), *Black*

Summer covers narrative territory well-trodden by over four decades of zombie cinema. The show

opens in media res after a zombie outbreak has ravaged the United States, leading to martial law

and, eventually, full social breakdown as survivors take to the streets. Tracking different bands of

characters as they navigate the treacherous terrain of the spaces that used to constitute society,

scavenging for resources and fending off antagonistic parties driven by the same agenda of

survival, the show evokes countless forebears in the zombie genre. What sets *Black Summer* apart

is the fact that, in this case, "tracking" is literal. One of the most striking and immediately apparent

features of the show is its widespread use of long takes—specifically, handheld tracking shots that

weave through dangerous and desolate environments alongside and among various characters.

Although more classical *découpage* is used—shot-reverse shot editing during some conversation

scenes, for example—tracking shots abound to the point where, I would argue, they come to

determine the viewer's impression of the show's overall aesthetic, which is marked by a feeling of

intense immediacy, a sense of the fundamental physical and perceptual limitations of the individual

human body and its phenomenological purview. This impression is tied to the way long takes

highlight the situatedness of the physical camera and its movement through physical space. The

longer the camera records, the more the act of recording and the camera itself are foregrounded. It

is true that, up to a point, the tracking shots in *Black Summer* are immersive, moving *with*

characters and, in a functional imitation of classical continuity editing, tracking *with* narratively

relevant actions, such as panning to an object that catches a character's eye. That said, the sheer

length of the shots is such that the presence of the camera is consistently emphasized, literally

framing the viewer's access to the filmic world as being contingent on the operations of the film camera and its relation to pro-filmic physical reality.

In other words, *Black Summer* is exemplary as a work that thematizes film's realist automatism, underscoring the tension between the subjective act of filming and the objectivity of the filmed world. Furthermore, I argue that, when captured in these shots whose duration emphasizes the physical reality of the pro-filmic space, characters become increasingly defined by the material facticity of their bodies and their physical movements. Reinforcing this sense of the body's immediate, present-tense thingliness is the way the show minimizes exposition on characters' backgrounds and "feelings," thereby attenuating a sense of inner life in favor of the body as pure exteriority. Furthermore, the show employs a cross-cutting scheme that, rather than offering the illusion of a seamless, coherent field of parallel narrative actions, reinforces a sense of fragmentation. Each episode is broken up into vignettes separated by title cards, and these intra-episode segments are often not presented in chronological order; one segment would often double back upon a narrative event depicted in a previous segment but present this event from a different point of view. Through this fragmentary narrative structure, *Black Summer* scrambles any synoptic sense of a shared spatial arena between geographically dispersed characters, foregrounding instead each band of survivors' enmeshment in their immediate, embodied existential situations.

One could argue that, even before any zombies appear, the show already "zombifies" its human characters, emphasizing their status as physical bodies defined more by material exteriority and the mechanics of movement than subjective interiority or sociality.[137] The narrative and

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[137] "Sociality" here refers to a dematerialized sociality conceived of as an encounter between subjective individuals rather than objective bodies (see my earlier discussion on primary and secondary identification). I make this clarification because, in the next chapter, I will suggest that *Black Summer* gestures toward an alternate sociality that is attuned to the vibrant materiality of bodies and things.

thematic conflation of humans and zombies is a well-worn trope in zombie cinema—think of the numerous films in which human characters become more monstrous and bloodthirsty than their undead counterparts, or how zombies' movements through erstwhile societal spaces have been used to allegorize human characters' own, as with the brain-dead zombie "consumers" in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978)—but I am unaware of any other work that so fully and systematically conflates the human and the zombie at the level of form.[138] Captured by the long take's indifferent lens, both human bodies and zombie bodies are, in *Black Summer*, foregrounded first and foremost *as bodies*, masses of flesh moving through terrain that, in some ways, has itself been ontologically "flattened": the distinction between city and countryside, "upper" and "lower," hilltop mansion and backwoods cabin have broken down in the wake of general societal breakdown. In *Black Summer*, the prevailing sense is of a great materialist leveling, the collapse of familiar social spaces—grocery store, suburban home, elementary school, city square—into their status as material things and of all individuals into the physical reality of their bodies.

The post-apocalyptic spectacle of formerly civilizational spaces and accouterments being emptied of their original social function is, in itself, nothing new, comprising well-established

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[138] *Black Summer* is not the first work to pair zombies with long takes, but, to my knowledge, it is the one that does so most systematically. The series' biggest contender in this respect is Shinichirou Ueda's *One Cut of the Dead* (2017), a film that seems at first to be a relatively straightforward, single-take zombie film that, at the halfway point, turns into a playful depiction of the *making* of the single-take film we had just seen. Though successful as a loving homage to the labor, craft, and contingency of amateur filmmaking, I believe this focus on *human* work results in cinema's realist automatism—the film image's denotation of nonhuman physical reality—to not be foregrounded as forcefully. Whereas *Black Summer* "plays it straight" and lets the felt duration of the shot creep into the viewer's awareness and accumulate affective and existential weight, *One Cut of the Dead*, in explicitly depicting the act of filmmaking, thematizes the whole ensemble of filmmaking within which the physical camera is just one part among many. Although such representations of below-the-line artistic work have value from the standpoint of labor advocacy, I believe the net spectatorial effect falls short in the manner I identified with overly "ecological" film theories in Chapter 1: the film image's specificity as an image *of* the world is downplayed in favor of the image as just one element within a larger material ecology. Although such an "ecological" perspective functions as an important corrective to overly formalist conceptions of the film image as dematerialized, ahistorical, and hermetically sealed, I also believe it does not account enough for how the film image, *as* a denotation of physical reality, impresses itself upon the viewer affectively and conceptually.

visual iconography within the zombie genre (and post-apocalyptic fiction more generally). What is striking about *Black Summer* is its formal articulation of this theme, the way it ties this theme to the specific affordances of the film camera and its particular relationship to physical reality. By foregrounding cinema's realist automatism and the ontological primacy it accords physical reality, *Black Summer*'s long takes powerfully suggest that the aforementioned ontological leveling does not occur after the fact but, rather, is something that was always already the case. They present an ontologically flattened and surfaced material world that precedes and exceeds the moment in which we identify someone as an "individual" or a "character" or territorialize the environment into particular "spaces" or "settings" imbued with social/narrative significance. Before society, there was materiality. And yet, as alluded to at the start of this chapter, neither is narrative negligible; it is not insignificant that the *formal* effect of ontological leveling occurs within a work that is *narratively* about zombies. Although there are many films that, in being structured around mobile tracking shots, can also be said to "zombify" their characters, it is *Black Summer* that specifically frames the tracking shot—and cinema in general—*as* zombification. It is within the generic frame of the *zombie movie* that the long take's effect of ontological flattening is coded *as* zombification, as resonating with zombie cinema's propensity for collapsing the human-zombie distinction.

And where this resonance between film "form" and zombie "content" manifests most forcefully is, quite intuitively, in shots of zombies. Although most of the film's tracking shots are tethered to the movements of "living" characters, such that the process of zombification tends to happen more subtly and in the "background" of the viewer's phenomenal experience of the film (as mentioned, however, long takes in themselves already have a zombifying effect, so "middle ground" may be more accurate), the show features a couple moments in which the tracking shots cling to the appetitive roving of a lone zombie. Occurring pronouncedly within the first episode of

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each season as if to lay out a philosophical and aesthetic mission statement for subsequent episodes, both scenes de-center the presence of "living" characters, either through their complete omission or in tracking a zombie's movements after these characters have exited the scene. This pointed elision of characters with whom the viewer can comfortably and subjectively "identify" results in the uncanny experience of double surfacing discussed in the previous section. Sticking to the material surface of a figure that already surfaces the body, these moments also "rebound" to foreground the surfacing work of cinema and the zombie individually. I contend that these two moments, in their spectacularly uncanny nature, train the viewer to notice and consider the structural affinities between film and zombie. Furthermore, attunement to these affinities reverberates out to inform how she engages with the rest of the show, which abounds with both long takes and zombies. Sensitivity to the surfacing, realist dynamics of the show, in turn, can reverberate out even further to encourage sensitivity to film's and the zombie's ecocritical potential more generally, *across* works and the broader culture. It is in this outward reverberation, this expanding affective and conceptual attunement, that I locate the value of filmic thematization, and I believe that, in the case of *Black Summer*, the epicenters of this outward reverberation are these two moments that pair zombie with tracking shot.[139]

I now want to examine one of these instances in more detail, exploring how, exactly, this scene generates an experience of zombification and surfacing.

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[139] This vision of outward reverberating affect, in which a single affective encounter has widespread phenomenological and social effects, was inspired by Denson, *Postnaturalism*, which demonstrates how a single, concrete technological transition—the replacement of the handloom by the power loom on the factory floor—can reverberate out to impact all areas of each worker's life and society as a whole, given the way the changes in physical comportment demanded by the new technology begets micro-changes in corporeality even outside the workplace; these micro-changes, in turn, invest other encounters and tasks with a different affective charge, and so on. In a similar way, I contend that *Black Summer*'s cinema-zombie collision can reorient how the viewer conceives of and affectively experiences long takes, zombies, and cinema more generally, and, by extension, how she conceives of and affectively experiences her own relationship to nonhuman reality.

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3.4 Agency, Choreography, and the Virtuosic Tracking Shot

The first episode of *Black Summer*'s second season opens with a title card that reads "Luke and Sophie" (Figure 7). Returning viewers will know that this onscreen text is descriptive: though initially cryptic, the text's referent will be revealed in the following episode segment. This revelation, however, comes only afterward; what appears first is the text, white in color and floating in a plain black background that seems to metaphorize the semiotic void within which the contextless text appears. In making the deferral of meaning a key part of its structure (as noted earlier, each episode is broken up into segments demarcated by title cards), the show as a whole foregrounds the material immediacy that precedes signification: the simple fact of the text, of white on black.

Figure 7: The opening title card of *Black Summer* Season 2, Episode 1 (2021).

The first "shot" proper then appears, showing a man siphoning gasoline from an abandoned car into a dirty KFC paper bucket. We recognize him from Season 1: his name is Lance, and, in the finale of that season, he had been separated from the band of survivors with whom he had been traveling (and not even for the first time; that this scene focuses on this particular character who has a propensity for isolation is significant, given the show's formal and thematic interest in the parochial, situated nature of phenomenal experience). One thing, however, is for certain: he is not "Luke and Sophie." As mentioned, this is not the first time *Black Summer* has delayed clarifying the referent of a title card, teasingly prompting the viewer to search the subsequent episode segment for candidate denotata, but it *is* one of the only times that the show has done so with a character, making the disorientation more pronounced. In the show, title cards containing names are usually followed quickly by fairly unambiguous shots of the human name-bearer. Here, however, the combination of a familiar character and unfamiliar names (not to mention that Lance is one person and "Luke and Sophie" two) results in a semiotic dissonance that defamiliarizes the process of "identification" itself. The title cards have failed to "identify" the character that appears, and, furthermore, suggest that Lance is not the one with whom we should "identify." This moment disentangles the act of identification—as signaled by the title card text—from the manifest, material person of Lance; a tension emerges between the act of naming and the indeterminate reality being named, whose existence apart from anthropocentric designations becomes foregrounded. Although he is the character whom the viewer first sees and with whom the camera is first aligned, the title card places pressure on this fact, guiding her expectation elsewhere in curiosity and anticipation. Who are Luke and Sophie? When will they show up? What does Lance have to do with all this? Within seconds of the scene's opening, two key, seemingly contrapuntal motifs have emerged: the presentness and facticity of a materiality that exceeds signification—the

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"here and now"—and the anticipatory and imaginative investment in an "elsewhere" beyond what is immediately visible, represented, and identifiable. There is, in other words, something of an oblique, anticipatory echo of the surface-depth dialectic—the relationship between what is surfaced/present/visible and what is withdrawn/absent/invisible—that the series foregrounds through its collision of the long take and the zombie.

As Lance drives away in his newly fueled vehicle, he comes across a woman in the road who claims to be pregnant and begs him to take her along. He sits for a couple beats, likely weighing moral obligation against prudent survival strategy. The former apparently wins out, and he unlocks the passenger-side door. Clambering in with tears of ostensible gratitude, she wraps her arms around him and surreptitiously unlocks the door on his side. The driver's-side door suddenly flies open and a gunshot rings out. Lance keels over, choking on his own blood, as the woman hysterically berates her fellow traveler for an unnecessary show of violence. Dismissing her protests, the new character throws a dying Lance out of the car but, after driving just a few meters, accidentally crashes it. The two new passengers—whom the viewer will likely gather are the "Luke and Sophie" of the title card—exit the vehicle in a fluster, but, before they can get their bearings, they are alerted to the dreaded sound of the murdered Lance reanimating as a zombie. What follows is a propulsive chase in which the undead Lance ravenously pursues the couple and, after the two split up, continues on Luke's heels. The pursuit, captured using kinetic handheld camerawork that largely tracks behind Lance as he careens after his prey, is a spectacularly stunts-driven affair involving bodies crashing through walls and doors and, in the sequence's choreographic centerpiece, Lance clinging to the roof of a speeding car (a different, working one) before being launched off when this second vehicle also crashes.

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Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this scene is the way it unfolds within what appears to be a single, unbroken "shot." As discussed in the previous chapter, what counts as "long" is contingent upon myriad contextual factors; here, numerous such factors converge to overdetermine the experience of protracted length. These include the pointed refusal to "cut *to*" something where reverse shots would customarily be used (e.g., when the sound of a murdered Lance coming back to life becomes audible and Luke and Sophie turn to look at him, the film follows their eyeline via whip-pan rather than cutting *to* the approaching figure); the choreographic virtuosity of the captured actions (as mentioned at the end of Chapter 1, virtuosic choreography makes duration more quickly and potently palpable because each passing segment carries more "weight," resulting from viewers' intuitive and referential knowledge about the physical and mechanical difficulties of choreographic coordination); and the sheer, quantitative length of the whole "shot," which encompasses the entire scene and runs over seven minutes (i.e., very long even when measured against the entire documented history of long takes in narrative cinema). I put "shot" in quotations because there are numerous cuts that have very clearly been masked—e.g., moments that briefly fade to black by having the camera duck into a character's jacket, or the convenient preponderance of whip pans within which it is easy to hide a cut—but these shots have been stitched together to maintain the general impression of a single, unbroken take; when the camera swerves into the jacket, the character is in the process of moving left, so he continues moving left in the next shot to give the illusion of uninterrupted recording. If anything, the not-quite-seamlessness of the shot-masking further defamiliarizes the long take, whose conspicuousness might otherwise have been overshadowed by the immersiveness and propulsiveness of the scene's kinetic, handheld style and the action-packed nature of the pro-filmic events. Akin to what Robin Wood has observed about

Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), in which cuts are conspicuously "hidden" in a similar fashion,[140] the semi-seamfulness of the "masked" cuts in this segment are simultaneously subtle enough to avoid becoming full-fledged *découpage* (which would have impeded the long take's overall effect) and pronounced enough to foreground the constructedness of the long take. In disclosing the presence of disparate shots that have been *almost* perfectly joined into the semblance of a single spatiotemporal unity, these semi-hidden cuts prompt the viewer to notice all the more the *desire for and attempt at a long take effect*, the *act* of smoothing over seams to maintain the impression of a single, integral image. As a result, the long take effect and its objectifying, surfacing address are more forcefully thematized.

In this scene, protracted shot length foregrounds the camera's indifferent lens, which surfaces the captured bodies such that any sense of agency and subjectivity becomes subordinated to the "brute" reality of physical bodies and physical movement. An additional, already alluded-to aspect further accentuates the interchangeable physicality of human and zombie bodies, and this is the element of choreographic virtuosity. Lindsay Steenberg and Lisa Coulthard have noted the prevalence of what they call the "choreographic gaze" in contemporary action cinema, in which the spectacle of screen fighting—influenced by various dance traditions—is increasingly organized around "beats" and set to music that percussively enhances the sense of rhythmic structure. I would add that "beats," as discretized moves incorporated into a larger choreographic arrangement, extend beyond dance-like fight scenes; the logic of choreography can be seen in the way particular maneuvers occur across films, such as the use of a pot of piping hot oil or water as a weapon in kitchen-set fight scenes. Coulthard rightly notes that the choreographic gaze is fundamentally intertextual; it is because certain beats recur across films that they become more

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[140] See Wood.

recognizable *as* "beats," *as* "choreographic" in the first place.[141] The *Black Summer* scene appeals to an intertextual action-cinema lexicon of "beats" in this way, thus accelerating viewer recognition of the action's choreographed nature; the act of clinging on to the roof of a speeding vehicle, for example, is a highly recognizable genre of stunts-driven set piece that has stabilized through appearance in films like *The Fast and the Furious* (2001) and *Death Proof* (2007) and harks back even further to transnational genre traditions like 1980s Hong Kong crime films and Italian *poliziotteschi* of the 1970s, both of which are renowned for trafficking in daredevil vehicular stunts. That said, I would also like to expand on Steenberg and Coulthard's account by arguing that, in much action cinema and certainly for the *Black Summer* scene, it is not only rhythmic musicality or intertextual referentiality but the immanent, intuitive physicality of a particular onscreen action—its appeal to viewers' innate sense of what is physically dangerous and mechanically difficult "in real life," what is risky and challenging to get "just right" in a safe and successful manner—that encourages its legibility as an action beat. This impression of virtuosity crystallizes at the intersection of the diegetic and the extra-diegetic, emerging from a sense of both the physical embattlement/empowerment of characters within the narrative world and the extra-diegetic act of staging such a spectacle for the camera, courtesy of stunt performers and stunt coordinators.[142] The reason the beat registers as an *action* beat is that it appeals to viewers' kinesthetic sense of the physical dangers that attend going fast and being exposed (the car is racing rather than parked, Lance is on top of the car rather than in it) and feels spectacular as a result; the

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[141] Lindsay Steenberg and Lisa Coulthard, "Dance/Fight: Musicality and Choreography in the Hollywood Fight Scene," Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference, presentation and panel discussion, Remote, April 2, 2022.

[142] This convergence of the diegetic and the extra-diegetic resonates with Harvey O'Brien's description of action films as a "fusion of form and content." See Harvey O'Brien, *Action Movies: The Cinema of Striking Back* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2012), 1. Lisa Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema* talks at length about action cinema's narrative and formal focus on the physical body's "becoming-powerful."

reason clinging-to-the-roof-of-a-car likely attained intertextual coherence as an action beat to begin with is its appeal to physio-spatial dynamics familiar to the viewer in her lived, proprioceptive experience. If an action beat's intertextual legibility emerges from an action's innate physicality, however, the impression of physicality is also reinforced by intertextual legibility. Just as the physical virtuosity of a particular maneuver may facilitate its incorporation into the intertextual corpus of iconic and reproducible action beats, inclusion in said corpus also codes a particular maneuver *as* an action beat, as belonging to a genre of spectacle that is *designed* to appeal to viewers' kinesthetic faculties.

Figure 8: Choreographic virtuosity.

The simultaneously and emphatically *designed and physical* nature of the action in the *Black Summer* scene supplements and enhances the force of the long take's physicalizing, surfacing address. As onscreen bodies execute increasingly strenuous and seemingly dangerous physical feats, the movement and constraints of the physical body become increasingly thematized;

who they are as characters becomes subordinated to the "what" and "how" of their maneuvers and the physical challenges posed by various obstacles (Figure 8). Crucially, the felt physical virtuosity of both pursuer and pursued results in a making-equivalent of human and zombie bodies, analogous to the film camera's own operations of ontological flattening. As physical virtuosity becomes increasingly pronounced, the work that went into staging and executing the spectacle becomes thematized, and, with it, the sense that all onscreen bodies are *stunt performers* before they are characters. Even though, narratively, the scene is still framed as involving the pursuit of a human by a zombie, formally and kinesthetically, the scene shifts emphasis to the shared status of the bodies *as* bodies through the medium of physical virtuosity, or what might be called a "virtuosic mode." As discussed, this impression of physical virtuosity simultaneously informs and is informed by the felt belongingness of the virtuosic acts to a larger intertextual lexicon of choreographic beats. Although the depicted actions might intrinsically activate the viewer's kinesthetic identification, it is their manifest "beat-ness," their reference *to* this larger lexicon, that accelerates viewer recognition of them as *choreographed*. With a heightened awareness of choreography comes a heightened awareness of onscreen bodies as "mere" parts of a larger choreographic design, functionally equivalent as mechanical components to be arranged. If physical virtuosity effects an ontological flattening by converting all characters into exerting, embattled bodies, choreography does so through foregrounding the power and agency of the choreographer, under whose direction all characters become just parts among parts, in thrall to the organizational logic of the larger choreographic arrangement. When these two, conjoined movements of ontological flattening are (literally) framed by the ontological flattening of the long take, the effect of flattening is redoubled. In the *Black Summer* scene, the impression of all

characters as just bodies among bodies and all bodies as just things among things is overdetermined, emerging as the scene's reigning affect and ethos.

Watching these characters move, viewers are compelled to kinesthetically identify with the corporeal mechanics of sprinting, falling, jumping, crashing, and grappling. As Aaron Anderson observed regarding the use of longer takes in Bruce Lee's films, the viewer's kinesthetic alignment with Lee's physical virtuosity is enhanced by sustained shot length.[143] So it is with the scene from *Black Summer*, in which the viewer's kinesthetic projection into the bodies of onscreen stuntpeople facilitates her recognition of the spectacle as choreographed and virtuosic, as involving physical risk and complex mechanical coordination. Conversely and simultaneously, this recognition of "choreographed-ness" and virtuosity rebounds to affect her own body, activating her kinesthetic attunement with the bodies onscreen. The latter is crucial. By appealing to her embodied response as a means of thematizing the physical equivalence of human and zombie, both of which are just bodies among bodies, the scene also draws her own body into the equation. Heightening viewer attunement to the bodies onscreen entails a concomitant heightening of attunement to her own body; the scene, in having her feel the reality of the onscreen bodies through her own body, conversely and simultaneously has her *feel her own body through the bodies onscreen*.[144] In other words, the *Black Summer* scene effects an ontological flattening not merely "conceptually" or

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[143] See Aaron Anderson, "Action in Motion: Kinesthesia in Martial Arts Films," *Jump Cut*, no. 42 (December 1998): https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC42folder/anderson2/index.html.

[144] Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* and *The Address of the Eye*; Lisa Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*; and Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) have discussed the phenomenological commutation between onscreen bodies and the viewer's own. Barker and Purse have examined this commutation vis-à-vis action cinema, with Purse noting how the viewer's body is both physically affected by the onscreen spectacle and the means by which the spectacle is fleshed out—given a sense of phenomenological fullness—in the first place.

"representationally" but phenomenally and affectively, compelling the viewer to feel the material equivalence of all bodies, theirs as well as her own.[145]

Having already undercut idealist, subjectivist conceptions on multiple fronts, effecting a formal zombification through foregrounding movement mechanics and muscular exertion over against who the depicted characters "are" psychologically and emotionally, the scene concludes with an additional level of thematic emphasis. After Luke crashes his second vehicle and the zombie Lance is launched off the car roof and temporarily out of sight, the long take becomes almost completely static. This shift to near total stasis seems to fit the captured moment: the spectacular nature of the collision makes death (a "second" death in the case of zombie Lance) a likely demise for all involved. The movement of life, it seems, has been stilled. A few seconds later, however, the camera suddenly lurches back into motion, tottering forward at roughly eye-level as if inhabiting the point-of-view of a zombie. After traveling a few paces, the camera encounters the sight of zombie Lance crawling to his feet and proceeds to track his meandering movements through desolate streets. This segment of the scene runs for roughly 58 seconds—only about 14% of the entire scene's runtime—but, especially following the pronounced "reanimation" of the camera itself post-car-crash, bears the force of a pointed coda, markedly extending the scene past the point where the viewer has been led to think it would end.

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[145] Of course, bodies are, in lived, historical experience, distinctly *not* equivalent, marked by a vast spectrum of physical ability and body types that are differentially affected by social and political forces like race, gender, and class. That said, I believe the *provisional* making-equivalent of bodies through a choreographic, virtuosic mode has heuristic value in the way it defamiliarizes the normative body, helping make room for alternate, embodied experiences (and, beyond that, a nonhuman vital materialism) to become thinkable and centralized. This notion of provisional heuristic value extends to my formulation of objectivity and film's indifferent lens, both of which *temporarily* downplay the heterogeneity of material existence/experience to denaturalize anthropocentrism and clear conceptual and affective space for this heterogenous materiality to assert itself with even greater force. Chapter 3 discusses this idea of temporary bracketing in more detail.

This denouement, in which an already undead Lance is reanimated after it seems he may have died (a second time), feels in some ways like a narrative "afterlife," a persistence of the story beyond where it would have conventionally concluded, and I contend that this impression emerges in large part from expectations regarding who or what can drive a story. As various scholars have noted regarding the narrative-oriented tradition of classical Hollywood cinema, the motor of plot development tends to be (traditionally white and male) protagonists marked by their agency, their propensity to attempt action and advance toward some goal(s).[146] Even as there have been attempts to distribute narrative agency to historically underrepresented demographics such as women and BIPOC, there remains a tacit assumption that only those with some semblance of *human* agency can ground and drive narrative progression. "Agency" in this case refers not necessarily to a characters' degree of agency within the diegesis; characters utterly deprived of power within the narrative world can still be narrative agents if the situations in which *they* find themselves and *their* actions and decisions are what propel the narrative. A sense of narrative agency stems from a palpable tension between a character's assertions of will and the narrative situation that instigates and resists such efforts (be it another character, an external calamity, or the protagonist's inner turmoil), and it is this tension with which the viewer comes to identify. If narrative tends to track characters that are most agential—i.e., those characters whose sense of agency is, tautologically, increased by how much their displays of or attempts at agency are tracked by the narrative—with cinema, this "tracking" extends to *visual* tracking. Narrative films tend to visually track characters who are most agential, and, because the duration and sequentiality of their choices and actions are more prominently telegraphed to viewers through increased screen time, these characters come to

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[146] See, especially, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

feel like they are "shaping" narrative simply because they take up more of it. No definitive, one-to-one correspondence exists between filmic visibility and narrative significance[147]—sometimes, the character smallest in frame is the one to whom the viewer's eyes are drawn and who bears the most dramatic weight—but I would nonetheless posit that, by and large, there remains a correlation in narrative cinema between greater character visibility and greater narrative agency. This convention of "tracking" agential characters extends into literal tracking shots, which, in narrative cinema, tend to be attached to characters who have been coded as narratively significant. Conversely, it is also the act of visually tracking characters that imbues them with narrative significance in the first place. In cases where the camera follows a character who seems to be narratively insignificant or not-yet-significant, a (usually only temporary) disorientation ensues wherein viewers are prompted to ask why the camera is following this character. In these moments, a feeling of suspense (one could say a suspens-*ion* of the classical cinematic harmony between narrative, agency, and visual representation) takes hold wherein the viewer experiences a momentary destabilization and the mechanics of cinematic identification become temporarily defamiliarized.

This tension is usually relieved through revealing information about the character or establishing them as a major player within the story, but in the zombie-Lance-focused denouement of the *Black Summer* scene, the tension persists. More precisely, the "character" of zombie Lance, in being a zombie, presents a case in which the possibility of human agency as narrative driver is *foreclosed from the outset*. As mentioned, a sense of agency manifests as a tension between context and choice, emerging when action is actively and deliberately taken in response to a situation. Narrative traditionally accommodates agency well (and vice versa) because it, too, involves a

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[147] See Morgan; Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*.

tension between stasis and change, between scenarios and their active transformation; this dynamic is what allows plot to "develop."[148] It is precisely this tension that the zombie, aimless and reflexive and literally "unthinking," lacks; as Shaviro puts it, these are creatures "drained of the *tension* of purposive activity." [149] In connoting a lack of will, introspection, and "higher-level" thought, the zombie seems like a poor bearer of narrative. Zombies do not act; they passively *are*, operating at the level of motor reflex rather than careful, conscious deliberation. Carried along by their physical impulses, they feel more akin to the "situation" to which willful agents must respond; as such, zombie movies tend, unsurprisingly, to pivot around "living" characters and what they decide to do *in response to* the zombies, who, despite the aggressiveness of their cravings, are typically relegated to the role of mute narrative backdrop.

With the end of the *Black Summer* scene, however, background becomes foreground; the ostensibly passive and non-agential zombie becomes stylistically positioned in a manner typically reserved for narrative agents.[150] As a result, the whole circuit of habitual narrative identification is interrupted and defamiliarized. The questions that are normally resolved with expediency in classical narrative cinema—why is the camera tracking this seemingly non-agential or less-than-agential character?—is here foreclosed from the get-go via the figure of the zombie, thereby throwing into bold relief the very act of (visual as well as narrative) "tracking" and the assumptions about cinematic identification that attend it. The resulting tension underscores both the tracking

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[148] Agency is a complex topic with a long history of debate in philosophy, some scholars of which would challenge the notion that agency must be conscious, deliberate, and active. Here, I am referring to a sense of agency that tends to be displayed within—and in turn be reinforced by—classical narrative, which revolves around active, goal-oriented actions taken in response to a situation.

[149] Shaviro, 85, emphasis mine.

[150] A common theme and goal of ecocinema and eco-film theory is to perform such a foreground-background inversion, wherein the natural world and/or environment is underscored as being more than a "standing-reserve" or static backdrop for human activities. See, for example, Petersen. In this respect, *Black Summer* is an exemplary work of ecocinema.

shot as a tracking shot (why, the scene prompts us to ask, does the camera keep following the zombie when there are no other living, agential characters in the frame to narratively "justify" and subjectively "anchor" this technique?) and the zombie as a zombie—i.e., mere, "brute," non-agential matter (or, more accurately, non-*humanly* agential). The tracking shot's conventional association with a bestowment of narrative agency (it literally moves *with* a character, seeming to confer them with the power of dictating where the camera looks and how it moves) exposes its own limits when confronted by a subject defined by its lack of agency; conversely, the zombie feels all the more non-agential in the way it resists the tracking shot's "agentializing" effect.

Figure 9: Zombie Lance pauses before his reflection.

Wandering down a side street, zombie Lance passes in front of a shop window in which his reflection is visible. The camera, peering over his right shoulder, gazes upon the zombie's reflected image as he pauses before the window, his roving and snarling temporarily subsiding (Figure 9). This moment, which features a surfaced figure (the zombie) seemingly contemplating

his image within a reflective surface, evokes the figure of the mirror's historical association with self-awareness and, by extension, an awareness of others as being distinct from the self. Jacques Lacan famously delineated a "mirror stage" in childhood development wherein an infant, upon seeing themselves in the mirror for the first time, begins to recognize that they appear to others differently (i.e., as an image) than they subjectively and proprioceptively feel themselves to be.[151] In his essay "The Child's Relation with Others," Merleau-Ponty similarly acknowledges the conceptual problem of reconciling "the visual image of the other" with one's "interoceptive image of [one's] own body,"[152] although he eventually bridges the self-other divide with the aforementioned concept of the body schema. Within cognitive science, the "mirror test" has been used to explore the existence of self-awareness in non-human animals. In a classic and much-emulated study, red marks were placed on the brow ridge of two chimpanzees, who were then set before a mirror and observed to see whether they attempted to investigate the marks on their heads.[153] So the reasoning went, the chimpanzee that explored the mark on its own head based (or *seemingly* based) on the visual information provided in the mirror exhibited traits suggestive of self-awareness, of being able to recognize that the body they inhabited and the one they saw in the reflection were one and the same. Put another way, "successful" test subjects seemed to exhibit the ability to intuitively bridge the gap between two different versions of the self. What the study highlights is how (human/humanlike) selfhood is fundamentally *fractured* between the self's internal experience of itself and the self as viewed from the outside, from another's perspective.[154]

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[151] See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

[152] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relation with Others," in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, eds. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawler (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007): 146.

[153] See Gordon G. Gallup Jr., "Chimpanzees: Self-Recognition," *Science* 167, issue 3917 (January 1970): https://doi.org/10.1126/science.167.3914.86.

[154] Researchers have suggested that self-awareness in animals can be expressed through means not testable via the mirror test (e.g., the visual nature of the mirror test would be a poor measure of self-reflexivity for olfaction-driven

With all three of these accounts, the encounter with one's own image thematizes a distinction between subjective interior and objective exterior, between an invisible subjective "depth" and visible objective "surface," and it is this distinction that, I argue, is evoked in this moment in which the zombie appears to contemplate his reflection in the mirror. I say "appears" because we do not actually know what the zombie is thinking or feeling. He makes no familiar, anthropomorphic gestures of self-awareness, such as touching his own face à la the chimpanzees from the study (and even in those cases, such gestures are only suggestions or signs of self-awareness, not self-awareness "itself"). Zombie Lance simply stands there, a pointed inactivity that simultaneously suggests some degree of choice (the act of stopping and becoming quiet feels like a deliberate act because it occurs right with the appearance of the shop window reflection and departs so sharply from the noisy, rabid perambulations he had just exhibited) and refuses to satisfy our curiosity, to confirm either way whether he possesses self-awareness or not (not that the show could have even if it had wanted to). This moment presents a powerful mise-en-abyme in which the surfacing address of the film image (which, significantly, has itself been associated with a mirror in the Lacanian mold[155]) encounters the surfacing address of the zombie as directed toward a mirror, which itself "surfaces" into visual form the body of the subject, abstracting the immediacy of "first-person," subjective lived experience into a "third-person" objective image viewed from

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animals), which embodies an anthropocentric bias: because *we* would measure our own self-awareness using mirrors, we assume that we could do the same for animals. See, for example, Elizabeth Preston and Quanta Magazine, "A Classic Test of Animals' Minds Has a Fish Problem," *The Atlantic*, December 17, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2018/12/fish-mirror-test/578197/. My interest in the mirror test lies not in whether animals actually have self-awareness in the human sense, or in whether we can ever know one way or another (as I will suggest in Chapter 3, the answer to the latter is almost certainly no). Rather, it is the anthropocentric bias that interests me, the way in which the mirror's deployment in the study reflects (no pun intended) something about the human experimenters, about *us*: the ingrained sense that human self- and other-awareness involves a tension between subjectively experienced interior and objectively viewed exterior, a tension we then extrapolate onto other animals.

[155] See, for example, Jean Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

the outside. With all these layers of surfacing—the mirror as a diegetic stand-in for the film camera, which functions as a structural analogue to the zombie that surfaces what the zombie already surfaces—what remains unseen and mysterious becomes triply thematized: the "depths" of the zombie's own experience. Through invoking the mirror's historical and cultural association with the self-other, inside-outside tension, this moment raises the surfacing effect of the film-zombie collision to another degree of power, underscoring threefold the missing element of the equation: the "other"'s own self-immanence, its own internal self-perpetuation and self-experience that is inaccessible to those viewing from the outside. What this moment thematizes, in other words, is the existence of some absolutely unknowable ontological depth, and it does so precisely through a saturation of emphasis on surfaces and surfacing addresses.

In the next chapter, I will explore the nature of this "depth" that is evoked through cinema and the zombie—specifically, how the aspects of motion and reanimation so central to both encourage a vital materialist conception of nonhuman reality.

4.0 Depths of Movement

In the previous chapter, I explored a structural analogy between cinema's realist automatism—as most forcefully expressed and thematized through the technique of the long take—and the figure of the zombie. I looked at how, individually but especially when made to collide, both exhibit what I called a "surfacing address": a tendency to "cling to the surface of things,"[156] defamiliarizing the manifest materiality of visible things that, in their thingliness, resist the Enlightenment tendency to subordinate matter to mind, objective exteriority to subjective interiority. I argued that, with film, this surfacing address is tied to the experience of ontological flattening effected by the film camera's indifferent, spatiotemporally distancing lens: because everything before the camera is equally and visually "captured" by a mechanical apparatus, the subjectivity of captured human figures becomes secondary to the materiality of their visible bodies, their status as just "thing[s] among things."[157] I noted that film's surfacing address both draws on and intensifies surface-depth metaphors emergent from ordinary phenomenal experience—which tends to involve perceiving the world in terms of discrete, three-dimensional objects—thus attuning the viewer to the otherness of things, their existence apart from us. The zombie's surfacing address, on the other hand, emerges from the figure's association with (literal) mindlessness—the zombie's subjective vacancy, its status as a "body deprived of a soul."[158] With the implication of missing subjective "depths," emphasis is shifted to the corporeal surface of the undead body. What makes the zombie uncanny is the way it defamiliarizes the "perishable carnality" of the human

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[156] Kracauer, l-li.
[157] Fay, 201.
[158] Cohen, 383.

body, foregrounding its "thingly existence"[159] in contrast to idealist, humanist conceptions of agency that treat the body as "ours," as a mere extension of the cognizing, intentional subject. Zombies simultaneously appeal to anthropocentric phenomenal experience—i.e., the visual familiarity of the human body—and destabilize it, revealing that a nonhuman, radically other materiality always lurks within and underpins notions of the human as a clean, functioning social subject. Such "an uncanny combination of familiarity and unfamiliarity"[160] also characterizes cinema, which is scaled and designed in accordance with "human perceptual ratios"[161] and "real-world visual and social experience"[162] but, simultaneously, de-exceptionalizes the human body, presenting it as part of a larger, more general worldly materiality in which visible surfaces simultaneously imply (nonhuman) depths that recede from view.

Through close-reading a scene from *Black Summer* in which the technique of the long take is made to collide with the figure of the zombie, I argued that the show doubly underscores the surface-ness of the human body. Although all long takes and all zombies exhibit a surfacing address to some degree, I proposed that *Black Summer* double thematizes the human body's thingly surface. I contended that this double thematization, in its forcefulness, not only reorients the viewer epistemologically and affectively toward nonhuman materialities but induces an "outward reverberation" wherein her future encounters with long takes and zombies (as well as her retrospective reappraisal of past encounters) are inflected by her encounter with this one, heightened instance. In my view, *Black Summer* demonstrates the value of thematization. It illustrates the affective power of spectacularly exemplary cases that, in their heightened register,

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[159] Cohen, 389.
[160] Inga Pollman, *Cinematic Vitalism: Film Theory and the Question of Life* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 239 on Kracauer's film theory.
[161] Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, 2.
[162] Prince, "True Lies," 31.

sensitize viewers to properties that exist more widely but have been naturalized through processes like cinematic classicality, which downplays the materiality of the film image. The properties that interest me are the surfacing addresses of film and the zombie and the way they prompt the viewer to adopt a spatialized epistemic and affective posture toward the world—a posture that, in being perpetually oriented toward unseen depths "beyond" and "behind" the visible surfaces with which they are nonetheless dialectically conjoined, is, I would argue, apposite for the Anthropocene.

In the following chapter, I explore in more detail what constitutes this "depth." Specifically, I examine how cinema and the zombie embody a rich and dynamic conception of this depth via their shared investment in automatic movement—i.e., the way they not only defamiliarize thingly surface but set it back into motion.

4.1 Depths of Movement

In a sense, the surfacing address discussed in the previous chapter is a process of "making dead," of freezing and disrupting ordinary phenomenal experience. Although appealing to phenomenality, filmic denotation also detaches imaged bodies from the lived flow of life. No longer are these bodies unreflexively incorporated—via Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body schema discussed in the previous chapter—into habituated processes of phenomenological social interchange in which the human as physical body, social subject, and cognizing individual are conflated.[163] Caught on camera, the human body, though possessing a familiar outward form, is also made strange; it becomes just a thing among things, "deadened" and made inert in the way

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[163] See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

humans often conceive of nonhuman objects. By turning "us" into one of "them," the film camera's photographic address forces us to confront our own abject materiality in excess of social, idealist personhood. If cinema's making dead reveals the human body to have always belonged to the general materiality of the world, defamiliarizing the unreflective immediacy of ordinary phenomenal experience, the zombie's surfacing address makes dead by having the "higher-level" cognition of the Enlightenment subject "die" while the carnal body continues to move. The pairing of vacated subjectivity with a physical body in motion defamiliarizes the latter's abject materiality, revealing its existence in excess of the former. Like with cinema, the zombie "makes dead" the lived, phenomenological conflation of subjective "selves" and objective "bodies," rendering the thingly reality of the latter forcefully apparent. In both cases, making dead delivers an estranging jolt. Defamiliarization prompts awareness of the alien that always exists within the familiar, the material excess that lies repressed within (relatively) stable forms and experiences.

And hence we arrive at the flip side of cinema's and the zombie's surfacing addresses: their shared evocation of depth, of the nonhuman realities that fall beyond the purview of human phenomenal experience. More precisely, I contend that cinema and the zombie evoke depth as a motive, nonhuman vital force. Indeed, I would argue that the reason cinema and the zombie are so effective as heuristic eco-critical figures is that they not only make dead—a necessary, defamiliarizing middle step—but bring back to life. Indeed, both cinema and the zombie involve a certain *un*-deadness, a *reanimating* of that which had been stilled. Although cinema's realist automatism draws substantially on photographic denotation, this photographic basis comprises only part of the (literal as well as figurative) picture. The other part is the impression of movement, achieved through the playback of static frames. For cinema, technological mechanicality marks not only the technology of the camera but also the technology of projection, which lends images

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an ostensible life of their own. Crucially, cinema's motive force is not something that can be viewed directly in the images onscreen. Rather, it comprises a structuring absence whose effects are clearly discerned—the images are moving rather than static—but whose mechanism eludes direct apprehension.[164] Similarly, the figure of the zombie is defined not just by a passage into death but an uncanny resumption of lively movement, in such a way where the body moves but manifestly not as a result of human will or agency in the normative Enlightenment sense. Instead, what sets the visible body moving is, like with cinema, a palpably nonhuman force working behind-the-scenes and beyond-the-frame of phenomenal experience. Like with cinema, this force (discerned only in its effects) confers the impression of a nonhuman materiality moving of its own accord.

When cinema and the zombie are made to collide in *Black Summer*, it is not only surface but depth that is foregrounded. Crucially, the two sides are dialectically conjoined. It is only because surface has been defamiliarized—i.e., made to feel alien and nonhuman—that the nonhuman vital force of depth becomes thematized, since it is only when we notice surface as being apart from us that we notice it *moving* apart from us. Conversely, the more we register the movement as nonhuman, the stranger the surfaces appear, given that they retain a speciously familiar form but lack their prior sense of ontological fullness and self-sufficiency. They become ontologically unstable, palpably subservient to forces beyond the realm of the humanly visible. This interplay between estranged surfaces and dynamic depths is central to Inga Pollman's

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[164] As Gunning and Belton have noted, early-cinema exhibition involved displaying projection technology as part of the spectacle—i.e., the mechanism of movement *was* directly perceivable to a significant extent. That said, with the entrenchment of cinematic classicality, projection technology receded from view, and, in our age of digital home media and streaming, the technology that sets the image into motion is obfuscated to an even greater degree, black-boxed away from the viewer's phenomenal experience. As such, I would argue that cinema's realist automatism in the classical era and beyond has, to a large extent, become associated with the impression of images moving "on their own."

paraphrase of Kracauer's "Photography" essay, which she views as evoking none other than the figure of the zombie. According to Pollman, Kracauer frames photography as a "dancing zombie" whose "arbitrary elements [….] take over and begin their surrealist '*danse macabre*'" once the photograph's human referent has passed away.[165] Because of photography's denotation of material excess, these excessive elements seem to "come alive" with the indeterminacy of reality itself, manifesting an unruly liveliness in the interstices between provisionally stable pictorial conventions.[166] This excess was always already there within the photograph but becomes affectively pronounced once it is no longer referentially tethered to a living person. Crucially, Kracauer and Pollman are talking about the static medium of photography rather than the dynamic one of film, so "dancing" seems to refer to implied rather than manifest movement. Much as Shaviro, paraphrasing Martin Heidegger and Don Ihde, describes a broken tool as seeming to "[become] alive"[167] once its streamlined incorporation into everyday practical activity short-circuits and its material specificity foregrounded, Kracauer's conception of photography implies a sense of movement that emerges despite (and through) stasis. Indeed, defamiliarization alone is, to an extent, enough to evoke a sense of "life," since the moment that one sees with fresh eyes how things are, one becomes attuned to how things could have been different. In Henri Bergson's parlance, the moment that one becomes more sensitive to "being," one also becomes more sensitive to "becoming."[168] Through the defamiliarizing mediation of photography, the liveliness of the captured reality asserts itself, generating an interplay between deadened surfaces and vital

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[165] Pollman, 248; see Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (1993): https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343959.
[166] Evoked here is also Roland Barthes' discussion of the punctum and the studium. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.
[167] Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 50.
[168] See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover, 1998).

depths—the "'*danse macabre*'" Pollman mentions. That said, it cannot be ignored that the figure of the dancing zombie seems to align much more closely with cinema than photography, since it is cinema that, like the zombie, *phenomenally manifests movement*. While retaining the estranging force of photography's making-dead, cinema presents a literally moving image. With film, the dynamism of reality is not only evoked but seemingly made manifest, perceptually corresponding with the viewer's own lived experience of the world as being in motion. It is this pairing of photography's alienating lens with the phenomenal impression of movement enabled by the mechanism of projection that generates cinema's distinguishing feature of automatic movement— an image (more precisely, an image *of the world*) seemingly moving of its own accord. The spectator who beholds the cinematic moving image differs from the "animating empathic beholder"[169] of static arts like painting, who sets an artwork "in motion" through her mental and kinesthetic participation. With cinema, movement vividly, mechanically, and phenomenally persists regardless of how the beholder approaches a film.

This dynamic between image and movement comes through most powerfully within the long take, which, as discussed in Chapter 1, spectacularizes cinema's realist automatism, making it sensational once more in an era where film technology has long lost its shock of novelty and in which cinematic classicality continues to downplay the materiality of the image. It is the long take that assuages the concern that the phenomenal immediacy of cinematic movement actually diminishes the estranging force of cinema's photographic aspect; as various theorists of film movement have pointed out, movement, unlike indexicality, tends not to referentially point

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[169] Pollman, 78, citing Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 112-113.

somewhere else but is right where it is, dynamically transpiring before the eyes of the beholder.[170] In being a shot that is felt as long, the long take asserts the materiality of the image and, with it, the alienating quality of photographic denotation, thus interrupting movement's immediacy with a sense of spatiotemporal distance. The continued phenomenal dynamism of the *moving* image, however, ensures that this defamiliarized world remains a world *in motion*—a world felt to be dynamically alive. To slightly restate my earlier point about the dialectical relationship between surface and depth: it is because image is foregrounded that movement *as* movement is foregrounded also. Conversely, noticing movement as movement rebounds to underscore the *image* that is being moved.

In one sense, what is foregrounded by the long take is simply cinema as a technical apparatus. The image is the frame imposed by the technology of the camera, and the movement is the result of the technology of projection. Watching a long take, we become more attuned to the technical reality of the moving image—the presence of the frame, how its movements imply the movements of an embodied camera, and how shot duration indexes the duration of both recording and projection. That said, film, in the way it is an image *of the world*, always also operates in a denotative mode. The realist film image is never *just* an image; it is felt to be denotative *of* and opening *onto* a physical reality that is experienced as being to some degree "real", corresponding to the viewer's own phenomenal experience of physical reality. And one quality of this reality is dynamism, its being-in-motion as a function of both the movement of things in relation to the phenomenological subject and the subject's own movements through the world.[171] When the film

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[170] This tension between indexical conceptions of the film image and movement's phenomenal immediacy has been explored by various theorists of film movement such as Morgan; Schonig, *The Shape of Motion*; Tom Gunning, "Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality," *differences* 18, no. 1 (May 2007): https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2006-022.

[171] See Merleau-Ponty; Richmond; Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*.

image moves, in other words, this movement registers as belonging to *both the filmic apparatus and physical reality itself*. With classical cinema, the suppression of the image means that this bothness is obscured; classicality facilitates an experiential conflation of image and imaged, such that the mere fact of phenomenally manifest onscreen movement masks the status of this movement as *both* emerging from the specific technical properties of the cinematic apparatus *and* corresponding with the movement in and of reality itself.

The long take, I contend, reactivates awareness of these two poles of imaged, onscreen movement. In foregrounding the image as image, the long take denotes a recognizable physical reality and, hence, posits the onscreen movement as "captured," as being "of" the world; again, a crucial part of this impression comes from the viewer's own lived experience of reality as dynamic, to which the moving image can be iconically compared. Simultaneously, this foregrounding of image also heightens viewers' awareness of the cinematic apparatus beyond the frame, and, hence, of phenomenal movement as something *conferred* by an unseen force originating from somewhere beyond the realm of the visible. At the same time that it points to movement as being "of" the denoted world, the long take also emphasizes movement as being conditional upon an exterior animating force. Within a realist conception of cinema, "the world" and the "cinematic apparatus" are experienced not in terms of a reality-artifice dualism, but, rather, as being inextricably entwined. The cinematic apparatus manifests movement through denoting the world's own movement, and the world's movement is denoted through the mediation of the cinematic apparatus.

Film generates a complex phenomenological scenario in which the visible world is experienced as *both moving and moved*, a bothness that the long take throws into bold relief. It may seem at first a simple task to ontologically parse the two terms: the pro-filmic physical reality

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"moves," whereas it is the image that "is moved" by the cinematic apparatus. But given that the film image is not just an "image" but an "image *of,*" this distinction rapidly breaks down. Through its visual correspondence with the viewer's everyday phenomenal experience, the denoted physical reality is experienced as possessing motion, but the long take's foregrounding of image as image emphasizes that this experience of motion is conditional upon the cinematic apparatus as movement-giving force. Not only does the film image correspond with ordinary phenomenal perception, but ordinary phenomenal perception, especially with the long take, comes to register as *corresponding with the film image*—i.e., as being limited by a perceptual "frame" and animated by some behind-the-scenes and beyond-the-frame nonhuman motive force. In other words, I argue that cinema's structure as both imaged movement and moving image—both an image *of* the movement inherent in reality and an image *moved* by an unseen apparatus—bleeds over into the reality it denotes, activating a sense of *reality itself as both moving and moved*.[172]

Furthermore, the long take underscores the fact that it is *through* the moved that the act of moving is thematized. We cannot see the act of projection directly but, via the movements in and of the image, we can infer the presence of a mechanism or force by which these things are moved. In ordinary phenomenal experience, movement tends to appear self-evident; we see *that* individual things and objects move and are moving but are less often primed to speculate about *what* moves them. We may discern that one phenomenal entity causes another phenomenal entity to move, but we are less frequently inspired to reflect upon what causes the phenomenal realm itself to move, to possess motion. With film, however—and especially with the long take—the foregrounded fact of both image and movement means that movement appears as mediated: it both *appears* (i.e., is

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[172] The concept of "imaged movement" over against the more familiar "movement image" was introduced in Jordan Schonig, "Contingent Motion."

phenomenally manifest) and appears *as mediated* (i.e., it runs up against the edges of the frame and the surface of the screen, suggesting that the impression of movement is coextensive with and conditional upon mechanisms that are either presently or perpetually out of sight). In other words, film, in defamiliarizing the causal relation between moved and moving and, through film's denotative address, attributing this relation to reality "itself," invites an epistemological and hermeneutic posture wherein the realm of the phenomenal is interpreted—and affectively experienced—as being *both immediate and mediating*. In other words, I contend that film embodies and enacts a critical phenomenology that treats the phenomenal realm as both an "in itself" that is a part of dynamic reality in general and a "beyond itself" that mediates unseen motive forces.

What the long take foregrounds, then, is three overlapping sets of terms: cinema as *surface and depth, moved and moving, mediating and immediate*. Though immediate to phenomenal experience, surface, in being moved, also mediates depth; depth, now mediated, registers as a motive force that was always already immediate to reality itself. Surface, as a mediation of that which moves it, emphasizes the existence of realities apart from the social and phenomenal purview of the human; depth, now experienced as that which sets all surfaces into motion and is materially immanent to these surfaces (even as it exceeds them), underscores that these unseen realities also move and constitute us. This dialectical interplay is even more forcefully thematized when the long take is made to collide with the figure of the zombie. In Chapter 2, I discussed how, like cinema, the zombie's surfacing address foregrounds surface as all there is to see, connotatively vacating subjectivity and interiority in favor of the human body's unexceptional, thingly materiality. When the zombie is made to collide with the long take, the collision of the two surfacing addresses results in a double thematization of surface. That said, the dialectical

entwinement of surface and depth means that this double thematization of surface is also a *double thematization of depth*. The zombie, though defamiliarizing corporeal surface via the spectacle of decay and visual cues suggesting a "loss of higher human functioning,"[173] also sets this body back into motion. Given the characteristics that thematized surface in the first place—a body visibly and connotatively already dead and subjectively vacated—what moves the body is experienced as something other than Enlightenment conceptions of agency and will. The zombie manifestly moves, but its movements, in being palpably detached from normative notions of human subjectivity, are also experienced as *being moved*—i.e., set in motion by a "behind-the-scenes" nonhuman motive force with which the viewer cannot phenomenologically identify. The zombie is both an *immediate* material surface felt to be continuous with the general materiality of the world and a *mediation* of the nonhuman motive force that moves it. The zombie, in other words, bears a deep structural analogy with cinema. When surface is double thematized in *Black Summer*'s human-zombie collision, so is depth and, with it, the surface-depth, moved-moving, mediation-immediacy dialectic itself.

This double thematization of surface and depth attunes the viewer to the material plane of contact between human and nonhuman—the visible surfaces of the world that are felt to both mediate invisible depths and condition our material continuity with these very depths, with reality itself. As a *materially immediate medium*—a *mediating immediacy*—this expanded conception of "surface" is the privileged focus of my analysis. It is the hinge around which subjectivity and objectivity turn, the horizon line toward which our anthropocentric perspectives are drawn in the hopes of reaching some reality beyond. Surface comprises what Shane Denson calls the "anthropotechnical interface" and Chelsea Birks describes as a "limit": the sense-able border,

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[173] Orpana, 306.

accentuated through the technological affordances of cinema, between inside and outside, human experience and nonhuman materiality.[174] We cannot ever reach an absolute outside, since all our speculations are inevitably grounded in the limits of human phenomenal experience. But there are times when the limit-ness of the limits are felt more acutely. In some cases, we become sensitized to the edges of anthropocentrism in what Birks calls a "limit experience." Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, remarking on the zombie's liminal position between human and nonhuman, describes the figure as existing at a "sensual as well as epistemic threshold at which the familiar loses certainty." (383) I contend that cinema's realist automatism, as thematized through the long take and doubly thematized when made to collide with the figure of the zombie, has the capacity to experientially foreground this threshold, generating a limit experience that prompts both a "sensual" and "epistemic" attunement to nonhuman realities.

Having theorized surface as a mediating immediacy, a moving-moved that delineates the border between (human) inside and (nonhuman) outside, the chapter will now move in two directions. The first is toward the nonhuman "outside" and the seeming epistemological quandary that any conception of this outside is always contaminated by the anthropocentric inside. One may claim that cinema's realist automatism makes us *feel like* we are approaching a nonhuman outside, but since this experience still occurs from within the human inside, who is to say that it "actually" brings us closer to the outside? If the outside can never be reached and its distance from us never "measured" in ways that are humanly legible, what is the value of a limit experience in the first place? Drawing on Cary Wolfe's concept of "openness from closure"—which Birks also mobilizes in her analysis—the next section argues that complexifying one's account of inside complexifies one's account of outside, which I reformulate as outside*ness*: not a fixed terrain circumscribing the

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[174] See Birks; Denson, *Postnaturalism*.

inside, but a shifting field dynamically co-constituted with the creation of different insides. I link this dynamism with Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "virtual" and contend that cinema's realist automatism, in its thematization of both surfaced elements and nonhuman animating depths, complexifies our sense of anthropocentrism's limits in precisely the way valorized by Wolfe. Although this thematization cannot be said to "actually" and absolutely denote a reality beyond the human, I contend that, simply in prompting self-reflexivity regarding the dynamism of the surface-depth, inside-outside, mediation-immediacy threshold, cinema complexifies the viewer's sense of the inside and thus attunes her to outsideness.

This account of outsideness builds on but also complicates the sense of cinema as mediating immediacy that I have laid out, which, though enriching Chapter 2's discussion of surfacing by introducing the element of motion, nonetheless continues to pivot around a spatialized metaphor; there lingers a sense of a spatially removed, non-anthropocentric outside from which nonhuman vitality issues forth to affect the human inside. This spatialization is linked to the spatialized structure of the cinematic apparatus, which is an imperfect metaphor because it physically and literally exists within the human phenomenal world (films, cameras, projectors, and screens tangibly exist within human phenomenal experience). When "depths" of nonhuman movement are conceived of as being analogous with the cinematic apparatus that literally and physically exists in the human world, the former becomes made in the latter's image—i.e., turned "concrete" and spatialized in accordance with human phenomenal experience. When nonhuman materiality is conceived of as emerging from "behind-the-scenes" and "beyond-the-frame," the prepositions "behind" and "beyond" implicitly appeal to a phenomenological conception of three-dimensional space. Although the cinematic apparatus as metaphor for movement-giving force valuably thematizes the idea of not just nonhuman reality but nonhuman *vitality*—i.e., liveliness

that falls beyond traditional, humanist conceptions of life and agency—it also risks reinstalling the sense that nonhuman vitality originates from some absolute, spatialized outside. What outsideness shows, however, is that there is no absolute outside; nonhuman vitality *is* the dynamic co-constitution of inside and outside, in which the human subject participates. If the spatialized address of surfacing as discussed in Chapter 2 is valuable as a disruption of ordinary phenomenal experience, and if cinema conceived of as mediating immediacy functions as an intermediary step that retains this estranging force while adding the element of movement, outsideness shifts even greater emphasis to the movement part, exploring the "theoretical" limit of dynamic becoming toward which cinema orients the viewer.

Following this theorization of outsideness, the chapter's final two sections pivot back toward the anthropocentric inside to address the concern that posthumanist theories re-homogenize the human species, rolling back intellectual advances made by feminist, queer, post-colonial, and critical race scholars who have illuminated the disparities in race, gender, class, and power that exist. One danger of speculating beyond the human is that the category of the human itself risks being treated as a monolithic whole, *against which* nonhuman others are defined. Rhetorically, such an argumentative move makes at least provisional sense, since posthumanism strives to sensitize the viewer to precisely that which is different *from* the traditional domain of human culture within which race, gender, and class "resolve"—i.e., come into view and become legible.[175] There are things and realms in this world that, one could argue, are "more" different than us than we are from each other, even after race, gender, and class differences are taken into account. For the sake of argument, it makes sense to temporarily bracket out "the human," lest anthropocentric

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[175] Zachary Horton, *The Cosmic Zoom: Scale, Knowledge, and Mediation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022) uses the concept of resolution to describe the phenomena that become legible at a given scale—in this case, a normatively "human" one.

concerns steal the spotlight once more. But this bracketing is only just that—a *temporary* setting aside. Race, gender, and class literally matter when it comes to the material effects of the Anthropocene: rising sea levels, drought, deforestation, and rampant pollution ravage different regions and communities to different degrees. Furthermore, who has or has not been allowed to be "human" has a fraught history that makes sweeping pronouncements of "humanness" immediately suspect. Similarly, as theorists like Sarah Ahmed have noted, the history of phenomenology as a discipline has been marked by overly universalizing rhetoric regarding how we are "all" intentional beings, paying inadequate attention to the way forces like race, gender, and class affect how we are each oriented in the world.[176]

The chapter concludes by returning to the human cultural and historical inside in two ways. The first is through exploring how *Black Summer* resists posthumanism's homogenizing tendency by articulating racial difference within an American historical and cultural moment marked by intense fractiousness along these specific lines. In the way it provides an "affective map" of racial tensions within the contemporary United States, *Black Summer* re-codes human difference into its vision of a more general, ecological materiality. Secondly, I examine various biases inscribed in the figure of the zombie and how its collision with cinema's realist automatism in *Black Summer* throws into relief a heretofore unmentioned component of my analysis: the politics of "surfacing" itself, whose defamiliarizing force presumes certain aspects of comportment and physiognomy that have been normalized as "familiar." Despite ultimately affirming the eco-critical value of surfacing, I also address the way it risks reinforcing problematic visual tropes regarding which types of bodies are coded as abnormal.

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[176] See Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

4.2 Cinematic Outsideness

I have argued that cinema's surfacing address (and depth address) sensitizes the viewer to the fact that visible surfaces are driven by invisible, nonhuman motive forces. One counterargument would be, how do we know that this arrangement is in fact a "fact"? Does not the impression of invisible depths itself, even if discerned in a "negative" fashion (i.e., by its absence) still remain totally rooted in anthropocentric phenomenal experience? Put another way, how are we to know if this impression of the nonhuman corresponds with reality "as it is"? Determining correspondence logically requires both reference and referent to be in view, so that they can be compared side by side. If one is missing—as the radically nonhuman outside is in this case—correspondence can be neither confirmed nor negated. This counterargument does not go so far as to deny the existence of reality, but it questions our capacity to determine it either way, even negatively or asymptotically. How can we know that cinema's realist automatism brings us "closer" to nonhuman reality when the destination itself eludes apprehension and hence precludes the possibility of "measuring" our progress? Might the impression of expanded awareness and self-reflexive perception itself be an underhanded re-centering of anthropocentrism, á la James Leo Cahill's point, discussed in the Introduction, that cinema's Copernican vocation may in fact subtly "support a triumph of [human] *reason and technique*"[177]?

This counterargument—which evokes the Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena, between the world as it appears to human senses and what Quentin Meillassoux calls the "great outdoors" that is completely discorrelated from human concepts and experiences—would be a tough hurdle to clear *if* reality were assumed to be composed of a fixed inside and a

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[177] Cahill, 18.

fixed outside.[178] This fixity, however, is precisely what I would like to dispute. Given that ordinary phenomenal experience revolves around the apprehension of bounded, physical objects at determinate distances from the viewing subject and from each other, I still maintain that spatialized appeals to surface-depth, inside-outside distinctions are an important first step for defamiliarizing anthropocentrism—a disruption from *within* the sphere of the human. However, this articulation of surface dialectically invokes a spatialized conception of depth, and it is the questionable verifiability of this depth that the counterargument targets. It is true that depth cannot be verified as existing "in itself" apart from surface. That said, the very foregrounding of surface *as* surface— as a medium that could very well appear differently to a different beholder and whose felt status as a boundary suggests the possibility of boundaries differently drawn—dynamizes inside/surface in a way that simultaneously dynamizes outside/depth; as discussed earlier vis-à-vis cinema as a "dancing zombie," this sense of dynamization is greater in cinema than in photography given the former's element of motion. Although cinema appeals to ordinary phenomenal experience of fixed, three-dimensional objects and spaces, it also manifests a sense of becoming in which surface is not a fixed spatial construction, but, rather, a contingent temporal one whose limits can be shifted and retraced. With a retracing of inside comes a retracing of outside; if one is revealed to be contingent, so is the other, since what is enclosed as inside determines what is excluded as outside, and vice versa. If spatial fixity—though still valuable as an initial appeal to ordinary phenomenal experience—alienates inside from outside, treating the two as provisionally distinct, temporal contingency brings the two back together in a relationship of dynamic co-constitution. Although,

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[178] Graham Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2018), 212.

phenomenologically, we remain on the surface/inside, the outside manifests in the intuitable dynamism of the inside's limits, which touch the outside as well.[179]

In his theory of posthumanism, Cary Wolfe attributes to this inside-outside co-constitution the possibility of what he calls "openness from closure." Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida and Niklas Luhmann, Wolfe argues that, because every inside generates an outside,

> the very thing that separates us from the world connects us to the world, and self-referential, autopoietic closure, far from indicating a kind of solipsistic neo-Kantian idealism, actually is generative of openness to the environment. As Luhmann succinctly puts it, self-referential closure "does not contradict the system's openness to the environment. Instead, in the self-referential mode of operation, closure is a form of broadening possible environmental contacts; closure increases, by constituting elements more capable of being determined, the complexity of the environment that is possible for the system."[31] In Derrida's terms, "The living present springs forth out of its nonidentity with itself and from the possibility of a retentional trace," which constitutes "the intimate relation of the living present to its outside, the opening to exteriority in general.[32]"[180]

A key term here is self-referentiality. Because the inside bears a fundamental relation of mutual constitution vis-à-vis the outside, the more rigorously self-reflexive our accounting of the inside's limits, the more open we become to the outside in all its complexity. I contend that cinema, in dynamizing the inside's limits, is a privileged medium for enacting this posture of openness. In denotatively positing nonhuman reality while simultaneously maintaining a sense of this world

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[179] I use "intuitiable" here because, as touched on in the surface-depth discussion that opened this chapter, the dynamism of depth cannot be perceived directly, only deduced through the movement of and in the image. That said, "intuition" as I am using it here is not only cognitive but affective, involving a heightened sensitization to the tension of the inside's limits, their felt contingency. Not simply a *conceptual* awareness, intuition thus constitutes a limit experience in the way described by Birks.

[180] Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xxi.

and our encounters with it as dynamic and contingent, cinema offers a rigorously self-reflexive accounting of the inside's boundaries. It is not so much that cinema necessarily denotes the world more faithfully than other media; determining fidelity in this way requires that reality exist as a fixed referent to which representations can be compared, which it does not. That said, in its denotative *address*—its historical association with "objective" recording, emerging at the intersection of discourse and artistic practice—as coupled with the element of motion that doubly underscores the contingency of perspective, cinema *thematizes* the dynamism of the human-nonhuman, inside-outside encounter with singular force; this thematization constitutes the complexification I have attributed to cinema. In thematizing openness from closure, cinema complexifies our account of the human inside and, thus, also *enacts* this openness.

Especially with long takes, cinema emphasizes an apart-from-us outside via the medium's surfacing, photographic address, counteracting the experiential unity and uncritical givenness of ordinary phenomenal experience. At the same time, the element of motion continually emphasizes the contingency of each view or framing, preventing any particular "outside" from ossifying into a fixed spatial given. I want to call this interplay that is evoked by cinema "outsideness," with the "outside" part corresponding with the spatialized outside/depth that is felt to shadow every delimited inside/surface and the "ness" part temporally opening up every inside/outside configuration to the possibility of transformation, of limits differently drawn. Outsideness describes not an absolute outside or even the set of all possible outsides, but, rather, the *general rule* that some outside will always attend some inside. Again, cinema does not transcend its grounding in the anthropocentric inside with its evocation of outsideness. That said, through evoking outsideness, cinema does complexify the inside's limits and, as such, heightens viewer attunement to outsideness in general.

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In many ways, outsideness is synonymous with Gilles Deleuze's concept of the virtual, which, drawing substantially on the philosophy of Henri Bergson, exists in a relation of both mutual constitution and mutual exclusion vis-à-vis the "actual."[181] The actual, which corresponds to my use of inside, refers to delimited, identifiable instantiations of something, a manifest occurrence of a particular thing (as viewed from a particular perspective and within a particular epistemological and metaphysical frame—in our case, human phenomenal experience within the current historical moment). The virtual, on the other hand, describes the totality of other ways in which this particular thing could have been, the potentialities that are foreclosed each time an actual appears. The virtual is not simply that which is "not actual," but, rather, the could-have-been-otherwise itself; it is the fact that the boundaries of actuality could have been drawn differently. It is what Steven Shaviro calls "a principle of emergence," a "transcendental condition for the actual by providing sufficient reason for what appears."[182] The virtual accounts for the manifestation of every actual but is also not exhausted by any of these. Simultaneously, however, the virtual only exists in relation to the actual. It is only with the possibility of drawing particular, concrete boundaries that the act of drawing boundaries in general comes into existence.

The virtual—which also resonates with Alfred North Whitehead's concept of potentiality, or that which is "real, without being actual"[183]—is different from what is "possible." Brian Massumi, working within a Deleuzian framework, argues that "possibility is back-formed from potential's unfolding."[184] In other words, possibility is a retroactive mapping of the actual onto the transcendental principle of emergence, in such a way where the latter becomes implicitly made in

[181] See Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988).
[182] Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 35.
[183] Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 37.
[184] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 9

the former's image. Possibility recasts potentiality as an infinite set of all other actuals that could have been created, using the present actual as a tacit reference point. As such, possibility is teleological and prescriptive. Potential, on the other hand, "is unprescribed. It only feeds forward, unfolding toward the registering of an event."[185] Although the virtual/potentiality is constituted *with* the actual/possible, it is not constituted *by* the actual/possible. It is not defined in relation to a particular actual but, rather, is the dynamism of actualization and becoming itself. Shaviro put it well when he wrote that the virtual

> is the impelling force, or the principle, that allows each actual entity to appear (to manifest itself) as something new, something without precedence or resemblance, something that has never existed in the universe in quite that way before. That is why the virtual is entirely distinct from the possible. If anything, it is closer to Nietzsche's will-to-power, or Bergson's *élan vital*. All of these must be understood, not as inner essences, but as post-Kantian "syntheses" of difference: transcendental conditions for dynamic becoming, rather than for static being.[186]

I contend that cinema, in its particular collision of image and movement, has the capacity to sensitize the viewer to not just a particular outside but outsideness itself—i.e., virtuality, potentiality, and becoming. In the way it places denotation and contingency in tension with each other, cinema induces a speculative, eco-critical posture in which nonhuman, non-anthropocentric materiality is thematized but also feels closer than ever, sticking to the flip side of the inside's limits via the principle of openness from closure, which unites all of reality through the shared contingency of becoming. As Jakob Johann von Uexküll argued, every being has its *Umwelt*, its

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[185] Massumi, 9.
[186] Shaviro, *Without Criteria*, 35.

perceptual milieu that resolves at a particular scale and comprises its sense of worldhood.[187] We have our *Umwelt*, as do dogs, fleas, and protists. *Umwelts* may overlap—a tennis ball manifests in our world as well as a dog's—but they are nonidentical, distinct to each being. That said, with all *Umwelts*, some things come into view as an inside, others recede from view and are excluded as an outside. In this shared activity of contingent boundary-drawing, all otherwise isolated beings become ontologically conjoined once more. Outsideness names an awareness of *Umwelts* other than my own while simultaneously bridging the ontological gulf through a shared dynamic becoming. We do not ever occupy another's *Umwelt*, but, through complexifying our sense of our own *Umwelt* via a dynamization of its limits, we become more open to openness itself, joined to all of reality in the flux of ongoing transformation.

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I argue that a conception of cinema as both mediating immediacy and thematization of outsideness—i.e., cinema's realist automatism—models and induces an ethical posture toward nonhuman reality that is apposite for the Anthropocene. On the one hand, cinema gestures toward the limits of human concepts and experiences, thereby resisting one of the most damaging yet prevailing strains of environmentalism that attempts to "fix" climate change according to anthropocentric, capitalism-mediated conceptions of what is stable and efficient.[188] Cinema's denotation of nonhuman materiality's indeterminacy and the limits (and limitations) of our own world-views encourages a radical humility wherein the human subject feels herself to be de-exceptionalized and de-centered; as discussed in the Introduction, James Leo Cahill described this

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[187] Discussed in Pollman.
[188] See Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us*, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Verso Books, 2017).

felt de-centering as cinema's "Copernican vocation."[189] This cinematic Copernican shift prompts greater sensitivity to the nonhuman others with whom we coexist and prompts us to be more self-critical about the way we project anthropocentric frameworks onto them, which in turn informs the "solutions" we imagine. On the other hand, cinema also revitalizes the nonhuman other, lest they remain mute and inert, passively defined by their difference *from* us. To be "sensitive" to nonhuman materiality as brute matter is not being sensitive at all; rather, it reinstates anthropocentrism and the presumed sovereignty of human life over all other forms of life, a presumption that has driven extractive worldviews that treat the environment as a "standing-reserve" of human-benefitting resources waiting to be tapped.[190] Being "aware" of the existence of nonhuman materiality is in itself insufficient, for it accommodates and even encourages the infamous "nature-culture" dualism that underpins such extractive practices; this exploitative dualism also risks extending colonialist ideologies that use otherness (of both land and people) *as* justification for exploitation.[191] Rather, one must be aware of nonhuman entities as having *lives of their own*, and hence having ethical and political claim to what Sean Cubitt conceptualized as an expanded polity composed of both human and nonhuman constituents.[192] If a recognition of radical difference resists our reflexive projection of anthropocentrism onto nonhuman others, recognition of nonhuman vitality undercuts exploitative worldviews that, ultimately, also reinstate anthropocentrism. I believe that cinema, in its collision of denotative image and phenomenally

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[189] See Cahill.

[190] See Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology."

[191] The nature-culture dualism has been amply critiqued, such as in Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[192] See Sean Cubitt, *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

immediate movement, encourages a sensitivity to the simultaneous otherness and liveliness of nonhuman things.

Furthermore, what is "othered" and subsequently "revitalized" is not only that which is more "obviously" nonhuman, but the captured human body itself. De-exceptionalized by the film image's surfacing address, the human body is revealed to be a thing among things that, when set back into motion via cinematic movement, does not lose its defamiliarized materiality. Rather, vital nonhuman materiality is experienced as *extending into* the "human" body, such that what moves it is no longer felt as originating from anthropocentric Enlightenment conceptions of agency and will. This *material and vital continuity* between human and nonhuman is captured well by Jane Bennett's concept of vital materialism, in which "human being and thinghood overlap."[193] Humans "are also nonhumans," she argues, and "things, too, are vital players in the world.[194]" Donna Haraway points out that within the seemingly integral organistic unit we call the "human body," there thrives an abundance of protists and microorganisms on which our own biological functioning depends, thus challenging notions of the human as separate from the rest of the biological world.[195] Furthermore, the constant death and regeneration of cells and the molecular porousness of our bodies vis-à-vis the "external" environment radically undercut conceptions of the human body as materially and ontologically stable and distinct. Along similar lines, Cubitt argues that, for his vision of an expanded polis to be realized, "we must cease to be human."[196] When I say that cinema de-centers the human, "human" describes a very narrow (yet historically salient) conception emerging at the tenuous intersection of ordinary phenomenal experience and

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[193] Jane Bennett, *Vital Materialism: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.
[194] Bennett, 4.
[195] Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 3-4.
[196] Cubitt, 6.

notions of the human body qua ideal social subject— a conception that rapidly breaks down under scrutiny. What cinema foregrounds, I contend, is that the human is always already contaminated by the nonhuman, always already a part of the general materiality of the world. It emphasizes not that nonhuman entities should be brought "up" to the level of the human, but, rather, that the "human" was always already nonhuman. More than just having vital human and vital nonhuman standing opposite each other, cinema, in capturing human bodies within its indifferent gaze and setting them in motion alongside all other elements within the denotative image, foregrounds our fundamental material and ontological entwinement with nonhuman things. Appealing to us from within the narrower realm of phenomenological, socialized humanness within which we typically operate, cinema induces a complex awareness of the simultaneous otherness and vitality of things, within which we ourselves are caught.

4.3 Reaffirming Difference

Having argued that cinema de-exceptionalizes the human body vis-à-vis nonhuman vital materiality, I would like to conclude by returning to the loose category of the "human," which, in being defined *against* and then rejoined *to* the "nonhuman," risks morphing into an ahistorical, monolithic category. As argued earlier, this bracketing of intra-human difference has both argumentative and heuristic value: although abundant differences exist within the sphere of human culture along the lines of race, class, gender, physical ability, and more, it is also true that some things are, in certain ways, more different from us than we are from each other. To avoid anthropocentric cultural concerns dominating discussion once more, it makes sense to temporarily shift focus to and beyond the fringes of human culture itself. That said, as the principle of

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intersectionality has taught us, it is important not to use gains in one domain as pretext for rolling back advancements in another. Just as the fight for gender equity should not hinder the fight for racial justice, which should not impede the fight for class reform, so the fight for nonhuman others should not occur at the cost of any of these. One of the main critiques of posthumanism and ecocritical approaches that attempt to de-center the human is that this de-centering reinstates a universalism wherein the historicizing, diversifying work of feminist, queer, post-colonial, and critical race scholars are sidelined. By erasing difference, such a universalizing move not only props up existing power structures by presuming the existence of a default universal subject, but it overlooks the way the Anthropocene's material effects impact different communities to different degrees, all as a function of various intersecting elements like geography, technological and industrial infrastructure, and sociocultural context. As Cubitt points out, "the global poor suffer far more from pollution and environmental loss than the global rich; and much the same is true for the local poor and the local wealthy."[197] Writing on the differential effects of increased pollution for different groups of people, Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz note that,

> the emission of one kilogram of carbon dioxide or methane does not fulfil the same function for all human beings. For some people it is a question of survival, in the form of the available ration of rice, while for others it is simply increasing a consumption of meat (cattle, like rice fields, are great emitters of methane) that is already excessive from a medical point of view, monopolizing half of the planet's cereal crop-land for cattle feed and generating 18 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, or more than the entire transport sector. We are therefore not in the peaceful and infra-political problematic of a reconciliation of humans with nature: the Anthropocene is political inasmuch as it requires arbitrating between various conflicting human forcings on the planet, between the

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[197] Cubitt, 14.

footprints of different human groups (classes, nations), between different technological and industrial options, or between different ways of life and consumption. The Anthropocene has therefore to be given a political charge in order to overcome the contradictions and limits of modernity that has spread globally over the last two centuries, and to explore the paths of a rapid and equitably divided reduction of the ecological footprint.[198]

With Cubitt's and Bonneuil and Fressoz's observations in mind, the task of an eco-critical posthumanism is, in my view, twofold. It is to expand the human polity to include nonhuman others, in ways that complicate what is meant by "human" and "nonhuman" to begin with; as Cubitt envisions, the goal is to eudaemonistically strive for the well-being of all. But within this polity remain the "cultural" differences that, even if previously framed by too-narrow conceptions of humanism, do not just disappear with an opening of the outer borders. Imbalances in power, privilege, and access continue to materially prevent the security, comfort, and happiness of the "human" members of this expanded polity. To equitably pursue eudaemonism requires attending to the specific, material circumstances of *all* members. For previously nonhuman others, a crucial first step is to sideline anthropocentrism (subsequent work then needs to be done to nuance our account of nonhuman materiality, lest we treat *it* as monolithic as well). For the "human" members, the work of social justice needs to continue, given the persistence of oppressive systems. Extending this framework to anthropogenic climate change, we should be similarly oriented in two directions: toward the harm humans have caused to nonhuman entities, and toward how this ecological damage materially affects different human communities to different degrees (and, furthermore, how responsibility for this harm and the capacity for reform are also unequally distributed, with

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[198] Christophe Bonneeuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, 33.

developed nations and political and economic elites bearing the greatest burden to act; this notion of unequal responsibility underpinned the recent establishment of a "loss and damage" fund at the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP27 that aimed to provide reparative financial support for countries hit hardest by the effects of climate change[199]).

Thus far in my analysis of cinema and the zombie, I have argued that the collision of the two results in a powerful experience of both surfacing and reanimation in which the human, as a general category, is simultaneously confronted with the reality of nonhuman others and joined to them via a shared, dynamic vital materialism. While valuable as a heuristic point of departure, this analysis does risk rendering the human monolithic—i.e., as that against which the nonhuman is defined. I contend, however, that *Black Summer* foregrounds human difference in a way that counterbalances and nuances this homogenizing tendency. I argue that the show does this through its racially diverse cast, which, though in some respect consistent with the tendency of much popular media to tokenize diversity as part of their marketing and brand, also places tension on the de-exceptionalizing force of cinema's surfacing address. Across *Black Summer*'s two seasons, recurring characters include a Black man, a Latino man, a Korean woman, a Mexican couple, and an Iranian man; the only prominent white male character is Lance (discussed in the previous chapter), who is repeatedly shown to be among the least competent of the survivors. This visible racial difference runs up against cinema's indifferent lens with generative results. On the one hand, the capturing of all bodies as equally surfaced and thingified sidelines racial (and gender) diversity in favor of a sense of shared corporeality. All bodies are equally susceptible to destruction and decay, equally continuous with the general materiality of the world. This equalization has the

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[199] "COP27 Reaches Breakthrough Agreement on New 'Loss and Damage' Fund for Vulnerable Countries," *United Nations Climate Change*, November 20, 2022, https://unfccc.int/news/cop27-reaches-breakthrough-agreement-on-new-loss-and-damage-fund-for-vulnerable-countries.

benefit of challenging conceptions of diversity based in specious labels and representational politics, shifting focus to the vibrant materiality and lived reality of all bodies. On the other hand, however, the show's racial diversity, in being so pervasive and visible, also resists total subsumption into "humanity in general" or "materiality in general." Especially given the show's debut during the presidency of Donald Trump—a four-year period in which American culture became acutely sensitized to racial difference as both charged political talking point and lived reality—*Black Summer*'s varied racial representation feels pointed and forceful, repeatedly reminding viewers of the difference that does exist despite our shared materiality.

In addition to the two counterbalancing each other, this collision of surfacing address and racial difference also generates at least one, synergistic result. Surfacing address "fleshes out" racial diversity's tokenization under neoliberal capitalism, and racial diversity reinscribes "human" difference into worldly materiality, but the two also dovetail in one respect: diversity's delineation of difference between human bodies bears a structural analogy with surfacing address' delineation of difference between "objective" bodies. Although, in one respect, surfacing elides difference through positing a shared materiality, it also reinstates a different kind of difference by dialectically positing withdrawn depths. Cinema's surfacing address, in other words, simultaneously joins all bodies in a shared materiality and posits the radical *independence* of these bodies from each other, each of which bears its own inner life that can never be fully grasped by others; it is for this reason that, in Chapter 2, I attributed to cinema a certain impassivity and inscrutability. Cinema foregrounds bodies as surfaces to be encountered and "read," and the depths of meaning and being that always elude such hermeneutic efforts. *Black Summer* takes advantage of cinema's formal impassivity by repeatedly presenting scenarios in which strangers run into each other and warily attempt to discern each other's intentions, to read past friendly (or not so friendly) surfaces to

figure out what the other is thinking. Countless zombie films (and numerous films in general) feature this kind of narrative scenario, which, in its felt interplay between disclosed and undisclosed information, is ripe for suspense. What is unique about *Black Summer* is the way its version of this drama draws on and thematizes cinema's own surfacing address, literally framing such encounters as a matter of bodies simultaneously confronting and receding from each other.

For the most part, the show does not thematize this impassivity of material bodies in terms of racial difference; it does not explicitly frame the two as related, nor the former as a "metaphor" for the latter. That said, given the intense politicization of racial difference within the cultural context of the Trump presidency, I contend that there emerges a resonance between the two. I want to suggest that *Black Summer*'s collision of racial difference and cinematic surfacing comprises what Steven Shaviro would call an affective map of the present: it obliquely evokes "what it feels like" to live within the fractious contemporary United States, even if this historical experience is not explicitly represented or narratively thematized.[200] This affective mapping, I contend, would have been operative even if the film had not featured a racially diverse cast; the felt withdrawing of the viewer from onscreen bodies and these bodies from each other, all as a function of cinema's surfacing address, would have been sufficient to evoke (even if only subconsciously) the splintering of the American polity and the kinds of social and physical alienation that resulted. In introducing the aspect of racial difference, however, *Black Summer* more explicitly codes its affective mapping as being "of" the contemporary historical moment, even if this coding never achieves the forcefulness of direct representation. The show evokes a sense of racial difference as embodied encounter, as involving a vexed process of negotiation between bodies with radically

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[200] Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, 2. Shaviro and I are attempting to affectively map different things—he is interested in evoking the joint proliferation of hypermedia and neoliberalism in the 21st century—but I believe his concept of the affective map pertains to what I am discussing.

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different histories and experiences. These depths that recede, however, dialectically implicate surface: the point of contact, the act of communication, the uneasy coming-together.

It is through evoking this sense of surfacing as inter-body negotiation charged with (but also exceeding) the cultural differentiations of the present that *Black Summer* introduces an expanded sense of sociality. More attuned to the materiality and orientations of the lived corporeal body than idealist, subjectivist, and tokenistic conceptions of sociality, and yet more invested in dynamic, communicative encounters between radically distinct beings than theories that collapse all bodies into a monolithic posthuman materiality, *Black Summer* both affectively maps the fractious social landscape of the contemporary United States and, paradoxically, locates the potential for a new and more mindful sociality within a certain "divisiveness." Although the show's depiction of social interchange is in many ways bleak, affectively channeling the present social climate in its portrayal of rampant distrust and human infighting following a viral outbreak (the second season was released during the COVID-19 pandemic), *Black Summer* also suggests that division's attunement to difference could help engender a more nuanced and inclusive sociality, even if demonization and animosity must first be overcome.

Through its complex articulation of bodies as both isolated and conjoined, material and social, absolutely distinct from each other and yet always coming into contact, the show sensitizes the viewer to the encounters between bodily surfaces that must be accounted for if we are to collectively build our way toward a more ecologically and materially inclusive society. Furthermore, through the medium of film, this surfacing of bodies phenomenologically implicates the surface of the viewer's own body. Film phenomenologists such as Jennifer M. Barker and Laura U. Marks have discussed film as possessing a "skin"—not in terms of a "literal fleshy covering of a human or animal body," but, after Merleau-Ponty, "a general style of being in the

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world"[201] in which other bodies manifest to the phenomenological subject as both distinct from and co-constituted with it. It is the subject's phenomenological intentionality that manifests the other, but, conversely, it is also through apprehension of the other that the subject's own phenomenological self emerges in the first place. Within this phenomenological interchange, it is the skin that both demarcates self from other and forms the material possibility for their encounter. Skin, in other words, resonates with my conception of surface, as exemplified by this passage from Barker's book:

> The skin is a meeting place for exchange and traversal because it connects the inside with the outside, the self with the other. It also constantly enacts both the perception of expression and the expression of perception; in other words, it perceives the world as the world objectively expresses itself, and it expresses its own act of perception to the world by touching it.[202]

Skin/surface as the medium of contact that affords the possibility of "exchange" between bodies resonates with the vision of sociality I have described, in which expanded inclusivity emerges through accounting for embodied difference. What Barker, drawing on the work of Vivian Sobchack, contributes is the notion that film itself manifests a skin in the way it mediates the operations of phenomenological perception itself: it expresses perception via what Sobchack calls the "viewing view" and perceives expression through the "viewed view."[203] As discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, by not only surfacing captured bodies but being itself a filmic surface with which the viewer comes into phenomenological contact, *Black Summer* implicates the viewer's

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[201] Barker, 26. Laura U. Marks. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).
[202] Barker, 27.
[203] See Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*.

own body in the drama of encounter and withdrawal playing out onscreen, compelling her to not only *see* this encounter but to *feel* her own participation in it.

If there is a character in the show that comes closest to thematizing the convergence of material surfacing and social difference, it would be Sun, who speaks in untranslated, unsubtitled Korean for most of the series.[204] Though Korean-speaking viewers would obviously experience her dialogue differently, for everyone else, the lack of translation registers as a pointed coding of difference. The show does not do so in a reductive or stereotyping manner; more screen time is given to Sun's facial expressions, bodily comportment, shifting tones of voice, and decisive physical actions than almost any other character (she is part of the show's main cast). As mentioned at the end of Chapter 2, there is a correlation between visual representation and narrative agency; in this respect, along with the care and nuance granted to this representation itself, Sun is clearly presented as an agential character. And yet, given that every other character speaks fluent English, her linguistic and cultural difference stands out, and, moreover, this difference is coded as significant given her narrative prominence. As her untranslated speech remains at the forefront of the viewer's experience of the show, persisting in tandem with the series' general portrayal of social alienation, these two forms of "untranslation" come to resonate with each other. If, by and large, the connection between cinematic surfacing and social difference is obliquely evoked by the show rather than represented directly, Sun's prominence as a culturally "other" character dramatizing the act of untranslation alongside the show's surfacing address is the closest *Black Summer* comes to explicit thematization.

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[204] English is the show's main spoken language, but even when the English subtitling option is selected, Sun's dialogue remains pointedly unsubtitled (with the exception of one scene—more on which momentarily—whose status as exception proves the rule).
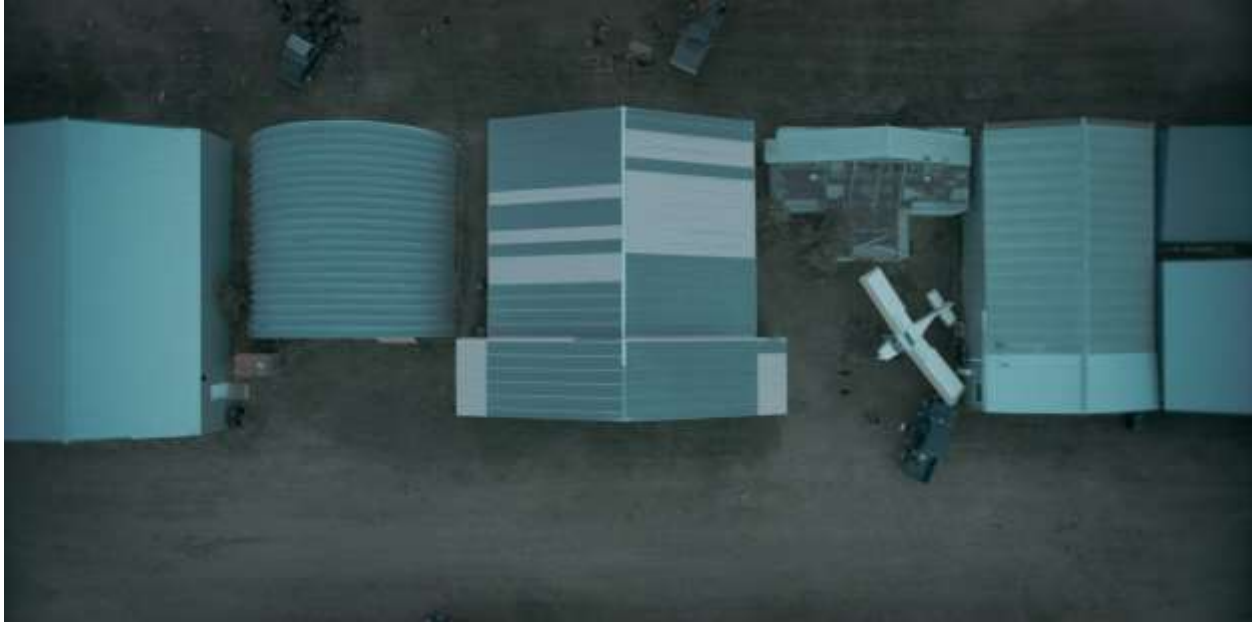
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Figure 10: Bird's-eye view shot at the start of *Black Summer* Season 2, Episode 8.

Crucially, Sun is not only an agential narrative driver but also the last character we see in the second-season denouement. Following a grueling episode in which the show's surviving characters converge on an airstrip to fight for a seat aboard a small plane, Sun is the only person who successfully boards. As the plane takes off and the earth falls away, her position of elevation recalls a moment earlier in the episode in which a bird's-eye-view shot captures various bands of characters—rendered tiny pinpricks from this height—milling around far below (Figure 10).[205] Striking for its departure from the show's dominant style of eye-level handheld tracking shots emulating the limited purview of human phenomenal experience, this shot is one of the rare instances in the show where we are granted a synoptic perspective denied to any individual character, enabling us to discern the spatial relationships between them and to conceive of them

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[205] This aerial shot evokes the helicopter-view shot at the end of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), in which the posse of human "rescuers" become, at this height, visually indistinguishable from zombies. This visual obfuscation of the human-zombie distinction is consistent with *Black Summer*'s formal and thematic investment in zombification (as discussed in Chapter 2).

collectively—i.e., *as* a collective. It is the kind of synoptic perspective that one could have only if one were high up, as in a plane, and it is this shot and its evocation of collectivity that is recalled in the episode's final, airborne moments. Strikingly, it is precisely at this point that the show subtitles Sun's dialogue for the first time. After so many punishing episodes fighting not only to survive but to communicate, Sun finds that respite in the former is miraculously joined by respite in the latter: the pilot of the plane bearing her to safety also speaks Korean. The significance is profound. It is when a perspective is adopted in which collectivity comes into focus that translation happens; conversely, it can be said that, in *Black Summer*, it is when translation happens that collectivity comes into focus.[206] Importantly, the show emphasizes translation *as* translation, not only through the presence of English subtitles (the first time Sun's dialogue has been subtitled in the show) but through having the pilot be coded as Korean-American ("I speak a little Korean," he tells Sun in Korean before switching to American-accented English: "Who'd have thought?"). In other words, even though Sun finds communion in language, there remains a cultural and linguistic gulf between her and him, and he himself occupies a position of cultural liminality characteristic of second-generation immigrants. Communication is never frictionless; it requires effort and is always mediated. And yet, despite the persistent communicative chasms that exist between languages, cultures, and bodies, translation palpably happens in this final scene. The attempt is made to communicate, and, in Sun's expression of profound and tearful relief, communication leads to one of the show's only restful moments; after two seasons of agitated movement and violence, a character closes her eyes to sleep (Figure 11). Although this denouement cannot exactly be called happy—the cumulative pain and death of preceding episodes weigh heavily on the viewer's experience of the scene, and Sun's expression right before the

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[206] See, again, Horton and his concept of resolution.

credits roll seems more exhausted than elated—it presents a vision of restful togetherness that is aspirational. Through its emphasis on translation, this soberly hopeful coda does not contradict the show's reigning philosophy of surfacing but, rather, emerges from it, imagining a form of radical community in which differences are both maintained and brought intimately together.

Figure 11: Restful togetherness.

4.4 The Politics of Surfacing

To conclude, I want to briefly discuss an important area not addressed by the show. Although *Black Summer* depicts racial difference that, when made to collide with cinema's surfacing address, affectively maps the social fragmentation of the contemporary United States, the series does not frame this difference and fragmentation in terms of power and privilege; in some ways, the show's premise works against such a framing, since, as discussed in Chapter 2, its vision of post-apocalypse involves flattened hierarchies and razed societal structures. Even if power imbalances may be thematized in a "negative" fashion (e.g., viewers may get a kick out of seeing historically disenfranchised groups exist on equal footing with erstwhile elites), *Black Summer* tends to sideline such issues at the level of representation. In a sense, this omission comprises a missed opportunity, especially given Meghan Sutherland's observation (arrived at through an analysis of American zombie cinema) that entrenched power structures would likely persist even into post-apocalyptic scenarios—if not in the form of physical institutions, then in inculcated bodily habits that reflexively perpetuate historical power relations.[207] Relatedly, although the show's surfacing address objectifies all bodies equally, not all bodies are equally objectified to begin with. Western culture and media have historically relegated nonwhite bodies and women to object status vis-à-vis the white male subject as default. In presuming a vantage point from which all bodies can be viewed as equally surfaced and thingified (a perspective bolstered by the film camera's seemingly indifferent lens, which, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, is itself not ideologically neutral), *Black Summer* risks obscuring the ways in which the very act

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[207] See Sutherland.

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of objectification is a prerogative historically available to only a few and whose material consequences have been dire to those caught in the objectifying gaze.

This discussion of the historical and unequal objectification of particular social groups also heavily implicates the figure of the zombie, which problematically instantiates historical power differentials by coding certain bodily traits as abnormal, even inhuman. The concept of subjectivity (or, in the case of the zombie, the lack thereof) connotes a "depth" that exceeds the realm of the visible and hence can only be deduced by reading surfaces; per Simon Orpana's description of the zombie, the figure's "loss of higher human functioning" is "*signified*" through the zombie's lack of "language use, reasoning, response to affect, facial expressions, and other social cues"—i.e., the "signs" are *read* and *interpreted* before subjective vacancy, social otherness, and inhumanness are deduced.[208] The determination of humanness based on visible, physical characteristics resonates with—and, as various scholars have argued, instantiates and perpetuates—racist, ableist, and colonialist epistemologies that deem some people less than human based on bodily traits. Anna Mae Duane, for example, has pointed out the ableism that inheres within zombie representation, whose regular association of the undead with various physical and behavioral disabilities tacitly reinforces the notion that deviation from normative body types is grounds for violent social rejection.[209] Travis Linnemann, Tyler Wall, and Edward Green have argued that the zombie functions as a valuable metaphor for Giorgio Agamben's concept of the *homo sacer*—i.e., those "zombified others" that "exist outside the protections of the state" and upon whose bodies

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[208] Orpana, 306 (my emphasis).
[209] Anna Mae Duane, "Dead *and* Disabled: The Crawling Monsters of the Walking Dead," in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

"'legitimate' violence" is exercised as a means of maintaining state power[210]—but I would argue that the zombie film also potentially reinforces this mode of thinking by depicting the permissible suspension of legal and moral law vis-à-vis bodies bearing nonnormative physical and behavioral attributes. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen puts the point even more forcefully, framing zombies as tacitly buttressing out-group demonization as a mode of thought:

> Never individualized, zombies present the single human collective about whom we can without hesitation speak in terms of determinative mental traits, communal bodily designators, and stereotyped characteristics. Zombies offer a permissible groupthinking of the other, the slough where we find ourselves besmirched by modes of thinking we claim to have surpassed. We feel no shame in declaring the discolored bodies of the undead repulsive. Zombies eat disgusting food. They possess no coherent language; it all sounds like grunts and moans. They desire everything we possess. They are a danger from without that is already within. We need to erect walls, secure borders, build fortresses, and amass guns against their surging tide. Applied to any other group, such homogenizing reduction and obsession with physicality, communal menace, and fantastic consumption should be intolerable. But the zombie is a body from which the person has departed, so we can talk about it without worry over bigotry.[211]

A barely veiled outlet for repressed and deflected social demonization, the zombie's presumed status as less than human seems to invite the floodgates of bigotry to be opened safely and with abandon, except "less than human" is not a given. Rather, the visual, aural, and narrative tropes associated with zombie inhumanness are culled from existing, harmful stereotypes, such

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[210] Travis Linnemann, Tyler Wall, and Edward Green, "The Walking Dead and Killing State: Zombification and the Normalization of Police Violence," in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 333.
[211] Cohen, 387.

that the resulting "permissible groupthinking" risks reverberating out to perpetuate more explicitly historical forms of social marginalization and demonization.

When *Black Summer* surfaces the human body through the collision of film and the zombie, in other words, many historically specific disparities in power and privilege—as tied to a rhetoric of objectification and thingification—are sidelined. The same can be said of my framework of surfacing in general: if deployed uncritically and unreflectively, it may not only obfuscate historical power differentials but reinforce them. However, I believe that, if mobilized as a heuristic that *provisionally brackets* (rather than elides) certain social and historical realities, surfacing—and, by extension, outsideness—retains great eco-critical value. In mobilizing the surface-depth, moved-moving, image-movement dialectic, the show sensitizes viewers to outsideness, through which we are simultaneously marked off from and joined to both human and nonhuman others. This sensitization, I contend, comprises a crucial epistemological and affective starting point for a more mindful, ethical, and socially and materially inclusive response to the Anthropocene to emerge.

In the first three chapters of my dissertation, cinema's realist automatism and its mediation of nonhuman reality has been the keystone of my analysis. It is the foundation on which the different levels of thematization—the long take, and the zombie on "top" of that—have been built, all of which reverberate back "down" to attune viewers to cinema's own mediation of physical, nonhuman reality. In the final chapter, I explore the tension placed on this realist framework by the digital transition, which has seemingly severed the denotative, analogical connection between image and reality. Shifting ontological emphasis from imaged to image, from denotation to *creatio ex nihilo*, digital cinema is associated with a diminishment of referential weight, a decreased ability to refer convincingly to realities beyond itself. Given the heightened ontological insularity of the

digital image and the broader cultural logic to which it is tied, does cinema's realist automatism today truly bear the epistemological and affective force I have claimed? Does digital post-production's cosmetic potential—the way images can be invisibly doctored while maintaining the iconic illusion of photographic capture—undermine cinema's realist force, since even that which appears to denote physical reality is materially based in manipulable bitmaps (and, given the proliferation and normalization of digital media, increasingly *known* to be such by the average viewer/user)? On the other hand, if digitality impedes some aspects of an eco-critical film realism, could it potentially reinforce others? These are the questions I address in the next chapter.

5.0 Film Realism in the Digital Age

Over the last three chapters, I have developed a spectacular, eco-critical film realism and explored how the long take expresses it in heightened form, confronting the viewer with the nonhuman vitality that both exceeds and encompasses her. Both inextricably grounded in the subjective human "inside" and dynamizing the limits of this inside, cinema, I argued, generates an experience of outsideness, which simultaneously asserts the difference of nonhuman others from us and connects us back to the becoming of the world.

What happens to this model of eco-critical film realism within a historical moment in which the image has become (and is largely understood to be) detached from physical reality? Within the regime of digital cinema, the creation of images contains an intermediary step in which photochemical inputs are first converted into discretized, manipulable bytes before being reassembled into a photorealistic aesthetic. Introduced is what Deborah Levitt calls an "interval of control" between the capturing and display of images, within which any number of adjustments can be made without the viewer being any the wiser.[212] As D.N. Rodowick has observed, digital conversion is a "one-way street"[213]; once the physical inputs of analog cinema have been translated into bit-based, "machine-readable notation,"[214] the resulting potential for infinite image manipulation means that any attempt to recreate a photographic aesthetic, while possible, is no longer ontologically necessary. Instead of the logic of mechanical capture, there is now the logic of *creatio ex nihilo*, the malleability of the endlessly customizable digital image that led Lev

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[212] Deborah Levitt, *The Animatic Apparatus: Animation, Vitality, and the Futures of the Image* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2018).

[213] D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 166.

[214] Rodowick, 115.

Manovich to align digital cinema more with painting than with photographic film.[215] Furthermore, as Shane Denson has noted, even the "created" digital image is not "finished"; digital displays typically "refresh"—i.e., are reconstituted and repainted—several hundred times a second, and recent, A.I.-powered smart televisions routinely touch up the images they present through processes such as upscaling.[216] Though most of these procedures fall below the threshold of human perception, their increasing ubiquity and familiarity to the general public (e.g., via the popularization of home theater systems equipped with such technology) contributes to the larger, cultural sense of digital images' protean nature. Not only does digital conversion sever photographic cinema's material and denotative link to physical reality, but, thanks to such image dynamization processes, even the digital image itself cannot be said to possess ontological solidity in the traditional sense, i.e., as bearing a stable form that persists through time and space. Within this image regime—which involves not just changes in the media production process but a shift in the entire cultural imaginary—the image becomes a referentially self-enclosed entity, an act of continuing adjustment and transformation that denotes only its own, manifest, moment-to-moment contents rather than any historical or material reality beyond itself.

How does an eco-critical film realism—which is predicated on an openness to a reality beyond the image—fare within a contemporary media regime that posits the present-tense visuality of the image as being all there is? Will long takes—even those shot on film—bear the realist force I have attributed to them, given an audience of digitally literate viewers who have grown acclimated to the hermetic, presentist logic of digital images? A telltale sign of this zeitgeist shift lies in the phenomenon of viewers assuming certain aspects of a shot were computer-generated

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[215] See Lev Manovich, "What is Digital Cinema?" in *Critical Visions in Film Theory*, eds. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, Meta Mazaj (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011).
[216] See Shane Denson, *Discorrelated Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

when, in fact, they were captured by photographic means—e.g., the floating feather in *Forrest Gump* (1994)[217], a skydiving action sequence from *Iron Man 3* (2013),[218] and many of the "non-player characters" (NPCs) in the background of *Free Guy* (2021), which takes place within a video game.[219] When one begins to approach images under the assumption that they were likely digitally manipulated, digital manipulability itself has clearly become a salient cultural episteme—a shift Levitt picked up on when she coined the term the "animatic apparatus" to describe the contemporary cultural transition from notions of ontological fixity toward a logic of proteanness and metamorphosis.

In this chapter, I argue that cinema's realist automatism remains a prominent force within the digital age. The grounding claim is that digital cinema continues to draw substantially upon the visual logic of cinematic photorealism and the physical reality it denotes. From this baseline argument, I propose three ways in which digitality can, when paired with photorealism, in fact bolster the eco-critical film realism I have been developing. The first, drawing on William Brown's digital eco-film philosophy, is that digitality ontologically flattens the image, such that the distinction between "foreground" and "background," "object" and "empty space" collapses, all becoming united in a shared reducibility to ones and zeroes. This flattening can encourage an eco-critical worldview that challenges anthropocentrism and conceives of everything as existing on the same material and ontological continuum. The second, turning to Levitt's theory of the "animatic," is that digitality has a singular capacity to thematize dynamism itself—the "ness" part of

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[217] Stephen Prince, *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 57-59.

[218] See "Top 10 Things We Thought Were CGI But Weren't," *WatchMojo*, YouTube Video, August 4, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0Z76B3U04U.

[219] See "10 Recent Movie Effects You Thought Were CGI (But Weren't)," *WhatCulture*, YouTube Video, October 11, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-30-Mq3tyE.

outsideness. The third—related to the second, and reading Levitt alongside the ethics-oriented film theory of Markos Hadjioannou—is that digitality, in embodying a logic of becoming, models a form of "how-ethics" that emphasizes the viewer's active, ongoing involvement in the world.

5.1 The Persistence of Realism

Photorealism, originally one of the core features of cinema's realist automatism, has, in the digital age, become that which threatens to undermine it. With analog cinema, the perceptual familiarity of the photographic film image—its appeal to human perceptual ratios, its visual isomorphy vis-à-vis everyday phenomenal experience, its resemblance to other photorealistic images once the conventions of photorealism itself have stabilized—registers as affirming the ontological solidity of nonhuman physical reality. The traditional, denotative film image posits an indexical-iconic worldview in which the humanly visible and visibly physical are presumed to be reality and, conversely, reality is presumed to be that which is humanly visible and visibly physical. What is imaged is implied to be "of" reality itself, and reality itself is implied to be what is imaged; this tacit correspondence extends even into fantastical works whose images, though depicting narratively outlandish phenomena, still register as indexical records of bodies, objects, and spaces that physically appeared before the camera during production (e.g., a shot of an animatronic monster, even if not assumed to be documenting the existence of an "actual" monster, nonetheless points to the physical, pro-filmic existence of the animatronic entity). With digitality's severing of this indexical connection, however, photorealism turns troubling, especially when it continues to seamlessly reproduce the aesthetic of its photographic forebears. The persistence of photorealism

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even into an era in which many (if not most) images are based in sub-phenomenal binary code generates a tension between the phenomenal and the ontological, in which things are increasingly understood to be not how they appear. The ensuing, paranoid posture in which photorealistic images are viewed with skepticism and pored-over for digital seams has become commonplace in contemporary digital culture[220]—as seen, for example, in the public discourse surrounding deepfakes, cosmetic applications like FaceTune, and the questionable veracity of news footage as tied to the phenomenon of Fake News.[221]

This cultural casting-in-doubt of photorealistic images is thematized by *Birdman: Or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014), in which "impossible" digital special effects—e.g., a levitating character, the camera seeming to pass through impossibly tight spaces, a giant metallic creature perched atop a building in broad daylight—are inserted into the realist technique of a very long take. These overtly fantastical moments—which, though photorealistically seamless, are referentially impossible and manifestly could only have been achieved through digital mediation— foreground the digitality of all surrounding moments of the long take, since, in order to be smoothly composited with the more sensational flights of spectacle, all within a "single" shot, they, too, had to first be converted into ones and zeroes. In *Birdman*, the use of digital *special* effects—what Stephen Prince defines as effects that the viewer notices—is used to highlight the ubiquity of

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[220] As Bernard Stiegler, "The Discrete Image," in *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 150 observes, "The *digital* photograph suspends a certain spontaneous belief which the analog photograph bore within itself. When I look at a digital photo, I can never be absolutely sure that what I see truly exists—nor, since it is still a question of a photo, that it does not exist at all."

[221] See, for example, Rebecca Jennings, "Facetune and the internet's endless pursuit of physical perfection," *Vox*, July 25, 2019, https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/7/16/20689832/instagram-photo-editing-app-facetune; Jia Tolentino, "The Age of Instagram Face: How social media, FaceTune, and plastic surgery created a single, cyborgian look," *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/decade-in-review/the-age-of-instagram-face; Ian Sample, "What are deepfakes – and how can you spot them?" *The Guardian*, January 13, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jan/13/what-are-deepfakes-and-how-can-you-spot-them; Jesselyn Cook, "Selfies, Surgeries and Self-Loathing: Inside the Facetune Epidemic," *Huffpost*, May 20, 2021, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/facetune-selfies-surgeries-body-dysmorphia_n_60926a11e4b0b9042d989d48.

digital *visual* effects, or those that fall below the threshold of human perception.[222] The long take, previously a hallmark and thematization of cinema's realist automatism, here facilitates the latter's subversion; it is because the shot continues seemingly unbroken from the more spectacularly "digital" effects to the more mundane moments (which otherwise could have conceivably been captured by traditional photographic means) that the photographic reality of these more mundane moments (i.e., the status of these moments as photographic, and, concomitantly, the denoted physical reality as physically "real") are called into question. In other words, the mundane aspects become ontologically "contaminated" by the digitality of the spectacular moments (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Digital special effects "contaminate" the long take in *Birdman* (2014).

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[222] See Stephen Prince, *Digital Visual Effects*.

Within the digital regime, photorealism, rather than ontologically corresponding with a physical reality beyond the image, becomes an aesthetic like any other, an arbitrary manifestation that could have just as easily taken a different form. William Brown calls this digitally-specific arbitrariness "supercinema," in reference to the way Superman's outwardly ordinary alter ego of Clark Kent (i.e., photorealism) belies extraordinary abilities (i.e., digital malleability).[223] This digital capacity is thematized in a famous moment from James Cameron's *The Abyss* (1989), in which an oceanic alien, taking the form of a ribbon of water floating several feet above the floor, snakes up to a human character and transforms its front end into the likeness of a human face, imitating the character's expressions. This representation of a metamorphosing body taking human form—which Cameron will later build on with the liquid metal T-1000 in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991)—not only evokes digital proteanness but embodies it: the spectacle of the alien's mealleable body was manifestly achieved through digital special effects. Furthermore, despite the outlandishness of the alien's physics (its liquid body, though stochastically verisimilar, is seen suspended above the floor and neatly bounded into serpentine form), the creature is seamlessly composited with the flesh and blood actors onscreen, offering the convincing visual illusion of all parties cohabiting the same physical space. In Prince's terminology, the scene deploys a "correspondence-based model of cinematic representation" that appeals to viewers' "audiovisual experience of three-dimensional space" to generate the impression of a continuous, visuo-spatial field uniting the mundane and the spectacular.[224] In other words, at the very moment that it depicts

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[223] See Brown, *Supercinema*.

[224] Stephen Prince, "True Lies," 31-32. It should be noted that, in Prince's later book *Digital Visual Effects*, he expresses dissatisfaction with the term "photorealism" as a description of the kind of Cartesian spatial representation described here. My use of "photorealism" draws more on Julie Turnock's from *Plastic Reality: Special Effects, Technology, and the Emergence of 1970s Blockbuster Aesthetics*, which links photorealism with seamless visual compositing. This sense of a spatiotemporal continuity between "captured" and "created" elements also underpins the correspondence-based realism from Prince's "True Lies" essay, and hence, when I use "photorealism," it is closer to his "correspondence-based realism" than what he means by photorealism.

a protean creature molding itself into a humanly familiar form, the film also puts into practice what it shows, presenting the illusion of seamless, anthropocentric three-dimensional space despite—and through—the image's basis in manipulable binary code (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Thematizing digital photorealism in *The Abyss* (1989).

In *Birdman* and *The Abyss*, photorealism is the medium through which digitality expresses itself to human eyes. The presentation of referentially impossible yet seamlessly photorealistic phenomena underscores the way the previously assumed, one-to-one relationship between photographic aesthetic and denoted physical reality no longer holds, since digitality's powerful plasticity now underpins even the most convincingly photorealistic images. Referencing only to subvert—and subverting *through* referencing—the metaphysical assumptions that attend the

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"integral photogram"[225] of analog cinema and its seemingly faithful and indivisible capture of a spatiotemporally unified physical reality, these films emblematize a sea change in which "image" has overtaken "reality," the pure, protean, arbitrary present-tense of the image seemingly having become the only "reality" there is. That said, it is telling that the medium through which digitality expresses itself *is* photorealism. The very fact that the digital special effects in *The Abyss* and *Birdman* feel spectacular—and were clearly deployed to elicit this response—indicates that the regime of photographic denotation is *not* totally gone. If we truly occupied a "post-cinematic" world, the term "post-cinematic" itself (which continues to grammatically hinge on the core term of "cinema") would not even be operative; cinema would no longer be a reference point at all. That it remains not only a reference point but a structuring one—digital cinema's expressive capacities tend to be defined *against* those of analog film and, as mentioned, conveyed through *first* referencing photorealism *then* subverting its logics—suggests the continued conceptual, formal, and affective prominence of cinema's realist automatism even into the digital age.

Birdman*, in particular, dramatizes this tension between digitality and cinema's realist automatism in its use of the long take. In deploying not only a long take but a very long one that runs for over 100 minutes, the film's subversions of photorealism (i.e., the ontological contamination of more mundane moments by more digitally spectacular ones) never feel total, the "making digital" of the image always meeting resistance from the long take's forceful invocation of photographic denotation. Even though the film makes the viewer aware of the ways in which analog cinema's ontological claims have been subverted by the digital turn, the long take's sheer length continually posits the physical reality of the pro-filmic space. Through foregrounding the presence of the camera and the act of recording, *Birdman*'s long take insists upon the physical,

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[225] Denson, *Discorrelated Images*, 51.

causal relationship between camera and pro-filmic, asserting that what is captured was filmically recorded and what was filmically recorded *was* captured—i.e., excerpted directly from the "real" time, "real" space flow of lived reality itself. In *Birdman*, there exists a tension between digital and photographic regimes that never settles in favor of the digital; the long take's superlative length continually thematizes the way cinema's realist automatism "frames" our experience of digitality. This persistence of filmic and photographic realism can also be found within the aforementioned anxieties about deepfakes, FaceTune, and the general potential for digital duplicity—specifically, in the fact that these discourses are *anxious* ones. Anxiety about digital manipulation simultaneously reaffirms the conception of reality being undermined. In the fear of losing a sense of denotative, analogical correspondence between image and pro-filmic, this very sense retains its vigor, its powerful hold on the conceptual imaginaries and affective investments of "digitally literate" subjects.

To recapitulate, I have argued that cinema's realist automatism, despite being unsettled by digitality's ontological undermining of photographic denotation, remains a structuring component of digital cinema aesthetics and spectatorship. As such, I contend that, especially when thematized by the long take, cinema retains its eco-critical potential, its capacity to mediate a physical, nonhuman reality apart from the viewer but to which she is joined in the shared dynamism of becoming. And yet, it is also the case that cinema's realist automatism is not the same as it was just a couple decades ago, let alone from Bazin's and Kracauer's day. Although digitality has not eradicated this automatism, neither has the latter been left completely untouched. The relationship between viewer, image, and reality has changed with the shift to an animatic regime and to digitality as a dominant cultural logic. The rest of this chapter explores how, given the baseline persistence of cinema's realist automatism, digitality's novel properties and capacities inflect

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film's eco-critical potential. I contend that, rather than simply being a weakened, diluted version of traditional film realism, a digitally inflected film realism can thematize particular aspects of cinema's realist automatism with greater force.

5.2 Ontological Flattening

In Chapter 2, I attributed to the film image an effect of ontological flattening, wherein all pro-filmic elements—including human bodies—are presented as being mechanically captured by the same indifferent lens and hence de-hierarchized, each equally a part of the same, indeterminate physical reality. Although the digital image bears a weakened denotational correspondence to physical reality, this diminishment is compensated for by an intensified sense of ontological flattening. Within the digital image, all image elements, from bodies and objects to the "empty" space between them, from foreground elements to background details, are equally reducible to ones and zeroes and thus exist on the same ontological continuum. Brown, writing on the expanded eco-critical awareness a digitally inspired film philosophy can encourage, notes how this sense of flattening is vividly expressed in instances that violate the viewer's commonsense notions of object solidity—e.g., moments in *Fight Club* (1999) when the computer-generated camera (or, more accurately, camera *effect*) slips frictionlessly through solid surfaces, including the surfaces of characters' bodies.[226] Other examples include a standoff in *Bad Boys II* (2003) in which a circling long take seems to pass through a couple tiny apertures to maintain the impression of visual

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[226] See Brown, *Supercinema*.

continuity (Figure 18); various moments in *Enter the Void* (2009) in which drifting, extended bird's-eye-view long takes reapproach the earth to ostensibly enter and inhabit characters' bodies; and a scene from *Panic Room* (2002) in which the camera glides with spectral ease into keyholes and through impossibly narrow spaces, thematizing the porousness of an Upper West Side apartment at the very moment that it is being broken into (more on which later). Such digital special effects induce what Brown, after Gilles Deleuze, calls "gaseous perception," or the awareness that objects are interconnected on a molecular level, such that what may appear bounded and solid in phenomenal experience is, at sub-phenomenal scales, diffuse and dynamic. Extending Brown terminology, I will refer to digital images that present such effects "gaseous images."[227]

The gaseous-perceptive viewer simultaneously sees simulacra of objects they daily experience as being physically bounded by impermeable surfaces and an impossible violation of these boundaries that retroactively casts doubt on the initial sense of solidity and distinctness. Importantly, it is only through the presentation of objects that are recognizable and apparently physically solid that the effect of porousness and ontological flattening is achieved. In other words, it is only through the persistence of photorealism and its appeal to anthropocentric, phenomenal object perception that ontological flattening registers *as* a flattening to begin with. To draw on Brown's Superman metaphor, although the alter ego of Clark belies the capacities of Superman,

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[227] With *Panic Room* and *Enter the Void*, especially, there is a mutual resonance between gaseous effects and narrative elements. The gaseousness foregrounds certain themes (the porousness of the apartment in *Panic Room*, the incorporeality of *Enter the Void*'s protagonist, who has died and roams Tokyo as a spirit), which double back to sensitize viewers to the existence of gaseousness. These cases of mutual thematization evoke what Whissel, *Spectacular Digital Effects*, 6 calls an "effects emblem," in which a combination of dialogue, narrative, and special effects overdetermine the impression of particular concepts and themes. Whissel is more interested in the way digital effects are mobilized for narrative and thematic ends, but I believe that, with films like *Panic Room* and *Enter the Void*, such mobilization also rebounds to thematize the spectrality and insubstantiality of digitality itself. This kind of thematization is what interests me and is precisely the framework through which I approached *Black Summer* in the previous two chapters.

Superman only feels super *in relation to* Clark's ordinariness (which metonymizes the ordinariness of mundane humanity in general).

Digitality reaffirms photorealism in a "negative" fashion, with the latter forming a key aesthetic and epistemic frame for the articulation of the former. Due to this baseline photorealism, which expresses cinema's realist automatism, the violations of object solidity that occur within the gaseous image also implicate physical reality, even if in less direct a fashion than with analog film. In the way it presents an ontologically flattened world that visually corresponds with physical, phenomenal reality, the digital image invites the viewer to entertain the possibility that their own reality is similarly gaseous. Because the digital image is materially disconnected from physical reality, the relationship between gaseous image and gaseous reality is not one of denotation; the computer-generated camera's disregard for object solidity does not register as indexing an actual physical camera actually passing through an actual physical object (and, in any case, commonsense referential knowledge of such a feat as physically impossible ensures the viewer will almost certainly experience the gaseous effect *as* a special effect). Rather, it might be said that the gaseous image signifies the *idea* of gaseousness, maintaining a material and ontological gap between signifier and signified. That said, given the persistent photorealism of the gaseous image, gaseousness remains iconically and connotatively linked to cinema's realist automatism and the physical, phenomenal reality it denotes.

Crucially, the gaseous image presents not merely an ontological flattening, but a flattening in relation to subperceptual realms—the microscopic bits and speed-of-light microprocesses that constitute (and continually reconstruct) the digital image.[228] In this respect, digitality's ontological flattening departs significantly from analog cinema's. With photographic film, all captured

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[228] See Denson, *Discorrelated Images*.

elements are rendered equally physical by the camera's indifferent lens, but this physicality is implicitly confined to the scale of human vision. As discussed in previous chapters, this provisional appeal to human perceptual ratios is an important first step toward broadening awareness of nonhuman realities, but the fact remains that photographic cinema has historically reinforced a sense of reality as physically visible and visibly physical. The gaseous digital image subverts such conceptions. The impossibility of effects like the ones from *Panic Room* and *Enter the Void* alert the viewer to the presence of digital mediation, which takes place at speeds and scales beyond the ability of human perception to detect.[229] When such a physically impossible effect occurs, a break appears in the visual logic of otherwise familiar, three-dimensional objects and spaces. In Mark B.N. Hansen's words, gaseous effects comprise cases of the image being "digitally warped" and "deformed," a warping that also implicates phenomenal experience in general, given the image's visual correspondence to ordinary object perception.[230] Confronted with gaseous effects, the viewer becomes attuned to the limits of phenomenal perception itself and the existence of formative forces that lie beyond it. These forces cannot be viewed directly, but, via a kind of present absence, a negative manifestation, the sub-phenomenal asserts itself in such moments of visual deformation. This attunement to the contingency and limits of human perception resonates with Chapter 3's discussion of the dynamic "depths" dialectically implicated by cinema's surfacing address. The gaseous image, however, more forcefully implicates the realm of the sub-phenomenal by deforming the image itself (in contrast to analog cinema, which tends to maintain the sense of the individual shot as an integral, photochemical registration of a continuous moment in physical reality). Through effects that manifestly could have been achieved only through digital

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[229] See Denson, *Discorrelated Images*.
[230] Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, 203, 220.

means, the gaseous image comes as close as possible to directly "depicting" digitality, presenting it "in frame." In-frame challenges to photorealism's spatiotemporal integrity, such as the less-than-seamless visual compositing of flesh-and-blood bodies with more "manufactured" image elements, have a long history in cinematic special effects. However, unlike analog examples in which the individual elements being composited still manifest as photographic and hence ultimately still point back to human-scale physical reality, the gaseous image displays effects that are alien to human perceptual ratios. Palpably *not* traceable back to physical, phenomenal reality, the gaseous image thematizes the existence of non-anthropocentric realities radically discorrelated from human phenomenal experience.

Again, the digital image's non-denotative relationship to physical reality means that the molecular, subperceptual realms thematized by gaseous effects do not register as physically corresponding with the molecular, subperceptual realms of the "real world." There is no necessary, denotative correspondence between the "molecules" of the image (ones and zeroes) and "molecules" in the physical world (a group of atoms). Gaseous effects are, in a sense, purely "of" the image, rather than being an "image of" the world. That said, as mentioned earlier, digital photorealism's continued appeal to cinema's realist automatism means that the gaseous image does foreground the *idea* of the molecular and the sub-phenomenal, prompting the viewer to consider the possibility that her own reality is similarly structured. The gaseous image, in other words, facilitates a double decentering of the human, sidelining both our visual delimitation of objects in phenomenal experience (given that these boundaries become porous vis-à-vis sub-phenomenal molecular diffusions) and our tendency to treat the phenomenal realm as primary in the first place.

5.3 An-Ontology

That which is gaseous, contrary to what is solid or even liquid, is marked by a fundamental openness: molecules that diffuse and drift, characterized more by their capacity for movement than where they are at any given moment. Once the boundaries of objects are revealed to be porous, and the ostensible stability of the phenomenal field shown to belie dynamic, open-ended subperceptual processes, a logic of being is replaced by one of becoming. In other words, Brown's remarks about gaseous perception directly implicate Levitt's observations about our contemporary cultural logic in which the

> horizon of possibilities of simulation in both art and science—from cartoons and the animatic effects of CGI to the various dreamt and incarnate potentials of biological production—are shifting the reigning cultural paradigms of life in significant ways, moving away from questions about ontology, category, and being to ones of appearance, metamorphosis, and affect.[231]

Echoing my earlier discussion of digitality's challenge to photographic denotation, Levitt notes how there has been an epistemic shift from the regime of representation—an investment in referencing and depicting something in the world that she explicitly links to cinematic indexicality—to technologies of doing, in which the ongoing interaction of elements is primary. Levitt terms this new cultural regime the "animatic apparatus," in reference to animation's capacity and propensity for proteanness and continual creation. Presuming, again, that the image is photorealistic, I contend that the animatic/gaseous image powerfully inflects the experience of outsideness discussed in Chapter 3. Specifically, if cinematic outsideness hinges on a play between

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[231] Levitt, 10.

"outside" and "ness"—between denoting a world that exceeds the viewer and rejoining her to the becoming of the world—the gaseous image compensates for digitality's diminishment of the "outside" part by intensifying a sense of the "ness" part, dynamizing not just the frame but everything within the image itself. Replacing the "molar" logic of the human scale with the "molecular" constitution of the bit-based image, gaseousness doubly underscores the idea of flux—a radical instability in which no image is final, no state permanent, every being always bearing the potential to become something else.[232] The ultimate expression of digital gaseousness qua pure expression of becoming is the digital morph, which offers the experience of an apparently solid object shapeshifting seamlessly into another; Cameron's special effects work in *The Abyss* and *Terminator 2* are cases in point. Kevin Fisher went so far as to call the morph a "Tesseract," a three-dimensional manifestation of the fourth dimension of time—an embodiment of becoming itself.[233] The morph exhibits what Vivian Sobchack calls a palindromic logic, in which moving backwards and forwards—i.e., transforming from one body into another and vice versa—are interchangeable.[234] Morphs predate the ascension of computer-generated imagery, but, with the latter, a new level of seamlessness and proteanness becomes achievable. Within the gaseous/animatic regime, there is no telos, only change itself.

Like the gaseous image, this new, animatic episteme is tied to digitality's basis in ones and zeroes. Writing on the gene editing tool *Crispr Cas9*, in which (in theory even if not quite yet in

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[232] Denson, *Discorrelated Images*, 32 discusses the distinction between molar and molecular vis-à-vis digital images and processes.

[233] See Kevin Fisher, "Tracing the Tesseract: A Conceptual Prehistory of the Morph," in *Meta-Morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick-Change*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

[234] Vivian Sobchack, "'At the Still Point of the Turning World': Meta-Morphing and Meta-Stasis," in *Meta-Morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick-Change*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

practice) DNA can be precisely programmed like computer code,[235] Levitt notes how the animatic apparatus reimagines the formerly "massy and anatomical" organism as a composite of "biological bits, material or informatic" that can be "'exchanged and recombined,'"[236] extending the logic of binary code into the biological organism. In other words, the animatic imaginary of manipulable flux is paradoxically conditional upon intense systematization, in which the previously unruly, irregular, and indeterminate biological body is reconceived as a collection of predetermined data points that can be read and rewritten. In Gilles Deleuze's words, such a digitization of the body—and physical reality more generally—turns the individual into a "dividual": a subject "divided," digitality's etymological basis in discretized "digits" here being fully operative. It is this dividuality that forms the basis for what Deleuze termed the "societies of control"—our contemporary social reality marked by the modularity and modulation of bodies, movements, and spaces, all as a function of their digitization and datafication.[237]

This spread of control logics via widespread dividuation has many bleak ramifications. For example, Seb Franklin notes how, in aspiring to digitize everything, a control society reproduces capital's tendency to render everything equivalent as exchange value and, hence, facilitates capitalism's expansion.[238] Bodies become more exploitable than ever when imagined as data points, whose ostensible, numerical cleanness and homogeneity masks the messy materiality of real bodies and the real material devastation capitalism continues to bring to those living on its margins. The logic of control also reinforces a sense of anthropocentric empowerment consistent

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[235] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013) outlines the cross-pollination of metaphors that has occurred between software and genetics, resulting in conceptual developments such as gene editing being conceived of as a form of programming, or the relationship between software and hardware being analogized to genetics' genotype/phenotype distinction.
[236] Levitt, 31.
[237] See Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *October* 59 (Winter 1992), https://www.jstor.org/stable/778828.
[238] See Seb Franklin. *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015).

with the goals of neoliberalism. Writing on how computer software both emulates and reproduces neoliberal ideology, Wendy Chun argues that the fantasy of programmability—which, again, is based in a logic of digitization—interpellates the user/programmer as an agent of utmost mastery and freedom. Any command that is typed seems to conjure results immediately and dramatically, belying the pre-written algorithms and rigid computer architecture that predetermine what "choices" the user can make and what range of outcomes can be produced.[239] Per Chun, this combination of greater-than-ever systematization and seemingly greater-than-ever freedom (and the latter as being conditional upon the former) is an insidious echo of neoliberalism's modus operandi, which maintains existing structures of power despite seeming to fulfill the individual subject's fantasy of ever-greater freedom (or, more accurately, the fantasy of *certain* individuals—i.e., those inhabiting a position of relative comfort and privilege within the current system). I would argue that this fantasy of programming as empowerment is also evoked by the gaseous image. Ontological flattening, though in one sense a radically de-anthropocentric aesthetic, also "flattens" by rendering all objects, bodies, and spaces as being equally digitized and hence equally programmable. My earlier point about how the gaseous image's photorealism prompts the viewer to consider their own physical reality as molecular has a troubling flip side: the gaseous image can also intensify anthropocentrism by encouraging the viewer to imagine their own reality as programmable, and themselves as programmer-like subjects capable of navigating and intervening in physical reality at unprecedentedly fine-grained scales.

The challenge here is to walk the tightrope—to acknowledge both the ideological dangers of the gaseous image and its eco-critical potential. It is my view that the gaseous image can both perpetuate a capitalistic, neoliberal, anthropocentric worldview *and* encourage more ecologically

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[239] See Chun.

mindful modes of subjectivity attuned to the animatic flux of the world, and I contend this bothness hinges on the spectacular visibility of gaseous effects. Chun, despite arguing that software encourages neoliberal ways of thinking, also notes that it proves resistant to this very same ideology on account of its visibility. Whereas ideology in general tends to be a diffusely aggregative phenomenon, invisibly coalescing at the intersection of various institutions and forms of social organization, software is relatively concrete and apprehendable at the human scale. In analogizing neoliberal ideology's structure in a form that is accessible to the individual user, software affords the possibility of this ideology becoming thinkable and more sensuously graspable. Certainly, many of software's operations remain black boxed away from human perception, a hiding-from-view that enables the programmer/user's fantasy of empowerment in the first place. But, comparatively, what is hidden with software is, I would argue, still more accessible to thought than the mechanisms of broader neoliberal ideology, largely because the former manifests at the human scale. It is easier to deduce the existence of algorithms underpinning the software one literally uses—especially when a program glitches or freezes, which deforms the user's phenomenal field in the way Hansen describes—than it is to parse the complex, distributed intersection of forces that coalesce into the nebulous entity called "neoliberal ideology." As a metonymic manifestation of this ideology, software may perpetuate the latter's structure, but it also thematizes it. I would suggest that the gaseous image metonymizes the logic of animatic control in a similar fashion. In the spectacular visibility of gaseous effects, programmability becomes thinkable, brought "to the surface" in a way that becomes resistant to the logic of control even as it reproduces it.

Simultaneously, the gaseous image also thematizes an alternate paradigm of radical de-anthropocentrism, emergent from the same ontological flattening. Since the gaseous image can

signify in either direction—toward a neoliberal, capitalistic anthropocentrism on the one hand, toward de-anthropocentric ecological awareness on the other—gaseousness itself does not guarantee that the viewer will adopt an eco-critical posture. All it does is bring to the surface the phenomenon of ontological flattening and, by extension, the various ideological and epistemic implications of such flattening.[240] That said, given the naturalized dominance of neoliberal anthropocentrism in our contemporary historical moment and the relative marginality of de-anthropocentric worldviews, I would argue that gaseousness, simply in putting the two on equal footing as equally viable "options," levels the playing field in welcome ways.

This dual manifestation of neoliberal control and de-anthropocentric ecological sensitivity can be seen in *Panic Room*'s digitally mediated long take, which sends a frictionless, weightless "camera" floating into impossibly narrow spaces and straight through the floors of a Manhattan brownstone, all while burglars are trying to break in. The ostentatious impossibility of the long take's physics foregrounds the image's digital basis, in such a way where the pro-filmic space becomes de-realized, acquiring the quality of abstract mathematical space. Especially when paired with the machinic, inhumanly smooth nature of the camera's movements, the long take's overt use of CGI activates the cultural association between digitality and processes of quantization and systematization, infusing the pro-filmic environment with a tenor of artifice, a sense of having been mapped and rendered within a computer. This ethos of systematization would seem to contradict the impression of unfettered movement offered by the long take, but, as discussed earlier, it is often through boundlessness that boundedness is thematized. It is because the long take moves so freely that the conditioning digitality is foregrounded, disclosing the way the

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[240] That said, if formal gaseousness is joined by eco-critical "content" that "rebounds" to thematize gaseousness (i.e., in the way the zombie "rebounds" to thematize the long take in *Black Summer*, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3), then the gaseousness would likely acquire a more pointedly eco-critical charge.

impression of freedom hinges on structures of control. Unveiling (even as it enacts) what is essentially the logic of neoliberal control, ossified in the technology and practice of digital visual effects, the *Panic Room* long take bears out a version of Chun's claim that software, in reproducing neoliberal ideology, also exposes it.

Formal freedom expresses the apparatuses of control on which it depends. And yet, the sense of freedom—of openness and transformation—has a "positive" effect as well (rather than being simply an insidious, epiphenomenal symptom of control). In being so spectral and untethered in its movements, the *Panic Room* long take destabilizes physics at the human scale, encouraging more ecological forms of perception. It foregrounds the molecular modulation afforded by digitality, but, in operating within a photorealistic, denotative mode, also transposes this molecularity to the "real" world, attuning the viewer to the subperceptual forces and diffusions that underpin and constitute the realm of the phenomenal.

At first, this claim may seem questionable within the context of *Panic Room*, a film that seems to hermetically seal itself within a nesting doll configuration of built, artificial environments—the eponymous panic room within which mother and daughter lock themselves during the central home invasion; the sleek, boxy apartment that houses it; and the imposing concrete jungle of New York City that encases it all. This sense of artifice increases once the home invasion occurs and the apartment becomes a de facto gameboard on which opposing parties attempt to outmaneuver each other, their actions circumscribed by the geography of the home; this "game-ification" of space occurs most emphatically within the long take itself, whose continuous recording maps the apartment as a unified spatial field within which multiple lines of strategic action can synchronously occur. That said, it is important to note that the long take also depicts a violation of borders, a breaching of the seemingly impregnable. The home is being broken into, a

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making-permeable that the film thematizes by having the camera slip into an impossibly small keyhole, right as the lock is being picked from the other side (unsuccessfully, but as part of a larger break-in attempt that succeeds). At the same time that the film "locks" its characters into a restricted arena of movement, it also "unlocks," thematizing the bypassing of boundaries (Figure 14).

Figure 14: The "camera" enters a keyhole in *Panic Room* (2002).

The long take's overt digitality has narrative and thematic resonance: digitality's systematized mapping of space reinforces the sense of the apartment's conversion into game space, whereas the porousness of the gaseous effects thematizes the building's permeability—but these narrative and thematic elements also "rebound" to inflect how the digital effects themselves register for the viewer: *Panic Room* suggests that digitality was always already gamic (i.e., systematized and mapped) and porous (gaseously violating traditional object boundaries). And thus, we return to the duality of the digital. Although *Panic Room* overdetermines a sense of digitality as systematization, it also overdetermines a sense of digitality as permeation, an overcoming of object solidity via the molecular diffusions of subperceptual forces—diffusions that photorealism referentially links to the "real" world. Enacting the logic of anthropocentric neoliberal control but also exposing and rerouting it (via the spectacular visibility of the digital effects and the denotative molecularity of the photorealistic image, respectively), the *Panic Room* long take highlights the potential for de-anthropocentric ecological attunement that exists even within the regime of digitality.

I want to reemphasize that, despite gaseousness' and the animatic apparatus' replacement of ontology with what Levitt calls the "an-ontology" of ongoing transformation, my conception of digital cinema's eco-critical potential still hinges on photorealism. It is because the image still phenomenologically references photographic denotation that the logic of an-ontology registers as being "of" a physical reality continuous with the viewer's own. Given this baseline reference to the "real world" as an ontological horizon, the pure flux of an-ontology continues to implicate reality and history, and, hence, ethics. The next section looks at how digitality's weakening of the analogical image-world relationship has ethical ramifications, and how Levitt's an-ontology offers an alternate, digitally specific ethical paradigm.

5.4 Digital Cinema Ethics

Markos Hadjioannou argues that the shift from celluloid to digital comprises not just a technological shift but an ethical one. While noting that a medium's meanings and effects emerge not only from technical substrates but the viewer's embodied interactions with them, Hadjioannou also contends that the respective technological constraints of analog and digital cinema position the viewer vis-à-vis reality in different ways, thereby implicating the realm of ethics, which concerns how one responds to the world. Drawing on the film theory of Stanley Cavell, Hadjioannou observes that the celluloid regime of indexicality provides the viewer with an "existential guarantee": even though she herself is absent from the image, there exists the sense that the imaged world is continuous with her own (i.e., *is* her own).[241] Furthermore, in mediating a past moment of the viewer's own reality, the indexical film image posits a temporal continuity that extends not just from (imaged) past to the (viewer's) present, but onward into the future; in Hadjioannou's words, "if the camera is an act in the past for the present view, the subject of that present is similarly an act in the present for a future."[242] Resonant with what I argued in Chapter 3, Hadjioannou shows how celluloid cinema positions the viewer as an active participant in reality, implicated in the becoming of the world because she is a part of it. Indexicality, in positing a "common ground of reality" between viewer and pro-filmic[243] and implicating futurity through invoking pastness, orients the viewer toward her own "response-ability"[244]—how she responds to the world, i.e., the structuring question of ethics itself.

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[241] Hadjioannou, 15.
[242] Hadjioannou, 181.
[243] Hadjioannou, 181.
[244] Hadjioannou, 182.

Digitality, in severing the analogical connection between image and denoted world, unsettles celluloid ethics. Imposing

> a transcendental order of control and manipulation—where what lies behind the image is not the world's duration but zeros and ones—the digital weakens the relation to the world and to the self.[245]

Within the digital regime, "the image does not sustain an existential assurance of the world because it is a graphic rendition of predefined numerical associations"[246]; rather than opening the viewer onto the becoming of the world, it encloses the viewer in the present-tense of the constantly renewing image. Drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche's formulation, Hadjioannou argues that the digital cinema viewer is technologically pressured into being a "reactive" rather than "active" subject. Instead of actively participating in the creative force of becoming itself, in which the future is free from any prescriptive telos derived from the present (see: the distinction between possibility and potentiality discussed in Chapter 3), the viewer is inclined to become a reactive subject "whose power to interact with the world seems predestined in the fixed configurations of digital tools, hard drives, and Cartesian grids."[247] Even despite illusions of agency, the digital subject—who, here, is analogous to the neoliberal software user delineated by Chun—remains circumscribed by binary code and prewritten algorithmic pathways. Especially since digitality has become a broader cultural logic that affects how viewers approach film images to begin with (regardless of whether the image is "actually" digital), the capacity of images to be experienced as mediating reality and, by extension, to inspire an ethics of active participation in the world's becoming seems to have been irreparably compromised.

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[245] Hadjioannou, 191.
[246] Hadjioannou, 191.
[247] Hadjioannou, 216.

Hadjioannou counters this dystopian vision on two fronts: firstly, by reminding us that the openness and indeterminacy of a viewer's response to the image means that even the most rigidly codified digital image does not absolutely foreclose the possibility of active, creative engagement; and, secondly, by noting how the newfound "ease and immense storage capacities of the digital"[248] enable the filmmaker to respond to the world "*on the spot*"[249] and "*in the act.*"[250] The contingent flow of life can be recorded with greater "liveness" in digital filmmaking, generating a heightened sense of real-time responsiveness to unpredictable phenomena as they occur; this responsive ethos is subsequently passed on to the viewer via her identification with the camera and the film in general. Through a close reading of Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000), Hadjioannou demonstrates how digital cinema, though sealing the image off from worldly becoming in some respects, can also provide tools for engaging with this becoming in more immediate a fashion than before.

I concur with Hadjioannou's balanced assessment of the digital turn, in which curbed ethical potential in one domain is compensated for by enhanced ethical potential in another. I especially appreciate his attention to the role played by technical affordances like storage capacity in the development of an ethics of/for digital cinema. That said, I would also suggest that the particular ethical upside Hadjioannou attributes to digital cinema remains more or less deferent to a celluloid model. That is, for Hadjioannou, digital is ethically valuable only insofar as it provides the technical means for facilitating and enhancing an aesthetic and ethos associated with filmic indexicality. For him, there is a distinction between celluloid's denotation of pastness and the digital camera's present-tense responsiveness to reality's unfolding, but I would argue that, from

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[248] Hadjioannou, 203.
[249] Hadjioannou, 213.
[250] Hadjioannou, 216.

the viewer's perspective, these two register as being ontologically more alike than different, since both are responding to physical reality "itself" via indexicality's existential guarantee. In other words, although Hadjioannou is right that digital technologies can facilitate an intensified engagement with reality—his argument supports my point about the persistence of cinema's realist automatism into the digital age—I am, in this section, more interested in how manifest, *distinctly digital* special effects inflect the viewer's experience of the photorealistic image and her ethical relation with the imaged world. The digital camera that Hadjioannou discusses may be literally based in digital technology, but I would argue that the aesthetic and ethos it embodies remains largely photographic. By contrast, with films like *The Abyss*, *Enter the Void*, and *Panic Room*, the photographic ontology of the image is unsettled in highly visible ways. Watching such films, the viewer becomes aware of digitality as digitality, whose logic transforms her relationship to the image and, by extension, the world.

I have already touched on the ethical challenges posed by the hermetic, present-tense nature of the visibly digital image. Where visible digitality has the potential to propound a specifically digital, eco-critical ethics is as an expression of Levitt's concept of an-ontology. For Levitt, digitality's emphasis on continual metamorphosis enacts Giorgio Agamben's conception of ethics as "'means without end'"; digitality embodies the form of ethics itself, which foregoes fixed identities or telos in favor of "'pure praxis.'"[251] As Agamben writes,

> "The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must realize. This is the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were or

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[251] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993): 43, quoted in Levitt, 146.

had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible—there would only be tasks to be done."[252]

Levitt astutely notes that this conception of ethics is analogous in form to the animatic logic of ongoing modulation and transformation. This dynamic manipulability is something into which the viewer can project themselves; the visibly digital image, in manifestly having been manipulated and hence positing the idea of further manipulation, invites the viewer to conceive of the image interactively—i.e., as an image with which she actively engages, as opposed to simply watches. Here lies another upside to the dividuation and ontological flattening discussed in the previous section: not only is the fantasy of neoliberal sovereignty offset by the potential for de-anthropocentric gaseous perception, but programmability itself has the benefit of implicating the viewer as an agent whose choices have consequences. This implication of the viewer is overdetermined by the emergence of interactivity as a cultural logic. The proliferation of video games, personal computers, and various touch-sensitive screens simultaneously symptomize and helped facilitate a concomitant cultural shift toward an-ontology, in which the viewer's body is directly engaged. Not only has the sense of a definite, existential relation between image and world been vacated from digital cinema, but the boundary between image and viewer has been eroded as well.

As discussed, although digital an-ontology seems to embody the utopian ideal of infinite variability and boundless futurity, it remains constrained by an intense systematization that facilitates the spread of neoliberal, capitalistic control logics. The frictionless customizability that has become a reigning digital-age ideal belies the material devastation and exploitation suffered

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[252] Agamben, quoted in Levitt, 142.

by those regions and communities whose labor and resources are what sustain the system for those privileged enough to be ignorant.[253] It is for this reason that I insist on counterbalancing the an-ontological with the ontological—"ontological" here corresponding with not any particular, totalizing and essentialist conception of reality, but an *investment* in reality's existence and material concreteness. In filmic terms, it means counterbalancing the an-ontological flux of animatic, gaseous effects with the denotative force of photorealism as an aesthetic, conceptual, and ethical baseline. As outlined in the previous chapter, the power of the film image lies in the way it conjoins a sense of continuity with one of differentiation: the viewer is both a part *of* the flux of reality itself (via the element of motion) and apart *from* it (via photographic mediation)— the latter act of distancing also being, however, that which enables the viewer to discern the denoted world as her own. When imbued with gaseous effects, the "flux" part of this formulation receives double emphasis, but photographic denotation remains a grounding element of the film image and the viewer's encounter with it, thus maintaining a tension within the image. It is against the background of photographic denotation that the ethical potential of an-ontology registers *as* potential, as opposed to being simply and uncritically incorporated into the viewer's phenomenal experience of "pure" becoming (see the discussion of uncritical phenomenological incorporation in Chapter 1). Furthermore, potential becomes ethically charged only when it occurs in reference to a reality denoted as such. Reading Hadjioannou's observations on ethics alongside Levitt's and Agamben's, we find that ethics may be the "pure praxis" of "'means without end,'" but it must also refer to a world in which the viewer feels herself to be situated and, hence, in which she is capable of acting and within which her actions have consequences. Transformative openness is

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[253] Franklin, drawing on Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), discusses the tension between digitally mediated control logics and the material devastation it both causes and effaces.

required, but so is the "common ground of reality." The converse argument can be made too: just as an-ontology by itself is limiting, so would the "common ground of reality" by itself. In isolation, both comprise an uncritical acceptance of the status quo, frictionlessly moving through normative pathways of meaning and being that perpetuate existing structures of anthropocentric power. It is when set in tension with each other that the ethical potential of each is brought to the fore, highlighting a dialectical relation between being and becoming that challenges the viewer to respond ethically to nonhuman vital materiality. In this interplay between being and becoming lies the eco-critical potential of cinema's realist automatism, even into the digital age.

6.0 Conclusion

Cinema's realist automatism, since the early days of its emergence, has concerned the interplay between subjectivity and objectivity, immediacy and mediation, being and becoming. It has animated questions about the relationship between human and nonhuman and lent them a heightened affective charge. Today, however, as ecological devastation encroaches, defamiliarizing the limits of the human, cinema's realist automatism acquires newfound resonance. This dissertation has argued that the virtuosic long take, as a heightened thematization of cinema's realist automatism, simultaneously models and induces an ethical and epistemological posture toward nonhuman reality apposite for the Anthropocene, and, in being such a culturally salient formal technique, has the capacity to enact this process for a wider base of viewers. As an amplified expression of cinema's own expression of reality, and especially in conjunction with narrative and thematic "content" that rebounds to thematize this expression all the more (e.g., the figure of the zombie in *Black Summer*), the virtuosic long take has the potential to effect an outward affective reverberation in which viewers and the larger culture become more attuned to cinema's subject-object dialectic—a potential that persists even into the digital age. This reverberating affective shift inculcates a mindfulness about the human-nonhuman interaction that comprises a crucial starting point for imagining and realizing futures of mutual survival and flourishing between human and nonhuman.

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