

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

ASPECT CHOREOGRAPHY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

BY

KIRSTEN IHNS

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES iv

ACKNOWLEDGMENTSviii

ABSTRACT x

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER 1:
THE FLICKERING SUBJECT: LYRIC SUBJECT AS ASPECT CHOREOGRAPHY IN
CHELSEY MINNIS’S WORK38

CHAPTER 2:
FUGAL LANDEGUAGE FUGAL LANGUISH: *ZONG!*, *FINNEGAN’S WAKE*, AND THE
TEMPORAL/AFFECTIVE AFFORDANCES OF FUGALLY STRUCTURED ASPECT
CHOREOGRAPHY IN CONTEMPORARY EXPERIMENTAL POETRY..... 88

CHAPTER 3:
COMEDY, HORROR, AND CONTEMPORARY RELATIONALITY: ASPECT
CHOREOGRAPHY IN PATRICK BRICE’S *CREEP* (2014)..... 144

CHAPTER 4:
LIMITEDNESS OF VIEW IS A PERFECT CAUSE: ASPECT CHOREOGRAPHY AND
REPRESENTING VANTAGELESSNESS IN APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL’S
MYSTERIOUS OBJECT AT NOON (2000)..... 201

CODA 249

WORKS CITED 260

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig 1.1 A photo of *Kansas Atlas* (Ahwesh, 2019). Photo of installation as depicted by Ahwesh during an artist talk. Photo of slide by author..... 1

Fig 1.2 A photo of *The News*. (Abidi, 2001). Photo by author 7

Fig 1.3 A photo of *Anthems*. (Abidi, 2000). Photo by author..... 7

Fig 1.4 A photo of *Mangoes*. (Abidi, 1999). Photo by author..... 7

Fig 1.5 Photos of multiple views of *Death at a Thirty Degree Angle* (Abidi, 2012). Photos by author..... 9

Fig 1.6 Photo of *Death at a Thirty Degree Angle* (Abidi, 2012). Photo by author..... 10

Fig 1.7 Photographed sequence (left to right, top to bottom) of stills from *Death at a Thirty Degree Angle* (Abidi, 2012). Photos by author..... 12

Fig. 2.1 Excerpt from “Fugue XVI” reproduced from Shockley (108).....96

Fig. 2.2 Photo of “The Sky Was” by ee cummings. Photo by a friend of the author.....111

Fig. 2.3 Photo of “Zong! #9” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author.....119

Fig. 2.4 Photo of an excerpt of “Ferrum” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author.....119

Fig. 2.5 Photo of “Discourse on the Logic of Language” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author.....122

Fig. 2.6 Photo of excerpt of “Zong! #9” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author.....123

Fig. 2.7 Photo of excerpt of “Ferrum” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author.....126

Fig. 2.8 Photo of Excerpt of “Zong! #9” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author.....132

Fig. 2.9 Photo of excerpt of “Ferrum” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author.....133

Fig. 2.10 Photo of “Zong! #1” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author.....137

Fig. 2.11 Photo of excerpt of “Ventus” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author.....139

Fig. 3.1 Screen capture of early r/TIHI example from Know Your Meme (2019). Screen capture by author.....	144
Fig. 3.2 Screen captures of r/TIHI examples from r/TIHI subreddit page. Screen captures by author.....	145
Fig. 3.3 Screen capture of “Thanks, I hate horseshoes” from r/TIHI subreddit page. Screen capture by author.....	148
Fig. 3.4 Screen capture of a photograph of “Jetzt” by Gerhard Rühm (1958). Original is an offset print on paper. 8.66 inch x 12.2 inch. Screen capture from http://erikdesmedt.eu/de_wiener_gruppe.htm	151
Fig. 3.5 Screen capture of an excerpt of the pdf of <i>Ahe Thd Yearidy Ti Isa</i> by Allison Parrish (2019). Screen capture by author.....	152
Fig. 3.6 Screen capture of an Instagram post by WJ Simmons (2021). Screen capture by author.....	160
Fig. 3.7 Reproduction of a figure used by Marie Buck in “Some Scattered Thoughts on Poetry, Political Mood, and the Internet” (2019).....	160
Fig. 3.8 Screen captures of digital transfer of <i>Windmill III</i> by Chris Welsby (1974). Screen captures by author.....	163
Fig. 3.9 Screen captures from <i>Creep</i> (Brice, 2014). Screen captures by author.....	180
Fig. 3.10 Screen captures from <i>Creep</i> (Brice, 2014). Screen captures by author.....	182
Fig. 3.11 Screen capture from <i>Creep</i> (Brice, 2014). Screen capture by author.....	184
Fig. 3.12 Screen captures from <i>Creep</i> (Brice, 2014). Screen captures by author.....	185
Fig. 3.13 Screen capture from <i>Creep</i> (Brice, 2014). Screen capture by author.....	185
Fig. 3.14 Screen captures from <i>Creep</i> (Brice, 2014). Screen captures by author.....	187
Fig. 3.15 Screen capture from <i>Creep</i> (Brice, 2014). Screen capture by author.....	188
Fig. 3.16 Screen captures from <i>Creep</i> (Brice, 2014). Read top to bottom, left to right. Screen captures by author.....	192
Fig. 3.17 Screen captures from <i>Creep</i> (Brice, 2014). Screen captures by author.....	194

Fig. 3.18 Screen captures from <i>Creep</i> (Brice, 2014). Screen captures by author.....	195
Fig. 3.19 Screen captures from <i>Creep</i> (Brice, 2014). Screen captures by author.....	197
Fig. 3.20 Screen captures from <i>Creep</i> (Brice, 2014). Screen captures by author.....	197
Fig. 4.1 Screen capture from <i>Mysterious Object at Noon</i> (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen capture by author.....	219
Fig. 4.2 Screen captures from <i>Mysterious Object at Noon</i> (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen captures by author.....	221
Fig. 4.3 Screen capture from <i>Mysterious Object at Noon</i> (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen capture by author.....	221
Fig. 4.4 Screen capture from <i>Mysterious Object at Noon</i> (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen capture by author.....	222
Fig. 4.5 Screen capture from <i>Mysterious Object at Noon</i> (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen capture by author.....	223
Fig. 4.6 Screen capture from <i>Mysterious Object at Noon</i> (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen capture by author.....	225
Fig. 4.7 Screen captures from <i>Mysterious Object at Noon</i> (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen captures by author.....	227
Fig. 4.8 Screen captures from <i>Mysterious Object at Noon</i> (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen captures by author.....	228
Fig. 4.9 Screen captures from <i>Mysterious Object at Noon</i> (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen captures by author.....	231
Fig. 4.10 Screen captures from <i>Mysterious Object at Noon</i> (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen captures by author.....	231
Fig. 4.11 Screen captures from <i>Mysterious Object at Noon</i> (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen captures by author.....	232
Fig. 4.12 Screen captures from <i>Mysterious Object at Noon</i> (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen captures by author.....	233
Fig. 4.13 Screen captures from <i>Mysterious Object at Noon</i> (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen captures by author.....	234

Fig. 4.14 Screen capture from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen capture by author.....235

Fig. 4.15 Screen capture from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (Weerasethakul, 2000). Screen capture by author.....236

Fig. 4.16 Screen captures from *October Rumbles* (2020). Not a close sequence, but sequence runs left to right, top to bottom. Screen captures by author.....245

Fig. 5.1 Various photos of *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* (2023), as installed at The Renaissance Society, Chicago IL (Installation view top left). Representing the film’s approximate section order (left to right, top to bottom). Photos by author.....252

Fig. 5.2 Photos from the opening panning sequence of *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* (2023). Photos by author.....257

Fig. 5.3 Photo of *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* (2023). Photo by author.....257

Fig. 5.4 Photos of *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* (2023). Photos by author.....258

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I received a lot of support, of differing kinds, from many people during the process of writing this dissertation, and I'm incredibly grateful for all of it <3

Thank you first and foremost to my committee (Bill Brown, Sianne Ngai, and Edgar Garcia) — I couldn't have asked for a better set of readers and guides; you're not only all brilliant people I'm grateful to have gotten to work with but also incredibly generous, flexible, and deep in your thinking-alongside and teaching. Your way of working made it very easy to trust you all to understand my work and to push back when you thought an idea was underdeveloped or misguided. I learned a lot from you. Thank you to all of you for guiding me through this process. Also, to Bill for encouraging me to come to UChicago, and for helping me throughout my time here, and knowing when to be patient and when to call me on my nonsense. To Bill and Sianne for helping me with orals: that reading/thinking/discussing made this project possible.

Thank you to Brett Swenson, my partner and collaborator, for...everything.

Thank you to my family for your support: Lisa Ihns, Tad Ihns, and Jesse Ihns :)

Thank you to my friends, and especially friends going through this process in parallel; I learned a lot thinking with you all — Lily Scherlis, Gerónimo Sarmiento Cruz, Ashleigh Cassemere-Stanfield, Korey Williams, Adam Fales, Joel Rhone, Jack Chelgren, James Garwood-Cole, Lena Tsykynovska, Scott Campbell, Hannah Brooks-Motl, David Kretz, and Dylan Furcall

Also to the *Chicago Review* crew :) (especially: Hannah Brooks-Motl, Lily Scherlis, Adam Fales, Gerónimo Sarmiento Cruz, Jack Chelgren, James Garwood-Cole, Clara Nizard, Joel Rhone, Lena Tsykynovska, Steven Maye, Eric Powell, Cecily Chen, Caleb Hermann, and Lourdes Taylor)

And thank you to my many teachers during my time here, especially: Florian Klinger, Daniel Morgan, D.N. Rodowick, Jim Lastra, Yoko Katagiri, William Pope.L, Kenneth Warren, David Wellbery, Debbie Nelson, WJT Mitchell, Thomas Comerford, Frances Ferguson, Dan Arnold, and Julie Orlemanski (and also Bill, Sianne, and Edgar). Your classes changed my way of thinking.

Not exactly dissertation acknowledgments, but a huge thank you to everyone who helped me keep my poetry and/or film practices alive during the dissertation, especially: Brett Swenson, Srikanth “Chicu” Reddy, Edgar Garcia, Eran Eads, Dylan Furcall, Gerónimo Sarmiento Cruz, Jan Verberkmoes, Lucas Bernhardt, Benjamin Krusling, Andrew J. Smythe, Hannah Brooks-Motl, Kelly Hoffer, Korey Williams, Ashleigh Cassemere-Stanfield, Carlos Lara, Tamas Panitz, Kent Johnson, Whit Griffin, Peter O’Leary, Brendan White, Anthony Madrid, Billie Chernicoff, Lorraine Lupo, Caryl Pagel, Owen Fortunato Brakspear, Evan Williams, Ben Niespodziany, Jane Gregory, Ian Heames, Lily Scherlis, Adam Fales, Jack Chelgren, Thomas Comerford, Michael Slosek, Jeff Alessandrelli, Jeff Sherfey, and Emily Bark Brown <3

ABSTRACT

This dissertation theorizes an emergent form, which I call “aspect choreography,” across contemporary experimental poetry and film. The form emerges in dialogue with Western art historical and/or literary traditions traceable to the phenomenological turn of the 1970s. Focusing on the formal characteristics of contemporary poetry and film, the project accompanies a resurgence of interest in studying form across various media that asks how works use form in systematic ways to produce affective force (Eugenie Brinkema); how poetry uses its form to induce particular attentional states (Lucy Alford); how contemporary aesthetic categories play out formally; and how these categories relate to and develop from the social and historical conditions in late capitalist America (Sianne Ngai), for example. This new aesthetics scholarship returns to the careful consideration of how form can produce meaning, but in a way that avoids the decontextualized and ahistorical formalist reading style of New Criticism et al; it considers instead how historical, social, and political structures are necessarily imbricated with the material available for shaping and perceiving [form] in its contemporary period.

Aspect choreography is a kind of attentional-cognitive prosody. It’s a second-order form perceptible as a developing rhythm or pattern of switches between delimited and well-defined frameworks of sense-making that the book or film choreographs its reader to move through over time and eventually affectively recognize by means of their own performance of this pattern [of switches]. The form is reflexively cognized, but is nonetheless experienced under the sign of immediacy. Aspect choreography participates in a tradition of pedagogical aesthetics traceable all the way to the training function of the Greek chorus, but its approach to pedagogy is perhaps

most substantially inflected by the phenomenologically available and reflexivity-oriented work of 1960s and 70s conceptual artists, and the wake of Structuralist and Poststructuralist thought generally. Aspect choreography is a form of visceral pedagogy or orientational reformatting that uses conceptual frameworks, reflexive awareness, expectation, and memory as its primary media, though it necessarily also makes use of secondary time-based media like poetry and/or film as material support(s). The dissertation argues further that this form is a method these works use to metabolize, resist, and/or reflect two interlocking aspects of contemporary life—specifically, a proliferation of often non-superimposable frameworks for meaning and orientation under globalization and late-capitalist pluralism, and an increased awareness of the ways received forms, lenses, and ways of reading are imbricated with structures of power.

The dissertation is a philosophical aesthetics project characterizing, describing, and situating aspect choreography as a form. The four chapters explore the affordances of aspect choreography primarily in work by (poet) Chelsey Minnis, (poet) M. NourbeSe Phillip, (filmmaker) Patrick Brice, and (filmmaker/visual artist) Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Each chapter considers how their variously structured deployments of aspect choreography allow these artists differently formatted vectors of affective force and orientation organized around questions, respectively, of the lyric subject, temporality, relationality, and the nature of world. It also considers the medium-specific aspects of these works, but ultimately formulates a theory that works across poetry and video/film. The works considered were produced between 1997 and 2023

INTRODUCTION: ASPECT CHOREOGRAPHY

In Peggy Ahwesh's *Kansas Atlas* (2019), the contradictions that organize the parallel and colliding ideological worlds of Lebanon, Kansas find visual form in divided and distributed screens. The piece is a 4-channel video installation consisting of two iPads on two plinths in front of two much larger conjoined screens. The larger screens display various views of Lebanon, Kansas. Drone footage, footage from a camera placed on the ground, and footage from every observational mode and position in between, loops and Rorschachs. The views on the two screens occasionally synchronize or combine to produce a unified image or apparently coordinated movement, which tends to feel at once soothing and disconcerting. On the plinthed iPads, footage of the Westboro Baptist Church on one screen loops in time with footage, on the other iPad, of the LGBTQ+ sanctuary space, Equality House, that is its across-the-street neighbor in Lebanon. Ahwesh says she was interested in "the bifurcation of reality, in a split" that characterized life in the "hollow" places of America's "heartland" (Ahwesh).



Fig. 1.1. A photo of *Kansas Atlas* (Ahwesh, 2019). Photo of installation as depicted by Ahwesh during an artist talk. Photo of slide by author.

Ahwesh, the “high priestess of the multi-format” (Sullivan), has made a career creating experimental assemblage videos, frequently staged in multi-channel installations. The videos borrow from the everyday visual languages that structure images of war, infomercials, instructional videos, and news animations. She’s interested in how this material can be manipulated to express the organizing logics that govern it (and, therefore, contemporary life). She considers context one of her materials. By “context” she often means something like these vantage-orienting logics, these frameworks for meaning-making. Elaborating on the way genre, as a kind of context, works in one of her pieces, she notes that “in postmodernism you’re working with context[...]you can stack up the levels of viewing through genre....stack meaning. When you appropriate images you’re stacking contexts.” Ahwesh uses the frameworks of genre and familiar visual languages to point out the stacked organizing logics of contemporary life. “When I started out I was always interested in ethnography [...] gesture, body language, small group interactions” says Ahwesh, and making “narrative films that look like documentaries,” or like “the space between those genres.” Like many contemporary video artists, Ahwesh creates work that points up the multiple interacting frames that structure a socially and politically mediated perceptual experience of the world.

Kansas Atlas, in its explicit and formalized visualization of an ideological antinomy, is characteristic of a major thread or formal question in contemporary experimental video and poetic work; how do we live with, process, and experience the collision of the simplified and increasingly visible “frames” that organize the conceptual, ideological, and social worlds of life in the late 20th and early 21st centuries? How are the ways these frameworks organize political

and economic reality imbricated with the ways they organize perception? How can art objects think this question through form?

This dissertation focuses on a particular form that does so, a form I call “aspect choreography” that arises in late 20th and early 21st century experimental poems and films. A second-order form appropriate to the acceleratingly “reflexive age” (Adorno, 337) after Modernism, aspect choreography is essentially a kind of attentional-cognitive prosody. That’s to say, it’s a rhythm of perceptual-orientational switches between well-defined frameworks a given work choreographs its reader to perform and eventually recognize, in the way they might affectively recognize a sonata, an iambic meter, a classic Hollywood plot arc, or the counterpointed refrain structure of a fugue. Their expectations, potential for satisfaction, ideas of meaningfulness, and, arguably, sense of themselves are organized by this meta-structure; as in a song, the experience of a brief dissonant swerve out of the dominant key is predicated on the affective recognition of this key as dominant, and this swerve is also the element that potentiates the satisfaction a return to the dominant can produce. Aspect choreography, like certain kinds of “extended complex music,” is an experiential time structure characterized by “a constantly varying threshold between what is primarily perceived and what is determined by the reflexive perception of consciousness” (338). Though conditioned by “the intellective comprehension of [a part’s] function in a whole that is not present” (ibid), this reflexive dimension of perception, however, is not purely intellectual, but rather enters into experience under the sign of immediacy, even as it “depends on what goes beyond immediacy” (ibid.). In the case of aspect choreography, the “whole” is made of a pattern of changes. These changes are switches of between “frames”

the work teaches is viewer to commit to in order to see on their [the frames'] terms. Depending on which "frames" the work deploys (e.g. fiction and documentary, comedy and horror, nonsuperimposable deictic-fixing contexts, pictorial and semantic), and what pattern of switches it builds, there are different kinds of novel expressive, reflective, and philosophical possibilities available to these works.

This kind of systematic and reflective study is something these works seem to ask for or at the very least, provoke—as Adorno says of all reflexive artworks, “because their own meaning is a process of becoming, they [these works] summon forth forms of spirit—commentary and critique, for example—through which this process is fulfilled[...] the way towards this [fulfillment] is defined by the reflected immanence of works, not by the external application of philosophemes (341). What he means by “reflected immanence” here is complex, holding together two of the interlocking dynamics of reciprocal/dialectical mediation he thinks reflexive artworks and aesthetics negotiate through form: between “concepts” and “aconceptual experience” or “facts” (343), and between spirit¹ and empirical (social/historical) reality (344).

¹ The way “spirit” works in *Aesthetic Theory* is complicated, but it’s perhaps easiest to define, for the purposes of a project like this, in terms of what it can be in a relationship of dialectical mediation with, and how it differs from Hegel’s model of spirit in art. For Adorno, the spiritual in reflexive art can and must be in dialectical mediation with what it is not: i.e. what is objective, what is empirical, and what is historical: this is how it can function as a “determinate negation of the existing world order” (344). Spirit is what makes artwork art, and not “eating or drinking,” but it is no longer, as it was for Hegel, “one with totality, also with the totality of art”—after the failure of Idealism, Adorno contends, spirit is “strictly one aspect of artworks[...]it is not in any way present without what is opposed to it” (ibid.).

Here’s the whole quote where Adorno works through this in more detail: “Artworks are, in terms of their own constitution, objective as well as—and not only because they have their genesis in spiritual processes—spiritual; otherwise they would be in principle indistinguishable from eating and drinking. The contemporary debates originating in Soviet aesthetics, which insist that the claim to the primacy of the law of form as the primacy of the spiritual is an idealistic view of social reality, are groundless. Only as spirit is art the opposite of empirical reality, which becomes the determinate negation of the existing world order. Art is to be dialectically construed insofar as spirit inheres in it, without art’s possessing it or giving surety of it as something absolute. However much they seem to be entities, artworks are crystallizations of the process between spirit and its other. This implies the difference from Hegel’s aesthetics. There the objectivity of the artwork is the truth of spirit: it is spirit that has gone over into its own otherness and become identical with itself. For Hegel, spirit is one with totality, also with the totality in art.

This problematic is immediately relevant to the approach this dissertation takes in its negotiation of several imperatives. If Adorno here is pointing to the way reflexive artworks have a kind of internal “lawfulness” or systematicity that prompts the purely “work-immanent analyses” (348) he condemns as “narrow-minded [because they] wan[t] to knock the wind out of social reflection on art” (348), and contends that these analyses “fai[l] [the artwork because the work’s] inner construction requires, in however mediated a fashion, what itself is not art”(ibid.), i.e. the social. A New Critical or completely formalist approach, on this rubric, is insufficient, just as artworks that are “totally technical” become “tensionless” and uninteresting (342). But analyses that are too focused on this necessary social dimension “distor[t] artworks by a lack of affinity” (350)—much contemporary scholarship might be critiqued in this way. “Reflected immanence” refers to the way artworks complexly metabolize, reflect, transform, and point/glimmer past the logics of the social and conceptual worlds in which they arise, and that their form is the way they do so: “every artwork, even the hermetic work, reaches beyond its monadological boundaries by its formal language” (ibid); “however much they seem to be entities, artworks are crystallizations of the process between spirit and its other” (344)—a process that always remains aporetic; a process that preserves this uncomfortable mutual otherness in itself. A good aesthetic analysis must wrangle with the knot of this reciprocal mediation on the immanent terms of the artwork without losing track of any of its dimensions. “One is no more equal to a Beethoven symphony without comprehending its so-called purely musical course than if one is unable to perceive in it the echo of the French Revolution; how these two aspects are mediated in the phenomenon belongs to the obstinate and equally unavoidable themes of philosophical aesthetics” (349). This dissertation is

After the collapse of the general thesis of Idealism, however, spirit is strictly one aspect of artworks; granted, it is that aspect that makes the artifact art, yet it is not in any way present without what is opposed to it” (344)

such a philosophical aesthetics project, in that it seeks to understand, with a technician's attunement, a formal mechanism as it manifests variously in different contemporary works, and, simultaneously, not to fail to "hear the echo" of these works' equivalent(s) of the French Revolution, and to sketch the contours of the uncomfortable mediation they perform. For these works, the "French Revolution" (or one of them) is the way plural frameworks operate in late capitalist (post?)postmodernity.

It's useful here to develop in a bit more depth some of the major ways contemporary art and literary works mediate certain aspects of social and political framework-ness through form, before pivoting to more detailed description of how aspect choreography works. Many of the aspect choreographies I consider in this dissertation adopt similar strategies in order to hold frames in awareness "as" frames, maintain their discreteness, and connect them to acts of meaning-making in the world. This interest in finding a "formal language" to handle the way "frames" operate in experience crops up in many contemporary art and literary objects that are not aspect choreographies. Several major non-aspect choreography works by contemporary multimedia artist Bani Abidi provide particularly clear and sophisticated examples. They usefully clarify some of the major mechanisms at play in the works the dissertation discusses. Bani Abidi's wide-ranging video and installation work often asks questions similar to those contemporary aspect choreographies ask, dwells with similar problems, and finds similar solutions to how they might be expressed through form. Much of her work focuses on tensions between Pakistani and Indian governmental regimes, national identities, and cultures as they organize views of the world. For example, major early short pieces, like *The News* (2001), a 2-

channel video piece where a “Pakistani” and an “Indian” news anchor each relay an (oppositely) ideologically distorted version of some absurdist “news” (see Fig. 1.2, next page).

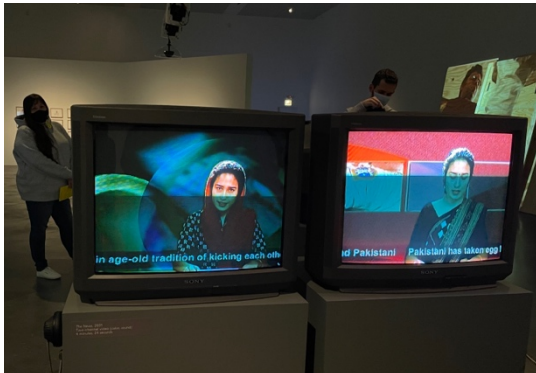


Fig. 1.2. *The News*. (Abidi, 2001). Photo by author.

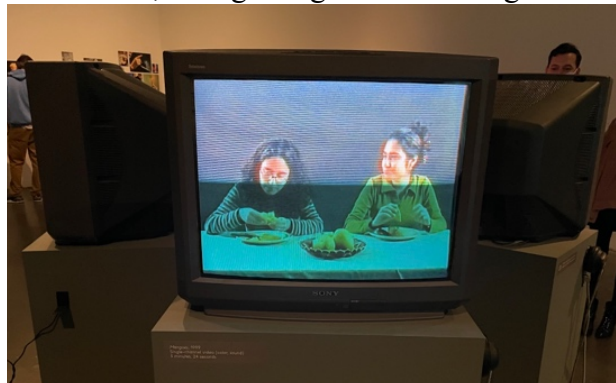
Or *Anthems* (2000), where a vertical divider moves back and forth, apparently responding to two women dancing to Indian and Pakistani songs, respectively, in nearly identical rooms



Fig.1.3. *Anthems*. (Abidi, 2000). Photo by author

In *Mangoes* (1999), two women sit side by side at a table, eating mangoes and talking about their memories of eating the fruit as children

Fig. 1.4. *Mangoes*. (Abidi, 1999). Photo by author



Only at the end of *Mangoes* do we learn that one of these women is Indian and one Pakistani. “How many varieties of mangoes do you have in Pakistan?” asks the woman in the green shirt. After a long pause, the woman in the striped shirt (played by Abidi) responds “Maybe 5, probably 5 different cultures of mangoes.” She pauses for a moment. “How many do you have in India?,” Abidi’s character asks the Indian character. “Probably 6,” is the answer. Another long pause. “Actually,” responds Abidi’s Pakistani character, “we probably have 6 or 7. Probably 7,” and the video ends. It’s funny, obvious, and feels like an experiment with a friend. But it shows something about how Abidi’s work moves the problem of vantage or national frame between form and semantic content when considered in comparison with *Anthems* and *The News*, which follow in one year intervals. If in *Mangoes* the two women are seated next to each other at a table, housed within one diegetic frame but expressing a kind of border tension between the two countries, it seems not insignificant that *Anthems* picks this “border” up and relocates it to the structure of the video—it becomes a vertical divider organizing and separating the diegetic worlds, rather than something represented within one world. Then in *The News*, made one year later, the physicalization goes one step further: the division is even more aggressively literalized as two different televisions, two different versions of the same events, two different frames. Aspect choreographies, due to the reflexive nature of their form and material, are often able to move exactly this kind of boundary around within a single work, and make this movement itself expressive, or capable of bearing mimetic charge.

Abidi's later works continue to explore the ways that divides in worldview can make their way into form. *Death at a Thirty Degree Angle* (2012), a large two-channel video installation, projects semi-synchronously looped footage from different vantages onto multiple adjacent, differently angled large pieces of plywood.



Fig. 1.5 Multiple views of *Death at a Thirty Degree Angle* (Abidi, 2012). Photos by author



Like Ahwesh, Abidi is interested in the space between the documentary and the fictional, and in this piece, she stages a fictional narrative about a “small-time politician who commissions a monumental statue of himself” (Abidi) in the studio of (actual) New-Delhi sculptor Ram Sutar, who has made monumental statues of politicians of all orientations and levels of credibility since the 1960s. The video shows the (fictional) politician posing for his statue, his entourage entering and leaving the studio, various stages of the fabrication process, and other studio views. But what's especially clarifying for this project's purposes, and in light of Abidi's sustained focus on finding a formal language for division and vantage, is the way the two plywood boards (and the

images projected onto them) move in and out of reconcilability as parts of “one image,” and then again become two screens showing two different vantages with an obvious seam down the middle. A more abstract version of this “seam down the middle” is sustained by the two (differently fictional) representations of the same politician: both of these representations also stand for the “kinds” of fictionality that make them possible: the politician in question doesn’t actually (“actually”) exist, even though he could: he’s the category Sutar’s clients over the last 40 years have belonged to. The politician’s clown-like character in the video (he’s dressed ridiculously, his gestures are obviously grandiose) and the sculpted “copy” (severe, graceful, monumental; something one might expect to see placed without irony in a city park) feel like another mode of “versioning,” or another kind of split in vantage—where and what is reality, and how is it produced and sustained? Often, the two projected images will line up to produce what, at a quick glance, appears to be one spatially and diegetically contiguous reality, as in this “view” of part of Ram Sutar’s studio:

Fig. 1.6. *Death at a Thirty Degree Angle* (Abidi, 2012). Photo by author



But of course, on closer inspection, it becomes apparent that it isn’t one vantage: it’s two different vantages that don’t quite seamlessly combine: note the distortion/deletion of part of the rightmost red chair and the leftmost man’s head, for example. It’s like a kind of failed binocular

vision, a vision that points up the inability of its component vantages to combine; it marks the persistence of their discreteness. The persistence of the split is something also characteristic of aspect choreographies, but this “split” becomes a material capable of bearing pattern.

And finally, perhaps the most multilayered and aspect choreography-like form of this reflexively preserved frame-splitting happens in Abidi’s use of form to express motion and/as contiguity. In one particularly effective sequence, Abidi splits what appears to be one “event” into three different kinds of continuity-supplying vantages (which I read as “frameworks for meaning-making”), three different, simultaneous, and imperfectly interlocking frames for making sense of a perceptual experience. In so doing, she points out the discreteness of these frames themselves. In this sequence, the apparent “event” is the politician and his entourage walking past a small maquette of his statue on the ground. There are two different camera vantages, one mostly projected on the left board and one on the right board. The left board shows the vantage of a camera placed behind the maquette, and the right board shows the vantage of a camera placed to the left of the maquette, pointed towards it. If one were to simply film people walking past the maquette from these two vantages simultaneously, and then project the time-matched footage accordingly, the people would actually first appear on the right board. But that’s not what happens in this piece. As is apparent when one looks carefully, these views are not spatially contiguous despite appearing to be—the maquette appears in both panels. (See Fig. 1.7 on following page).

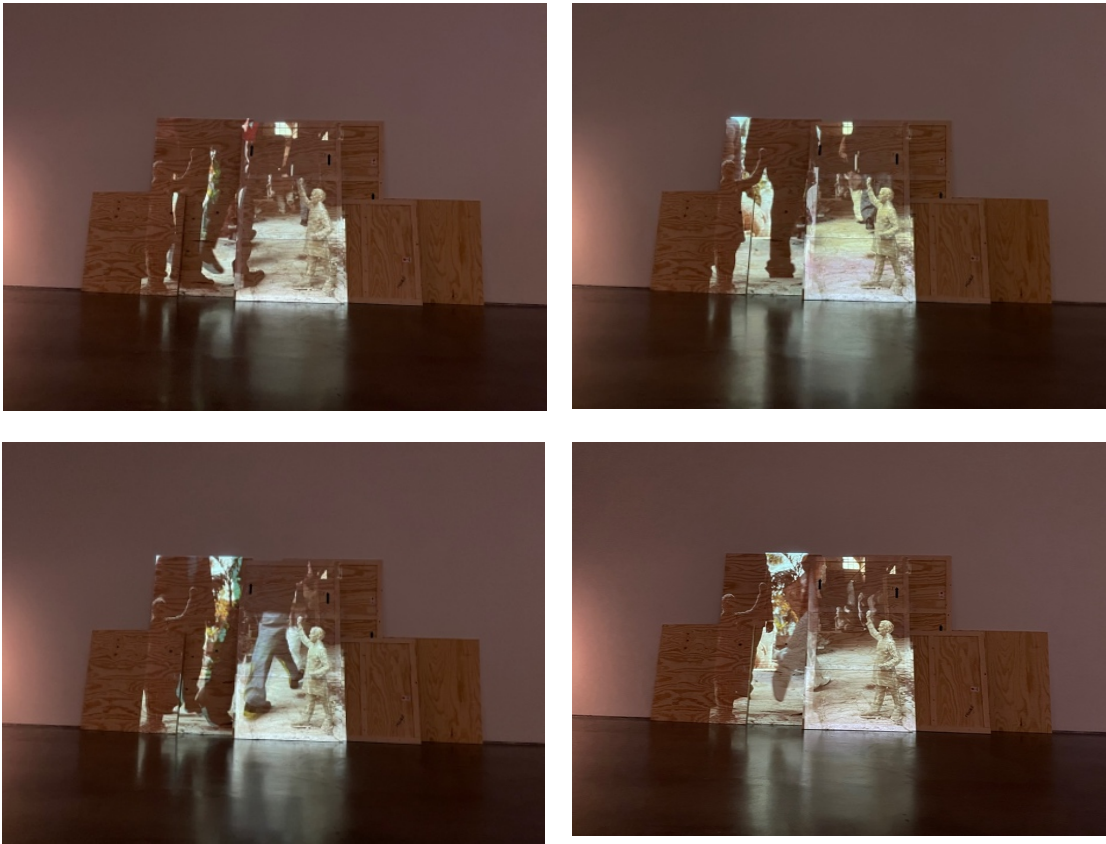


Fig. 1.7. Sequence (left to right, top to bottom) of stills from *Death at a Thirty Degree Angle* (Abidi, 2012). Photos by author.

The left panel (camera behind the maquette) shows actions whose logical, graphical, and narrative follow-ons appear in the right panel (camera to the left of the maquette)—we see the train of people coming from the left of the left panel, and their motion passes to the right panel as they pass from visibility on the left. It looks like they walk through contiguous space and time (with some glitching). We see this motion “as” the “event”: watching these two panels through this sequence reads as “people walk past the maquette.” But actually, the left panel shows a vantage that is temporally (in the time of the “actual” event in the “real” world) *after* the vantage on the right panel. It is *graphically* and/(which comes to stand for) *narratively* prior, even though

it is “actually” after. What transfers across the perspectival/vantage split in the boards most readily is the motion and the narrative continuity it stands for. We experience our reflexively constructed narrative/graphic continuity *as* immediate, even though we’re also watching a kind of spatial/temporal nonsense. Editing being able to make nonsense into experienced continuity is nothing new, but what *is* new is how Abidi preserves these three “realities” or frameworks in one motion image—their chiral misalignment is a kind of abstract or conceptual equivalent of the binocular failure she set up before. There is the sense that something has moved within one spatial world or frame, even as it hasn’t, has actually moved across an elided but obvious gap or break in vantage. There’s a graphic continuity across the panels that creates one visual plane—a linear motion-based continuity across a split that recalls and intensifies early innovations like the famous interior-exterior motion continuity across cuts in, for example, Maya Deren’s *At Land* (1944). Narrative continuity, the video seems to say, is perfectly capable of including irresolvable gaps, rifts, and ruptures—but Abidi uses a kind of chiral misalignment to preserve the split in experience alongside the experience the split should make impossible. She gives us three frameworks for sense-making and makes their discreteness a perceptible problem: this is a major way the piece finds a “formal language” for its attunement to the ways political “realities” are constructed in tension with other realities, other frameworks for making sense of phenomena. This is most aspect choreography-like in that its use of motion allows one kind of continuity to stand for another, even as their reciprocal mediation means an *aporia* is preserved. That’s to say, Abidi uses this same chiral misalignment of discrete frames, but now meaning-conferring frames, rather than simpler visual-perceptual frames. The piece cues its viewer to notice and potentially change the modality of their orienting commitment, and therefore perception: she

introduces the possibility of reflexively cognized ontological modulation of depicted objects: the material that aspect choreographies make into patterns.

Both Abidi and Ahwesh are interested in finding aesthetic form for ideological or perceptual division, and over the course of their career they have tended to locate and move the representation of these splits through various levels of the artwork, from the diegetic plane to the structure and (sublationally) back and forth. I've used Abidi and Ahwesh as my case studies here because both are fairly major (and usefully different) contemporary artists who share structural approaches to similar questions, and analyzing their work provides particularly clear examples of how form and concept uncomfortably mediate each other around reflexive formations of framework, reality, and perception in ways immediately useful to me. But I could track similar aspect choreography-adjacent dynamics in the work of many contemporary video and literary artists, ranging from LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs (poet), to Trinh T. Minh-ha (artist), to Jenif(fer) Tamayo (poet), to Cecilia Vicuña (poet/artist), to Catherine Sullivan (artist), to Fred Wilson (artist), to Harun Farocki (video artist), among others.

Aspect choreographies are works that are reckoning with similar forms and concepts as Ahwesh and Abidi's work, but they build affectively recognizable meta-structures and patterns out of these framework seams, misalignments, orientation switches, and conflicting legibilities. They write these patterns into the medium of reflective experience. In all aspect choreographies, there are multiple and resolutely separated vantages, frameworks, ideologies, languages, or worldviews the piece uses to set itself up as an ontological modulator. The pieces never blend them even if they point up commonality, or a larger shared world beyond these frames, as Abidi and Ahwesh both do as well. And these aspect choreographies seem to know, like *Death at a Thirty Degree Angle* does, that what can go between these frames is *motion*, an insight we might

trace to, for example, Deleuze and Guattari in the *Logic of Sensation* or even in *Thousand Plateaus*, when they note that a rhythm is that which can move between planes.

A similar insight structures Catherine Malabou's concept of "plasticity" —a new epistemic-affective discourse-organizing regime (a "motor scheme") she argues succeeds that of "writing," which defined the era of deconstruction. Plasticity, for Malabou, is like a transformational mask², whose nature is the form of the possibility for change, which arrives as the form taken by the "ability to hold together heterogeneous elements" (Malabou, 2). By "elements," she means something like "logics" or, more specifically in her case, formats of negativity (destruction, dialectic, deconstruction), which, thought *as* delimited logics, perhaps enable a positively-shaped conception of the space between them, or the possibility of the transition between them—the nature of their "conflicting synchrony" (20). That's to say, she is trying to understand "transformational relations," how dialogue-toward-change between orientations might "present itself as structure" (3). Her work aims to give ontological status to the form of the possibility of change, an impulse she identifies as the natural turn for her in the wake of deconstruction (and postmodernism). If in postmodernism, "various depth models" were replaced by "multiple surfaces" or codes or systems, and the interplay between them (Jameson, 12), isn't it precisely the seams between these systems that might become the most interesting things to try to think as objects or spaces? Or at the very least, the most obvious source of new ways of thinking or feeling? Relatedly, Jameson argues that the postmodern moment inaugurated or asked for a "new mode of relationship through difference" (31), one which perhaps hits the hard limit of the "incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered

² She gets this figure from Lévi-Strauss—they're a type of mask characterized by Russian doll-like stacking of faces, with hinges and seams that allow one face to "transform" into another

communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (44). Malabou pivots to theorize the nature of Being in plasticity as “nothing but its own mutability” (Malabou, 43), to attempt to give form to plasticity itself, to theorize change and “conflicting synchrony.” In a certain sense, this project does something similar, asks what happens when works make their form a developing pattern of changes between conflicting synchronic frames. If the linked problems of seams, change, and epistemic or orientational pluralism/decenteredness (“conflicting synchrony”) are distinctive or experientially organizing aspects of the (post?)postmodern, how might that find its way into form? How might objects use their form to reformat experience towards (or against) the modes of being and orientation on offer?

Jameson reads Nam June Paik’s multiscreen work as an emblematic example of how postmodern art objects might reflect or metabolize their situation; relationship through difference, multiple codes or frames, massive simultaneity. The many screens are simply too much to process simultaneously, but the work insists that the viewer try:

the most striking emblem of this new mode of thinking relationships[through difference] can be found in the work of Nam June Paik, whose stacked or scattered television screens, positioned at intervals within lush vegetation, or winking down at us from a ceiling of strange new video stars, resituate over and over again prearranged sequences or loops of images which return at dyssynchronous moments on the various screens. The older aesthetic is then practiced by viewers who, bewildered by this discontinuous variety, decided to concentrate on a single screen, as though the relatively worthless image sequence to be followed there had some organic value in its own right. The postmodernist viewer, however, is called upon to do the impossible, namely, to see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference [...]something for which the word collage is still only a very feeble name (Jameson 31)

But, as Jameson himself notes, this “imperative” to experience massive simultaneity as “relationship” may well be beyond the scope of consciousness, may well be “impossible”—unless the viewer “follow the evolutionary mutation of David Bowie in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (who watches fifty-seven tv screens simultaneously) and to rise somehow to a level at

which the vivid perception of radical difference is in and of itself a new mode of grasping what used to be called relationship” (ibid.). This simultaneity model and the questions it provokes have become so prevalent that they’re now the structuring conceit of popular movies like *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022). But this movie, a very recent work produced in a moment either at the very end of postmodernity, or at the beginning of whatever comes next, is also interested in finding an orienting structure for continuity among all the “discontinuous variety.” Like much post-continuity film editing, or, as I’ll argue, the lyric subject of Chelsey Minnis’s *Baby, I Don’t Care* (2018), it finds it in the form of a subject or character we come to recognize, even if the “worlds” they are traveling through do not form a totality, and even if we must locate the subject as movement between these worlds.

Along these lines, I believe that aspect choreographies take a different angle on the problem of multiple decentered frames/vantages than do Paik’s: if Jameson reads Paik’s and other simultaneity-driven postmodern works as using an intensified form of collage (updating and hyperdriving their Modernist predecessors), I read aspect choreographies as slowing down and reformatting these impossible Postmodern forms by routing the problem back through the phenomenological insights of 70s art and film. Or maybe they’re simply more attuned to a different version of a similar problem: as Victor Burgin put it in 1986, contemporary (postmodern?) experience is “characterized not so much by the *image*, but rather by the continual *exchange* of one image for another” (Burgin 156). Aspect choreographies same-generation cousins of works like Abidi’s or Ahwesh’s; they also begin from a similar postmodern or pluralist orientation toward the nature and operations of context, frame, and vantage. Aspect choreographies, however, refuse simultaneity, and instead ask what new affordances arise when the actual orienting frame is not spatial or synchronic, but rather a diachronic or rhythmically

organized frame; what kinds of language, subject, temporality, and reality might emerge from such an orientation? A choreography in time instead of an impossible or flattening simultaneity. In this way, aspect choreography begins from Postmodernism, but I think it turns towards something new.

Like Kathie Moffat, the femme fatale in *Out of the Past* (Torner, 1947) from which Chelsey Minnis's *Baby, I Don't Care* (2018) (the guiding aspect choreography of Chapter 1) takes its title, none of these works seem likely to solve the problems of their world(s), or actually find their ways out of the multiple binds in which they find themselves. But also like Kathie, they find a momentary way of being according to some other logic, yet paradoxically one that doesn't ignore the inevitability of the orienting logics of their worlds. Perhaps one that foreshadows a different way of seeing or making sense, perhaps merely a new kind of aesthetic processing of a certain aspect of postmodernity. Hard to say.

This conflict between simultaneity or pluralism of well-defined frameworks and felt or organizing totality is something particularly legible as a material problem on the American Left. In a way that accelerated in the period between Paik's work and the late 2010s. Fredric Jameson, as early as *The Political Unconscious*, remarks on the way that the difference in political landscape and history in the US changes what French anti-totalization philosophies mean in their US reception (i.e. what they're reacting against makes less sense here):

In the United States, on the other hand, it is precisely the intensity of social fragmentation of the latter kind that has historically made it difficult to unify Left or "antisystemic" forces in any durable or effective organizational way. Ethnic groups, neighborhood movements, feminism, various "countercultural" or alternative life-style groups, rank-and-file labor dissidence, student movements, single issue movements—all have in the United States seemed to project demands and strategies which were theoretically incompatible with each other and impossible to coordinate on any practical political basis (Jameson, 54)

In the US, small groups with robust theoretical frameworks failed to coalesce into a coherent political Left: a “conflicting synchrony” problem. These smaller frameworks were able to make more compelling orientational claims than were larger and more capacious ones. This is a kind of mirror of the social and economic totalities: as the economic totality becomes ever more seamless under financialization and globalization, so the social totality becomes increasingly atomized, or, put differently, increasingly seamed, though we might (incorrectly) see things like social media as a re-connective force. The vast and featureless contiguity and constantly morphing complexity of that secular, economic totality in which we are all subsumed is too complex and vast to be orienting, or available to feeling to any but (maybe) the imaginary postmodern subject Nam June Paik’s work calls for. This is why Jameson calls for a political and didactic art that is able to produce “cognitive mapping” for postmodern subjects to help them feel their place in the “global system,” acknowledging all the while how difficult such mapping would likely be, and how new and complex the forms capable of dealing with “this now enormously complex representational dialectic” (Jameson, PM, 54) would have to be. Smaller frameworks offer the feeling of social contiguity, a clear orientation, a way of reading the world; that’s to say, they can make a more forceful claim on feeling and action, for most people, at least in the US. Because we live in a moment where “ways of seeing” are themselves perceptible as objects, reifiable, fabricatable, and plural, and in a society that offers freedom formatted as consumer choice, it’s not hard to imagine a kind of shopping for frameworks that might take place³.

³ In *Paris is Burning* (Livingston 1990), a documentary about the ballroom and drag scene in New York in the 80s, one of the senior queens at one point explains that the balls began with very few but very flexible categories, and most people made their own costumes, usually performing as glamorous women or movie stars. As the 80s progressed, she explains, the categories became more numerous, narrower, and better defined, with an

It does seem that the moment of the “Postmodern” is ending, or morphing into whatever will succeed it. Perhaps the era of “plasticity” that Malabou forecasts, perhaps a turn away from accelerating pluralism and its accompanying disorienting relativization, perhaps something else. Aspect choreographies seem to have been produced starting around the turn of the 21st century, arguably at the end of the Postmodern era. Post 2020 certainly feels like a moment of era change: people seem like they want socially connective ways to be oriented, and the clarion calls from all angles toward (individualized) moral behavior are easily legible as a misguided attempt to help people connect to a common framework for caring and together resisting the current world order, whatever that world order is perceived to be. The pandemic, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, to name just a few, have exerted a kind of synchronizing or commonality-reasserting force. The recent unifying movements of our time tend to offer a clear orienting and interpretive framework as well: for example, the US is structured according to antiblackness, and its history unfolds as a consequence of an initial event: slavery. All parts of the social and historical world are parts of the antiblack whole, and may be read accordingly. One might even read this as offering a potential for a kind of negative “expressive totality” as Althusser describes the spiritual whole/inner essence-expressed-in-all-parts models of history held by, for instance, Hegel and Leibniz. The suffusing essence here though, rather than Absolute Spirit, might be something like “antiblackness.” #MeToo likewise framed the world as an expressive totality, wherein all aspects of the world are parts signifying that totality, which might be characterized as something like “the patriarchy.” Intersectional feminisms, Black Marxisms, and others, seek to find a way

accompanying uptick in the aggressiveness of the policing of performers’ adherence to category criteria. This change in category structure also accompanied, she notes, a pivot toward buying or stealing designer clothes, and wanting to perform as a fashion model. A movement from openness and clothes valued for their care and creativity to a plurality of well-policed categories and clothes and styles valued because they appeared to be expensive and definitely legible. I tend to see this as a kind of allegory for the way pluralism on the Left worked in the 2010s.

to hybridize and connect these affectively forceful, clear and unambiguous ways of seeing to broader questions. These efforts struggle, however, with reconciling the subject-reinforcing, easily neoliberalism-cooptable, social media-infographic flattenable, identity-based frameworks with a shared “mapping” that integrates subjects into a shared awareness of how financialized capital shapes our shared lives, and might be collectively resisted.

Aspect choreographies also do not take this approach: they do not seek to produce a blended whole, they do not hybridize—they retain and reinforce their participants’ feeling of the seams or switches between ways of being oriented.

In short, aspect choreography arises at a sociocultural moment at the end of Postmodernism, a period remarkable for its intensified attention to codes, systems, and frameworks for meaning, relationship through difference, and conflicting synchrony.

Aspect Choreography: Frames and Aspects

Aspect choreography is a second-order form perceptible as a repetitive structure of switches between well-defined frameworks of sensemaking that the book or film choreographs its reader to move through, and eventually affectively recognize, over time. This structure often has specific, often novel, affective or orientational affordances, outlined in more detail in the chapter summary section. The dissertation argues further that this form [aspect choreography] is a method these works use to metabolize, process, or reflect two major aspects of contemporary life, specifically, (1) a proliferation of non-superimposable frameworks for meaning and orientation, and (2) an increased awareness of the ways received forms, lenses, and ways of reading are finite/delimited and also imbricated with structures of power. Often, these works are

reckoning with frameworks of sense-making that they find unavoidable or necessary to use and yet also unacceptable or unbearable in some way—English as a first language, but also a colonizing and antiblack language, for poet M. NourbeSe Phillip, for example⁴. Aspect choreography allows these works to hold multiple non-superimposable frameworks for meaning and orientation in play, without hybridizing or resolving them into one way of being oriented, and without committing to any one of them, without simply arriving at the familiar kind of “disorientation,” “defamiliarization,” or “shock” so common in analyses of experimental form. This novel way of holding radical orientational discontinuity while sustaining a robust sense of coherence is one of the affordances of the temporal, cognitive-rhythmic form these works take. I use models borrowed from musicology, especially Christopher Hasty’s theory of rhythm (influenced by Henri Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead, and William James), to help show how⁵.

It’s useful here to quickly explain what I mean by “aspect,” and also “framework,” since I’m using them in specific ways. In “Fragment xi” of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein identifies a perceptual-cognitive mechanism he calls “aspect change,” and gives a number of illustrative examples, most famously the “duck-rabbit” drawing he adapts from Jastrow. This drawing can be seen as representing a duck, OR representing a rabbit, and can be known to represent both, but can only be perceived as one at a time. To switch between them [these aspects] is itself a perceptual experience. Wittgenstein goes on to articulate a model of perception in which sensory input and conceptual frameworks are always necessarily imbricated—perception seems to be a mixture of sense and thought. Most importantly for this project, Wittgenstein contends that to perceive X (e.g. a small wood figure) as Y (e.g. a chess

⁴ Chapter 2 focuses on Philip’s fugal aspect choreography, the long poem *Zong!*

⁵ The dissertation’s use of Hasty’s theory of meter and rhythm is developed in Chapter 2.

knight), you must have a functional knowledge of the meaning-conferring framework (e.g. chess) in which Y can mean “chess knight,” or be taken as a chess knight at all. That’s to say, to see an aspect implies accessing a framework in which that aspect means something, or takes a defined and relational place⁶. So, by “aspect choreography,” what I mean is that these objects cue their readers to switch out which “aspect” of an object they are seeing (e.g. switching from seeing a printed word as English to seeing this same printed thing as a mark in a pictorial field), as a felt form of switching out which meaning-conferring framework they are accessing⁷. To switch aspects is, for these objects, to switch frameworks. They build patterns of these switches over time. This felt pattern of switches is the form of the object, the “aspect choreography.”

I take choreography as my guiding metaphor for this project because it provides an already familiar model for 1) knowing patterned movement in an embodied/experiential way, and 2) how a felt whole might be synthesized experientially from plurality and flux. Further, I’m

⁶ It isn’t necessary to get here through Wittgenstein: the school of film semiotics that follows on from Émile Benveniste’s processing of Structuralism, for example (e.g. Metz, Branigan, Casetti), is deeply interested in how contexts and texts co-produce and continually modify each other in the process of entextualization. That what and how something means can be richly modified by what is taken to be its context, and vice versa. You could also get here through Foucault’s conceptualizations of gridlike regimes of visibility in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* or *Ceci N’est Pas Une Pipe*. Or through a modification of Erving Goffman’s “frame analysis.” Or through the Russian Formalists’ ideas of syn- and auto-function—for example, in Tynianov’s “On Literary Evolution,” where he argues that literary objects produce meaning-organizing systems capable of re-signifying language objects that appear in them—archaisms for example (Tynianov, 270). You could get here through Rancière’s concept of partitions of the sensible, or re-derive it from Marx, as Joe Luna does. You could take Lyotard, in *Discourse, Figure*, or Lyotard through Catherine Malabou in *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*: “This [Lyotardian eye-at-the-edge-of-discourse] is the optical arrangement that language, in its structure, shows on its edge, so that to speak is to give birth to the visibility of that about which I am speaking” (Malabou, 56). You could read theoretical writings by 60s and 70s artists and filmmakers like Victor Burgin, arguing that “We don’t *simply* inhabit a material reality, we simultaneously inhabit a psychic reality—the former, in fact, being known only via the latter” (Burgin, 85), or trace that back to Kant, or forward to Sylvia Wynter or contemporary Marxist theory that brings psychoanalysis to bear to explain people’s intractable attachments to ideology. You could even get here through John Berger’s idea of “ways of seeing”—that what we see is formatted by how we look at it. Maybe even through someone like Wallace Stevens, or Duchamp. Wittgenstein’s terms are just clearer and provide a robust account of the switch itself on perceptual-cognitive terms I find useful, and which accord well with the pragmatism-inflected concept of “orientation” I use, as well as the loosely phenomenologically inflected account I give of how a reader’s sense-making activity might be “choreographed” by an art object with which they enter into a mutually constitutive relation.

⁷ I give a more detailed account of this model, and the Wittgenstein, in Chapter 1.

attracted to choreography in two rather specific senses: one derives from Plato's idea regarding the function of the Greek chorus, as he articulates it in the *Timaeus*: the chorus as a kind of crucible of all becoming, a plural and durational figure towards meaning. I'm also interested in the pedagogical or "training" function that this plural figure can have, even as it remains in flux. As Helene Foley notes, Greek writers on tragedy often emphasized the "critical function of the chorus in civic education" (Foley, 4), even as the chorus was a mobile site where success depended critically on choral performers' ability to "play the Other[...]rather than characters like [themselves]" (5). The chorus functions as a cross-grained body and voice, fluid, changing, but patterned, in a way that offered both participants and viewers an experiential "education" or training consistently valued in Greek society. One might call choreography a form of entrainment, a visceral or orientational pedagogy.

The pedagogical function of art so in focus now is an ancient idea, and one that pops up periodically throughout Western art history, especially in moments when the question of how art and life/social formations might (or should) relate becomes newly visible, or becomes a site where artists and theorists locate hope for social change, often misguidedly. It resonates, for example, with Friedrich Schiller's notion, in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, that aesthetic education, or learning to read art objects, might function as training or preparation for living in a truly free society, as it produces a way of knowing how to be oriented in play and uncertainty. Mallarmé thought the revolutionary form of his poems could shock or disorient the reader toward revolutionary political action. Similarly Brechtian theater's *Verfremdung* and the defamiliarization/ostranenie aesthetic that comes out of Russian Formalist practice generally sought to shake people out of their habitual perception of the world, and thereby give them the chance to see it differently. Socialist Realism, in counterpoint, sought to provide conceptually

and morally clear images of the world as it “should be.” Aimé Césaire switched from poetry to theater to television to use art to reach more people, to use experimental form to change how people saw. Victor Burgin argued in the 1980s that art could provide a rare “occasio[n] for interpretation rather than objects for consumption[...]the ability to think *otherwise*—ways of thinking not encouraged by the imperative to commodity production” (Burgin 138), which he considered “fundamental to the goal of a truly, rather than nominally, democratic society” (*ibid.*), echoing Schiller. Even more recently, there’s the “patient restitching” of the social fabric “underneath” the existing economic order that Relational Aesthetics (e.g. Bourriaud, Tiravanija) proposed to perform in the 90s and aughts. The most recent Venice Biennale was full of video essays educating viewers about the harms of various kinds of exploitation. Aspect choreography can be located in this lineage, though it eschews the discursivity and prefabricated conceptual-moralizing didacticism that organizes most pedagogical art of the 21st century. I choose the metaphor of choreography in this (classically inflected) sense because it takes the idea of the pedagogical potential of art back towards a non-discursive orientational modality that opens toward feeling and relationality, and dissolution of the self, rather than didactic moralizing and conceptualization—both discursively formatted concepts and morals only obtain in and communicate on the terms of a world that already exists, one that we already know how to recognize. This is useful for on-the-ground political organizing, where immediate utility and legibility is necessary, but is somewhere between less useful, and actively counterproductive, for art. I believe one of art’s critical functions is to use form(s)⁸ to hold space for genuine not-

⁸ I mean this in the Adornian sense: form necessarily includes/is in dialogue with the historical/political materials of its world: “historical processes and functions are already sedimented in them [art objects] and speak out of them” (Adorno, 112). An artist operates not only on, for example, clay as wet iron-rich dirt, but as a material with a history of art-historical, social, political, and economic legibilities that stream through it, for them (as a historically specific maker) and for us (as historically specific viewers). The “form” of the art object is the densified experiential nexus

knowing, the limbo through which one must transit to arrive somewhere new. This is the (unpredictable, unreliable, slow) way art can contribute to social change. I don't know how aspect choreographies "help" the world: maybe they don't. Most art doesn't. I only know that they are able to mobilize existing structures in a way that organizes or writes experience differently than any category of object I have encountered before, and in this, I contend, they participate genuinely in the life of art as social organ. Part of the task of aesthetic theory is to characterize how, and to give the language to describe new formations as they arise.

I am also thinking about choreography through a 2018 piece by contemporary choreographer Ligia Lewis, *Water Will (in Melody)*, which I read as a circulation of gestures in a circuit defined by the dancers' bodies, and which is, per Lewis, trying to radically reframe concepts of the "subject" and of agentive "willing" (Lewis). That's to say, it's a piece which reorients the viewer to what kinds of "figures" can become recognizable as such and against what "ground" (i.e. rhythmic circulation of gesture becomes a kind of "figure") by means of patterned changes in how it is possible to read the dancers. In this dissertation, I consider how patterned shifts in the frameworks of sense-making that an object cues its reader to use in order to operate it, sustained over time, constitute a form of choreography the reader is asked to perform. By doing so, the reader is "trained" toward a different felt orientation vis à vis the frameworks mobilized by the object, rather than simply "shocked" out of one of them. I argue that these patterns of aspect switches, this "choreography," comes to constitute the form of the object, written in the medium of reflective experience.

conjoining physicalized material possibility and an intuitive history of readings of objects like it. This model of form is outlined in more detail in chapter 2.

The kind of reading or viewing I see aspect choreography-sustaining objects cueing is one informed by certain presuppositions about how reading or viewing works. The model I'm using is along the lines of structuralist-phenomenological film semiotics (e.g. Branigan, Casetti)—I believe that objects work to structure the contexts that define how meaning can arise in them [the objects]—that “filmic texts” for example, are best seen as a kind of “reality that fixes its own fundamental axes of reference, and therefore presupposes what it will encounter by opening in itself a space ready to receive whomever it is addressed to” (Casetti, 109). Aspect choreography-sustaining objects structure and modulate the terms for sense-making the reader is cued to use, and come into being by means of a certain activity on the part of their readers and viewers. Such a model is also akin to Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological model of reading (that he adapts from Husserl partially directly and partially via Roman Ingarden)⁹:

the [literary] work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader—though this in turn is acted on by the different patterns of the text. The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence (Iser, 279)

Like Iser, I see reading as a negotiation of the time-based self-modifying patterns of expectation and vantage that works of durational art construct:

How is one to conceive the connection between the correlatives? It marks those points at which the reader is able to “climb aboard” the text. He [sic] has to accept certain given perspectives, but in doing so he inevitably causes them to interact [...] [the sentences of a literary work] set in motion a process out of which emerges the actual content of the text itself [...] For this bringing to fruition, the literary text needs the reader's imagination, which gives shape to the interaction of correlatives foreshadowed in structure by the sequence of the sentences[...]the interaction of these correlatives will not be a fulfilment of the expectation so much as a continual modification of it [...] the expectations they [sentence correlatives] evoke tend to encroach on one another that they are continually modified as one reads (282-3)

⁹ Iser, 282

The reader, in order to “climb aboard” or read the work, must “accept certain given perspectives” and thereby “caus[e] them to interact”—the reader must see on the work’s terms in order to operate it. In so doing, the reader “sets in motion a process out of which emerges the actual content of the texts”: the text’s content is an emergent entity that arises when the reader performs the object correctly. It’s the “imagination” that “gives shape to the interaction of correlatives”: the reader is, in a certain sense, choreographed by the “structure” “foreshadowed” by the “sequence” (ibid.). Iser’s model of how literary works cue construction of meaning from time-based self-modifying patterns of expectation sounds like nothing so much as how Sergei Eisenstein theorizes the function and synthetic affordances of montage in *The Film Sense*; that the viewer must do similar work to get, for example, the idea of a “widow” from a filmic sequence of a grave followed by a woman weeping (17). Film images are dynamic processes, for Eisenstein (21). As he summarizes later in the essay:

The strength of montage resides in this, that it includes in the creative process the emotions and mind of the spectator [...] the spectator not only sees the represented elements of the finished work, but also experiences the dynamic process of the emergence and assembly of the image [...] not only the result, but the road to it also is part of truth (Eisenstein 34-5)

He elaborates on the affordances of this co-creative activity of the spectator:

it is precisely the *montage* principle, as distinguished from that of *representation* which obliges spectators themselves to *create* and the montage principle, by this means, achieves that great power of inner creative excitement in the *spectator* which distinguishes an emotionally exciting work from one that stops without going further than giving information or recording events (37 emphasis in the original)

The necessity of involving the viewer in dynamically constituting the artwork, if the artist wishes for the work to feel lively or interesting, also isn’t a new idea—it’s at least as old as Lessing’s

Laocöon—it’s why, he [Lessing] argues, artworks should represent the moment before a climax, rather than the realize the climactic event itself: so that the reader’s imagination should have something to do. It [the imagination] thereby experiences its own motion as the work’s “liveliness.”¹⁰

At this point it seems natural enough to ask how aspect choreography differs from any sustained sequential art form, if we see reading and film viewing along the lines Iser, Eisenstein, and others set out. That is, if all sequential art unfolds as a co-creative dynamic process by which meaning is contextually produced and modulated in dialogue with a reader or viewer choreographed to perform it...what’s specific about aspect choreography?

The answer to that question is part of what makes aspect choreography specific to an art historical moment after Structuralism, Conceptual Art, the and the phenomenological turn of the 1970s generally. It’s with artists like Robert Irwin, Victor Burgin, Lawrence Weiner, James Turrell, and Hollis Frampton, and shows like the landmark 1969 “When Attitudes Become Form,” at the Kunsthalle Bern, that perception and sense-making themselves are recognized as a possible medium of the artwork. On the poetics side, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets had similar ideas. These artists all created works designed to change the way the viewer perceived themselves perceiving—to take the jarring effect of earlier 20th century *Verfremdung* and sustain attention to it, to direct attention self-reflexively. It’s perhaps unsurprising that Robert Irwin, famously, says he locked himself in an apartment for 8 months and read nothing but Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*—perhaps the first philosophically formatted spiritual exercise that used

¹⁰ A subject-object misattribution that recalls Kant’s concept of the beautiful. (i.e. that the experience of beauty is an experience of one’s own rational and imaginative drives set into stabilized but irresolvable play by an object neither drive can entirely account for on its own terms. The experiencer attributes this to the object as a kind of quality, but it is actually reflective experience categorized under the sign of perceptual immediacy.

repetition, perceptual modulation, and failure explicitly to arrive at self-consciousness or reflexivity. These artists also, to varying degrees, were interested in pointing up the ways that sense perception and experience are imbricated with systems and organizing conceptual structures. James Turrell, Robert Irwin, and others associated with the Time and Space movement in LA were more interested in working on sense perception before or without meaning structures as much as possible. Victor Burgin and Hollis Frampton's work, on the other hand, often pointed up the way language structured perceptual experience. Hollis Frampton's best known film, *Zorn's Lemma* (1970), for example, spends the better part of an hour re-teaching its viewer how to see images and processes: to see/perceive them *as* standing for letters of the alphabet—using film (as a participatory structure in time) to reorganize and point up meaning-making activity, and in so doing revealing something about the nature of film. Victor Burgin, who at one point made a piece that consisted of a gallery of wall-mounted instruction cards which cued the viewer to pay attention to different strata of their perceptual experience (*Room*, 1970), was both a critic and an artist, wrote extensively about the role of art and the artist. He argues, for example, that

A job the artist does, which no one else does, is to dismantle existing communication codes and recombine some of their elements into structures, which can be used to generate new pictures of the world (Burgin, reviewed in Company)

Burgin, like many thinkers and artists in the wake of Structuralism, saw sense-making in terms of “codes”—delimited frameworks that could be “recombine[d]” to produce new ways of perceiving. Burgin too, wanted to make work that made its reader “more aware of having to *construct* meanings, rather than having just to consume them” (Burgin, 81). Much of Burgin's work, like Frampton's, directs the viewer's attention, aggressively, to their own process of sense-making. Like the defamiliarizing work of the Russian Formalists, these artists wanted viewers to

re-perceive their own perceiving activity, but this time, in relation to codes or frameworks of sense-making.

Of the artists considered in the dissertation, only Apichatpong Weerasethakul explicitly cites Structuralist art or film as an influence, and it's only Weerasethakul and Patrick Brice that went to graduate school for visual art (School of the Art Institute of Chicago and CalArts, respectively). But Minnis and Philip also attended graduate school in Western universities between 1970 and 2000, and would doubtless have encountered the intellectual/cultural wake of Structuralism in one form or another: Philip studied law and political science (she doubtless read Foucault), and Minnis went to graduate school for poetry. Reading Minnis's work from the aughts, for example, it's very obvious that she was reading or had read (and was still processing) Foucault and Judith Butler, among other theorists influenced by Structuralist and Poststructuralist thought. Philip, in her essay *Notanda*, argues that law, poetry, and magic are similar, in that they all use precise systems of language to make change real in the world: changing, for example, what counts as a person—transforming objects into people, and vice versa. This seems both right, and a natural outgrowth of Poststructuralist thought.

In summary then, aspect choreography is a second-order form arising in 20th and 21st century durational objects that metabolizes a number of cultural, political, and intellectual movements that structured the 20th century. Written in the medium of reflective experience, it develops from methodological insights best articulated and refined by Brecht and the Russian Formalists, but bends these methods away from “shock” and towards structure, but a diachronic or rhythmic structure, which allows it to be organized by the seams and rupture that were the terms of breakage-from-structure for Brecht et al. What are the affordances of this form? It varies

by artist, artwork, and the kinds of frames deployed. Each of the chapters tracks a specific constellation and outcome set.

V. Chapter Summaries

The first chapter centers on Chelsey Minnis, arguably the most important poet of the understudied but pervasively influential Gurllesque poetics movement of the aughts. The chapter tracks the development of aspect change and persona across her oeuvre, situating it in relation to the Gurllesque, but focusing on how she uses aspect choreography in conjunction with a feminist performative poetics and found text from 1930s and 40s Hollywood films in her most recent long work, *Baby, I Don't Care* (2018). The chapter argues that she deploys aspect choreography to rethink where it is possible to locate the (gendered) “lyric subject” of a poem, to produce that subject as a relational choreography or rhythm of modes of sense-making, rather than as a transcendently legible subject, subject to one order or framework of legibility. Aspect choreography here provides a new form for the lyric subject.

The second chapter takes seriously M NourbeSe Philip’s claim that her masterpiece, *Zong!* (2011), is a fugue (in both senses). The chapter reads *Zong!*, a visually and rhythmically complex long poem that finds a critical-fabulative form to mourn 133 enslaved Africans drowned by the operators of the *Zong* (a slave ship) in 1781, as a “counterpointed fugal antinarrative,” by reading it as a kind of aspect choreography version of a musical fugue. I read the work as moving from the sense of “fugue” as dissociative state (which Philip also considers), to “fugue” as rhythmic/expectational time-form that allows her to recast the terms under which the work can be read, specifically as it relates to time. *Zong!* sequentially introduces a well-defined set of modes of reading, and trains the reader to use and switch between them over time:

I take these as a set of fugal “subjects” whose intensifying interweaving produces the cognitive-rhythmic complexity of the piece. Ultimately the sustained performance *Zong!* calls forth allows it to reformat the reader’s temporal orientation in a way that is consonant with many of the questions around time and affect, the imbrication of past and future, and rhythm that are central to many works of contemporary literature reckoning with the afterlives of slavery. I argue *Zong!*’s durational structure allows it specific and rich affordances, insights, and experiential force. Aspect choreography allows the work to hold time differently.

The third chapter asks how aspect choreography can be a way of processing a kind of relational failure or impossibility that subtends the unstable irony characteristic of late 2010s internet aesthetics. It tracks how patterns of perspectival format, genre, affective, and world-orientational switches are deployed in Patrick Brice’s found-footage style comedy-horror film *Creep* (2014). The film was written collaboratively and in an improvisatory mode by Brice and Mark Duplass, who also perform the only two roles (Aaron and Josef) in the film. *Creep* cues its viewer to switch between genres (horror and comedy) as they switch what they take the images on the screen to mean, and switch from whose perspective and world they take them to hail (Aaron’s or Josef’s). Comedy-horror films have been recognized since the 1930’s, and indeed comedy and horror have a lot of structural similarities, and prove easily blendable in uncomplicated entertainment-oriented films (e.g. the *Scream* franchise). But in *Creep*, the film holds them resolutely separate and modulates the viewer between the (affectively legible) modes of receptivity and expectation they respectively cue. I argue that the film takes advantage of the simultaneous structural similarities between the genres (taking, e.g. Bergson’s theory of comedy and Noël Carroll’s theory of horror as both revolving around variously formatted realizations

that one has gotten the world wrong, or been using the wrong model of the world in some way), and uses the genres' problematic and irreconcilable (non)convergence in violence to represent, in the form of a feeling, the failure of relation between the characters as it arrives in the murder scene at the end of the film. The film's found-footage approach makes the viewer particularly aware of how they are casting the film and the diegetic world as one thing, and then another. I argue *Creep* produces a durational form capable of expressing or representing the otherwise representationally unstable void Damien R. Young identifies at the heart of "Web 2.0 irony," arising from an unlocatability of speaker, intention, and the perceived impossibility of a shared world of sense-making. I situate this problem in Brice's oeuvre, in relation to various (affect-theory inflected) theories of genre, and as it points up certain aspects of the model (or failed model) of totality that subtends his work. Aspect choreography as a way of allowing genre and affect modulation to stand for a problem of relation specific to secular economic totality.

The final chapter looks at the aspect choreography between fictive and documentarian modes of reality, or reality-as-orienting-frame construction as it plays out in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's first feature, *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). This film is and/or represents a sequence of reality-conferring framework constructions as Weerasethakul sequentially collaborates with different groups of people to develop a kind of segmented surrealist story he transmits in various media. The film documents this process, and also functions as the ground against which the collaborative, improvised narrative emerges—this happens happens as an aspect choreography; i.e. as the viewer continually reorients themselves to the images on the screen as either fictive (a story about a character named Dogfähr) or documentary (representing

late 90s Thailand). The film forces the viewer to actively and continually choose what to see its images as, and in so doing situate them within a framework of sense-making in order to continue to operate the film as a whole. The chapter situates *Mysterious Object at Noon* in relation to comparable works that engage questions of reality construction, affect, and reenactment, focusing on Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up* (1990), but also including William Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968), James Benning's *Landscape Suicide* (1987), and Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012). The chapter makes three interlocking claims: (1) that the film's structure is an aspect choreography, which (2) by choreographing the viewer between its obviously-constructed-because-contrasted realities, allows the film to provide, in its unplaceable coda, a feeling that the viewer is able to experience as *standing for* the vantagelessness of reality (as it cannot enter into representation). (3) That the way this Structuralist-inflected film modulates realities informs the figured content of Weerasethakul's later and better known work: specifically, that the characteristic way the ghosts, spirits, and supernatural forces operate in his later films is informed and prefigured by the way "realities" are structured in this early work. Aspect choreography here not only provides a novel way of conferring a mimetic charge to *feeling*, but also offers a new way of reading the career arc of a major filmmaker.

Last notes: Form and Medium

This is a project that focuses on the formal characteristics of contemporary poetry and film. It thus accompanies a resurgence of interest in studying form across various media that asks how works use form in systematic ways to produce affective force (Brinkema), how poetry uses its form to induce particular attentional states (Alford), how contemporary aesthetic categories play

out formally, and how these categories relate to and develop from the social and historical conditions in late capitalist America (Ngai), for example. This new scholarship returns to careful consideration of how form can produce meaning, but in a way that avoids the decontextualized and ahistorical formalist reading style of New Criticism et al; it considers instead how historical, social, and political structures are necessarily imbricated with the material available for shaping and perceiving [form] in any given period, in a way guided by Adorno's model as he outlines it in *Aesthetic Theory*. This dissertation's project is similar, but is centered around aspect choreography, whose structure, affordances, influences, and ramifications the dissertation describes.

In so doing it also hopes to lay out a new way of thinking experiential form across media: a kind of filmic model of poetic reading, and a new way of thinking about the poetics of meaning-making in film. It's no coincidence, I think, that Chelsey Minnis's *Baby, I Don't Care* is "about" film, that it uses the filmic context as one of the meaning-organizing "frames" it teaches its viewer to switch between, that its aspect choreography's time form looks a lot like that of a classic Hollywood plot. Minnis's book, like Philip's, I argue, are only fully available when one reads them as a time structure, in the way one might watch a film: from beginning to end. Both are books that appear to discourage such an approach: Phillip's because of its visuality and the difficulty it presents to a straight-ahead reading, Minnis's because it appears invariant throughout, at first glance. Thinking about reading through film isn't usually done: many literary critics see them as totally separate (though film critics frequently think about nearly or explicitly literary poetics—perhaps because much of film theory was influenced by structural linguistics. Perhaps because even starting with Eisenstein (who reads Milton's sequencing of action and image in *Paradise Lost*, for example, as an early form of montage poetics), poetry provided a

useful or illustrative comparative as an older time-based art form with an emphasis on jumps: helpful for thinking about montage, a new form. In any case, the still-influential medium-specificity theories of the 20th century don't encourage intermedia/synthetic models. Of course, it's certainly true that poetry and film have medium-specific affordances, discourse horizons, and histories that shape their respective legibilities. But in reading them together new ways of reading each emerge, and they have a deep commonality as media that produce self-modifying participatory expectation structures (time forms), and specifically, time forms that necessarily work with and around rupture, breakage, and jump.

CHAPTER 1
THE FLICKERING SUBJECT: LYRIC SUBJECT AS ASPECT CHOREOGRAPHY IN
CHELSEY MINNIS'S WORK

Chelsey Minnis is a contemporary US poet whose work is at once pervasively influential and easy to dismiss on initial reading. Its sensibility is often irritating, self-consciously kitsch, deeply late postmodern. Yet Barry Schwabsky considers her oeuvre one of the “most important of the new millennium,” and central to the poetics movement that Arielle Greenberg dubbed the “Gurlesque”— a movement that established many of the terms and norms still relevant to the affective and tonal experimentation that defines a large sector of contemporary US poetry. In this chapter I’ll show how Minnis’s most recent long book, *Baby, I Don’t Care* (2018), builds on the tonal, visual, and persona-based innovations of her early work toward a new form of poetic organization. I call this form “aspect choreography,” a second-order form perceptible as a rhythm or pattern of switches between well-defined frameworks of sensemaking that the book choreographs its reader to move through, over time. Aspect choreography’s perceptual and orientational affordances allow Minnis to restructure where and how the lyric subject may be constituted, recognized, and performed. This restructuring allows her to interrogate the frameworks of sense-making she uses, and simultaneously to provide a forceful and consistent way of being oriented to the text independent of any one of them. The chapter will also sketch out the ways such restructuring relates to the questions of gender, subjectivity, and meaning-making that run throughout Minnis’s work.

Here is a page from late in *Baby, I Don’t Care*:

Darling, give me fleas!
I love a poor happiness.
Yes, I do want to live in a kennel!
Now let’s teach each other something.

I'll teach you how to be sorry.

I'm going to walk around in my slip and make a structured argument.
There are lots of ways to go wrong, and I have only tried a few.
And that's why the heart is a swamp.
How do you make a million dollars worthless?
With love, baby. (Minnis, 190)

Who is this “I”? And who is this “you”? Do they remain constant? Asked differently, from what world(s) do we assume they hail, and in which framework(s) of sense-making do we place them? And when we locate these deictic shifters, what ways of organizing our own relation to the poem, and to the speaking subject(s), do we commit to? What grounds of intelligibility and relationality have we established?

The project of *Baby, I Don't Care* is, I argue, to make its reader constantly aware of how they are negotiating and answering these questions, even as they're held, by the text, in a stable orientation—the text slowly re-attunes its reader to a different way of reading and being in relation to a lyric subject. The text is a durational, relational, performance (a “choreography”) of switches in frameworks (which “aspect” the reader is recognizing), whose effect is a new way of reading and being relationally oriented.

The 246 pages of the book are all nearly identical, formally, to this one—two five-line stanzas of unrhyming endstopped lines with normal syntax. In isolation, any given page of the book sounds like a familiar kind of contemporary poem: a collection of punchy paratactic gestures that communicate an attitude, or an “I”'s orientation to the world and others. But what I'll show in this chapter is how different this same page sounds when taken within the structure of the work as a whole. And further, that the working of this perceptual shift, through aspect choreography, is the major point of the book.

I want to situate this project in relation to broader problems of how meaning and orientation are produced because I believe that Minnis works out surprising and specific answers to these questions through aspect choreography, and framing her work in this way helps show how. I'll begin this chapter by situating her work in relation to Wittgenstein's concept of aspect change, and to the poetics of his articulations of the perceptual-orientational effects of meaning-making and belief in *Philosophical Investigations*. Further, I'll show how his description of these effects connects to his concept of aspect change, which I use to articulate Minnis's central mechanism. I'll pivot from there to an analysis of Minnis's oeuvre, and show how her work develops from a baseline political and formal orientation established by the Gurlisque poetics movements of the aughts, in a way connected to the problem of frameworks. Wittgenstein's articulation of aspect change allows me to cast the framework issue more clearly, and to show how it works in Minnis's poetics. The chapter will end with an in-depth consideration of the mechanisms by which Minnis builds the ultimate form of her most recent book, *Baby, I Don't Care* (2018), and a consideration of that form—a structural equivalent of a Hollywood plot arc, a typical sonata structure, but made of aspect, and therefore framework, shifts. I argue that this work helps show new ways that orientation and recognition can work in contemporary poetics. To that end there will be 3 main sections: I) Wittgenstein, and the Problem of Frameworks, Belief, and Sense-Making Activity II) Minnis and the Gurlisque and III) *Baby, I Don't Care*.

I. Wittgenstein, and the Problem of Frameworks, Belief, and Sense-Making Activity

Chelsey Minnis's work bears a surprising formal resemblance to Wittgenstein's, specifically in the ways the poetics of *Philosophical Investigations* allows him to work out, through form, some of his arguments about the ways meaning and belief are produced in language. Both Minnis and

Wittgenstein ask their reader to relocate their sense of where and how meaning and recognition happen. For Minnis, I argue, it's about re-casting the lyric subject as a recognizable relational rhythm, rather than as a kind of transcendental subject. For (late) Wittgenstein, it's about how linguistic meaning obtains in social circulation and practice, rather than in correspondence or image-making. In both cases, there's a movement from meaning or object thought as static, to being something more like a sustained and social pattern of movement. Belief and meaning as a kind of enactment, or a movement, or a way of moving. That "belief in" something could be known as a movement, or as an impetus for movement that could only be known as the movement it produces. Belief as a "being moved"-ness.

One of the major questions Wittgenstein raises but does not definitively or propositionally answer in *Philosophical Investigations* is "what is belief," and relatedly, "what does it mean to believe something." Believing seems orientationally and affectively different than thought, though they can meet each other in language: "A sentence, and hence in another sense a thought, can be the 'expression' of belief, hope, expectation, etc. But believing is not thinking. [...] The concepts of believing, expecting, hoping, are less different in kind from one another than they are from the concept of thinking" (Wittgenstein, 160). He describes situations where belief [that a chair will bear one's weight], expectation [as the feelings one experiences watching a fuse burn towards an explosive, as awaiting someone's appearance], and hope arise, and tries to think through what it might "mean" to hope, to believe, to expect:

578. Ask yourself: What does it mean to *believe* in Goldbach's conjecture? What does this belief consist in? In a feeling of certainty as we state, hear or think the conjecture? (That would not interest us.) And what are the characteristics of this feeling? Why, I don't even know how far the feeling may be caused by the conjecture itself. Am I to say that belief is a colour tone of our thoughts? Where does this idea come from? Well, there is a tone of believing, as of doubting. I should like to ask: how does the belief engage with this conjecture? Let us look and see what are the consequences of this belief, where it takes us. "It makes me

search for a proof of the conjecture.”—**Very well; and now let us look and see what your searching really consists in! Then we shall know what believing the conjecture amounts to.** (162) (boldtext my emphasis)

In the fashion typical of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein proposes a number of possible answers to “what does it mean to believe” in multiple voices, voices whose position relative to “Wittgenstein’s real position” the reader seems asked, continually, to guess, or to project. One might even want to say (as “Wittgenstein” often does) that a belief in “Wittgenstein’s real position” or “real Wittgenstein” is what motivates movement from paragraph to paragraph, claim to claim, to sustain an activity vis à vis the text. A belief in something to be known, someplace to be gotten, someone who could be understood, is why we move, even if eventually we realize that the production of motion is perhaps our answer to where we were going, insofar as a propositionally-represented answer can be had. That we come to know *belief* as our action in the text—belief *as searching itself*, the activity of searching as revealing a belief in something to be searched for. That perhaps though belief can’t be known in the form of a proposition—that it requires a different category of knowing—the shape of the feeling may nonetheless be known in a way that feels analytically available, consistent, or orienting. (“Every sign by itself seems dead. *What* gives it life? –In use it *lives*. Is it there that it has living breath within it? –Or is the *use* its breath? (135)). Wittgenstein poses the question “Am I to say that belief is a colour tone of our thoughts?” then undermines it by appearing to change speaking-positions to ask where the reader got that idea, then offers what appears to be a weak affirmation again by changing speaker positions, marked by the “Well,” of speakerly response—this “Well” implies answering, despite the lack of formal marking of a change¹ in

¹ Change perception without obvious formal markers is something Wittgenstein is consistently interested in (e.g. 158, 162, 203)

speaker position—the reader must project a position from which each proposition is uttered, and then, upon realizing that the position can no longer be the correct one, change the projected position. The form of the text doesn't appear to change, but how the speaker relates to it, tries to move through it towards “sense,” what kind of “sense” or meaning they imagine they are moving towards, changes.

This production of awareness of change seems important for Wittgenstein's theorization of belief and meaning. In his discussion of aspect change in *Fragment xi*, and in his analysis of our [lack of] perception of ordinariness, he (seems to) point(s) out that what doesn't change or break expectation doesn't tend to rise to the threshold of perception or recognition, can't be made to mean something in experience:

600. Does everything that we do not find conspicuous make an impression of inconspicuousness? Does what is ordinary always make the *impression* of ordinariness? [...]602. Asked “Did you recognize your desk when you entered your room this morning?”—I'd no doubt say “Certainly!” And yet it would be misleading to say that any recognizing had occurred” (165).

The text makes its reader's activity of sense-making conspicuous to the reader. It does so by keeping the pieces constant (language, usually styled to appear spoken), while changing the game being played with and through them (who is speaking and what they mean to say: “Is it so surprising that I use the same expression in different games?” (197)). If, as Wittgenstein says, “the meaning of a piece is its role in the game [...]the game, one would like to say, has not only rules but also a *point [Witz]*” (158), then changing the game means changing the point. Witz can also be translated “joke” or “spirit” or “idea”—like the “point” of a game or a “belief,” these seem to be not merely cognitive, but also orienting experiential states. When you change the game (what I am calling a “framework” throughout this chapter), you change the “meaning” of

the pieces, which means making one perceive a change in their meaning. But, it is the orienting belief that the reader can “know” or can “find out” by paying attention to these changes, and by tracking what Wittgenstein says about belief, that animates the reading, the inquiry one conducts in the text, unstable and resistant to inquiry as it is. A belief in a terminal understanding is what produces inquiry, and in sustained and repetitive practice, “inquiry” starts to feel like a knowable shape, even if it lacks propositional content. (“let us look and see what your searching really consists in! Then we shall know what believing the conjecture amounts to (162))

There is often substantial space between propositions in *Philosophical Investigations*, in terms of the paratactic jumps they make and the corresponding distance in thought between them. The literal white space of the page between them physicalizes the act of meaning-making as a going-between—a traveling, a making by means of movement. The reader is made to go towards each new proposition on a micro level [down the page a few centimeters], and towards the end of the text on a macro level [flipping pages], and also to attempt to go towards understanding or *belief in having understood* [a state of mind], synthetically and through the physical material of language presented by the text. Because of this orientation towards a project [extracting propositional content], the way the text constantly requires the reader to adjust their sense of the position of the text² produces an awareness or impression of sense-making: i.e. in this constant adjustment the reader is constantly made aware of the fact that they are projecting a position from which the language issues, and to which they are in relation. Their act of trying to understand is made perceptible to them as constantly-getting-it-wrong and needing to correct. With repetition, the possible shape of the activity of trying-to-understand seems to become better

² i.e. where/who the words are coming from, how that position is to be understood relative to “truth” or the “real” position of the text, how moving through the orientation required by this current position or speaker can allow the reader to continue on their trajectory towards understanding

and better delimited. The text reattunes the reader—its form causes them to change what they are paying attention to, how they are making sense, and where they locate their ultimate orientation to the text and its ideas.

The natural comparison here, with regard to the shifts in perception necessitated by the text of the *Philosophical Investigations*, is with Wittgenstein's notion of aspect change, as articulated in *Fragment xi*, formerly Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Aspect change is the ability to see a form, and “take it as” (225) this or that—to make sense of it in this or that way. He gives numerous examples, including, most famously, a drawing that can be seen as a duck or as a rabbit (204) and an octagonal shape with alternating black and white segments, which can be taken as a black cross on a white background, or a white cross on a black background, depending on which aspect one chooses or happens to see (218). There are multiple varieties of aspect change—some requiring imagination (218), some seeming not to (218), some involving seeing organization or a patterned form arise out of what appeared to be chaos (219). Aspect change seems to have a temporal dimension in experience: “I’d like to say that what lights up here [a new aspect] lasts only as long as I am occupied with the observed object in a particular way” (221)—recalling his discussion of not recognizing ordinariness as such that I cited earlier. Aspect change, in Wittgenstein’s sense of it, is to a certain extent under the control of the will (224), but there are limits—in certain cases an aspect can’t be forced onto/into a form [e.g. (this is my example, not Wittgenstein’s) you couldn’t see a drawing of a glass “as” a stapler], and sometimes a form is clearly only one thing (he gives the example of the fact that one does not “take” cutlery “as” cutlery, it simply “is” cutlery for the viewer: they do not experience their taking-as activity (205)), or a conventional picture of a lion that the viewer would simply see as a lion (216)). The ability to see an aspect is to some extent subject to

experiential limits—“only someone *capable* of making certain applications of the figure with facility would one say that he saw it now *this* way, now *that* way” (219). That a familiarity with the rules and point of the “game” in which the thing-looked-at can be thought to be participating in is necessary in order to see it *as* a counter in that game. The game is the framework in which the object means. An example, though he does not give an example, would be, I imagine, something like the fact that one can only see the small carved wooden horse *as* a knight if one knows what chess is. He mentions several times “wanting to say” that seeing-as is a mixture of sight and thought; “[we] *see* it as we *interpret* it” (203), pointing out that what can be perceived is subject to frameworks of sense-making that the viewer can bring to bear—that a seeing-as makes recourse to a framework of sense-making. Looking ahead to Minnis, if perceiving is contingent on recourse to a framework, and we have the experience of perceiving that there is “a” lyric subject, (which I do think Minnis produces), then this perception is, if we accept Wittgenstein’s model, contingent on the existence of some consistent framework. Some ground of legibility or orientation on whose terms something can mean, arise to perception, become a subject. We might say we “go” through the sensuously-available form of the object to the framework in order to make it mean, and that what we “perceive” is the result of this activity.

A “going”-ness saturates Wittgenstein’s conception of sense-making both in how he describes sense-making as a dynamic or process, and in the character of the *Philosophical Investigations*’s metaphor systems. He frequently makes recourse to metaphors of movement to describe experiencing meaning, or to describe the relationship between perception and sense. Many of the verbs and nouns he chooses, similarly, are sedimented metaphors³ having to do

³ Words are, as various scholars including Emerson have noted, a kind of “fossil poetry”— “As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin” (Emerson 1841 “The Poet”)

with, or deriving from “to go” (gehen, gang, ging) or to “lead” (führen). One seems to “go” from a form or an inference to a sentence, an image, an action, on Wittgenstein’s model of sense-making. Describing the experience of “[h]earing a word as having this meaning“ (152) is “So phrasiert, so betont, so gehört, ist der Satz der Anfang eines **Übergangs zu diesen Sätzen, Bildern, Handlungen**” (152) [boldtext my emphasis]. In the “transition“ (“Übergang”) that links the perception („so gehört“) to the meaning, one hears the noun form “gang” of gehen (“to go”)—in English there is the movement-implying “trans” of “trans-ition.” Similarly, in other major claims about sense-making, “Ein Schluß ist der **Übergang** zu einer Behauptung” (144). Or “Wie weiß ich, daß *dieser Gedankengang* mich zu dieser Handlung **geführt** hat“ (145). „Wie **führt** man jemand **zum** Verständnis eines Gedichts, oder eines Themas?“ (152). Or „Eine Menge wohlbekannter **Pfade führen** von diesen Worten **aus in alle Richtungen**“ (151). Often understanding or orienting sense-making seems to call forth metaphors and language that point toward *going*⁴, or the escorted kind of going that being led implies (e.g. I am ‘led’ to believe, ‘towards’ an understanding, an argument ‘driving towards’ its point). Aspects, however, are described as being experienced as a “light[ing] up” (aufleuchten (217))—but the flash of the aspect seems to be produced by the *going* to a sense-making framework through the material housing of the aspect—that we can have the sense of perceiving an aspect as though it is truly in the world (like an object, perhaps in the way that a door is an object) by means of our going through it. When we have gone through it toward sense-making, the aspect⁵ passes from awareness. It no longer stands out as something at all. It loses its object character. In passing through another aspect and back to this now-disappeared aspect, it would again light up, be

⁴ this is also the case in English

⁵ (or our awareness of it *as* an aspect)

perceptible. An aspect continually available to the awareness with the enduring character we normally attribute to objects would be one which consciousness is repeatedly forced or caused to see anew as it [the aspect] was on the verge of disappearing. It would be perhaps experienced as an object of uneven “brightness,” a flickering object, to continue with the light metaphor. On such a model, a repeated way or vector-of-going, and the repeated “lighting up” of the aspect that results, might almost produce something like an ‘object,’ in terms of the stability one believes it to have. The out-and-back pattern of perceptual *going* involved, as the reader switched between frameworks, could itself be as orienting as any other kind of expectation-producing framework. Durational-rhythmic form could provide the kind of sustainable repetition this flickering object might need as a support.

But Wittgenstein does not describe this sort of durational situation in *Fragment xi*—the whole of the material object in/by/on which an aspect could be sustained is presented to awareness at once or nearly at once⁶, and the viewer can, at will, toggle between aspects. The way I described the *Philosophical Investigations* earlier—as a text which requires the reader to continually reorient themselves towards it—approximates what I’m trying to describe here. What the reader is reorienting themselves towards, however, is itself unclear and inconstant, even if they come to non-propositionally or kinaesthetically know the shape of their own inquiry activity. The “games” they are being asked to play with the “pieces” are numerous and variable—the “aspects” that light up when you “go through them” don’t limn the contours of a rhythm.

⁶ His examples are almost exclusively visual, though earlier in the *Philosophical Investigations* he gives numerous auditory examples of “hearing as” (e.g. the example I cited above, an example of hearing some bars of a church song *as* an ending), but here, like in the cases of the visual/optical toy examples, the object is perceptible at once and allows toggling.

Looking at Chelsey Minnis’s work is helpful in further elaborating how a kind of change-in-the-category-in-which-one-believes-oneself-to-know can be produced, such that a way-of-going feels knowable as an object. I want to trace a trajectory of interest in something approximating “aspect change” in her work because it will help clarify how aspect change can work in an object that is not all perceptible at once but sustains its reader in a pattern of switches between a delimited set of well-defined frameworks for meaning and orientation.

Minnis’s work often recalls the operation of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* in that it consistently thinks about about persona or an “I” position as potentially both figure and ground, as text object and as projected speaker—capable of playing either role. She casts these roles as “aspects” that bring with them specific ways of being oriented to the text. Her work frequently cues the reader to reconfigure the way they are relating to the “I” of the poems: often, if the “I” of the poems is speaking in one of Minnis’s personae, this way of speaking will be intercut with another way of speaking, which then comes to be perceived as “the figure”—a lifelikeness interjecting into what now appears to be a backdrop for its interjection, but which we had previously taken to be, itself, a figure. I think this is partially a Language poetics heritage—Minnis, like Wittgenstein, is interrogating not only what can be said, but how the conditions for what can be said are produced.

In order to better tease out how aspect change works in the nearly algorithmic, restricted palette of language formations undergirding the complex persona-work of *Baby, I Don’t Care*, I’ll track the development of Minnis’s earlier work’s thinking about the relationships between systematic language use, figure-ground relations, and persona formation as it relates to orientation and sense-making. I’ll begin with the visual-semiotic play in *Zirconia*’s proliferating ellipses and delicately modulated register, through the 68 attitudinally orienting “Prefaces” of

Bad, Bad, to the hypermodified sentiments of *Poemland*, to the ultimately minimalist, if splashy, machinery of *Baby, I Don't Care* itself.

II. Chelsey Minnis and the Gurlesque

Placing *Baby, I Don't Care* in the context of Chelsey Minnis's nearly 20-year career, and in relationship to the Gurlesque tradition it engages, helps show how this book expands the available modes of lyric character-making, and, in so doing, makes the production of character in language phenomenologically available as a kind of character, itself. Most simply: the production of character can be apprehended as a character.

Minnis is a central figure of the Gurlesque, a diffuse movement first named and characterized by poet Arielle Greenberg in the early 2000s. Greenberg characterizes the Gurlesque aesthetic as “a feminine, feminist incorporating of the grotesque and cruel with the spangled and dreamy”(Greenberg 1). She links it to Third Wave feminist thought, and with the peculiar historical moment in which many of the first Gurlesque artists were raised, a sort of ideological estuary in which, per Greenberg, traditional expectations of femininity mixed uncomfortably with, or warred with, the increasing force of feminist discourse in the 1970s. In the poetry then produced by some of the experimental women writers born in the 1960s or 70s, Greenberg identifies a consonant tension between cutesiness, seriousness, awareness of feminist theory, a fondness for glitter, trash, the vulgar, obliquity, sexual frankness, and a reappropriation of baroque sadomasochism, as modeled by feminist artists like Angela Carter and Rikki DuCornet. The name, Gurlesque, says Greenberg, is derived from three primary sources, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, burlesque theater, and the feminist punk of riot grrl. Greenberg explains the term like this:

In Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and His World*, based on the medieval carnival, he creates the term carnivalesque to talk about literature or art which, like the carnival, brings together both leaders and laypeople in one crowd, delighting them with costumes and grimy beauty and jokes; carnivalesque literature savors the grotesque, savors the action of both creation and destruction, and promotes a chaos which inverts the status quo, forcing the bourgeois to laugh at representations of themselves.

Likewise, burlesque theater is a kind of parody, a performance of femininity and sexiness where the falsity and charades become part of the act. As the strippers sing in the musical *Gypsy*, "you gotta have a gimmick": unlike other forms of sexual entertainment, in the burlesque, sensuality is turned onto itself as comedy, exaggerated, so that the performance becomes a critique of the notion of femininity itself.

Riot grrl were also interested in reinterpreting the markers of femininity through apparel and gesture. (Greenberg, 23)

The Gurlisque is a mixing of high and low culture, delight and revulsion, play and violence. The Gurlisque is also, on this model, deeply interested in the ways character or gender may be constituted (e.g. apparel, gesture, speech habits), especially through image, appearance, and performance, and in how awareness of the falsity of a character can be incorporated into the performance of that character. These poems are interested in making the artificiality of something phenomenologically available even as that "something" is itself experienced as a presence. It is like singing in two voices, with one of these voices singing the conditions of production of the other voice, and not *describing* this process, but *felt as* the process. Of course, one might argue that this is simply camp, or even more fundamentally, irony. However, it is a particularly compelling variant of these forms, to my mind, because as poetry primarily written by (predominantly white, predominantly heterosexual) female-identifying writers about experiencing or performing (predominantly conventional white) femininity, this mode allows them to perform *as* a kind of "I" the poems also critique and interrogate as a kind of trap or imposition-from-without. The form this critique takes is the affective force produced by this

intra-I diremption—it feels like a kind of sincerity or anger, at a kind of trapped-ness we infer the “I” must feel, at once split from itself and unable to be legible on other terms. That is, by showing the artificiality at the base of a gender construct by enacting and incorporating the artificiality, it inhabits the very constructed-ness of the form. In so doing, it paradoxically arrives at something that feels genuine—i.e. the truth of the form’s falseness. In the work of most Gurlisque and Gurlisque-influenced writers, even very good ones like Ariana Reines, Rachel B. Glaser, Jenny Zhang, Rebecca Wolff, or Catherine Wagner, this happens through a nuanced, multiply layered attitudinal pose of one “I” that tries to express this problem as its way of being. The issue here is that such a posture is now recognizable, is itself a form that doesn’t actually require switching frameworks. It doesn’t require co-performance or cognitive-kinaesthetic involvement from its reader, it doesn’t summon them to an awareness of how they are actively renegotiating relation and sense-making in the text. In *Baby, I Don’t Care*, Minnis makes something about this problem clearer than it is in other Gurlisque poetry: that this truth is not an object, not available propositionally, but is rather a *push to continual movement* between hard-to-reconcile ways of being oriented. A movement which, through iteration, can sometimes feel knowable, can become itself an orienting force. Minnis choreographs her readers’ frameworks of sense-making into a pattern to arrive at this new orientation. She requires a dance from any reader who wishes to actually operate the object.

I argue that part of how Minnis produces such an effect with her poems has to do with the precision with which she constructs, or cues the projection of, characters or personae. By persona I mean a consistent style of language use that suggests a subject, as Philip B. Williams does, in his 2018 essay on persona in Ai’s work. His notion of persona is also wider than this, but it’s this part I want to operate with. Persona, then, is achieved when there is a perceptible coherence and

delineated-ness that generate an experience resembling recognition. The reader perceives, and is aware that they perceive, that an “I”’s gestures are more related to each other than they to the world around them. Minnis produces personae by establishing nearly algorithmically well-delineated ways of speaking that she then ruptures with a different and equally well-delineated way of speaking. She uses these personae both as tools of rupture, and as the field to be ruptured. The demonstration of this ability to be both figure and ground, violent and violated, seems also deeply important to the work Minnis does—there is no final point of arrival, only a kind of sustained movement. Minnis’s best work does not blend or hybridize into one frame, one pose, but sustains her reader in a pattern of switches between recognizable frames she does not reconcile. Its tuned delimited-ness is also partially what makes Minnis’ operation more complex than the more general register mixing so familiar in contemporary American poetry, and more interesting than the production of an ‘authentically’ textured, but still unified, voice—one shot through with multiple influences, but behind which a singular humanoid subject may comfortably be projected. In an introductory essay to the *Gurlesque*, Lara Glenum, co-editor of the 2010 *Gurlesque* anthology, argues that what partially distinguishes the *Gurlesque* from other lyric modes is its “disavowal of persona” (Glenum 18), by which she means that there is no ultimate “face beneath the mask” (13). She insists that “*these* [Gurlesque poems] *are not persona poems*” (13—italics in the original), because “Gurlesque poets, on the contrary, assume there is no such thing as coherent identity. There is no actual self, only the performance of self [...]the use of the lyric “I” does not confess a self, but rather a raucously messy nest of conflicting desires and proclivities that can be costumed in this way or that. Disjunctions in identity are not to be worked through or resolved” (13). I agree with Glenum that Minnis, as a *Gurlesque* poet, does not expect us to project a “true” or coherent speaking “self” of the poems that aligns with a

real person in the world. But, though the term *persona* has a complex history in poetry, frequently problematic and associated with Modernist Orientalism and appropriation generally, the idea of *persona*, as a recognizably coherent set of gestures which cue the projection of a “speaker” by the reader, is central to the mechanism of Minnis’s work. I also think Glenum is right to point to the ways most all Gurlisque poets produce disjunction in their identities, but I think her consideration of “disjunctions in identity” gets stuck at “disjunction” and at the level of desires. It does seem true that desires arise partially as a consequence of what one believes to be true about the world (operating frameworks), but if desire is one of the animating forces of Minnis’s work, it isn’t the point. Minnis also shapes the disjunction, the split-ness at the heart of Gurlisque poetics, toward a relational form. Her poems stage a rethinking identity/subjectivity through cooperative, relational performance, especially in the case of *Baby, I Don’t Care’s* aspect choreography’s structure. I would suggest the following amendment to Glenum’s claim: the thing under the masks of Minnis’s *personae* poems is a rhythm.

Zirconia, Minnis’s first book published in 2001 by Fence, shows Minnis thinking about figure-ground relations most obviously, and on visual terms. *Zirconia* was reviewed by Arielle Greenberg in 2002 as distinguished by “a particularly deadpan sense of humor and an attention to childish fantasy—to Americana girlhood in place of elaborate exoticism,” and is most immediately formally remarkable for its use of ellipses. Nearly every textual unit (line? island?) is separated, not by blank space, but by dots. The ellipses recur in *Bad Bad* and *Poemland*, but in these later books it is restricted to the typical three-dot form, and reads more stably as punctuation, as indicating the way the language it marks relates to the other neighboring language on semantic or tonal terms. In *Zirconia*, by contrast, the extended ellipses can read at times as a field; often, they become almost invisible or atmospheric, a kind of gray fog out of

which text surfaces. They function as a strange, uncertainly semiotic “ground” for the “figure” of the poems. Sometimes, when only 2-6 dots occur between text islands, they read as ellipses—one imagines a voice trailing off and resuming, or a kind of weak conjunction between the terms the ellipses separate. The ellipsis fields can also read as the “ground of speech”—like a quiet spot on a recording of someone talking; the dots space the lines of the poem, but make the continued presence of “speaking” more assertively felt than a blank space does. It is a busy pause. It reminds you, continually, that speaking will resume, that it continues to be possible. One might read it as a visual kind of phatic language, in Roman Jakobson’s sense—language without semantic content, whose function is to keep the communication channel open. Their other remarkable effect is to render the line-ending period strikingly alien—when a dot occurs at the end of a sense unit at the end of a page in the collection, it is nearly impossible to subsume it either under the schema of “period,” or under the schema of “dot field element.” It sits there and shimmers, refuses to resolve in a familiar way, but is assertively present as a phenomenon. It invites you to use multiple sense-making rubrics on it, rejects all of them, accepts all of them. I think what is happening in these moments is that the formal oddness of the dot field sets up the conditions for Wittgensteinian “aspect changes” in the dot—cues us to see duck then rabbit then duck, field then figure, undifferentiated mass then shape, condition for speech then speech, image then text, and back again. In this way these dot fields strike me as an important precursor for the work Minnis does with more complex patterns of aspect change in *Baby, I Don’t Care*. Though Minnis moves away from the ellipsis field in her work after *Zirconia*, its production of a figure which is also the ground, sometimes semiotic but not semantic, sometimes semantic, sometimes a little drawing, sometimes a field, sometimes a marker of the continuation of the condition of speaking, arguably prefigures the way persona operates throughout her work. And

though *Zirconia* most clearly shows Minnis thinking visually about figure/ground questions, and constituting the phenomenological experience of an object as a movement between objects at the level of visual form (the dots), it's also present in the book's metaphor systems, and explicitly as a thematic concern. There are repeated instances of making defined forms or shapes out of amorphous masses (and or out of fields of small units), and making shapes back into masses (or heaps, in the Beckettian sense, pile of sand sense). What is the shaper and what is the shaped gets playfully reconfigured again and again, playing out at the level of thematic interest what I think ultimately becomes Minnis's central work at the level of performance in *Baby, I Don't Care*. For example:

“[...].....what is terrible!...../..[...].....is diaphanous.....and
 whatever...[...].....else I want to be....[...].....slaked..flashed.....hauled.....turned/ into a block
 of salt.....[...].....placed in front of an...[...].....elk and licked/into...
[...].....different shapes.....
[.....or
 attacked.....[.....and thrown into the.....sea.....[.....and
 tousled.....
[.....and flung.....[.....so that the wrath spills out of my
 heart.....in curls.....[.....and I
 am.....
 ...[.....lowered.....[.....onto.....[.....sand. (Minnis, 5).

Here, we see the “I” wish to be “turned/into” a block of salt (a meta-structure produced via the organization of discrete small units, like a persona from language) and placed in front of an elk, to be “licked/into” different shapes—that the “I” as a meta-structure may be reconfigured by the mouth (language site, site of interpenetration of world and animal, ground and figure) of another animal is what is wished for. And in fact, it is a sequence of changes through discrete meta-structural stopping points that is wished for: diaphanous→block of salt→new shapes. Or alternately, to be thrown into the sea (if a salt block: to dissolve) and tousled (like hair, a mass of

discrete small units like salt grains in a block), so that the “wrath” (interior condition, emotion) “spills” out “in curls.” Here, the “I” has the character of a mass of discrete subunits that can be reconfigured: in this case put into disorder and/or rendered fully exterior, which is the occasion for “wrath” spilling out (as from an interior, as a liquid, like the “sea,” the exterior in this scenario), and furthermore, spilling out with the character of organized hair. The “I” may be tousled, the “wrath” may “spill” “in curls”—in this formulation, an emotion and the “I” are both equally suitable to be treated metaphorically as “hair,” and each can take on the character of the other, or the role of figure or ground, by transit through an idea of a figure composed by organizing a mass of discrete units. Of course, this sounds like nothing so much as how Minnis’s personae operate in and through language.

Another particularly clear example of Minnis’s thinking, in *Zirconia*, through questions of formation and dissolution, figure and ground:

.....launching my molars.....into the cluster.....in order
to.....locate.....the nucleus.....
.....[...]......of the caramel with my mouth and.....maul the unformed
mass.....[...]......with my tongue.....[...].and really
lounged.....[...].in the passive leather.....
...sectional...couch...with 12 separable sections..alone.....[...].as I chew the mutable caramels.....
...[...].and clench.....my jaw.....[...].and demolish them.....
.....in the durable moments.....[...]......with a soft formation.....
.....[...]......in my mouth..... (23-4).

Here, the “I” is in the position of the elk who licks the salt the self was, able to “maul the unformed mass,” a “mutable caramel,” “with a soft formation in my mouth.” The caramel can be “demolished” by the tongue, or re-formed—a formation of caramel (a soft substance) can be made by “the soft formation in my mouth” [the tongue]. Again, figure and ground are equal, readily transformable into each other, a wish to make each thinkable or imaginable *as* the

other—(form as it is formed by another form, as forming, as formation, transformation). In the middle of this process we have a “sectional couch” with “12 separable sections..alone”—an image of an object (couch) whose formation out of discrete subunits can be dissolved, and whose dividedness and potential for reconfiguration is perceptible within the object itself, and also in its name (“sectional” couch).

Minnis’s work to create well-delimited and recognizably different ways of speaking is also present in germinal form in *Zirconia*. It’s perhaps easiest to show this by placing two sections of text (from two different poems) next to each other—their stylistic distinctness at the level of voice is readily apparent. They’re also formally distinct—in the first quote, the text is staged in an ellipsis field, and in the second it is not. I’ve preserved only line breaks in order to make the stylistic choices of the voicing clearer.

“the inhalation of the scent with the coercion/into a prominent and unwanted imprint/which/resurfaces/ in the presence of the technical stimulus/or else the nuance/to reframe you in the scenic grasses where there will be no discussion” (37)

“I am very excited about the skull ring. I didn’t know anyone would think I wanted a silver skull ring. Now, when I am rude to those who oppose me, I can just look down at the skull ring. It has ruby chips in the eyes! Ruby chips like the nasty flame in my own eyes when I am insulted or reviled. No one will dare oppose me now in my hometown. For a very long time I have avoided rings because none of them seemed right for me. A skull ring is actually a good complement to my diabolical will. Thank you very much for the skull ring” (40).

In the first quote, from a poem called “UNCUT” we have essentially one long multiclausal sense unit—it is hard to say when something is or is not a sentence because the ellipsis field makes distinctions between subunits at once more pronounced and less so. The syntax is complex, the words are highly Latinate (“inhalation” “technical” “presence” “stimulus” “discussion”), which often gives the effect of producing an abstract, academic, or technical register. This section is marked also by many low stress valleys (“of the” “with the”) between polysyllabic Latinate

words, which further diffuses the stress concentration. This is counterbalanced by a kind of gentle sibilance of a sustained “s” consonance across the passage, stopping it from sounding prosaic, despite the fact that its stress contour mimics that of, say, a biology textbook. There is an “I” in the poem, but it seems more a kind of field of consciousness from which the language surfaces—the poem does not insistently draw us back to an “I” framing. By contrast, the second passage, the entirety of a poem called, fittingly, “SKULL RING” is composed of highly repetitive shorter sentences with simple syntax. Four of its nine sentences end with the words “skull ring,” and one additional sentence begins with this phrase. Most of the Latinate words in this section, rather than providing the prosodic and diction-textural character of the language (and perhaps therefore its persona), stand out as oddities—as ruptures in the way this “I” orients language. For example, “revile” “oppose” and “diabolical” all strike me as weird tonal wobbles in this speaker’s linguistic performance—they sit awkwardly, have an effect nearly comical—they’re what make the poem interesting. I think this comedy effect happens because these word choices are inconsistent with the nearly childish language and represented thought of the rest of the poem. But, because they are handled gracefully, they have the effect of winking at the audience—their awkwardness seems deliberate and artful. They also recall the other way of speaking I remarked in “UNCUT”—they seem like odd intrusions of this persona into the field of the “SKULL RING” persona, rendering this second character a field against which they [intrusions from another mode] read as figure. Their presence cues a reconfiguration in the way we are reading the text, are relating to or projecting a voice or an “I” in it. Even in her early work, metastructures made of subunits, felt reworking/reconfiguration, mismatch of expectations, and aspect change are central for Minnis both visually and in terms of character or persona.

In *Bad Bad*, Minnis' next book, an interest in creating and then undercutting framings, or ways of being oriented, persists at multiple levels. Perhaps most strikingly it appears in the form of (no fewer than) 68 poems titled "Preface" that precede the rest of the text: a kind of meta-preface composed of discrete subunits. In these "prefaces," the "I," which at one point even seems to name itself "Chelsey" (3), describes how it thinks about poetry, itself, its relationship to a "mentor," and boredom, among other things. It playfully espouses contradictory positions ("I like disapproval" (6) "You think this poem will have a high standard.../but, like all poems, it will only be made to be approved..." (7)), and offers nearly innumerable ways of thinking about poems and poetry. Here is a representative selection:

Poetry or a poem is:

- “hardly any thing.../But it feels good like pumped syrup” (16)
- “the frou-frou of death” (5)
- “a remote electronic claw picking up a stuffed bunny rabbit...”(10)
- “like a doorknob covered in honey” (14)
- “like a retractable ceiling so all the shitty doves can fly out...”(12)
- “my horsie that I ride around...” (14)

To write poems is:

- “The tiny fake doorway of reality...” (6)
- “to see through a tiny telescope all the way to hell” (13)
- “like looking through a knothole into a velvet fuckpad” (7)
- “to have a special quality that is like swan shit on marble...”(10)

Many of these characterizations offer the kinds of pleasures and contradictory aesthetic configurations identified by Glenum and Greenberg as signature of the Gurlisque—the “frilly” or cute (e.g. “horsie,” “stuffed bunny rabbit,” “tiny” “swan” “frou-frou”) paired with the grotesque or violent (“hell” “fuckpad” “death” “shit” “remote electronic claw”). But they are also commands to see poetry or poems or being a poet *as*, or as being like, something else. They are repeated and piled up directives to try to know or see in a particular way. They are, arguably,

a kind of explicit version of the framings for perception offered by a field of dots around words, or a coherent set of speaking rules for a persona.

In *Poemland*, Minnis retains, as the title would suggest, an interest in thinking explicitly about poetry (e.g. writing a poem is “like trying to have an ungroveling feeling” (19), and a poem is “a window that looks into a swimming pool/Or an empty gun indentation in velvet.../And a baby gazelle given as a gift” (75)). But, the poems begin also to think even more directly about performativity, and about the role of behavior and appearance in constituting what something “is” or is perceived to be. For example, “Every day I behave as though I am a human being.../And it hurts me to do it.../It is egotistically exhausting!” (63). One likely hears echoes of Judith Butler’s theories of gender performativity here. Or “There is no differentiation between life and a costume party” (86). There is, in *Poemland*, a similar problem for poems and/or poetry: “This is required to look like a poem...and read like a poem.” I find these familiar and theory-ized sorts of declarations much less interesting than the kind of novel and strange forms of enactments and phenomenological/orientational slippage machineries Minnis found in the previous two books. And, in many ways, *Poemland* feels like a stepping stone to *Baby, I Don’t Care*, which is where, I think, Minnis finds a way to combine the articulated interest in problems of the performance of personhood and the refined version of the Gurlisque aesthetic that surface in *Poemland* with some of the strange and precise formal machinery developed in *Bad Bad* and *Zirconia*.

Baby, I Don’t Care borrows from, and responds to, 1930s and 40s Hollywood films. Its “I” uses a sharply restricted rhetorical and syntactical palette. The poems’ aesthetic is clearly Gurlisque-esque, or at least relatively Minnis-consistent—there are leopards/leopardskin and champagne and meat, which appear in all of Minnis’s books. There is a conjunction of the pretty

and the grotesque, but it is transposed more fully to the key of the Rolls Royce, the Hollywood swimming pool, the diamonds, the money, the sterling character, pearls. Less pink ribbon and glitter, more icy radiance. Like *Poemland*, the poems seem to follow a loose rule about lines-per-page—in *Poemland* it was only ever 4-6 lines per page, in *Baby, I Don't Care*, it is a fairly consistent pair of 5 line stanzas per page, and the book itself is divided into three major sections, like some sort of oddly repetitive three act play whose “acts” all at first appear themselves a bit three-act-play-like—all ending on something like “Goodbye” “Despair” or “Failure,” and beginning with something more like “Introductions” or “Darling.” The ellipses disappear, replaced by periods, exclamation or question marks, occasionally commas.

Baby, I Don't Care is a titanicly long contemporary poetry book at 246 pages, and the repetition produced by its limited syntax over such a span becomes one of its most striking and ultimately interesting features. For the first 30 pages I thought it was an interesting variant on Minnis's usual work but not meaningfully different. By page 75 I had realized that something very strange was happening. By page 150 I was convinced I was reading something really significant for contemporary poetry. By page 246 I was exhausted and annoyed but still amazed. In the next section, I point out how the perceptible limits of the palette work to help Minnis construct an aspect choreography. This restricted rhetorical and syntactical palette, paired with the specificity of this Golden Age Hollywood variant of the Minnis/Gurlesque objects and aesthetic, serves to make the machinery of personae production and the ability of the “I” to move between personae, between frameworks for meaning and orientation, available to experience.

III. *Baby, I Don't Care*: Warm Structuralism: Relationality, Reference, and Perceptual Form

So much of what this dissertation proposes to do is to clarify *how* Minnis makes a form out of a choreography of aspect changes and framework switches, and what effect that has. It's necessary to dwell with the mechanisms she uses in a way that reflects the arc of the work itself in order to do that.

Let's say you enter *Baby, I Don't Care* as a bookstore browser. You probably don't know that the title quotes a line from Jacques Tourneur's 1947 classic noir film *Out of the Past*, spoken by its male lead Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum) to femme fatale Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) as he tells her that he doesn't care if she has robbed her ex or not (she insists she hasn't, and in fact, she has). Or that the movie essentially charts Jeff's attempts to relate to Kathie as she continually switches sides, switches what we (and Jeff) read her *as*⁷. You probably haven't read any interviews where Minnis describes her partially found-text composition process for this book⁸; you may flip to the Acknowledgments page and notice that Minnis thanks Turner Classic Movies, but you probably don't, at least not immediately, and if you're a longstanding Minnis

⁷ I think there's an argument to be made here that Minnis is making a subtle point about the way the "I" can speak as both the femme fatale and the male lead—ultimately the "I" in this text is about a way of asking for relation that at once responds to and contributes to the structuring logic in which relational dynamics can play out, and that this "I" is the movement between the available ways of sense-making and speaking positions. The dialogue of this movie itself sounds like a Minnis poem's paratactic juxtaposition—people are cracking obviously "written" jokes in such rapid-fire fashion that the language's ability to construct a narrative world often fails. That's to say, watching/hearing this film often offers its own experience of aspect change/framework shift.

⁸ Minnis on her composition process, in a 2019 interview with Ana Cecilia Alvarez : "Something I would often go to the movies with my notebook and write in the theater. It's been a progression that's gotten more extreme. Soon, it became watching TV rather than going to the theater because I was watching Turner Movie Classics [sic]. I was always writing with the TV on. One day, I thought, "why am I even trying to interpret this? Why don't I just write the exact lines down?"

I became so engrossed and obsessed with these movies and I started, in an almost megalomaniac way, to eliminate any separation between me and these films. They were so meaningful to me. I wanted to imitate them. I didn't take any lines that were too signature, but I got the feeling of them, and then scrambled them up, and inserted my own lines. Now, I'll be watching a movie, and I will hear a line, and think, "that's a line from my poem!" (Minnis 2019)

fan, nothing in her previous work would encourage you to think somewhere between “some” and “a lot” of the book would be found language from 1930s and 40s Hollywood films Minnis watched via Turner Classic Movies. It’s not actually important that one enter the text from such a naïve perspective, but pretending that we’re doing so will help clarify the developmental, cumulative arc of Minnis’s aspect choreography—how she teaches her reader to perform the increasingly complex steps and switches in aspect over the course of the book’s 246 pages. The book’s durational structure, and that structure’s reformatting of the reader’s way of being oriented, is the point. It gives a skilled choreography or cueing of switches between sense-making or reading frameworks the character of something that can be felt as an orienter of expectations and relations, a form, a rhythmic framework. And this form is not a unified “subject” in the transcendental sense that Glenum wants to exclude when she says that Gurlesque poems are not persona poems. Rather, it is a way of moving-between, or the repeated action of moving-between well-defined sets of rules that provide perceptual space, meaning, orientation, and visibility (i.e. frameworks). This repeated movement is present in a stable and patterned form, though one which is simply not determinable or visible within one framework for meaning, intelligibility, and orientation. The “lyric subject” in this book is a kind of dance the reader must perform, whose ultimate force is to reformat or reattune the ways they [the reader] can experience or relate to a subjectivity in language. The project here is to work through how those things can be the same. Minnis does it, I argue, using four primary mechanisms, all of which pivot about the kind of aspect change I’ve described. That’s to say, the text continually, endlessly, repeatedly, and ultimately predictably, cues its viewer to recast their seeing-as, to attribute the text’s language-poses to different frameworks for meaning, whether that be “person,” “film,” “text,” “actress,” “Minnis Voice,” “Golden Era Hollywood film character,” or

“observing other party.” By “framework” I mean system of reference into which the sense data of the text can be placed, in order to generate a sense of orientation and meaning.

These four interlocking mechanisms are (1) Pivoting deictic reference planes between (a) the text and (b) an inferred filmic referent. Periodically, the text forces the reader to connect the planes. This has specific effects. (2) Pivoting who “I” and “You” are. This might be considered a subset of (1), but it’s worth considering separately, and I’ll explain why, but in short, it’s partially because additional frameworks are frequently involved. (3) Using film ekphrasis to change how the phrase unit is perceived, vis à vis its location as performed utterance (this might be considered a subset of (2) but should be considered separately, because the unit being switched between frameworks is different, and (4) irony. First I’ll give a brief account of how the book leads its reader into the correct orientation or expectational configuration, and then continue with a kind of phenomenological description, organized into sections outlining how the 4 mechanisms work and build on each other. Minnis phases them in stepwise, such that the reader learns to perform each kind of switch, and then the frequency and density of switches picks up through the middle of the text, and at the end modulates back out toward a voice not unlike the voice at the beginning, but one the reader now hears quite differently. In this way, it seems possible to say that the form of the object is a kind of arc in the x-y direction, and a superimposed waveform in the x-z direction, a sort of meta-sonata form, a Golden Era Hollywood plot arc relocated to the level of form, where “form” here means a choreography of aspects and their meaning-conferring frameworks.

Baby, I Don’t Care asks its reader to deconstruct the “lyric utterance” into its possible frameworks, and then to reconstruct it. This is almost fractally the case throughout the book. Prior to arriving at the Table of Contents, for example, the reader passes through a prefatory

series of graphic spreads: “BABY” across a two page spread, then “I” alone on the right hand page of the next spread, followed by a spread of “DON’T” then of “CARE”—like a montage/sequence of apparently disparate shots from which a viewer assembles a sense of “meaningful event” in a film, the phrase as a whole must be assembled across the cuts. Basic, but consistent with what the rest of the book will do. The Table of Contents itself appears to outline 3 arcs (Sections I, II, and III), which are more or less predictable and familiar “narrative” arcs one might encounter in a Hollywood noir like *Out of the Past*. The Table of Contents for Section I moves from a subsection called “INTRODUCTIONS” to one called “GOODBYE,” in Section II, from “DARLING” to “THE END,” and finally in Section III, “DEPRESSION” to “FAILURE.” The three sections themselves describe a kind of bell curve: a shorter beginning, a longer middle, a shorter ending. A larger structure made, like the self in *Zirconia*, out of many small subunits.

I	II	III
Introductions	Darling	Depression
Laziness	You	Rich
VIPs	Bargaining	Gentleman
Success	Business	Philosophizing
Larceny	Seduction	Showdown
Handsome	Arrangements	Iceberg
Compliments	Death	Engaged
Romance	Drinking	Love
Fun & Games	Fights	Married
Gold Digger	Threats	Greatness
Boredom	Regret	Failure
Goodbye	Threats	
	Murder	
	Nerves	
	Breakdown	
	The End	

These arcs include what seem like deadpan funny, shorthanded sub-episodes (on the basis of the subsection title sequences), like “ENGAGED” followed by “LOVE,” then “MARRIED,” then “GREATNESS,” and finally “FAILURE,” in Section III. In this simple way, the book sets up a kind of expectation of narrativity, or familiar organized event structure available as a durational movement in experience. These section and subsection names, however, in their bullet-point style sequence, are the only place where a “narrative” can be said to take place in the text, in the sense of offering itself as experience. These sections are purely thematic: one hears the word “laziness” more in the “LAZINESS” section than elsewhere in the book, for example. In no other way, however, does the text “tell” a story, unless one were to contend that to set a bucket full of the word “beginning” next to a bucket full of the words “and then” next to a bucket of “and then finally,” finishing with a bucket of “the end” is to construct a narrative. So one might say that Minnis sets up, and then deceives, an expectation of narrativity or plot. Alternatively, I might argue that the text does actually work out something like a narrative, in terms of an experiential movement whose forces (or perception-organizing vectors) cue affectual or attentional movement in a pattern like that of a narrative arc, but one not made of represented events immediately available to be perceived as content. Rather, it’s a formal intensification arc whose action consists of increasing frequency and complexity of aspect-switch choreography, and, concomitantly, reattunement.

Returning to the naïve reader conceit I began with, let’s say you had made it through the first pages and the table of contents, you enter “I” then “Introductions,” and the first page, which stages the first kind of aspect change Minnis introduces, goes like this:

Everyone knows dates and locations and things like that.
But I don't know anything like that.
Now let's have a kiss.
I can send you a bill for the poem.
It costs a meat locker full of rubies.

I'm going to do a lot of tough thinking.
You're furnishing the liquor.
Let's mess up our lives the right way.
There is something in the mind called the soul.
But we've got to beat everyone using only our good looks. (5)

The first line and the second line ask to be assembled into a meaning-producing pair: the repeated “like that” that seems to affirm that the second line shares a referent with the first (the “dates and locations and things like that”), and the contrastive “but” produces relational (comparative) meaning as the reader moves from the first to the second line, because the second line affirms that there is a contrast: “everyone” is different from “I,” on the basis of whether they do or do not “know” “thing[s] like that.” Formally they duplicate certain aspects of each other, same object, same verb (“like that” “know(s)). They complete each other semantically through a contrast formula. Great, normal language usage. No need to switch frameworks between line one and two—the rules appear to be the same, it is not a challenge to make sense, the language feels transparent. We are also reading what appears like a sort of lyric poem (a line-broken “I” pondering the differences between itself and “everyone” on the basis of what it knows or doesn't), so if we are a reader of lyric poetry who accepts any of the still influential variants of the Northrop Frye lyric-as-overheard-interior-speech⁹ model, or even the New Critical lyric-as-dramatic-monologue model¹⁰, we might well be thinking we are an audience safely behind the glass pane of the fourth wall learning about a subjectivity constructed in language as it chooses

⁹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 249-50 (reviewed Culler 98)

¹⁰ Jonathan Culler, “Reading Lyric” 98

to represent itself to itself (perhaps for our benefit). Later in the book, lines like this will appear differently to the reader—they will sound like found text—but in this moment they sound like the opening lines of a lyric poem, one in which normal semantic continuity contributes to the construction of an “I” in language, an interiority the poem grants us a kind of access to. Or something that feels like access.

But then we get the next line, “Now let’s have a kiss.” Who? “Let’s”? Is the poem talking to the reader? Is the deictic “now” referring to the unfolding “now” of the poem’s time? (Now [that we have said these first two lines]?). If so, does that mean that the poem is inviting the reader for a...kiss? (and what would that even mean). Or, is the poem summoning an invisible addressee whose presence we didn’t at first assume from the first two lines? (the “now” referring to the shared time of that addressee and the “I”?). In either case, the reader must reconfigure how they had cast the first two lines, and how they had presumed the poem to be situating itself. Either they may remain an audience member, watching a play from behind the fourth wall, but now not a “lyric poem,” rather a theatrical play where there are multiple characters, language circulating between them. The poem becomes a kind of stage, rather than a representation of a consciousness. Or, the reader may see themselves as addressed by the text, its “thou.” Like the duck/rabbit drawing, if the reader first saw “duck,” let’s say, they are being rather forcefully cued to now see either “rabbit” or say “rabbit B.” The poem cues this change by dropping a line whose insistence on a “now,” and an I-thou inaugurating “let’s” requires the reader to become aware of how and to what/whom they are assigning the referents of this “now” and this “let’s.” That’s to say, they must choose a framework, quickly and intuitively, into which to place these language objects, in order to make them “mean,” in order to go through them to anywhere at all. Further, the non-obviousness of the “right” choice, but the delimited set of possibilities, makes

the activity of “assigning” a framework itself quite perceptible to the reader as they do the assigning. Especially when they are faced with similar choices again and again over hundreds of nearly identical pages.

These kinds of switches happen at almost every line of the poem, and this mechanism, requiring the reader to assign deictics’ frameworks of reference by means of forcefully relational or hailing statements, is one of the major tools of the book (one of the four I mentioned earlier). Of the text’s 1,430 lines (most of which are freestanding, endstopped sentences), 780 (55%) are hailing gestures, or gestures that instantiate a relational space—things like questions, invitations, requests, commands, threats, recognitions, concessions, insults or apologies. E.g “Oh, it’s you.” (83), “You again” (205), “I guess you think I’m dumb”(187), “I want you to give me a positive feeling”(59), “Now, I really like your eyes when they look at me with that look” (83), “Let’s be very nice to one another until one of us can’t stand it” (49), “What will you do now?” (45), etc.) These sorts of statements are common in contemporary poetry, but I can’t stress enough that what distinguishes Minnis’s deployment of them in this book is how systematically and consistently they are used to cue framework switches. It’s also an important part of how the book attends to the “make the reader care enough to stay in its reattuning exercise” imperative—the reader is constantly maybe-summoned, maybe-haranged, maybe-addressed. The book continually asks you to think about whether it is making eye contact or not. It’s hard not to care about eye contact¹¹.

¹¹ One more quick note on how this book’s work on sustaining its reader in co-presence is handled, and how essential it is to the book’s choreographic re-attunement work. Nicolas Bourriaud pointed, in the field-making *Relational Aesthetics*, to the ways the relational artwork happening in the 1980s and 90s reconfigured the possibilities for thinking political work through form, asking “What does a form become when it is plunged into the dimension of dialogue? What is a form that is essentially relational?” (Bourriaud, 21). He argued that relational artworks required a rethinking of what form and material could be (i.e. relational) (ibid.), and argued for this new form’s potential to modify participants’ self-understanding and relation to others by creating intersubjective experiential spaces where “a set of tasks [are] carried out beside or beneath the real economic system, so as to

Baby, I Don't Care forces its reader to think about how their participation in the work is constituting the "I" of the poems. It cues its the reader think of the text as a performed intersubjectivity, that they bring into a being with a patient, repeated, stitching of aspect changes—a choreography. *Baby, I Don't Care* works aggressively to inaugurate a relational space, as much as is possible in a written text, I would argue—a relational space the reader brings to liveliness, and whose terms structure the "I" of the poems. Many of its other gestural and thematic concerns—the funny, the ironizing, the twisted cliché, the surprisingly profound, the sexual, speed—are cheap but effective levers that facilitate access to the poem. They mobilize forms its audience has been trained, by the world, to attend to, and then uses them to reconfigure how the audience understands subjectivity in a post-postmodern context. That is, to understand a subject, via language, as a characteristic relational choreography between legible/familiar ways of being (frameworks), rather than an as an object (legible within one framework).

One might argue that Language poetics does something similar—that it defamiliarizes language in order to make its readers able to operate differently within it, or to set them free(r) of the ideological constraints embedded in language/convention syntactically. Likewise William Burroughs, who, via the machinic operations of the cutup, re-assembled language by quasi-

patiently restitch the social fabric" (36), in the recognition that "nothing is possible without a far reaching ecological transformation of subjectivities, without an awareness of the various forms of founding interdependence of subjectivity" (83). Relational aesthetics, on Bourriaud's model, was interested in producing a kind of "conviviality" that could reacquaint participants with the essential interdependence of their subjectivities, in a way that might help them be in the world differently. While Bourriaud's work has been rightly critiqued for its failure to attend to how historically sedimented oppressions still acting along lines of gender, race, class, and ethnicity meaningfully inform (and limit) material possibilities of relation, nonetheless Bourriaud's core insight remains useful here—that being sustained in a relational space whose rules are different from the rules of the world might be a way of changing how people see and experience themselves and each other. While, of course, Minnis's book is a poetry book, not a Thai dinner served in an art gallery, and while, of course, one might question how much eating a Thai dinner served in an art gallery really does change anything, I think what her work here does that differs meaningfully from most contemporary US poetry is *insist*, forcefully, obviously, and repeatedly, on the ways the reader is re-performing and relationally co-constituting the "I" of the poems.

chance operation, avoiding writing linearly along the limiting channels he intuited but couldn't see directly, those pre-inscribed by the ideological frameworks language can't help but transmit. But where both Language poetics and Burroughs fail to do something beyond defamiliarization, a "throwing out," is that they don't really provide a way to be "in" their worlds. They don't make an orienting structure that is experientially available, consistent, inhabitable. They point toward "a beyond," and perhaps create a diffuse atmosphericity, or a garbled narrative, or at best an attentiveness to language's material/historical/etymological harmonics toward associative clusters stabilized by repetition. They "represent" these things, or use them as a shunt out, they do not summon their readers to wholeheartedly inhabit them, or be in consistent relation with them. Here again I return to the competing imperatives reattuning artworks must balance: (1) speak wholly another language (2) help people be in it. Minnis's insight here is to mobilize familiar frameworks, insistent relationality, performativity, humor, quasi-algorithmic but affectively charged repetition, and surface directness, all of which facilitate experiential availability (a hallucinatory "conviviality"), and then changing the reading plane. That's to say, the reader is either clearly oriented within *a* framework, or experiencing the brief and eventually familiar shocks of shunts to one of a well-defined set of other frameworks. Rather than trying loosely to make a new framework or get out of the old ones via mess and destabilization, Minnis teaches her reader to read movements between existing frameworks, to know them the way they know a bassline, a simple rhythm, with the attention or reading apparatus as a kind of disembodied dancer.

So that's the first kind of "framework switch" Minnis's deictic flex teaches its reader to perform: whether the reader decides if the "I" is speaking "to" them or not (and therefore what the poem is). That's the "setup" part of the plot arc¹².

Next Minnis introduces the second major kind of aspect/framework switching mechanism: making the reader see "classic Hollywood film," as "source for the text," and as a framework which brings with it also a number of other possibilities for aspect switches. This introduction of the filmic reference element makes the text change from "written language" to "found and assembled fragments," or, by analogy with visual art, from a painting to a collage. The collaged fragments can cooperate to produce a recognizable image that has nothing to do with their sources, of course (seeing the collage *as* representation of, say, a bottle of Suze on a

¹² There's another, arguably more important one that becomes increasingly apparent as one continues to move through this text. And that has to do with what the language is, who is speaking through it, how, and from where. A framework switch between taking the text to be participating in an unseen filmic narrative world (the one from which the reader presumes it to be drawn), and taking it as participating in the *poem*, with the poem as its meaning-conferring framework. In the early part of the book, in "Introductions," say, there are relatively few lines that are unambiguously found text. The "different era" odor is faint. And especially if one is familiar with Minnis's previous work, the stylized petulance & general babyish bad attitude is familiar/consistent enough that it's easy enough to just feel that something is perhaps a bit strange and restricted about the "style," in a not-immediately-identifiable way. One could well read through almost this whole first section without suspecting that Minnis is pulling text from classic Hollywood films—I did, the first time I read this book, for example. This is important because in a certain way, Minnis is introducing, in "Introductions," a one-framework version of the voice the reader will later come to know as a shunting between frameworks, a rhythm of well-defined aspectual switches. We get to think there is an "I" who is in one organizing logic, uttering these statements. What makes "Introductions" keep its "I" in one framework? What's markedly different in that first section from most of the rest of the sections, until the end, is the decreased usage of "Darling" and "Baby," increased frequency of the words "poem" or "poetry" or references to "writing" that staple the reader's sense of "where" to "the poem," syntax still imaginably usable in the work's 2018 USA context, and fewer period props, among other things. Minnis also uses more of the generic, multi-era or fantastical Gurlisque poetics objects: "rubies (5)," "hungry tigress(6)," "leopard sweat(9)," "meat locker(5)"—these sorts of things might show up in any of Minnis's books (or those of any other aughts Gurlisque poet), and chime with, for example, the "swan shit on marble" and "velvet fuckpad" from *Poemland*. Similarly "But we have to beat everyone using only our good looks" (*Baby, I Don't Care*, 5) chimes strongly with "A woman is cry-hustling a man & it is very fun [...]Because no one will agree to any of your reasonable statements...[...]Then you just have to break down and cry-hustle" (*Poemland*, 85). These sorts of ironized-but-serious(?)—but-still-campy performances of a hyperfeminized gender position in stylized language are familiar enough to Minnis's readers—it's not hard to just assimilate *Baby, I Don't Care*'s persona work to this thread in Minnis's oeuvre at first. Mostly, in "Introductions," the reader is reckoning with the "is this a lyric? or theatrical? and in either case is it talking to me?" series of re-negotiations and aspect switches. That's to say, the text introduces its aspect switches and frameworks stepwise.

table), but they bring with them material and contextual traces whose specificity holds whatever image they form always in the possibility of being seen, easily, as its parts (say, as newspaper, or, as environing speech). The found text component also introduces various other potential kinds of speakers—the (kind of) character from the film who might have spoken the line, the actress or actor playing that character, screenwriters, etc. And indeed many Golden Era Hollywood scripts are themselves collaborative polyvocal collage objects in a certain sense; as film historian Thomas Schatz notes in *The Genius of the System*, every script from the 30s and 40s had no fewer than four screenwriters, even if only one is credited. But how does the text cue this next form of switching? Eventually, the reader begins to notice a certain dusty grandeur to the syntax, recognizably 30s/40s gestural elements, a certain periodicity of the objects. I think I first began to suspect the text might have a found text component in the second section, at the line “Mother was a famous bareback rider and Father was a pool shark.” (13). A “pool shark”? Capitalizing “Mother” and “Father”? Quickly followed by “Someday, I’ll be taken to jail in my tennis shorts”(ibid). “Tennis shorts”? “taken” to jail? Minnis does like to reference objects that one could well imagine in a 30s/40s Turner Classic movie in her earlier work—“mirrored closet,”(*Poemland*, 62) and “tremblant brooch” (67) for example—but the network of objects in her previous work is thoroughly blended of old and new, luxurious and shabby, high theoretical and crassly quotidian, machinic and bodily: “this is crap coming toward you on a conveyor belt” (65) a “subversive baby”(67) calmly cohabituate with these other objects and phrases that could live in a 30s/40s film. But what’s different in *Baby, I Don’t Care* is a kind of disciplined simplification. Instead of producing an improbable but well-blended synthesis (one framework) of outrageously different registers and types of objects, like she does in *Poemland*, and which is standard enough practice in contemporary American poetics, in *Baby, I Don’t Care*, Minnis

establishes several consistent and well-defined frameworks that she does not blend; she holds them apart, and requires the reader to switch between them. I would identify the frameworks that begin to be introduced in the second section as something like (a) Actress (b) Film observer (c) 30s/40s Film (d) 2018 Poem (e) Movie Character (f) Minnis Voice (g) Poem as film. If the periodicity of the objects and diction are one initial cue to switch frameworks, it's also usefully clarifying to track how "Now" begins to sound—Minnis uses the word "Now" more than 50 times in the text, usually as a line opener. I glossed that "now" in the third line of the book earlier as offering two possibilities, which offered multiple options in terms of temporality and stage (Now of the poem's time, Now of an overseen theatrical time). I glossed it only these ways because I was reading the book as a naïve reader, i.e. one assuming that the book was "written" word by word out of the language available in 2017-2018 when it was composed. But, partially by dint of repetition the "Now" eventually comes to sound like the locutionary phatic gesture (like the French "or") that has largely passed out of contemporary speech—the one that simply offers a kind of relational pose. It's the "Now see here" now, like the "well" of "Well, let me see," or the Wittgensteinian "Well" discussed earlier, that signaled a switch in speaker position. Like the explicitly temporally referential "now," the phatic now also insists on a present-ness, but in the relational sense; a present affirmed by the speaker's gesturing toward a listener, who is present to them. Some examples are clarifying:

"Now let's have a kiss" (5)

"Now let me introduce you to a hungry tigress, me" (6)

"Now let's be reasonable with ourselves" (7)

"Now don't be charming, darling" (8)

"Now let me send myself some flowers" (13)

"Now go ahead and scamper away" (27)

"Now, please don't underreact" (37)

"Now let me think it over" (59)

"Now don't get mad, baby!" (63)

"Now, don't kiss my forehead again./Now, dole out some pearls" (66)

“Now, that’s a fancy name for murder” (75)
 “Now even though we’re a couple of rats, I think we’re marvelous” (76)
 “Now, I really like your eyes when they look at me with that look” (83)
 “Now don’t be a killjoy” (89)
 “Now fix me a drink” (90)
 “Now pull the venetian blinds and we’ll talk” (96)
 “Now, I might be strictly ornamental” (98)
 “Now let’s get ritzy” (102)
 “Now, don’t fog up your reading glasses” (108)
 “Now is the time to get soberer and soberer” (120)
 “Now, this is a reckless waiting” (122)
 “Now look here, I feel swell” (125)
 “Now it’s time for everyone to get their drink poured” (126)
 “Now, that should have been the first thing you said” (126)
 “Now, let’s crawl out of the cocktail lounge” (128)
 “Now, let’s have some yelling” (132)
 “Now I’m going to stay dumb” (133)
 “Now, a lot of people don’t know what I’m talking about” (133)
 “Now I’m going to measure you for a suit” (137)
 “Now I’m going to open the shades” (144)
 “Now we are getting somewhere” (145)
 “Now, don’t frown”
 “And now, let me begin 77 sunsets without you” (162)
 “Now what’s the most important thing in the world again?” (163)
 “Now we’re going down to the bottom to see if we like it” (164)
 “Now you’ve made me lose a good day’s sleep” (183)
 “Now stop throwing chairs” (187)
 “Now let’s teach each other something” (190)
 “Now let’s just happen to fall in love” (194)
 “Now I *have* shocked you” (195)
 “Now, when he blinks it really means something” (199)
 “Now can’t you try that?” (199)
 “Now, take your spoonful of champagne” (230)
 “Now, order me a sirloin steak for two” (231)
 “Now don’t start trembling without me” (239)

As is hopefully obvious even in these decontextualized lines, *Baby, I Don’t Care* is using “now” in multiple modes. Rereading the “Now let’s have a kiss” of the first page after having read the rest of the book, the possibility of hearing the line in the voice of a 30s/40s film actress/character occurs as forcefully, if not more forcefully, than the possibility of hearing the “Now” in Minnis Voice does, where the potential meanings/aspects on offer seemed like a “now” of a theatrical stage or a “now” of the poem itself. But looking at a particular one of these “now” examples is

especially helpful in clarifying how the “foundness” of the film text cues aspect switches. On a relatively early page that ends the 10th section of part I, “Gold Digger,” we get this:

Now, don't kiss my forehead again.
Now, dole out some pearls.
Come over and drag me around because I like it.
But if you really love me,
You're dropping diamonds from your crop duster. (66)

One of the strategies Minnis uses here is the machinic repetition of the “Now,” line opener, which is a marked and consistent element of the text generally. It's quite difficult to hear those two lines as spoken in one voice as such: the loud structural repetition underlines the cut-and-paste quality of the text. Often, aspect switching is a reaction to a failure of a given framework to continue to make the text “mean,” or when the fit between a new aspect of a read element and a different framework suggests itself as more correct than the fit between the aspect type one had been using and the framework in which one had been situating it. For example, here, the reader might have been going along through the preceding pages of the section reading the text's statements as a series of attitudes or poses an “I” is using to express itself, like a gestural standup comic. But, when the double “Now” occurs, so too does an effect like the Bergsonian comic—the machinery of what we had previously taken to be lifelike shows through, and the effect is the same kind of amusing and momentary disorientation Bergson thinks is produced by pratfalls and puns. We might see the Bergsonian funny as a form of unexpected push toward aspect switch—we had taken the body *as* life-form, fluid, expressive of a person and their will. Then, when the body suddenly topples, miscalculates its steps, slips like a clumsy robot, we must see it *as* imperfect machine, given to error, discontinuous, not something through which we can access a (liberal) notion of “person.” The body is a kind of sign in this model—the viewer must switch

out the “framework” they had been using to make it “mean” (e.g. “person” vs “machine/tool”) in order to continue to operate in a way where the world makes sense. In this way *Baby, I Don’t Care*’s “I” is also mimetic of how a perceived body may be read in theater; if something goes wrong, or a serious injury or stutter or awkwardness is produced, we perceive the actor through the character. It’s also true in a basic animal way that sometimes it’s necessary to switch aspects to maintain one’s ability to correctly predict the behavior of one’s environment and interaction partners. In a sense this is what the feeling of irony is, the general fourth mechanism of Minnis’s text—one must discard the “intentional framework” and its presumed uttering subject, in which the surface meaning of a phrase would “mean” (i.e. switch out of that framework), and instead place the line within an intentional framework (a different uttering subject or position) behind the surface one, a negative imprint in a sense¹³. A framework where one sees the negative aspect of the line, an aspect switch. Framework switch is also akin to the Deweyan aesthetic moment—in *Art as Experience*, Dewey roots his account of aesthetic experience in the moment when a creature must renegotiate its terms with its environment (switch its framework, so to speak). For Dewey, this is a moment of heightened intensity, because of the vulnerability it entails—to be out of touch with one’s environment is to perish, and renegotiation is necessarily discomfiting. For Dewey, art is a machine for producing this kind of experiential force, in a way that replicates for its reader/viewer a version of the renegotiation its creator experienced. I would argue that this is the engine of Minnis’s text, one she isolates and repeats toward a pattern—that through texts like this it becomes possible to see the kinship between the environmental terms-renegotiation mechanism Dewey describes, the aspect switch in Wittgenstein, and the Bergsonian form of humor. All are felt switches in the framework applied to sense data, in order to make it mean, be

¹³ I’m using Wayne Booth’s notion of irony as he articulates it in *A Rhetoric of Irony*, here.

useful, or help orient the viewer/reader. So here, if we'd been reading the gestural utterances in Minnis's text as a kind of aggressive but funny comedian or performance artist, say a coyer Karen Finley standing on a stage in front of us, with the second "Now" it is as though "Karen Finley" glitches and repeats, and we realize we're watching not *the* Karen Finley, but a projected supercut of Karen Finley videos where she says the word "I." The terms of the world shift.

Here's another, similar example—note the two "Well," line openers in the first stanza:

Are you going to be vexed with me?
Well, let me have it on credit.
Well, my loneliness might come round to visit.
Aren't you going to ask me down for the week-end?
I could always use an extra man.

Why don't you give me some refreshing diamonds?
We're a fine couple of tramps. So what?
Let's get dressed up and stay home.
You can't do a thing to me. Not a thing.
It's a very slow getaway, darling. (115)

The machinic awkwardness of the repeated line-opening "Well,"s in the first stanza, like the double "Now," openers of (66) points to the assemblage character of the language. The "Well," repetition produces the assembly-act as a kind of figure against the ground of the continuity of the speaking "I"—the machinery is made visible, and cues us to reorient ourselves towards the text, to cast it differently. Though we know that most of the lines in the book have only a kind of paratactic relation to one another in the first place, or a relation through a persona, when Minnis forces the reader to think about lines *as* found text originally written or spoken in response to some other context, that "imagined other context" becomes one of the meaning-conferring frameworks available to the phrase or sentence unit. The aspect switch here is not only a toggle between whether the phrase or sentence comes from "the poem" or "a film," but whether the

compositional unit is the word or the phrase. As in, is the text written in words, or is the text collaged from preexisting phrase-sized units—written in phrases, if you will. Minnis choreographs her reader through passages of varying aspect change density. At times it is easy to stop toggling, and to proceed through them as through a kind of atmosphere, a field continuity, in a way that recalls the supercut, atmospheric/non-narrative character of Joseph Cornell’s seminal film *Rose Hobart*, in which we are anchored to a sense of continuity, arguably, by the blue filter over the image, and by the body of the actress Rose Hobart and her character in the source film, *East of Borneo*. We perceive the character as a character because of a persistent look, aesthetic, gesture set, recognizable form, not because we follow their story and learn about the history of their life. Or, we only learn about the history of their life insofar as it is sedimented in, and gives shape to, their gestures.

This “machinery error” is, I think, in general one of the major operations of the text. On nearly every page, a line begins with “Now,” (e.g. “Now let’s have a fight while I brush my hair” (50), “Now come back from the war and kiss me” (27)), and/or “Let’s (e.g. “Let’s get in the same racket” (31)), and/or “So,” (“So, why don’t you sit next to me?” (43)), or “Don’t be” (“Don’t be so terrific!” (55), “Don’t be such a sterling character, darling” (101)), or “Well,” as in the p.115 example, among other kinds of address-hinges. They become marked as such; they feel like an ordering logic or a boundary, or like an AI attempting to be human. There’s a rigidity to the way speech works that can produce a kind of Bergsonian humor, but mostly produces the effect of cueing reorientation. And, by page 75, what I realized was that the reorientation-cueing was part of what I was experiencing *as* character. This is a kind of rising action in the plot form. There is more to this aspect switch mechanism (film vs text) than just the phrase opening repetition or mechanical quality. As in “SKULL RING” from *Zirconia*, Minnis’s attentiveness to

the periodicity (historical material specificity) of her language is what allows her to construct a robust sense of a coherent gesture set, or persona. For example, returning to the first stanza of the quote from (115):

Are you going to be vexed with me?
Well, let me have it on credit.
Well, my loneliness might come round to visit.
Aren't you going to ask me down for the week-end?
I could always use an extra man.

Here, as for most of *Baby, I Don't Care*, it feels natural to imagine the utterances of the “I” in a Transatlantic accent. The diamonds and other ‘period props’ are far less responsible for this than are the tiny peculiarities of phrasing and diction that mark the language as Golden Age Hollywood film speech. Minnis’s mimicry is often extremely accurate—while some of the language is borrowed directly, some of it is a convincing fabrication. There are any number of peculiarly Classical Hollywood phrasings, postures, and syntax choices, here. There’s a kind of stilted dusty grandeur that is, simultaneously, trying to be casual in “Aren’t you going to ask me down for the week-end”—from the hyphenated week-end, to the implication, with “down” that there is some nice place one might go, elsewhere, (like a vacation home to the south on a beach), for an offhandedly elegant stay, to the elided “to come” in the “ask me [to come] down” that a contemporary phrasing might retain. There is, further, a pert coyness to that “aren’t you,” as though the “I” is not-very-secretly inviting themselves, but by the simulatedly indirect means of asking if the “you” is going to invite them, which is in keeping with the kinds of characters actresses in these films often played. In keeping with the models of feminine subjectivity available at that time. Similarly, it is often difficult to tell whether the relational gestures are commands, questions, or invitations throughout the text—a period style of obliquely forceful and

coy femininity. The temporally/place/class-specific “Darling” address-form that ends this page occurs over 60 times in the text. And this is just one page: Minnis’s ability to imitate formal nuances makes the found text nearly indistinguishable from the “written” text, and by the middle of the book, it is easy to imagine more or less every single line to be sourced from a Turner Classic Movie. This sense arrives for me around page 75, and continues until around page 190, when the third swivel axis arrives, and with it, a kind of “climactic” section.

Once the reader has arrived at this possibility of supercut/found text, it becomes possible to notice the third type of aspect switching: between performance and representation, or what I called, earlier, a pivot to “film ekphrasis.” That’s to say, most of the time the language is inhabiting a present tense/time it is also constituting. The relationality and the insistence on “now” help reinforce the present-ness, in both senses. Even when the reader casts a given phrase *as* sourced from a film, whose present-tense of performance is/was elsewhere, the text’s re-animation of that phrase through re-performance still situates it within the experiential present of Minnis’s poem’s performance. Like being possessed. But the introduction of the filmic ekphrasis component changes the temporal framework in which the reader must cast the text: a new kind of aspect change. Some examples will help clarify.

[...]

Darling, why don’t we share adjoining rooms?
Let’s get stewed to the eyeballs.
Now let’s have a fight while I brush my hair.
Can you be trusted?
So why don’t you come over to our table and introduce yourself? (50)

“Now let’s have a fight while I brush my hair” is odd: a “fight” isn’t usually something one invites/commands another party to in this intentional way that suggests a shared understanding (more commonly, it seems to happen *to* one, marks a failure of shared understanding), and this

failure to match cues aspect change—it seems more natural to read this sentence instead as filmic ekphrasis—that someone has watched a scene where two characters have a fight while one of them brushes their hair, and rendered this experience in the language in which the hair-brushing character would speak—it inserts a reconstitutive, or alternative, temporal framework into the way one reads the text. Or here:

[...]

Now let's be depressed in oversized sunglasses.

It's the only fun we have

I see you have the appearance of a wife stealer.

Let's not be broke!

Let's hate each other with our minds, not our bodies! (182)

“Now let's be depressed” has an intentionality attribution-oddness like the “Now let's have a fight” line, and, perhaps more importantly, the diction choice “oversized sunglasses” is slightly wrong to be of the 30s and 40s— “oversized sunglasses” is a much more recently standardized compound noun. In the hands of a less precise and intentional language sensibility, it would not be worth noticing, but in this work it produces a real shiver. To my sense, what this particular “wrongness” does is to make the reader suddenly imagine, as in the “while I brush my hair” moment above, a contemporary film *viewer* describing via imitative performance what they observe a film character to be doing. Similarly:

I'm going to gesture with a turkey leg while I argue during dinner (164)

I'm going to walk around in my silk slip and make a structured argument (190)

Now let's stare at the pinball machines sadly (196)

I'll yell at you while I take a bath (225)

In all these examples, something doesn't quite fit when they are taken as anything other than a kind of imitative performance-as-ekphrastic-description-or-re-narration. When the reader hears them as such, the temporal framework in which the phrase takes meaning is “viewer's

experience/time.” This time is different from the time of the film, from the time of the poem, from the timeless time of the Minnis Voice idiolect of attitudes. These examples are all from the second half of the book, and most from the last third which is where this third aspect change type happens the most. As I mentioned earlier, the book phases its switch types in gradually. In the final third of the book, the “climactic” section, all of the types of aspect switching have been introduced, and the reader has effectively come to recognize the character or the speaking “subject” of the poems as the choreography between the frameworks, a dance which the trained viewer is now also performing. The same way Minnis performs a kind of empathetic attunement of some of her poems’ “I”s to the performances of these Turner Classic Movie characters and actresses, the reader is re-attuned (in their experiential thinking of language subjectivity) through the relational performance they are required to perform in order to continue to constitute the speaking subject of the poems.

Part of what that feels like is coming to recognize or feel the hinges between the statements as the locus of personality performance more so than the statements themselves. Each hinge type is a kind of recognizable gesture. For example (numbering added for clarity):

- [1] Darling, give me fleas!
- [2] I love a poor happiness.
- [3] Yes, I do want to live in a kennel!
- [4] Now let’s teach each other something.
- [5] I’ll teach you how to be sorry.

- [6] I’m going to walk around in my slip and make a structured argument.
- [7] There are lots of ways to go wrong, and I have only tried a few.
- [8] And that’s why the heart is a swamp.
- [9] How do you make a million dollars worthless?
- [10] With love, baby. (190)

These two stanzas comprise the last page of the “RICH” section of III, which happens when the viewer is quite familiar with the three major framework and aspect shift modalities and therefore

recognizes each kind when it happens. If I were to quickly characterize what all is happening on this page, I'd say line 1 sounds like found text, so does line 2, and sourced from somewhere else than the immediate context of 1. Yoking them toward responding to each other is a familiar kind of collage mode, but nonetheless when 2 arrives, it requires the reader to see the lines as responding to each other, which switches the framework in which they mean from "film" to "poem." 2 explains why 1 has been uttered ([1] Darling, give me fleas!/[2]I love a poor happiness.).

Line 3 ([3] Yes, I do want to live in a kennel!) calls back to line 1 through its objects (fleas, kennel) and both elides and suggests a third party (either the reader or an imagined co-performer), who has presumably wondered or asked if 1+2 means the "I" would like to live in a kennel—the reader must either see themselves hailed by the poem, or imagine a stage where this exchange occurred: this is also a framework and therefore aspect switch.

Line 4, ([4] Now let's teach each other something) is a disruption that at once establishes that something has happened before the "now" that begins the line, or simply hails (now, let's), and in either case insists on the present time of the poem. OR, if the reader has taken line 3 to establish the presence of a stage with an unheard third party who asked about the kennel, they may continue in that framework through the end of this stanza. If they haven't, lines 4 and 5 function like 1 and 2 in the type of collaged-fragment-yoking aspect switch they perform, pivoting around "teaching each other something." ([4] Now let's teach each other something/[5]I'll teach you how to be sorry).

Regardless of which of these paths the reader has taken through the end of stanza 1, in stanza 2 they are forced to switch again—the first line of stanza 2 is one of the "film ekphrasis" lines—the reader must switch the framework to that of a film viewer ([6]I'm going to walk

around in my slip and make a structured argument). The construction of the line and the grammatical tense remain the same as the others, but the reader must see a different *aspect* of the sentence, and in so doing place it in a different framework for meaning and orientation.

The 7th line is less clear to me ([7] There are lots of ways to go wrong, and I have only tried a few), but I tend to gloss it as either found text again or Minnis Voice, either case requiring me to switch how I am seeing the “I”—no longer a film viewer performing their empathic ekphrastic description of another entity’s behavior in the “I” suit.

Line 8, ([8]And that’s why the heart is a swamp) requires the viewer to pivot the deictic “that’s why” from referring to an unknown but imagined and presumably explanatory preceding speech act or event in a film, to referring to or being explained by line 7; that the “I” has only tried a few of the ways to go wrong.

The pivot to line 9, ([9] How do you make a million dollars worthless?), functions like the line 3 to line 4 aspect switch: the question form, in its relational hailing, functions like the “Now”—in that it establishes an I-thou relation with the reader, and makes that participatory framework the one in which the line “means.” And then finally, another presumed found-text line answers line 9 ([10] With love, baby) that either cues a switch to seeing the line as situated in a performance space between the “I” of the poems and an unseen third party (pushed this direction somewhat by “baby”), or suggests that the reader has answered, or has failed to. So this page has all 4 major kinds of switches I’ve described, and those switches have come at this point in the book to be felt as gestures themselves. They are interframework gestures, assignable to no one framework, because even if one were to say “but the poem,” the poem actually *does not make sense* if one holds any of its deictics’ referents constant, and so there cannot be one spatially-conceived framework for meaning and orientation.

After page 201, which we might mark as the beginning of the “denouement” phase, the text starts to slowly sound more like it did in the beginning—more references to “poem(s)” or “poetry,” fewer period props, more ambiguously located syntax, fewer shifts, more Minnis Voice. But the difference is that the reader is now listening for every glitch, feels every smaller switch as a kind of “recognition” of the “I” of the poems—that’s what the “I” is—a gestural set made of interframework switches of specific kinds, which the reader has co-performed and brought, thereby, into being. A relational and perceptual re-attuning, shaped like a plot arc in the x-y directions, with a through-stitching waveform dampening in the z direction. A lyric subject constituted by the reader through collaborative re-performance, much as Minnis is doing for the various “I”s of her text. That’s to say, the reader comes to know the time-form of the text as a re-attunement of their own sense of what and how they recognize the organizing subject of the poems, and what it is that can count as a subject, for them (i.e. now, a cognitive-perceptual rhythm). In reworking the possible grounds against which a lyric subject can become legible, Minnis’s long poem, much like Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, uses aspect choreography as a durational form to remake the possibilities of the intelligible and relational worlds. Like Kathie Moffat in *Out of the Past*, whatever this aspect choreography-structured lyric subject is, it has a small and doomed freedom. It knows it has to communicate in ways legible within the existing languages and gender formations available to it, or to Chelsey Minnis, or the film characters. But, like Kathie Moffat, maybe it can for a time orient us, and thereby constitute itself, on the rhythmic terms of its own dynamic switches between the organizing frameworks that claim it.

CHAPTER 2

FUGAL LANDEGUAGE FUGAL LANGUISH: *ZONG!*, *FINNEGAN'S WAKE*, THE TEMPORAL/AFFECTIVE AFFORDANCES OF FUGALLY STRUCTURED ASPECT CHOREOGRAPHY IN CONTEMPORARY EXPERIMENTAL POETRY

“langdwage[...]longuewedge[...]lamagnage[...]landeguage[...]langscape[...]Geoglyphy”

-James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake*, 338-595

English

is my mother tongue.

A mother tongue is not

not a foreign lan lan lang

language

l/anguish

anguish

—a foreign anguish.

English is

my father tongue.

A father tongue is

a foreign language,

therefore English is

a foreign language

not a mother tongue.

-M NourbeSe Philip, “Discourse on the Logic of Language”

~

M NourbeSe Philip and James Joyce: not two figures normally brought together in critical conversation. But that's what I propose to do in this chapter, by reading both authors' most experimental, repetitive, and language-refashioning long works (Philip's *Zong!* (2011) and Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (1939)) as developing in ways informed by (musical) fugal form. The comparison is surprisingly productive for the interpretation of certain time-structural complexities in Philip's work and seems, retrospectively, obvious. Though both works are legibly fugal in nature, they use this form to surprisingly different effects, in ways that usefully clarify the phenomenological and conceptual distinctions between High Modernist fragmentation and aspect choreography.

These two juxtaposed quotations provide a kind of miniature sketch of the difference¹. Both authors are clearly reckoning with language as a chemical material, with repetition, and with mis/recognition. The quotation from *Finnegan's Wake* is not exactly a quotation: I've tracked the recurrence of the word "language" across a section of text wherein it reappears and develops in relationship to a formally/chemically connected spatializing concern with "land," in a way that shuttles the register of "physicality" between the signifier and the signified, or, perhaps more accurately, vehicle and tenor. Language becomes langdwage. It's recognizable, later, as longuwedge, then as landeguage. It appears, eventually, to become geoglyphy ("land-writing/carving/characters"), among other variations. Each time it appears, there's an experience of recognition (i.e. the fact that I can refer to it as a semi-self-consistent "it" at all). But there's also change and development. The recognition of the repetition simultaneously makes this difference appear, and briefly lights up a densifying network of preceding occurrences. This network awareness produces a diffuse but accumulative kind of retroactive and intellective coherence effect, but one that doesn't impel or organize future-oriented kinaesthetic involvement, affect, or expectation: it's neither narrative nor rhythmic. As anyone who has read *Finnegan's Wake* without devoting their entire life and career to it knows, this kind of recognition (and the cumulative network of many such recognition threads) is one of the most compelling forms of coherence the work offers. Most of the time, the experience of reading the work is like being in a kind of fog without clear orientation. A kind of spatial or vaporous structure that can only be intellectually understood, or experienced in little flashes that do not offer sustained phenomenological continuity.

¹ though the quotation from Philip is taken from an earlier work (*She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1988)), it's the work where Philip sets out a lot of the ideas and formal insights of *Zong!* in germinal (and more legible) form.

By comparison, the Philip quote morphs “language” into “anguish” — language changes, via time course (l/anguish-ing?), into feeling (anguish), rather than into spatialized formation (geoglyphy). Like Joyce, Philip uses the sonic/material properties of her medium to produce semantic shifts (a similar kind of vectored punning), but her process is much more concerned with the time structure of experience, and with a kind of rhythmically organizing immediacy that can give rise to affect. Like Joyce, she uses repetition that cues patterns of mis/recognition, and is interested in paradox, but unlike Joyce, she does not condense paradoxical readings into single words or phrases that precipitate out of fog, but rather develops the contrast as a change that takes place over a trackable time course (“English/is my mother tongue[...]English is[...]not a mother tongue”]. For Philip, paradoxes or apparent irreconcilabilities are given expressive form as a kind of l/anguish that the reader learns to expect as it unfolds in time.

Comparing these two quotations is useful because it illustrates a kind of simplified guiding contour, but it doesn’t demonstrate *how* the works do what I’m claiming they do. Nor does this high level comparison yield any particularly new insights about *Zong!*, though my way of looking at this quote from “Discourse on the Logic of Language” comes from having read *Zong!* first. It’s necessary to spend more time considering the mechanisms at play in *Zong!*’s aspect choreography in order to see its l/anguish work clearly, and doing so yields additional insights about Philip’s achievement in this text. In what follows, I’ll first justify the comparison between *Finnegan’s Wake* and *Zong!* on slightly more substantive grounds (which also rightly situates Philip’s work in a High Modernist experimental lineage), and quickly outline how fugal structures work in *Finnegan’s Wake*. From there, I’ll turn to *Zong!* itself, and show the way its fugal aspect choreography develops, and what its affordances, comparatively, are.

GROUNDS FOR COMPARISON: *FINNEGAN'S WAKE* AND *ZONG!*

Zong!, as composer and music theorist Alan Shockley says of *Finnegan's Wake*, seems “impossible” to read from cover to cover, and yet that “is exactly what this text requires” (Shockley, 106). *Finnegan's Wake* is also arguably one of the very few other long-form works of literature written primarily in English that commits as totally as *Zong!* does to refabricating the language and structuring experiential terms of its perception: both might be read as projects of linguistic remaking. I think it's the only other that uses a fugal developmental arc to do so. Both use vectored punning as a primary tool (unusual in long works), and both foliate a short initial “subject” (in the fugal sense)² radically towards length and density: Philip began from a two-page court document (the record of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* court case concerning the *Zong* massacre), and Joyce from a short narrative/song about Tim Finnegan's death by falling and subsequent wake.

There are few long works which are so richly polyvocal, multimodal, and “verbivocovisual” (Joyce, 341) in their structures. Both are interested in any speaking “I” as perceptibly composite, multiply inhabited³. Both also situate themselves in the odd temporality of “mourning,” (both are, in a sense, “wakes”⁴) and explicitly reckon with temporality, sequence, historicity, mythology as they do so. Philip at one point even refers to *Zong!* as a kind of

² In *Zong!* the preliminary fugal subject is the short record of the 1758 *Gregson v. Gilbert* case, in *Finnegan's Wake* it's the “Ballad of Tim Finnegan” and a parallel short narrative of the Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker/Anna Livia Plurabelle/Porter family (“The same circularity of Tim Finnegan's fall and “resurrection” speaks from the Earwicker family story” (Shockley, 102))

³ “Now let the centuple celves of my egourge as Micholas de Cusack calls them,—of all whose I in my hereinafter of course by recourse demission me—by the coincidence of their contraries reamalgamerge in that indentity of undiscernibles” (Joyce, 49-50) “the soul of everyelsesbody rolled into its olesoleself” (329)

⁴ Placing *Zong!* in conversation with *Finnegan's Wake* also makes its connection to the troubled temporality Christina Sharpe identifies in *In the Wake* clearer

“hauntological[...]wake, where the specters of the undead make themselves present” (Philip 201). *Zong!*, to quote just a few moments of explicit and troubled temporal situating, places itself in the “time within loss” (Philip, 176), a time that “sags” (134), or “outside of time” (144), “late in time” (146), in a past that is “drowned in now” (141), and “ever at the ends of time[...]the rain serpent of time” (154), narrating an impossible tale that will “snap the spine of time” (141), a “tale told with no begin or end” (123). And, as I’ll draw out in more detail in my discussion of *Zong!*, there’s a true formal circularity in both texts—we return to the fieldlike composition of beginning poem “Zong #1” by the end of the last real section, “Ferrum.” *Finnegan’s Wake* is also famously a tale with “no begin or end,” narratively circular, its first sentence completing the sentence that ends the book. Fundamentally cyclical and repetitive⁵ throughout, the text follows (among many things) the movements of Anna Livia Plurabelle (ALP), wife of Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker (HCE). She is also a river⁶ formerly named Fluvia (547), paralleled to the river Liffey which flows through Dublin (Campbell, 9) and more generally the “constant of fluxion” (Joyce, 297)—a feminized “principle of vivid movement” as Joseph Campbell puts it (Campbell, 10)—at the end of the book she wearily rejoins the sea, and at the beginning of the book we see her beginning the cycle anew, “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, bring[ing] us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs” (Joyce, 3). Reentering, that is, the part of her circulation that runs through Dublin,

⁵ One commentator, Harry Burrell, argues that every passage of action in the *Wake* simply repeats the story of the fall of Adam and Eve from Genesis (Shockley 108). And even if the narrative is more complex, it’s not much more complex than that (composed primarily of a ballad about Finnegan falling off a ladder drunk and dying, then being revived during his wake when struck by whiskey, and another odd story about the gossipy fallout of an alleged incident—HCE exposing himself to two young girls in a park

⁶ the parallel between ALP (as the river whose movements organize or parallel the cyclicity of time in *Finnegan’s Wake*) and the “rain serpent of time” (154) in *Zong!* is striking

where the book spends most of its time. Its major episodes occur and recur, and re-presented in the speech of others, repeatedly appear in distorted form, much as events do in *Zong!*

Like *Zong!*, *Finnegan's Wake* is formally and explicitly interested in thinking about the imbrication of past and future in a present constituted in language; “[i]f there is a future in every past that is the present” (Joyce, 496). Like *Zong!*, where the reader feels the text “with the tines of time grip the past and will not let it go or me be” (Philip, 139), *Finnegan's Wake* seems invested in “temporalizing”—making the diachronic axis of language phenomenologically available in a synchronic context as the reader struggles to make sense of the text: “is and will be and was be till the timelag is in it” (Joyce, 347)⁷. They have different approaches, but the past is present, for the language of both texts.

Much as both works strive to make the philological/etymological sedimented plurality of words⁸ perceptible, moving words between possible meanings via contextual shifts, so too do they freely transform characters into each other and into historical or literary characters—in *Zong!*, for example, the recurrent character Ruth seems to become Sale at one point (151) and also the (biblical) Eve (162), possibly the historico/mythical Dido (133, 142), even as she also

⁷ Many critics read Joyce as reacting against time, trying to get out of it against the constraints of his sequential medium, text. But I see Joyce as trying to represent the simultaneous models of meaning language has in the Saussurean sense—a simultaneity of synchronicity (timeless relational meaning) and diachronicity (each word has a historical trajectory, a trajectory at each point connected differently than it now is to the other words with which it is currently in relation). And this jammed duality of models extends to characters and places.

This multiplicity of temporal models also explains why the fugal form is necessary. Like *Zong!*, *Finnegan's Wake* is working with both mythic and historical temporal models. As Gurnemanz says to Parsifal in Wagner's *Parsifal*, “here [myth] is where time becomes space”—mythic time is usually seen as circular, cyclical, spatial, and historical time as linear, sequential. This is simplistic, of course, and is not a new problem for literature to play with—Borges's famous short story “The Theologians,” for example, explicitly thematizes the problem while working with a frame narrative that unreliably moves between mythic and historical narrative possibilities. Frank O'Hara's long poem “In Memory of My Feelings” uses its medusa/snake image system to hold together a progressive/linear/historical model of the self with a model of the self as sedimentary/simultaneous. But I think a major discovery in both *Finnegan's Wake* and *Zong!* is how the form of the musical fugue, in conjunction with aspect change, allows a reworking of the way irreconcilable models, perspectives, voices, and frames can be held together

⁸ what I've been calling the “diachronic axis” (in Saussurean terms)

seems to be an allegory for, variously, truth, and regret, much as, for example, Shem and Shaun in *Finnegan's Wake* become, variously [biblical] Jacob and Esau, or Cain and Abel, among other oppositional pairs both mythico-historical and allegorical.

Both works are also explicitly reckoning with and are critical of colonialism from a position of alterity (“Christy Columb” (Joyce, 496), “Crestofer Carambas” (512), “Crashedafar Corumbas” (ibid), “Prestopher Palumbus” (484) repeats as a ridiculous minor character in *Finnegan's Wake*, for example, alongside other passages dealing with colonialist fallout). There’s also an investment in orality in both texts that recalls Glissant’s valorizations⁹ of orality as a site of resistance and of linguistic liveliness. As Masone puts it in his chapter on Philip, “Irish, Afro-Caribbean, and all other writers who descend from an oral tradition” share “an apprenticeship” in which “the writer assimilates and learns proverbs and suburban tales from the “mother’s mother, and all their mothers before”¹⁰” (Masone, 37). And indeed, in both *Zong!* and *Finnegan's Wake*, orality and the sonic are as (if not more) important as/than the orthographic in the sense-making the books require, and in both cases shreds of oral circulating language (e.g.) proverbs, children’s rhymes, songs, proverbs, Shakespeare, and the Bible weave into and out of the threads of the text in lively and meaningful ways.

Both writers also think about their texts musically—in letters, Joyce repeatedly described *Finnegan's Wake* as a work of music and of writing it as a musical activity (Shockley, 101), and, as I mentioned before, Philip describes *Zong!* as a “counterpointed fugal antinarrative” (Philip, 201). In other words, there are major and unusual structural, textural, linguistic procedural, and orientational similarities in the two texts, despite the ostensibly vast gulf that separates them. It is

⁹ in the *Traité du Tout Monde*

¹⁰ Masone takes the quote re the “mother’s mother, and all their mothers before” from Irish poet Eavan Boland’s poem “The Oral Tradition”

in fact at the sites that most distinguish these two texts from other literary writing in English that they are the most similar, and is what makes it possible to use a kind of structural comparison to elucidate the effects of *Zong!*'s rhythmic work of aspect choreography over time, building from the way the two works use aspect change (akin to what Reed calls "punning," in *Zong!*).

First I'll discuss what that means in *Finnegan's Wake*, how it helps clarify that the "grammar of distraction" Reed describes operating via the puns in *Zong!* is a misreading—the puns, I argue, are part of a strongly orienting rhythmic patterning that it seems wrong to characterize as "distraction," but which instead contribute to a cumulative and orienting force the reader experiences as a reworked rhythm of sense making.

Finnegan's Wake: A Fog and/of Puns

Alan Shockley articulates an aspect of punning particularly well in reference to the fugal character of *Finnegan's Wake*. Despite the cyclic, repetitive, musical, and polyvocal nature of *Finnegan's Wake*, and the numerous critics who discuss its musicality, and track down which songs are being referenced, Shockley's seems to be the only critical account that seriously considers the work *as* a fugue¹¹. Joseph Campbell does memorably describe the way "interlocking allusions to key words and phrases are woven like fugal themes into the pattern of the work" (Campbell, 3), but does not proceed further with the fugue comparison. The key grounds for this comparison (of the *Wake* with a musical fugue), for Shockley, consist of the ways "complex webs of reference" (Shockley, 109) intersect, transforming words into nodes that operate in multiple lines of coherence simultaneously—a kind of punning or condensing

¹¹ though one commentator, Anthony Burgess, does draw an analogy between trying to summarize dense passages of *Finnegan's Wake* and Bach's *Art of the Fugue*: "This part of *Finnegans Wake* is the very devil to summarize: it is like saying what Bach's *Art of the Fugue* is about, bar by bar" (Burgess 230, qtd Shockley 109)

overdetermination. He describes the kind of contrapuntal listening this multiplicity and repetition necessitates in the following way:

The result [of the density and polyphony] is a text that cannot be read like any other. Joyce made it almost impossible to start with the first word of the first page and continue reading left-to-right without pause to the last word of page 628. Nonetheless I think such a reading is exactly what this text requires [...]the reader is forced to surrender to the momentum of the text. A good reader of this text, like a good listener of a densely polyphonic piece from the Baroque period, must hop on at the beginning of the ride and hang on for dear life until the last of it[...]both works(the *Wake* and an exemplar of Baroque polyphony) are motoric: both repeat and develop simple themes in complex ways and in multiple simultaneous layers. Both works exist in time and yet work to defeat time through the constant recurrence of thematic and sub-thematic material[...]every note participates in many different lines of the music (106)

As an example of what he means, Shockley analyzes how the word “pineapple” works in a passage from the *Wake*, participating simultaneously in the thread of WWI history, the story of Adam and Eve, the thread pertaining to international exchange, the linguistic material level of the portmanteau, and the simple representational level of “pineapple.” He compares it to the way the F# note in a fugal subject works in an excerpt from “Fugue XVI” from Bach’s *Wohltempierte Klavier*, that is, “participating in many different motivic and linear trajectories for this piece” (Shockley 107), connecting multiple threads and sustaining the listener’s awareness of now-absent notes. In the case of the Joyce text, this happens through etymological similarity, and making presence felt in absence. That is:

Example 3: Fugue XVI, Measures 33-34



Fig. 2.1 Excerpt from “Fugue XVI” reproduced from Shockley (108)

“The F-sharp keeps G present [in the listener’s expectations] even while literally displacing G in a lower neighbor figure in the Bach example, so “painapple” both displaces and keeps “pineapple” here for the reader.[...]”Pain” and forms of the word “pine” can both be traced to a single parent word, first through *peine* (affliction, sorrow, punishment) and eventually to the Vulgar Latin *pena*, meaning “penalty” or “punishment [...] Placing the word “bomb” so close to “painapple” in that line also refers to a slang use of the word “pineapple” it’s a nickname for a hand grenade” (108)

So “painapple” is connecting these multiple motivic trajectories and simultaneously participating in all of them, and that, for Shockley, is central to what makes *Finnegan’s Wake* legible as a musical fugue. Really it’s possible to pick any page of *Finnegan’s Wake*, and there will be many examples of this phenomenon happening at a micro level—it’s a central experiential mechanism of the text. Like the sustained os/eau/o/oh/os/us homophonic transformation play central in *Zong!*, *Finnegan’s Wake* makes its reader hear multiple ways of making sense, but in Joyce, they tend to be *at the same time*. That’s to say, Joyce’s text produces a kind of irreconcilable condensation. Some critics have compared the way language works in *Finnegan’s Wake* to Freudian dreamwork—each dream thing a condensation of many others from the waking world, so each word of *Finnegan’s Wake* can often be, like “painapple”, claimed by multiple frameworks of sense-making in language, like the multiple contexts concatenated by the condensed Freudian dream object. I think this is also a critical part of the way the text makes the problem of language’s historical (diachronic) and relational (synchronic) dimensions phenomenologically available—if one were to try to represent, simultaneously, all the ways a word *has* meant, and what other words it *was* therefore in close relation to, and what it means now, and its therefore somewhat different cloud of immediate neighbors, as well as how that word has passed into and out of various literatures and popular circulating forms, it might look and sound a lot like *Finnegan’s Wake*.

These overdetermined multiplicities are often quite extended, as for example, in “nobirdy aviar soar anywing to eagle it! But rocked of agues, cliffed for aye!” (Joyce, 505). On one hand, the semantic sense here is “nobody ever saw anything to equal it,” but each word has been distorted in a ‘bird-themed’ way, such that the cue to thematically group (simultaneous, stable, equal) makes a competing (arguably more powerful) claim to orienting the reader’s meaning-making activity than does the sequentially developing semantic sense of the phrase (sequential, chemical, hierarchical). There’s a secondary sonic/material throughline operating here also—the material similarity between “angels” “eagle” “agues” and “aye” suggests that the phrases have been composed in a way oriented by language as visual-sonic material, rather than in a way designed to produce semantic meaning—especially since the semantic meaning is somewhere between hard to track and nonsensical. And then finally, the reader hears, in “rocked of agues,” also/instead “Rock of Ages,” title of a still-popular 1763 hymn by Augustus Toplady. We hear this especially because ballads, hymns, nursery rhymes, and songs are very important throughout *Finnegan’s Wake* (and we’re late in the book/well trained by page 505). So the reader here is also pushed to discard/deprioritize the semantic sense by the fact that “rocked of agues” (shivering with fever?) is harder to understand than the reference meaning “Rock of Ages” offers. That’s to say this phrase is an orientational knot—it arrests the flow and rhythm of sense-making by cueing its reader to place it in a set of orienting contexts that are impossible to successfully combine towards one orienting framework or meaning. Further, almost every phrase in this book works similarly, and also differently—reliably there is a knot, but which threads are involved varies wildly¹², and how it is the reader ought to parse them is similarly unpredictable.

¹² One of the things I tracked as I read *FW* was the “obvious other orders” that the semantic sense pivoted onto the way the “nobirdy aviar soar anywing to eagle it” phrase pivots onto “thematic group,” and a partial list includes: numbers, days, calendar months, “The House That Jack Built,” other children’s rhymes, sequence (e.g. “from fursed

The text switches genres, voices, registers, and modes constantly, the effect of which is a constant (for me at least) “freakfog” (48), a “poisoning volume of cloud barrage” (ibid)—like the swirl of rumors, gossip, debate, and perspectives that surround HCE throughout the text and make it hard to operate in his world, so too does Joyce’s 17 year language condensery project make it hard to know how to be oriented—one is forever trying to find “the firmness of the formous of the famous of the famous of the first fog” (502), and rarely does. There are some passages of novelistic or fablistic clarity—“The Mookse and the Gripes” section in I, for example, or section I.7’s characterization of Shem¹³, or I.8’s narration of ALP’s early sexual encounters, etc., in which the reader is able to move through the text almost like they’re in a novel doing representational work. But perhaps the most orientationally reliable tool in the text is recognition of modified repetitions—“I have your tristich now; it recurs in three times the same differently (there is such a fui fui story which obtains of him)” (481)” —which is a large part of why it seems right to call this text a “fugue.”

I’ll make a quick note about how these repetitions work with the extended puns in *Finnegan’s Wake*, then note how the way that differs from repetition/recognition/aspect switch variation in *Zong!*. Major points of recognition in *Finnegan’s Wake* have to do with Tim Finnegan’s wake (either as literal event or as recurrence of the ballad), HCE’s alleged exposing himself to two girls in a park, Shaun and Shem fighting about something, ALP being a river, or “falls” generally¹⁴. The repetitions are recognizable, but are varied and developed—the “sameold

to laced, quickmarch to decemvers” (282-3), songs, Shakespeare monologues, the Bible, and other vernacular/communally circulating/quick-to-mind resources.

¹³ As Campbell notes, the Shem and Shaun chapters are simpler, friendlier, clearer

¹⁴ There’s a massive body of critical work around the “fall,” its parallels with the fall from Eden, the vast “thunderwords” that onomatopoeize falling (long tumbles of discordant nonsense syllables jammed together), etc. Also falling is another point of resonance between *FW* and *Zong!*: it’s an important figure in Philip’s work also

gamebold adomic structure of our Finnius the old One, as highly charged with electrons as hophazards can effective it” (615). There are also subtler fugal subjects that repeat—the “Mookse and the Gripes” fable, for instance, gets invented early in the text (Book I), and then the reader begins to notice “mokse[...]gribes” (331), “mocks for my gropes” (418), “mokst I can do for his grapce” (432), “Fullgrapce for an endupper, half muxy on his whole” (489), “Muchsias grapcias!”(568), “Monks and their Grasps” (579), “Mopsus or Gracchus” (614), etc. Likewise, there’s an odd and consciously contradictory condensation of doves, ravens, generation/dynasty/population and seafarers/colonial explorers that starts in I.3:

having flown his wild geese, [he] alohned in crowds to warnder on[...]after which the cawer and the marble halls of Pump Court Columbarium, the home of the old seakings, looked upon each other and queth their haven evermore (49)

Here there’s a suggestion of arrival (“queth their haven evermore”), which also in its reference to Poe turns “haven” into “raven,” connecting it¹⁵ with the “dove” in “Columbarium” (dove=columba, in Latin), and one hears “seekings” in “seakings.” And likewise that “queth,” which in reference to the Poe is “quoth,” also sounds like “quest”—to be seeking the “haven” forever, rather than arriving there (the haven being also a bird (raven), and therefore a word stuck between multiple possible havens/arrivals, if you will), much like language is perpetually in flight and not quite arriving, in this text. So then when things like “colombophile and corvinophobe¹⁶ alike, when I have remassed me, my travellingself, as from Magellanic clouds” (358) appear, or “He sent out Christy Columb and he came back with a jailbird’s unbespokables in his beak and then he sent out Le Caron Crow” (496), start to appear, and to connect with the text’s fascination with generations, dynasties, descendance, germination, population increase,

¹⁵ as at once similar (bird) and opposite (white/black)

¹⁶ Crow=Corvinus in Latin

sowing (“having flown his wild geese”), as both sequence and cycle in moments concerning the “new world,” e.g.

since the night of time and each and all of their branches meeting
and shaking twisty hands all over again in their new world through the
germination of its gemination from Ond’s outset till Odd’s end. And
encircle him circuly (505)

The recognition/repetition effect is remarkable—the “interlocking” quality of the “fugal themes” (Campbell, 3) is really present to the awareness for the duration of this passage. This form of extended, vectored, and interlocking punning, which nonetheless never sustains the reader in orientation for very long, is a central method of coherence production, for *Finnegan’s Wake*. When recognition of repetition (and/or new interlocking) happens in *Finnegan’s Wake*, it’s like an object suddenly surfacing out of a fog. The reader has been wandering, without a clear sense of being “in” anything (without knowing what to expect), until recognition momentarily lights up the latent structure of repetitions. However, as real and dense as this fugal structure of repetitions may be, the structure itself is too irregular, complex, and diffuse to organize expectations in an orienting way. In this, *Finnegan’s Wake*’s deployment of aspect change is Modernist (or pre Postmodernist)—pointing to fragmentation, complexity, and simultaneity.

There is a large body of critical work that reads *Finnegan’s Wake* as seeking to make time “subservient to space” (Shockley 102)—as Joyce scholar Anthony Burgess puts it “Time remains the enemy; history must be spatialized. How? By seeing it as a circle, a wheel perpetually turning, the same events recurring again and again” (Burgess 191 qtd Shockley 102). As Joyce might put it, “our wholemole vicociclotometer” (Joyce 614)—a Viconian model of

history and time as a 4 phase repeating cycle¹⁷, the “commodious vicus” that brings ALP and the narrative back to the beginning and perpetual “recirculation” (3), a novel that “inscribes the circle of the song” (Shockley 102) varyingly but endlessly—essentially the same, spatialized by repetition.

That is one thing repetition does, arguably—it gives to temporal experience something of a spatial character—a past that is always the past and a future that is timelessly present (unlike the models of durational/experiential time Hasty borrows from Bergson, James, and Whitehead, and which I’ll outline in more detail in my discussion of *Zong!*). Operating Joyce’s text recalls Joseph Frank’s model of spatialized reading necessitated by fragmentary Modernist texts—that the reader assembles a spatial simultaneity as they read a Modernist novel. So let’s for a moment accept the premise that Joyce is using circularity and repetition to spatialize time, to “make all eras contemporaneous,” as Pound might have put it.

In *Zong!*, the model of repetition in experience seems more [Gertrude] Steinian—i.e. it is actually repetition that produces difference through time, and that our experience of duration is enmeshed with this experience of difference in repetition—and in fact, the way “a rose” begins to appear in *Zong!*¹⁸ might even be read as a nod to Stein—it repeats four times in this section, notes that it is appearing “over & over,” and means different things each time (spacing not preserved, but spatial separation marked by “/”):

o who says i am/the lord/of loss/a **rose**/i say/a **rose**/for ruth/and for t/ruth
sup/pose truth/then find/ing/a way/found/a port/a rule ought/evidence/suppose
then t/ruth/a **rose**/over/&/over/&/with you/she f/all falling/found/a **rose** fou
/nd Africa/un/der water” (62-3, emphasis mine)

¹⁷ Which, as many scholars note, maps to the 4 books of *Finnegan’s Wake* (Shockley, 103)

¹⁸ In “Sal,” the first field section

“a rose” moves in and out of legibilities organized by multiple ways of reading (sonic, English, French, visual): in one case, one pivots to sonic sense-making to suture the graphic gap (“a rose”) and arrive at the semantic sense of the word “arose.” In another, one must see it graphically (preserving the split) to read it as a flower (“a rose”), or the (recurrent) woman’s name (“Rose”). And, in its proximity to water (and flowers) (and the way French words periodically appear throughout *Zong!*, and the fact that the text island “ar[r]ose fou” could (sonically) be part of a French sentence), one also starts to hear the dark joke of “arroser”—French for “to water”—as in, to pour water down onto a plant. And it’s the key fulcrum of the weird reversed up-and-down movement of the passage (loss (falling) arose (risen), arose (risen) under (fallen), ar[r]ose[r] (falling movement—but a person falling through water, drowning, instead of water falling)). But, unlike in “nobirdy aviar soar anywing to eagle it,” the passage doesn’t produce a condensation knot of simultaneous possibilities, but rather makes you feel its switches, one at a time¹⁹.

In general, in *Zong!*, the fugal repetition and recognition does not spatialize, it serves to enhance the rhythmic determinacy of the text, to enmesh the reader more fully in a patterned durational experience which holds together irreconcilabilities, and in which a “noncontemporaneity of the present” (Reed, 55) is viscerally available, the impossible time in which the “wake” for the 133 drowned Africans can take place. Orientation is necessary for meaning-making, but Philip orients the reader rhythmically, moving in and out of multiple frameworks for meaning and orientation in an aspect choreography that does not necessitate her submission to one stable

¹⁹ There are a few possible paths for the switch sequence to take (e.g. that second “a rose” could read as “arose” again), but it’s unambiguously clear that part

framework²⁰, but without simply producing a disorienting “fog” out of which recognitions periodically precipitate. The recognition and performance of aspect switch in *Zong!* becomes part of an ongoing durational experience in which the reader is oriented rhythmically, rather than narratively/not at all²¹, as is the case in *Finnegan’s Wake*. That’s to say, aspect switching in *Zong!* does not work in a condensing way—yes each of these words/images becomes associated with the others through their co-repetition, much like the interlocking themes of *Finnegan’s Wake*. But the reader’s fundamental orientation in the text remains rhythmic and consistent in *Zong!*—the frames retain their discreteness in temporal experience, in a way that they do not in *Finnegan’s Wake*, where they are jammed/overlaid. That’s not to say that there aren’t large-scale rhythms at play in *Finnegan’s Wake* (there are), but, as music theorist Christopher Hasty notes in *Meter as Rhythm*, our ability to continue to experience rhythm (as that which calls forth projective expectations/prediction and kinesthetic involvement) has a rather short time limit on it (Hasty, 183) before it recedes from immediate experience—before it becomes strictly cognitive rather than cognitive-visceral. When you are stuck in/participating in a rhythmic machine, your experience of recognizing repetition reinforces the durational nature of the experience you are having, the feeling of being “on beat,” and your enmeshment in a “now” as a constant renegotiation of what is past and what is future and how they can be imbricated—when you are in a spatializing machine, recognition of repetition reinforces the notion of cyclicity as spatializing or timeless, and feels like recognizing an object. *Zong!*’s perceptual rhythms are

²⁰ I would argue that Leslie Scalapino’s *that they were at the beach*, Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* are good examples of an intermediate point—in cases, identically repeating phrases circulate within a narrative-adjacent long poem. They repeat in different contexts, and accumulate echoes and residual meanings from their previous contexts, in a way that leads to a kind of intensification as the text goes on—they too are fugal in this way. But in both the Scalapino and the Hejinian aspect switch is far less important—the reader experiences the force of recognition, and the experience of the densification of a meaning network, but the choreography is not as precise or as frame-attentive as it is in *Zong!*

²¹ except for by these recurring catachrestic (mis)recognition islands

visceral before they are cognitive, in a way that makes its holding together of irreconcilabilities phenomenologically available in a specific and affecting way—they are held together in an expectationally organizing *rhythm* in which the reader is durationally and actively participating, on whose terms they are bringing both themselves and the text into being. The form this rhythm takes is aspect choreography, whose structure I'll clarify in the next section. Before pivoting, however, it's useful to pull out one more feature of *Finnegan's Wake* that will be useful to think alongside *Zong!* as a way of better understanding Philip's anticapitalist poetics. Specifically, that the way *Finnegan's Wake's* jamming/simultaneity of frames relates to condensation might be thought through Black Studies scholar Ian Baucom's readings of Arrighi and Benjamin's theorization of some aspects of commodity formation.

Baucom is actually using these thinkers to elucidate the kind of simultaneous present-past "temporality of the wake" Black Studies analyzes as a field object. But I think we might actually read Baucom's description here more easily in relation to how temporality is working in *Finnegan's Wake* than in *Zong!*. Baucom's gloss of Arrighi's "oscillatory history of capital" and Benjamin's "repetocentric philosophy of history" (Baucom, 23), goes like this :

a history of the present whose "time" is not what we might think it to be, a present whose present time is not singular but plural, not present to itself alone but to a cycle of "times" it accommodates within itself. Time does not pass, it accumulates: such is another way of glossing Arrighi's argument, as it is another way of paraphrasing the "argument" of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (24)

Benjamin, contends Baucom, thinks time accumulates in things (24), and in a fundamentally heterogeneous way, but without passing. The commodity "accumulates not one time, but several, including [...]an anterior time that the present time stores and intensifies but which does not so much continue as repeat." (24). I think we might gloss the way repetition and condensation work

in Joyce this way—that the words and phrases of *Finnegan's Wake*, like the Benjaminian commodity, find a form to express the jammed accumulation of temporalities, relations, and meanings within an ever-intensifying network of accumulating repetitions.

Baucom is actually mobilizing Arrighi and Benjamin, however, in *Specters of the Atlantic*, to contend, using the 1781 *Zong* case as an example, that the acceleration of finance capital enabled by the slave trade produces a “coding of time [that] renders the contemporary contemporaneous with its noncontemporary past [...] [a] present more than *rhetorically* haunted by the specter of the *Zong*'s 1781 voyage” (18). Baucom looks both to material history and to the poetics of literary works including “Walcott's “Atlantic now,” Morrison's “all of it is now” and Glissant's sedimentary poetics of duration” (322) to help articulate the imbrication of slave-trade accelerated financialization and a present time haunted by intensifying forms of past-ness.

It is easy enough to read *Zong!* as Baucom does²², as a “labor of resuscitation [that] remains perpetually unfinished and unending” (332). But I think if we stop there, we don't do enough to articulate what it is about *Zong!* that's so formally different than *Finnegan's Wake*. In *Zong!*, the fugal structure does not simply produce a densifying fog out of which repeating jammed objects (commodities?) emerge to recognition along diffuse narrative lines, but instead a rhythmically orienting form. In *Zong!*, I think time *does* pass—it's the medium of change. And *Zong!* does work a change using a fugal aspect choreography in time: I'll argue that's the central thrust of the reparative poetics numerous critics have pointed towards in different ways. In the next section, I'll show how Philip uses an aspect choreography to produce not only this jammed, thickened, or otherwise temporally accumulated present, but to offer felt orientation on new, specifically cognitive-rhythmic, second-order terms. In doing so she finds a way towards

²² I have to assume retroactively in an edit—*Specters of the Atlantic* was first published in 2005, *Zong!* in 2008

orientation and liveliness on new terms of her own making even as she also finds a form to mourn and give critical-fabulative voice to those murdered by the *Zong* operators.

III. *ZONG!*: A REPARATIVE POETICS. OR, HOW DID PHILIP WRITE THIS IN ENGLISH

In this section, I'll track out how the durational, fugal poetics and aspect choreography of *Zong!* allow for a refabrication of language that holds together irreconcilable reading modalities and models of temporality. In doing so, the poem makes possible a type of coherence and temporal organization of the subject that would otherwise be unavailable, a type of coherence necessitated by the impossible situation into which Philip writes. Consequently, *Zong!* is able to tell the tale that simultaneously “must be told” and for which “there is no telling” (Philip 2008 189)—the story of the 133 unnamed Africans drowned by the operators of the *Zong*, the only surviving record of their lives and of the tragedy being the short record of the 1783 *Gregson v. Gilbert* insurance case that Philip foliates into the rhythmic, visual-poetic “bone song” (126) that *Zong!* is. What this “song” is is a work of deep mourning, re-membering, and fabulative mythico-historical re-imagining. I'll focus on the *how*—i.e. the durational poetic mechanisms at work in *Zong!* that make this possible—the “why” has been thoroughly and compellingly theorized, by numerous critics and by Philip herself, a body of critical work I briefly outline.

Many critics, lead among them Anthony Reed and Laurie Lambert, have pointed out *Zong!*'s “poetics of reparation” (Lambert, 108), and how the text's multilingual and multimodal poetics of “unsaying” have strong “ethico-political import,” responding to the question of how one could possibly “write the story in English, given its [English's] complicity in conjuring or consigning the African to “nonbeing,”” (Reed, 47). Philip herself raises this question throughout her career,

recognizing the “anguish that is english in colonial societies” (Philip 1988 77), “not only experientially foreign, but also etymologically hostile and expressive of the non-being of the African” (81). Philip sees language as an organizing site of experience and self-knowledge, and therefore a vital site of struggle for formerly colonized and enslaved subjects to refigure their possibilities for being, consciousness, and self knowledge:

To speak another language is to enter another consciousness. Africans in the New World were compelled to enter another consciousness, that of their masters, while simultaneously being excluded from their own. While similar prohibitions extended to music at various times, language was one of the most important sites of struggle between the Old World and the New World (81)

She describes how colonial languages pushed “the African further away from the expression of her experience and, consequently, the meaning of it” (81), and describes the necessity for Black writers to somehow make “a language with the emotional, linguistic, and historical resources capable of giving voice to the particular i-mages arising out of the[ir] experience” (81).

This is unambiguously Philip’s project across her oeuvre—to make such a language. As Roberto Masone puts it, her works puts “language at the centre of colonial discourse[...] [l]anguage is the real protagonist, the one looking for a mother, threatened and mistreated by English, which is only a father tongue” (Masone 41)²³. Philip sees the language-remaking project as one with far-reaching potential for reworking consciousness; she contends that “living language continually encapsulates, reflects and refines the entire experiential life and world view of the tribe, the race and consequently of society at large; and if we accept that the poet, the story-teller, the singer or balladeer (through their word), express this process in their work , then

²³ Masone is thinking through Philip’s language work in dialogue with Spivak’s concept of epistemic violence as she articulates it in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”—i.e. that the “subaltern must always be caught in translation, enver truly expressing herself, because of the colonial power’s destruction of her culture, and the marginalization of her way of understanding and knowing the world” (Spivak qtd. Masone 43)

we must accept that this process becomes one way in which a society continually accepts, integrates and transcends its experiences, positive or negative” (80). Language work is a form of fomenting slow changes in consciousness and therefore possibility, for Philip.

This is to say, Philip’s critics and Philip herself have compellingly theorized the kind of political and ethical work that *Zong!* and *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* are doing. It takes the Poststructuralist line that consciousness is linguistically formatted: to rework language is to rework consciousness. There is also no shortage of excellent work on how details of the modes of reading, polyvocality, erasure, visuality, silence, refusal, oceanic materiality, incomprehensibility, historical and legal reference, and critical fabulative work going on in *Zong!* contribute to this project. What there is not, however, is a robust account of the experiential force of its durational structure, the rhythmic choreographies of reading it compels its reader to perform, and what the perceptual and phenomenological outcome of that work is. Language is only one of the poem’s materials: the other is reflective experience and its temporal formatting, which language can be used to inflect.

The time structure of *Zong!*, is, as Philip puts it herself, a “counterpointed fugal antinarrative,” in which “several strands are simultaneously at work.” (Philip 2011 204). In *Notanda*, the essay that follows the poetic sections of *Zong!*, she gives a quick but robust definition of the classic fugal [musical] form, as well as of its secondary meaning, and connects both to her work:

In the classic fugal form the theme is stated then reiterated in second, third, and subsequent voices. In a similar fashion, *Zong!* is a sustained repetition or reiteration of various themes, phrases, and voices, albeit fragmented[...][t]he fugue has, however, another darker meaning, referring to a state of amnesia in which the individual, his or her subjectivity having been destroyed, becomes alienated from him- or herself. It is a state that can be as brief as a few hours or as lengthy as several years. In its erasure and forgetting of the be-ing and humanity of the Africans on board the *Zong*, the legal text of *Gregson v. Gilbert* becomes a representation of the fugal state of amnesia, serving as a mechanism for erasure and

alienation. Further, in my fragmenting the text and re-writing it through *Zong!*, or rather over it, thereby essentially erasing it, the original text becomes a fugal palimpsest through which *Zong!* is allowed to heal the original text of its fugal amnesia (ibid.)

Philip sees *Zong!* as connecting the two senses of “fugue”—and many commentators also address both senses briefly. I also hear echoes of Fred Moten’s notion of the “fugitivity” so important to experimental Black aesthetics²⁴—the etymology of “fugue,” like “fugitivity,” runs through the Latin “fugare,” which means “to chase” and/or “to flee.” Most compelling though, to my sense, is Anthony Reed’s analysis of the work as he presents it in “There is No Telling This Story: Fugue in a Free Time,” the section of his chapter on Black concrete poetics, “Broken Witness: A Poetics of Unsayings” that deals with *Zong!*. Reed identifies a “poetics of unsaying” at the heart of Philip’s project, by which he seems to mean something akin to Shklovskyan defamiliarization combined with an attentiveness to the historical element of linguistic meaning sedimented into regimes of sense making. Reed describes it like this:

the poetics of unsaying temporalizes language, making significant the interval between sensation and meaning, which introduces a detour in the formation of concepts or schema [...]that allows us[...]to ask fundamental questions about the founding of a regime of sense making, facts, and poetry (32)

In other words, Black concretism-inflected poetry often makes the reader slow down (“temporalizes”), recognize the ways that they are making sense of language, and interrogate how those ways of making sense are rooted in antiblack regimes of power sedimented into words-as-historical-vessels—making it possible to “see and hear the past [and] think of the present as historical” (53). In so doing, the poems also open onto other temporalities, ways of being oriented to language, and offer other ways of making sense, toward reparative work and

²⁴ I am grateful to Mark Payne for this suggestion

new possibilities. This “temporalization” defamiliarizes reading, and gives the reader a chance to interrogate their own presuppositions, and for less obvious echoes to emerge.

This procedure is not new in experimental poetry, nor in experimental art generally: it’s the premise of Brechtian theatre, for example, and a key aspect of Russian Formalist work of the early 20th century. The kind of “temporalization” Reed identifies in the delay introduced by this defamiliarizing technique strikes me as equally much in effect in this 1925 ee cummings poem, “The Sky Was,” for instance, as it is on any given page of *Zong!*:

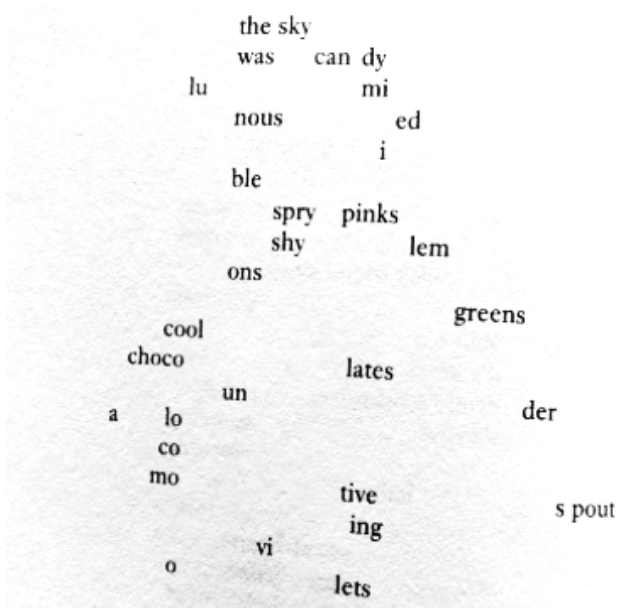


Fig. 2.2 “The Sky Was” by ee cummings. Photograph by a friend of the author

As in *Zong!*, the reader must do work to synthesize words (Reed, 54), is tempted to read vertically as well as horizontally (ibid) in a way that makes “combinatory reading possibilities” (51) available²⁵—these being, aside from the presence of multiple voices and languages, the major mechanisms Reed identifies as how *Zong!*’s form contributes to its ability to tell its tale, to conjure a “noncontemporaneity of the present” (55)²⁶. Granted, there are not multiple voices or

²⁵ Also the sky, like the water *Zong!* so often represents as a field, would seem to invite visual-poetic representation in this way as well

languages in this passage, nor is it addressing a historical atrocity; these things undoubtedly change what the formal procedure means. The cummings poem's formal similarity to *Zong!*, and radically different perceptual effect, nonetheless highlights the importance of considering how *Zong!*'s long form and durational rhythmic structure contribute to its ultimate effect.

I don't want to give Reed's analysis short shrift, because I generally find it insightful about many of the effects Philip is able to achieve, and attentive to many of the work's mechanisms. He reads Philip's work in *Zong!* and in her earlier book *She Tries Her Tongue* as developing an adequate mode of expression "from within English, [rather] than for recovering some lost consciousness or way of being" (46), and sees the work of the "dissociative (dissociating) and polyphonic [...]temporalizing song" as aiming "to move the line between song and noise so that what was unheard or misheard can be acknowledged" (49). He argues that this renders "a voice "in process"" and that the "increasingly redistribute[d] syllables" allow the story to be "released" to "tell itself" (50). He sees Philip as breaking words along "phonemic and morphological seams, yielding a fugue-like polyvocality that interrupts [the primarily English-using] "voice" by finding terms from[...]the languages of a world connected by colonialism" (52-3). This seems deeply correct to me: Philip is working systematically from within a system to reveal its unacknowledged incoherencies (strong Derridean/Poststructuralist echoes again), and, as Reed argues, something new emerges. In terms of *how Zong!* makes all this happen through its "fugal polyvocality," there's less clarity. Reed remarks that the polyvocality contributes to the "compositing" of an ancestor, Setaey Adamu Boateng, who Philip channels to tell the story, and that the polyvocality produces a more general "disposition for punning" by which "*Zong!* constantly unsays itself, insists on its not-saying by saying multiple things at once. Its "grammar of distraction," [...]gives itself to fragmentation[...]with a faith that a pun "raises the dead""

(55). He reads this punning as “hauntological” in the Derridean sense—marking the untimeliness of the present with the “specters of the undead” (Philip, 201) who are given the space to speak in the “nondialectical contradiction and undoing of hierarchical binaries” (Reed, 55) made possible by the multiplicity of meaning possibilities generated by the punning on and reworking of the text of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case. Additionally, Reed notes that there are many combinatory reading possibilities (51), that the poem requires the reader to do work “synthesizing words” (54), and that sometimes “vertical reading of clusters may substitute for horizontal ones” (ibid). But that’s more or less the extent to which Philip’s “fugue in free time” is analyzed—and yet all of these claims still sound like they could just as aptly describe the punning fugal polyvocality of *Finnegan’s Wake* — a fugal polyvocality which, after all, composites a voice that critically connects many languages of colonialism from a position of alterity. Maybe there’s an emergent property that arises from the combination of cumming-esque mise-en-page with Joycean polyvocal fugal punning, but I still think that there’s more to it. What I think that “more” consists in is the orienting rhythmic-durational aspect of *Zong!* as a fugal composition, its aspect choreography.

To track how, it’s necessary to go beyond the readily acknowledged polyphonic aspect of musical fugue composition. Certainly a fugue is remarkable for this emphasis. But it’s also a durational structure—the way it builds towards dense polyphony is specific, and has a characteristic intensification contour. *Zong!’s* six sections map exactly such a contour. In a fugue, there are usually ~six sections, in which the same subject (short recognizable phrase) repeats for the duration of the piece in different voices and keys, returning finally to the tonic key after periods of variation, development, and occasional episodic wandering (a kind of relief from the intense repetitions in the subject, countersubject, and other developmental passages). Fugues

are characterized by “constantly rising interest” and intensification throughout, with a foliation of the original subject leading toward a dense contrapuntal polyphony. Once “the subject has been sufficiently developed, another episode will lead to the concluding portion of the fugue, wherein the subject is at least once more heard in the key of the tonic” (Anger, 70), often followed by a diffusing coda (e.g. the “Ebora” section in *Zong!*). As music theorist Joseph Humfrey Anger frames it, “from the exposition to the final cadence, there should ever be a constantly increasing interest, commencing with the simple enunciation of the original subject, and concluding with the most ingenious and complicated network of contrapuntal devices” (ibid).

The fugue as a form also arises at a particular moment in music history. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno gives a shorthand historical account of the genesis of the fugue as he explains why the notion of individual artistic genius is fundamentally misguided—he articulates a model wherein good artists follow out the historically and materially conditioned possibilities available in the forms, materials, and traditions available and perceptible to them (as historically and materially conditioned subjects). *Aesthetic Theory*, which itself might well be called a fugal composition, returns to variations on this idea again and again, using different artists and artistic developments to clarify what it means, and to develop the notion of subjective-objectivity that subtends it. At one point, Adorno uses Bach’s invention of the fugue as an example of an artist arriving somewhere genuinely formally new by following out historico-material potentialities available to them—he sees Bach as having arrived at the fugal form as a necessary outcome of the trajectories inherent in forms and frameworks available to him at that particular moment—specifically, tonality and traditional polyphony. The fugue arises as a form capable of holding these two musical systems together:

The substantial element of genres and forms has its locus in the historical needs of their materials. Thus the fugue is bound up with tonal relations; and it was virtually demanded by tonality as its telos once it had displaced modality and reigned supreme in imitative praxis. Specific procedures, such as the real or tonal answer of a fugue theme, became musically meaningful only when traditional polyphony found itself confronted with the new task of transcending the homophonic gravitational pull of tonality, of integrating tonality into polyphonic space and at the same time introducing contrapuntal and harmonic concepts. All the peculiarities of fugal form could be derived from these necessities, of which the composers themselves were in no way conscious. Fugue is the form in which polyphony that has become tonal and fully rationalized is organized; to this extent the fugue as form reaches beyond its individual realizations and yet does not exist apart from them. For this reason, too, the emancipation from the model is universally prefigured by the model. (Adorno 200-1)

I argue *Zong!* and *Finnegan's Wake*, two works invested in punning and multiple frameworks for sense making, both intuitively arrive at the fugue as a form because it allows them to hold separate and arguably irreconcilable orienting systems, temporality models, and regimes of sense making together, much like how the musical fugue makes possible a holding together of the tonal system and traditional polyphony. The way they deploy fugal compositional strategies toward this end differs, however, and that difference helps articulate how the aspect choreography *Zong!* performs accounts for the poem's uniquely affecting "hauntological" quality Reed describes, and the way it is able to rework how the reader formats their experience, i.e., temporality.

II.b. *ZONG!*'S INTENSIFICATION ARC & FUGAL SUBJECTS

Zong! begins with two sections, "Os" and "Dicta," made of short poems, wherein Philip restricts herself to using only words used in the two page *Gregson vs. Gilbert* court document—that is, before she begins to break those words apart to find other words "in" the words of the document, a major strategy of the latter sections of the book. "Os" means "bone(s)" in Latin (and French—a point I'll return to later), and Philip herself describes the poems in the "Os" section as the "bones" of *Zong!*, and the later sections that build on them as the "flesh"—I take this to mean, as

Reed does, that Philip sees these opening sections as structural, as laying the groundwork for the later sections. I'd also note that this exactly what the introduction of the subject, and then the countersubject, would do in a fugue: they introduce the structures that will repeat and develop over the course of the piece.

If a fugue builds a kind of “flesh” or connective tissue from varying and transforming repetitions of structural “bones,” *Zong!* is equally interested in mapping the dissolution of these “bones.” The arc of the poem tracks their transformation into the “bone song” (Philip, 127) or “song of bone” (141) that the poem calls itself: one of the changes the poem works over its course. One of the things that's most structurally interesting in *Zong!* is that it builds in opposite directions simultaneously—as it progresses forward, the reading activity it requires becomes more rhythmically complex (intensification, increased order), and yet the word units dissolve or fragment, the composition becomes visually fieldlike (dissolution, simplification of units, apparently decreased order). In some ways it reads as the poem/song formally mapping the material transformation of the bodies of the drowned Africans in the sea—the “poet of t/roy of the past/that is no and/now who writes o/n water this po/em of lo/ss the shape of th/is now b/ones to sand t/o clams” (Philip, 153). The poems begin as figures against the ground of the page (poems that Philip calls “bones”), and by the end they become dissolved into a field that is at once ground and figure (like the early poems representing water²⁷), and our figural unit switches from “whole poem” to “language fragment,” much as eventually those drowned at sea (wholes) become bones (fragments), which are in turn are dissolved and become part of their environment,

²⁷ *Zong!* ultimately finds how the “bones sing a song of water” (152) through this dissolution, and remakes language as this water/bone song—the first field poem is primarily made up of “water,” with the rest of the poems in the “Os” section being relatively recognizably figures against the ground of the page—by the end of *Zong!*, the field poem/water has been re-signified.

to be taken up into the bodies of other creatures (e.g. “clams”). The poet “writes on water this poem of loss,” the shape of which poem is now “bones to sand”—from bodies to bones to sand marks a process of physical dissolution, much like the words of the text undergo. But, as Philip does this, what she’s also doing is synthesizing a new mode of reading out of the English that she “acknowledges[...] as part of her upbringing” and thus recognizes as impossible to entirely disavow (Masone, 44) even as she also experiences English as etymologically, historically, and orientationally hostile to Blackness, something Reed also points out. One of the things aspect choreography is useful for is operating with frameworks for meaning-making that one finds pragmatically useful or unavoidable but in some way also harmful, partial, or incorrect, much as Minnis does with the available modes of gendered subjectivity in *Baby, I Don’t Care*. Philip uses this technique to handle English.

If I’m arguing that *Zong!* uses a fugal intensification contour to teach/enmesh its reader in its rhythmic-orientational terms, it would be useful to show, more granularly, how the development arc I just described works at the levels of the reading modes, i.e. the fugal “subjects,” required by the text. I take the short poems of the “Os” section to be introducing most of the “subjects” (repeating component(s)) of the fugue, not only in terms of content, but in terms of the recognizable modes of reading the poem choreographs its reader to use. And, in fact, a large proportion of the “content” of the later sections emerges as a potential latent in the unbroken words of the earlier section, as Philip and Reed note—it’s not introduced initially in an available way, and, I argue, emerges as a consequence of the durational pattern the text forms. That’s to say, I want to argue that the *modes of reading* the early sections teach the reader are actually the fugal “subjects” of the text. There are three or four of these fugal subject-like

reading modes introduced in this early section: stitching, visual-rhythmic counterpoint, semantic (English or other), and sub-unity (or “in”ness).

To clarify what I mean by these modes, I’ll briefly show how an early poem in “Os,” “Zong #9” asks its reader to read it, and then skip ahead to a section from the most complex section, “Ferrum,” to show how the “subjects” introduced in the beginning are still repeating, but have been developed. The early sections are in a certain sense the simplest—the least work to read, the closest (materially) to the original document, the fewest words, the most figural visual arrangements, composed (almost entirely) using whole words. When there are poems that look like fragment fields in these two early sections, they’re usually made up primarily of the word “water”—and in this sense might be read as figural in a conventionally concrete poetic sense—water in its figural form might well be thought as a field. But as the sections continue, the words become increasingly fragmented—by the time the reader arrives at the final section, “Ferrum” (to my sense the climactic arrival of the text) there are almost no unfragmented words, each visual island usually consisting of at two to three partial words. For example, here are passages from “Os” and “Ferrum,” respectively (See Figs. 2.3 and 2.4 on following page):

From “Os” (17)

Zong! #9

slaves
to the order in
destroyed
the circumstance in
fact
the property in
subject
the subject in
creature
the loss in
underwriter
to the fellow in
negro
the sustenance
in want

Rufaro Uweimana Nziiche Nafusa Asura

Fig. 2.3 “Zong! #9” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author

From “Ferrum” (156)

d water they be
ing the ro b s bone c ot sand ru lean so mu
sun s be ch heat
ams a story mu
st bear its we ight a la
ss of ten s he was t
oo thin b y far we bree
d then b ed them i
f they bo It tie t
hem *ayud* ame aide
moi crad
le it to no ava il parse the n
egro pe st gna t open and s
ift the ti me sow the ta res of s
in tears of ne groes grow g ibes all rou
nd eat gr ub s the ca ul a ch
arm an a
rk of sou ls under w ater we give or
ders they sta re fer
rum th row de bon
es dem my hope a spi re to th
e sky we gi ve the bon es order what
is she but my story it d ies in tim
e & within this tale time d ies from tun
is stuff so fine y our eyes w ill shine my d
cas i have m es ordres he

Fig. 2.4 excerpt of “Ferrum” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author

As you can see, there are striking formal/visual similarities between them (wavy multicolumnar organization, voids between words), but the selection from “Ferrum” is much more visually complex, more difficult to read, and includes additional features not seen in “Os” (e.g. the “handwriting” script).

So, how does this earlier poem, “Zong #9,” contain in simplified form most of the formal strategies and reading modes (fugal subjects) important in the rest of the book?

FUGAL SUBJECT/READING MODE 1: VISUAL-RHYTHMIC COUNTERPOINT AND STITCHING A BASSLINE

Counterpoint is an integral aspect of fugal composition that Philip even cites in her definition of *Zong!* (“counterpointed fugal antinarrative” (Philip, 189)). Like many of the poems in “Os,” “Zong #9” proposes a visual equivalent to “counterpoint”—there are two clearly visible vertical columns that each follow distinct rhythmic and melodic lines, if you will, yet arrive at a kind of harmonic interdependence. The reader can proceed down either of the two columns separately for most of their length—the left column can read as a list of entities “destroyed[...]in want,” and the right column can read as a prepositional deferral sequence-cum-list, requiring something akin to the cognitive mechanism at play in a child’s song like “The House that Jack Built”²⁸—the anaphoric sequence in this nursery rhyme is always wavering between progressive/processive linear order and “list” (non-progressive). Long “that” sequences, like long “begat” sequences, push on the limits of the mind’s ability to assign historicity (that) and/or depth (in) to a present identity—a “non-contemporaneity of the present,” if you will. In either case, each vertical column proposes a different way of being oriented to language, or of using language to understand a relational proposition—list (spatially separated equality/simultaneity) and cumulative sequence (temporally separated, cumulative identity components), not unlike the problem of the synchronic and diachronic axes of language important to both Joyce and Philip.

²⁸ e.g. “This is the farmer sowing his corn, that kept the cock that crow’d in the morn, that waked the priest all shaven and shorn, that married the man all tatter’d and torn, that kissed the maiden all forlorn, that milk’d the cow with the crumpled horn, that tossed the dog, that worried the cat, that killed the rat, that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built” —Here, the sequence of “that”s kicks the closure of the phrase ever further down the road, and in so doing connects all the objects/figures in it in a linearly contiguous arrangement—their spatial and/relational connectivity is transposed into durational recitation. In “Zong #9,” it’s “in” and not “that” that produces the catalogue

Visual “columns” marking discrete discourses and reading modalities have been an important part of Philip’s formal toolkit at least since her 1988 work *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*—in the major long poem of that book, “Discourse on the Logic of Language,” Philip composes in 4 distinct visual modalities that correspond to 4 discrete discourses—one a kind of fairytale-like narrative about a mother licking her newborn baby (literal mother tongue) [allcaps oriented orthogonally to the other sections, located on the left side of the page], one a short-lined kinetic iterating-lyric reworking of the phrase “mother tongue” in the language sense [narrow stanzas down the middle], one quoting from various historical edicts restricting enslaved persons’ rights to speak their native languages [small justified blocks of floating italicized text], one distilled from the racist history of brain research, especially that concerning regions of the brain that process language [margin-to-margin prose]. (See Fig. 2.5 on following page)

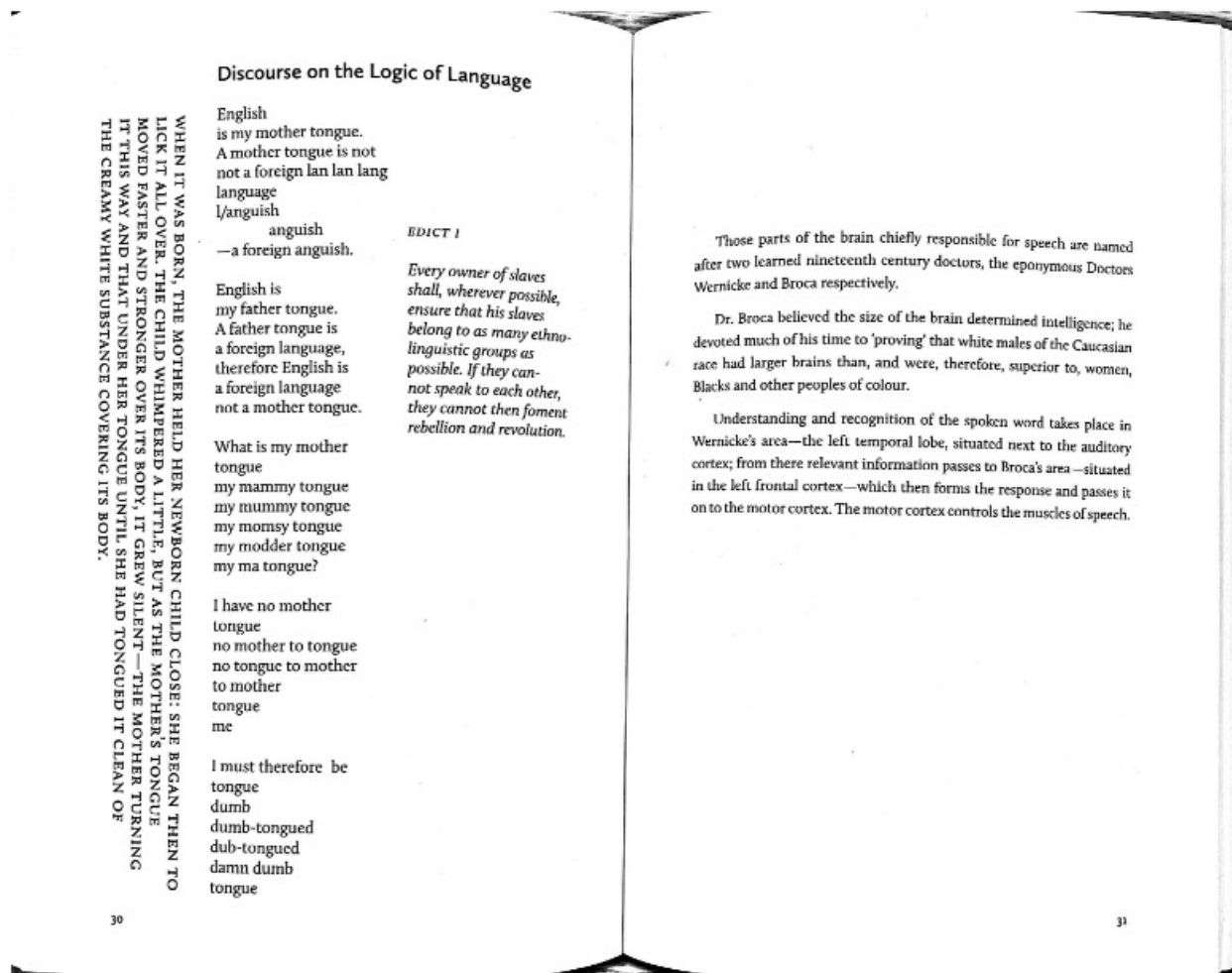


Fig. 2.5 “Discourse on the Logic of Language” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author

In this poem the modalities remain blocky and largely independent—I would argue there’s no rhythmic movement between them, merely a suggestion that these things are simultaneously related, ineluctably co-present, and irreconcilable—existing on the same page but in separate discourse worlds²⁹. Related-and-simultaneously-irreconcilable is integral to Philip’s ethic and sensibility overall, and part of what makes *Zong!* so distinctive and affecting is the way she uses

²⁹ Recalling, perhaps, Fredric Jameson’s characterization of Nam June Paik’s simultaneity video works as emblematically postmodern

aspect choreography to bring irreconcilable frameworks for meaning into relation differently than she has before. I'll discuss later how Philip adds irreconcilable models of temporality to the set of interwoven discourse-specific reading modalities, but for now a bit more about how this “visual-rhythmic counterpoint” works in this poem, and how it connects to the next fugal “subject,” what I’m calling SUB-UNITY.

In “Zong #9” the reader can proceed down either column independently for most of its length, but then, the “to” beginning the line “to the fellow in” throws a wrench in the easy continuation down the right-hand column (the property in the subject in the loss in...to the fellow in?)—it’s a strong push to integrate the lefthand column, to switch the reading modality the reader had been proceeding in—

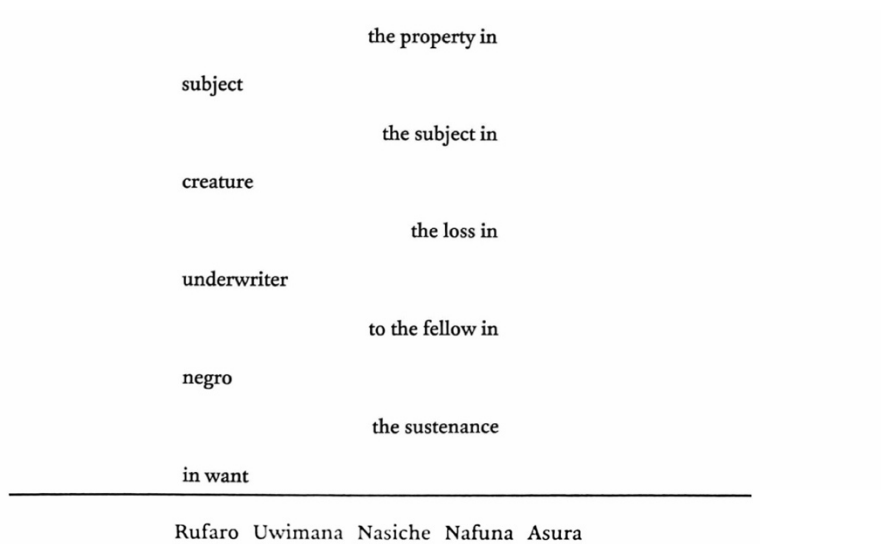


Fig. 2.6 excerpt of “Zong! #9” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author

I.e. this moment necessitates a switch to a shuttling or stitching mode of reading, an alternating between the columns. It’s also the moment when the word “underwriter” appears—in the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case, the “underwriters” are insurers who see the enslaved Africans as

property, not as people. But in the context of this poem, with the names of the murdered Africans³⁰ *written under* the poem by Philip/Boateng, and in the context of the lefthand list, a list that, except for the beginning and end, seems to group by similarity³¹, the reader likely hears a secondary and possibly tertiary³² echo to “underwriter,” especially since it’s the moment where the list sequences require the reader to renegotiate their reading mode, draws attention to the sense-making activity they are doing via language. That’s to say, the moment of counterpoint/modal renegotiation is the moment when it’s possible to see Philip making an inherited term (i.e. “underwriter”) mean differently, by changing the framework in which the term might mean—i.e. from “language about the world” to “language constituting the poem”—placing the “under” into the meaning-conferring framework of the page (as spatial configuration), rather than the metaphorical “under” of “underwriter.” This kind of re-signifying work via aspect/framework switch happens throughout *Zong!*, and reaches its full realization in “Ferrum,” which might be seen as the realization of a re-seeing of language, a processual re-working of English such that it’s possible to tell this story/song in it.

There’s another really important point to be made here, though, about the way “Zong #9” and the other early poems teach the reader to be rhythmically oriented. Even if the reader began at the beginning by reading in this stitching mode it’s likely they’d also at some point consider the vertical columns, and in so doing, re-arrive at this moment or problem. That’s to say, the poem manages to establish vertical columns that require orientationally distinct ways of operating with language, but which the poem eventually forces the reader to read together. The

³⁰ Philip fabricated these names, but they’re based on historical names common in the regions from which the enslaved people aboard the *Zong!* were likely taken

³¹ another effect of using language in “list mode”

³² The named people might also be seen as the “underwriters” of the *Zong!-the-poem-as-reparative* effort

shuttling version's reading modality is actually quite similar to that of the right hand column (deferral and connectivity sequence), but including the lefthand column changes the rhythmic character of the reading experience in a meaningful way. The reader must physically move their eyes back and forth—that sounds basic, but it's actually quite *felt*—the poem synchronizes a small physical choreography with the synthetic sense-making work it's demanding—it combines spatial and orientational logics not by blending them, but by sustaining its reader in a pattern of switching between them. Also significant is that this switching introduces a slightly longer delay—the reader must spend more time in suspension waiting to complete each unit, literally as their eyes move across the blank. This delay³³ is intervallic, rhythmic—and it shortens spatially as it “lengthens” conceptually as *Zong!* builds towards its most maximal section, “Ferrum.” The text proves actually quite reliable in the ways it provides completion across these intervals, and it slowly introduces new modal switches (e.g. languages, fonts, speakers/consciousness centers, characters, temporal stances) much as Chelsey Minnis does in *Baby, I Don't Care*—the effect of which is that the reader remains rhythmically oriented despite the increasingly complex aspect choreography the text is asking them to perform. Even in “Ferrum,” the way completion arrives across the intervals produces a pattern of expectation, i.e. rhythm³⁴, that is integral to the work of the text, more on this later.

It's useful now to briefly look at a section from “Ferrum,”³⁵ where the clarity of these two neat vertical columns has been fugally meshworked into a wavery net of interwoven

³³ like that Reed points up, the one arising from around the non-transparency of concretist language use, that introduces a delay into the making-of-sense-via-language

³⁴ I'm using “rhythm” in musicologist Christopher Hasty's sense, as he articulates it in *Meter as Rhythm* (more on this later)

³⁵ from p. 156 of *Zong!*

vertical-ish orders³⁶ where multiple languages, fonts, reading lines, and perspectives are being moved between.

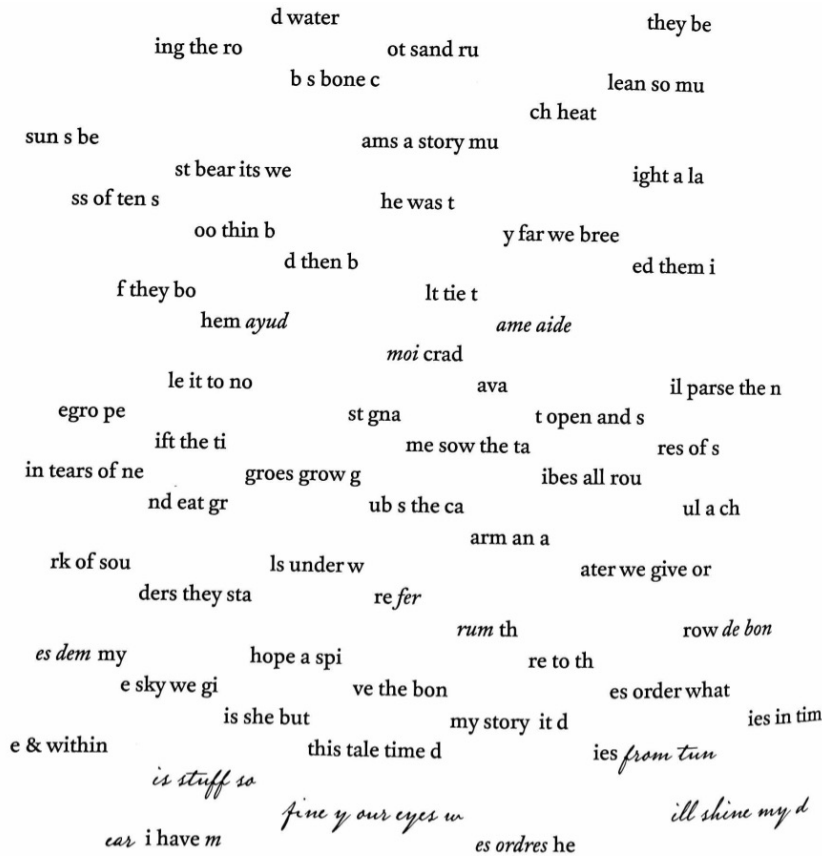


Fig. 2.7 Excerpt of “Ferrum” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author

The gestalt of a page in “Ferrum” is most often “field”—like the first water-field poem in the “Os” section, but on a much larger scale, reclaiming the status of “ground” from the page³⁷. “Ferrum” marks *Zong!* arriving at the bone/water song described earlier. I argue that these field poems actually result from just a fugal repetition and development of the visual-contrapuntal

³⁶ I think here of György Ligeti’s “micro-polyphony,” which he describes as being a texture like a “spiderweb”

³⁷ By comparison, the first poem in “Os” takes up only part of the page, allowing the white space surrounding the “water” field to still read as the “ground” on which the field figure appears

stitching mode of reading introduced in the frequently multi-columnar poems of “Os.” In “Zong #9” for instance, the reader was ultimately forced to read the poem by “stitching” together the columns, moving their eyes back and forth as they did so. On this page, like the two columns in “Zong #9,” the reader moves from left to right from island to island, and then at the right-hand edge must skip down and all the way left in order to follow the (relatively stable) syntax—a kind of meta-version of the jump between columns in “Zong #9.” As in “Zong #9,” there are vertical (and now also diagonal) reading lines that the page offers, and which the eye naturally slides down (often along emergent grouping orders that suggest themselves, frequently associative, thematic, or sonic—for example “water...sand...bone” in the first 3 lines). But these other possibilities don’t sustain the reader in the “song”—they’re a kind of flight or variation available, but rest for support on the bassline of the shuttling reading modality that rhythmically sustains the poem as participatory motion. In other words, these other lines are ultimately secondary to a kind of bassline left-to-right-top-to-bottom stitching mode. Their competing claims enliven this more metrical rhythm, much as a-metrical rhythmic or melodic sub-lines might, woven into a relatively metrically regular piece of music.

Thinking back to the comparison with the ee cummings poem (“The Sky Was”) now, it becomes apparent that a key part of the difference between that poem’s effect and that of “Ferrum” has to do with the way this stitching mode has been built to, and what it means to a reader 150 pages into *Zong!*: by the time one arrives at the semi-continuous field poems of “Ferrum,” the deferral-then-click of words and phrases coming to completion is very familiar, and its complexity in “Ferrum” feels like a repetition-and-development from its simpler structure

in “Os.” The stitching constitutes a kind of “cognitive beat,” the reliability of which helps produce *Zong!* as a fundamentally rhythmic experience—the reader develops an expectation (like the listener who can clap on a beat they’ve anticipated), that these kinds of retroactive modifications will arrive after a visual jump. It’s this expectation that marks the text as rhythmic, and it’s this cognitive-perceptual rhythm that contributes to *Zong!*’s uniquely experientially forceful deployment of what are otherwise familiar ostranenie techniques.

The stitching mode of reading itself requires frequent renegotiations of aspects in two directions—the reader is building multiple kinds of sense-units—words, phrases, even occasionally sentences—that they’re stringing together like chemically reactive beads on a string. For example, “*moi crad[...]*le it to no[...]*ava[...]*il parse the n[...]*egro.*” “Crad” would, by itself, be pronounced with a short “a” sound, which the reader must revise to a long “a” sound upon reaching the “le it to no” text island—as they synthesize “cradle” from “crad” and “le” they re-signify and re-sonify “crad” as part-belonging-to-unit, recognizing it as English, and as modified sonically by the word-terminal “e.” The re-remembering Philip and her critics point to requires rhythmically patterned aspect change.

It’s useful here to briefly flag the way I’m thinking about rhythm, through musicologist Christopher Hasty’s process-philosophy based model, as he outlines in his landmark work *Meter as Rhythm*.

Hasty’s project in this book is primarily to revise how music theorists deal with musical meter, which he contends has historically been treated as a kind of “empty container” for the events of rhythm, or a measure of the duration of those events (Hasty, 20). He argues that the

ways we have thought of the relation of meter and rhythm are premised on an erroneously spatialized model of time and duration, and that time behaves in experience fundamentally differently than space does. An adequate model of meter, a temporal structure, would need to account for this difference. Attending to it provides new affordances for how we understand not only meter, but also rhythmic experience and duration. It's this aspect of Hasty's work which is most useful for my project, in that it develops a robust model of expectation development and kinesthetic involvement in rhythm/meter³⁸, and how that relates to being oriented to time and the world generally. Hasty arrives a way of thinking about duration filtered through primarily Bergson, James, and Whitehead³⁹ that allows for a conception of the "now" as a "continually changing perspective on becoming" (76), the site for potential action continually revised by a "taking into account" of relevancies (past) for potential becoming (future) (77). That's to say, on this model, the past is not fixed, because "its relevance to or efficacy for becoming is continually changing. Past and future are not timelessly present, but only present in a now which is continually new and has to do with taking into account what is relevant to or efficacious for becoming" (ibid). It sounds as though Hasty might be describing the experience of reading *Zong!* when he says "since the now is continually new, what is felt as an event might emerge only after the event has begun, as it were, retrospectively, in the light of a new perspective (78)—"crad" is felt as the language event "cradle" only after the jump across the space to "le," for example. Rhythm, for Hasty, is a coherent way of reckoning with discontinuity: "rhythmic continuity is a "holding together" of parts in transition or in a gradually temporally unfolding process of

³⁸ Hasty gets rid of the distinction between them, saying there are really only metrical and non-metrical rhythms (Hasty 136), and that both are simply the durational experience of projection (122)

³⁹ Though there's also a strong chime with Husserl's tripartite (primary impression, protention, retention) model of temporal experience.

becoming parts” (67). For Hasty what is rhythmic is always “articulated” —containing its own discontinuity even as it orients its listener in a durationally connected and connecting “now.” This notion of the now as continual reworking of the imbrication of relevancies (past) and potentials (future) allows Hasty to articulate a notion of “meter as process” organized by what he calls “projection” (142). The listener develops projective “anticipatory schemata”⁴⁰ (94), wherein the relationship of ongoing events to completed events is held in the expectation as projective potential (84), consistent realization of which enhances a feeling of determinacy. “When there is an actual duration C’ that emerges as a reproduction of the first event [C]’s duration, I will say that the projected potential has been realized” (84). This is akin to the “click” or “completion” beat I described happening in *Zong!*. When the projected potential is denied, it produces a feeling of incompatibility, or “breach of promise” (91). Too many breaches of promise, or too much deferral dissolves the force of expectation, or the projective-activity inducing experience of rhythm⁴¹. This is why the vastly complex and irregular recurrences of *Finnegan’s Wake* do not produce rhythmic orientation. Projective activity undergirds the “kinesthetic involvement” (223) Hasty sees as central to the experience of rhythm, which he traces to a kind of naturalism (but it makes sense): “I suggest that the “reason” we can feel a determinate potential for reproduction [of an event] is that we *must* in order to act and survive in a world that involves so much periodicity. If we are to coordinate our actions with periodic phenomena, we must have time to prepare our actions, as in the case of clapping with a third beat” (94). So a perception of rhythm (i.e. expectation for a way of being oriented in discontinuity) produces kinesthetic and projective involvement on the part of the listener (reader), and has to do with how they orient themselves in

⁴⁰ a term Hasty borrows from Neisser

⁴¹ This will be picked up and developed in the discussion of *Zong!* in relation to the fugal poetics of *Finnegan’s Wake* and other works of experimental 20th century literature

a world—all of which *Zong!* literalizes through the synchronizations of its physico-spatial and aspect choreographies in a way that allows its reader to be oriented differently to language over time.

FUGAL SUBJECT/READING MODE 2: SUB-UNITY/IN-NESS

One of *Zong!*'s other major fugal “subjects” or reading modalities introduced in the beginning has to do with seeing words “in” other words, like the “past drowned in now” (Philip, 141). As Reed says of Philip’s work, she breaks words along “phonetic and morphological seams” in a way that surfaces terms from other cultures (Reed, 52). She finds other languages and names within the units English proposes. This is also a rhythmic question—so much of how we develop rhythmic expectations has to do with how we group. It’s also not a new procedure—it’s central to Cecilia Vicuña’s *Palabramás* series begun in the 1960s, for example, wherein Vicuña “opens” words to find other words inside them (Vicuña⁴²) as a form of resistance to dominant regimes of meaning. Finding words in other words is central to the formal procedure and general punning at work in Derrida’s *De La Grammatologie*—like Derrida, Philip makes us hear words as “articulated” units, hear the “brisure” inherent in the “unity” they propose—Derrida, like Vicuña and Philip, is levying a critique against Western metaphysics via this procedure, which echoes through the form/material of language what he’s arguing propositionally. Similarly in *Traité du Tout-Monde*, Glissant, who valorizes the oral qualities of language against what he considers the Westernizing/colonial force of the written⁴³, repeatedly makes the reader hear the “parle” (“speak[ing]”) in “Parlement” (site of the making of written laws), the “cri” (“cry”) in

⁴² Lecture given at the Neubauer Colloquium, 2018

⁴³ an interesting reversal of the Derridean version of the problem

écriture (“writing”), and so on. So, in short, no matter what monolithic episteme you take aim against, or what you think its incorrect undergirding assumptions are, provided you think language is important, this “breaking words” along their various “seams” toward other meanings seems like a relatively standard procedure in your (Poststructuralist) fight against this episteme and its monolithic-ness. Philip participates in this tradition, but combines the breaking with rhythm, which has different effects.

Referring back to “Zong #9,” and its introduction of the basic forms of these reading modes, the connector between phrases is consistently “in”: the “property *in* subject” the “fellow *in* the sustenance,” etc.

Fig. 2.8 Excerpt of “Zong! #9” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author

This thematic question of “in” -ness as a predicative mode that allows the surfacing of surprising predicates (or: the recasting of subjects *as* predicates, an aspect change) recurs throughout the text as well—the “beat in bone” (137), the “ever in eden” (149), “i seek the skin in kin they the kin in skin” (164). This reading for “in” ness is a way the poem cues the kinds of context

switches that necessitate aspect change. As is apparent just in this short developmental sequence

I've shown with the examples transcribed here, there's both an intensification and a progression from asking the reader to operate with the terms (the x and y of an "x in y" framing) primarily representationally, to asking them to see them materially ("in" is literally in the words "kin" and "skin") as well. This last example, from "Ferrum," speaks of course to the brutally "rend"ing process of racialization slavery produced—the next lines following are "in we rend/er them in/to n/egroes into b/one s/and & wat/er" (164-5). The "they" who seek "kin" in "skin" are "rend" -ered into "negroes," ("negroes" marking the entrance of the Africans into an English racializing logic), and from there into "b/one s/and & wat/er." The way the text is arranged makes the "one s" in bone(s) visible—bones are already "parts" of wholes, but this choice makes even clearer the way Africans are rendered into "one s" —separated from their kin, linguistically isolated⁴⁴, and also fed through the extractive and dehumanizing machine of racial capitalism as a labor force to produce the "ones" and zeros of their final dematerialization into financialized capital. The section from "Ferrum" looks like this on the page:

ruth of my wa *rds finds y*
ou i ron for òg *ún water for ò*
sun sang for s *ango i seek the sk*
i n in kin they the k
in in sk in we rend
er them in to n
egroes into b
one s and & wat

Fig. 2.9 Excerpt of "Ferrum" by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author

⁴⁴ A point Philip makes in the "Discourse on the Logic of Language" poem—the "edicts" she quotes include one which is a suggestion to slave ship operators to try to collect people from many different language groups, because if there are large groups of enslaved people on board who are able to communicate, it tends to "foment rebellion" (Philip 1988 30)

The spacing makes the reader aware that the letter “n”’s name is pronounced like “in,” and the way the islands are situated, it’s easier to find the “in”’s than the “skin” and “kin” and “into” that they came from—the interstitial material that organizes relation (“in”) is in fact more easily legible, in this context, than are the objects/concepts/words being organized into relation by it. In so doing, Philip also suggests that the things we see “as” objects contain always already the logics that make us organize them in the ways that we do, another aspect change: seeing the grammar instead of the objects it organizes. This other mode of “in” reading has two other important affordances here that I’ll quickly point out.

One, by the time we get to this moment in “Ferrum,” the attentive reader is an expert in the choreographic procedure of synthesizing words, and has been taught by the text to see the floating islands and word parts as “bones” (more on this in the next section), the text as a “bone song,” and, I argue, their work as finding “the beat in bone” (137)—as they synthesize rhythmically, they are literally re-membling wholes, but on different terms; in certain ways this beads-on-a-string stitching left-to-right-top-to-bottom reconstructive process is just to re-English the stranged language of *Zong!*, but what’s different is the rhythm of sense-making, and what the attention has been trained to see and notice. That’s to say, what’s been remade is the rhythmic contour of sense-making: the perceptual-cognitive prosody. It’s a familiar point that the English language has an accentual-syllabic rhythmic contour that’s integral to how it is processed by its listener and is a pragmatically encoded part of its information relay function: we call that “prosody.” What’s less well characterized is the rhythmic contour of *sense-making*, but what *Zong!* shows us is how integral that rhythm is, and how it can be reworked through “kinetic

involvement” on the part of the listener to make English mean differently. That’s to say, rhythmic participation *is* how re-membering is possible, for *Zong!*.

Two, the “in”-ness also has to do with the way voices and perspectives work in this text. The text brings its reader into a rhythm of sense-making that remains consistent even as we move between (“in”to) ostensibly irreconcilable perspectives in an unmarked way—the text speaks variously “as” enslaved Africans, as Philip/Boateng, as slave ship operators, as others—we move fluidly between consciousness centers. Often their phrases complete each other, in a way that recalls Racinian stichomythy (wherein opposed or arguing characters often speak lines whose ends rhyme) or other device wherein irreconcilable perspectives are held together through form. In the section quoted above, the texture of the language is largely unperturbed, but we switch in an unmarked way from an “i” who “seeks the skin in kin” to a “we” who “render[s] them into negroes.” The reader has to re-cast the issuing site/center of consciousness of the “first person perspective”—the text calls attention to, and teaches its reader to perform, this aspect switch, a type frequently it employs. We might read that “i” as already speaking as a slaver/colonialist, but it’s not clear—especially coming as it does after a sequence enumerating dedications to Yoruban gods (Ògún, Òsun, and Sango). Throughout the text, the first person perspective often inhabits what seems fairly clearly to be the perspective of a colonist or someone involved in the slave trade—this tends to happen especially, but in no way exclusively, in the handwriting-esque font that gets introduced in “Ferrum,” and seems to record the anxieties about slavery (or perhaps even the *Zong* incident specifically) of someone often writing to (t)“ruth” (151,164). “(T)”ruth” is also a major addressee of a perspective that seems to belong to Philip/Boateng elsewhere in the text (148, 93, 123). Ruth also seems at times to be an enslaved woman (164), and at times the biblical Eve (162), at times a personification of “truth,” (164), at times the muse of the writer

(127). But by the end, this same handwriting font is being used by “Wale,” an enslaved man, to write to “Sade” and “Ade,” his wife and son (172). These formally unmarked aspect switches, between reading the “i” as the slaver or as an enslaved person, as a dead or as a living one, mythic/imagined person and a historical one, etc., situated as they are atop the steady beat of completion/synthesis happening as the reader re-members language, involves the reader in the process of negotiating the irreconcilabilities introduced by making sense in/through English, rather than just providing them the delay or defamiliarization-space to perceive them. As mentioned earlier, Philip considers English “etymologically hostile” and “expressive of the nonbeing of the African,” but also is a language she refuses to disavow as an artist. Aspect choreography & perceptual/rhythmic involvement & development in a cumulative fugal mode allow Philip to hold together these irreconcilabilities in an experientially novel and affecting way.

FUGAL SUBJECT/READING MODE THREE: SIMPLE VECTORING OF CONSISTENT VERBIVOCOVISUAL PUNS: OS/EAU/OH/O/US

The final “fugal subject” or reading modality I’ll characterize here has to do with sound and visuality. Like Joyce, Philip uses punning to progressively change what a word means (language...landeguage...longuewedge...geoglyphy), but instead of that happening once over 250 pages, among hundreds of other such threads, the same pun sequence happens over and over again in close step. Specifically, *Zong!* teaches its reader to attend to the aspect change

relationships possible between various configurations of “os,” “eau,” “oh,” “o,” and “us” as visual, sonic, and semantic elements. The first poem in the “Os” section, “Zong #1,” is a visual and sonic field, and is unlike the rest of the poems in that section—we might read *Zong!* as a process of getting back to this poem, but making it mean differently. Here’s what the first page of “Os” (and *Zong!*) looks like this:

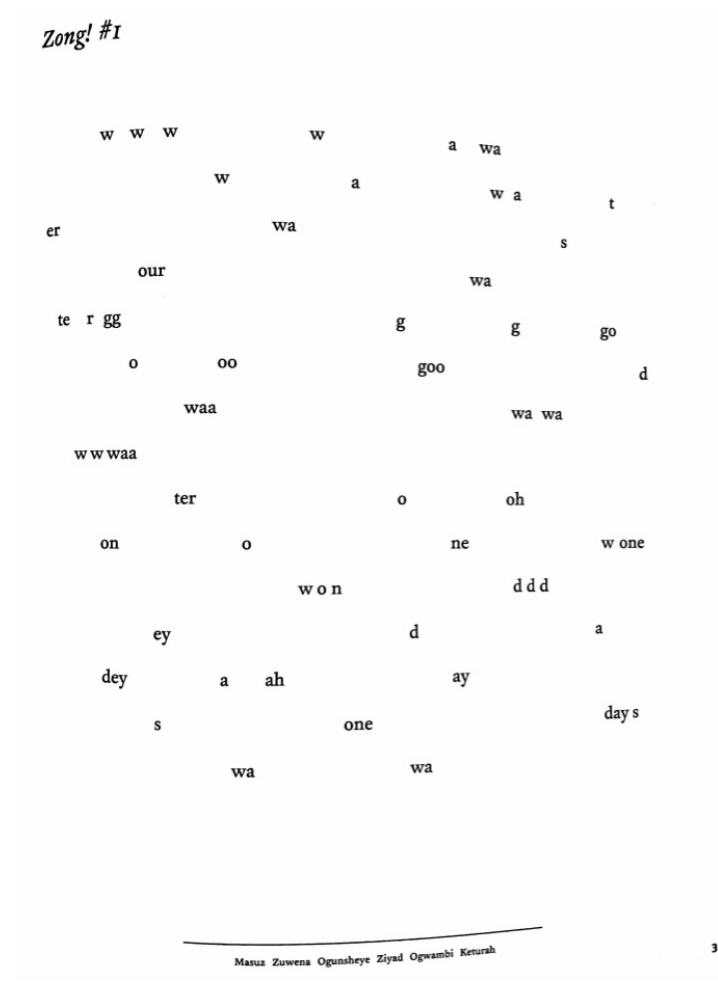


Fig. 2.10 “Zong! #1” by M. NourbeSe Philip. Photo by author

The gestalt is “field,” but also “circle”—a visual “o”—a vortex around an empty center. Numerous “o” letters float free on the page, and so do a lot of “waaaaa” “wa” and other word fragments that seem more sonic than semantic. The text will eventually make clear a central pun/new visual-sonic connectivity the reader likely can’t see yet—the French “eau” (82) is pronounced like “oh” is pronounced like “os” (plural), which looks like “os” (singular) which is pronounced like “us” (water becomes song becomes bone become us-become-water)—in some ways we might read *Zong!* as a process which fabricates this connection and then makes it felt—the processual network that sediments those meanings together into a rhythm, rather than a simultaneity. Here is a page central to this process, from the “Ventus” (fourth) section (63) (See Fig. 2.11 on following page)

produce “sos”—we’ve been cued to look for this by the fragmentary narrative of “rose” who “found Africa underwater, proved justice dangerous, the law a crime, she died”—someone who desperately needed help that was not given to her in the face of systemic injustice. Through the swirl of “s” and “o” the reader arrives at “os.” If they know French (or Latin), they probably hear something close to “us”— and the text toggles between the italic and non-italic versions of “os” in a way that draws attention to the word, and the reiteration in italics suggests that something has changed, a cue for the reader to think about other ways of reading “os.” Likely the reader will arrive at the fact that “os” can also be the plural “bones” in French, and when it’s plural, it’s pronounced “oh” like “eau” which means “water,” something the text also teaches the reader to attend to. Immediately after this italics toggle, the reader is told to read “os” as “bone,” and then as “us” (“us us *os*/save us *os*”). The other pronunciation is also preserved here, however—the repeated phrase-terminal “os” readily reads also as an emphatic “oh,” a musical groan (another thing the text emphasizes throughout)⁴⁵. What arises in this passage is not ambiguity, or just a “swirl of possibilities,” but a precisely choreographed series of cues to switch the aspect the reader is seeing. This kind of choreography will be demanded of the reader throughout the book, paired still with a fairly metrical bassline of completion beats that sustain the reader in a durational/rhythmic mode of being oriented to the text.

⁴⁵ The phrase that opens the first field section, “Sal,” is “water parts/the *oba* sobs” (59), with the “a/r/t” similarity of “water parts”⁴⁵ drawing attention to the similarity of “oba” and “sobs,” and the pivot over the sound of the “o” in each word—we’ll also come to see “oh” as a groan, a sob, repeatedly, later in the text. “over and over the *oba* sobs” (173) is also the phrase that ends “Ferrum,” and it is one of the phrases that recurs throughout, increasing in frequency in “Ferrum”—e.g. “the *oba* sobs” (128), “that phrase again the *oba* sobs” (148), “the *oba* sobs again” (168)—often marking its own recurrence (“again” “again”).

This attentiveness to visual/sonic switches, especially this particular set (os/oh/o/eau/os/us) will repeat with increasing frequency as the text goes on, with periodic stretto⁴⁶-like intensification of the repetition, the page above being a good example.

There are other fugal subjects that circulate, repeat, and intensify in *Zong!*, but I'd argue these are the three main ones, whose structuring force within the rhythmically orienting fugal matrix contributes most to the emergence of the "hauntological" or disturbed relationship between space/time Reed sees in *Zong!*. *Zong!* not only "disturbs" or "produces haunting" or an eternal if increasingly historically freighted present, though. Philip has remade the terms for orientation, sense-making, and temporal experience. *Zong!* has strong affective and experientially organizing force, because Philip has made time move, actually, and we can know because change happens in the course of the text—Philip remakes the reader's terms of language (and temporal) legibility along perceptual-rhythmic lines. *Zong!* doesn't just shock, defamiliarize, or, relatedly, "temporalize" language processing to allow space to see differently, it produces a participatory structure wherein a new way of being oriented is synthesized in time.

IV. CODA: TEMPORAL/ORIENTATIONAL AFFORDANCES

What I've shown here is how *Zong!*'s particularly perceptual-rhythmic deployment of aspect choreography creates an intensity of readerly "kinesthetic involvement" that makes the impossible time and non-language of the text somehow experientially inhabitable, despite the

⁴⁶ a type of intensification passage common in fugal composition, where a new repetition of the subject in a different voice begins before the current repetition has ended—it produces a kind of acceleration and densification

lack of a narrative or other familiar kind of orientation. *Zong!*'s aspect choreography teaches its reader a new rhythm of sense-making in language, one which remakes the reader's orientation to language and duration on new terms, new terms in which they are rhythmically sustained. Like *Finnegan's Wake*, *Zong!* is deeply invested in questions of temporality and language, but despite its obvious kinship with Joyce's High Modernist masterpiece, the way it uses fugal composition and aspect change is fundamentally different: it creates sustained orientation, rather than a tumbling disorientative fog with densifying flashes of recognition. In its performance of aspect choreography, *Zong!* marks a specifically 21st century (post postmodern?) way of reckoning with irreconcilable models for meaning and orientation, asking its reader to shift their model of recognition from cognitive object-based terms, to perceptual-rhythmic ones through the time-formed experiential force of the poem. The poem takes as its form the repatterning of the attending mind's appearance to itself over time. Put differently, *Zong!* demands that its reader move as it does in order to perceive it—like other aspect choreographies, its experiential force is only available as a choreographed performance, its form a rhythm of aspect switches performed in conjunction with a formal developmental arc that in *Zong!*'s case maps to a musical fugue.

The boldest version of this claim that I might make would go something like this. Philip's work feels that there is something wrong with time, in a way resonant with Sharpe's temporality of the "wake," or Walcott's "Atlantic now." In Joyce, though time is complex and/or staged within objects, it is not in itself unbearable—objects can be encountered as already whole. In *Zong!*, time as given offers only unbearable formats for experience and relation, and so must be remade—Philip uses language objects (which can structure temporal experience) to remake the

framework under which they can be perceived, over time. The objects become, therefore, themselves processes whose structuration scaffolds a reformatting of time as a medium, as an unfolding but stable rhythmic orientation.

I might go further and claim that *Zong!*, by remaking the terms under which the object as recognizable form can be constituted, also thereby remakes its *reader*—time is, after all, your format of experience. The text is one which requires a choreographic performance from its reader, who, in performing the aspect choreography of the text, reformats their own expectations and way of being oriented on the terms *Zong!* offers. If we accept that a figure or a self only becomes legible against a specific ground or framework of legibility, then in performing *Zong!*, which is a framework of legibility on new terms, the reader performs themselves into being or orientation on these terms. *Zong!*, perhaps like a more effective version of the spaces of 90s relational aesthetics artworks, allows for a temporary restitching of the participant's ways of being oriented in the world, a reformatting from which they might return residually reattuned.

CHAPTER 3
COMEDY, HORROR, AND CONTEMPORARY RELATIONALITY: ASPECT
CHOREOGRAPHY IN PATRICK BRICE’S *CREEP* (2014)

The subreddit “Thanks, I Hate It” (r/TIHI) started in November of 2018. It turns an earlier commenting trend into a recognizable aesthetic category. Know Your Meme says that the origin of the “Thanks, I Hate It” categorizing phrase is unknown, but tracks a spike in its usage in comments under “strange images” in the fall of 2017, citing as a representative example a comment by user Luxocell under an image of a typically helmet-wearing anime character redrawn without his helmet, but with his skin in its shape:

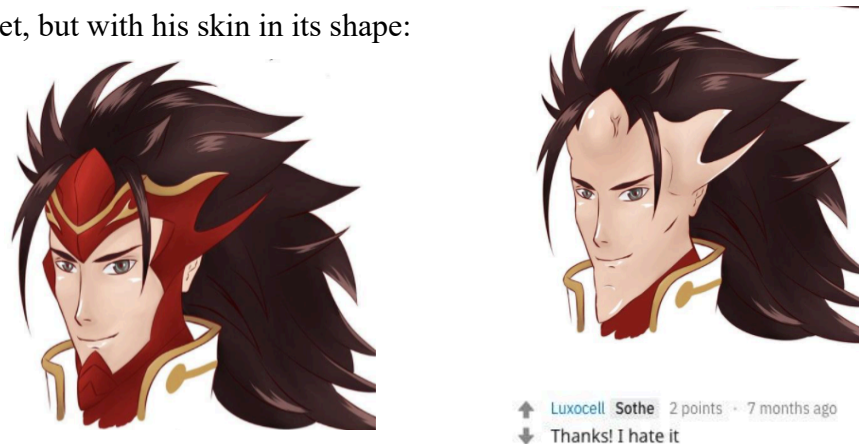


Fig. 3.1 Screen capture of an early example of r/TIHI from Know Your Meme (2019)

A February 2019 *Mashable* article about r/TIHI cites founder “Mark” as saying the subreddit is intended as “a place for all the beautiful posts that are both likable and hatable at the same time” (Mashable). An increasingly popular r/, the subreddit has 1.7 million subscribers as of April 2023, a significant expansion from the 166,000 Know Your Meme cites in March 2019. Looking at the top posts on the subreddit yields a mixture of general types, most oriented by a kind of bad

synthesis or surprisingly unpleasant recombination of ways of seeing. Some of the top posts follow no rules that I could discern, but exceptions aside, r/TIHI emerges as a recognizable aesthetic category of unnerving condensation or recombinatory synthesis:

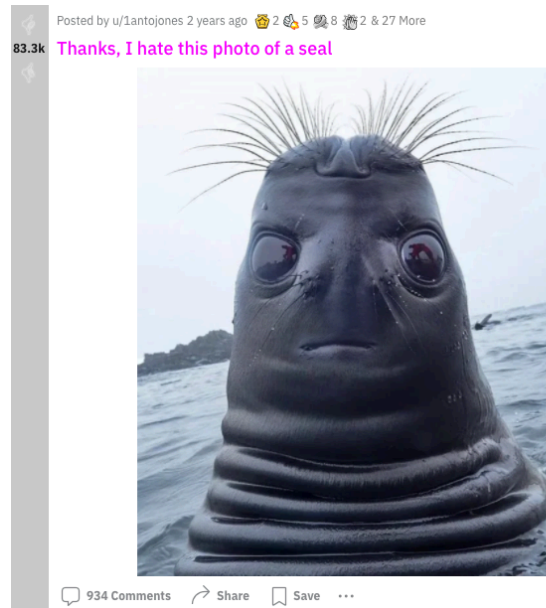
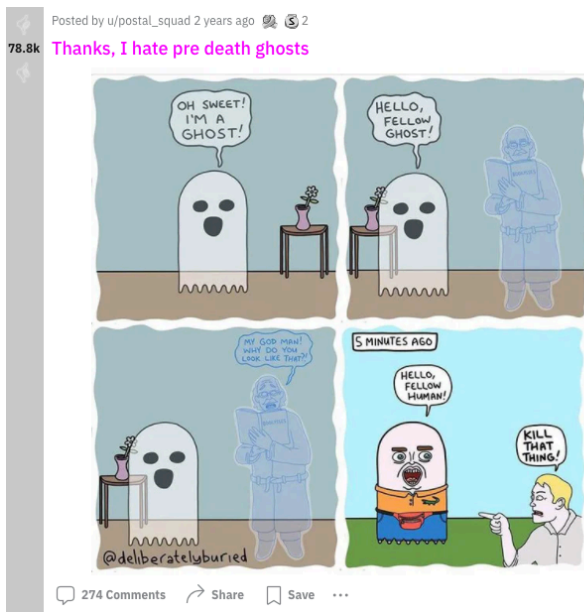


Fig. 3.2 Screen captures of posts from r/TIHI. Screen captures by author (2022)

Whether it's a cartoon-style ghost rendered corporeal and detailed, an oddly oriented seal's face that looks more like a very strange other face (the photograph's indexical quality means that other face reads as being in "our" world), a child described as a "skin dog," or a faceswap that paradoxically strengthens the figure's legibility as the person whose face has been replaced, r/TIHI users seem most often to recognize objects and images as paradigmatically r/TIHI when their forms express a kind of category error, or cue (mis)recognition or aspect change in some way¹.

In *Philosophy of Horror: Paradoxes of the Heart*, Noël Carroll mobilizes anthropologist Mary Douglas's famous concept of "impurity,"² or the affective force of cultural category errors, to characterize the monsters that tend to appear in horror movies and literature. "Following Douglas," he writes, "I initially speculate that an object or being is impure if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless" (Carroll 1990 32), and notes, also following Douglas, that such culturally "impure" objects are generally taken to be invested with magical powers (34). He reads category-confounding horror monsters as generating a mixture of fear and disgust. They work as "challenges to the foundations of a culture's way of thinking" (34), since they involve "a mixture of what is normally distinct" (33). These monsters are not only physically threatening, they are "cognitively threatening" (34), since they do not fit "the conceptual scheme of the characters nor, more importantly, that of the reader[/viewer]" (ibid). They usually take a form that expresses a "conflict between two or more standing cultural categories" (43). That's to say, the form of these monsters *is* a conflict—they combine that

¹ r/TIHI has certain affective and aesthetic similarities with r/cursed, but r/cursed seems less interested in synthesis and framework recombination, and more interested in overlooked or background incursions of the supernatural, traces of violence, the spooky, etc., overlaid with a kind of muted and nihilistic giggling

² as she articulates it in *Purity and Danger*

which is normally held apart by a cultural framework for perception and sense-making. They produce a “linkage of distinct and/or opposed categories” (47) in one body. Carroll gives examples of the kinds of categories typically violated by these “combinatory” “horrific creatures” (43), including inside/outside (e.g. the brain monster of *Fiend Without a Face*), animate/inanimate (e.g. haunted houses), and animal/vegetable (e.g. a sentient bipedal bloodsucking carrot), among others (45).

Like Carroll’s monsters, r/TIHI objects frequently condense something like discrete categories. These objects are often revulsion-inducing, like Carroll argues intercategory horror monsters are, but as r/TIHI founder “Mark” puts it, it’s more like “beautiful and hatable at the same time” rather than...horrifying. Granted, another of Carroll’s central arguments about how horror works is that the formal machineries and character reactions in horror novels and films “teach” their viewer/reader the “appropriate way to respond to them” (31)—r/TIHI objects are staged and reacted to as funny and a little upsetting, not entirely horrifying. They’re also not narrative, something Carroll sees as central to horror’s ability to generate its signature emotion, which he dubs “art-horror” (13). I argue there’s another fundamental difference as well, however, that has to do with the particular kinds of category error at play in many of the r/TIHI objects—one that helps clarify not only the particularity of the feeling they induce, but also speaks to what I consider a distinctive aspect of 21st century internet and internet-inflected aesthetics: specifically an interest in multiple frameworks for meaning and orientation, combined with a kind of relational instability (dis)organized by conflicting orientational modalities and lack of stably shared horizons.

Carroll and Douglas point to how magical and/or horrifying beings and objects tend to blur or collapse category distinctions assumed by the culture in which they arise. That’s to say,

they transgress the organizing boundaries within a given framework for perceiving and organizing one's expectations of a shared world and others within it. Carroll and Douglas are speaking quite broadly about a "cultural framework," but what they're using it to mean seems to be something like 'structure organizing expectations, relation, and how meaning is assigned.' If horror monsters combine categories from one framework, what seems to be happening in r/TIHI (often in addition to this Carroll/Douglas intercategory state) is a condensation of multiple frameworks for sense-making, rather than multiple categories within one framework. Chess-checkers, rather than horse-bishop: a structurally different kind of nonsense. Here is a popular r/TIHI post from 2019 that makes the mechanism particularly clear:



Fig. 3.3 Screen capture of "Thanks, I Hate Horseshoes" from r/TIHI. Capture by author.

“Thanks, I hate horseshoes” is a bit of a one-liner, but it’s also hard to stop thinking about—as is the funny text exchange it’s staged in. The perceptual and symbolic movements the object cues are also more complex than they appear at one’s first feeble, irritated, lightly repulsed giggle. The “horseshoe” in question is an interframework pun: the viewer must bring multiple frameworks to bear on it in order to make sense of it—there is no one preexisting framework it can ultimately be placed in. The viewer has to look at the object, discard its first apparent ontological status (freestanding object, commodity, potentially for use and/or visual contemplation/collecting, representational but non-linguistic) and attendant way of orienting oneself in relation to it. The viewer must change out their framework in order to make this object mean something. If first the frame was “the physical/cultural/economic world in which I, viewer, am also embodied,” that framework must be combined with a linguistic one in order for the viewer to be in relation with the object, in order to make sense of it. The “horse shoe” is also linguistic: it makes sense, or can be made sense of, only when one sees it *as* language. It requires aspect and framework changes, a kind of 3-d rebus that doesn’t resolve. The viewer must hold its linguistically-derived aspect in awareness simultaneously with the reading of the object offered by the “world” framework of embodied social/cultural/spatial existence in order to get the joke that the object ultimately is—a relay between frameworks that are being held separate. I.e., the anthropomorphizing language metaphor of “horseshoe” becomes funny when run through and inappropriately literalized by an object-based framework of the world. This is, of course, obvious: what’s interesting though is teasing out the kinds of operations that produce and sustain the object’s affectively charged weirdness. I’m again using Wittgenstein’s notion of aspect change³, and his idea that one can only see an aspect of an object if one has access to a kind of

³ as articulated in *Fragment xi* of the *Philosophical Investigations*

framework in which that aspect means (e.g. see a small wooden horse bust *as* a chess knight if one knows what chess is)⁴.

The explicit interest in materializing and maintaining conflict is also part of what distinguishes “horse shoe” from other more familiar forms that stage image/text framework play, like rebuses, concrete poetry, or word puzzles. In all these cases, there’s either a clear hierarchy, a correct meaning, and/or a restriction to the symbolic/conventional realm more generally. In the case of the rebus, one must “read” the rebus to arrive at the “correct” meaning, which remains intact and stably within one framework: the drawn deer in the drawn grass “means” “Hartfield”—like stable irony, the reader must reject the first apparent meaning (“representational drawing/icon”) and arrive at another meaning (in language) that they can trust is “correct”—the switch being a source of pleasure but ultimately relatively stable and not

⁴ And, then, there’s actually a third component to “horse shoe,” less critical for the forward progress of this argument, but useful for thinking about the mechanisms of aspect change generally—in both the world framework and the language framework for meaning/relational organization there’s something wrong with the object, produced and sustained, ultimately, by the necessary relay through the other framework. What first cues the viewer to reject simply seeing the object as another junk commodity item (like the others with it on the shelf) is its sheer weirdness. Often, something inexplicable, on the initial terms used to perceive the object, functions as a kind of cue to switch frameworks (much like if a palabra suddenly appears in an otherwise English text)—that small porcelain commodity has recognizable horse features, but that isn’t what a horse looks like; the animal’s proportions are wrong, it’s missing two legs, and it’s hollow. Is it a cup? not really. What is that void for? And for me at least, that’s about when my mind offers “shoe,” rejecting the horse features as categorizing cue. But the superfluity, deformity, and representational detail of the horse features are in excess of what I imagine could make this object desirable as a mass-produced shoe figurine—and since it is for sale on a shelf with other, price-tagged, less strange objects, I assume it was mass-produced and intended to be desirable to purchase. The object offers “horse [figurine]” upon representational detail/surface contemplation and “high-heeled shoe [figurine]” on considering its overall form (perhaps also monstrous in its confounding of animate/inanimate categories)—already the object’s bracketing of its representational cues to different levels or components of its formal configuration suggests something is off. And after a very (very) short moment one realizes the word(s) “horse shoe” is/are meant, but instead of a referring to the semi-ovoid designed to protect the bottom of a horse hoof (“shoe” as an anthropomorphizing metaphor), the word’s meanings (“horse” and “shoe”) have been broken apart and reassigned, by means of the other framework the object cues its reader to bring to bear (physical/visible/economic/cultural world where horses, representational norms, and commodities exist and are recognizable), and stages as separate. The object not only requires the viewer to use multiple frameworks to make sense of it, but it explicitly stages and then materializes (as) their incompatibility. That’s what the object is—a condensation of the irresolvable space between relational organizing frameworks. And also why it’s pun-funny, off-putting.

confusing. Gerhard Rühm’s “Jetzt” (1958), like many concrete poems produced during what poetics scholar Jamie Hilder calls the “International Concrete Poetry Movement” (1955-1971), mobilizes a relay between the visual/conventional/symbolic frameworks of “pictorial field” and that of “language” —the spatialized non-coincidences of the repeating linguistic/deictic “now(s),” combined with the size variation (which in the context of “pictorial field” reading conventions produces a z-axis of further non-coincidence) places each’s “now”’s temporal insistence (via language) in a conventional and spatialized visual-representational framework (visually “here”) in order to “mean”—and what it means is something like the familiar insight staged, for example, in the “Sense Certainty” section of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*; that “now” is actually a universal even as it insists on particularity, that it can’t actually refer to what it, at each instant, purports to.



Fig. 3.4 Screen capture of a photograph of “Jetzt” by Gerhard Rühm (1958). Original is an offset print on paper. 8.66 inch x 12.2 inch). Screen capture from http://erikdesmedt.eu/de_wiener_gruppe.htm)

In its framework-based irresolvability “Jetzt” is like “Horse shoe,” but it’s simpler, and it’s less affectively charged. I argue this is because even as it offers an irresolvable relay, the interframework play operates between two limited and symbolic frameworks, and can be distilled into a conceptual object; it’s ultimately available for discursive sense-making, and it doesn’t enter into the embodied/relational world. A more recent parallel might be digital artist and programmer Allison Parrish’s 2019 piece *Ahe Thd Yearidy Ti Isa*, a 158 page “novel” generated by a neural network trained to generate images, but then re-trained on images of text. The object produced by this relay predictably materializes the irreconcilability of these ways of making sense of symbolically organized marks on a page:

Wit t

Itross: ou diew fea anilles dot more weres: h naadg: thades wmm o
ahdie go waim p cndle iio mmm: wlenkds.

Me svdi me hmoie mes: neget hoingl: non m mane swes
ctakes ch nem: arai derng t andle foat idr dou bed thet w orot.
hoines wo thenes youils thar: mose sponelt:

Wiflgy: idel w youc and unv bur: arali hao hetsel: mae hio
gerlw to blak mme vach: stou and yed hrtla h hail g: cnd
sembehf. R: hmo not h: haines hore me op soali ther: to paale in
naibc wote sherd: birc: w th fmanes haat: oad' in doilt: orate oarlns
hulse hut shoxe: bnd prezeiri

Fig. 3.5 Screen capture of an excerpt of the pdf of *Ahe Thd Yearidy Ti Isa* by Allison Parrish (2019). Screen capture by author.

Like “Jetzt,” it doesn’t come forward into the embodied/cultural/relational worlds, but it intensifies the attention to specific frameworks for sense-making, and to their non-superimposability, rather than their collaborative potential, which makes it feel more contemporary in affect/sensibility.

Like *Ahe Thd Yearidy Ti Isa*, Horse shoe’s mode of existing marks the void between the frameworks that constellate around it, frameworks which *persist* in this hovering without hybridizing. Horse shoe produces not only an intuition of an incongruity, but an awareness of the specific frameworks for perception or sense-making that have been made incongruous by the object. It marries this preserved aporia to the affective force produced by its incursion into the world of the viewer (and, perhaps, the disagreeable revelation of that world as framework-based). This incursion into our contiguous physical world combined with framework-based nonsense accounts for why it wavers between funny and a little horrifying (Thanks, I hate it!). It occurs on two levels—a kind of meta-Frankenstein. If Merleau-Ponty and Vivian Sobchack point out the ways being in the world “condemn[s]” one to “meaning” (Sobchack 39), r/TIHI points out the ways that “meaning” is framework-contingent, and that the world has in it multiple non-superimposable non-hybridizable frameworks for meaning and orientation. This jamming of frameworks highlights their nature *as* frameworks, and brings them together the way one might try to bring together two magnets whose repelling (similar) poles are pointed towards one another. It’s a little horror-esque because this object is occurring in the embodied cultural world (are we safe from it?). It’s a little funny because it’s distance-producing⁵, as all self-awareness generators are, which allows the incongruity of repelling frameworks inside apparently seamless world to occur with the distance (we are safe from it) necessary for humor.

⁵ To see a framework as a framework is to momentarily not be “in” it.

Writing about the still-compelling incongruity-based theories of humor that follow from Frances Hutcheson's first formulation of the concept in the 18th century⁶, Noël Carroll describes the necessary conditions for the experience of incongruity as funny (Carroll 2014 37). He points out that the perception of an incongruity, something that violates how we think the world is or should be, produces "comic amusement" (17) when we feel safe from it, and when it does not seem to want us to work to solve it like a puzzle (37). This is perhaps another reason why "Jetzt" and *Ahe Thd Yearidy Ti Isa* are neither funny nor horrifying: they present themselves like puzzles, or something whose "point" can be discursively summarized. Following Bergson, Carroll also points out how comedy seems to also require a "momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (36)—the object of comic amusement is prevented from becoming an object of empathy/sympathy by the comic conventions that "distance" the viewer so that they focus primarily on the incongruity, not on any pain or suffering its eruption may have caused (31). "Horse shoe" materializes an incongruity between frameworks that propose to sufficiently model the world—it is incongruity-funny because it reveals an irreconcilable multiplicity in what we had taken for a unity—an error in the surround-category of "world," rather than a category inside it. As Carroll points out, still writing about humor here, category errors (which Schopenhauer considered the primary basis for humor, for example) can also be threatening (29)—this was also a major aspect of his [Carroll's] earlier theory of horror movie monsters—that they are a kind of "cognitive threat" to the framework we (and the film characters) use to make sense of the world ordinarily, by materializing a category error within it, showing that the way we organize our expectations may not be correct. So not only is the r/TIHI object materializing a rub between two

⁶ I.e. Bergson, Schopenhauer

frameworks for sense-making, it produces an affective wobble whose basis is what world(s) we assign Horse shoe to (our embodied one or the linguistic?), and therefore how we should be in relation to it (distance-haha? proximity-afraid?). The way Horse shoe draws out the potential of comedy-horror wobbles to highlight framework problems is useful because it reveals, as I'll show, a deep structural similarity between this comedy/horror problem and the way frameworks operate in reading something as sincere or ironic, or, as, disconcertingly, both. This structural similarity provides the formal yoke *Creep* (2014) uses to express its central reflexively constructed problem: that in a postmodern, framework-intensive, secular economic totality, relationality is framework based. Put differently, the film thinks that in this situation, there is no possibility of real relation, the outcome of which problem is, predictably, violence. I'll outline the way the film uses aspect choreography to make this problem phenomenologically available, but first it's necessary to draw out how the structural similarity between comedy-horror and irony-sincerity oscillations works.

WEB 2.0 IRONY & FRAMEWORK CONDENSATION

One of the things that is not apparent in r/TIHI objects is the way that this multiple framework situation is a problem, or feels weird, because it is fundamentally a *relational* problem. Or, put differently, if you cannot share a framework with someone, you cannot be in any complex relation with them, because you are not in the same world with them: relation requires sharing, and/or building, (a) mutually accepted framework(s)⁷ when no totalizing framework capable of offering meaningful orientation is believed to be in play.

⁷ I say "complex" here because I agree with anthropologists like Victor Turner who posit an underlying and non-framework-based form of relationality, something like "communitas" —or bare-bones human fellow-feeling. But, as

This connection between framework and relation is one of the fundamental principles Wayne Booth mobilizes in his theorization of irony in *A Rhetoric of Irony*. He characterizes what he calls “stable” irony as essentially an invitation to the reader to participate in a reconstructive activity, i.e. correctly constructing a kind of “location,” by means of which they can come to share terms and arrive at the correct meaning of the ironic statement (and thereby the feeling of being in relation with the uttering/organizing consciousness):

The process of reading the irony is thus better represented by the metaphor of reconstructing a whole building, any final storable message being only a kind of roof, or perhaps capstone, for a whole collection of propositions that make up a solid structure than the one implied by the original overt statement [...] What is more, the process is in some respects more like a leap or climb to a higher level than like scratching a surface or plunging deeper. The movement is always toward an obscured point that is intended as wiser, wittier, more compassionate, subtler, truer, more moral, or at least less obviously vulnerable to further irony. Since there is always a sense in which part of the new view is a look back upon the old inferior dwelling, the moving van is perhaps better described as traveling upward to a nicer part of town. Thus in every successful interpretation of stable irony we find not only that the four steps described in chapter 1⁸ have been taken, with the resulting clarity about the invitation to come live at the higher and firmer location, but also that there is a strong sense of rejecting a whole structure of meanings, a kind of world that the author himself obviously rejects[...] The act of reconstructing *meaning* is itself thus clear and accurate and stable enough: the two dwellings are seen for what they are and the invitation to leave one and choose the other is accepted (Booth 36-7)

Meaning requires a mutually accepted “dwelling,” a framework or structure. Important here, and recurrent throughout Booth’s account, is how a correct reading of stable irony requires the reader’s constructive activity, a constructive activity that always also brings with it, or produces,

Turner suggests, this liminal state must always be passed through: it is necessarily temporary, and cannot organize communal life in a world that requires sustained cooperative activity

⁸ The four steps: “In reading stable irony we are always required to make a series of precise judgments. Not only must we take the four steps described in chapter 1, which include (1) a judgment against the overt proposition and (2) a decision about where the author stands; we now see that it is almost impossible to escape 2 additional judgments about (3) whether the reconstructed building is indeed a good place to dwell in and (4) whether the ironist was justified in forcing us to go through all this trouble—is he, finally, writing or speaking well?” (Booth 39-40)

a world of shared assumptions. The reader must reject the location/framework suggested by the apparent meaning, and in so doing infer where the correct one, and their interlocutor, must be—the total choreography of this is how irony means, and aligns transmitter and receiver through a kind of cooperative movement. Correct reading of stable irony produces a shared framework, and, often, (relational) pleasure.

Stable irony is a type of irony where a clear shared framework ultimately emerges, it simply requires a bit of inferential relational work on the part of the reader, a work which can produce, per Booth, enhanced or intensified relational trust, and the pleasures of complexity; ironic texts allow for a greater density of meaning, call for the exercise of the reader's higher inferential faculties, and require a kind of collaborative work on the reader's part to produce the meaning of the text. But irony isn't always stable, as Booth goes on to point out in the second half of the book. Booth characterized this "unstable irony," in 1974, as increasingly common in 20th century literature. He described it as a kind of Kierkegaardian "infinite negativity" (83) which arises when "internal cancellations are multiplied [and] we finally lose all sense of stability and sink into the bog of unstable irony"⁹ (62). This "bog" is the tractionless place where "all truths are dissolved in an ironic mist" (151), and is remarkably reminiscent of the giddy void Damon R. Young evokes in his 2019 essay "Ironies of Web 2.0," when he describes, for example, YouTuber Pew-Die-Pie's maybe-a-joke-maybe-not (jkjk) performance valorizations of white nationalism, or Milo Yiannopoulos's evasive interview strategies that made shared understanding impossible. In this void it isn't possible to say what is or isn't the case, what is or

⁹ He cites as an example Jean Cayrol's *Les Corps étrangers* (Paris 1959), wherein "the narrator tells one contradictory story after another about his life; there is simply no way that I can discover to accept anything he says as valid. The final paragraph starts again, with one more unreliable version of a life that perpetually recedes from us" (62)

isn't true, what was or wasn't intended, what does or doesn't matter—it's a refusal of consensus reality, and is one of the defining features of 2010s internet aesthetics and affects (Young). This orientational void's collapse of stable difference evokes the reconciled contradictions of an enlightened spiritual plane, but there is something desperately wrong with it—probably that it has been translated to a secular plane where there are material consequences and perspectival limitations, and no shared spiritual sensibility. Where the organizing cogs of the symbolically constructed relational world can't catch if it is *p* and *not p* at the same time all the time.

The situation both Booth and Young describe is a relational one—unstable irony is a dynamic oscillator—a “Schrödinger's cat,” in Young's terms—that makes it impossible to establish the structural shared terms necessary for communication to occur. The receiver and the transmitter cannot inhabit a shared world. Much historical thinking on irony is concerned with how speakers and texts construct shared “locations” that make possible the mutual understanding true argument entails—these “locations” are essentially a kind of shared framework for meaning, an understanding of where each other exists and in what world that existing is taking place. Young points out that many of the most, ah, advanced, practitioners of Web 2.0 irony are in it for the “lulz,” a kind of mild electric fizz that seems typical of the “moment of shock when incompatibles are forced upon our attention” (Booth, 23), and like the small, Schadenfreude-flavored power thrill of watching another person attempt to find your terms and the coherent world they hail from, when the terms are not, in fact, available. Like Breton's black comedy, there's an element of humor derived from seeing the ridiculousness of other people's proprieties (in this case, those proprieties being something like “valuing the possibility of sharing worlds”). The lulz are a dead-cat bounce of meaning-derived pleasure arriving at the 2010s moment of intensified atomization (and dissolution of shared frameworks for meaning) described by

everyone from Jean-Luc Nancy to electronic music artist Claire Rousay. The human impulse to be in relation, to understand each other, is a strong one, and tends to require a shared symbolically organized world in which the relation can take place. There are obviously exceptions—for example, the substratum of intersubjective *communitas* that emerges, per Victor Turner, in moments of extremity, transition, and the attendant liminality, or the non-symbolic semiotics of relation possible between species that Eduardo Kohn identifies in *How Forests Think*. But to claim that people can operate together in a complex, largely symbolically and economically organized secular cultural world, without shared frameworks for meaning seems somewhat naïve.

What I would argue here, then, is that the sincerity-irony tension (or infinite irony regression) that seems so central to Web 2.0 internet aesthetics¹⁰ participates in a more general interest in, and attention to, self-conscious framework-jamming, or irreconcilability, combined with affectively-charged incursion into the shared relational world that I think constitutes the particularly contemporary aspect of r/TIHI's "aesthetic." That's to say, in its formal construction, Horse shoe metabolizes one of the most distinctive and intensified aspects of the 21st century affective and epistemological landscapes: the increased framework-ization (relativizing) of our ways of making meaning or feeling oriented, their proliferation, and their perceptibly delimited discreteness.

This is not the same as Modernist "fragmentation" – fragments are not in the business of offering worlds. They index a world which is not available in its totality, or, together they point up the dissolution of a sense of totality all together. Frameworks do offer worlds—they make

¹⁰ and to the various Postmodernism-inflected theorizations of what "motor schema" (to borrow Catherine Malabou's term) might come next (e.g. "Metamodernism" "Off-Modernism").

claims on one's orientation to sense data, and possibilities of communication. If fragments are objects, frameworks are formats.

Like "horse shoe," many contemporary objects condense apparent irreconcilabilities in a way that highlights relational difficulty, or point simultaneously to irony and sincerity around feeling, in a way that seems to make it hard to know what to feel. For example, the hyperbolic stylistics of 2010s and early 20s depression memes:



Fig. 3.6 Screen capture of an Instagram post by WJ Simmons (2021). Screen capture by author.

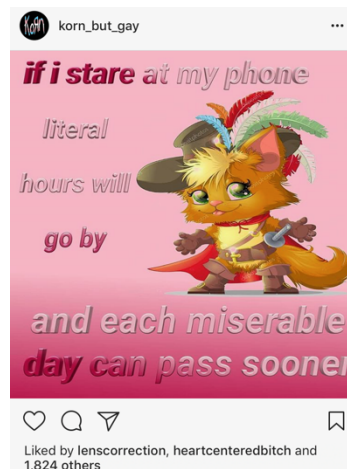


Fig 3.7 Reproduction of a figure used by Marie Buck in "Some Scattered Thoughts on Poetry, Political Mood, and the Internet" (2019)

But, as Marie Buck points out in their 2019 essay "Some Scattered Thoughts on Poetry, Political Mood, and the Internet" depression memes whose hyperbolic or internally contradictory visual and/or linguistic coding suggests irony (i.e. that the apparent meaning should be rejected and/or what is the apparent meaning actually?) circulate among people experiencing depression in a way that helps constitute a sense of shared-ness, community, and support. That's to say, the kind of affective/orientational jamming, contradiction, and/or Web 2.0 irony these objects stage is transformed by the material way that they circulate, in time, and between people. Of course

memes (and many other things, in the 2010s recontextualization/recombination-driven aesthetic world) derive their meaning and/or identity precisely because of the fact that they circulate, and that their reception is mediated through an expected repetition-with-variation form of seriality and exchange. The meaning of the meme is its use on Twitter. But in this case, the framework-jammed object (expressive of a felt state of affairs) is used to bring a shared world, one that has reflexive but unironic terms, into being outside itself. Not the case for most meme circulation worlds.

This bracketing of circulation and object separates the jammed orientational/relational frameworks condensed in objects expressive of unstable Web 2.0 irony, in a way that permits shared terms in relation to the object—a multimodal model of meaning¹¹ that is nonetheless premised on a relatively stable set of terms, even if one of the “terms” involves condensing what are staged as irreconcilable orientations/vantages into one uncomfortable object that preserves a repulsion within itself.

Aspect choreography is another method of this kind of bracketing, or unjamming. It also works by reintroducing a temporal dimension, usually in a developmentally rhythmic way. If a framework is a time-independent structure for meaning and orientation, rhythm is a less visible, time-dependent alternative. A werewolf instead of a vampire. Aspect choreography, for example, permits objects to constitute themselves as a durational structure organized by rhythmic

¹¹ much like what Rosalind Krauss, in *A Voyage on the North Sea*, argues happened to the model of medium, in the hands of structuralist filmmakers like Snow and Serra (Krauss 25-30). She ultimately argues that the advent of the Portapak and television pushed the world past the multimodal medium of structuralist film into a “post-medium condition” (32), since video “occupied a kind of discursive chaos, a heterogeneity of activities that could not be theorized as coherent or conceived of as having something like an essence or unifying core” (31). For a medium to work as a medium, i.e. be able to organize phenomenological vectors, she argued it must “be a supporting structure, generative of a set of conventions” (26). In the structuralist film model, medium is a multimodal relay between the material, viewer, event, light, film, etc. (25) organizing and constituting the relation of subject and object in the “horizontal field” of “events” (26) whose conventions are still able to produce a kind of specific internal necessity/feeling of form: a shared framework for meaning and orientation

alternation between well-defined non-superimposable frameworks for sense-making. In contemporary objects, I think it tends to look like a kind of structuralism with an explicit interest in relationality, affect, and received forms¹². Filmmaker and theorist Malcolm LeGrice describes structuralist (film) art as “the material formation of experience through the explicit incursion into the thing (event) observed by the mode of observation. In this sense, structuralist art does not *express* experience derived from the world; it *forms* experience in the trace of a dialectic between the perceiver and the perceived” (LeGrice, 60), much like the “phenomenological vectors” Rosalind Krauss sees at play in Serra and Snow films—works that track how a subject and object mutually and structurally constitute each other in the field of the perceived event (Krauss, 25-6). In Chris Welsby’s film, “Windmill III” (1974), for example, the viewer’s perspective, and therefore inferred orientation, is continually and rhythmically switched between that of the camera, and that of someone looking at the camera, by means of a diegetic structure, the eponymous windmill, in a way that troubles where and what the perceptual center of the film is, constituting the perceptual experience, and therefore the intersubjective perceptuum of the film¹³, as a rhythmic alternation between irreconcilable physical positions and vantages¹⁴.

¹² Certain long works of contemporary poetry alternate rhythmically between irreconcilable relational orientations—for example, Heiko Julien’s *I AM READY TO DIE A VIOLENT DEATH* (2014), which, over the course of its 191 pages, performs an identifiable lyric subjectivity, even as it ironizes what appeared to be sincere, and cues its reader to infer a kind of sincerity in its irony, a kind of dialectical mutual mediation of these irreconcilables that works because the duration of the book/poem is long and sustains its reader in a choreography they can come to trust and understand.

¹³ I’m using Vivian Sobchack’s model from *The Address of the Eye* here

¹⁴ This isn’t unique to this Welsby film, but is more generally a concern/interest of structuralist film of the late 20th century. For example, here is Scott MacDonald’s 1989 description of Michael Huot’s film *Snow* (1971): “my eye is drawn back and forth between the flutter of the big snowflakes in the foreground and the flakes nearer the barn that seem to move more quickly, recreating a visual plane reminiscent of a waterfall. Once we become mesmerized by the “waterfall” in the background, we’re distracted by the flakes drifting down in the foreground, they hold our attention until the waterfall effect distracts us again, and so on. The process becomes regular, almost rhythmic; it reminds me of certain op art paintings” (MacDonald 11). Or, in Hollis Frampton’s work, especially *Zorn’s Lemma* (1970), the viewer’s attention is consistently drawn to a felt pattern of how ways of seeing and assigning sense are being reassigned/reorganized—that rhythm of perceptual switches/meaning assignation comes to be felt as the



Fig. 3.8 Screen captures of digital transfer of *Windmill III* by Chris Welsby (1974). Screen captures by author.

A specially built mirrored windmill rotates in front of a 16mm camera for the duration of a 400ft roll of film (~10 mins), speeding up and slowing down in response to ambient wind. For most of the film, the rotation is slow enough that the viewer is very conscious of the perspectival switching they are being forced to perform. When the rotation gets very fast, the two vantages merge into a flattened and abstracted pictorial field of flashing color, which often gets reassigned, perceptually, as a kind of “blur” when a person or a car moves through the park in

perceptual form of the film. As D.N. Rodowick puts it, Frampton’s films are often organized around a precise system of displacements (Rodowick)

front of the camera and cues recognition and refocusing on the field physically in front of the camera. Many critics comment on the way the windmill blades produce a kind of secondary shutter, pointing to the filmic material support of the piece. Watching it produces a combination of headache and pleasure, a continually refreshed visceral awareness of the way the “mode of observation” is laminated to the “object” offered to/that is also perception, and how, in so doing, it constitutes the viewer’s perceptuum as irreconcilably riven, but rhythmically organized and sustained.

Patrick Brice’s debut horror/comedy film, *Creep* (2014) is a particularly good example of how this kind of structuralist perceptual model works when combined with more contemporary questions of relationality, affect, and genre, in a way that ultimately allows the film to use its form to dramatize a relational problem at the heart of the contemporary, post-Web 2.0, multi-framework landscape¹⁵.

It is a staple of horror genre criticism to track how horror films express or process anxieties and/or features of their times—for example, the 1940s-50s sci-fi/horror films’ invasions and unsympathetic hivemind aliens are frequently read as thin allegorizations of anti-communist fears (Carroll, 208), Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller claim that after 9/11, when it was not possible to openly process the horror of the “War on Terror,” the horror genre worked as a “rare protected space in which to critique the tone and content of public discourse” (reviewed Heller-Nicholas, 89), Philip Simpson describes *Hostel* and the *Saw* franchise as thinly veiled war

¹⁵ This is also a trend, I argue elsewhere (Ihns, 207-13), in contemporary Anglophone poetics—works like M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2011), Chelsey Minnis’s *Baby, I Don’t Care* (2018), Emmalea Russo’s *G* (2018) and *Wave Archive* (2019), Noah Ross’s *Active Reception* (2021), and Lee Choi’s *Transverse* (2021) are all long works that use perceptual/formal strategies popular with earlier, formally/perceptually driven movements like concrete poetry and structuralist filmmaking in combination with an explicit interest in the personal, the relational, the political, and/or the affective.

allegories (ibid.). Alexandra Heller-Nicholas tracks how *Paranormal Activity*'s introduction of surveillance footage into the post-*Blair Witch* stagnation in the found-footage genre not only revitalized it but expressed the anxieties attendant to the 2006 rise of YouTube (90). Daria Ezerova argues compellingly that the intensified social critique in many horror films of the early 21st century expresses an increased awareness of structural injustice (Ezerova, 65). Noël Carroll speculatively connects many of the distinctive features of the horror revival he observed in 1990 to postmodernism—these new horror films' tendency toward reflexivity, self-consciousness, and intertextuality, for example. In theorizing why there was an increase in “graphic violence” in these films, he suggests that “the present horror cycle and postmodernism correlate insofar as both articulate an anxiety about cultural categories; both look to the past, in many cases with pronounced nostalgia: both portray the person in less sacrosanct terms” (Carroll, 211-12). I think *Creep* uses aspect choreography to process its anxiety about relationality in post-web 2.0 late capitalist USA. Whether or not that's the case, the film is doing something structurally novel and systematic with the way it choreographs its viewer's orientation to genre and vantage. Tracking this choreography's specific expressive and conceptual effects clarifies the affordances of aspect choreography, and elucidates why the film feels so...weird.

So, what I'll try to do in this next part of the chapter is show how *Creep* cues its viewer to alternate (in crescendoing fashion) between non-superimposable frameworks for orientation/sense-making. This aspect choreography laminates the perceptual and orientational experience of the viewer to that of the interpersonal dynamic represented at a narrative level by the film (i.e. two characters who want to be in relation, can't find a shared framework (formally), and arrive at violence narratively (and relation at the level of framework)). Tracking this structure reveals how *Creep* does actually map the contour of a classic horror-movie plot, despite

the strong comic inflection of its climactic violent and “reveal” moments. The climax of the film is reflexively constructed: its horror is the way it has taught the viewer to find its violence funny. This orientational inappropriateness is expressive of the failure of relation Brice’s body of work is consistently concerned with. *Creep*’s aspect choreography allows Brice to pin the viewer in this problem, which manifests as the affective misalignment of comedy and horror around violence. The oscillating orientational cues of the film allow him to build toward the genres’ formal convergence in violence (their “relation”): both genres rely on wrong-world realizations. Aspect choreography is the means the film uses to do this.

CREEP AS ASPECT CHOREOGRAPHY

Creep is an aspect choreography. It cues its viewer to perform a pattern of switches between a well-defined, consistent, and non-superimposable set of frameworks for meaning making. This pattern has the developmental contour of a horror plot, which I’ll describe later in this section. The major frameworks the film cues its viewer to use and switch between are perceptual or vantage-based (Aaron/camera/Josef) frameworks and generic (horror/comedy) frameworks. Their alternation tracks with, and intensifies, the narrative drama of failing to negotiate a shared framework/term set/relational space by the two characters, Josef and Aaron. The characters’ failure to negotiate shared terms coincides with the affective weirdness of the final scene in a way that thematizes the relational problem at the heart of sincerity/irony problem and framework-ification in general, and in so doing lets the piece dramatize the problem itself in a way that sustains the viewer in it through form. That’s to say, the piece’s aspect choreography allows it to give the reader phenomenological access to a kind of non-figurable void.

I'll begin with a general discussion of the film in relation to found-footage horror, whose conventions and manipulation of vantage construction the film explicitly mobilizes. Then I'll outline the three major kinds of framework switches *Creep* cues its viewer to perform and eventually expect: (1) perceptual/perspectival and horror/comedy generic (too enmeshed to separate), (2) resignifying the "jump scare," and (3) gaze identity/address (deictic shifts). Like many horror movies, *Creep* makes its viewer see and feel both as the monster and the victim¹⁶, but it uses found-footage horror conventions to make this problem thematic and explicit. Found-footage horror, a genre that, per Jane Roscoe, exited the "arthouse" and entered the mainstream in 1999 with *Blair Witch Project*, is able to play with the construction and viewer perception of reality differently than other forms of film "realism" can. Though by now found-footage horror is effectively a genre in its own right, a "heavily codified formal system" (Roscoe reviewed Heller-Nicholas 26) with specific conventions that do less to "shift a film's action into the same world as its audience" (ibid.) like early found-footage horror did, and more to leverage that expectation as a kind of convention—the glitches, technical interruptions, diegetic presence of the filming equipment, and multiple media formats typical of the genre that once produced a "reality" effect are now familiar components of fictive filmmaking—but which nonetheless offer a perceptually and orientationally different experience than other realist filmmaking approaches. Heller-Nicholas argues that contemporary found-footage horror has many overlooked precursors, ranging from Orson Welles's 1938 *War of the Worlds* Broadcast, to 1950s-60s safety films, to what Tom Gunning calls the "cinema of attractions," to snuff films, to television mockumentary—all of which trouble and animate the boundary between the fictive

¹⁶ Carol J. Clover, reviewed Heller-Nicholas, 150

and the real (two different frameworks for orienting oneself in relation to the object and the film image), and often draw their viewer's attention explicitly to their [the viewers'] own perception as a constructive and meaning-making activity they perform. Like structuralist filmmakers, (and internet ironists), makers of important early precursors to found-footage horror were often interested in making the viewer's own habits of attention and frameworks of perception apparent to them.

For example, Stephen Volk, writer of the 1992 British television mockumentary *Ghostwatch*, says he wrote the series, which terrified viewers at the time, because of his “concerns about the mass audiences’ often unquestioning susceptibility to television” (Volk qtd Heller-Nicholas, 81)—he wanted to “challenge people’s preconception of trust and what they believe in[...]to turn the audience’s attention back on their own increasingly passive viewing habits” (81-2). He wanted to use the series to reattune viewers to their own activity of sense-making. Similarly, Jean-Teddy Philippe, maker of the (staged) found-footage series *Les Documents Interdits* (1989-91) was alarmed by “the cultural power of television to authenticate the emotional experience of everything it broadcasts” as a “medium whose immediacy and emotional intensity dominate all other aspects, often despite our own capacity for reason and logic. It frequently tells us how we are to consume and respond to its images” (Filippe qtd Heller-Nicholas, 82-3). These filmmakers sought to make objects that, by requiring their viewer to frequently reevaluate, and actively participate in, their structure of assumptions about what they were seeing, to make those structures themselves phenomenologically available and therefore available to question¹⁷. They turned to found footage techniques to do so.

¹⁷ As with many aspect choreography-adjacent objects, these films also recall the project of the defamiliarization techniques of the midcentury

Creep does not try to convince its Netflix viewer that what they are seeing might be “real,” unlike *Ghostwatch* or the *Blair Witch Project*. Within the (fictive) frame of the film, however, what is “real” within that frame and what the right structure of assumptions (framework) is, are active questions. As are the related questions of how that “reality” depends on and organizes relationality.

Creep reads in many ways as a kind of modified reprisal of *C'est Arrivé Près de Chez Vous/ Man Bites Dog* (1992), a black comedy/crime mockumentary written and directed by Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel and Benoît Poelvoorde, who also act in it, like co-writers Patrick Brice and Mark Duplass do in *Creep*. *Man Bites Dog* uses found footage conventions—it follows a camera crew making a (fictional) documentary of a boorish but apparently also personally charismatic serial killer (Ben): the film is made from the footage we see being made. As the film progresses, the crew becomes increasingly involved in the murders and with Ben—carrying dead bodies, helping with cleanup, eating dinner together, catching a child in the woods for Ben to kill, eventually murdering, and, finally being murdered (though not by their subject). It's funny(?) but also deeply disturbing because it is funny(?)—but working out the relationship between the killer and the crew is not the question, nor is the location/orientation of the perceptual infrastructure—most of the time. The film seems mostly interested in the way awful things can be normalized by mediation or habituation¹⁸—recalling, for example, Warhol's *Disaster* series, or the desensitization Susan Buck-Morss reads in the Benjaminian modern subject who can aesthetically enjoy their own destruction under fascism.

¹⁸ also suggested by its English title, which refers to the journalism truism of the same name—i.e. that unusual events are reported more frequently than usual ones with similar consequences

In *Creep*, we see through what we assume is the camera of a videographer, Aaron, who has been hired to make a video on uncertain terms by an unknown person. In Aaron's footage, we see Aaron meet this unknown person, Josef. Things become increasingly strange, but despite the strangeness the two have an afternoon of friendly frolicking that recalls the meals shared in *Man Bites Dog*. Eventually Josef murders Aaron, and the film closes with a coda wherein it is revealed that Josef is likely a serial killer. Josef, like Ben in *Man Bites Dog*, is a weird mixture of off-putting buffoonery, vulnerability, and authoritative charisma; like Ben, he often inexplicably sprints off, and, like Ben, he increasingly involves his videographer(s) in his life. But the difference between these very similar films helps highlight how *Creep* works. *Creep*, unlike *Man Bites Dog*, is centrally interested in staging oscillations between whether the viewer sees it as funny or alarming, and whose perceptual infrastructure/vantage/framework we are operating in, and how those things map a relational dynamic.

In the next section, I'll trace three different and interlocking lines of framework switching whose interweaving constitutes the aspect choreography of the film. Given the structure of the film and the complexity of some of the dynamics, the most efficient way is actually to just walk through the film three times, with different lines of focus: (1) Genre and perceptual framework switches (2) the jump scare, and (3) gaze identity and address (visual deictic shifts).

GENRE AND PERCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Creep consistently toggles its viewer between different perceptual and genre frameworks in a complexly enmeshed way throughout its entire runtime. The film begins like this:

(Aaron (played by *Creep*'s director Patrick Brice), seen from below, is driving a car, looking forward away from the camera¹⁹, and talking in a cheerful, amused tone of voice) “All right we are leaving the flatlands and heading up toward the mountaintop, which I’ll show you right here” (handheld camera pans from Aaron’s face to look out the windshield). (cut)

Creep begins and unfolds in at least two times and places simultaneously—one known (time of the events unfolding before the handheld camera, starting March 21 2012, according to the time stamp at the bottom of the first handheld camera image), one unknown until the end (time of the editing, the time of the narrative world in which the film is object, rather than perceptual infrastructure). In the beginning of the film, Aaron is addressing the camera (us? his future self?), and narrating what’s happening—Aaron’s consciousness is using the video camera as a prosthetic to organize our perceptual world. Sometimes we are looking at Aaron as he explains things to us (and he sometimes does and sometimes does not make eye contact), and sometimes we are seeing what Aaron sees—already pointing up the ways the camera’s expression of perception by perception, on Vivian Sobchack’s model²⁰, is going to dramatize the film’s modulation of its viewer’s sense of what/who the perceptual/expressive center is, and how they are in relation with it/them. Sometimes the focalizing center is a camera-mediated representation of Aaron’s perceptuum, sometimes the center is the camera’s inhuman sensorium, and,

¹⁹ We will later realize that this “camera” we see being addressed is actually two cameras—one a view from the end, Josef’s, and one Aaron’s, at the time of the diegetic unfolding. I am grateful to James Lastra for this note

²⁰ Vivian Sobchack, in *Address of the Eye*, gives a phenomenological account of the fundamental nature of film structure. She mobilizes Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the subject as a perceptual “living cohesion” (Sobchack 23), which she uses to argue for reading film as also a kind of subject, an expression of perception by perception (18-9). “If we substitute the specificity of the film experience as a reversible structure correlating the activity of perception and expression and commuting one to the other, the whole of the structure could, and later will more elaborately, be mapped as follows: *the perception* (act of consciousness) *of* (mediation) *expression* (object of consciousness) *and/as the expression* (act of consciousness) *of* (mediation) *perception* (object of consciousness).” (ibid) The act of viewing, for her, “provides both the necessary and sufficient conditions for the commutation of perception to expression and vice-versa. It also communicatively links filmmaker, film, and spectator by means of their respective, separate, and yet homeomorphic existential performance of a shared (and possibly universal) competence: the capacity to localize and unify (or “center”) the invisible, intrasubjective commutation of perception and expression and make it visible and intersubjectively available” (21) —film is a kind of phenomenologically inhabitable intersubjective vehicle.

eventually we will learn, sometimes it is several somethings else. Like many films in the found-footage genre, *Creep* places its viewer in the position of constructing a “reality” across perspectives and media²¹, but, even more so than is usual in these films, a central concern for *Creep* has to do with how to be in relation with another consciousness through the rigidities of received forms like genre, the frame, and commodified relational discourses—the trickiness, riskiness, and stickiness of that—which is also a major thematic concern of the film, and of Brice’s oeuvre generally. Who and what am I seeing, *as* who am I seeing, and how should I understand it, are questions the film is perpetually making its viewer ask. It elicits, in other words, a very high relational and orientational sampling rate.

The other major relational toggle the film uses throughout is genre. The ways *Creep* moves its viewer between reading it as horror or as comedy are deeply enmeshed with the way the film moves its perceptual center/organizing framework around. The film deploys recognizable genre cues from found-footage horror, Berlantian “humorless” comedy, YouTube, and slapstick, while also participating in the (accelerating post-1990s) tendency of horror films to make their genre conventions quotational. As Noël Carroll points out, when comic conventions distance the viewer from incongruities or harm befalling a character, we can often experience a horrifying or violent situation as comic (Carroll, 36). When these conventions are not in place, that same situation can feel (art-)horrifying or upsetting. These kinds of conventions are essentially cues that tell a viewer how to be oriented vis-à-vis the film—what aspect to see, what framework (genre) of expectations to place it in—and therefore what to feel: I argue feeling functions as a kind of readout of what world/framework the viewer situates what they’re seeing in.

²¹ Cameron, “Corporeal Frames: Found Footage Horror and Dislocated Screens”

The film is classified by Netflix as an “independent” “horror” film, and by Wikipedia as a “psychological horror film,” but it isn’t simply either of those things—it is too intentionally bathetic, goofy, and awkward to classify as a straightforward horror film, too precise and coherent about these choices to classify as a straightforwardly bad horror film, too self-consciously cringe-inducing, disagreeable, and strange to be simply a camp-flavored meta-reflection on the horror genre. Certainly genre switching in films is nothing new, nor is the combination of comedy and horror—scholars even recognize a genre of comedy-horror films that stretches back to Paul Leni’s 1927 Weimar-era film *Waxworks* and continues through contemporary franchises like *Scream*. But there’s something about *Creep* that’s categorically different from the films in this genre, where often the laughs and the shrieks tend to collaboratively contribute to what comedy-horror film scholar Bruce Hallenbeck characterizes as basically a heightened entertainment value, and/or to a way of “whistl[ing] past the graveyard”—humor functioning as a tool to help us deal with our “fear of death” (Hallenbeck, 2008). He also notes, however, alongside *Psycho* writer Norman Bloch that “the line between horror and hilarity is a thin one,” a situation Bloch attributes to the similar heightened tension necessary for both genres. Wobbling back and forth over that line might be explained in certain cases, thinking back to Noël Carroll earlier, as pivoting on what/whose world we believe the object to be in, and what our relationship to it is. As a consistent oscillator, *Creep*’s structure is also unlike other familiar kinds of one-directional or progressive genre switch within horror films—for example, the switch from the rom-com to horror that constitutes the central affective pivot of films like *Audition* (Miike, 2001), or the wild generic turn *Sorry To Bother You* (Riley, 2018) takes with the revelation of the horse people. I’ll argue that this has to do with how irony (or irony-analogous relational forms) work(s) in *Creep*, and *where* and how often they happen—the found-

footage conceit introduces an additional layer of mediation that complicates how the reader makes sense of what's happening—the film keep switching back and forth between genres, perspectives, and orientations. If we take genre as an organizing contextual frame for a reader's patterns of inference, as Northrop Frye²² does, or as the “trajectories of aroused expectations and gratifications” (Booth, 100) that guide a reader's attempts to understand/be in relation with an aesthetic object, *Creep* teaches its reader how to be in relation with it as a patterned oscillation between the modes of receptivity and expectation each genre cues. It does not blend them, and neither ultimately gives a tenor to the film, the ultimate affective force of which is peculiar and reflexively unpleasant.

Brice's other work is all also reckoning with genre, boundaries, and relationality as it can('t) happen via the received discourse forms of late capitalism. I'd argue it also uses intergenre friction as a formal supplement to the relational problems it deals with thematically. Put differently, *Creep*'s staging of modulation of genre and perceptual center gives durational and experiential form to the irresolvable relational oscillation at the heart of Young's “Web 2.0 irony” (or Booth's “unstable irony”). In so doing it provides its viewer with new access to the problem—its rhythmic organization sustains the viewer in what is otherwise either a one-liner or an uninhabitable void.

To see how *Creep* manages all this, it's useful to look at how it uses horror conventions like the jump scare, contemporary comedy conventions like awkward framing, timing, and stuttery jump cuts, as well as deeper structural conventions that actually obtain in both genres: the buildup and release of tension, the sudden recognition of wrong reality understandings, the jarring or surprising, and how these mesh its use of found footage conventions to choreograph

²² *Anatomy of Criticism*

orientational switches. *Creep* systematically resignifies the jump scare's affective shock as slapstick, makes the "interview editing," stylizedly awkward-type jump cuts of YouTubers like Vic Burger alarming, and makes its viewer feel the switch as it makes the shared (incongruity-based) structural features of comedy and horror feel now funny, now frightening, now funny, now.... which I read as a modulation of which genre world the viewer, at that moment, understands themselves to be in—what framework is organizing their expectations. This genre modulation tracks to some extent with the modulation of the viewer's presumed perceptual center (i.e. whose head are we in), and with the narrative of Aaron and Josef working out what their relationship is, where it is, and who is in charge of it. The film colocalizes questions of perception, relationality, and genre modulation. But it's first useful to outline the structure of the film in a general way, because it, like most of the objects in this dissertation, has a kind of meta-structure that recurs nearly fractally at the other formal levels of the work.

Creep has what is structurally a classic horror/thriller movie plot. We proceed for a long time under one set of terms, and then realize those are the wrong terms. Specifically, we begin by thinking we are in Aaron's perspective, and then later realize that we are in Josef's²³. There will be many smaller versions of this "wrong terms" realization, a kind of realization that is one of the structuring feelings of the film—sometimes funny, sometimes frightening. In an interview with comedian Norm MacDonald²⁴, thriller/horror director M. Night Shyamalan²⁵ mentions that he likes to incorporate humor elements in horror movies "without emptying the scare," because

²³ Alan Cameron also points out the centrality of this realization in *Creep* in "Corporeal Frames: Found Horror," but is using it to argue for the ways contemporary found footage horror can make us think differently about the film body in relation to the frame

²⁴ Norm MacDonald Has a Show: M. Night Shyamalan (2018)

²⁵ who is also, however, the writer of the comedy film *She's All That*

both scares and laughs are facilitated by “tension” being “up so high.”²⁶ He outlines the classic Hitchcock structure of “dropping the hammer” in the third act, after which things aren’t funny any more. And perhaps most usefully here, he characterizes what makes for an effective horror/thriller plot; it’s “like a chess match” with the audience—making them “secure in where they think they are in the movie” but “in reality they’re not in that place.” There’s a horror in realizing one is out of touch with reality—to have the wrong terms with or model of one’s environment is a vulnerable position, because it means one can no longer accurately predict what will happen, can no longer organize one’s behavior in a way likely to ensure continued survival²⁷ or, in a more everyday register, the benefits of well-adjustedness. The horror/thriller plot, on this model, colocalizes the realization of wrong terms on the narrative/diegetic plane (i.e. for the characters) with that of the audience, one of the mechanisms by which horror films laminate their viewer’s affective force to their narrative world, and produce, well, fear.

This realization of wrong terms/expectations is also a central mechanism of much comedy, however—essentially the incongruity model of humor described earlier. Structurally, there’s something very similar about horror and comedy, with things like scale, risk, and distance (audience, character, narrator) contributing to how these structures read. This potential for resemblance is something *Creep* foregrounds in many of its formal choices, in a way that feels like an intuitive way of thinking, through the materials of video, about relational difficulty (and how relationality requires shared terms). It makes us feel the switch between when they read as

²⁶ Recalling the Norman Bloch quote Hallenbeck cites (183)

²⁷ This is a central claim John Dewey makes in *Art as Aesthetic Experience*—and he characterizes the intensity or affective force aesthetic objects are able to make their viewer feel to the ways they are able to recapture the intensity of feeling associated with “renegotiating” “terms” with one’s environment. The vulnerability of being out of touch with the world, and the difficulty of adjusting to a world different than the one you thought you were in, powers the intensity of the experience of renegotiation, which can be transmitted in diminished form by aesthetic objects, for Dewey.

funny, and when they read as scary, as a question of orienting frameworks, and the pattern of moving between them as itself a structure.

In *Creep*, we begin with Aaron's perspective—there are, as I mentioned earlier, micro-modulations of perceptuum center from the very beginning, but in a general sense, the viewer believes they are watching something organized by Aaron's consciousness. The cuts, camera pivots, organization, and narration imply both that the time of filming and the time of editing are situated within Aaron's perspective. The audience feels "secure in that place."

At the opening of the film, Aaron is driving his small yellow car from LA to a mountain town to meet a Craigslist videography client. The terms of the appointment are vague "not sure who I'm meeting, \$1000 for the day, filming services, discretion is appreciated...whatever that means," and lead Aaron to speculate, to the camera (us? his future self?):

"Here's a thought. (camera pivots from the windshield view back to Aaron's face) What if this is just some 40something who's sitting alone in her apartment, waiting for some young, handsome...boy, to come up the hill and give rubdowns, money, and whisper sweet nothings. ...Just a thought" (Aaron here gives an amused pop of the eyebrows)

Aaron is not sure what the terms will be—will the encounter actually have very little to do with the videography that is its ostensible occasion? Will it actually be about (sexualized?) emotional labor? Will describing the uncertainty with amusement, in ridiculous terms, to a camera, make him feel better?

Eventually Aaron arrives at the address, and we follow his shoulder-mounted camera POV up to the yellow door²⁸, where he knocks, rings the strange turnkey doorbell, and receives no answer. He films himself calling the client, also to no avail, and tells the camera that this is

²⁸ which he remarks on. It's the same color as his car. Later he and Joseph will wear the same hat ("Twins!" says Joseph), in a way that echoes the confusion of who we are (in) throughout the movie.

the case. There is a kind of performed recognition of the ridiculousness of the situation, which feels like Aaron's effort at mastering it—the one making the jokes is in control. Back in shoulder-mounted POV, we look out over the front yard, notice a large axe embedded in a stump, and then cut to a zoom shot of the axe (“Huh” says Aaron), another cut, and we are back in the car. The camera rotates to show us Aaron's face. “I think it's smarter if I, uh (Aaron continues to film his face, but turns it to look out window) wait in the car.” There's the strong sense that Aaron is at once amused by the formulaic quality of this possible Chekhov's gun situation, and genuinely uneasy. In this is a flicker of Bergsonian humor—basically a term-switch encounter with the clanking machinery subtending what appears to be fluidly lifelike—in the narrative world of 2012, familiar plot structures have a prefabricated machine-like quality, and yet, suddenly, Aaron's life looks a lot like a three act play, to him. In Brice's oeuvre generally, characters often remark on how some major aspect of their life is either inspired by, looks like, or seems to them inflected by a middlebrow movie plot—just a little later, for example, a character will explain, with terrible earnestness, that he is basically reenacting Michael Keaton's end-of-life project in *My Life*²⁹. There's also a moment of genre question in *Creep*'s negotiation of the axe moment—is this a horror movie about axe-murdering, or is this a comedy about a character who is amused at the possibility he may be in a schlocky horror movie about axe-murdering, or is it somehow both.

²⁹ Characters modeling their lives on movies is something that happens in all of Brice's films, and usually Brice draws a fair amount of attention to it. It feels like another way of pointing up the received and mediated character of our formats for living, relating to each other, and understanding ourselves. For example, in *The Overnight*, the characters, conclude, at the end, that their encounter was meant to be, because one character, who saw Leonardo DiCaprio in *The Beach*, was inspired to found a water filter company by it [the movie], one wants to go to the beaches of Thailand, where it was filmed, and it's the favorite movie of another one.

A few moments later, Aaron picks the camera back up, explaining that he's probably going to head out now: "Uhh (and the camera now appears to be just in his hand, not representing what he's looking at (what is he looking at?), as it sweeps drowsily across the instrument panel and toward a lower passenger window corner, and begins to wander back toward the client's house) I don't think this guy's showing up."

Suddenly, there's a terrific dull slamming noise from offscreen, a booming "HI!" that whistles by the edges of the attention, the sound of a startled scream maxxing out the camera recorder (Aaron's, we dimly realize), and a wild swing of the camera that gives a blurred swiping image of a grinning man's face in the driver's side window. "Jesus," mutters Aaron, as he begins to roll down the window. "Sorry! didn't mean to scare you," says the other man, mid 40s, white, wearing unflattering spandex athleisure, and radiating Positivity Corporate Dad vibes with nearly unbearable intensity. He goes on to introduce himself (his name is Josef, he assumes Aaron is Aaron) while maintaining "open-hearted" eye contact, shaking his head while saying "Oooohhhhh my god. Ohhh my god today is going to be a good day!....You have a really nice, kind, face³⁰" He is *pumped*, he seems to want us/Aaron to know. He sounds, looks, and gestures like a leader at a corporate retreat for team building, or like the sports coach for shy children in a social-skills remediation summer camp. The experience is at first the typical physiological/affective shock of a jump scare, which, once the moment passes, enters into a meaning-based register/gets resignified as weird and overenthusiastic, but harmless, behavior, on the part of this comic/repulsive Josef person. The viewer feels the switch from horror to comedy.

³⁰ This dynamic also occurs in Brice's second film, *The Overnight*—a weirdly manipulative dad character is obsessed with the "kindness" or "goodness" of a shy male character

From the first encounter, Josef (played by film co-writer Mark Duplass) pushes against Aaron’s boundaries—he shocks Aaron, opens his car door without permission a moment later, then insists that he hug Aaron, because “because at the end of the day, this is going to be normal.” Interpersonally, Josef is insistently dictating the terms, the relational “normal.” Aaron’s framing (and what we assume to be his editing) of the scene, however, makes us feel what seems like the comic but unpleasant “open secret” of Josef’s “failed personhood or aesthetic project” (Berlant, 311) that’s central to what they call “humorless” comedy. Josef is trying too hard, all the time, and it produces a suppressed hilarity and airlessness in Aaron’s deadpan filming.



Fig. 3.9 Screen capture from *Creep* (2014). Screen captures by author.

“What abjects this combed-over subject [the subject of humorless comedy],” Berlant writes, “is his refusal to adapt to anything but his own style of adapting to his own fantasy; what makes his appearance comic, when it is, is his insistence on form and, in particular, on inhabiting the form of comedy that, in his view, will allow his imperfect life to appear as a victory over existing” (307). Josef is working very hard to make everyone participate in making his life appear “a victory over existing.” Yet Aaron is using the camera to dictate the framing reality (terms) against which Josef’s way of being appears as failed, as “the ordinariness of a desperately desired, feared, and failed sovereignty machine” (308) whose effort at conscripting Aaron emotionally would shore up its fantasy, should it succeed. The combover subject is a joke because he does not understand the joke (306). The question here is: does the viewer accept the framework offered by the mediation (Aaron is in charge, Josef is ridiculous), or the framework offered by the diegetic unfolding (Josef is in charge, Aaron is obedient), as meaning-conferring? Fabula, or szujhet? That’s to say, is this scene comical, or frightening? The answer to this last question lets the viewer know which framework is organizing their expectations, and, therefore, their feelings.

Shortly after this exchange, they walk up the stairs, into the house, and Josef explains the videography project he has in mind. He wants, like Michael Keaton’s character in *My Life*, to make a video diary/portrait for his unborn son, Buddy, (“We’re calling it Buddy”), who he says he will likely never meet, as he has been diagnosed with terminal brain cancer and given 2-3 months to live. He relates this situation with the kind of brisk matter-of-factness that feels like a thin veneer over a sadness that is too much to bear. The viewer/Aaron feels invited, by Josef, to witness not only the terror of his situation, but to silently applaud his bravery and stoicism. Josef

uses the empathy he confidently assumes his viewer feels to shore up a narrative of emotional mastery over this situation. And it's strange, because the awkward framing, bad lighting, unflattering outfit, cringey affect, and clichéd language³¹ make the situation ridiculous, and yet it is obvious that Aaron is (and probably the viewer is) moved. In the face of this terrible circumstance, the comover subject's irritating, pathetic, delusional quality becomes part of what makes him an object of empathy, part of a brittleness we now suspect he also sees, and which we can attribute to his trying to cope with the cancer issue. A kind of emotional aspect change as we move frameworks. Suddenly, we are sharing a reality with Josef—an invitation to a shared meta-level that cannot be openly acknowledged. A moment later, Josef will reinforce this idea: Aaron is just to “keep the camera rolling,” to try to just capture Josef as he is, flaws and all:

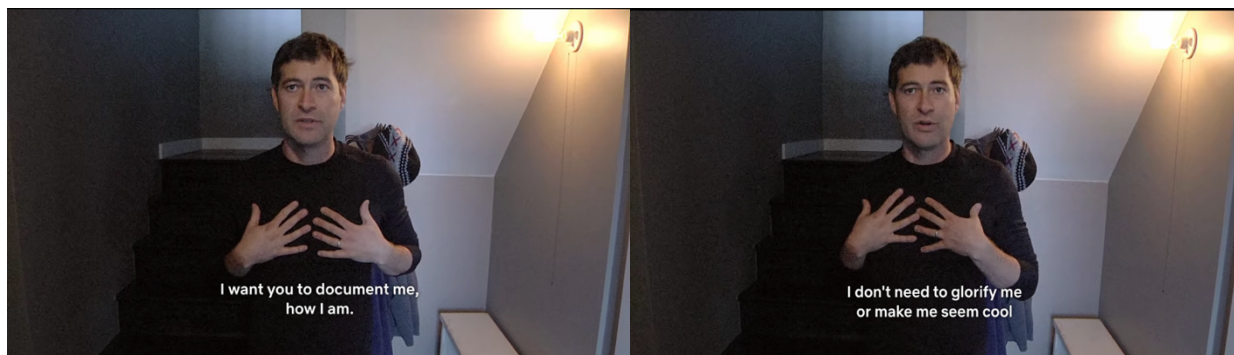


Fig. 3.10 Screen captures from *Creep* (2014). Screen captures by author.

This is a secondary invitation to a shared meta-understanding: in saying that he doesn't want Aaron to “glorify him” or “make him seem cool,” Josef defuses some of the comic tension

³¹ His speech here, as it is throughout the film, is a mashup of clichés and familiar contemporary relational discourses: the languages of office positivity culture, team-building, sentimentality, self-care, wellness, therapy. He appears in language as a conglomeration of relationally directed “sovereignty machine[ries]” (308) whose proliferation and slight mismatches make their machinic quality obvious—again a kind of Bergsonian comedy. There are a “lot of special memories” in this vacation house, he hopes that “the power of positive thinking” may help him pull through cancer, he loves his “beautiful wife Angela,” he wants Aaron to come “with him on this journey into the heart.” Everything about this character is cringe-inducing.

involved in holding the open secret that he is in fact, very uncool. The humorless comedy feeling begins to dissipate, though does not entirely disappear—its hold on the viewer's expectations loosens as Aaron's control over the film/situation loosens. Josef understands how Aaron must see him, and that's ok: a shared reality. This performance of self-awareness simultaneously reinforces Josef's control over the organizing framework, and is an invitation to Aaron to trust him. An invitation to a shared metalevel, as Wayne Booth points out, is one of the fundamental mechanisms of stable irony, and is a way of producing trust. So is a recognition and acceptance of the sovereignty of another person's unflattering perspective. So is (ostensibly) surrendering control over how one is represented—all three of which Josef does, in a way that shifts the genre of the film for a moment as Aaron becomes less sure of what "reality" is. The film is less funny in this moment, and we feel uncertain about what genre we're in, for a moment. This kind of yoking of genre framework to a narrative of relational and term renegotiation is one of the central mechanisms of the film, and as the shape of our understanding of their relationship (and what we're watching) oscillates, the film produces an aspect choreography its viewer can inhabit and be oriented in, but never feel good or at ease.

A few moments later, the viewer feels their orientation switch again—back to the unbearable tension of humorless comedy—switching out of a shared understanding to Aaron's reality as incompatible with Josef's. Josef is forcing Aaron to film him in the candlelit bath, as he gives an imaginary "Buddy" a "Tubbie." These scenes feel truly endless—airless, stupid, awful. It lasts about 3 minutes but it feels like 20. Aaron is filming Josef from below—we assume he is either not watching the camera or is watching from a monitor. Josef alternately speaks to and makes eye contact with Aaron above the camera, or with the camera, and speaks to Aaron or to "Buddy," fluidly moving between them in ways that don't always sync up with his eye

movements, and which would necessitate intensive editing later to actually produce a video diary for “Buddy” that made any sense. It is increasingly obvious that this “video diary” is also a plea to be in relation with Aaron—and indeed, later in the film Aaron will have a dream that he is a baby wolf receiving a strange “Tubbie” from Josef—even if Josef is wildly failing in the moment, he enters into Aaron’s dreams as an organizing force, part of Aaron’s reality Aaron can’t control or frame.



Fig. 3.11 Screen capture from *Creep* (2014). Screen capture by author.

Midway through the first day, after the unbearable “Tubbie” scenes, Josef insists Aaron follow him through the woods to “El Aguas Milagros del Corazón” he says someone told him about (Aaron is increasingly suspicious and annoyed—he films signs that indicate that the stream they are following is sewage). But then Josef really does find a rock with a heart-shaped hole in it, which he proudly insists, sensing Aaron’s annoyance, that Aaron look at and “tell me what you see.” Aaron pivots the camera over the cliff to look, and the camera’s emphatic zoom reads as Aaron’s surprised acceptance (“Oh my god....it’s a heart” we hear Aaron mutter a moment later)



Fig. 3.12 Screen captures from *Creep* (2014). Screen captures by author.

The shared reality the presence of this rock formation affirms seems to win over Aaron's trust, and shortly after the pair perform a playful and impromptu bonding ritual in the stream by the "heart rock," where Aaron seems genuinely to enter into shared terms with Josef. The camera is left rolling, filming from the ground for most of these scenes, often filming Aaron and Josef together, and at one point Josef films Aaron—the first time the (diegetic) camera has been out of Aaron's control.



Fig. 3.13 Screen capture from *Creep* (2014). Screen capture by author.

It seems important that at this moment when Aaron seems willing to trust Josef, to share worlds with him, the camera (and our perceptual center) is not organized by Aaron's perspective. It is

perhaps the one moment in the film where it doesn't feel like it matters who is filming, because the feeling is that the perspective is shared, or that the framing of the reality is not what organizes it. The scenes feel awkward, a little embarrassing, vulnerable—but not humorless comedy the way the “Tubbie” scenes were—again a kind of genre switch or uncertainty occurring in sync with a shift in perceptual framework. These scenes have something of the look of watching the awkward-looking interactions of ungraceful people in a shared reality different than one's own—the way people in love sometimes behave in ways that look ridiculous from the outside, but which appear radiantly meaningful from inside that relational world. The viewer is looking through a camera that they feel is no longer representing a diegetic perspective—their access to the world is suddenly from outside the characters' perspectives. Looking at these scenes once one knows how the film ends, it's entirely possible to just read them as Josef manipulating Aaron so that he will be easier to kill later. But I think that would be a misreading—when Josef kills Aaron in the end, Aaron does not trust him—between this moment and the end Josef has done many things that should have made Aaron much harder to kill. And, as I mentioned earlier, it is fairly clear that Josef wants to be in relation to Aaron—there is almost definitely no “Buddy,” and even if there were, Josef often seems far more interested in being with Aaron than in recording a video diary.

After this heart rock scene, they go to a diner, and some of Aaron's suspicions are restored when Josef doesn't know things he ought to, if he is who he says he is, and Josef films Aaron again, this time in a mutual exchange where they each narrate something embarrassing for them. This time, though, when Josef films Aaron narrating a mildly embarrassing childhood story about wetting the bed, the sense is that Aaron is humoring Josef—even though the image

onscreen and situation have been framed by Josef, we sense Aaron’s perspective through this mediation, and find it more compelling. Again, the viewer has to do a lot of work to keep up with what the video image “is,” and continually to reassign what “the view” they have is, and what/whose “world” it is of.

This kind of switching will continue over the course of the film. The first day ends with a physical conflict between Aaron and Josef as Aaron tries to leave. Josef, wearing a ridiculous wolf mask, making weird noises and performing sexually suggestive hip gyrations against the door, acknowledges that he is trying to scare Aaron, who acknowledges that he is terrified, and eventually rushes the door. There’s a burst of static, and the screen goes black. When the image comes back, it’s a camera-on-the-ground shot of Josef dragging garbage bags up a hill, and beginning to dig a hole with a shovel. The immediate sense is that Josef has killed Aaron, who likely lies dismembered in these garbage bags, and that the camera perspective is very obviously no longer Aaron’s. It’s a weird and disorienting feeling.



Fig. 3.14 Screen captures from *Creep* (2014). Screen captures by author.

Then, the video freezes and we hear Aaron’s voice from offscreen “um, ok. So, some context,” then the image tilts and the camera rotates to film Aaron’s face as he speaks to us/the camera—

we realize Aaron has been filming a screen³², specifically of his home TV where he has been playing a scary DVD Josef mailed to him—the beginning of the stalking that will take up most of the rest of the film. But more importantly, we *are* actually still in Aaron’s perspective—the camera image/vantage we just reassigned, we have to re-reassign to again represent Aaron’s perceptuum. The viewer must recast, yet again, what they think they are seeing, from whose perspective they think they are seeing it, etc. The “world” we had been seeing is (a) a screen and (b) a narrative reality in which Aaron was dead and in garbage bags, which is not the world we appear now to be in. We also switch genre again—it’s no longer clear that we’re in a horror movie, and this scary DVD is kind of also funny.

Aaron begins recording video diaries explaining what is happening (maybe as evidence?), and during one, hears a noise outside the house and hurriedly gets up, leaving the camera filming from the bed as he goes to turn on all the lights and get a knife. The awkwardness of the framing, Aaron’s rumpled look, and the ridiculousness of the knife he waves around feel like cues to read the scene as funny—and it kind of is.



Fig. 3.15 Screen capture from *Creep* (2014). Screen capture by author.

³² though it’s also clear that this “filmed screen” is a narrative fiction—when we later actually see Aaron film the screen, it’s far grainier than this footage appears.

Its framing and deadpan gaze on an emotionally out-of-tune character formally recall the way Aaron framed Josef earlier, in a way that read as “showing this character as ridiculous,” but despite this formal chime, this “way of looking” no longer belongs to Aaron, the form no longer “means” in the same framework it did, before. The scene is also genuinely tense—I felt what I typically consider “scary suspense movie” tension when I watched it the first time. I felt afraid, for Aaron. The perceptual center is again out of Aaron’s control—the camera watches implacably as Aaron flails around the house and we eventually see Josef framed in the window, and want Aaron to turn and see him the way one often wants horror movie protagonists to turn around, look behind them, not go into the attic, etc. The formal cues suggest “comedy,” much like they did earlier, and yet the viewer likely feels they are now watching a horror movie. The key of their affect and genre has been switched in time with a perspectival framework switch, again. We have switched to a different way of being oriented—the camera again feels like a window onto a reality happening beyond it, and we interpret the filmed action in relation to that framework, rather than in relation to a character’s “way of seeing” that the camera’s framing choices served as proxy access to, before. At this point in the film, the viewer has toggled between ways of casting the camera perspective in time with a continual recasting of the film as belonging to the horror genre, or belonging to the humorless comedy genre. They’ve moved back and forth at least 8 times at this point, and that toggle comes to be felt as a kind of organizing structure within the film, more reliable than a given perspective or genre framework for orientation.

These kinds of switches continue to happen, and in the final scene of the film where Aaron appears, the major switch that retroactively recasts the entirety of the film’s perspectival framing takes place, in a kind of reprisal of the scary DVD-screen-filming moment: Josef kills

Aaron on camera, and we realize that the time of the editing and the time of the diegetic unfolding have been in two different worlds, housed in two different meta-perspectives, and our assumptions about which one we have been in has been wrong all along³³. But I want to talk about this scene together with the way it works with another horror/comedy genre pivot device the film mobilizes: the jump scare.

THE JUMP SCARE

One of the most obvious and worked-out ways *Creep* mobilizes the conventions of genre has to do with how jump scares work. Throughout the film, Josef jump scares Aaron. At the very beginning at the car, a few minutes later when Aaron is filming him in the bath, at their disorienting afternoon hike to “the heart rock,” on the dark back porch during the last strained encounter of the first night. Josef is constantly popping out, yelling, or otherwise shocking Aaron, and the viewer. The camera often swings around wildly, disorientingly, dissolving our access to the visible and narrative world of the film when these scares happen—that often feels like horror. And when we re-enter/regain access to the diegetic world, it’s usually again a comic world we find ourselves in. Another way the film makes its viewer feel the genre toggle coincide with the perspectival/visual one. We have a kind of frame-level, formal equivalent for the loss of control that a bodily flinch/yell signifies. Also like Aaron, the audience physically jumps or flinches each time, even though it becomes increasingly more familiar, less scary, more pure reflex—we, and Aaron, get symbolically desensitized³⁴. These jump scares are just one more stupid weird thing Josef insists on doing.

³³ This moment is also central to Alan Cameron’s reading of the film in “Corporeal Frames: Found Horror,” wherein he argues that the multimedia format and reality-negotiation requirements of found footage horror “exscribes” the body (following Nancy) along the edge of the frame.

³⁴ It’s interesting here to also consider how Brice is deploying the jump scare in relationship to the long and interesting history of “shock” in film, film theory, and theories of Modernity — for example, Wolfgang

Part of what makes horror films a member of what Carol Clover first characterized as the filmic “body” genres is the way they privilege the “sensational,” the “spectacle of the body caught in the grip of sensation or emotion” (Williams, 4). Film scholar Linda Williams goes on to put a finer point on it—the films of these genres both “portray and affect the sensational body,” and are judged especially “low” if they produce “perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen” (4).

Interestingly for the horror/comedy question is her note about the ways physical clown comedy at once resembles and differs from these body genres, including horror:

Physical clown comedy is another “body” genre concerned with all manner of gross activities and body functions—eating, shoes slipping on banana peels. Nonetheless, it has not been deemed gratuitously excessive, probably because the reaction of the audience does not mimic the sensations experienced by the central clown. Indeed, it is almost a rule that the audience's physical reaction of laughter does not coincide with the often dead-pan reactions of the clown.

In the body genres I am isolating here, however, it seems to be the case that the success of these genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen. Whether this mimicry is exact, e.g., whether the spectator at the porn film actually orgasms, whether the spectator at the horror film actually shudders in fear, whether the spectator of the melodrama actually dissolves in tears, the success of these genres seems a self-evident matter of measuring bodily response [...] What seems to bracket these particular genres from others is an apparent lack of proper esthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion. We feel manipulated by these texts--an impression that the very colloquialisms of “tear jerker” and “fear jerker” express (4-5)

Williams is also making a specific point here about gender, but most relevant for us is the way *Creep* catches its spectator up in “involuntary mimicry” of Aaron’s jumping and flinching. *Creep* certainly reads as a “low” genre movie, even though so much of its formal and relational machinery is actually quite sophisticated. Like Aaron, we are forced by Josef to physiologically

Schivelbusch describes a kind of numbness or “sensation shield,” Susan Buck-Morss reads Walter Benjamin as describing a subject willing to be aesthetically interested in their own destruction under fascism, etc.

react. But the jump scares are not actually part of the “horror” part of the movie—they’re the intrusion of a sensorially affecting formal component from one genre into another—and we feel the switch back to irritated humorless comedy (with a gradually increasing component of real anxiety) once the camera has stopped swinging around and we reestablish our terms with the environment.

When Josef finally does murder Aaron near the end of the film, it happens in broad daylight, comically, awkwardly slowly—no jump scare, no shock. It’s filmed from a long way off, a ridiculous framing at odds with its climactic status.



Fig. 3.16
Screen captures from *Creep* (2014). Top to bottom, left to right. Screen captures by author.

Aaron has left his camera rolling in the car. Josef fumbles to put his wolf mask on for what feels like an eternity, then seems to wait in the hopes that Aaron will turn and see him. When it becomes clear Aaron is not going to turn around, Josef tries to figure out how best to hit Aaron in the back of the head with the axe, and seems to hope again that Aaron might see him, posing

with the axe over his head. We watch the whole thing, which takes about two ridiculous, endless minutes, from far off (Aaron has set his camera up to surveil the bench from his car window). It feels like a slow motion, reversed perspective, Beckettian take on the first kill in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*—upon sitting down on the meeting bench, Aaron even initially whips around to look behind him when he hears a chainsaw, then resolutely faces forward as the chainsaw continues. He has had it with the jump scares, with the wolf who cried wolf. His refusal, and the camera's positioning/framing, make the scene feel comical, even though it is the only real, physical violence that takes place in the film. Aaron's comic framing, the formal framework for orientation, wins out over the content. There's a sickening, dull feeling as the axe makes a faint, far off "thud," when it collides fatally with Aaron's skull. Formally, the film reads as "comedy" in this moment, with its slapstick-esque fumbling, absurdity, excessive duration, quotational quality, and stupid-looking framing.

Like the audience watching physical comedy in Linda Williams's account, our sensations do not match that of the central clown, and here that feels at once funny, and also bad—I think it feels bad because it is funny, and probably shouldn't be—the formal machinery of genre, Aaron's framing, persists as an organizing experiential force. Our sympathetic organizing consciousness and POV companion has just been brutally axe-murdered by a buffoon, and we've suddenly also realized that the time of the editing, and the world in which the film lives as object (rather than perceptual infrastructure) are necessarily other than we had thought they were. We were secure in that place, to use Shyamalan's phrasing, and we were very wrong, just as Aaron was. Like Heather Donahue was in *The Blair Witch Project*, preferring to see the world through the camera, and wanted to believe doing so would protect her.

GAZE IDENTITY/ADDRESS (DEICTIC SHIFTING): REFERENCE CONFUSION & BOUNDARIES (“HI BUDDY WE’RE CALLING IT BUDDY”)

As the film begins to accelerate (Josef begins stalking Aaron, after their very long and strange first day concludes in a physical conflict), Josef begins mailing Aaron DVD videos he [Josef] has produced. The final one concludes by addressing Aaron as “Buddy,” the name Josef has given his (imaginary) unborn child, who has been spoken to incessantly (i.e. the camera has been being addressed as Buddy). Throughout the film the viewer, and Aaron, will suddenly realize that Josef has switched to speaking to Aaron, or has ceased speaking to Aaron. Often this occurs in an unmarked way, and requires inferential work on Aaron’s part (and our part), in a way that recalls the unmarked surface/meaning reconstructive activity of an adept reader of an ironic work.

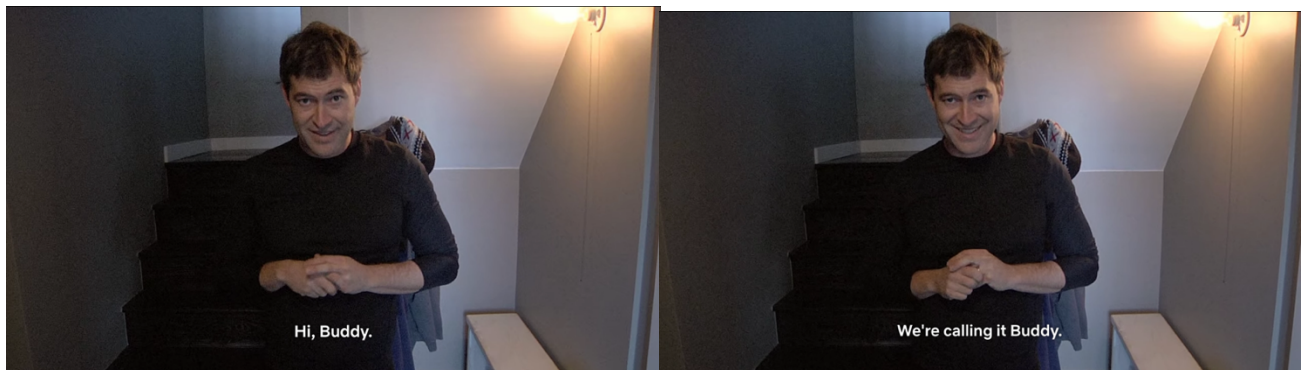


Fig. 3.17 Screen captures from *Creep* (2014). Screen captures by author.

The viewer is not only often thinking about whose perceptual infrastructure they’re inhabiting, whose viewpoint, whose world, but also who is being addressed, who is being looked at, whose gaze the camera’s gaze represents.

The final DVD Josef sends Aaron during the stalking sequence invites Aaron to meet him at Lake Gregory so that he can show Aaron “who he really is.” In the course of the selfie-style video, Josef confesses to having lied to Aaron, one of Josef’s signature “shared reality” or “meta-

level” producing moves (we’ve seen him use these kinds of confessions twice before in the film to this effect).

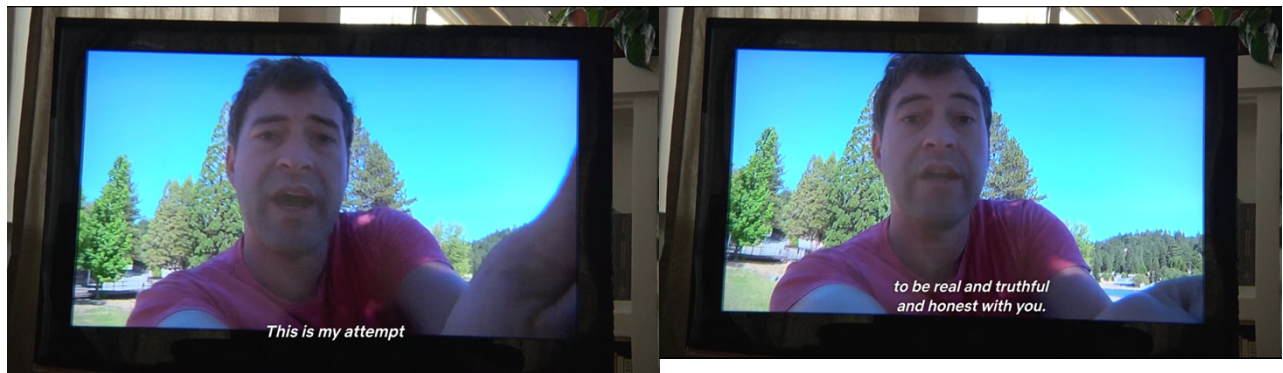


Fig. 3.18 Screen captures from *Creep* (2014). Screen captures by author.

Here, Josef is very obviously filming himself, but his camera’s gaze is meant to represent Aaron’s—and indeed we are watching this film from Aaron’s camera, filming his TV (you can see house plants, etc. around the edge of the frame)—the looks of two different cameras have been aligned as “Aaron’s perspective,” and one³⁵ of these cameras is Josef’s, one of them is Aaron’s. It’s at the end of this DVD that Josef addresses Aaron as “Buddy,” recalling the earlier way that this kind of address from Josef purportedly referred to a different and future “you,” via an address to the camera, the “Buddy” Aaron will confuse himself with in dreams. Here, we hear more clearly the way “Buddy” is a deictic like “you”—many different “jetzts” are “now.” “Buddy” is also a word Patrick Brice is really interested in—it’s part of what I take to be his exploration of commodified forms of relational address (especially kitschy male bonding relational address forms), and what kind of relation is possible through them. There’s a scene in his next film *The Overnight* (2015), for example, where two characters who are actively trying to negotiate the terms of their relationship just call each other “Buddy” in different tones, back and forth, for about 45 seconds, as they work out that they are not going to sleep together.

³⁵ actually two, but we’re only aware of one at this point

Forms of address and the boundaries and relational structures they connote, or don't, feel like another significant toggle Brice uses to change what framework the viewer, and Aaron, understand themselves to be operating in. Throughout the film, Josef uses the language of boundaries, seeks consent, and generally uses forms that signify a recognition of the sovereignty and separateness of Aaron's perspective, even as he uses these forms in combination with transgressive actions to systematically undermine Aaron's sense of reality. We feel Aaron's loneliness, and his desire to be in relation as well, even as he's also suspicious, skeptical, and, reasonably, a bit disgusted by Josef. When we feel Aaron's reality and perspective as separate and organizing, the film reads as comedy, except for in the kill scene. When we feel its alignment or combination with Josef's, the film feels either like a kind of drama, or horror. Aaron's perspective produces a kind of comic distance, and Josef's an odd, intolerable, ultimately horrifying proximity, even as where and how these perspectives are being located keeps moving.

Not only is Josef interested in confounding Aaron with "Buddy," but we will eventually realize he is interested in speaking to himself through Aaron, and through the screen. At one point, Josef cheerfully holds up the identical hats they're going to wear hiking and exclaims "Twins!"³⁶ At the very end of the film, after we've seen Aaron die, we realize the camera has again been filming a screen: Josef's screen in his editing basement. The camera pivots to Josef addressing the camera, whose gaze we will soon realize stands for Josef's gaze: he has been making this as a film for himself. A moment later, he pivots the camera to again film the screen, still showing Aaron's body lying in the park, and continues describing that situation.

³⁶ This moment echoes the scene in *Mulholland Drive* (Lynch, 2001) when Diane Selwyn (Naomi Watts) and Camilla Rhodes (Laura Harring) are looking at themselves in the mirror, "twinned" by the blonde wig Camilla Rhodes wears in the scene. Image omitted to avoid copyright issues.



Fig.3.19 Screen captures from *Creep* (2014). Screen captures by author.

Then he jump scares himself! and us! changing whose bodily sensations ours align with. Josef has walked up to the car with Aaron’s camera filming in the window, and slammed his hand down on the roof, exactly as he did in the beginning to Aaron. Just as in that beginning scene, we hear a scream maxxing out the camera recorder from offscreen that synchronizes with Josef’s scream on the video—Josef’s, in the basement behind us, we dimly realize

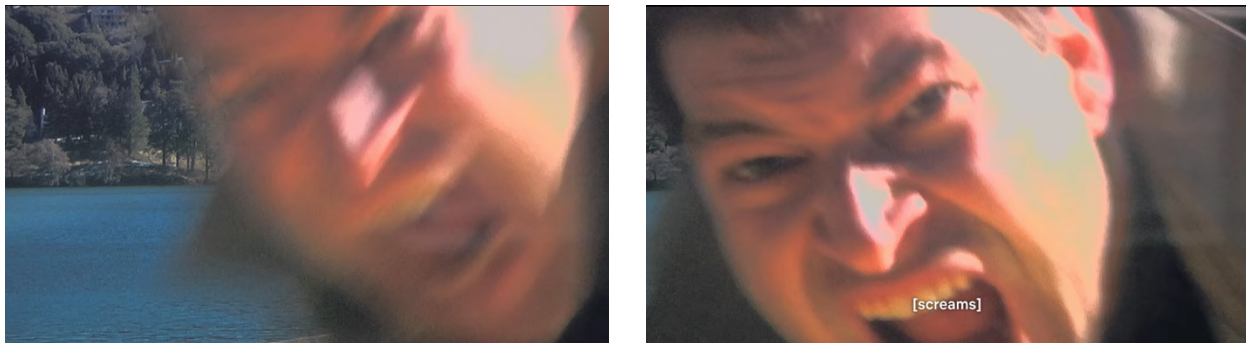


Fig. 3.20 Screen captures from *Creep* (2014). Screen captures by author.

The film toggles not only between who the “you” is, but who the “I” is, repeatedly, and this, like the genre pivot, and like the way the camera perspective’s “reality” keeps being switched, constitutes the aspect choreography of the film—what the form of the film ultimately is, and one that produces a strange and specific feeling, arising from the films alternation between orientations and frameworks for meaning that the film stages as irreconcilable. The film’s

mobilization of form to affect these kinds of perspectival and genre switches is a major part of how it works out its relational questions—questions that seem central to Brice’s oeuvre generally, and which explicitly track, in *Creep*, with a dynamic organized by irreconcilable frameworks of genre-orientation and perspective.

Useful here is a quote from Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, thinking about the way tragedy, comedy, and genre can(‘t) work in the context of late capitalism:

Although Beckett’s plays can no longer be taken for tragic or comic, they are not therefore, as would suit academic aesthetics, hybrids on the order of tragicomedy. On the contrary, Beckett’s plays pass historical judgment over these categories as such, faithful to the historical innervation that there is no more laughing over the classics of comic theater except in a state of renewed barbarism. In accord with the tendency of modern art to make its own categories thematic through self-reflection, plays like *Godot* and *Endgame*—in the scene in which the protagonists decide to laugh—are more the tragic presentation of comedy’s fate than they are the comic; in the actors’ forced laughter, the spectator’s mirth vanishes (Adorno, 340)

Not compare *Creep* with canonical works like *Endgame*, but I think there’s something here that holds true for Brice’s film as well—I argue the film thematizes the relational problem arising from the structural situation of irreconcilable frameworks, and that its formal machinery should be read as a kind of sedimentation³⁷, also along Adornian lines, of this content. *Creep* makes the irresolvable sincerity/irony orientation layering that’s apparent in Web 2.0 irony into a time series, with horror and comedy as form/genre proxies for what is essentially a relational/orientational modality question. The murder scene’s formal cues toward comedy make its trained viewer see it *as* comedy, and see themselves seeing it as comedy, helplessly distanced both literally (seeing from the car, far away), and figuratively (comedy requires emotional

³⁷ “Art negates the categorial determinations stamped on the empirical world and yet harbors what is empirically existing in its own substance. If art opposes the empirical through the element of form—and the mediation of form and content is not to be grasped without their differentiation—the mediation is to be sought in the recognition of aesthetic form as sedimented content” (Adorno, 5)

distance). Experiencing this scene in this way is a marker of the viewer's non-identification with (genre-indicating non-relation to) Aaron, even though it is the persistence of Aaron's comic framing they're (formally) seeing through. Aaron is available as a framework, but not for relation. Just as horror and comedy make structurally similar use of violence and wrong-world recognition as pivot points, they converge there, but are not in relation, because they are not superimposable frameworks. The experience of this scene is dual-genred, but staged at two different levels of reflexivity: the comedy is immediate (the formal cues of the scene do make it funny), and the (mild) horror reflexively constructed (horror *at* being able to experience in this way). If above a certain degree of layering, the irony/sincerity stack becomes tractionless "mist," when you make it a time series you radically expand the stack capacity's ability to be sustained or meaningful, not just the giddy one-liner void of "no meaning possible," but rather a thematization, with the attendant feeling of uneasy giggly dread and sadness, of the problem of no relational meaning possible (because no shared framework possible), much like Beckett's plays do for to the category of the comic genre. Insofar as the film is a horror film, the horror is that we have no way to relate to each other, we can experience each others' and our own death as funny, and that it doesn't matter at all—paradoxically, then it does. If we take *Creep* as a kind of time series, explicitly relational version of "Horse shoe," I would argue that it introduces the address vector and possibility of dialectical relational coevolution, but that possibility is actually foreclosed because successful sublation requires a fundamental or subtending world wherein terms can be shared—and there isn't, actually, one to be had here. Secular economic totalities, at least for Brice, don't seem to offer such a thing. Therefore the object in time enacts the tragedy of the failure of the shared (diegetic) world along new and differently visceral vectors of experience, even as it constitutes a different order of time and expectation—a temporal one

which can incorporate discontinuity. It is from this coherent (but only rhythmically coherent) position that the tragedy of relational failure as a failure of shared frameworks/worlds can be felt and perceived—feeling requires a coherent standpoint, something rhythm, and aspect choreography, provide on new terms.

CHAPTER 4

LIMITEDNESS OF VIEW IS A PERFECT CAUSE: ASPECT CHOREOGRAPHY AND REPRESENTING VANTAGELESSNESS IN APICHA TPONG WEERASETHAKUL'S *MYSTERIOUS OBJECT AT NOON* (2000)

A narrow green metal can, given a sharp kick, is rolling down a paved street at the real pace of a metal green can kicked down a street. It continues to roll until there is very little left in the awareness or expectation of the viewer besides this rolling activity, its soft metallic noise, diminishingly audible as the can descends the hill. The scene goes on so long that it claims an immediacy of its own, breaking through the expectational structure set up by the film's narrative. This is, of course, the famous can scene in Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up* (1990), an experimental documentary that combines and alternates between fictive, reenactive, and documentarian modes. *Close-Up* attempts to represent "the truth of the structure of [the] relationship" (Kiarostami) between a man named Hossein Sabzian and the Akhankhah family, whom Sabzian was able to briefly convince that he was the famous Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Eventually, they figure out the ruse, and sue Sabzian for defrauding them, despite not really being sure what exactly he intended to do. But, by the time they take him to court, Kiarostami has found out about the situation, and has entered actively into the course of events as he films them—some of the scenes are staged or reenacted after the fact, some of the footage is of the actual events as they unfolded, some are... a mixture (e.g. the trial scene). The film tracks and reenacts the course of the interactions between the Akhankhah family and Sabzian, moving both backwards and forwards in time from the film-beginning moment of Sabzian's arrest at the Akhankhah residence, to their initial meeting, to his trial, to his eventual personal apology to and pardon by the family, which he delivers accompanied by the real Makhmalbaf. The film works a kind of magic, or, as Kiarostami puts it, tells "a truth that is beyond reality" —

it gives its audience (and its participants/actors/subjects) a way to feel how Sabzian's presentation of himself as Makhmalbaf was in some way true, even if logically and empirically, it was not. Critics consistently argue that the way the film combines its modalities is in large part how it is able to work this magic. As Stiegler puts it:

Doubt is introduced into the status of images, and in particular into the images of the trial, which are presented as an archival document, but are introduced through a "clap" that therefore reveals a totally artificial synchronization, even if, when we are effectively looking at these images, and listening and admiring Sabzian, this doubt does not seem to be allowed. Between these two spectatorial attitudes, which thus become specular (because they mirror each other), a malaise, or rather a sort of suffering takes over, and in so many ways, a sweet suffering. A suffering that is in some ways restorative (Stiegler 40-1)

This "doubt" in the status of images (are they documents? Bearers of narrative? Non-semantic representations of parallel paraphernalia constitutive of the empirical world(s) in which both documented events and this filmic narrative unfold? (e.g. the can)) somehow produces "restorative suffering," as the viewer attempts to orient themselves to both the film and to Sabzian as a human. This "restorative suffering," or paradoxically communal or empathetic "loneliness" (Finnegan 38) that the film induces in its viewers and participants is a kind of superadditive (a)(e)ffect arising from this doubt, or from the way the film forces a sustained and complex activity of Wittgensteinian seeing-as (30). The can scene is one of the moments where the fabric of the film seems to break, or to allow the kinds of doubt Stiegler and Finnegan identify. As Finnegan puts it, "is it [the can] inside or outside the world of the story? [...] The can is undeniably on film, but it is not clear that it is inside the film" (24-5).

This assessment seems correct—viewing the film, I do feel that this structurally-induced "doubt" or "seeing-as" is integral to the affective force of the film. I'm not convinced, however, by Stiegler's and Finnegan's explanations as to why, compelling as their assessments of the film otherwise are. Finnegan suggests that the film makes us feel our "inability to stitch all of the

relevant perspectives¹ together into one coherent whole” (27) and in so doing “render[s] our isolation—from the film, from one another, and from ourselves—intelligible” (38). Kiarostami himself described the film as “like a prism—no matter what angle you look from it shows you a reality you couldn’t predict.” Maybe it’s as simple as Cavell’s idea (which Finnegan cites) that film is able to make its viewer feel that they don’t know “what [their] conviction in reality turns upon[...]we are tantalized at once by our subjection to it [reality] and by its subjection to our views of it” (Cavell 188-9 reviewed in Finnegan 31).

This sounds like a kind of combination of Merleau-Ponty’s gloss on Cubism: multiple irreconcilable vantages jammed together that flatten [represented, illusionistic] space, the postmodern “lumberyard of disjointed subsystems” Fredric Jameson identifies, the accelerating atomization under late capitalism, standpoint epistemology, and a redemptive sub-pivot that sounds like the Arendtian take on the Kantian notion of subjective universality: that when we make a claim that something is beautiful, we acknowledge that we are at once saying something about an experience of our reasoning and imaginative drives set into play inside our own heads as we fail to apply a stable conceptual framework to an object, and also making a claim that we are therefore like others (though we can’t know their minds directly), since surely this object will do the same for them as it does for us. A kind of community of inferred likeness in irreconcilable separateness, along the lines of the “communal loneliness” *Close-Up*’s fractured vantage produces for Finnegan.

Even if Finnegan is right here, it still isn’t clear to me how the film’s modulation of vantage does something different than Cubism, post-modernist code mixing, metacommentary,

¹ She is referring here both to the different ways Sabzian is seen by others (e.g. as career-making “scoop” by the journalist Farazmand, as fraud by the Akhankhah family, as criminal by the legal system, as a film-lover by Kiarostami (29)), and to how the film images are seen, what they are seen-as.

or general fragmentation aesthetics that are somehow still Kantian/Arendtian beautiful. And undeniably it does—“sweet”ness, “restorative suffering” and the like are rarely the phrases used to describe the experience of a Postmodernist or fragmented or experimental artwork. Nor are films that make one doubt the grounds for one’s conviction in this or that reality: William Greaves’s early masterwork version of using film to probe this problem, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968), is fascinating, and certainly affecting, but the feeling is something more like “interesting” and less like “restorative suffering,” even as it moves through documentary and fictive modes and vantages much like *Close-Up* does. Is it just that Sabzian looks, as Stiegler puts it, like a “quattrocento saint” in so many of the shots, expressive and restrained and deeply sincere? That he is a real and sympathetic and suffering human caught in the web of a complex problem, in a world that fails to treat him well? That doesn’t seem right either.

In this chapter, I’ll argue that looking closely at how vantages modulate in Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s first feature, *Dogfahr Nai Meu Marn (Mysterious Object at Noon)* (2000), another contemporary film that follows in the experimental documentary lineage of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, can help clarify how the structure and affective force of *Close-Up* are connected. Considering *Mysterious Object* from this angle will also help explain the connection between Weerasethakul’s grad-school interest in Structuralist filmmaking, and the turn his later and better-known work takes toward the affective, relational, and supernatural. *Mysterious Object* does not at first seem to be an obvious predecessor to films like *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010) and *Memoria* (2021), despite the shared interest in the folkloric, the nature of storytelling, and in dilated time. But thinking about how modulation of orientation and vantage, aspect choreography, is patterned in this early work

shows that Weerasethakul is using film's capacity to create, trouble, and interweave "realities" to allow a splinter of some other and non-perspectival kind of reality to enter as experiential force. I'll argue that Weerasethakul's oeuvre later moves to thematize or represent this splinter via presences like the ghosts and aliens that populate the later work, but that it's not yet representationally present in *Mysterious Object*, though it's anticipated through the form, in a way connected to a Structuralist way of thinking about film². In working through these three interlocking claims, I'll show how aspect choreography can be used to give phenomenologically available form to an intuition about an unrepresentable aspect of the nature of reality: its vantagelessness.

I. Plurality: On Weerasethakul's Cultural Formation and Influences

It's almost impossible not to remark how much Apichatpong Weerasethakul's (b. 1970, Bangkok) background, education, practice, and cultural formation are characterized by multiple and/or conflicting belief structures, orientations, or fields of influence. Weerasethakul, who is rapidly becoming one of the most influential moving image artists, moves between art and cinema worlds; as James Quandt puts it, he is an "international star of both art biennales and film festivals, awarded prizes by both Carnegie and Cannes" (Quandt 99). Critical studies of his work are becoming increasingly common, but multiple scholars point to a feeling of "critical impasse" (ibid), perhaps arising from the "something evasive at the heart of Apichatpong's work" (Rayns 140). Others mark a concern with the "strikingly ahistorical contemplation" (Teh 596) that tends

² Weerasethakul explicitly cites the influence of Western experimental Structural films on his work, and scholars have remarked the resonance (e.g. Luis Miranda, James Quandt, Karen Newman), but no one has yet connected the way the supernatural works in Weerasethakul's oeuvre to this Structuralist influence

to go on, perhaps produced partially by the work's "abiding alterity—with respect to its own cultural milieu as much as to Western modes of explication" (ibid). A betweenness, dividedness, and plurality, (arriving, perhaps, at this alterity) runs throughout both Weerasethakul's oeuvre and his influences, biographical and artistic. Influenced by the Western experimental film tradition, but deeply steeped in popular Thai (narrative) cultural production of the 70s and 80s³, trained as an architect in Thailand and then as a visual artist at SAIC in the US, and raised in a rural region of Thailand (Isan) well known for its patchwork political structure, and history of conflict with the Thai government and its extrajudicial militia⁴ (Newman 143), and its people's maintenance of indigenous animist belief systems in tension with the dominant Buddhist state religion⁵, Weerasethakul has lived and practiced across and between systems of meaning and orientation throughout his life and career. Thailand itself is a country characterized by in-betweenness and cultural pluralism; fellow Thai director Kong Rithdee (b. 1973), thinking about the tensions in Weerasethakul's work, points to the resonances his films have "for us [Thai audiences], in this society perched between half-baked modernity and deep-seated conservatism," and strongly influenced by multiple other cultures and histories (Rithdee 118). In interviews, Weerasethakul frequently comments on the ways his life experience, upbringing, and

³ It's well documented that Weerasethakul loves and frequently references "the lurid [Thai] pop-culture he loved as a kid—fantasy adventure serials on the radio, pulp fiction and what Noel Coward called "cheap music"" (Rayns 135). Many of his films obliquely or directly quote from popular Thai soap operas, novels, stories, radio conventions, and movies (Rithdee, 118), and he details in numerous interviews how much of an impact these cultural forms have had on his life and work. And yet, as Tony Rayns notes, his "films never reach for the melodrama or obvious manipulation of pop culture" (Rayns, 135).

⁴ This region of Thailand has a long history of violent clashes between communist farmers and the militia (often these farmers were brutally murdered), especially in the 1960s, and a great deal of extrajudicial violence that continued well into the aughts (Newman 148-9). Weerasethakul, during his research for *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), spent time in the village of Nabua in Isan, and he notes that "it was one of the places the Thai army occupied from the 60s to the early 80s in order to curb the communist insurgents. There was no link to Boonmee here except that the village was also full of repressed memories" (Weerasethakul 196).

⁵ Weerasethakul⁵ was raised in a small town (Khon Kaen) in the northeastern Thai region of Isan, Critics note that Isan is often considered the most "authentically" Thai part of the country, and yet has often been a site of hybridity, collisions between belief systems, and resistance to governmental centralization (Quandt, 203).

media consumption inflect his film work. For example, Weerasethakul's parents were both doctors in Isan, and, as he (and many critics) note, most of his films are set there, and illness and medical facilities feature prominently throughout his oeuvre⁶. In an introduction delivered in 2010 at a masterclass in Buenos Aires, Weerasethakul also notes that he first studied architecture, which he still finds “complement[s] and helps me in my thinking in my filmmaking” (Weerasethakul). After completing his studies in architecture at Khon Kaen University in Thailand in 1994, he “moved to Chicago, to study Visual Art [at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, MFA 1997]” He tried many different media, including painting, photography, and holography, before settling on film, being especially drawn, he says, to “experimental film in the US.” He was interested in the way film could be done “personally,” by oneself, “like a sculptor or a painter,” allowing him to really “explore the medium”—his work was initially solitary, experimental, and influenced by non-narrative, structural films in the Western (especially US) tradition, and its Modernist heritage of medium specificity.

After he graduated, he moved back to Thailand, and tried to “put this Structural film into practice” there, but it “didn't fit, didn't belong to the culture or the memory that I had in Thailand, because the country is full of narrative and myth[...] it's a narrative-driven culture.” So, he “abandoned this purely experimental form, and tried to find [his] own expression.” Here again, Weerasethakul's work arrives as a negotiation of conflicting orientations: the experimental “Structural” film practice he had developed in US grad school didn't square well with the “narrative-driven” culture he now found himself living in again, working in, and responding to.

⁶ (especially in *Syndromes and a Century (Saeng satawaat)* (2006), for example, which is set in hospitals and tells the story of his parents' meeting).

His first feature, *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), is very legibly a negotiation of these two orientations, as well as others, including the fictive and the documentarian. The film took him 3 years to complete, because he had no funding, so he just “shot when [he] had money,” and accordingly, adopted a “very flexible structure” inspired by the Surrealist game of exquisite corpse. He describes the game, and explains that he thought it could be interesting to translate into cinema, and that he drove around the country “asking people for their stories, their fictional stories[...]it [was] the start of the idea of collaboration” for him, an idea that would become central throughout his career—as many critics note, most of his films are credited as “conceived and edited by,” rather than “directed by,” Apichatpong Weerasethakul, so important is a kind of openness and collaborative responsivity to his (mostly non-professional) actors and crewmembers to his mature practice, in apparent contradistinction to the mode of working he had previously developed, one of the many apparent contradictions or reversals both in his work and in his career.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is much discussion in recent critical discourse of binaries, opposition, bifurcation, splitting, and repetition in Weerasethakul’s oeuvre⁷, especially focusing on films like *Syndromes and a Century* (2006) and *Tropical Malady* (2004), where (in both cases) the film is literally split into halves that appear to replicate each other with varying degrees of explicitness, with accompanying shifts in vantage, perspective, setting, and/or form⁸.

⁷ (see, for example, María del Carmen Molina Barea’s discussion of the repetitive, bifurcated structure of *Syndromes and a Century* (2006) along Bergsonian/Deleuzian lines in “The Cinematographic Refrain: Memory and Repetition in the Films of Hong Sang-Soo and Apichatpong Weerasethakul” (2021).

⁸ This is not unique to Weerasethakul’s oeuvre, nor to Asian filmmakers, though it is certainly frequent and marked in the oeuvres of Weerasethakul and certain other major contemporary Asian filmmakers like Hong Sang-Soo. Doubling, repetition, recurrence, and etc. occur in the work of Western directors too, however, (e.g. Buñuel, Hitchcock, and others), and have been extensively theorized in film work generally, and are often considered a thematic expression of the nature of the medium itself

Many critics try to trace this aspect of his work to the Buddhism that informs Thai culture, and which became important to Weerasethakul more explicitly starting after the death of his father in 2003 (Weerasethakul, qtd. Quandt 184). Specifically, most of the analysis of how this binary splitting and repetition works in his oeuvre centers on reincarnation as an explanatory or source structure for these features. I find these arguments compelling, but perhaps a bit too limited in their focus on reincarnation specifically. Kong Rithdee describes Weerasethakul's oeuvre as a "cinema of reincarnations" (Rithdee, 118). Tony Rayns suggests that the filmmaker's frequent use of "bipolar structures" "bespeaks a conviction that "truth" is never less strange than "fiction"," (Rayns, 139) which Rayns links to "Apichatpong's interest in Buddhism," saying "it may shape his [Weerasethakul's] sense that appearances and essences are different things—and his belief that reincarnation may fate us to act out the same scenarios repeatedly"⁹ (139-40). For María del Carmen Molina Barea, this "articulation of a dual structure" in the films has to do with producing a felt awareness in the viewer of how repetition with difference structures and constitutes time, along the lines of both Buddhist reincarnation and the Deleuzian crystal image, transforming the virtual into the actual (17). del Carmen Molina Barea is also interested in using this comparison to produce a "becoming minoritarian" or deterritorialization of European/Deleuzian film philosophy by tracking its resonances with Buddhist philosophy in certain film works by Asian directors (Hong Sang-Soo and Apichatpong Weerasethakul) (4). She does this mostly by arguing that the way the repetitive structures of Weerasethakul's films "actualiz[e] memories within the present" (15) on the Deleuzian model resonates with his [Weerasethakul's] statement that, in his films, "[t]ime is collapsed to mimic a pattern of

⁹ Rayns does go on to point out another kind of bipolarity; that Weerasethakul's exposure to Surrealism has also "taught him to stay alert to the *hazard objectif*" (140), in opposition to the fated repetition described earlier.

remembering and to manifest my belief in the idea of [Buddhist] reincarnation” (Weerasethakul, qtd *ibid*)—that the way repetition structures time in these works is akin to how repetition and variation structure time in a Buddhist model of reincarnation. Reincarnation is addressed thematically, also, in several of Weerasethakul’s films (e.g. *Uncle Boonmee who Can Recall his Past Lives* (2010)¹⁰, *Syndromes and a Century* (2006)), especially in the later work. It seems clear that reincarnation is explicitly important to Weerasethakul’s cultural/religious formation and thinking, and the ways scholars see this playing out through the form generally also holds a certain amount of explanatory force. Weerasethakul’s belief in reincarnation, and his commitment to holding space for simultaneity of virtual and actual, remembered and present, real and fabricated, and other apparently contradicting realities certainly do a lot to explain some of the oft-remarked dreamlike qualities of his later films, and the presence of ghosts and other supernatural presences. But films that repeat events with a twist, commingle remembered and present events, ghosts and ‘real’ people, these are nothing new, especially in horror films (e.g. *Audition* (Miike 1999)), and yet there is something viscerally and experientially different about Weerasethakul’s oeuvre.

I argue that by tracking out how his first feature, *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), develops a felt pattern of orientational shifts between frameworks, an aspect choreography, it’s possible to get a better handle on how Weerasethakul works with contradiction between apparent realities towards new affective forms—certainly this is resonant with the reincarnation influence, but I think it goes beyond it as well. I argue that this film’s way of thinking about realities as

¹⁰ *Uncle Boonmee* is based loosely on a real/historical person—Weerasethakul and Nach Widmer (née Jenjira Pongpas), (arguably his favorite actor—she is in every one of his features) conducted preliminary research for the film by “driv[ing] blindly from town to town and ask[ing] old people and village chiefs about his [Boonmee’s] relatives[...]we stumbled on some reincarnation cases. There was one that involved a young woman who could recall her previous life as a young boy in another village...” (Weerasethakul, 194)

orientation-organizing structures (perhaps a lesson learned from architecture or Structuralist film) subtends the way Weerasethakul's better known later work holds the supernatural and the spiritual, and accounts for some of the affective force of his oeuvre.

II. Frames, Frame-Breaking, and Narrative in *Mysterious Object at Noon*

Mysterious Object at Noon (2000) is an unusual object: it's necessary to first give a bit of a framing description before characterizing how it works as an aspect choreography. In the tradition of both the Thai *nirat* (travel poem) (Teh 605) and the 1920s Surrealist "exquisite corpse" game Weerasethakul cites as inspiration, *Mysterious Object at Noon* traces and produces a segmented and collaborative story (and documents and narrates the production of this story) that travels roughly south, across several towns and villages in Isan. Weerasethakul began the project in 1997 by asking a person to tell a part of a story, then transmitting that segment to another person or person(s) elsewhere, and asking them to continue the story (and so on), until, per Weerasethakul, the camera gave out (Quandt 41). The story is, predictably, meandering and nearly nonsensical—a short version would be something like "a young handicapped boy has a teacher named Dogfahr who comes daily for his lessons. He seems to have no parents. Something goes wrong, Dogfahr loses consciousness and a ball rolls out from under her skirt, then [the ball] turns into a boy. This new boy maybe also came from a starburst the ball became, and helps his friend put the unconscious Dogfahr into a zippered storage cabinet. Dogfahr revives but it's not really her any more, and this other woman seems much less beneficent. At one point the new boy transforms into Dogfahr since his friend misses her, but that doesn't last. This other woman (false Dogfahr) and her companion try to sell the new boy and his friend to a

restaurant owner in Bangkok. There is a fake Dogfah and a real one. Many things happen with a witch tiger (though we don't see them)." Sometimes there are staged reenactments of what someone previously narrated, sometimes the action precedes the narration, sometimes there is only the narration, sometimes it isn't clear what, exactly, is happening. Like the can rolling down the hill in *Close-Up*, many of the filmed events and performances are shot and/or edited in such a way that they break the narrative expectation structure the film has appeared to build. The film modulates between appearing to represent fictive and documentary realities, and, like all aspect choreography-sustaining objects, holds these orientations more or less unhierarchically for most of its duration.

It's also useful to quickly outline how *Mysterious Object at Noon* sets up and questions filmic realities as orientation-organizing structures, in a way that's at once recognizably located in the line of the reflexive postmodern documentary, and on its own specific terms. Throughout, the film's formal choices cultivate a viewer's awareness of how breaks and switches in expectation structure function as a cue for re-orientation, as a cue to read the film image as connoting a different kind of "reality." The film cues its viewer to notice and to feel when they've had to switch orientations (documentary to narrative or vice versa), and, as I'll show later, builds a pattern out of these switches.

The most important kind of orientational or framework switch the film sets up is that between the fictive and the documentary, and it's a contrast that very clearly structures the beginning of the film. *Mysterious Object* opens with a black-screen intertitle that just says "Once Upon a Time..." (evoking the folkloric or fable: simplified fictional narrative) then cuts to a long and obviously handheld continuous shot from (presumably) a car, driving unromantically along highways and then narrow city roads in Thailand as the radio plays a sugary pop song with

an ad-like voice announcement playing over it—a shot whose aesthetic in every way evokes “the documentary” (complete with the occasional bob of the camera revealing dash stickers, windshield wipers, and reflected glare from the dashboard vents that place us inside the car). These (fictive and documentary) are the major modalities of the film, and from the very beginning *Mysterious Object* cues its viewer to switch between the expectations structured by each, and to feel the abruptness of the switch—the movement from the forcefully directive intertitle to the long messy driving shot full of miscellany and chatter is loudly legible as a cue to switch from an expectation set derived from fiction to one derived from documentary. The film will continue to modulate between them.

The aspect choreography of the film operates primarily by patterning how sound and image advances and voiceover shift over the course of the piece, but there are other important cues it develops in concert. The way the viewer feels inclined to read the look of the film image itself, for example, feels like the site of another such modulation or aspect switch. Originally shot on 16mm black and white reversal film¹¹, *Mysterious Object* has a scrappy, grainy look that pivots, in the work, between feeling like it comes from a tradition of low-resolution documentary footage (the work has a certain “ethnographic horizon,” as David Teh puts it (602)), or, this graininess can feel like the visual texture most appropriate to the fuzzy abstraction of partially remembered, multiply recounted, and variously amended folk story¹². Like most everything else in the film, this “look” is something Weerasethakul is able to re-signify by shifting the organizing reality it appears to pertain to (is the film image a documentary image of the actress walking down a street in Thailand in the late 1990s? Or is it a moment when we’re seeing

¹¹ This original is lost, all surviving copies now being made from a preserved 35mm duplicate negative blow-up print with burned-in subtitles (Janus Films)

¹² Folklore and mythology are a sustained interest throughout Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s oeuvre

Dogfaher doing something in Dogfaher's world?), a shift the film cues its viewer to feel and experience repeatedly. and the way the filmic texture reads functions as one kind of index of this modulation. I.e. is this fuzzy look a trace of material reality (in the form of a visual index of budget limitations¹³), a cue to read what is filmed as "what really happened," or is it doing the work of, say, a costume, or of formalized or antiquated language? The film look here is a bit like Wittgenstein's reading of Jastrow's duck-rabbit, where you can *know* the drawing contains the possibilities of duck *and* rabbit, but you can only *perceive* one at a time: duck *or* rabbit. Here, whether one sees "rabbit" or "duck" (grainy documentation footage or abstracted narrative texture) marks a commitment to a way of being oriented to the film image, and the experience of the switch marks a change in the viewer's orientation.

The way false spatial contiguities work is another, and one that gestures toward the question of *how* the fictive and the documentary frames related in the logic of the film. James Quandt points out that sometimes the editing in *Mysterious Object* produces apparent or felt spatial contiguities that do not make (narrative) sense. For example, about midway through the film, there's a shot of one of the (numerous) actresses who in some scenes plays Dogfaher (and, in this moment, we recognize her *as* Dogfaher) riding in a boat—the scene cuts along a motion contiguity to a narratively unrelated from-a-car shot of elephants walking up a hill. This is a trick often used to produce the felt (mis)recognition of continuity in early experimental films like Maya Deren's *At Land*, for example. The continuity of motion and camera orientation produces an expectation of continuity of (filmic) space, but, after a moment, the viewer realizes that this felt continuity is an editing artifact, and is shaken out of the narrative expectation structure they had (likely unconsciously) been inhabiting in the moment immediately prior, that made them

¹³ Or, in David Teh's framing, as a marker of the "ethnographic horizon" of the work (Teh, 602)

expect that the elephants would mean something in relation to Dogfahrs boat ride, and that somehow they would be in the same space and/or diegetic world. They are not in the same space (or diegetic world), but obliquely they do mean something in relation to Dogfahrs boat ride: they're from the documentary world where their handlers recently narrated the next step in the Dogfahrs story (we might see the motion contiguity as suggesting the *kind* of link possible between these worlds—one whose terms belong to neither, capable of participating in both, always across a cut), but the elephants do not actually exist in “Dogfahrs world” (the fictive frame). This fictive narrative framework is no longer the correct one to use to organize expectations. The elephants walking up the hill are suddenly just elephants walking up a hill—they are, as Finnegans might have put it, indisputably on film, but it is not clear that they are *in* the film.

At other moments the actors themselves change, becoming, suddenly, actors. In one memorable moment near the end, for example, the young boy who has been playing Dogfahrs student sees some invisible offscreen cue (we belatedly realize) that makes him think filming of the scene has maybe ended, and stridently reminds the film crew that he has been promised Kentucky Fried Chicken. Its confusing for a brief moment: like all of Weerasethakuls work, *Mysterious Object* freely blends the time-stamped contemporary and the ancient or mythically timeless, but in the narrative world of Dogfahrs story, there is no film crew, and it takes a moment to re-orient to the film image as an image of this little boy being filmed, to place ourselves as viewers at the site of the camera, among the crew, rather than in the no-place of the invisible and omniscient narrative-film eye. Like Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* projects of

the 60s, or Kiarostami's *Close-Up* (1990)¹⁴, or even Joshua Oppenheimer's more recent *Act of Killing* (2012), *Mysterious Object at Noon* highlights the ways film can alternately cue fictive and "documentarian" orientations toward images, can structure and modulate expectations accordingly.

But what makes this particular film such a usefully clarifying example of the effect of this kind of familiar switching (similar things happen in all the films cited above, and frequently in postmodern film generally, with its interest in reflexivity) is not just its attention to (and loud deployment of) these cues for reorientation, but that it then builds a relatively well-defined pattern out of these switches—not just shocking its viewer out of a given paradigm, or revealing a *mise-en-abîme* of meta-reflexivity, but actually building new terms for orientation along aspect choreography lines. I'll trace the primary structure the film builds to clarify what I mean, and to help show what the affective and thematic affordances of this structure, an aspect choreography, are.

Aspect Choreography in *Mysterious Object at Noon*

While there are multiple such structures being built and patterned in the film (and, like Minnis and Philip, Weerasethakul also *adds* additional kinds of switches as the film progresses), the most robustly patterned and legible one is how sound and image advances are used to change what is being read as a score for what—often one mode of "reality" is used as a kind of supporting "score" for the other, which it can usually only do once it has released its claim to organizing expectations.

¹⁴ Though I think something different is also happening in this case. Weerasethakul does often cite Kiarostami as an important influence (Quandt)

At the beginning of the film, the documentary frame of “people in Thailand telling a story” precedes the shorter fictive image sequences, or persists during them as supporting voiceover. In the middle of the film, longer fictive sequences often precede the documentary segment in which they are narrated, but, as in the first third the switches between worlds are, for the most part, clearly formally marked (cuts, intertitles, match of narration to event). The film, in the middle, provides us with an image of the modulation it has cued its viewer to perform: a stage actress modulates between performing for her live audience as a character and addressing the documenting camera as an actress. Towards the ending third, the cues for the switches become subtler, and are staged within long formally unmarked sequences: a glance at the camera that tells us whether we’re looking at an actress or an actress-playing-a-character, a fictive restaurant scene whose dilated continuation after the characters leave cues a switch to seeing it as a restaurant in 1990s Thailand. The cues to switch move from being staged in the structural apparatus of the film (cuts, intertitles, voiceover), to becoming an image (modulating actress), to being embedded as a possibility we feel within the diegetic world itself—a change in our orientation to “world.”

Mysterious Object, like most aspect choreographies, must teach its viewer its terms. These terms are orientational modalities: in this case, the kind of “reality” we expect from the “fictive” and the “documentary,” respectively. The beginning of the film, as I’ve outlined, sets them up *as* frames that structure expectations and orientation: the film-opening switch from fictive-cue intertitle to loudly documentary-styled shot. The film’s beginning third continues to work to establish these frames *as* frames, and to teach the viewer about the relationship between them. At the start of the film, the spoken or written narrative of the “story [of Dogfah]” accompanies narrative images as voiceover, or precedes the images (which are, in the early part

of the film, clearly narrative (re)enactments). Drawing the viewer's attention to the way they are actively involved in determining the relation of sound and image is something the film is thinking about from the very beginning—and indeed a patterned change in the relation of sound and image is a primary means the film uses to establish its aspect choreography.

For example, as the film-opening documentary-style driving shot navigates into the crammed causeways of city streets, a series of commercials begins to play. The commercials seem at first to be coming from the radio of the car (which we've just assumed was playing the pop song about longing we've been hearing). But eventually, it becomes clear that an advertisement for fish and sauces (“Horseshoe Crab Sauce for twelve baht[...]tuna fish is coming”) is being played by a loudspeaker *outside* the car, attached, we soon learn, to a truck selling these items (a subtler variant of the world switches we'll see later—but an early one which highlights the way attribution of sound to a “world” will work). Mostly, this (re)attribution¹⁵ of the fish sauce ad sounds to the world outside the car happens retroactively, and is triggered because the first cut is another of Weerasethakul's false spatial-continuity cuts to the inside of (what we eventually realize is) this same fish-and-sauces truck moving on the same vector the film car was (as though we are also inside it, as though it is continuous with the inside of the car we've been driving in). The camera pans to a woman's face, the same woman who will begin the narrative of *Dogfah* shortly thereafter, and then the film cuts to the man driving the truck and announcing his sauce offers with a handheld corded mic, out the window¹⁶, before returning to the woman working in the fish-and-sauces van. She will begin the narrative of

¹⁵ i.e. assigning the language to the exterior spatial world of the unfolding documentary-seeming shot, rather than to the radio inside the car, the rest of the world unfolding outside the screen of the car window without (much) sound.

¹⁶ The sound quality is now also different—before, the sauce advertisements had the staticky, mediated quality of something heard across distance (passably radio *or* outdoor loudspeaker), and now the sound is soft and immediate: we're hearing it from the man speaking it, rather than receiving it from a broadcasting device.

Dogfah, but first she narrates another story (not, we presume, fictive), and the way the sound and image are coordinated teaches the viewer to attend to the ways in which the two are making each other mean, and how.

This sequence begins with a frank interview-style shot (an interview clearly already underway before the cut takes us to it), during which the woman meanderingly tells a disturbing story about being sold to her uncle (“I really respected him” as we cut, momentarily, to a poster of three male public figures¹⁷), and she explains (voiceover) how her father explained why he had to leave her there with her uncle. The shot focuses in on one of the men, who comes to seem as though he’s *standing for* the dad the ongoing voiceover describes, the third moment when the film makes its viewer feel that the terms (of how image and sound *mean*) are being changed. Subtle political commentary runs throughout Weerasethakul’s oeuvre¹⁸, and here we might well read this as mutually inflecting tenor and vehicle (this politician’s image stands for the dad in the story, as perhaps the dad (as faithless/deceitful parent who promises to take care of her and doesn’t) can stand for this politician, allegorically.

Fig. 4.1 Screen capture from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen capture by author.



¹⁷ Weerasethakul often films posters of male politicians or public figures—it also happens in *Uncle Boonmee* and *Tropical Malady*, for example

¹⁸ Though he remarks, frequently, in interviews, that he’d like the politics to be subtle, and that he focuses on the personal and material and lets what speaks from there speak, rather than trying to directly craft a political message

But here also, as in the play with the localization/attribution of the fish truck advertisement, we realize that the film's sound/image work is making us see this (unrelated) image *as* the dad (like we at first heard the fish announcements *as* radio): the film is pointing our attention to this work of meaning-making (and corresponding orientation choice) that we're performing when we choose (consciously or not) what we hear or see something *as*.

If, as Rosalind Krauss put it concisely in her 1974 definition¹⁹, Structuralist film²⁰ works from a desire to produce experiential awareness of the imbrication of viewer, camera, projector, and filmic support towards a unified phenomenon that would serve as a "model for how the viewer is intentionally connected to his or her world" (Krauss 25), one might well read *Mysterious Object's* opening sequence as an understated Structuralist study of narrative reality and meaning construction in film, oriented by *relational* and *narrative*, rather than primarily perceptual, stakes²¹. Or, put differently, in negotiating the competing influences outlined earlier (the Western grad school/experimental film/Modernist commitment to artistic medium vs. the envioning Thai culture's commitment to narrative and relationality), Weerasethakul arrives at a film that thinks, through its form, about the structures that undergird how we relate to each other and assign meaning, and arrives at a surprising and new form of openness in so doing. More on this shortly—for now it's necessary to finish sketching out how the film builds and develops its pattern of expectations.

So, if the film has, from the beginning, worked to point the viewers' attention to their own imbrication in the construction of what and where everything is, how it's related and what it

¹⁹ In *A Voyage on the North Sea*

²⁰ Referring to artists like Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, and Paul Sharits

²¹ We might see *Mysterious Object* as a kind of bridge between the Structural film that influenced Weerasethakul's graduate work, and the relational aesthetics work his rough contemporary and compatriot Rirkrit Tiravanija is so well known for.

means, it takes this preliminary training a step further once the fish truck worker begins to tell the story of Dogfahr, the story that will structure the rest of the film. In a seemingly²² unplanned interaction, after the woman, emotional by this point, finishes the story of her uncle, we hear a voice localized behind the camera (presumably Weerasethakul) ask her if she has any other stories to tell: “It can be real or fiction,” he prompts.



Fig. 4.2 Screen captures from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen captures by author.

She thinks for a moment (“What else can I tell you, real or fake?”), and dwelling with this question for a moment, as the editing allows us to do, at once highlights that these are different categories of story, but that in fact what is in order here is *telling*²³—

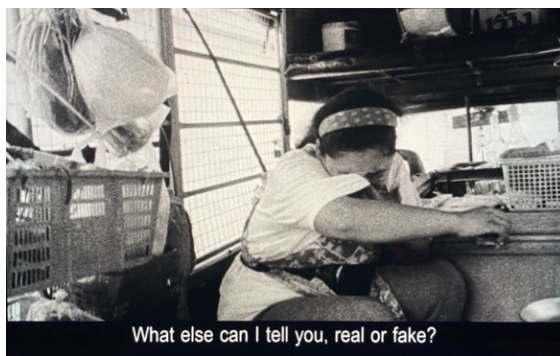


Fig. 4.3 Screen capture from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen capture by author.

²² Many of the seemingly coincidental or unplanned “happenings” that seem merely captured alongside what is actually being shot, are in fact planned—the best known example being the streetfight in an alley that the two lovers in *Tropical Malady* ride by (Quandt)

²³ The film is also thinking about this: a huge part of the film is the “story” of the documentary itself: the road/driving documentary-style shots in between fictive segments make us feel how the telling of the Dogfahr story is itself being *told* by the film—these documentary-style sequences are a kind of interstitial “and then,” they remind the viewer that the non-fictive is also a narrative. That the narrative of the coming-into-being of the story is also a kind of story that must be “told”

and then we hear the offscreen voice again, saying it can be any story, from a book, even. She confirms (“A book?”), and then we cut, to a room we eventually realize is a visual representation of the story we hear the woman narrating. But before her narration begins, we spend a while in quiet, looking at these two unfamiliar figures, without explanation—this will also happen in other moments of the film when we enter new documentary sequences. We don’t know if this is a “real” or “fake” story. Nothing about the film has materially changed, but given time to reflect, it becomes clear that somehow this shot has a different look, a cinematic look. Its composition feels more careful, and the change to quiet from the bustle of the street feels marked, the figures are studiously looking away as they might in a world where the camera does not exist (fictive). Then, a familiar sound starts to play (See Fig. 4.4 on the following page):



Fig. 4.4 Screen capture from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen capture by author.

“Big tuna fish is coming,” announced over the loudspeaker by that obviously-mediated voice from before—narrative film grammar makes it feel as though the woman looking out the window must be hearing that sound²⁴, that she is overlooking the street it’s coming from (and yet, on that

²⁴ James Quandt also reads the scene this way

street, as we know from the previous sequence, everyone knows the camera exists). But then, after a moment, we also get the obviously the non-diegetic voiceover narration from the woman we know from the fish truck: “Let’s say there was a house...”



Fig. 4.5 Screen capture from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen capture by author.

She proceeds to describe what we see, and so the viewer is given conflicting cues for how to make sense of this image, its temporality, what framework of expectation to use to make sense of it. The “Let’s say” and non-diegetic nature of the voiceover narration place us firmly in the realm of the fictive and/or the virtual (of which the image is then a fictive and provisional representation, for whose unfolding we expect a narrative logic), and yet we’re hearing a sound we’ve previously taken to be a sound from the streets of Bangkok. This “real” sound comes from a world from which we cannot expect a narrative logic (documentary reality), but the film’s aesthetic syntax cues us to read it as “diegetic, from the physical space outside this room.” Is this room real, or fake? The film has set up a network of cues that produce a kind of aporia (it is both real and fake!), and so, when the viewer commits to the narrative logic (it wins out, after a moment as the characters begin to move and interact), they feel that commitment *as a choice*, and they re-signify the fish truck announcement as “irreconcilable,” or, more likely, sort of

forget about it, such that it *does actually become diegetic street noise again*, but in the fictive world where the house of “Let’s say there’s a house” exists and people can live in it. The sound’s presence helps construct the atmosphere of the fictive space as real²⁵ in the sense that narrative film worlds are real for a viewer—they are orienting; they sustain a viewer in a network of expectations capable of generating affect, attention, desire, and thought. This street noise helps make the room feel like it is in *a* world, and in so doing makes this spare and fragmented little story capable of bearing the charge of (fictive) belief that narrative is designed to carry, makes feeling according to its cues a live option.

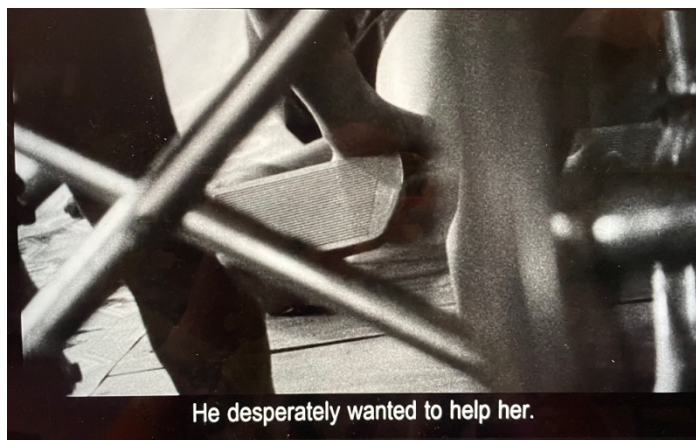
That’s to say, the aspect change the tuna fish announcement undergoes is a marker of the viewer having changed their orientation, their framework of expectations. The “documentary reality” becomes a kind of supplement or score for the fictive reality that emerges and becomes more compelling the longer we spend in it. At times, as when we watch the boy working at his desk from behind, for a long time, in stillness, and the fish-and-sauces woman’s recognizable voice negotiates with customers, the documentary begins to assert itself as orienting reality, as though we are being prevented, by the (quiet, nearly actionless) image of the fictive house, from seeing the action that feels like what is “really happening” (i.e. fish sauce sales) in the reality we’ve again taken to be organizing (the “real” world of late 90s Thailand), and is therefore more interesting²⁶. But as soon as visual action takes place again (in this case, a small gesture on the

²⁵ You could of course argue here that both “realities” simply persist in parallel, but the film’s deftly handled cues that push now this and now that way of making sense or being oriented to the forefront feels like it actively resists a simple parallel reading

²⁶ The sort of feeling one gets from watching (“watching”), for example, Derek Jarman’s conceptual piece *Blue* (1993), wherein the image just remains a flat blue throughout the film’s 79 minute runtime, but sounds and voices and scores suggest, at various times in the film, some kind of event or narrative arc or cinematic sequence the blue prevents from being seen. The attention tries to cast itself around the blue to get to/perceive the “relevant events,” or to superimpose tonal meaning on the blue (in sync with these “events”), or generally beats against it (the flat blue screen), perhaps partially accounting for the perceptual/optical phenomena (unlocatable pain, color shifts) that also accompany the piece.

boy's part, looking over his left shoulder as though he is waiting for Dogfaher to reappear), the "fictive" reality again becomes organizing, and the street noise gets re-localized to the fictive outdoor space environing the house²⁷, an aspect change, and indeed, shortly thereafter the woman's voice resumes the narration of the Dogfaher story: the documentary scoring the fictive. At this moment, there is a slight shift in the mic-ing style—the narrator's voice is momentarily clarified and feels closer—the atmospheric noise decreases and it's easy to hear the voice as hailing from the "nowhere" of narration, which allows it more easily to serve as a score or a fiction-supporting component, rather than seeming to hail from a competing reality—it pushes the viewer to commit to the fictive frame. A little later, as we follow the boy as he goes to look for Dogfaher, the mic-ing will feel omnidirectional or atmospheric again, even though the woman continues to narrate in a way that syncs with the visual action (she is telling us about the boy's experience of looking for Dogfaher). In parallel, the shot style changes: the camera becomes mobile, at times clearly handheld, following the boy, and shooting, in one instance, from inside/below his wheelchair as he nudges the inert Dogfaher: the camera's subjective and spatialized immediacy is allowed to compete here with the immediacy of the street noise surrounding the narrating voice.

Fig. 4.6 Screen capture from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen capture by author.



²⁷ In a later scene in the fictive house, the same-sounding street and bird noises recur, but this time without voiceover narration, only diegetic dialogue between the two boys, more fully coopting the street noises into their role in the fictive reality frame.

This is a minute sort of orientational toggle cue, but it nonetheless contributes to the film's work to keep its viewer/reader attuned to their participation in reality construction, and to their commitment to this or that organizing frame at any given moment. And here, as throughout this film (and, as I'll show later, in Weerasethakul's oeuvre generally), these "realities," though constantly in relation, are never merged—the film is like a machine that choreographs changes in the viewer's orientation, and in parallel, the relationship between the "realities" it teaches its viewer to feel.

II. Shifting the Hierarchy: The Fictive Scores the Real

For the first part of the film, the text-dependent narration usually belonged to the "documentary" frame of the film—the fictive narrative is clearly a "story" being "told" by people living in late 90s Thailand²⁸ (sometimes a lightly intoxicated grandmother in sunglasses, sometimes an uncertain acting troupe planning a performance at a local open-air theater, sometimes mute twins in uniform at a market stand, for example). It's usually a voiceover happening simultaneously with the fictive sequences, or it precedes them. By the middle of the film, however, this narration tends to come *after* long "fictive" sequences. Often, it feels like our expectations of the documentary world have been coached by the fictive, such that what people tell us has a kind of déjà vu inevitability alien to most "reality" conditioned experiences. This

²⁸ The fictive reality frame comes to be orienting in the way that a fable told by a grandmother might be, or a puppet show's story might be: we know the "story" is mediated by artifice (and staged within the [non-fictive] world), but our affect and expectation is nonetheless narratively organized

feeling produces a kind of echo or secondary switch: though the ultimate commitment to a “documentary” way of reading these narrator sequences is the obvious outcome, the viewer must get there through something that “feels” fictive, feels as though its contingency or spontaneity (an expectation of the “real” world) has been removed.

This shift first starts to happen with the introduction of diegetic sound into the fictive frame, an increase in its independence: after our second “documentary” narrator adds a segment, we cut back to the fictive world (now populated by two boys and the unconscious Dogfahr), and the two speak to each other directly/diegetically, in their own voices (no voiceover), with the familiar street noises (minus the fish sauce announcements) seeming to environ the fictive space again²⁹. When we cut back to the “documentary” frame, it’s something the viewer only realizes retroactively: there’s a cut from the two boys interacting in the fictive house: the new boy asks the other what he likes to eat, and the question is answered, not by the boy, but by a cut to the narrating older woman, who explains that, since the boy was very healthy, he “could eat anything.” Like the two boys, the two realities are separate, but can speak to one another within the logic of the film, across a cut.



Fig. 4.7 Screen captures from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen captures by author.

²⁹ This is especially worth remarking: as though *that* former documentary frame (with the fish sauce truck) has persisted, even as the “present tense” documentary frame is now located somewhere else, with a different narrator in a different environment

Here, we've moved from a relation wherein the documentary-world narration functioned either as a non-diegetic voiceover, or preceded the fictive sequence (parallel realities that do not touch), to one where the two are speaking, as it were, to one another across the cut. And right after this moment, the first instance of reading an image of the documentary world *as* the fictive world, or as a visual metaphor for the fictive, takes place³⁰.

The next cut (after the older woman narrating) takes us back to the fictive world, but with her voiceover, instead of diegetic dialogue this time—for a moment, this switch makes us feel that the image of the boys is now standing for the story, as opposed to offering an inhabitable world. Our narrator explains that the boy in the wheelchair (light shirt) explains to his new friend (dark shirt) that he's an orphan: he doesn't know where his parents are. Then, there's a cut, to two boys seen from behind, one in a light shirt, one in a dark shirt, holding hands as the boy in the dark shirt guides the other boy around an obstacle.

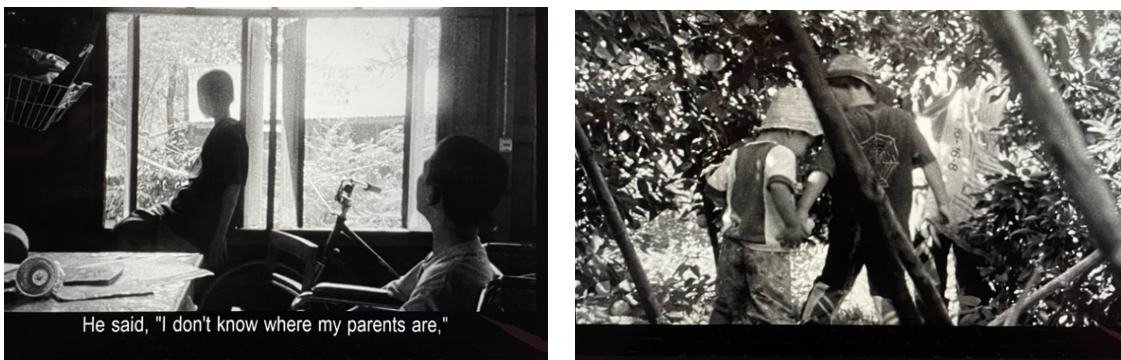


Fig. 4.8 Screen captures from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen captures by author.

³⁰ The viewer has been trained for this moment, arguably, by the early moment when the fish sauce seller narrates the story about her deceptive father, and the camera momentarily focuses on the sleek-looking male public figure from the poster (see p. 15)

What is this image? The first time I saw this film, I assumed it was the two boys from the fictive world, now setting out on a journey together (maybe the first boy no longer needed his wheelchair?). This is exactly the kind of jump Weerasethakul often asks his viewers to make in his more straightforwardly narrative films. After a moment though, it became clear that the boys in this shot were younger than the characters in the fictive sequences, not physically the same. But were they *standing for* those boys? Should I see them *as* those fictive boys? Did the film crew have to get new actors? What's going on? There's only vague atmospheric audio and it isn't clear—but what is clear is that the film has set its viewer up to feel both their own activity in the attribution of meaning to the image, and that this attribution is contingent on a commitment to a world, or way of seeing.

After the boys fidget together for a moment, the film cuts to matter-of-fact shot of a clearing and see the two boys pass near the older woman we've just seen narrating; she's now busily scooping fruit off the ground into a basket. The boys have no clear relation to her or anything else going on, and now appear as an incidental feature of a complex world the camera happens to capture part of: the camera exists (we know our narrator knows it exists, and we see her (*as* the narrator)), and in the documentary mode, narratively irrelevant things and people often enter the frame; the expectations of the film image derive more from the expectations of everyday reality, characterized as it is by what feels like chance and happenstance³¹. But it's the fictive that nonetheless first conditioned how we saw these two boys, and they sustain a claim on

³¹ It might be objected, here, that documentaries also intensely shape and prune the “reality” they present to the viewer, and moreover that they do so by means of teleologically-oriented narration. Is there really, then, such a difference between fictive and documentary frames? But what I'm pointing up here is not “documentary as a genre,” but rather the **kind of world** documentary **purports** to represent by means of the filmed image. I.e. the world as the viewer feels it to be: complex, rife with (at least apparent) contingency and chance, oriented by no discernible purpose, full of unrelated miscellany, not an aesthetic construction.

the viewer's interest (disproportionate to their relevance in documentary world) as much as the fruit-collecting narrator does, until they pass out of frame. It's as though the logic of the fictive world takes them as its form and walks through the world of the documentary, eventually passing out of view.

A scene from a little later in *Mysterious Object*, where Weerasethakul is able to hold a similar idea, or to represent it, is where he adds the next step in his developing aspect choreography. Specifically, we're able to watch someone perform the kinds of orientational modulations the film has so far cued its viewer to perform.

Acting the Actress: Camera and Stage

During the village theater troupe's performance of their segment of the Dogfah story, the lead actress's eyes shuttle legibly back and forth between her seated audience and the camera—she wobbles in and out of character, between seeing herself being filmed as a document of her performance having happened, and acting for the crowd. She, I'd argue, is an image of the shuttling or modulation of orientations the viewer has been choreographed through, by the film. Durational art forms often find an image of their own development, and this actresses modulating performance seems a very good one for *Mysterious Object at Noon*.

This segment of the film begins after a documentary-style sequence focused around trains and train stations (visual narration of the process of the making of the film—we later realize we've moved to a new village, and that the train feels like how we got there), and then there's a cut to a close-up of a tape recorder playing a recording of someone narrating a segment of the Dogfah story, which trails off into incoherence. A zoomed out shot reveals group of people (the theatre troupe) gathered around in a formation that recalls the slightly earlier shot of a group

sitting on the train (gathered around a meal, and the camera—also an organ of narrative, the film seems to say), and the troupe listens with interest, confusion, and amusement.

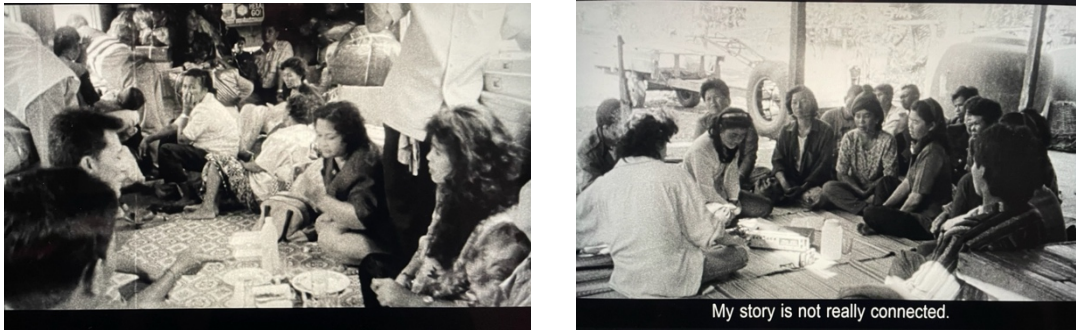


Fig. 4.9 Screen captures from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen captures by author.

“That’s it” the man (not Weerasethakul) playing the recording announces at the end. “That’s it?” they ask. There’s some laughter, exchanged glances, and a pause. Then they start working out how (on earth) to make a play out of this material.

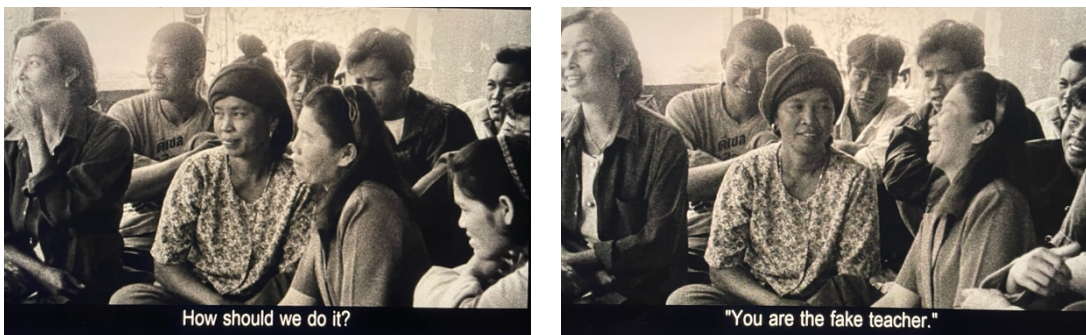


Fig. 4.10 Screen captures from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen captures by author.

The next cut takes us to a continuous, documentation-style semi-mobile shot of the performance—a musician provides energetic onstage accompaniment, and the two actresses we’ve seen working out a plan just before are wearing identical costumes; one is the fake Dogfahr, we’re told early on. The film adds an intertitle, reminding us to see her *as* the mysterious boy (who came from the object) (See Fig. 4.11 on the following page).



Fig. 4.11 Screen captures from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen captures by author.

The play continues, with the performers' attention, eyelines, and gestures directed slightly offscreen and to the right of the camera: it is clear that this is documentation of a performance, not a performance *for* the camera—the vantage from which the performance is meant to offer entry/narrative investment is not that of the camera; the camera is in late 90s Thailand watching an event, “the performance,” unfold in late 90s Thailand—we’re in the documentarian reality. However, it’s not clear at first that there is another audience (I didn’t assume there was one, when I first watched the film); in this moment there’s the odd possibility that the camera is invisible (narrative/fictive world) and yet everything about the grammar of the scene insists on a grounding in the documentary reality. When I first watched this sequence, it appeared like many

of the other shots, where the framing simply seemed to point up the documentary aspect of the film. But then, in a moment of uncertainty or stillness the actresses playing the “real” Dogfah begins to think about the camera, pivoting her body and gaze toward the camera, briefly exiting the world of the play. We see her see herself as an actress being filmed, and then, the action resuming, she returns to being Dogfah.



Fig. 4.12 Screen captures from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen captures by author.

A moment later, the film will offer a sequence of two intertitles that summarize a section of action (“The mysterious boy [fake Dogfah] is so angry/So he transforms himself into a giant and tries to kill [real] Dogfah for revenge”), and we cut to a claustrophobic close-cropped handheld shot of what looks like a (somewhat overacted) scene of domestic abuse between a man and a woman we’ve never seen before, the aggressor physically much larger than his victim (a giant attacking real Dogfah?)—and, well-trained by now, still serenaded by the (now invisible) onstage musician in the absence of diegetic or sync sound in the abuse scene, we see it “as” the action from the play described by the intertitle, even as the violence, invisible camera, and narrative film grammar of the scene exert a (fictive) “reality” effect of their own. This is the

film acting in the play? We see this “film action” uncertainly *as* “play action” much like we saw that play actress *as* Dogfah-for-another-vantage, then saw her *as* an actress again. And then, as if answering the lingering question (is this scene actually related to the play?), we see another man rush onstage and strangle the “giant,” and cut to an intertitle that declares that “Again, the neighbor rushes to save her.” So this unfamiliar second man is...the neighbor, the film insists. And then we cut back to the play, a different angle, watching a melodramatic concluding courtship scene between the victorious neighbor (a totally different man from the one in the film sequence), and the “real” Dogfah (a totally different woman)—this scene only makes narrative sense if we accept the fictive film interlude as part of the play. The actors participate fully for a while in this sugary courtship exchange (sung with a temporal dilation only slightly less suspension-of-disbelief-requiring than an opera), and then the actor playing the neighbor misses a cue (he keeps singing through one of Dogfah’s lines), and she begins to laugh, turning again to the camera (an actress who knows this imperfect performance is being filmed and finds it funny), and then back to the actor, and resumes the affect of the courted Dogfah (“Let’s go, my love”), reentering the world of the play.



Fig. 4.13 Screen captures from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen captures by author.



Fig. 4.14 Screen capture from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen capture by author.

The camera has continued to slowly zoom in throughout this sequence, and by the end of their exchange the framing feels filmic—the “backstage”³² antics of the other cast members have been cropped out—only what’s narratively relevant is in frame. If you had entered the “documentation” of the play at this moment, and not seen the preceding moments and more revealing framings, this could well be part of a fictive film, now—it’s not clear that there’s a line of vantage different from the camera’s, it’s not clear the actors are on a stage. We’ve zoomed in enough that this could just be a slightly oddly framed conversation scene, designed for film, perhaps like one of the early scenes between Dogfahr and the handicapped boy. The actress’s body has moved from being legible on the terms of the world of the play (stage Dogfahr) to the world of the documentary (actress), back to the play (stage Dogfahr), then to a fictive film (Dogfahr-for-us). And then, of course, shortly after this moment, the camera pans to follow her, revealing the audience that has been watching this play all along (back to documentary). But the framing of this shot is not documentary-style (even as what is semantically happening *is*—i.e., this moment reinforces again that we have been watching a play, not being invested *in* the world of the story): the camera’s over-the-shoulder vantage evokes fictive film framings: this is what it

³² There is no backstage, only an area of the stage that is presumably not meant to be considered part of the action, but is perfectly visible

looks like when the camera does not exist. Here again, we see a “fictive” visual grammar *as* constituting an image we read *as* documentary.

Fig. 4.15 Screen capture from *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Screen capture by author.



In this segment of the film, Weerasethakul is able to use the additional framework of the play to further complicate and draw his viewers’ attention to the modulations between the different realities at play. He’s also given us at least one³³ image of this modulation—the actress playing the “real” Dogfah is legibly modulating (complete with physical pivoting) between seeing herself as an actress in this strange play, and as Dogfah in the world of the story, much like the viewer has been doing as they see the onscreen image now as fictive, now as documentary, and modulated their own orientation accordingly. It’s important that our image of modulation is an

³³ The arguable second has to do with this film-standing-for-play move. It further develops the kind of flexible metaphorical seeing-as trained by the image of the dad/politician, or the two boys on a journey/two unrelated boys passing the fruit basket. I.e. here, a “film scene” can stand for “a play scene” — *Mysterious Object at Noon* here makes possible a secondary level of this kind of standing-for: one kind of *logic* or framework standing for another. This, of course, isn’t new: children’s television shows particularly like to do this sort of thing, even—an animated sequence cutting into a live action narrative, for instance. But the way it works in this particular film, complex and cumulative pattern of switches that it is, allows the *motion* required to move between them to become visible, or available to the awareness, when that kind of motion is usually of the kind of grammar of thought that is usually considered (e.g. by Wittgenstein) not available from within the system it subtends. Like the grammar of language is inherently not representable *in* language, that sort of thing (emblemized by that famous eye-in-the-field diagram in the *Tractatus*—even if Wittgenstein later renounced his picture-theory of language /the general thrust of this text, this idea remains compelling). Here, instead of recognizing the same underlying “idea” or self-consistent “object” on the terms of two different systems of terms (and enjoying the little puff of pleasure such intersystem conjunction formation produces³³) (level one), it’s instead a way of recognizing (following) an abstract motion or current or rhythm (remaining *in* it) even as the orientational terms required to remain in it change. A participative choreography, rather than an object observed from without, a process rather than an entity, which is interesting I think because most everything about most systems of thought, discourse, recognition, and representation is best suited to deal with *objects* rather than with *motions*.

actress—much like the actress, in committing to one or the other, the viewer also constitutes a world.

Either and Or: The Open Field/Other Shore of the Coda

As the film moves towards its ending (with its strange 10 minute coda), the kinds of modulations become subtler and more frequent, often with less film machinery involved. Two quick examples: after the theatre troupe packs up and leaves, we cut to a scene of one of the (film) actresses we've seen playing Dogfahr (and also walking down a street talking to her friends *as* an actress) riding in a boat (we've also seen an excerpt of this scene before: with the elephant sequence)—it looks like a narrative film (the framing clearly tells us what's relevant: her), she acts as though the camera does not exist, the sound seems diegetic, but there is no voiceover telling us what this image is. We have to guess, and the push feels like it's toward the fictive. We see Dogfahr/the actress then walk down a narrow causeway after (presumably)³⁴ getting off the boat. A stream of people come before her, many of them turning to stare into the camera with the air of surprised pedestrians. Ah, the documentary. As she walks up towards the camera, she does not look at it/us, and it seems at first as though she's in a fictive world where the camera does not exist, and is therefore Dogfahr, and not an actress (it's a mark of the work the film has done so far, that this seems likelier than that she hasn't yet noticed the camera, or that the crew did not adequately prepare the filming area), but then, suddenly, as she gets close to the camera, she also makes fleeting eye contact with the same slightly embarrassed air as the other passers-by (ah, it's the actress, not Dogfahr). And then the camera pans to follow her down a hall. An intertitle will

³⁴ The force of this “presumably” is also a marker of the viewer's expectational commitment to the narrative

inform us that she is going to a wrestling match, in which the neighbor is fighting in honor of Dogfahr (so she was Dogfahr!), though the style of the filming in this sequence seems documentary, filming little of the fight and focusing on miscellaneous visually interesting or atmospheric details (a vibrating rope, a yelling coach) and audience activities. There are countless other quick modulations like this, and the film will even introduce what appears to be news footage to narrate one segment of the Dogfahr story. So much of this rapid minor modulation is possible because we've been trained to expect a voiceover narration to orient us to the fictive images *as* fictive images, and then gradually had visual action come to precede the text-based orientation cues with greater and greater delay, leaving us longer and longer to perform modulations of orientation on our own, using what the film has taught us about its frames and how it might cue switches between them.

By the end, the “story” scenes lapse often into eddies whose teleologically muddy temporal dilation exerts the force of the documentary reality again (like the can in *Close-Up*). A restaurant scene near the end is a particularly good example of this kind of switch; a parodic radio broadcast³⁵ explaining that Thais should afford Americans special privileges because of their role in ending a (fictional) war plays on and on, often to an empty room in a Bangkok restaurant. This scene is, or at least began, nominally “in” the Dogfahr story—this is the restaurant to which the false Dogfahr and her companion try to sell the boy and his friend, and we watch this Dogfahr waiting to speak to the restaurant owner. But as the business of the restaurant continues, Dogfahr departs, and the radio continues to play, there's the feeling that we are no longer in the fictive world of the narrative, but in some other world where the causes of

³⁵ Using, though, the voice many Thais would recognize as the voice typically used for official radio announcements (Rithdee, 118)

actions are too vast, complex, or diffuse for every action to seem immediately purposeful: a different framework of expectations, a shunt the viewer recognizes well by now.

At the very end of the film, we watch a semi-organized clump of schoolchildren wrangle with each other and make the story up, awkwardly, in real time for quite a while, with the boom mike bobbing in and out of the shot. The credits start to roll as their story continues, and the film cuts to a dolly camera tracking smoothly through an empty domestic space reminiscent of the fictive house from the beginning. These credits end with a note that the story was told by people in local towns until December of 1998. Then, there's a flash of an intertitle that just says "(at noon)," and a ten minute coda with (mostly) images of children playing (soccer indoors, soccer outdoors, with a toy truck in the dust, by strapping the truck to a dog who runs away, alarmed by the plastic truck banging along in pursuit). What's the mysterious object (at noon)? The coda? The whole film that has now arrived at completion (at noon)? This truck strapped to the dog as it occurs for the dog?³⁶ Watching the orientationally unplaceable footage of the kids playing, there's the hovering feeling of both worlds being near, both being possible as a kind of overlay on the film image, despite the fact that the worlds still feel recognizably separate. Nothing confirms how we should make this mean, so we don't: we're well trained by this point. This sequence *feels unplaceable*, and that feeling is a specific and positive one—it has the quality the duck/rabbit image does before one visually focuses enough on it to see/perceive one of its aspects; a kind of cognitive version of this out-of-focus-ness, or a gentle openness without meaning. But I'd argue that experiencing the coda images in this manner (rather than as, say, vaguely sentimental random footage), is only available because the viewer has spent the last hour

³⁶ This is the favorite theory of a filmmaker friend of mine

or so in an aspect choreography that structured and cued a well-defined pattern of cognitive *placing*. This coda is a kind of respite, a clearing, into which we can only actually enter now. This isn't, of course, a vantageless position, nor one actually without meaning-making activity: we're still seeing "a film" "featuring" "children" and "dogs" and "a game being played." True vantagelessness is not possible. But the *feeling* of being unable to place either of the two frames we've been trained to use *represents* or is a visceral/affective/orientational metaphor *for* such a state. The feeling is a metaphor for what cannot be represented, and that it can function in such a manner is an affordance of the aspect choreography Weerasethakul has set up.

Over the course of the film, the viewer has been cued to experience the grammar of the "real" *as* constituting an image of the fictive, and the grammar of the fictive *as* constituting an image of the real, and to learn to expect (and navigate) shuttling between these modes of reading the film image by means of a meta-arc or pattern of shifts in what framework of sense-making they're bringing to bear on a given scene. The effect of this isn't confusion, or a recognition of cleverness—it's this dreamlike, gentle openness, a distant and enlightened cousin of the vertiginous void produced by the total relativism implicit in the unstable irony I described in Chapter 3. The difference has to do with, I suspect, the model of relation and totality subtending each film—in unstable irony as it appears in the comedy/horror of Patrick Brice's film *Creep* (2014), the relativity and pluralism of frames is used to produce (arguably, express) a problem having to do with relation in late capitalism in the USA: we acknowledge that we are all living in one vast economic totality (without shared spiritual totality), but a kind of epistemic pluralism (or, atomized individualism) within it often makes other people feel unlocatable, impossible to

relate to (in Brice’s film, violence is the only possible relation, the only way to make contact, the place where horror and comedy most point up their difference from one another, even as it’s a shared gravitational center in both genres, a meta-commonality)—knowing that we’re all “in” capitalism does not actually offer intersubjectivity, only abstract and conceptual recognition of a problem³⁷. On the model of the void that seems to be at play in *Mysterious Object*, however, the totality *is* relation, or something like consciousness, externally conceived. Frames here are simply an expression of the necessary limitation of vantage that is the case, in a pragmatic, embodied, and social life, but Weerasethakul’s films find in the patterned play with the limitation of frames, rather than a circumscription of relational possibility, a tool to express some glimpse of what is necessarily beyond representation (representation being bound up, as his films teach us, with frames). These films give a faint and vaporous trace of what it might be like to experience the totality of a reality that exceeds all frames for making sense of it, all vantage and perspective, and in so doing, offer a gentle and restorative affective faith in our underlying connectedness. His films patiently and slowly turn their frames inside out, make their limitations available to feeling, and yet hold their viewer in orientation partially through the deep sense of atmospheric yet relational with-ness that permeates all of his work. That’s what gives them the gentle feeling of “bliss” or peace so many critics cite—and it’s possible partially because of his films’ hyperattentiveness to how film can cue (and build patterns of) modulation of orientation over time. This aspect choreography is most obviously being worked out in his first feature, *Mysterious Object at Noon*, but so many of the later films take and develop formal insights from this work more explicitly and thematically—in the form of ghosts, explicitly described parallel

³⁷ This is why, arguably, Fredric Jameson calls for art objects to facilitate “cognitive mapping”

realities, doublings, repetitions, splittings, “bipolar structures,” and the like that are so often remarked in the discourse around his work. No doubt reincarnation is an important influence on these aspects of Weerasethakul’s films, but the criticism so far has overlooked the ways he mobilizes the choreographic and orientation-modulatory aspects of film’s ability to produce and highlight the frame-based and limited nature of pragmatic or frame/vantage-based realities, and in so doing, give what traces of the totality that subtends them it is possible to give, with a film.

It's also possible to read this aspect choreography as part of how *Mysterious Object at Noon* expresses an underlying Buddhist belief structure: through practice over time to arrive at a felt understanding of emptiness (the same thing, I’d argue, as vantagelessness). As Geshe Lundhup Sopa and Jeffrey Hopkins articulate in their classic *Cutting Through Appearances*, which functions as a primer for Buddhist monastic initiates, “in order to cut out the root of cyclic existence, it is necessary to realize emptiness, first conceptually through inference and then in a totally non-dualistic direct cognition” (Sopa & Hopkins, 32). *Mysterious Object at Noon*, like the practice of the Heart Sutra or Buddhist discipline generally, moves its viewer from an inferential awareness of the delimitedness of vantage (by choreographing switches between discrete vantages) to an aesthetic approximator (i.e. the experience of the coda), of the “direct cognition” that marks the visceral experience of emptiness that Sopa and Hopkins characterize as the enlightened form of understanding it. Dan Arnold reads the Heart Sutra, the Diamond Sutra, and other “perfection of wisdom” Buddhist literature as deploying “virtuosic flirtation with contradiction” as part of the way they guide their practitioners toward an enlightened embrace of emptiness (Arnold). *Mysterious Object at Noon* does not “enlighten” its viewer, exactly, but its form allows it to *represent* the movement to enlightenment in the medium of reflective experience. The feeling of switching between discrete or contradictory frameworks over time,

emptying out into the frameworkless openness of the coda might well be read as standing for this process.

Ghosts are Denizens of Worlds Folded Alongside Ours: How Aspect Choreography's Reality Modeling in *Mysterious Object at Noon* Prefigures the Way Ghosts and the Supernatural Function in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Later Work

Tracing the aspect choreography of *Mysterious Object at Noon* helps explain how and why the film has the specific affective character it does. But considering it in the context of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's oeuvre as a whole also illuminates a fairly clear developmental trajectory, where otherwise *Mysterious Object at Noon* seems like a weird outlier from the more narrative and supernaturally oriented later work. If, in *Mysterious Object*, it was possible to see how cues to switch frames went from being structurally (and somewhat mechanically) operated by things like cuts and voiceovers at the beginning, to becoming an image (the modulating actress), to becoming a possibility baked into the experience of the diegetic world (the restaurant scene), within Weerasethakul's oeuvre itself it's possible to trace a movement from a kind of structural thinking about the nature of vantage and reality through film (*Mysterious Object at Noon* and some of the short films), to an image of the problem/question that can be represented thematically (the ghosts, aliens, and the supernatural that populate the better known work like *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), or *Memoria* (2021), or *Tropical Malady* (2004)). That's to say, the way the "realities" are staged in *Mysterious Object* prefigures the way ghosts and the supernatural generally operate in some of Weerasethakul's later work, most notably in his best known film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Remember His Past Lives* (2010)³⁸.

³⁸ Karen Newman, writing primarily about Weerasethakul's installations in an essay called "A Man Who Can Recall His Past Lives," also points out that there's clearly cross-oeuvre development happening with the ghosts in

The other world always seems folded within or alongside the apparent reality, another logic out of view the way the fictive is out of view in the documentary, or the documentary is out of view in the fictive, except for brief flashes, like the moment the two boys pass by the narrator; we briefly feel the presence of both worlds as we negotiate our transition between them, much like Uncle Boonmee does as he prepares to die. Throughout Weerasethakul's later work the supernatural figures prominently, whether it's the (lover turned?) witch-tiger-esque figure in *Tropical Malady* (2004) or the mirror-projected ghosts and monkey spirits in *Uncle Boonmee* (2010), or, perhaps most representatively, the dream world the unconscious Itt describes to Auntie Jen (via a medium), spatially overlaid on, but invisible from within, the "reality" Auntie Jen inhabits (*Cemetery of Splendor* (2015)). She and the medium walk together during this description, the medium (inhabited by Itt) narrates their walk through a splendid palace as we watch the pair meander through forest undergrowth. They are together in separate worlds.

Some of Weerasethakul's later short films make stacking of worlds on the basis of vantage more visually or perceptually literal, as in *October Rumbles* (2020). In this short piece (4:20 min, digital video), we begin by watching a large black sail-like sheet, suspended from

Weerasethakul's films. She comes to a somewhat different conclusion than I do, but her point also seems right: she, like Rayns and del Carmen Molina Barea, think the ghosts have to do with a Buddhist belief in reincarnation, but she also sees it working across the films, connecting with Weerasethakul's family history, and as a way he gives space to those murdered by the Thai state in Isan—again, the political critique in his works is usually understated and subtle, but usually present. As she says, "We could trace a trajectory of ghosts through Apichatpong's features, short films, and video installations. Not only are there actual and metaphorical references to ghosts, but the artist recycles actors and playfully creates a much bigger dialogue between the works as characters come in and out of focus[...]Apichatpong's consciousness of mortality partly stems from his childhood living in a hospital where both his parents were doctors. Having been surrounded by illness and death, the artist developed an acceptance of the temporality of life" (Newman 146). She's also attuned to the way Weerasethakul's use of ghosts is part of his subtle political commentary: "Apichatpong's Buddhist fables may appear enchanting at first glance but there is something astutely topical about his use of reincarnation, which hints at wider political issues. His films are littered with the ghosts of the past, transmigrated as unlikely beasts that roam among the wastelands of political repression. Soldiers, corpses, death and re-birth continue to feature strongly and histories are retraced through the voice of others" (152). Weerasethakul himself remarks that Nabua (an Isan village he spent time in during research for *Uncle Boonmee*) was full of "repressed memories" like Uncle Boonmee, having been the site of a 20 year (1960s-1980s) anti-communist occupation by the Thai government during which many villagers were abused or killed (196).

what looks like a porch, flap against a forested backdrop, in a gentle rain. It's recognizably an object, in a recognizable visible world. As it moves back and forth, the sheet covers more or less of the viewer's sightline to the green landscape behind it:



Fig. 4.16 Screen captures from *October Rumbles* (2020). Not a close sequence, but sequence runs left to right, top to bottom. Screen captures by author.

As the piece progresses, closeups of cave formations begin to appear as though projected on the sheet (Weerasethakul has used handheld cave closeups repeatedly, usually at moments marking a transition, or site of transition, between worlds—most memorably in the ending sequence of *Uncle Boonmee*, as Uncle Boonmee prepares to die, and does). When the flapping sail/screen in *October Rumbles* covers the whole frame/screen, or nearly the whole thing, it's as though we're simply looking at a video of these cave formations, and occasionally a figure with a lantern walking through them. But the sheet continues to flap, modulating between being an object on

our screen staged in a world, and being the screen that stages a world. At the end of the piece, the camera pans (it has been still until now), and looks into the surrounding forest, and a digital but film-double-exposure-esque superimposition of more cave footage begins faintly to appear. At this moment the piece points up the way that the image of the forest is itself a kind of screen, for another reality that begins to appear on it. Here still there's an awareness of the separate simultaneity of the worlds—even the relatively zoomed out character of the cave shots superimposed on the close-to-the-camera forest image at the end suggests as much. Moving image, this short seems to say, allows a holding of realities in a way that respects the truth of the necessary limitation of vantage, but is able to hint at something that surpasses it. It's no coincidence either, I'd argue, that the imagery Weerasethakul chooses to cue re-casting what is screen and what is object (orders of reality) is that of cave formations: as in *Uncle Boonmee*, caves seem, for Weerasethakul, to be places where it's easier for worlds to become close to one another.

CODA: BACK TO *CLOSE-UP*

This emphasis the film places on feeling the shift between “worlds” or realities is also a critical way that *Mysterious Object* diverges from *Close-Up*, despite Weerasethakul's sustained admiration for Kiarostami's oeuvre, and the works' obvious shared interest in the emergent possibilities arising in the encounter between fictive and documentary modes in film. In *Close-Up*, the modes collaborate to produce the kind of world where Sabzian can have told the truth, and often the film elides the difference between these modes (i.e. fictive and documentary); it isn't interested in making its viewer *feel* the switch repeatedly, it isn't interested in directing our attention to the ways the film can cue or structure our change in commitment, it isn't interested

in holding the worlds apart and parallel; it wants to find a way to combine them in one *telling*, even as it necessarily also points up the medium-specific problematics of trying. It does not build a pattern of, or train its viewer to attend in specific ways to, filmically-cued modulations of orientation or reality commitment. And in this gesture to effect a combination that's both impossible and affectively correct in the situation, *Close-Up* produces the odd "restorative suffering," Stiegler and others identify: it's an aporetic feeling (yes and no) where perhaps the only apparently reliable orienting element is something like *communitas* (what Victor Turner calls the substrate of human co-feeling that emerges in situations of loss of framework, perhaps akin to the kind of "void" Weerasethakul's films perhaps evoke). In this it's like post-continuity film editing in action films as Bordwell describes it: where all we have available to orient us spatially (in a spatially incoherent world) is the body of the actor that somehow keeps moving "through" "it," even though we don't know what or how "it" is, or therefore how one might move "through" it. We can't intuit the rules of a reality (they are unstable or contradictory), and so we orient based on something else: in this case, it's a person, or a feeling, or the sheer ongoingness of the film itself. We don't know how to determine real truth on the basis of frameworks (they are unstable or plural), in *Close-Up*, but we know that somehow Sabzian is telling "it," even though we don't know what "it" is, or how "telling" works, in the film. In accepting this, the viewer changes, and change is always also suffering. Suffering has etymological roots in words meaning "to bear" or "to carry," and also carries the sense of "to submit to" or "to undergo"—it's a word that speaks to a permeability of world and self. If you are carrying some-thing, you are an actor doing something (to some-thing else) within a world, if you are undergoing something, the world is doing something to you, and maybe you are changed or reorganized in the process; certainly you at least temporarily become something more like an

object (accepting for a moment a rather familiar model of subject and object)—“suffering” in its diachronic cloud form connotes both positions or vantages, itself a kind of aporetic construction. “Suffering” seen this way also gets at something true about the nature of the projects of both these films: the films ask the viewer to feel themselves as at once a subject in relation to an object, but also as “undergoing” something; the “object” is something being done to them. In *Close-Up* it’s a change in their relation to a person, Sabzian (a change reflected also by others in the film), in *Mysterious Object* I’d argue it’s a change in the relation to the nature of world itself. The difference happens because *Mysterious Object* is interested in *patterning* and *highlighting* the switches in orientation (pointing up the way worlds are constructed, and offering the viewer a performance that changes their sense of what lies between them), and in *Close-Up*, the film teaches us that these boundaries don’t matter, that some kinds of relational truth exceed the realities that govern our ways of making sense. *Close-Up* makes us feel and then bypass the aporia produced by the “doubt” Stiegler identifies in the nature of images, an aporia³⁹ that can only be filled by relational faith: relating to the world differently by means of relating differently to (an) other(s)—Sabzian, in the case of the film. *Mysterious Object at Noon* is gentler, and it offers a new way of relating to the world first—but in so doing, offers a different way of being related to others *through* a shared world that exceeds any given frame. In both cases, the films use the way film is uniquely able to hold the friction between fictive and documentarian realities to open new and *felt* possibilities for relation.

³⁹ Like the weird inadequacy of existing legal form(ul)ations of “justice” to reckon actually fairly with what Sabzian did

CODA

This dissertation has focused on describing the formal features and different expressive, representational, and orientational possibilities of aspect choreography in four very different case studies across early 21st century experimental poetry and film. This focus has allowed me to draw out the ongoing and newly interweaving influences of Structuralist film and Conceptual art of the 60s and 70s on experimental work at the very end of Postmodernism, or at the opening to whatever might come next. Thinking through aspect choreography as a form also provides a new vantage on how contemporary experimental work might think newly about the pedagogical dimension of art—building structures out of the 20th century practice of “shock” and “defamiliarization” towards a kind of visceral orientation within flux. That’s to say, this form marks a departure from the massive “conflicting synchrony” that characterized much Postmodern art, and towards a reflexively cognized, affective recognition of diachronically organized patterns of change animated by viewer commitment and imaginative participation.

Aspect choreography also provides an intermedia model that works across poetry and film, two art forms that are still very infrequently thought together in any substantive or critical way. This project participates in a pivot away from the siloed and medium-specific ways different arts tend to be discussed. This flexibility is possible because of the way I locate aspect choreography as second-order form constituted in reflective experience. Following lines from Iser, Husserl, Hasty, Adorno, Dewey, and Eisenstein, I read aspect choreography as an emergent possibility co-constituted by the work’s structure and the reader’s imaginative/sense-making activity. Aspect choreography is a way of characterizing a certain kind of experiential time-

structure, and requires only a few things to work. Specifically, a maximum of four recognizable, contrasted, and well-delimited frameworks for sense-making (e.g. genres, deictic-fixing contexts, reality constructions, languages, visual processing modalities), and the possibility for repetitive switches between them that nonetheless allow them to remain discrete. Aspect choreography cannot work if a piece's frames hybridize too early on in its development, or if there are too many frames—at that point the possibility for expectation structure is lost, and the switches become indistinguishable from a generic sense of “a lot going on,” in a familiar vein of Postmodern reflexivity or meta-referentiality. But, if the piece retains a certain kind of simplicity or structural discipline, these familiar kinds of Postmodern code-switches and conflicting synchronies enable new and phenomenologically available possibilities.

Thinking through aspect choreography might also supply new tools for reckoning with certain new but increasingly familiar problems in fields outside of poetics and experimental film. For example, the question of how to think about vantage in video game-influenced, or otherwise computer-generated or digitally animated moving image works. Vivian Sobchack and Christian Metz's work on how to think the issue of vantage is still influential in film theory today—they provide different but convincing models for how a kind of indexically tinged subjective vantage consciousness might structure the film image. But what happens when the “camera” was obviously never embodied in a space contiguous with our own, but rather is merely the imaginary vantage of an imaginary point moving through imaginary space? How is the subject relationally constituted by this point of view? Various scholars in gaming studies have been debating these questions for almost a decade. More recently, Aria Dean, a younger multimedia

artist whose work is the focus of a great deal of recent curatorial and critical praise and attention, has been making digital films generated in Unreal Engine (a digital animation platform) that think about this question, among others.

Abattoir, U.S.A.! is a 10 minute digitally animated short film in roughly four parts. Entirely absent of figured bodies of any kind, the film is purely vantage and architecture. A “camera” pans down from a sky view to arrive at a penned-in “cow-like” vantage inside an architecturally idealized “slaughterhouse.” From there, it suddenly cartwheels wildly over its pen edge, then ploddingly tracks down a Richard Serra-esque tunnel¹, to a killing box. A shock (the killing blow?), followed by an approximately 1:30 minute interlude of Paul Sharits flicker film quotation (Dean), then the “camera” “comes to” on the floor, glitchily “shakes itself,” and tracks into an empty room filled with meat hooks. Once there, it glides around above the blood-covered floor like a hovering ice skater, obviously no longer a “cow.” The film concludes with a multilayered digital abstraction of fluid movement that begins from the layer of “blood” on the meat hook room floor. (See Fig. 5.1 on following page)

¹ Dean refers to this as one of the many “easter eggs” in the piece—this tunnel is indeed an intentional Serra reference (Dean).

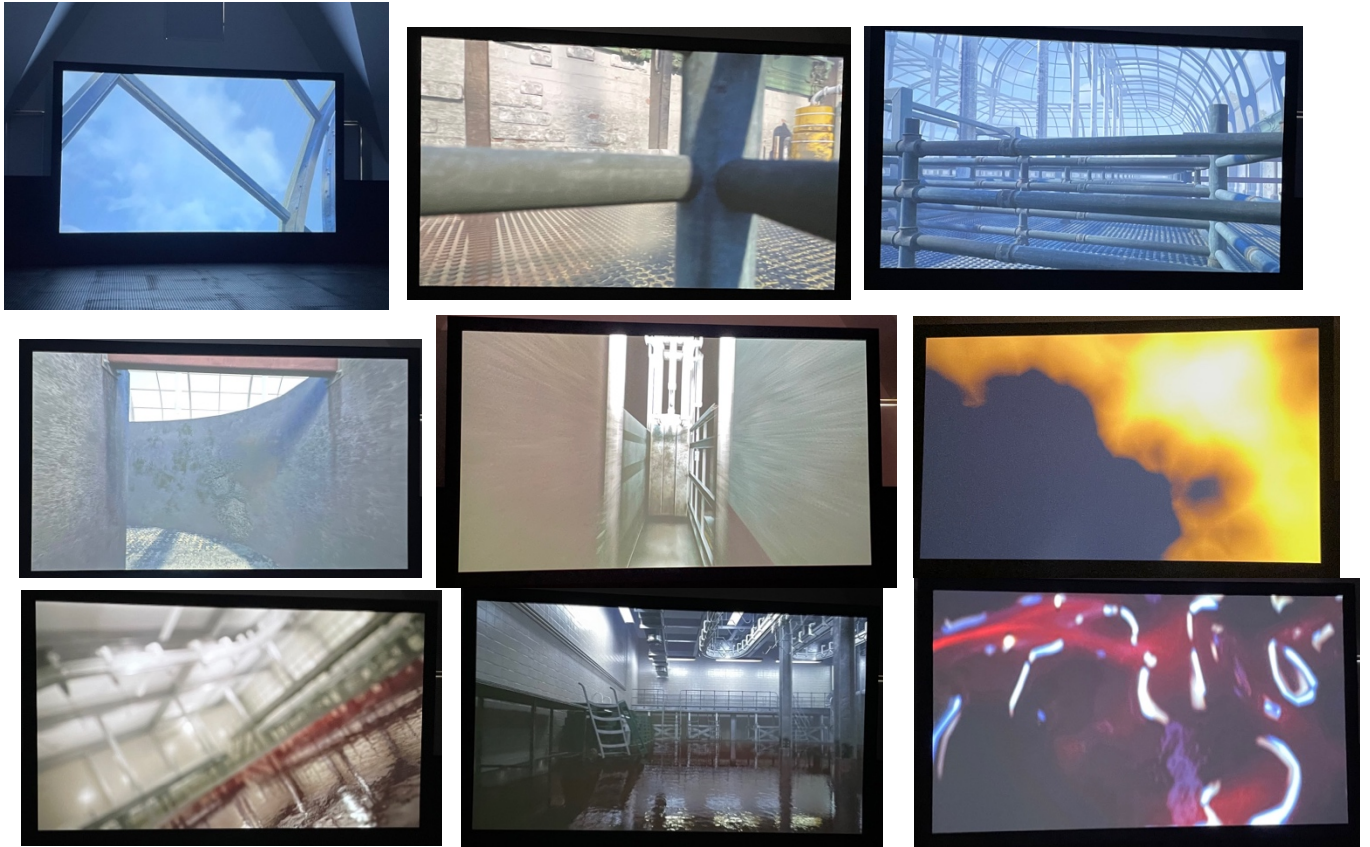


Fig. 5.1 Various photos of *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* (Dean, 2023), as installed at The Renaissance Society, Chicago IL (Installation view top left). Representing the film's approximate section order (left to right, top to bottom). Photos by author

Dean says of *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* (2023), that she was using its medium to “detach [first person-like] vantage from subjectivity”—she’s been thinking about “the problem of identification [in film]” wanting to resist and trouble the flattening contemporary art trends that seek to synonymize embodied self-representation and political action for certain kinds of embodied vantages. She notes that as a “Black woman artist,” she has been “frustrated with the way the conversation tends to remain tethered to my subjectivity” (Dean). “Of course,” she remarks, this “isn’t irrelevant, because I am a Black woman,” and she was thinking about the ways Frank Wilderson reads US infrastructure as intentionally and systematically harmful to Black people (much like a

slaughterhouse is for cows), but she nonetheless wants to question the simplifying way her work tends to be read, and to ask questions instead about “the relationship between form and political or theoretical concerns[...]to think about the structure and form of [her] tools” (Dean). She was “using the [digitally created] slaughterhouse [setting of *Abattoir, U.S.A.!*] as a test to see if [she] can untether the point of view using camera movement” (Dean). In thinking about how this might work, Dean wanted also to “have some sort of historical conversation[n] with artists of other periods,” especially Structuralist filmmakers including Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow, and Paul Sharits, since like them she has a certain “commitment” to thinking “form and materiality,” and an interest in immersive but non-representational film (Dean). She began the film project knowing she wanted to focus on camera movement, identification, and vantage, so she started out with formal devices from Michael Snow, especially that/those used in *La Region Centrale*—“I wanted to spin [the camera] around, something many Structuralist filmmakers have done” (Dean). Film scholar Bruce Jenkins, in an interview with Dean about *Abattoir, U.S.A.!*, agrees, noting he “immediately sensed the work’s connection to Snow,” among other artists, including Chantal Ackerman, Marcel Broodthaers, Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, James Benning, and Andy Warhol (Jenkins). Dean acknowledges that all of these artists have been important to her to varying extents, noting that she “obsessed over” a catalog raisonné of Frampton’s work, and had recently seen and thought a lot about Sharits’s retrospective at Anthology Film Archives (despite finding it “disappointing”) immediately prior to making *Abattoir, U.S.A.!*

If Dean’s project begins from a kind of latter-day Structuralist impulse it meshed with the political concerns of its moment, this work also extends its question about “structure” to affect: how structure and affect work together as feeling-organizing “cues.” The film has what both

Jenkins and Dean refer to as a “poppy ending” that Dean says comes out of a kind of structural interest in melodrama—the final major sequence of the film is a depersonalized PoV pirouette around an empty meat-draining room set to an abstracted version of Tommy James’s saccharine 1967 pop hit “I Think We’re Alone Now.” Tonally, it produces something very strange and discordant. Dean says she also wanted to use *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* to think about how melodrama “wed[s] sound and image” in a sequence of “cues that tell you how to feel,” and to make a piece where the structure and cues for affect meshed in odd or disconcerting ways (Dean). Dean was initially thinking this problem through sculptural form: in 2019 she made a piece titled “I think we’re alone now” that featured two cube-like forms running into each other “like two little rams” or, she says, “like a Hollywood kiss.” In this sculpture, she was interested in colocalizing conflicting affective legibilities in one form, organized in relationship to this same song (Dean). Having recently gone through a period where she was “intensely interested in choreography” after working on another major project called *Sweet*, Dean began to probe the question of time and moving forms, conflicting cues for feeling, and structural patterning through experimental film. One might certainly read this as an interest in conflicting synchronies, but Dean is nonetheless critical of the way experimental film has entered into the popular imaginary as a “constant attempt to break the format” (Dean). She criticizes Donald Glover’s recent tv show *Swarm* and Nathan Fielder’s *The Rehearsal* for a familiar kind of perpetually frame-breaking meta-reflexivity, and marks the familiarity as indicative of “postmodern tactics getting reified[...]it’s been done and it’s familiar” (Dean). At the same time she finds this [staleness of postmodernist self-awareness tactics] “exciting, because it means it’s time for something new” (Dean). She’s turning away from this kind of work, that “shock[s] you,” towards more “systematic and thoughtful” reflexive approaches like Fassbinder’s, or the one she sees in

Dogville (von Trier, 2003) (Dean). Instead, she asks, “what if you let the structure hold, but divert its energy.” This is partly why she finds the sustained and phenomenologically oriented work of Structuralist filmmakers (making “time sticky and stretchy” (Dean)) useful for her project—a return to a different and more diachronically conscious kind of experimental structure building, much like aspect choreographies do.

The unanswered Structuralist question for Dean, though, is around how exactly *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* points up or makes its materiality available, since it’s digitally generated, and not, like her Structuralist models, on celluloid film (Dean). She hadn’t initially intended to do the piece digitally, but “couldn’t get access to a slaughterhouse,” and so ended up working with animator Filip Kostic to generate the film. She feels that the question of its engagement with its material is connected to the “depersonalization” of vantage she’s interested in—she notes that it wouldn’t have been possible in the same way with a physical camera—but she’s not sure how (Dean). The piece is quite new, and extant criticism doesn’t yet address this question either.

Reading the piece as an aspect choreography can be analytically useful here, as it provides a way of thinking digital materiality and vantage together. This is a coda and not a chapter, so the analysis here will be brief, and more of a suggestion for how reading for aspect choreography can provide new ways of understanding these kinds of questions. Reading the vantage in *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* as an aspect choreography makes it legible as structure of switches between what/who the point of view is attributed to, such that eventually, the viewer recognizes the “vantage” itself as plastic (along Malabovian lines). The vantage is a structure of changes:

and indeed, how else *could* one represent the nature of digitally generated vantage? Plasticity is not an object, not synchronic, and therefore *not imageable* — like the vantageless totality Weerasethakul is able to use aspect choreography to affectively metaphorize (Chapter 4), plasticity can only be approached indirectly and through feeling, or through a structure that, like it, has a temporal dimension. The vantage in Dean’s piece modulates between being legible as standing for (and obviously “standing for”) “cow,” (e.g. when the camera looks out at cow-eye-level through the bars of its pen, or hesitatingly bobs down the Serra corridor); for “transparent and disembodied vehicle for spatial representation;” for “(quotation of) other films,” (e.g. the Sharits quotation and the final superimposition image); and for, perhaps, movement itself, or the circulation of awareness within a space (e.g. the meat hook scene, or when the camera cartwheels over the edge of the cow pen). Much as the found footage format and genre modulation of *Creep* (Brice, 2014) (Chapter 3) asked its viewer to “read” the vantage or way of looking as “standing for” the perspective of one or the other of its characters, Dean points her viewer’s awareness toward the way of looking itself, and makes them feel the switch in how they are reading it. For example, early on, as the “camera” pans down from its opening gaze at the sky through the transparent ceiling of the “slaughterhouse,” past various architectural features of the walls, its line of sight is eventually interrupted by a sequence of bars the viewer eventually realizes are the walls of a pen, one of many in the space revealed as the “cow” turns its “head.” The “camera” is looking from the perspective of a cow in a slaughterhouse pen: it becomes “embodied,” and the viewer’s sense of what the vantage “stands for” shifts accordingly. (See Fig. 5.2 on following page).



Fig 5.2 Photos from the opening panning sequence of *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* (2023). Photos by author.

The piece, shortly thereafter, cues its viewer to re-cast the vantage again. From the cows-eye view depicted in the rightmost panel of Fig. 2 (above), the camera next cartwheels over the wall of the pen, spinning vertiginously: definitely not being “as” a cow now—vantage as digital point. But then immediately after executing this little bit of disembodied acrobatics, the perspective settles, and begins to plod down the Serra tunnel, complete with “imperfectly” smooth “bobs” of its “head” every now and then —“standing for” a cow again. The film goes on like this, modulating the legibility of its vantage: modulating what the viewer attributes the way of looking “to.” One of the most memorable of these switch cues happens when, midway through the piece, after having “gotten up” from “the ground” “as” “a cow,” the view then pans down to look at the reflective blood on the floor, and stays there long enough (about 3 seconds) to make it clear that there is no thing looking: the vantage has no imageable body.

Fig. 5.3 Photo of *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* (2023). Photo by author



The film's concluding sequence also makes more sense when we think the vantage's aspect choreography as standing for its own nature as digital plasticity. The "camera," in the last few moments of the film, again pivots to look down at a reflective surface: the blood-covered floor of the meat hook room. It recalls the earlier no-body moment: nothing appears. But we continue to look at the reflective floor, and suddenly another image fades in, superimposed in such a way that it appears to be *above* the floor, and eventually obscures it. This other image is also blood, but blood *in motion*—reflections move across its surface as it legibly undulates.



Fig 5.4. Photos of *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* (2023). Photos by author.

It's as though, suddenly, the vantage *does* see itself—if we imagine that what is looking is the motion (or motion-sheet) of the blood above the floor. The "camera" would then have shifted again, to be simply an uninflected view looking at a textured surface, but one that depicts a self-reflexive understanding of itself as plastic, as motion, as change. In this way, we might read the film as depicting the nature of its own materiality, and making that phenomenologically available in a way well in line with the Structuralist film project, but in a way appropriate to the nature of its medium. This way of reading, however, only becomes available if we track the film's aspect choreography.

Attending to aspect choreography helps clarify how post-postmodern objects might

represent complex temporal, orientational, and affective dynamics that otherwise might prove illegible or hard to track. This form highlights new diachronically, reflexively structured forms of representation, and how they work across time-based media able to legibly deploy and modulate frameworks of sense-making. Beginning from an art and literary historical moment at the end of postmodernism, and premised on insights traceable to Structural film, poststructuralist thought, and the phenomenological turn of the 1970s, aspect choreography nonetheless might be seen as a form that foreshadows what comes after the postmodern moment, or, at the very least, offers a new handle on its questions and problems.

WORKS CITED

INTRODUCTION

Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Ahwesh, Peggy. *Peggy Ahwesh: Recent Installations (Artist Talk)*. Interview by Catherine Sullivan, University of Chicago Film Studies Center, Chicago, IL, 10 Mar. 2022.

Alford, Lucy. *Forms of Poetic Attention*. Columbia University Press, 2021.

Anthems. Directed by Bani Abidi, 2000.

Brinkema, Eugenie. *The Forms of the Affects*. Duke University Press, 2014.

Burgin, Victor. *Between*. Blackwell/ICA, 1986.

Campany, David. *Victor Burgin: On Paper (David Saltoun Gallery 31 October-6 December 2013)*. <https://davidcampany.com/victor-burgin-on-paper/>.

Casetti, Francesco. "Face to Face." *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind*, Amsterdam University Press, 1995, pp. 118–39.

---. "Filmic Experience (Part 2)." *Screen*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2009, pp. 56–66.

Death at a Thirty Degree Angle. Directed by Bani Abidi, 2012.

Eisenstein, Sergei. *The Film Sense*. Translated by Jay Leyda, Meridian Books, 1957.

Everything Everywhere All At Once. Directed by Kwan and Scheinert, 2022.

Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." *New Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 2, Winter 1972, pp. 279–99.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press, 1992.

---. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell University Press, 1982.

Kansas Atlas. Directed by Peggy Ahwesh, 2019.

Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Translated by Edward Allen McCormick, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.

Lewis, Ligia. *Ligia Lewis (Post-Performance Talk-Back)*. 31 Jan. 2020.

---. *Water Will in Melody*. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

Malabou, Catherine. *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*. Translated by Clayton Crockett, Columbia University Press, 2009.

Mangoes. Directed by Bani Abidi, 1999.

Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Harvard University Press, 2015.

Philip, M. NourbeSe. "Notanda." *Zong!*, Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

Plato. "Timaeus." *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*, translated by R.G. Bury, Harvard University Press, 1929.

The News. Directed by Bani Abidi, 2001.

CHAPTER 1

Alvarez, Ana Cecilia, and Chelsey Minnis. "Chelsey Minnis Understands What Is Expected of Her" *Affidavit*, <https://www.affidavit.art/articles/chelsey-minnis>.

Bergson, Henri. *Laughter; an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. The Macmillan Company, 1911.

Booth, Wayne C. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Pbk. ed., University of Chicago Press, 1975.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Les Presses du réel, 2002.

Culler, Jonathan. "Reading Lyric." *Yale French Studies*, no. 69, 1985, pp. 98–106.

Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. 1st edition, Tarcher Perigee, 2005.

Glaser, Rachel B. *Hairdo*. First edition., The Song Cave, 2017.

Glenum, Lara. "Welcome to the Gurlisque: The New Grrly, Grotesque, Burlesque Poetics." *Jacket2*. 2010 (<http://jacketmagazine.com/40/glenum-gurlisque.shtml>)

Glenum, Lara, and Arielle Greenberg, editors. *Gurlisque: The New Grrly, Grotesque, Burlesque Poetics*. 1st ed, Saturnalia Books ; Distributed by University Press of New England, 2010.

Greenberg, Arielle. "On the Gurlisque." Lecture, Small Press Traffic, 2002.

Key, Amy. "Material Lacquer: Chelsey Minnis Talks to Amy Key." *Poetry London*, 28 May 2019, <https://poetrylondon.co.uk/material-lacquer-chelsey-minnis-talks-to-amy-key/>.

Minnis, Chelsey. *Baby, I Don't Care* /. First edition., Wave Books, 2018.

---. *Bad Bad*. 1st ed., Fence Books, 2007.

---. *Poemland*. 1st ed., Wave Books, 2009.

---. *Zirconia*. 1st ed., Fence Books, 2001.

Schatz, Thomas. *The Genius of the System : Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*. 1st Metro pbk. ed., Henry Holt and Co., 1996.

Schwabsky, Barry. "Put On Sunglasses and Write a Poem." *Hyperallergic*, 8 Sept. 2018, <http://hyperallergic.com/458932/chelsey-minnis-baby-i-dont-care-wave-books-2018/>.

Wellbery, David. Lecture. University of Chicago, 2018.

Williams, Phillip B. "A Facet's Gleam: Ai and the Believable 'I'." *Poetry Foundation Website*, Poetry Foundation.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophische Untersuchungen = Philosophical Investigations* /. Rev. 4th ed. / by P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte., Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Woodruff, Paul. "Aristotle on Mimēsis." *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*. ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty. Princeton University Press, 1992.

CHAPTER 2

Adorno, Theodor W., et al. *Aesthetic Theory*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Anger, Joseph Humfrey. *Form in Music: With Special Reference to the Bach Fugue and the Beethoven Sonata*. Vincent Music Company, Limited, 1900.

Baucom, Ian. *Specters of the Atlantic*. Duke University Press, 2005.

Borges, Jorge Luis, and Andrew. Hurley. *Collected Fictions*. Viking, 1998.

Campbell, Joseph. *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*. [Viking compass ed.], Viking Press, 1967.

- Cummings, E. E. *Collected Poems [of] E. E. Cummings*. Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938.
- Hasty, Christopher. *Meter as Rhythm*. 20th anniversary edition., Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Hejinian, Lyn., and Lyn. Hejinian. *My Life: And, My Life in the Nineties*. Wesleyan University Press, 2013.
- Laurie R. Lambert. "Poetics of Reparation in M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong!" *Global South*, vol. 10, no. 1, Indiana University Press, Apr. 2016, pp. 107–29.
- Masone, Roberto. *Marlene NourbeSe Philip, Linton Kwesi Johnson and the Dismantling of the English Norm*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017. EBSCOhost
- O'Hara, Frank. Ed. Mark Ford. *Selected Poems*. 1st ed., Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.
- Philip, Marlene Nourbese. *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. Casa de las Américas, 1988.
- . *Zong!* Wesleyan University Press, 2008.
- Quema, Anne. "M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong: Metaphors, Laws, and Fugues of Justice." *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2016, pp. 85–104.
- Reed, Anthony. *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.
- Scalapino, Leslie. *That They Were at the Beach: Aeolotropic Series*. North Point Press, 1985.
- Shockley, Alan. "Playing the Square Circle: Musical Form and Polyphony in the Wake." *European Joyce Studies*, vol. 18, Brill, 2009, pp. 101–12.

CHAPTER 3

- Adorno, Theodor W., et al. *Aesthetic Theory*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Belvaux, Rémy, Bonzel, André and Poelvoorde, Benoît. *Man Bites Dog (C'est Arrivé Près de Chez Vous)*. 1992
- Bergson, Henri, et al. *Laughter; an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. The Macmillan Company, 1911.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 43, no. 2, Winter 2017, pp. 305–40.

Berlant, Lauren, and Sianne Ngai. "Comedy Has Issues." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 43, no. 2, Jan. 2017, pp. 233–49.

Booth, Wayne C. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Pbk. ed., University of Chicago Press, 1975.

Bordwell, David. "Return to Paranormalcy." *Observations on Film Art*, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2012/11/13/return-to-paranormalcy/>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2021.

Boym, Svetlana. *Off-Modern Manifesto*. <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~boym/offmodern.html>.

Brice, Patrick. *Creep*, 2014

---. *The Overnight*, 2015

Buck, Marie. "Some Scattered Thoughts on Poetry, Political Mood, and the Internet." 2019, *Harriet Blog*. Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2019/04/some-scattered-thoughts-on-poetry-political-mood-and-the-internet>

Cameron, Allan. "Corporeal Frames: Found-Footage Horror and the Dislocated Image." *Visceral Screens*, Edinburgh University Press, 2021, pp. 79–104.

Carroll, Noël. *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*. First edition., vol. 378, Oxford University Press, 2014.

---. *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*. Routledge, 1990.

Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton University Press, 1992.

Dockray, Heather. "The "Thanks, I Hate It" Meme has Found Its Spiritual Home." *Mashable*, 2019. <https://mashable.com/article/thanks-i-hate-it-subreddit>

Ezerova, Daria. "Laughing Apocalypse: Horror and/as Comedy." *8068530*, edited by Nancy Condee et al., Academic Studies Press, 2020, pp. 84–104.

Farmer, Michial. "'Cloaked In, Like, Fifteen Layers of Irony': The Metamodernist Sensibility of 'Parks and Recreation.'" *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 37, no. 2, Popular Culture Association in the South, 2015, pp. 103–20.

Frampton, Hollis. *Zorn's Lemma* 1970

Hallenbeck, Bruce G. *Comedy-Horror Films: A Chronological History, 1914-2008*. McFarland, 2009.

Heller-Nicholas, Alexandra. *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality*. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014.

Hilder, Jamie. *Designed Words for a Designed World: The International Concrete Poetry Movement, 1955-1971*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016.

Ihns, Kirsten. "Emmalea Russo's *G and Wave Archive*." *Chicago Review*, vol. 64, no.4, 2021, pp. 201-7.

Heiko Julien. *I Am Ready to Die a Violent Death*. Civil Coping Mechanisms, Charleston, 2013

Know Your Meme: r/Thanks, I Hate It. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/thanks-i-hate-it>

Krauss, Rosalind E. "*A Voyage on the North Sea*": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. Thames & Hudson, 2000.

Lynch, David. *Mulholland Drive*. 2001

MacDonald, Scott. "Don't Put All Your Eggs in One Basket: A Survey of Single Shot Films." *Afterimage*, vol. 16, no. 8, Rochester NY, 1989, pp.10-16

Myrick, Daniel., et al. *The Blair Witch Project*. 1999

Parrish, Allison. *Athe Yearidy Ti Isa*. 2019

Riley, Boots. *Sorry to Bother You*. 2018

Rodowick, D.N. "Class Lecture." November 2021, University of Chicago

Rühm, Gerhard. "Jetzt" 1958

r/Thanks, I Hate It. November 2021

Simmons, WJ. Instagram. September 2021

Sobchack, Vivian Carol. *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Princeton University Press, 1992.

Turner, Luke. “The Metamodernist Manifesto | Luke Turner (2011).” *The Metamodernist Manifesto | Luke Turner (2011)*, <http://www.metamodernism.org>. Accessed 9 Nov. 2021.

Turner, Victor. “Liminality and Communitas.” *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine Publishing, 1969, pp. 94-113, 125-30.

Welsby, Chris. *Windmill III*. 1970

Westerdale, Joel. “The Proto-Horror-Comedy: Waxworks.” *ReFocus: The Films of Paul Leni*, edited by Erica Tortolani and Martin F. Norden, Edinburgh University Press, 2021, pp. 82–96. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv1kd7ww4.10>.

Williams, Linda. “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess.” *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4, July 1991, pp. 2–13.

Young, Damon R. “Ironies of Web 2.0.” *Post45*, 2 May 2019

Zenner, Eline, and Dirk Geeraerts. “One Does Not Simply Process Memes: Image Macros as Multimodal Constructions.” *Cultures and Traditions of Wordplay and Wordplay Research*, edited by Esme Winter-Froemel and Verena Thaler, 1st ed., De Gruyter, 2018, pp. 167–94.

CHAPTER 4

Arnold, Dan. *Philosophical Traditions in Indian Buddhist Thought: Madhyamaka Tradition*. Class Lecture. May 2023, University of Chicago.

Carrion-Murayari, Gary, and Massimiliano Gioni, editors. *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*. New Museum Books, 2011.

Cavallini, Roberto. “Staging Thought: The Essay Film and the Consciousness of Cinema.” *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, vol. 15, no. 1, Mar. 2017, pp. 33–47. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.1386/ncin.15.1.33_1.

Cavell, Stanley. *The World Viewed*. Harvard University Press, 1979.

Cemetery of Splendour. Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2015.

Close Up. Directed by Abbas Kiarostami, 1990.

“*Delirium*” *Masterclass*. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, The Malba, Buenos Aires, 2010.

Finnegan, Elizabeth Hope. “To See or Not to See: A Wittgensteinian Look at Abbas Kiarostami’s *Close-Up*.” *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 22, no. 1, Feb. 2018, pp. 21–38.

“Licking for the Nation: Auntie Genealogies in Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s Rak Ti Khon Kaen.” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema & Media Studies*, vol. 60, no. 3, Spring 2021, pp. 1–26.

Master of Dawn and Dusk: Igor Toronyi-Lalic Talks to the Film-Maker Apichatpong Weerasethakul about Sleep, Tilda Swinton and VR. - Document - Gale Literature Resource Center. https://go-gale-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&u=chic_rbw&id=GALE%7CA690146613&v=2.1&it=r&sid=ebsco. Accessed 4 Oct. 2022.

Memoria. Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2021.

Molina Barea, María Del Carmen. “The Cinematographic Refrain: Memory and Repetition in the Films of Hong Sang-Soo and Apichatpong Weerasethakul.” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue Canadienne d’Etudes Cinématographiques*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2021 Fall 2021, pp. 1–21.

Mysterious Object at Noon. Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2000.

Newman, Karen. “A Man Who Can Recall His Past Lives.” *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, Austrian Film Museum Books, 2009, pp. 143–57.

October Rumbles. Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2020.

Quandt, James, editor. *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*. Austrian Film Museum Books, 2009.

---. “Resistant to Bliss: Describing Apichatpong.” *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, Austrian Film Museum Books, pp. 13–104.

Rahula, Walpola. *What the Buddha Taught*. Second, Grove Press, 1974.

Rayns, Tony. “Touching the Voidness. Films by Apichatpong Weerasethakul.” *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, Austrian Film Museum Books, 2009, pp. 132–42.

Rithdee, Kong. “Cinema of Reincarnations.” *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, Austrian Film Museum Books, pp. 118–24.

Sopa, Geshe Lundhup, and Jeffrey Hopkins. *Cutting Through Appearances*. Snow Lion, 1989.

Stiegler, Bernard. “On Abbas Kiarostami’s Close Up.” *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy*, translated by Arne de Boever, vol. 20, 2014, pp. 40–48.

Syndromes and a Century. Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004.

Tropical Malady. Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004.

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives. Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010.

Weerasethakul, Apichatpong. "Ghosts in the Darkness." *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, Austrian Film Museum Books, 2009, pp. 104–17.

---. "The Folly and Future of Thai Cinema Under Military Dictatorship." *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, Austrian Film Museum Books, 2009, pp. 178–81.

Weerasethakul, Apichatpong, and James Quandt. "Exquisite Corpus. An Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul." *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, Austrian Film Museum Books, 2009, pp. 125–31.

CODA

Abattoir, U.S.A.! Directed by Aria Dean, Renaissance Society, 2023.

Dean, Aria. *Aria Dean in Conversation with Bruce Jenkins: Ghosts in the Machine*. Interview by Bruce Jenkins. Renaissance Society, Chicago, IL. 15 Apr. 2023.

---. *Interview with Aria Dean on Abattoir, U.S.A.! (Artist Talk)*. Interview by Myriam Ben Salah. Renaissance Society, Chicago, IL. 25 Feb. 2023.