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Feeling Postmodern: Emotion in Postmodern Film Aesthetics and Theory

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Abstract

It is widely assumed that postmodern critical and aesthetic practice projects a glacial, emotionless universe that renders it irrelevant to or even incompatible with what has becomes known as the “affective turn.” It is just as widely assumed that of the two terms at the heart of this “affective turn,” affect and emotion, emotion is the less critically interesting or politically productive of the two—the pedestrian, slightly stodgy cousin of a desubjectivized, mobile and liberatory affect. In bringing postmodernism and emotion together through an analysis of a series of “postmodern emotions,” this thesis attempts at once to salvage postmodernism from critical redundancy by revealing the idiosyncratic, hybrid emotions that permeate it, and to salvage emotion from critical redundancy by describing the theoretical and political challenges posed by its postmodern incarnations. The textual frame through which this somewhat binocular argument will be articulated is itself two-sided. On the one hand, I broach a number of significant theoretical texts, from Sigmund Freud’s “The Uncanny,” to Fredric Jameson’s famous meditation on Los Angeles’ Bonaventure hotel, to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s The Inhuman. On the other, drawing on cinema’s status as both a commercial medium with an inbuilt relation to emotion, and an aesthetic form of historical significance to the elaboration of postmodern aesthetics, I examine a series of self-consciously “postmodern” films from the 1990s, a period when postmodern concepts and practices achieved a broad popular currency: Wes Craven’s Scream (1996), David Cronenberg’s Crash (1996), David Lynch’s Mulholland Drive (2001), Harmony Korine’s Gummo (1997) and Wes Anderson’s Rushmore (1997). In a series of close readings, I endeavour to show that far from incompatible with postmodernism, emotion is absolutely key to its theoretical and aesthetic articulation, and that the postmodern aesthetic strategies and cultural shifts seen as most hostile to emotion can become the most productive tools for reflecting on emotion. This conjunction of postmodernism and emotion forces us to revise our received understanding of emotion—throwing up a series of idiosyncratic, borderline feelings, from ecstasy, euphoria and sublimity, to knowingness, bewilderment, fascination and boredom, to a peculiarly self-reflexive instantiation of fear. Emerging under the intense pressure of postmodernism’s destabilizing critique of hermeneutics,
embodiment and subjectivity, these distinctively postmodern emotions diverge in striking ways from the rigid cognitive appraisal model of emotion that continues to structure feeling theory’s assumptions about emotion. In tracing these divergences, this thesis suggests that emotion may be quite as valuable as affect to the affective turn’s efforts to reassess feeling’s relation to agency, sociality, embodiment, faciality, hermeneutics and intentionality. Yet if the conjunction of postmodernism and emotion helps us transform our understanding of emotion, it also helps us reconfigure the clichés of postmodern aesthetics—converting the flat, depthless surface into a textured plane bristling with fractures and gleaming with gloss; the failure of cinematic suture into the bewildering loss of orientation; practices of allusion into a knowing social network glimmering with knowing winks. Far from a moribund critical and aesthetic practice incompatible with and irrelevant to current work in the field of affect and emotion, then, this thesis suggests that postmodern aesthetics and theory may provide the perfect platform from which to enrich and engage this burgeoning field.
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Introduction: Postmodernism and Emotion

I.

It’s no secret that the past two decades have witnessed an extraordinary resurgence of interest in the study of affect and emotion, in what has become known as critical and cultural theory’s “affective turn.”¹ What’s less readily acknowledged, however, is the widespread conviction that where the critical stocks of affect and emotion are on the ascendant, the critical stocks of postmodern theory and aesthetics must be on the wane. Ann Pellegrini and Jasbar Puar’s survey of the regeneration of “critical interest in the cultural politics and claims of affect,” in the Fall 2009 issue of Social Text, is a case in point.² Opening with a series of observations on Fredric Jameson’s groundbreaking 1984 article, “Postmodernism, or, The Logic of Late Capitalism,” in particular his comment that postmodernism is marked by the “waning of affect,” Pellegrini and Puar’s piece reads the emergence of theories of affect and emotion against the backdrop of an implicitly dated and moribund postmodern theory.³ According to Pellegrini and Puar, the “growing centrality of theories of affect to conceptualizations of subjecthood, being, corporeality and politics” can be taken as a


³ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” New Left Review 146 (1984): 53-94. This article was to yield the bulk of the pilot chapter of Jameson’s 1990 book of the same name. (Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991.])
sign that postmodernism has had its critical and cultural day.\(^4\) As they comment, “some thirty years after Jameson’s first exploration of these questions [of feeling], it is postmodernism that has ceased to be sounded as a term of, and for, critical analysis.”\(^5\) While noting that Jameson’s proclamation of the “waning of affect” is matched by a series of seemingly divergent proclamations about the emergence of “intensities”—free-floating, non-cognitive entities that “really don’t imply anything about the world”—Pellegrini and Puar nevertheless persist in framing the emergence of theories of affect and emotion as a direct impeachment of Jameson. In this and similar framings, Jameson is cast as a theoretical antagonist, the avatar of a vision of postmodernism hostile to the affects and emotions that currently magnetize critical interest.

Pellegrini and Puar are not alone in their suggestion that what Sara Ahmed calls the “cultural studies of affect and emotion” marks the demise of—or is at least is incompatible with—theories of postmodernism, with critical work in the field routinely establishing the value of “new” work on affect and emotion through a ritual vanquishing of the “old” postmodern.\(^6\) Kathleen Woodward, for example, suggests that the “excitement” of recent “research on the emotions” lies in the extent to which “it has not been underwritten by major theoretical developments such as Foucauldian genealogy or Derridean deconstruction.”\(^7\) Cameron McCarthy et al.’s work on race and affect situates itself squarely as a rebuttal of Jameson, arguing that far from being “overwhelmingly marked by a certain exhaustion or waning of affect,” “contemporary life [is]… marked by a powerful concentration of affect.”\(^8\) Elspeth Probyn’s

\(^4\) Pellegrini and Puar, “Affect,” 36.


\(^8\) Cameron McCarthy, Alicia P. Rodriguez, Ed Buendia, Shuaib Meacham, Stephen David, Teriberto Godina, K. E. Supriya, and Carrie Wilson-Brown, “Danger in the Safety Zone: Notes on Race,
endorsement of “a new nexus of research on affect” is preceded by an extended critique of a monolithic “theory” she identifies with “poststructuralism” or “postmodernism.” Finally, Brian Massumi’s impassioned defense of the significance of “affect” in contemporary social life is prefaced by a dismissive dig at Jameson, in the form of the observation that, “Fredric Jameson notwithstanding, belief has waned for many, but not affect. If anything, our condition is characterized by a surfeit of it.”

According to Massumi, whose work on affect has yielded some of the affective turn’s founding texts, critical theory’s failure to account for this “surfeit” derives from the fact that its “entire vocabulary has derived from theories of signification that are still wedded to structure even across irreconcilable differences” theories he identifies with poststructuralism, one of postmodernism’s key manifestations. Yet even if one were to overlook what theorists of feeling have to say about postmodern theory, it would be harder to overlook what they fail to say—to discount, that is, the conspicuous absence of postmodern concepts from contemporary accounts of emotion. Although the critical scaffolding of the postmodern could, conceivably, supply a valuable social and economic framework against which to map theories of affect and emotion, postmodern theories are almost never explicitly invoked or deployed in these analyses.


Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 27

Feeling theorists’ hunch about the expiry of postmodern criticism finds an unexpected resonance in the more recent work of some of postmodernism’s own most committed early champions. While the nominalism of Brian McHale’s account of postmodernism would seem to preclude anything as positivist as an announcement of its end, his recent retrospective consideration of his own work, entitled, significantly enough, “What Was Postmodernism?” offers just that. Pointing to the events of 9/11 as the mark of a significant historical break with postmodernism, McHale speculates that “Maybe on 9/11 history finally caught up with our postmodern imagination of disaster, and we are now living in
Certainly, it is not hard to grasp why critics might perceive the new theories of affect and emotion as incompatible with older theories of postmodernism, studded as the latter are with statements that seem unequivocally to announce the demise of emotion. Jean Baudrillard’s suggestion, for example, that “the cold and cool universe” has eclipsed “desire, passion, seduction … expression and competition, [which] are the games of the hot universe,” identifies the emergence of digital technology and media with the onset of a kind of emotional ice age. Similarly, the aftermath of postmodernism.” (Brian McHale, “What Was Postmodernism?” Electronic Book Review, December 20, 2007, accessed September 3, 2011, www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/fictionspresent/tense.) Even Linda Hutcheon, whose work throughout the eighties and nineties constituted a lovingly exhaustive profile of the postmodern, and whose The Politics of Postmodernism provided a template for a wealth of thinking on the subject, declares, in a new introduction to that book that “the postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on.” (Linda Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism [New York: Routledge, 2002], xi.) While declining to illuminate the question of exactly what postmodernism consists in if not “discursive strategies and ideological critique,” Hutcheon’s statement constitutes a fairly unambiguous assertion of postmodernism’s demise. Similarly, Steven Connor, whose 1989 work Postmodernist Culture offered a wide-ranging series of accounts of the changes inaugurated by the advent of postmodernism in literature, popular culture, architecture and art, suggests in his 2004 introduction to the Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism that we occupy the “dissipation” period of postmodernism, the terminal stage of the epoch’s rise and fall. (Steven Connor, Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary [Oxford: Blackwell, 1989]; Steven Connor, Introduction to Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism, ed. Steven Connor [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 1.) The sense that something “else” has emerged to displace postmodernism is thus endemic, not only among those committed to forms of thinking seemingly incompatible with postmodernism, but among postmodernism’s former advocates.

13 Steven Shaviro offers a nice summation of this popular argument: “The argument goes something like this: ‘Thanks to the new electronic technologies, the world has become a single global marketplace. Universal commodity fetishism has colonized lived experience. The real has been murdered by its representations. Every object has been absorbed into its own image. There is no longer (if there ever was) any such thing as a single, stable self. Subjectivity has broken into multiple fragments, and the high modernist endeavor to totalize these fragments, to redeem them, to bring them back together again, is a futile and meaningless exercise. The death of emotion is concomitant with all these other losses.’ ” (Steven Shaviro, “The Life, After Death of Postmodern Emotion,” Criticism [Winter 2004]: 5.)

David Harvey fuses the social, political, technological and economic changes that his thinking outlines to a kind of numb affectlessness, maintaining that “to the travails of time-space compression … the first line of defense is to withdraw into a kind of shell-shocked, blasé or exhausted silence.” Jameson, meanwhile, offers perhaps the most blatant statement of this position, in his infamous claim that the postmodern world is marked by a wholesale “waning of affect.” Yet quite apart from these flagrant declarations of postmodernism’s emotional deficiencies, it remains difficult to discern how the social and aesthetic co-ordinates of the postmodern could be hospitable to the flourishing of emotion. From Jean-François Lyotard’s proclamations about the end of meta-narrative to Baudrillard’s statements about the demise of the real, theories of the postmodern are commonly held to operate according to what Catherine Constable has called “a logic of negation,” in which the key subjective, social and hermeneutic structures on which emotion has customarily been thought to rely have come under relentless critical attack. Emotion is conventionally conceived as expressive of a subject, yet in postmodernism the subject is dead; emotion is customarily held to be interpretative, yet in postmodernism, the hermeneutic depth models that once enshrined the promise of stable meaning have collapsed; emotion is traditionally understood as having a visceral, physiological dimension, yet postmodernism has been seen as inaugurating an age of disembodied indifference. At a pinch, some theorists have suggested that postmodern theory is capable of accommodating an “affect” conceived as a mobile, organic and nonsubjective feeling; reconciling postmodern theory with the psychological and interpretative phenomenon denoted by emotion, however, seems a hopeless case. Given the broad critical uptake of theories


18 See, for example, the work of Ian Buchanan in *Fredric Jameson: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2006), 90-4. This argument—that postmodern theory actually accommodates affect, even while dismissing emotion—has gained widespread acceptance in the few years. Pellegrini and Puar, for
of emotion and affect across the academy, it thus seems hardly surprising that, even outside their purview, the analytic and aesthetic frame inscribed by the term “postmodern” has become something of a lost cause in the past few years, dropping silently from circulation as a signpost for the roughly contemporary in favour of “globalization,” “hypermodernity,” “metamodernism,” or even—as if out of a desire to efface the very memory of postmodern theory—a suddenly undead “modernity.”

This thesis, however, is structured around the premise that there is a certain tension between, on the one hand, the widespread assumption that emotion has no place in postmodern theory and aesthetics, and, on the other, one of the key tenets of recent theories of emotion and affect—what Ann Cvetkovich has called its commitment to “the richness of emotional experience.” On the suspicion, then, that some of the “rich[est]” thinking about emotion might take place through an encounter with those aesthetic and theoretical texts that seem least congenial to emotion, this thesis attempts to honour the affective turn’s avowed commitment to the “richness of emotional experience” by thinking emotion and postmodernism in conjunction. As I demonstrate through a series of close readings of canonical postmodern theorists and some of the classic hits of postmodern film—texts often seen as enshrining postmodernism’s glacial emotionlessness—emotion is not just legible within postmodernism but is central to its theoretical and aesthetic articulation. Indeed, postmodern theory and aesthetics is a sensational phenomenon, host to a series of distinctive, borderline emotions that paradoxically incorporate as their enabling condition the very cultural and aesthetic changes that would initially appear to undercut emotional response. Drawing on cinema’s dual qualifications as at once

example, offer a version of this argument, as does Shaviro. (Pellegrini and Puar, “Affect,” 36-7; Steven Shaviro, Post-Cinematic Affect [Hants: O-Books, 2010], 4-5).


what Jameson calls “the predominant instrument for exploring social reality” in the postmodern world, and a popular commercial medium with an inbuilt relation to emotion, I show that postmodern cinema may be the perfect platform for assessing these strange hybrid emotions.\textsuperscript{21} In doing so, I suggest that what seems on first sight like postmodernism’s frigid lack of emotion is merely a chimeric effect of the persistence within the affective turn of an overly limited, narrow model of emotion—a model whose lingering hold is manifest not just in the ubiquitous assumption that emotion is necessarily incompatible with postmodernism, but in the related and no less pervasive conviction that whereas “affect” indexes something liberatory and progressive, emotions are what Massumi calls “old surprises to which we have become more or less accustomed.”\textsuperscript{22}

As this summary suggests, the critical investments of this effort to bring the newly powerful field of affect and emotion studies into dialogue with its “other,” the now-marginalized field of postmodern theory, are decidedly dual. On the one hand, I deploy postmodernism as a means of enriching our thinking about emotion—situating emotion in a theoretical and aesthetic domain ostensibly hostile to it in order to explore the less familiar aspects of a form of feeling often dismissed as the stodgier, more pedestrian counterpart to a mobile, promiscuous and liberatory “affect.” On the other, I deploy emotion as a means of renewing our understanding of postmodernism. Whereas postmodern theory is regularly dismissed as a moribund critical and cultural framework, an emotionalized vision of postmodernism allows us not only to reconcile postmodernism with recent critical work on feeling, but to reconceive this “affective turn” as one of postmodernism’s key symptoms.

The elaboration of these arguments pivots centrally on a reconfiguration of our received understanding of the ways in which both emotion and postmodernism work. Reconceptualizing emotion’s form and structure, of course, is hardly a new project: critics such as Sianne Ngai, Rei Terada and Woodward, all important figures in the cultural studies of affect and emotion, have recently expended considerable


\textsuperscript{22} Massumi, \textit{Parables for the Virtual}, 220-1.
theoretical energy in expanding the envelope of our understanding of emotion. Yet as the abiding conviction that emotion is wholly irreconcilable with postmodernism attests, calcified subjective models of emotion retain a tenacious hold over the theoretical imaginary within the field of affect and emotion theory. As I will demonstrate, these subjective models are perhaps best exemplified by “cognitive appraisal” theory, whose strongly subject-based and object-directed understanding of emotion tends to limit the emotional palette to emotions like anger, hatred or fear—emotions that, while quite at home in what Ngai calls “canonically major forms and genres like Homeric epic and Shakespearian tragedy,” are entirely incongruent with postmodern aesthetics and culture. In attempting to reconcile emotion and postmodernism, then, this thesis aims to enrich our emotional lexicon, pressing up against a more marginal cluster of emotions, from ecstasy, sublimity and euphoria, to fascination, knowingness, boredom, bewilderment and a peculiarly self-reflexive instantiation of fear. As what Philip Fisher dismissively calls “provincial” emotions, these triangulated, recursive, inverted, metaleptic or supplementary emotions are devoid of the powerfully exemplary status of the “fear, grief [and] anger” he champions as the “core vehement states.”

Far from a simple evaluative response to an object, knowingness is a mobile, social emotion that must be conferred on us by others; bewilderment pivots on a chiasmus in which the respective attributes of subject and object are felt to be inverted; and euphoria is a self-reflexive, internally contradictory emotion that revolves around the prospect of emotion’s displacement by affect. In failing to conform to cognitive appraisal models of emotion, these emotions effectively destabilize the subjective, ethical and hermeneutic norms that cognitive appraisal models are often called upon to anchor. To take just two examples, where emotion has conventionally functioned as “proof of the human subject,” fascination


makes painfully clear the extent to which the subject is bound up with the other. Likewise, where emotion has conventionally been grounded in an ideal of “individual decisions” that spur “action,” bewilderment dramatizes the extent to which both our understanding of and agency in the world are regulated by a network that exceeds our capacity for control or comprehension. Highly attuned to postmodernism’s erosion of modernist categories of truth, value, reason and subjectivity, these models of emotion not only directly undermine the values that cognitive appraisal models of emotion both rely upon and sustain, but, in doing so, challenge our obdurate assumption that emotion is affect’s conservative cousin.

Yet if these emotions are uniquely incompatible with the conventional cognitive appraisal theories of emotion that have seen emotion banished from postmodernism, they are also uniquely congenial to the aesthetic and cultural attributes commonly assigned to postmodernism. Knowingness has an unusual affinity with the postmodern text’s fabled excess of allusion and reference; fascination with postmodernism’s superficial “depthlessness”; bewilderment with its insistent problematization of the figure of the face; and a peculiarly postmodern, recursive version of fear with textual self-reflexivity. Far from foreclosed by postmodern aesthetic strategies, the emotions discussed in this thesis are facilitated by them. Indeed, where many of postmodernism’s favoured formal devices are defined, at least in part, by their disruption of the subjective and hermeneutic platforms that have conventionally underpinned emotion, it is no surprise that also common to the emotions I examine is their proximity to the scene of non-emotion. Whereas cognitive theories of emotion project emotion as a substantive psychological and bodily entity, postmodern emotions tend to revolve primarily around a problematization or crisis of feeling. While fulfilling the basic criterion of emotion—they are, in Terada’s words, a “psychological, at least minimally interpretive experience”—knowingness,

26 Terada, Feeling in Theory, 5.


28 Jameson, Postmodernism, 6.
fascination, bewilderment and boredom are nevertheless marked by a peculiar
ghostliness or negativity. As such, they are less what Sally Markowitz calls “meta-
responses,” responses to a response, than supplementary responses to our failure to
respond with the kind of immediacy and directness we conventionally attribute to
emotion. Boredom is a dysphoric emotional registration of emotional vacuity;
bewilderment marks both an inability to formulate an object and an inability to collect
to oneself into the shape of a subject; fascination projects the figure of an other who
feels intensely in order to compensate for and resolve its own emotional paucity; fear
is an emotion that emerges in proximity to the spectacle of another’s emotional
deficiency. In the process of taking the emotional temperature of seemingly non-
emotional phenomena, like self-reflexivity, irony, instability and depthlessness, the
analysis of these emotions breaks down the persistent opposition between emotion
and its absence—an opposition that allows Fisher, for example, to insist that “the
passions are at the farthest remove from irony; they are its diametric opposite.”
Underpinning this enterprise is not only the sense that, as Nigel Thrift puts it,
“nothing is affectively neutral, because emotions provide vital information about
every bit of information,” but a sense that moments of apparent emotional “neutrality”
or vacuity may be precisely the most fruitful sites at which to begin thinking about
emotion.

29 Terada, Feeling in Theory, 4; Sally Markowitz, “Guilty Pleasures: Aesthetic Meta-Response and
Fiction,” Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 50 (1992), 307. See also Susan Feagin, “The

30 As Terada has noted, however, not only is the “originary” response that these supplementary
emotions ostensibly “supplement” a purely hypothetical entity, but supplementary emotions are “not
less emotional as such than first-order emotion.” (Terada, Feeling in Theory, 13.) In fact, reflecting on
emotion from the perspective of its problematization, these emotions seem to gain in power and
intensity to the degree that immediacy recedes.

31 Fisher, The Vehement Passions, 44.

32 Nigel J. Thrift, Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect (New York: Routledge, 2008),
228. See also Sara Ahmed’s claim that even the apparent absence of emotion in the figure of the “hard”
or aloofly resistant body is “not the absence of emotion, but a different emotional orientation.” (Sara
Yet if the vision of emotion called up by the figure of an emotional postmodernism is an idiosyncratic one, the vision of postmodernism called up by these postmodern emotions is no less idiosyncratic. As it has become customary to announce in inaugurating a discussion of postmodern thinking, postmodern theory is far from being a unified or coherent field. On the contrary, a brief overview shows rich evidence of its diversity and inconsistency. Theories of postmodernism range from Linda Hutcheon’s description of postmodernism as “doubleness” or duplicity; to Peter Sloterdijk’s important discussion of postmodern cynicism or “enlightened false consciousness”; to Brian McHale’s postmodernism of an ontological dominant as opposed to the epistemological dominant of modernism; to Jameson’s sense of postmodernism as a series of melancholic failures of temporality, subjecthood and hermeneutic depth; to Lyotard’s notion of postmodernism as a crisis of authority and a delegitimation of meta-narratives; to Baudrillard’s hallucinatory meditations on reversibility, ecstasy and the obscene in a postmodernism marked by the triumph of the simulacrum over an expired real.33 When translated into aesthetic terms, as they often are, critical models of postmodern artistic production are no less varied. On the one hand, postmodern aesthetics involves a new self-reflexivity that amplifies the self-reflexive tendency in modernism; on the other, it marks a return to the representational practices that had been snubbed by an anti-representational modernism. On the one hand, postmodernism is nostalgia and pastiche, a freewheeling riffle through the dustbin of historical style; on the other, it is precisely a “discontent with” the disintegration of modernist stylistics, and an effort to revivify the project of innovation initiated with high modernism.34 On the one hand, postmodernism is de-doxifying critique; on the other, it’s a reveling in the commodified thrill of the cinematic blockbuster. This theoretical diversity is just as


34 Fredric Jameson, foreword to The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, by Jean-Francois Lyotard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xvi.
apparent in speculation as to the kinds of technological and economic shifts to which postmodern cultural and aesthetic changes are meant to correspond. From Jameson’s argument that postmodern aesthetics is an instance of “the cultural logic of late capitalism,” to Harvey’s conceptualization of late capitalism’s time-space compression, and from Lyotard’s emphasis on new types of information, knowledge and technology, to Baudrillard’s intuition that we have undergone a shift from an economy dominated by industry and production to one fueled by the circulation of signs and images—theories of postmodernism are diverse where they are not wholly conflicting.35

Rather than attempt to extract some kind of coherence from this diverse archive of observation, polemic and speculation, this thesis exploits postmodern theory’s lack of coherence to create a space for thinking newly about emotion. In my work on fascination, for example, I show how analyses of postmodern aesthetics in terms of the opposition surface/depth can be complicated by their persistent, often unconscious, mobilization of a tropology of surface texture, from the glossy to the rough. Similarly, in my work on fear, I argue that the postmodern spectre of the end of emotion is destabilized by that spectre’s long and vigorous critical life, suggesting that postmodern fear is in some sense bound up with the spectacle of its own demise. While assuming, with Harvey, that there has been “a sea change in cultural as well as in political-economic practices since about 1972,” this thesis does not presume to provide a consistent vision of postmodernism.36 Its more modest aim is to demonstrate how some of the figures or gestures within postmodern aesthetics can be read not as an impediment to emotion but as the very condition of emotion. This thesis, in other words, examines postmodernism’s ecstatic reversibility rather than its mere indeterminacy; postmodernism’s fascinatingly glossy surfaces rather than its mere depthlessness; postmodernism’s bewildering disorientations rather than a mere absence of epistemic and ontological certainty; postmodernism’s triumphal, knowing


feeling of “getting it” rather than its purely cerebral practices of decoding; postmodernism’s tedious or terrifying affective voids rather than its mere emotional vacancies.

Seen in this light, postmodern aesthetics and theory is not only amenable to, but may be seen to prefigure, aspects of the kinds of feeling-oriented analyses currently enjoying a critical renaissance. Yet this argument is neither an effort to insert emotion into postmodern theory and aesthetic practice, nor an effort to show how, by reading “against the grain,” it is possible to locate it there. Rather, I insist that though not always positively valorized, or even always explicitly acknowledged, emotion has always been central to postmodern theory and aesthetics—as rhetorical tool, as theoretical lynchpin and as subject matter.37 While the work of postmodern theorists is peppered with assertions that, directly or indirectly, problematize or even repudiate emotion, the interpretation of these proclamations as evidence of emotion’s complete irrelevance to or incompatibility with the project of postmodern theory is a misconception. Indeed, I would suggest that to the extent that emotion seems irreconcilable with postmodernism, the problem lies not in postmodern theory per se but in the fact that it has not been taken far enough. The assumption that the demise of the centered subject and of hermeneutic depth entails the demise of emotion is a peculiarly modernist way of reading postmodern theory that is quite out of step with postmodern theory’s commitment to radical theoretical reformation. Keeping this commitment in mind, then, it becomes clear that far from irrelevant to current thinking about affect and emotion, postmodern theory may constitute the ideal platform from which to engage with it.

37 The term “ecstasy,” for example, recurs continually throughout Baudrillard’s discussions of the simulacrum, yet its specifically affective charge—as opposed to its function as an empty conceptual designator—has been largely suppressed or overlooked in discussions of his work. In Jameson’s work, the feeling of “euphoria” is persistently used as an example of what he calls postmodern “intensities,” which, while often identified with floating, de-subjectivised affects, might more properly be understood as emotions. In Lyotard’s work, conversely, while the affective weight of his theorization of the feeling of the “sublime” been fully credited, its lamination to a model of the postmodern “inhuman” has been overlooked. My first chapter will discuss these examples in detail.
II.

As will already be clear, despite my resistance to some of its less productive assumptions about both emotion and postmodernism, this thesis is very much aligned with Clough’s “affective turn,” at least as it manifests in the text-based disciplines.38 This is a turn that, following Ahmed’s “cultural studies of emotion and affect,” I will refer to as “a cultural studies of feeling “or “feeling theory”—preferring these phrases over the more familiar “affect theory” for their capacity both to encompass work that specifically broaches the question of emotion, such as that of Ahmed, Ngai, Terada and Woodward, and to exclude work without loose ties to cultural studies, such as that which is currently taking place in the fields of philosophy, law and science. Importantly, while often framed as a new development that can be traced to the landmark essays of Massumi and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in 1995, in fact, this critical turn to feeling also marks a coalescence of older trends.39 On the one hand, it emerges out of certain strands of feminist and queer scholarship, with their investment in embodiment, popular cultural affect and the gendering of emotion. On the other, it owes a debt to the explosion of scholarly work on historical trauma in the 1990s. Yet feeling theory also draws on a number of genealogical threads that are notably at odds with the mainstream of critical theory or cultural studies. Influences as diverse as the work of psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins, the philosophers Aristotle, Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and Benedict de Spinoza, and scientific studies of emotion by neuro-scientists like Antonio Damasio, attest not just to feeling theory’s own interdisciplinary voraciousness but to its sense of its object’s capacity to cross boundaries and frontiers, as an entity that is both social and physiological, human and non-human, constructed and natural.40 As Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth

38 Clough, The Affective Turn, 1.


put it, “affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body [sic] (human, non-human, part-body and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves.” Yet while diverse and interdisciplinary, the field is not without a common impetus. What unifies this new cultural studies of feeling is a conviction, shared by this writer, that much earlier criticism has, as Ruth Leys puts it, “given too flat or unlayered or disembodied” an account of subjectivation, politics, ideology and the social, and thus that these critical practices must be supplemented by an understanding of the work of feeling in shaping textual experience.

In this connection, one of feeling theory’s core projects is to investigate the relation between feeling and the political, social and economic worlds that have been the more conventional objects of critical analysis. According to cognitive appraisal theories of emotion, feeling is an exclusively subjective phenomenon—a model that has allowed feeling to be variously marginalized, pathologized, moralized, normalized and dismissed. For feeling theory, by contrast, feeling emerges in, indexes, and encrusts the political—even as its capacity to ground, facilitate or constitute political action remains highly problematic. Feeling theory, in other words, has set out to document the various modes of disclosure, response, resistance, formation or failure that mark

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Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004); Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin Books, 1996); Damasio, *Descartes’ Error*. As Hardt puts it, the “challenge of the perspective of the affects resides primarily in the syntheses it requires. This is, in the first place, because affects refer equally to the body and the mind; and, in the second, because they involve both reason and the passions …[Affects] illuminate, in other words, both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers.” (Hardt, foreword to *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Clough [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007], xi.)


the fraught relation between feeling and political, social and economic life. Exemplary here are Jonathan Flatley’s work on “melancholia,” in which he argues that rather than just being a mood state into which one falls, melancholia is “something one does,” a practice that might “produce its own kind of knowledge” and which becomes a condition not just for withdrawal from the world but for engagement with it; Sara Ahmed’s work on the sociality of emotions, in which she argues that “it is through emotions that [the] surfaces or boundaries” of both collective and individual life are formed; Lauren Berlant’s work on the affectively charged “intimate publics” central to American popular political culture; and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s work on affective labour as part of the ensemble of “immaterial labour” forms that “ha[ve] come to have an increasingly crucial role in the organization of neoliberal, globalised capitalism.” In underscoring both the affiliations and the incommensurabilities between politics and feeling, theorists of feeling have also attempted to reconfigure what might count as political feeling—particularly in the context of a contemporary moment in which faith in the potentially transformative agency of activism and critique has dropped rapidly away. Whereas “anger,” “fear” and “pride” have long carried political weight, Ngai’s work, for example, addresses “ugly feelings” like anxiety and envy, feelings characterized by “obstructed agency,” in order to argue that their overt symptomatization of art’s powerlessness paradoxically affords them a certain critical reach; Heather Love suggests that the “backward” affects of shame and depression that underpin queer


marginalization should become available for political identification, alongside the positive affects of pride and solidarity that propel queer entitlement; while FeelTank Chicago calls on “political depression,” as well as “detachment, numbness, vagueness, confusion, bravado, exhaustion, apathy, discontent, coolness, hopelessness and ambivalence,” to play their part in a newly expanded political field. This thesis’s effort to consider emotion in proximity to the theories and aesthetics of postmodernism participates in this endeavour to map both the affiliations and tensions between emotion and political or collective life. On the one hand, a number of the emotions this thesis examines—from knowingness to fascination—starkly theatricalize their relation to the social and political contexts in which they emerge. Boredom, for example, is an emotion whose manifest appetite for external stimuli foregrounds the extent to which the subject’s emotional life is caught up in an unevenly distributed economic access to consumer sensation. On the other, these same emotions tend to undercut the utopian hope that emotion can function as a political and social resource. To stick with the same example, while boredom brings into stark relief emotion’s lamination to consumer culture, it is flagrant in its resistance to the kinds of political action this insight might yield, signaling a crisis in our ability to respond to scenes of suffering and inequality. As this suggests, the emotions discussed in the following chapters resist cognitive appraisal theory’s contradictory presumption that emotion is at once wholly personal in its inception and readily translated into political action.

Yet what differentiates cultural studies of feeling from other fields of scholarly endeavour is at least as much a difference of methodology as it is of object or argument. Theories of feeling participate in a move away from a practice of ideology critique, locked into the task of exposing hidden (political, racial, sexual, class or gender) violence, and toward a richer descriptive and phenomenological account of our experience of texts and world. This refusal of critique has been schematized in a number of new theories of reading, usefully enumerated by Love, who catalogues Rita Felski’s account of the “new phenomenology”; Sharon Marcus and Stephen

Best’s notion of “surface reading”; Bruno Latour’s suggestion that, after the demise of “critique,” we might turn our attention to “matters of concern”; Francois Dosse’s attempt to find “a third way between the prevalence of pure lived experience and the priority of conceptualization”; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of “reparative reading,” an approach to interpretation motivated not by paranoia but by pleasure and interest.46 Within these modes of reading, the text appears, as Love puts it, not as a “symptom to be denounced, but as a problem to be explained, described and understood” in all its textural and affective intricacy.47 Again, these methodological tendencies in feeling theory are reflected in my own work. In mobilizing film and theoretical texts to make an argument about the significance of emotion in postmodern discourse, I have relied very much on the capacity of the often-neglected filmic building blocks of editing, camera movement, lighting, mise-en-scène and colour to supply resources for resisting some of the more familiar truisms about postmodern aesthetics. This reliance on the gloss and grain of textual experience is redoubled where the emotions my arguments bring into play remain under-theorized, and thus require a kind of phenomenological “filling out.” In its emphasis on close reading, this thesis will contend that it may be in part as a result of a tendency—


47 Love, “Feeling Bad in 1963,” 113. Aiming to account for those elements shaping individual and political life that are neither subsumed by, nor resistant to, a repressive norm, Cvetkovich thus advises “going slowly, noticing the details of the moment or the object without demanding that it instantly give rise to a reading or a political efficacy, or without having to choose between art and politics.” (Cvetkovich, introduction to *Political Emotions*, 11.)
among both secondary postmodern critics and many in feeling theory—to reduce the reading of texts to paraphrase and narrative précis that the unique contours of postmodern emotion have been allowed to remain obscure.

While my work is indebted to many theorists working in this broad field, perhaps the scholar within feeling-orientated theory to whom my work owes most is Terada, whose bold *Feeling in Theory* offers a paradigm not just for thinking about feeling in contemporary culture, but for thinking about feeling in specific dialectical tension with a model of contemporary culture that seems to militate against it. While not directly addressing the relation between emotion and postmodern theory, Terada focuses on the analogous relation between emotion and poststructuralist theory, a field of analysis that is—as Jameson has shown—one of postmodernism’s clearest symptoms, and that, like postmodernism, has been “widely criticized because its emphasis on the death of the subject seems to preclude dealing with emotion.”

Terada’s gambit, however, is that “poststructuralism’s destroying the illusion of subjectivity does not destroy emotion”: on the contrary, she argues, “emotion is the sign of the absence of that illusion.” Elaborating this argument through a series of close analyses of key texts by Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, she demonstrates that these poststructuralist theorists can be shown to offer a consistent theory of emotion as a nonsubjective (but still interpretative and psychological) phenomenon, characterized by a process of self-difference between a sense of origin and the work of rhetorical projection. Crucially, Terada’s attempt to think poststructuralism and emotion together—like, I hope, my own—distinguishes itself from other projects that have sought to conjoin emotion and postmodernism, such as Kimberly Chabot Davis’s *Postmodern Texts and Emotional Audiences*, a book that exemplifies not a full conjunction of terms but what we might call the “persistence of emotion despite postmodernism” position. As Davis argues:


Poststructuralist theory discredited depth models as illusions and replaced the belief in inner depth and essences with a fragmentation of the subject and a play of surfaces. Jameson wrongly concludes, however, that a postmodernist fragmented subjectivity precludes the expression of real emotion . . . Jameson simply ignores that affective depth-models—sentimentality and melodrama—can still be found in postmodern culture.51

Instead of critiquing the narrow, rigidly subjective model of emotion by which postmodernism’s “fragmentation of the subject and a play of surfaces” must be judged incompatible with emotion, Davis merely argues that contemporary culture is not evenly postmodern, and that while some texts have fallen victim to postmodern “fragmentation,” others are still replete with “affective depth-models.” In arguing this, Davis can be aligned with a number of critics, such as Susan Best and Michael L. Schwalbe, who wish to attack the claim that there is no feeling in postmodern aesthetics but who fail to interrogate the logic on which this claim most often rests.52 While I do not dispute the validity of the argument that traditional structures of emotion are still in operation in many contemporary texts, I suggest that such a position fails to take up fully the challenge postmodernism poses to our thinking about emotion. This is the challenge of establishing a necessary rather than merely contingent relation between emotion and postmodernism; delineating the emotional contours of postmodern aesthetic strategies, rather than limiting postmodernism’s emotional life to the persistence of older modernist aesthetic strategies.

Yet while this foregoing description of cultural studies’ turn to feeling tends to frame the phenomenon neutrally, as a turn toward an encompassing notion of “feeling,” accounting for this thesis’s focus on “emotion” rather than “affect” requires delineating more clearly the weight and significance that feeling theory has afforded

51 Davis, Postmodern Texts, 21.

the terms “affect” and “emotion” respectively. In doing so, I want to argue that, for most scholars within feeling theory, the salient vehicle for the reconfiguration of our understanding of feeling is a quite strictly defined notion of affect. Drawing on Deleuze’s model of affect as the passage from one bodily state to another and Tomkins’ model of affect’s autonomy from the drives, these theorists—perhaps most notably Berlant, Grossberg, Massumi, and Sedgwick—tend to favor an “affect” that is differentiated from “emotion” along the lines of its distinctive relation to subjectivity, meaning, and narrative. According to Massumi, emotion not only requires a subject whereas affect does not, but also possesses both content and meaning while affect is “irreducibly bodily and autonomic.”53 In other words, whereas emotion is “a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal,” affect is a prepersonal, asignifying “intensity.”54 Grossberg, whose pioneering work in the field of affect theory places affect in the context of popular culture, shares Massumi’s position on the relation between affect and emotion, arguing that, “unlike emotions, affective states are neither structured narratively nor organized in response to our interpretations of situations.”55 Affect’s nonnarrative, nonsubjective, “a-signifying” and “irreducibly bodily and autonomic” status means that “the affects are … completely free of inherent meaning or association to their triggering source,” enabling them to influence and condition our decisions at a level inaccessible not just to cognition, but to the broader ideological and social frame in which our cognitions are embedded.56 Indeed, not only does affect elude conscious control, but as an entity that “exceed[s] the context of [its] emergence, as the excess of ongoing process,” it harbours a potential for political and personal transformation, its “vitality … sense of aliveness [and] changeability” pointing to possibilities that, at the level of the biological, the

53 Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 28.

54 Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 28, 25.

55 Lawrence Grossberg, We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservativism and Postmodern Culture (New York: Routledge, 1992), 81.

56 Grossberg, We Gotta Get Out of This Place, 80; Donald L. Nathensen, Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex and the Birth of the Self (New York: WW Norton and co, 1992), 66.
interpersonal and the social, remain unaccounted for within established ideological and social regimes.\textsuperscript{57} Institutionally enshrined in Gregg and Seigworth’s aegis-defining 2010 collection \textit{The Affect Theory Reader}, the figure of “affect” has achieved a broad critical currency in feeling theory, and it’s not hard to see why: its mobility and flexibility, its availability to social and political analysis, and its capacity to evade ideological norms without requiring anchorage in an essentialized subject, make it immediately instrumental to the effort to reconfigure the relation between feeling and the political that lies at feeling theory’s heart.\textsuperscript{58}

Ironically, however, one of the effects of affect’s runaway popularity as the medium for articulating a critique of cognitive appraisal models of feeling, is that feeling theory’s model of \textit{emotion}—often less directly described than dismissively gestured at—has tended to retain the qualities attributed to it by cognitive appraisal theory.\textsuperscript{59} In arguing this, it is worth elaborating more clearly how I understand cognitive appraisal models of emotion. As I have already suggested, cognitive appraisal theory frames emotion as an intentional state directed toward an object and regulated by our beliefs, cognitions, and desires. Nussbaum, a leading exponent of the theory, is exemplary in her emphasis on the specifically propositional component of emotion, arguing that “emotions involve judgments about the salience for our well-being of … external objects, judgments in which the mind of the judge is projected unstably outwards into a world of objects.”\textsuperscript{60} In this formulation, emotion may be bodily in manifestation but

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} Gregg and Seigworth, \textit{The Affect Theory Reader}, 5; Massumi, \textit{Parables for the Virtual}, 36.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Gregg and Seigworth, \textit{The Affect Theory Reader}.
\item \textsuperscript{59} It is worth noting, however, that this model of emotion, particularly in its philosophical instantiation, resonates with and draws heavily on the work of Aristotle, who figures emotion as an important component of the engaged political life. (Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011,]. )
\item \textsuperscript{60} Nussbaum, \textit{Upheavals of Thought}, 2. Indeed, emotion possesses sufficient representational or diagnostic value for Ronald de Sousa, one of the theory’s most prolific champions, to declare emotions “genuine representations … of the external world of value.” (Ronald de Sousa, “Emotions: What I Know, What I’d Like to Think I Know, and What I’d Like to Think,” \textit{Thinking About Feeling}:
\end{itemize}
its unique organization derives from the specific object-directed judgments and desires involved.\(^{61}\) Within this basic paradigm, positions vary, from more radical pundits who argue that judgment is fully sufficient for emotion to more moderate critics who argue that emotion requires some form of physiological expression or appetitive and visceral impetus; from those who allow for notions of “unconscious” judgment to those who frame judgment as fully conscious and rational; from those who attribute the evaluative judgments underpinning emotion to an autonomous, unified, monadic subject, to those who emphasize the role of social norms in shaping emotions’ evaluative content. There is, however, a general consensus across cognitive appraisal theory that emotion is a fundamentally subjective and intentional entity, predicated on individual judgment and precipitating unproblematised ethical action.

Not only has this model of emotion been the object of extensive critique within feeling theory, but, as my outline of the work of Massumi and Grossberg suggests, much thinking about “affect” is implicitly structured around its denunciation.\(^ {62}\) Yet to the extent that most scholars in feeling theory take the critique of subjective models of emotion as a platform less to revise our understanding of emotion, than to shift

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\(^{62}\) As the above descriptions of feeling theory suggest, the critique of cognitive appraisal theory has focussed on two key problems. First, that cognitive appraisal models of feeling elide the physiological dimension of affect and thus fail to “locate in the body some important part of the difference among different emotions.” (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 113.) Second, that it fails to “think the relation between the psychic and the social.” (Cvetkovich, *Introduction to Political Emotions*, 5.)
attention to a newly valorized “affect,” these models have been able to remain intact—if only as a kind of historical artifact or critical whipping boy. Massumi’s construction of affect as a mobile, nonsubjective and asignifying entity, for example, asks an emotion figured as the “capture,” “closure” and “mastery” of affect to bear the full weight of the ideological captivity that affect is said to escape. Likewise, Shaviro’s contention that “emotion is affect captured by a subject, or tamed and reduced to the extent that it becomes commensurate with that subject,” and that whereas “subjects are overwhelmed and traversed by affect … they have or possess their own emotions,” effectively consolidates the very subjective models of emotion he means “affect” to resist. Similarly, in Sedgwick and Frank’s now-classic account of Tomkins’ model of affect, the term “emotion” is kept in play only as long as it takes them to skewer “commonsense” cognitive appraisal models of emotion—as if these models entirely exhausted emotion’s critical potential or interest. Certainly, affect has not entirely syndicated feeling theorists’ efforts to counter older subjective models of feeling: not only have critics such as Terada, Woodward and Ngai overtly attempted to reconfigure our conception of emotion, but other work, engaging less rigorously or militantly with the distinction between emotion and affect, has circulated the term “emotion” in ways that seem to stray, not always consciously, from explicitly available theoretical models of the phenomenon. Indeed, it should be acknowledged that of those critics who are committed to the analysis of affect, not all elaborate their model of a mobile, desubjectivized “affect” through reference to a rigidly subjective, politically conservative “emotion.” Yet to the extent that we remain unable to countenance the possibility of postmodern emotion, it is hard not to sense that traditional cognitive appraisal models of emotion have retained their intellectual tenure as feeling theory’s go-to or “commonsense” understanding of emotion.

This thesis, however, argues that emotion may prove quite as valuable a resource as affect in advancing feeling theory’s broad aim of thinking feeling in new relations to politics, embodiment and sociality. Indeed, as I will show, bringing emotion into

63 Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 35, 35, 17.

64 Shaviro, Post-Cinematic Affect, 3.

65 Sedgwick and Frank, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins,” 18.
dialogue with postmodernism may be the most effective methodological strategy for opening up our models of emotion beyond cognitive appraisal theory's limited explanatory horizon. Where cognitive appraisal theory has reified the subject as the source and vessel of emotion, postmodern aesthetics prompts us to consider emotions that depend on the evocation of an other; where cognitive appraisal theory has reified notions of subjective agency, postmodern aesthetics offers the example of emotions that congregate around moments of frustrated agency; where cognitive appraisal theory has reified the figure of an intentional object, postmodern aesthetics points to the recursive mental and social structures through which emotion can take itself as its object; where cognitive appraisal theory has reified the trope of emotional expression as an entity “lifted from a depth to a surface,” postmodern aesthetics forces us to examine emotions that emerge in and through the circulation of bodily signs; and where cognitive appraisal theory has reified strong or intense emotions, postmodern aesthetics engages with the political efficacy of weak emotions like boredom. But given the mobility and flexibility of these models, can we still be said to be talking about emotion rather than affect at all? This thesis’s answer is yes, but the question cannot be resolved here once and for all. Indeed, one of the tasks of this thesis will be to determine how far it is possible to take emotion from its conventional moorings in subjectivity, intentionality, cognition and meaning without sacrificing the dialectical relation to these terms that differentiates emotion from affect.
III.

Steven Shaviro’s memorable description of movies as “machines for generating affect” makes it abundantly clear why cinema might be congenial to this effort to create a dialogue between emotion and postmodern theory, and many scholars have been quick to second Shaviro’s postulation that cinema possesses a powerful affinity with emotion. For Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, “cinema is inherently linked to the body and the senses”; for Gregg M. Smith, “everyone agrees that eliciting emotions is a primary concern for most films”; while for Linda Williams, the pathos of melodrama is “the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures.” So strong is this alliance between cinema and emotion, in fact, that Janet Staiger has recently suggested that although film’s theory’s current overt interest in discussions of feeling might seem to be an extension of a broader, interdisciplinary shift toward thinking about feeling, its origins may be more specific to cinema studies. In other words, the proliferation in the last two decades of work on cinematic feeling lays bare an investment in emotion that has marked film theory’s entire history, with twentieth-century “theorists of cinema … consider[ing] emotion within nearly every type of ontological or epistemological proposition.” By this light, Siegfried Kracauer’s work on the reactionary cult of cinematic “distraction” and Walter Benjamin’s insistence on the emancipatory power of the cinematic “shock effect,” to say nothing of later psychoanalytic theories of cinematic fantasy, desire and identification, embody a series of textually embedded prefigurations of modern-day theories of

67 Shaviro, Post-Cinematic Affect, 3.


filmic emotion and affect. Reference to this tradition belies the persistent refrain, from scholars working in contemporary film studies, that feeling had been overlooked and disregarded by earlier instantiations of film theory.

To point to film theory’s long-standing investment in emotion is not, of course, to detract from the value of the more explicit considerations of the sensational and emotional capacities of cinema has emerged over the past two decades. Rick Altman,


71 Yet if cinema is valuable for its status as a medium whose very structure seems designed to “move” its spectators, it is at least as valuable for its history as a medium haunted by queries and anxieties about its emotional status—a haunting crystallized in Adorno’s work on “distraction,” in which he argued that this mode of experience displaces more unified, holistic and richer forms of engagement typified by the high art object, and thus buttresses and facilitates reactionary forms of “instrumental rationality.” These kinds of anxieties have returned with redoubled intensity in the past few years in the face of new cinematic technologies, including the displacement of film stock by a dispersed and seemingly disembodied digital technology, with Vivian Sobchack, for example, arguing that “the electronic [media] is phenomenologically experienced not as a discrete, intentional, body-centered mediation and projection in space but rather as a simultaneous, dispersed, and insubstantial transmission across a network or web that is constituted spatially more as a materially flimsy latticework of nodal points than as the stable ground of embodied experience” has led to what she calls a “material and technological crisis of the flesh.” (Vivian Sobchack, Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004], 154, 161.) This move, in turn, has been met with a barrage of recuperative criticism insisting that the incipient obsolescence of the material technology on which classic theories of cinema are based has not evacuated our experience of movies of visceral power, and that in “the era of digital cinema, the body and the senses are, if anything, even more central for an understanding of the film experience.” (Elsaesser and Hagener, Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses, 171.) For another example of this argument, see Shaviro, whose Post-Cinematic Affect offers a stunning series analyses of the “structures of feeling” that emerge in a “computer- and network-based, and digitally generated, ‘new media.’” (Shaviro, Post-Cinematic Affect, 1.) It is worth noting, however, that if critics have been eager to draw out the latent affective power of the new digital media—in part as a result of the historical accident that digital media’s rise to prominence coincides with the emergence of new theories of affect and emotion—they have been less willing to consider the affinity between emotion and “postmodern” aesthetics and theory.
Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams in particular have generated a remarkable series of answers to the question of the relation between feeling and cinematic genre, their shared assumption that “excess may itself be organized as a system” prompting an exploration of the affective organization of genres like hard core pornography, horror, the musical and the woman’s film.72 My thesis can be readily situated within the annals of this work in film criticism. Yet it also possesses affinities with recent work on film by Berlant, Laura U. Marks, Sasha Torres and Amy Villarejo, who explore the emotional labour not of obviously emotive genres like pornography, melodrama or horror but of less rigidly codified forms, such as the “independent” filmmaking of Gregg Araki, the artist’s film, the politically “relevant” feature, and the cinematic scene of coming out respectively.73 The emotional formations at stake in these examples are not describable in terms of the sensational and melodramatic frameworks that are conventionally attached to genre. Rather, they involve a more muted, displaced or underperformed emotionality, expressing and playing on what Kathleen Stewart calls “ordinary affects.”74 The work of Berlant, Marks, Torres and Villarejo is thus particularly relevant to this thesis’s effort to position emotion in the context of a theoretical and aesthetic framework resistant to conventional or sensational forms of emotion. Like theirs, my work is preoccupied by emotions whose


relation to bodily animation, facial expression, meaning, subjectivity and intentionality is fraught and complex. As this thesis will demonstrate, if cinema proffers a wealth of material valuable to the re-evaluation of familiar genre-based emotions like horror, arousal or sadness, it proves quite as useful for the analysis of the borderline or marginal emotions of postmodern aesthetics—for considering how, as Thrift puts it, “we are being made susceptible in new ways.”

Yet if cinema has a critical long and vigorous relationship with emotion, it is just as closely affiliated with theories of postmodernism. Jameson, for example, treats cinema as an exemplary postmodern form in its fetishization of the visible, with Postmodernism mobilizing cinema in the development of notions of pastiche, the loss of history and the nostalgia mode, and Signatures of the Visible establishing cinema as an ideal textual foundation for a series of analyses of postmodern culture. As Constable has suggested, while an “icon of modernity,” cinema is also a “symbol of the postmodern”—the hallucinatory gloss of its surfaces providing a crystallizing figure for the visually oriented epistemology conventionally perceived as characteristic of postmodernism. Certainly, cinema is neither postmodernity’s dominant nor its most representative media platform; it is neither ubiquitous in nor a clear manifestation of the social, political and economic life of postmodernity. It is hard to argue with Shaviro’s expression of the widespread conviction that “film gave way to television as a cultural dominant a long time ago, in the mid-twentieth century; and television in turn has given way in recent years to computer-and network based, and digitally generated, ‘new media’”—media that seem more properly to embody the postmodern. Yet precisely because of its distance from key technological, economic and social changes, cinema has yielded some of the most concise inscriptions of postmodern form, exemplifying every one of the aesthetic features Jameson attributes

75 Thrift, Non-Representational Theory, viii.

76 Jameson, Signatures of the Visible.

77 Constable, “Postmodernism and Film,” 43.

to the postmodern. From Brian de Palma’s hysterical pastiches of Hitchcock, to Quentin Tarantino’s relentless verbal and visual allusions, to the loss of historicity of *Back to the Future* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1985) and the schizophrenia and hypnotic depthlessness of *Crash* (dir. David Cronenberg, 1996), cinema has been shown to yield generous resources for a postmodern analysis.

Yet despite the centrality of emotion in the reception and experience of cinema, many theorists’ efforts to import postmodern aesthetic theory into the study of film have licensed a wholesale translation of the cinematic experience into one of deciphering, reading, sorting and decoding. Not only is postmodern cinema routinely characterized as a cinema of “depthless pastiche,” a “layering of cinematic references and in-jokes,” but these aesthetic claims are also more often than not aligned with an affective claim: that postmodern cinema is “vacant,” “empty” and characterized centrally by a dearth of affect.79 Jim Collins, for example, who refers to postmodern cinema in terms of a kind of “hyperconscious intertextuality,” describes spectatorship in a vocabulary so austere it evokes not people watching a movie but computers processing information (“[the spectator] engages in a process of retrieval, drawing on a reservoir of images that constitutes the past”), while influential semiotician and postmodernist Umberto Eco portrays postmodern textuality as a “paramount laboratory for semiotic research in textual strategies.”80 Propagating a vision of the postmodern text as a dazzling mesh of allusions and references, this school of thought also conceives a postmodern spectator uniquely capable of grasping it—a being of almost supernatural textual literacy whose ability to bring extensive mental reserves of textual knowledge into play in the interpretation and decoding of postmodern film texts are seemingly limitless. Critics celebrate her “encyclopaedic film competence,” her ability to “draw

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on a repertoire of codes and references,” and her “mastery of the process of decoding/deciphering.”

Exemplary here is the work of Cristina Degli-Eposti, which defines postmodern films as “texts that use strategies of disruption like self-reflexivity, inter-textuality, bricolage, multiplicity and simulation through parody and pastiche.”

Rightly identifying many of the aesthetic strategies of postmodern film, she problematically reduces them as a group to strategies of “disruption,” and concludes that they render the film “an intellectual game … that implies various levels of spectatorial competence.”

According to this model, postmodern filmic strategies operate primarily to “disrupt” the more positive operation of traditional filmic strategies, rather than to produce any substantive effects of their own, thereby rendering postmodern film and postmodern spectatorship purely critical, cognitive, or, in Constable’s sense, “negative” phenomena.

One of the ongoing legacies of this kind of approach is that the question of exactly why spectators would flock to see these films—what kind of basic affective appeal these ostensibly dry and cerebral exercises exert—remains entirely up for grabs.

In attempting to answer this question, this thesis will show that postmodern film is rich with a strange, ghostly sort of emotion that is uniquely bound up with the postmodern aesthetic devices that initially seem so hostile to it. Pedro Almodovar’s Talk to Her—a film whose appearance in 2002 places it at the far end of the “long” nineties—provides an excellent example of this, for its relentless deconstruction of melodrama’s expressive models of emotion produces a displaced form of melodramatic emotion that is, if anything, more intense than that of classic melodrama. Documenting the perplexities of love and desire in the lives of two


83 Degli-Eposti, introduction to Postmodernism in the Cinema, 6.

84 Constable, “Postmodernism and Film,” 54.
couples—journalist Marco (Dario Grandinetti) and matador Lydia (Rosario Flores), nurse Benigno (Javier Camara) and the beautiful comatose dancer for whom he cares, Alicia (Leonor Watling), the film features at its centre the comatose, insensible, Alicia, a figure seemingly worlds away from the fraught, hysterical, afflicted heroines that populate classical melodrama. Where the expressive heroine of classic melodrama offers her eloquent body endlessly to be read, Alicia’s can hardly be said to “express” anything at all. Far from vital expressions of a deep self, her infrequent but definite movements—opening her eyes, yawning—are systemic effects of a diverse array of medical technology: the artificial respirator that breathe for her; the intravenous drip that feeds her. As the head doctor explains later in the film to a recently bereaved Marco, the brain-dead’s breathing, their vivid colour, their yawns, even their opening of their eyes, are no more than “mechanical actions”; “[they have] no ideas or feelings.” One poignant scene shows Benigno applying eye-drops to Alicia’s eyes; the eye-drops coagulate, overflow, and then proceed to descend down her cheeks like tears. Tears have conventionally functioned as signs of interiorized emotion; yet as the film itself is at pains to show, despite their glimmering liquid promise, Alicia’s “tears” are effects not of a deep self but of the continuous pastoral care of the medical establishment—the massages, the bed-baths and the enteral nutrition by which Benigno and her other carers secure her daily upkeep. In the person of Alicia, then, the film substitutes for the figure of tears as uncheckable expressivity the figure of tears as institutional prosthesis. Only amplifying the film’s problematization of expressivity is that, lifeless as Alicia is, Benigno nevertheless reads Alicia’s body in expressive terms. Eliding his own role in their administration, for Benigno, her tears sign the presence of a mysterious yet knowable self to which he himself has a unique and unrivalled access. When Alicia’s dance teacher describes a projected production to her inanimate ex-student, Benigno confidently asserts that “Alicia is loving this,” a claim to which Alicia’s smooth brow and lidded eyes offer neither corroboration nor dissent. More than reading her expressively, Benigno is convinced that the feeling is mutual, appraising her responsiveness to his touch as indexical of her desire to be touched, her lack of resistance to his desire as a sign of her own. As he passionately insists later in the film, “Alicia and I get on better than most married couples.”

While necessarily excluded from the film’s central “action,” Talk to Her’s Alicia takes centre stage in the film’s distinctively postmodern critique of the ideology of
expressivity by which we tend to understand tears. For as the film demonstrates, Alicia’s oddly desubjectivized tears, sighs and shudders are less a freakish exception to the rule than an exemplary metonymy of the melodramatic disciplinary systems that function to enlist the body in heteronormative patterns of affective display. In these terms, and as the film ultimately suggests, far from an aberration of the melodramatic economy, the apparent pathology of Benigno’s misreading of Alicia’s tears as expressive embodies its central logic—the logic by which the bodily signs through which melodramatic subjects are enlisted in a “hetero-sensible” system are misrecognized as naturally arising expressions. Yet even as Talk to Her emerges as one of Almodovar’s most subtle deconstructions of a melodramatic emotional economy, it is also—as any number of reviews might attest—one of his most moving films, its postmodern critique of ideologies of expression effecting not a termination but a displacement of the affective structure that usually attends the loss of ‘innocence,’ ‘true love,’ or ‘family,’ by re-attaching that affective structure to the failure of the bodily signs through which we conventionally express grief: tears. And tears themselves, paradoxically, turn out to be the ultimate objects of loss. Most melodrama, after all, is able to recoup the relational, familial and temporal losses it dramatizes by transfiguring the suffering attendant on these losses into the occasion for “the recognition of a hidden and misunderstood virtue,” with the legibility of virtue under the pressure of loss compensating for the loss itself. Yet since it is the expressivity of expressive signs per se that is “lost” in Talk to Her, the film can offer no such compensation for the epistemological privations it plays out, only further moral and epistemological confusion. Far from evacuating the film of feeling, then, the deconstruction of tears’ status as expressive signs of loss only amplifies the sense of loss that occasions spectatorial tears in the first place. As this ultimate postmodern critique of melodrama reveals itself simultaneously as the ultimate in weepies, the


86 Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” 54.
film functions finally to dissolve the distinction between melodrama and its critique. Tears become a kind of irreducible substance, an infinite resource, multiplied, rather than curtailed, by their own indictment.

As Talk to Her demonstrates, postmodern film relies on a series of emotions that are not the affective residue of older cinematic forms but direct adjuncts of postmodern aesthetic devices of depthlessness, pastiche, bricolage, self-reflexivity and narrative fragmentation. Far from disabled by postmodern aesthetic devices, knowingness flourishes amidst the social network of winks and smiles activated by postmodern allusion and reference; bewilderment is inextricable from the kinds of subject/object inversions at play in a postmodern problematization of classical cinematic suture’s use of the face; a peculiarly postmodern instantiation of fear feeds off the postmodern horror’s self-reflexivity; while fascination is perfectly at home in the hermeneutic vacuum of postmodernism’s glossy surfaces. In arguing this, this thesis mobilizes a representative sample of films from the archive of what nineties critics eagerly identified as the postmodern movement in cinema: Wes Craven’s Scream (1996), David Lynch’s Mulholland Drive (2001), Harmony Korine’s Gummo (1997), David Cronenberg’s Crash (1996) and Wes Anderson’s Rushmore (1998). While certainly not the first properly “postmodern” films, these films hail from an era in which the term postmodernism was gaining wide currency in the form of what Jesse Fox Mayshark calls a “cultural tide of pop postmodernism” that “reached a peak in the music, film, literature and fashion of the 1990s.”

On the one hand, the films’ self-reflexive, postmodern occupation of their various generic categories perpetuate displaced versions of traditional cinematic emotions that are all the more powerful for being “postmodern.” On the other, they are able to invite emotions new to the cinematic vocabulary, emotions that possess a singular rapport with the aesthetic strategies conventionally identified with postmodern film.

While films remain my primary textual ground, and while much of my account of the postmodern will be articulated through a discussion of cinema, my first chapter, “Euphoria, Ecstasy and the Sublime,” provides a broader conceptual context for my work by grappling directly with three figures who are widely recognized as the key

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87 Mayshark, Post-Pop Cinema, 1-2.
thinkers of postmodernism: Baudrillard, Jameson and Lyotard. Secondary commentators often infer that these theorists’ investment in the destabilization of norms of truth, value and subjectivity goes hand in hand with a vision of postmodernism as an exercise in emotional erasure. Yet as I will show, not only do all three theorists’ visions of “the cultural logic of late capitalism” yield complex and capacious models of emotion, but emotion is central to each theorists’ elaboration of their vision. Jameson’s model of postmodernism plays host to a series of “intensities” best described as emotions with a difference—recursive, paradoxical emotions that, structured around a misrecognition, take the “waning” of emotion, and its displacement by free-floating, desubjectivized affect, as their object. Baudrillard’s construction of postmodernism revolves around the emotion of “ecstasy,” which lends its unusual oscillating structure to his conceptualization of an advanced capitalist society in which processes of semiotic “intensiﬁcation” have sent reference spinning out of control. Lyotard’s projection of postmodernism, meanwhile, is underpinned by a model of the “sublime,” in which intense emotion is very much bound up with the “inhuman” forces of postmodern techno-science and rationality. All three theorists’ work, then, generate complex, dialectical models of emotion that paradoxically feed off the subjective and hermeneutic instabilities that might seem to foreclose emotion altogether.

Continuing this dialectical procedure, each of the five subsequent film-based chapters is structured in such a way as to situate a postmodern aesthetic strategy that has been thought to preclude feeling altogether in intimate relation to a specific “postmodern” emotion. Chapter Two, “Fear: Dead Subjects and Living Dolls in Sigmund Freud’s the Uncanny and Wes Craven’s Scream,” perhaps the most schematic and straightforward of the chapters in this thesis, considers the operation of fear in Wes Craven’s “postmodern” horror classic, Scream, a telling example of a conventionally emotion-orientated genre whose organizing emotion is subjected to postmodern reassessment. As I will show, Scream’s awkward convergence of horrific violence and comic affective cues was widely taken to constitute a particularly stark inscription of the already critically ubiquitous figure of the numb, affectless viewer. As such, it seemed to bear out the then-current notion that postmodern cinema was a harbinger of a general decay of feeling. This chapter resists this conclusion through a revisionist analysis of Sigmund Freud’s “The Uncanny,” arguing that one of that essay’s key
intersrets, Ernst Jenstch’s “On the Feeling of the Uncanny,” offers a kind of proto-postmodern model of fear as an emotion that revolves around the spectacle of emotional bankruptcy—a model of fear at once suppressed and exemplified by Freud’s own argument. In describing the ways in which Jentsch’s model of fear is borne out in Scream’s form, narrative and reception, this chapter argues that the figure of the fearful, feeling subject, whose expiry the film appears to consolidate, is inextricable from the paradigmatically numb, affectless postmodern subject that is its apparent antithesis. Like the fabled slasher himself, repeatedly extinguished and continually resurrected, emotion contrives to reappear in displaced form just when it seems to have been killed off altogether.

The third chapter, “Bewilderment: Postmodernity’s Face in Mulholland Drive,” addresses an emotion that has achieved a privileged status in postmodern theory and aesthetics as the most accurate bodily symptom of postmodern social and economic co-ordinates. Arguing, through an extended reading of Fredric Jameson’s meditation on the Bonaventure hotel, that bewilderment can be situated at the crux of a chiasmus in which subject and object exchange their properties, I go on to suggest that it is in a crisis of facialization that bewilderment finds its clearest theoretical and aesthetic articulation. Yet in tracing bewilderment’s intertwinement with the figure of the problematized face through a close reading of Mulholland Drive, the chapter will also demonstrate that bewilderment’s status in postmodern aesthetics and theory is a profoundly ambivalent one. While celebrated as an eloquent bodily symptom of the “actual” subjective and epistemic conditions of postmodernity, bewilderment is also an extreme emotion whose destabilizing effects find their apotheosis in the form of grotesque violences visited upon the face of the bewildered subject. Not accidentally, bewilderment tends to be quarantined and displaced to certain socially and sexually “othered” bodies in which its corrosive subjective and bodily effects are unable to threaten a critical practice still structured by a traditionally masculine ideal of autonomy and agency. Tracking bewilderment in Mulholland Drive, this chapter will argue that the reification of bewilderment has consequences that force us to ask questions about our investment in an emotion whose diagnostic efficacy is matched by its troubling bodily implications.
Taking a cue from the compelling, highly variegated textural world of David Cronenberg’s psycho-sexual thriller *Crash*, my fourth chapter, “Fascination: Between the Rough and the Glossy in *Crash*,” argues that alongside postmodern theory’s key organizing opposition of depth/surface—an opposition regularly mobilized to support the notion that postmodern aesthetics forecloses feeling—there exists a submerged line of thinking about surface textures, extending from the fractured and rough to the gleaming and the glossy. Yet while clearly capable of unsettling the opposition depth/surface, the opposition rough/glossy is more often mobilized to sustain it, with many postmodern theorists aligning the rough surface with authentic, direct or “deep” emotion, and the glossy surface with the affectively and ideologically dubious emotion of fascination—an emotion whose manifest reliance on social mediation has earmarked it as not really an emotion at all. As this chapter argues, however, *Crash*’s exploration of the relation between texture and emotion works to destabilize this opposition between a “superficial” fascination and “deep” emotions like horror or fear. In its presentation of a group of accident victims who have become part of a kind of fetishistic car-crash cult, *Crash* configures fascination not as a superficial, illusory effect of ideological manipulation but as a paradigm for understanding the workings of postmodern emotion *per se*. In doing so, *Crash* recuperates the power of “texture” to unsettle our understanding of the relation between surface and depth, true emotion and false.

Chapter Five, “Boredom: Avant-Garde and Trash in *Gummo*,” addresses another emotion central to postmodern aesthetics: boredom. As I will show, while clearly situating itself in the tradition of the cinematic “avant-garde,” *Gummo* is marked by an unapologetic refusal of the conventional avant-garde commitment to strong emotion, replacing the “shock” or “anger” that traditionally animates the avant-garde film text with an insistent boredom that saturates the film’s form, content and reception. To the extent that boredom remains the morally and politically devalued signature emotion of the consumer culture that the modernist avant-garde has conventionally defined itself against, it comes as no surprise that *Gummo* was almost universally heralded as an avant-garde failure. Observing, however, that the shift from modernity to postmodernity has entailed a radical shift in the status and dominion of emotion, this chapter argues that far from a symptom of excessive immersion in consumer culture, boredom has become the emotional economy’s affective waste.
product, its emotional “trash.” In these terms, it becomes possible to construe *Gummo*’s engagement with boredom not as an index of the film’s avant-garde failure but as part of an effort to repurpose the avant-garde for the changed economic and political co-ordinates of postmodernity. Exploring the convergence of emotional and literal trash through a semiotic analysis of the film’s junk-filled, over-stuffed frames, I argue that precisely as a trivial, vacuous and a-political feeling—as our emotional trash—boredom can be shown to possess a certain unexpected utility in a newly configured avant-garde project, which recruits the emotion not as a springboard to political action but as a means of underscoring the incommensurability between emotion and political action in late capitalism.

Whereas earlier chapters argue for the persistence of emotion in postmodernism, the sixth chapter, “Knowingness: Feeling Theory and its Others,” argues for the persistence of postmodernism through the emotion of knowingness. As I will show, knowingness’s unique union of epistemic instability and cultural hyper-competence has seen it repeatedly yoked to, even identified with, postmodern textual and critical practices. It is thus no surprise that the emergence of feeling theory—a critical field unified, at least in part, by its repudiation of allegedly moribund “postmodern” methodological and conceptual habits—has also been marked by repudiation of the emotion of “knowingness,” perceived as postmodernism’s signature emotion. This chapter contends, however, that the notion that feeling-orientated criticism has relinquished postmodernism’s characteristic “knowing” aesthetic and critical posture depends on a rigidly restrictive and narrow model of the emotion. Yet as I will demonstrate, knowingness is less an inherent quality of an isolatable textual or critical strategy, than the effect of social feedback, and as such, remains far more mobile and insidious than the proposal that we might simply “surrender” it allows. I make this argument through Wes Anderson’s *Rushmore*, a film whose critical status as the cinematic avatar of a “New Sincerity” places it in a relation to filmic postmodernism that is roughly analogous to affect theory’s relation to critical postmodernism.88

Arguing that *Rushmore*’s efforts to sever itself from circuits of knowingness merely

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88 This term has been on high rotate in newspapers, magazines and blogs in recent years, but its origins probably lie in Jim Collins’s influential 1993 essay, “Genericity in the 90s: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity.” (Collins, “Genericity in the 90s,” 262.)
amplifies its implication in them, I contend that a similar inevitability attends knowingness’s function in much recent feeling-orientated criticism, where that knowingness—and thus the postmodernism it laminates—possesses a continuing if unacknowledged power.

This thesis takes a cue from Grossberg’s observation that many of the aesthetic, sociological and historical discourses that make the idea of the postmodern their starting point are “predicated on the perception that something ‘feels’ different”—an observation that situates postmodern theory and aesthetics not as the expiry of feeling but as the mark of a change in the nature and orientation of feeling.89 These chapters, then, explore cinematic and theoretical emotions that emerge not despite but in and as moments of irony, critical self-reflexivity, allusion and fragmentation—emotions that are shot through with their own absence and constituted in and through their own negation. Underwriting these critical forays is the conviction that, as Terada puts it, while “specific emotions appear and disappear, carrying peculiar rationales with them … there is no such thing as the absence of emotion,” and that our most critically productive engagements with emotion might take place through encounters with those texts that seem least obviously “emotional.”90 Yet also underwriting this thesis is the assumption that bringing postmodernism and feeling theory into dialogue can work to revivify both critical practices. From postmodernism, feeling theory can learn to think emotion in ways that are less bound by an immediate, substantive or positivist notions of feeling, by channeling emotion through negativity, reflexivity, irony, self-loss, and the social. From feeling theory, meanwhile, postmodernism can learn to acknowledge more explicitly and to name more clearly the emotional life that animates it.


90 Terada, Feeling in Theory, 13.
Ecstasy, Euphoria and the Sublime: Jameson, Baudrillard and Lyotard

If our familiar map of emotional life has taken its bearings from feelings like anger, fear, sadness and love, the emotions that recur throughout postmodern theory—emotions like ecstasy, euphoria and the “sublime feeling”—would seem to demand a wholesale redrawing of the map. This chapter sets that cartographic project in motion through an engagement with the work of Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard and Jean-Francois Lyotard, the three theorists who have done most to define the parameters of the postmodern. Each of these theorists has produced significant critiques of the subjective, social and hermeneutic platforms that have conventionally underpinned emotion. As a result, their different visions of postmodernism are widely perceived as frigid and emotionless, wholly incompatible with the forms of embodied affective experience that are currently attracting critical interest under the auspices of the new studies of affect and emotion. This chapter argues, however, that Jameson, Baudrillard and Lyotard have each generated uniquely flexible, sensitive and capacious models of postmodern emotion that both broach emotion’s problematization and attest to its endurance. Jameson’s work, I argue, produces a model of emotion as a recursive, self-contradictory “intensity,” an emotion that paradoxically takes the expiry of emotion—and the birth of affect—as its object. Baudrillard’s use of the term “ecstasy” elevates emotion to the status of a metaphysical principle, drawing on ecstasy’s unusual oscillating structure—as an emotion that slides definitionally between subject and object, inside and outside, animal and mechanical—to approximate the phenomenological climate of an advanced capitalist society in which “reversibility” rather than semiotic fixity is the name of the game. Finally, I show that Lyotard’s discussion of the sublime yields a conceptualization of emotion that is tightly bound up with—rather than endangered by—the “inhuman” enterprises of postmodern techno-science and rationality.

I.
While Jameson’s 1984 essay on postmodernism—initially published in the *New Left Review*, and later revised as the keystone chapter of the book *Postmodernism, or, the*
Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism—did not originate the term “postmodernism,” its connection of the aesthetic and cultural shifts that had preoccupied much previous postmodern thinking to a series of historically coeval economic shifts effectively “redrew the whole map of the postmodern at one stroke.”¹ Indeed, it is in large part as a result of the authority of this work that the term “postmodernism” came to acquire its status as a conceptual anchor for much critical thought during the decade after its publication. Yet of all the claims made in Postmodernism, none has enjoyed quite the career of Jameson’s proclamation that postmodernism is marked by “the waning of affect”—a theoretical catch-phrase that has become almost totemic in its condensation of contemporary fears and anxieties about “our” condition.² According to Jameson’s description, the “waning of affect” can be traced to two interlinked cultural shifts.³ On the one hand, it is associated with the demise of the hermeneutic models of meaning embodied in the oppositions surface/depth, inside/outside and appearance/reality, a demise that results in a “new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense.”⁴ Where emotion is conventionally assumed to inhere in and be “projected out and externalized” from a depth imagined as a kind of monadic recess, this “new depthlessness” resists emotion at every point.⁵ On the other, the waning of affect can be traced to the demise of the subject, the figure of the centered and unified individual that had been the cornerstone of political and social theory, and that is traditionally thought to be the “source” of emotion. As Jameson puts it, “the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older anomie of the centered subject may also mean … a liberation from … feeling as well, since there is no longer a self to do the feeling.”⁶

² Jameson, Postmodernism, 8, 11.
³ Jameson, Postmodernism, 8.
⁴ Jameson, Postmodernism, 9.
⁵ Jameson, Postmodernism, 11, 9.
⁶ Jameson, Postmodernism, 15.
Yet despite the slogan-like confidence with which critics have cited and circulated the phrase, the status and implications of “the waning of affect” remain ambiguous. This is especially the case when we recall that current models of “affect” do not predicate “affect” on the existence of the subject or hermeneutic depth at all. For Brian Massumi, while “affect is most often used loosely as a synonym for emotion,” there is, in fact, a world of difference between the two terms: where emotion is subjective, intentional, cognitive and meaningful, affect is “a-signifying,” “irreducible bodily”, “not ownable or recognizable.”7 It is thus unclear why the waning of affect should follow on the problematization of the subject and traditional hermeneutic structures of meaning. To compound the uncertainty, Jameson repeatedly counters his claims about the death of affect with proclamations about the emergence of what—borrowing a term from the work of Lyotard, who had himself appropriated it from Gilles Deleuze—he calls “intensities,” suggesting that to announce the demise of affect “is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are entirely devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings—which it may be better and more accurate to call intensities—are now free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria.”8 From this angle, Jameson’s work might be seen to broadcast less the demise of feeling than the emergence of what he refers to as “a whole new type of emotional ground tone.”9 Unfortunately however, his effort to clarify the nature of these incipient “intensities” only further confuses his reader, since these “free-floating and impersonal” phenomena bear an unmistakable resemblance to what we are accustomed to call “affects”—the very entities that Jameson has already relegated to a moribund modernism.10 On a superficial overview,


9 Jameson, Postmodernism, 6.

10 Jameson, Postmodernism, 6.
then, Jameson’s position on emotion, to say nothing of his sense of the relation *between* emotion and affect, remains curiously unresolved.

Given these striking ambiguities, it is perhaps no surprise that Jameson’s work on feeling has elicited widely conflicting interpretations, the two most polarized of which are worth outlining here. Reading Jameson’s work as a chronicle of the demise of affect in postmodernity, a number of affect-oriented critics in feeling theory, of which Massumi and Lawrence Grossberg are representative, dismiss Jameson’s work as dangerously misguided. At the heart of this critique is the anomaly remarked above: that far from necessitating the expiry of affect, the intertwined phenomena of the death of the subject and the failure of hermeneutic models of meaning should logically entail the proliferation of an affect conceived as an impersonal, desubjectivized and noncognitive entity. Redoubling this logical objection, however, is an empirical one, as the flourishing of affect in contemporary social and political life—to say nothing of the burgeoning of theories of affect in contemporary scholarly life—leaves the charge that “affect” is “waning” in postmodernity looking decidedly anachronistic. Massumi dismisses Jameson in sub-clausal, off-hand fashion, announcing dismissively that “Fredric Jameson notwithstanding, belief has waned for many, but not affect,” while Grossberg’s effort to define the affective consequences of “postmodernity’s cynical relationship to the ideological” sees him listing a number of things those consequences are not: “Nor is it, as Jameson has claimed, a waning of affect …” As these asides suggest, for Massumi and Grossberg, Jameson’s apparent insistence on the demise of affect evinces both a disregard of logic, and an insensitivity to the increasing centrality of affect to cultural and scholarly production.

Yet where Grossberg and Massumi treat the phrase “the waning of affect” as if its meaning were at once completely self-evident and entirely exhaustive of Jameson’s position on feeling, a more recent reading of Jameson takes a more considered and holistic approach. In fact, where Grossberg and Massumi have impugned Jameson for his failure to accommodate affect, Ian Buchanan has championed Jameson as a kind of proto-affect theorist whose work draws on the thinking of Lyotard and Deleuze in a way that actually anticipates rather than opposes the recent work of Massumi, Grossberg and others. As Buchanan demonstrates in a persuasive historicization of the term “affect,” many of the critiques of Jameson’s work turn on a fairly simple
terminological misunderstanding, in which critics in affect theory have assumed a specifically Deleuzian use of the term that was either unavailable or remained unconsolidated at the time of Jameson’s composition of the Postmodernism essay. In an attempt to rectify this misunderstanding, Buchanan demonstrates that as Jameson deploys it, “affect” refers not to the impersonal, non-cognitive, asignifying entities cherished by Massumi and Grossberg, but to an expressive model of emotion that can be understood in precise contradistinction to Massumi’s notion of “affect.” If, for cognitive appraisal theorists, emotion is typically subjective, expressive and personal, for Jameson, “affect” is understood in terms of “the wordless pain within the [individual] monad” that is then “expressed by projection outward”—making Jameson’s characterization of the “affect” he expels from postmodernity powerfully reminiscent of conventional cognitive appraisal models of emotion. Far from banishing a Massumi-esque “affect” from postmodernism, then, it would appear that it is “emotion” (which Jameson, somewhat idiosyncratically, refers to as “affect”) that Postmodernism relegates to a superseded historical moment. As Buchanan concludes, “What Jameson means by “affect” then is the emotion of the individual subject, understood as a self-enclosed ego or monad. It does not survive into postmodernity because its precondition does not.” Indeed, having argued this, Buchanan further presses his case for an unexpected alliance between Jameson and contemporary affect theory by suggesting that the “countless free-floating and impersonal ‘intensities’” that Jameson sees emerging in the wake of traditional, expressive, subject-bound kind of emotion can be readily identified with a Deleuzian model of “affect.” For Buchanan, then, so far from being anti-affect, Jameson is a forerunner of

11 Buchanan, Fredric Jameson, 92-3. As Buchanan puts it, “one could plausibly argue that Deleuze’s concept of affect is a reaction to and consequence of Jameson’s waning of affect, for it is precisely a de-subjectivized (i.e., schizophrenic) and indeed ‘depthless’ account of the concept that he offers.” (Buchanan, Fredric Jameson, 93.)

12 Buchanan, Fredric Jameson, 92-3.

13 Massumi, Autonomy of Affect, 88; Jameson, Postmodernism, 11, 15.

14 Buchanan, Fredric Jameson, 93.
contemporary affect theory whose work prefigures much of the current critical investment in affect.

Whereas Massumi and Grossberg’s critique of Jameson seems limited by its fixation on the slogan-like proclamation “the waning of affect” at the expense of Jameson’s claims about intensities, Buchanan’s work is welcome both for historicizing our understanding of Jameson’s notion of “affect” and for recovering the significance of Jameson’s “intensities.” In this chapter, however, I will argue that while more cogent and considered than that of Massumi and Grossberg, Buchanan’s reading falls into a similar trap in too hastily assimilating Jameson’s understanding of intensities to pre-established models of feeling. While he is incisive in his initial observation that in Jameson’s vocabulary “affect” is a synonym for a traditional model of emotion, his subsequent equation of Jameson’s “intensities” with a Deleuzian “affect” is the effect of a certain false choice, in which it is assumed that intensities must be aligned either with an “emotion” burdened with all the weight of outmoded humanist thinking or with an “affect” understood as completely non-interpretative, pre-personal and free-floating. Undertaking a close, detailed reading of a key passage in *Postmodernism*, however, I want to argue that Jameson’s vision of postmodern feeling must be understood in its own terms rather than through recourse to our customary paradigms for classifying feeling. Strictly synonymous neither with free-floating “affects” nor with a traditional model of emotion, intensities are emotions with a twist—emotions marked by a uniquely recursive, paradoxical and epistemically “faulty” structure.

Jameson’s most sustained analysis of the workings of “that euphoria or those intensities which seem so often to characterize the newer cultural experience” takes place in the course of a description of some very different works by artists Doug Bond and Duane Hanson—works that, placed side by side, bring strongly into relief the hermeneutic crisis that marks postmodern art. If Bond’s work is radically anti-anthropomorphic, characterized by desolate, evacuated spaces, or what Jameson dubs “the empty bathrooms of Doug Bond’s work,” Hanson’s work produces “polyester figures”—most famously his life-size simulacra of tourists—whose eerie resemblance to real people renders them distinctly out of place in their surroundings.15 With Bond,

in “Bathroom,” focused on space without figure and Hanson, in “Museum Guard” and “Tourist II,” focused on figures without space, the two practices suggest two halves of a never-to-be-completed whole. As Jameson explains, “the representation of space itself has come to be felt as incompatible with the representation of the human body,” where space is “radically anti-anthropomorphic” and the human body, in turn, radically isolated.\(^\text{16}\) Whereas in traditional realist painting the dialectic of figure and ground sees the two terms bound together in some kind of correspondence, with the subject metonymically representing the space and the space, in turn, expressing the subject, here there is a radical incommensurability that sees space and figure thrown disjunctively apart. At stake here is less a simple gap between signifier and signified than something more like what Jameson, drawing on Lacan’s work on schizophrenia, calls the full-scale “breakdown of the signifying chain.”\(^\text{17}\) As Jameson puts it, “when the links of the signifying chain snap, then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers,” as figure and ground are irretrievably dissociated, unable to be reconciled into a seamless signifying chain.\(^\text{18}\) “Bathroom,” “Museum Guard” and “Tourist II,” then, perfectly embody the kind of work that might play host to the affect-like “intensities” Buchanan sees as characteristic of postmodernism.

Yet as Jameson’s glancing description of the works themselves gives way to a fuller delineation of the response they provoke, the passage itself at once invokes and rules out the possibility that “affect” is what is at play here. For Jameson’s suggestion that the disintegration of signifying relations embodied in the work of Bond and Hanson results in an experience of “doubt and hesitation,” as “the world thereby momentarily loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density,” is conspicuously non-committal in the claims it makes for the relation between semiotic collapse and affect.\(^\text{19}\) On first sight, phrases

\(^\text{16}\) Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 34.

\(^\text{17}\) Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 27.


\(^\text{19}\) Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 34.
like “stereoscopic illusion” and “rush of filmic images without density” invite us to imagine a world suffused with the euphoric affect that Buchanan reads into Jameson’s work: immediate, unconscious, pre-personal. Yet closer inspection makes it clear that the breakdown in the signifying chain does not actually become a “rush of filmic images”: rather it “threatens to.” At play here is not affect as such but the idea of affect, and the level on which the encounter with this “stereoscopic illusion, [this] rush of filmic images” is taking place is specifically cognitive, as the terms “doubt and hesitation”—terms that refer to a failure or blockage within the process of judgment—confirm. In this sense, it would appear that in exemplifying the non-relation between signifier and signified, human content and cued response, world and meaning, the works at issue less index a world released from the interpretative strictures that constrain emotion, than dramatize that world as a possibility. Whereas Buchanan has argued that postmodern works become the focus of a nimbus of detached, impersonal, free-floating affect, Jameson invokes affect here only as the preliminary cognitive object for a larger structure of emotional response.

If Jameson’s discussion of “affect” relegates it to the status of an idea rather than a reality, that idea is soon shown to be the object of the intensity of “euphoria” in a formation that suggests that euphoria is structured according to a simple cognitive model of emotion. For the description of the moment at which the concept of affective liberation is conjured in a viewer does not conclude Jameson’s analysis, but rather prompts him to inquire: “Is this now a terrifying or exhilarating experience?”20 As we already know, Jameson tends toward the latter, characterizing postmodernism precisely by the predominance of exhilaration over terror, by the “end of the psychopathologies of the ego” and the “exhilaration of these new surfaces.”21 Yet the answer to the question is of less significance here than the fact of the question, for in situating “exhilaration” as one of two feelings available to be considered as options, the question figures whatever feeling we eventually embrace as the effect of a judgment. Where cognitive appraisal theories conventionally associate emotion with

20 Jameson, Postmodernism, 34.

21 Jameson, Postmodernism, 15, 34.
judgment and evaluation, “exhilaration” then, is clearly an emotion of some kind.22 Yet the conclusion that Jameson’s euphoria is merely an emotion by another name is not quite sufficient; for while euphoria is interpretative, it is not interpretative of just anything. Rather, it is an interpretation of the idea of a world in which emotion has given way to affect, a world “become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density.”23 Euphoria, then, is an emotion that self-reflexively takes the end of emotion and the triumph of affect as its object. Interpreting the breakdown of signification as a sign that the world has undergone a sociological shift that has seen the logic of emotion displaced by a logic of affect—“a rush of filmic images without density”—it takes this, in turn, as an occasion for euphoric excitement. Intensities like euphoria, then, are posthumous emotions, emotions whose uniquely recursive, paradoxical structure allows them to take the death of emotion as their object.

Yet if euphoria is distinguished from emotion by its self-reflexivity, it is also distinguished from emotion by the structural misrecognition that seems to underwrite it. For as has perhaps become clear, the judgment made by euphoria (that feeling has been released from the bounds of interpretation or judgment, and that affect has triumphed) and the internal structure of euphoria (which is interpretative and judgment-based) are fundamentally at odds. At play here is a classic performative contradiction, in which form and content are in direct conflict. In light of this, the euphoric subject has to undertake a further movement, eliding the gap between the fact of her emotion and her belief in emotion’s expiry, by interpreting the euphoria she feels as an example of the triumph of affect that it in fact takes as its object. There is, then, a kind of fundamental misrecognition at the heart of euphoria, a misrecognition that seems to preoccupy Jameson throughout *Postmodernism*. He continually evaluates euphoria in negative epistemic terms, repeatedly describing the emotion as “hallucinatory” to indicate its basis in distorted perception.24 The point not


23 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 34

to be missed here, however, is that the “intensity” both deploys the structure of emotion and provides a unique spin on it: whereas emotion bears a diagnostic relation to reality, and affect bears no diagnostic relation to reality, the intensity’s relation to reality is one of structural misdiagnosis.

This analysis of the euphoric intensity as a kind of self-reflexive, epistemically dubious form of emotion has a number of critical advantages for the assessment of both Jameson’s work and the status of emotion in postmodernity more generally. Most immediately, it enables us to account for elements of Jameson’s argument that Buchanan rides roughshod over, such as the fact that both the texts Jameson takes as his examples, and the intensities he frames as their dominant response, are marked by a very specific semantic character. As I made clear in my introduction, a model of affect as free-floating and noninterpretative tends to detach affective response from textual content; in fact, for Massumi, “the strength or duration [ie. the intensity] of an image’s effect is not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way.”25 Yet Jameson offers very strong determinations of the character of both the “intensities” and the texts around which they supposedly circulate. Despite the glossy, commodified gleam of their presentation, these texts—which run the gamut from Andy Warhol’s deathly Diamond Dust Shoes, to the mournful social satire of Hanson’s Tourist II, to the anonymous series of photorealist images whose content Jameson evokes as “automobile wrecks,” a city “deteriorated or disintegrated,” “urban squalor” and “an unparalleled leap in the alienation of daily life”—are uniformly gloomy and bleak, evocative of decay, death and loss.26 The intensities Jameson describes are also cast in a very specific mould: as Jameson puts it, they “tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria.”27 If intensities are understood as affects, Jameson’s insistence on both the texts’ gloomy content and the intensities’ “euphoric” content seems unnecessary, or even wrong-headed—since affect is by definition incalculable and asignifying, unbound by social and cultural meaning.


26 Jameson, Postmodernism, 33-4.

27 Jameson, Postmodernism, 16.
Framing intensities as affects, then, entails reading Jameson’s attribution of content to both intensities and texts as misguided and problematic. Yet if, on the other hand, intensities are understood as recursive, paradoxical emotions, Jameson’s insistence on the relation between the intensities’ euphoric content and the images’ bleak content suddenly becomes startlingly necessary and significant. If euphoria is predicated on the conviction that the breakdown of signification has released the subject from the interpretative strictures of emotion, its exhilaration can only be heightened by a scenario in which the “content” transcended is so dire, so potentially painful. In this sense, the “deteriorat[ion] or disintegrat[ion]” of the content of these images is registered in the euphoric response precisely to the extent that they are incongruous with such a response.  

The more painful the content, the more euphoric I feel in sensing—mistakenly—that my response is no longer bound by the dictates of diagnosis and that only the “hallucinatory splendor” of commodified form carries any real weight.

Yet if this reading of intensities as recursive, structurally self-contradictory emotions has important implications for a reading of Jameson, it also throws valuable light on the structure of emotion in postmodernism more broadly. For where intensities are at play, it would seem that any event or phenomenon that quashes emotion will breed more as well as less emotion, rendering emotion a kind of an irreducible quantity, an ever-renewable resource. Indeed, it is just this ghostly or spectral characteristic of emotion that is conveyed in Jameson’s description of Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*, a series of silk-screen prints taken from photographic negatives of ladies’ shoes—shoes whose submission to the double-exposure of both photograph and silkscreen trap them under the shimmering surface of their new status as kitsch. As Jameson shows, in using the negative rather than the photograph as its base, *Shoes* undertakes a kind of critique of this emotive allure of the commodity, attempting to reveal the deadly materiality that underpins commodification.

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The external and colored surface of things … has been stripped away to reveal the deathly black and white substratum of the photographic negative which subtends them.\textsuperscript{29}

At one level, then, \textit{Shoes} thwarts the fascinating charm of the commodity by exposing the twin materialities of production and reproduction that subtend it. Yet the paradox that Jameson’s analysis pivots on is that despite—or perhaps because of—its attempts to “strip away” the charm of the commodity image to its “black and white substratum” in order to quash all emotion and all depth, \textit{Shoes} nevertheless produces even more euphoria, if in a “compensatory, decorative” form:

There is a kind of return of the repressed in \textit{Diamond Dust Shoes}, a strange, compensatory, decorative exhilaration, explicitly designated by the title itself which is, of course, the glitter of gold dust, the spangling of gilt sand that seals the surface of the painting and yet continues to glint at us.\textsuperscript{30}

In being crushed to “dust,” what these diamonds lose in ontological stability—and exchange value—they gain in ubiquity, as “that spangling of gilt sand that seals the surface of the painting and yet continues to glint at us”; in just the same way, an emotion quashed by self-reflexive critique is at once demoted from the status of emotion (indeed, as Buchanan’s own reading shows, no longer even identified as emotion) and yet at the same time dispersed and diffused across the text as a whole. The less emotion there is, the more emotion, for emotion—as intensity—is capable of taking as its object its own demise. Intensities, then, refer to emotion in its undead, eternally regenerating state.

This appraisal of Jameson’s intensities as uncanny constellations of self-reflexivity and misrecognition does more, however, than simply provide a counter to Buchanan’s reading of intensities as affects. It suggests that the figure of euphoria contains a kind of pre-emptive critique of that reading. For the mistake made by Buchanan—the

\textsuperscript{29} Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism}, 9.

mistake of overlooking the complex processes through which euphoria comes about, and, in doing so, misrecognizing euphoria as an example of the triumph of affect that it in fact takes as its object—is the mistake internal to euphoria itself. Buchanan’s reading of euphoria as an “affect,” then, buys in to the very misrecognition that lies at the heart of the intensity of euphoria as Jameson describes it. Moreover, this sense in which Jameson’s “intensities” effectively refute in advance the argument that mobilizes them as signs of affect’s triumph can be usefully extended to the work of Massumi and Grossberg themselves. For it would not be hard to identify a current of euphoria in the rhetoric of escape and capture that dominate their efforts to clarify the emotion-affect distinction. According to Massumi, for example, whereas affect is “outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as it is from vital function” and “escapes confinement in the particular body,” emotion is linear, cultural and bound by convention, its “formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage … the capture and closure of affect.” At play here is precisely the euphoric—but also structurally self-contradictory—fantasy of emotion’s demise that Jameson so clearly analyzes in his descriptions of euphoria.

As this analysis has shown, while Buchanan casts Jameson’s work on intensities as a precursor to recent studies of affect, in fact, Jameson is less interested in expelling emotion from his vision of postmodernism altogether than in taking on the challenge that postmodernism sets for thinking about emotion. On the one hand, “euphoria” bears many of the features we conventionally associate with emotion, in that it is both interpretative and personal; yet on the other, its interpretative capacity operates in a paradoxical, recursive and finally epistemologically suspect way that at once marks intensities’ difference from emotion and allows them to reconfigure our assumptions about the structure of emotion. Yet in assessing the implications of this reading of intensities for Jameson’s understanding of postmodernism, it is important to note that for Jameson the epistemic error so central to euphoria does not deflate its value as euphoric sign of what he calls the “relief of the postmodern generally, a thunderous unblocking of logjams and a release of new productivity that was somehow tensed up

and frozen, locked like cramped muscles, at the latter end of the modern period.”32 There is something endlessly appealing about the idea that our feelings are somehow free-floating and detached from content, especially when that content is—as current world economic and environmental crises ensure that it is—both painful and difficult. This kind of double edge is essential to Jameson’s fully developed dialectical sense of postmodernism’s ambivalent promise of transcendence. While deconstructing euphoria’s epistemic foundations, Jameson is entirely alive to its thrill.

II.

Though consistently celebrated—and anthologized—as a key thinker of postmodernism, in many ways Baudrillard has an ambivalent relation to the field of postmodern theory. Observing that he did not once use the term “postmodernism” except to repudiate association with it, Mike Gane, for one, has devoted much of his extensive work on Baudrillard to contesting any alignment between the two, his long-standing dispute with Douglas Kellner on this point culminating in the claim not only that Baudrillard can be understood outside postmodernism, but that he stands in a position of “coherent rejection” of postmodernism.33 Gane’s account carries a great deal of weight. While spanning a broad spectrum of disciplines, operating at the axes of social theory, political economy, semiotics, psychoanalysis, media studies, art, architecture and literature, Baudrillard developed a determinedly idiosyncratic theoretical vocabulary, a vocabulary that does not readily submit to contextualization within other scholarly debates. From an iconoclastic early engagement with semiotics, Freudianism and Marxism, he went on to construct his own distinctive theoretical “world,” populated by powerful and densely imagined concepts of “seduction,” “transparency,” and “obscenity,” an intellectual bestiary overrun with “vengeful objects,” “fatal strategies” and “banal seductions.” In light of this, a number of his more recent scholars have argued that, whereas much previous work attempted to position his work in relation to some pre-existing discourse, from postmodernism to neo-Marxism, McLuhanism, semiotics, or the situationiste internationale, Baudrillard

32 Jameson, Postmodernism, 313. My italics.

must be read “in his own terms.”

Victoria Grace, for example, maintains that rather than impose a preconceived conceptual framework on Baudrillard’s thinking, it is more important to read his work in a way that “continually modifies and refines one’s understanding of his concepts and use of language and rhetorics in light of their repeated appearance in his work.”

Yet the striking affinity between Baudrillard’s work and that of postmodernism’s more witting proponents makes it easy to grasp why, despite his obvious idiosyncracies, Baudrillard has nevertheless become one of postmodernism’s most powerful icons and thinkers. First among these points of congruence is the stylistic or tonal character of his work, whose mood of end-ism, finality and apocalypse is strongly redolent of a popular strain of postmodern discourse characterized by its pronouncements about the end of history. Kellner, for one, has made this connection, arguing that to the extent that we see modernity primarily as “a radical break and rupture from modernity,” Baudrillard is a postmodernist, for his discourse extensively deploys “the discourse of ‘no more’ and ‘no longer,’” “describ[ing] the rupture between his former analysis of modern objects and the new postmodern condition.”

Second, despite Baudrillard’s efforts to kick away the disciplinary scaffolding that sociology afforded his earlier work, his thought remains structured almost obsessively around the temporal and social referential of what Jameson calls “our own present of history.” Since for the majority of critics the historical parameters of the “now” have—up until quite recently—been coterminus with the parameters of postmodernity, Baudrillard’s investment in the technological, social and theoretical dimensions of a present-day time and space establishes him firmly within the field of postmodern theory. The third and perhaps most powerful factor demanding


Baudrillard’s alignment with other more avowedly “postmodern” thinkers is that his key concepts of simulation, the demise of the real, and the obscene resonate so resoundingly with postmodern engagements with media culture and postmodern critiques of positivistic thought and referentiality. While not actively mobilizing the discourse of postmodernism, then, Baudrillard’s work shares a cluster of tonal, thematic and conceptual qualities with those who do, placing him securely within postmodernism’s disciplinary annex. Intention aside, Baudrillard remains a thinker “of” postmodernism, where the genitive retains its original sense of possession rather than the secondary sense of “about-ness.”

Regardless of whether he can properly be considered one of postmodernism’s exponents, Baudrillard has inarguably fallen victim to a fate common to those who are, with his work widely relegated to a chilly, anaesthetized realm beyond emotion. Ackbar Abbas, for example, has suggested that “Baudrillard’s advocacy of fascination … snubs affectivity”—interpreting Baudrillard’s investment in fascination as the signature posture of the third order of simulacra as a sign of his refusal of feeling.38 Likewise, in the process of offering a summary of the dimensions of Baudrillard’s theory that have most often been recruited to arguments about postmodernism, Steven Shaviro maintains that Baudrillard is committed, among other things, to an argument about the failure of emotion:

Jean Baudrillard’s work is all about how ‘the cool universe of digitality’ has eclipsed the real, ‘the “cool” cybernetic phase supplanting the “hot” and phantasmatic. The argument goes something like this: Thanks to the new electronic technologies, the world has become a single global marketplace. Universal commodity fetishism has colonized lived experience. The real has been murdered by its representations. Every object has been absorbed into its own image. There is no longer (if there ever was) any such thing as a single, stable self … The death of emotion is concomitant with all these other losses.39


Cynthia Willet describes Baudrillard’s universe in comparable terms, as a kind of “global information net” in which “not emotion-laden language games but emotionless computer chips store memory and determine subjectivity.” As these critical responses make clear, Baudrillard’s theoretical universe is widely perceived as hostile to the very possibility of emotion.

Baudrillard’s oeuvre supplies ample sanction for this conventional view, for his work is organized around a series of quasi-descriptive, sociological concepts aimed at destabilizing some of the key binary oppositions that uphold the real and thus our traditional conventional understanding of emotion. Perhaps the best known of these concepts is that of “simulation.” Characterized as the “generation by models of a real without origin or reality,” a simulation is an object or discourse that has “no firm origin, no referent, no ground or foundation.” As Rex Butler has warned, despite many critics’ one-dimensional reading of simulation as a synonym for illusion, “simulation is … not only the loss of reality, but also its very possibility. The aim of simulation is not to do away with reality, but on the contrary to realize it, to make it real,” securing a beauty that is more beautiful than the beautiful, a truth that is more true than the true, and so forth. Yet whatever its “aims,” simulation’s total effect is the collapse of reality and the binary oppositions that sustain it—in particular, the opposition reality/illusion. Neither true nor false, “bear[ing] no relation to any reality whatever,” the emergence of the simulation entails the extinction of “the referentials of production, signification, affect, substance, history and the whole equation of real


42 Butler, The Defence of the Real, 23.
contents that gave the sign weight by anchoring it with a kind of burden of utility."43 Clearly, simulation’s dissolution of the real/unreal binary has a number of urgent implications for emotion, which, bound up as it is with ideas of subjective authenticity, has a chronically overdetermined relationship with notions of truth. The collapse of the true/false binary in an inflated culture of simulation thus calls the possibility of emotion into serious question.

While Baudrillard’s concept of simulation has acquired a certain exaggerated prominence in critical accounts of his work, a number of his other concepts have equally important consequences for emotion. Exemplary here is what Baudrillard calls the Obscene, which names a contemporary technological and cultural state defined by a “pornography of information and communication,” in which everything is rendered “immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication.”44 Importantly, the state of obscenity heralds the collapse of a number of other binary oppositions fundamental to the classical understanding of emotion. For obscenity’s communicational excess has the effect of dissolving the stable poles of subject and object, inside and outside, between which communication—and thus the expression or projection of emotion—is meant to take place. At stake here is what Baudrillard evocatively calls a “forced extraversion of all interiority, …[a] forced introjection of all exteriority,” in which the subject becomes “a pure screen, a pure absorption and resorption surface of the influent networks.”45 The consequences for emotion of this corrosion of the modern paradigm of “the subject at odds with his objects and with his image” are—seemingly—disastrous.46 As Baudrillard himself observes, “we no longer invest our objects with the same


emotions, the same dreams of possession, loss, mourning, jealousy.” If what is inside is “already” outside, what need for the inside-outside trajectory that expressive theories of emotion take as a basic format? Conversely, if what is outside is already inside, what need for the judgments or evaluations that have become associated with cognitive theories of emotion?

If the collapse of oppositions at play in simulation and obscenity tends to foreclose certain more familiar or everyday emotions, however, extreme or borderline emotions retain a central place in Baudrillard’s vision. As Baudrillard announces, while “desire, passion, seduction … expression and competition … the games of the hot universe” have been replaced by the “cool” or “cold” universe, this “cool and cold universe” has emotional effects of its own: “ecstasy, fascination, obscenity …. are games of the cold and cool universe.” The implication is that the dawning of advanced industrial society marks less the expiry of emotion than a shift in its structure, as emotions such as anger or fear—emotions that are strongly object-directed, intentional and expressive—give way to a coterie of more idiosyncratic or “extreme” emotions. In this section, I will argue that “ecstasy,” a term that slowly emerges across Baudrillard’s later work as one of his key figures, is one such emotion. As I will demonstrate, ecstasy initially functions as a synonym for or double of Baudrillard’s better-known concept of reversibility—a kind of abstract subversive principle and the primary engine of the state of terminological and ontological collapse to which both simulation and obscenity point. Yet ecstasy very quickly comes to acquire a pre-

47 Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication, 12.

48 Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication, 16


50 Baudrillard himself says, “In applying our old criteria and the reflexes of a scenic sensibility, we run the risk of misconstruing the irruption of this new ecstatic and obscene form in our sensorial sphere.” (Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication, 25-6.)

51 Initially elaborated in the early Symbolic Exchange and Death (1972) and underpinning many of his later writings, reversibility describes the operating principle of what Baudrillard calls the system of symbolic exchange. According to Baudrillard, “symbolic exchange” structures social relations in a
number of ancient societies, in which it functions to forestall the production of positive, essentialized identities. Whereas in our current system of economic exchange an object is assumed to possess a fixed, innate being, in a system of symbolic exchange, the object is without positive attributes or value, but is itself constituted in and through the act of exchange. Similarly, whereas in a system of economic exchange objects work to “seal the subject as an individual unit within the consumer system,” symbolic exchange annuls or erases the individual subject and their ownership or self-definition in what William Pawlett calls “a convulsive moment, an experience of sacredness or ritual festivity.” (William Pawlett, Jean Baudrillard: Against Banality [London: Routledge, 2007], 21) At stake here is what Baudrillard calls a kind of “constant reversibility” where “the animal form, the human form, the divine form are exchanged according to a rule of metamorphosis in which each ceases to be confined to its definition,” and which ensures the ceaseless dissolution of the boundaries and oppositions that sustain identity. (Jean Baudrillard, Passwords, trans. Chris Turner [London: Verso, 2003], 16.) Yet if this early work frames reversibility as an actual feature of particular ancient societies, later work, from “Fatal Strategies” onward, broadens the reach of the term to render it a kind of abstract mechanism, the key agent of the state of ontological collapse marked by the terms simulation and obscenity. As Baudrillard demonstrates, the current order—an order that Baudrillard refers to alternately as “the system of economic exchange” and the “semiotic orders”—is committed to maintaining the illusion of a firm binary opposition between the real and the imaginary, between subject and object, between inside and outside that is structurally antithetical to the system of symbolic exchange. Indeed, as we have seen, at the heart of simulation and obscenity is, paradoxically, an effort to stabilize oppositions, in what Baudrillard calls a process of “intensification”—an attempt to secure beauty as more beautiful than the beautiful, truth as more true than the true, and so forth. (Jean Baudrillard, Jean Baudrillard, 189.) This process of intensification involves a process whereby each term is artificially re-energized or revivified through reference to its binary opposite, shoring up a weakening “true” through an injection of the “false” (simulation); a weakening “beauty” by drawing upon “ugliness” (fashion); a weakening “visibility” by incorporating the “invisible” (obscenity). (Baudrillard, Jean Baudrillard, 190.) Yet as this rhetorical mise-en-abyme suggests, instead of stabilizing binary oppositions, the strategy of intensification in which objects are “raised to the superlative power, caught in a spiral of redoubling” merely sends them spiraling into a state of even greater confusion and collapse. (Jean Baudrillard, Fatal Strategies [London: Pluto Press, 1999], 9) “The more [the object] tries to realize itself, the more it hyperrealizes itself, the more it transcends itself to find its own empty essence.” (Baudrillard, Jean Baudrillard, 190.) Intensification, then, ultimately culminates in reversibility, where an endless process of terminological inversion evacuates terms of all referential value. Thus, while the simulacrum, while the obscene, while fashion are, on the one hand, intensified, heightened forms of an original term—“more real than the real,” “more visible than the visible,” “more beautiful than the beautiful”—they are, on the other hand, markers of that term’s complete collapse into its opposite. (Baudrillard, “Jean Baudrillard, 189.) Meaghan Morris ably mimics Baudrillard’s logic here, with reference to the simulacrum and obscenity respectively: “the real is growing and enlarging, so the real no longer exists… the escalation of information itself generates the implosion of meaning in the media.” (Meaghan
eminence of its own, suggesting that extreme emotion not only has the capacity to survive the logic of reversibility but could be said to embody it.

On first sight, the notion that contemporary culture is subject to a logic of reversibility would seem to corroborate the popular critical conviction that Baudrillard’s universe is characterized by the demise of emotion. As Grace has put it, and as our brief thumbnail analyses of simulation and the obscene suggest, “the reversion annuls,” displacing “any content or any particular quality” with an ontological burlesque in which true and false, inside and outside, circle around each other without end. Yet a closer reading of Baudrillard’s work suggests that far from extinguished under a state of reversibility, emotion—or rather, one emotion in particular—has the capacity to survive reversibility’s apocalyptic regime. That emotion is “ecstasy,” a term whose importance, initially flagged in “Fatal Strategies,” is cemented in the later Ecstasy of Communication. Frequently substituted for by the quasi-synonymous figures of “giddiness” and “vertigo”—emotions with which it shares the qualities of intensity and self-loss, if not euphoria—ecstasy is used in alternation with the term “reversibility” to refer to the condition of an entity in which binary oppositions have collapsed:

Ecstasy is that quality specific to each body that spirals in on itself until it has lost all meaning, and thus radiates as pure and empty form. Fashion is the ecstasy of the beautiful … simulation is the ecstasy of the real.

Far from falling victim to reversibility’s evacuation of substance, ecstasy has become the general name for that evacuation; far from expiring with the advent of

Morris, The Pirate’s Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism [London: Verso, 1988], 194.) As this suggests, while modes of symbolic exchange are officially less relevant than ever, reversibility’s disappearance on a practical or ritual level heralds its reappearance in systemic form, as the maleficent reversal of the system itself.

Grace, Baudrillard’s Challenge, 43.

Baudrillard, Jean Baudrillard, 190.
reversibility’s relentless terminological machinations, ecstasy characterizes those machinations. While not designating anything new from a conceptual point of view, “ecstasy”—and its verbal entourage of vertigo, sublimity, euphoria—grants a kind of phenomenological weight to Baudrillard’s universe, suggesting the peculiar emotional atmosphere in which reversibility operates.

Though it may readily be objected that Baudrillard’s use of the term “ecstasy” transforms the emotion into an empty conceptual designator, deprived of its usual affective ballast, it is worth noting that the ease with which ecstasy is able to be mobilized as a synonym for reversibility derives precisely from the term’s familiar emotional connotations—connotations very specific, even exclusive, to certain kinds of extreme emotion. As Philip Fisher has shown, emotions have customarily been categorized according to the key regulating opposition of “love” and “hatred,” or desire and aversion—oppositions that can be extrapolated to subsume innumerable other emotions, from pity to grief. Yet if most emotions fall into one or another of these polarized categories, ecstasy is conventionally defined by its capacity to oscillate between categories, almost forfeiting all substance in the process. In her quasi-taxonomical Encyclopaedia of Emotions, for example, Gretchen M. Reevy configures ecstasy as at once animal and mechanical; at once wholly authentic and entirely artificial; at once subjective and objective; at once entailing “a complete focus on one’s own inner life ... leav[ing] little room for awareness of the external world” and “associated with a dissolution of the self.” Baudrillard’s description of ecstasy taps into this conventional conception of the emotion as the locus of a strange toggling between opposing terms. Arguing that “whereas the aesthetic form always implies a moral distinction between the beautiful and the ugly, the ecstatic form is immoral,” Baudrillard insists on the emotion’s capacity to transcend familiar binary distinctions. Whereas the ontological fixity of most emotions renders them wholly

54 Baudrillard, Jean Baudrillard, 189.


56 Gretchen M. Reevy, Encyclopedia of Emotions (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010), 215.

57 Baudrillard, Jean Baudrillard, 189.
incompatible with reversibility’s “vertiginous” regime, ecstasy’s capacity to vacillate between the opposing terms of subject and object, inside and outside, true and false, ensures not only its compatibility with, but its aptitude as an analogue for, the “delirium of attributes” that defines contemporary life.58

It is an index of ecstasy’s definitional elasticity as an emotion that one of the oppositions it oscillates between is that of the emotional and the non-emotional. In “Fatal Strategies,” for example, Baudrillard’s capricious description of ecstasy as “the fragile and total passion that excludes all feelings” confers on the emotion the properties of both “total[ity]” and “fragil[ity,]” while framing it at once as a “passion” and as entirely “exclu[sive of] all feelings.”59 In Ecstasy of Communication, likewise, ecstasy is dubbed a “disembodied passion,” an oxymoronic turn of phrase that figures the emotion as both subjective realization and self-transcendence.60 If these accounts of the emotion directly describe ecstasy’s ambivalence, that same ambivalence is more obliquely manifest in Baudrillard’s tendency to offer widely conflicting blanket statements about the nature of the emotion. While there are a number of instances throughout his work where he aligns ecstasy very specifically with “passion”—as in the description of the “vertiginous effect” that is our “only passion” cited above—he elsewhere identifies ecstasy bluntly as “the opposite of passion.”61 This kind of inconsistency, of course, has led many critics to dismiss Baudrillard’s work, yet in this particular instance it serves a definite purpose, tapping clearly into the instability of the emotion at issue. Indeed, given this instability, it scarcely comes as a surprise that, in another feat of elasticity, ecstasy is also capable of absorbing and containing boredom. Less an emotional excess than an affective registration of emotional lack, characterized not by self-loss but by an intensified self-consciousness, boredom constitutes ecstasy’s would-be opposite number; yet as Baudrillard puts it, “No matter

58 Morris, The Pirate’s Fiancée, 188.

59 Baudrillard, Jean Baudrillard, 189.

60 Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication, 33.

61 Baudrillard, Jean Baudrillard, 189; Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication, 26
how boring, the important thing is to increase boredom; such an increase is salvation, it is ecstasy.”62 Here, in an ample demonstration of ecstasy’s capacious ambivalence, ecstasy is boredom amplified.

Ecstasy is not the only emotion to enjoy a vibrant afterlife in Baudrillard’s brave new “reversible” world, which also accommodates “fascination,” “terror” and an “extreme confusion.”63 Common to all these emotions, however, is that their definitional contours swing as wildly between categories as ecstasy’s own—combining, as they do, the mechanical and the passionate, the human and the inhuman, the emotionally excessive and the emotionally deficient. Yet if reversibility’s “semiotic order” is characterized not by the end of emotion but by the rise of a certain brand of “extreme” emotion, this is best exemplified not in Baudrillard’s texts, but by them.64 For to the precise extent that they have shrugged off the claim to “represent the direction the world is moving in,” Baudrillard’s texts have garnered a reputation as some of the most provocative around, eliciting responses ranging from euphoria to outrage, from incredulity to incomprehension.65 It can be no accident that the point in his theoretical career when Baudrillard began matching his piercing critique of reference with an ostentatious refusal of reference, and producing texts that consistently challenged customary distinctions between true and false, subject and object, theory and art, coincides so clearly with the escalating critical excitement surrounding his work—an excitement that prompts Meaghan Morris, for one, to observe that hers is “a delight in a Baudrillard who declares the real no longer exists.”66

III.

62 Baudrillard, Jean Baudrillard, 203.

63 Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication, 25, 27, 27. Baudrillard’s morphology of “extreme confusion” bears a striking resemblance to the profile of bewilderment I offer in my fourth chapter.

64 Mike Gane, introduction to Symbolic Exchange and Death, ed. Mike Gane (London: Sage, 1993), x.

65 Pawlett, Jean Baudrillard, 107.

As I have shown, many critics read the postmodernist writings of Baudrillard and Jameson as dismal visions of an inhuman, frigidly emotionless universe. This is a reading I have tried to destabilize by arguing that theorizing the continuing function and efficacy of emotion in postmodernism is foundational to both theorists’ projects. Yet if Baudrillard and Jameson have been unjustly construed as prophets of an emotionless postmodernism, the key misconception that attends Lyotard’s work is slightly different. While acknowledging that emotion has a significant place in Lyotard’s vision of postmodernism, critics have tended to figure the relationship between the two terms as binary and antagonistic, with emotion persisting only despite and in the face of a “postmodernism” that militates strongly against it. Stuart Sim’s work on the series of essays collected in Lyotard’s *The Inhuman*—essays primarily focused on the subject of the sublime in art—is exemplary here. According to Sim, Lyotard’s argument in *The Inhuman* is structured around a rigidly hierarchicalized opposition between on the one hand, emotion (which Sim identifies with the “human”), and on the other, “the forces of ‘techno-science’ (technology plus science plus advanced capitalism, the multinationals, and so on)” (which Sim identifies with the “inhuman”). For Sim, that is, Lyotard’s *The Inhuman* is fundamentally the expression of “a fear that computers will eventually be programmed to take over from human beings,” through a progressive “infiltration of the inhuman into our everyday concerns,” as traditionally human characteristics like emotion are eroded by the inhuman forces of techno-science. Another of Lyotard’s critics, Andrew Slade, situates Lyotard’s sublime in opposition not just to reason but also to “cognition,” a term that covers all mental labour. As Slade puts it, the stakes of … Lyotard’s thought of the sublime lie precisely in the intractable difference between cognition and sensibility. The feeling of pleasure or

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displeasure, or of pleasure and displeasure, that is central to the sublime feeling, cannot come under the legislation of the rules of cognition.70

Here, “sublime emotion” exists at an unbridgeable distance from “cognition”—a cognition whose continual devaluation throughout Slade’s discussion of Lyotard affords it a similar status to that of Sim’s techno-scientific “inhuman.” Perpetuating a model of Lyotard’s work that has gained a widespread critical currency, both Sim and Slade champion emotion as a peculiarly “human” entity that is the direct antithesis of wholly inhuman postmodern technological, scientific or cognitive phenomena. In this view, emotion emerges as a series of natural, bodily and autonomous impulses that, both expressing and embodying what it is to be human, are perpetually at once endangered by and disruptive of the “inhuman” social grids of technology, cognition and rationality.

It is not hard to grasp the grounds on which this rather romantic reading of Lyotard’s view of emotion might be advanced. Like many postmodern and poststructuralist theorists, Lyotard is committed to a philosophy of singularities, heterogeneity and difference, a philosophy of the “unharmonizable” within discourse.71 This otherness takes various forms across his work, assuming the shape, variously, of the visible, figure, the rhetorical, work, the unconscious, the event, postmodern anachronism, the sublime, affect and the Thing. In Discourse, Figure, for example, Lyotard argues that structured, abstract conceptual thought has dominated philosophy since Plato and that sensual experience has been undervalued; the figural functions as a disruptive force which effectively undoes rigid structures of discourse and thought.72 Likewise, in Libidinal Economy, Lyotard develops the notion of “intensities,” which are unbound excitations of force.73 In The Differend, he shows that the existence of the differend


72 Jean-Francois Lyotard, Discourse, Figure, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

73 Lyotard, Libidinal Economy.
within a speaking situation can open up new possibilities for thought and action and allow those voices threatened with silence to be heard.74 As Simon Malpas has noted, Lyotard’s thought generates ways to destabilize and disrupt those systematic theories that attempt to provide totalizing or universal explanations, whether they be theories of art and literature, politics, philosophy or history. The primary aim of Lyotard’s writing is, through these disruptions, to allow different voices and new ways of thinking, writing and acting in the world to emerge.75

Deploying a number of different terms throughout his career as privileged metaphors for disruption and difference, then, Lyotard has continually sought to find fissures within abstract or universal thought—an effort perhaps crystallized in his work on postmodernism’s delegitimization of meta-language. As Sim observes quite accurately, “Lyotard’s sympathies always lie with what the system cannot encompass: to wit, ‘work, figural, heterogeneity, dissensus, event, event, thing … the unharmonizable’—all synonyms in his writing for ‘difference.’”76 In other words, Lyotard typically valorizes forces of disruption and instability that might be thought hostile to the rationalizing and “inhuman” forces of science and technology.

Yet whereas Sim assumes that, in doing so, Lyotard unambiguously opposes the two sets of terms, in each one of these cases, Lyotard’s work is marked by a subtle deconstruction of the implicit opposition between the two terms under discussion, revealing the extent to which they are mutually implicated. Discourse contains elements of the figural; the differend materializes only through the fact of language-games; libidinal intensities emerge only on the “great libidinal strip” of language. As Bill Readings puts it,


75 Simon Malpas, Jean-Francois Lyotard (London: Routledge, 2003), 103.

76 Sim, Lyotard and the Inhuman, 29.
Lyotard’s attacks on the negativity of theory and critique in de Saussure, Marx, Lacan and semiotic analysis do not represent any naïve affirmation of experience (itself a theoretical construct in reference to a subject), but a deconstructive disruption of the conceptual reduction.77

That is, rather than simply opposing the figural to discourse, or the differend to the speaking situation, Lyotard deploys deconstructive techniques to expose the ways in which ideologically and metaphysically privileged terms like discourse, language, reason and science are inextricably bound up with these “other,” discredited terms. To return to the terminology offered by Sim and Slade, Lyotard’s sense of the relation between emotion and the “inhuman” forces of postmodern techno-science and rationality cannot be assimilated to an oppositional or binary model; rather, for Lyotard, the two terms are dialectically fused together in a way that tends to conform more clearly to a cognitive model of emotion than a romantic model of expressive emotion.

In what follows, I want to demonstrate this by tracing the contours of Lyotard’s analysis of one emotion in particular—the emotion of the sublime, an emotion that, first elaborated in classical Greek and Roman philosophy, and achieving the status of a popular topos of debate in the eighteenth century, acquired its fullest, most realized working-through in the work of Immanuel Kant. As I will show, while many critics have interpreted Lyotard’s model of the sublime emotion as an unbounded, upswelling force entirely alien to and disruptive of an “inhuman” postmodernity, this interpretation can’t be sustained. In fact, Lyotard’s sublime conforms clearly to my own dialectical model of the relationship between emotion and postmodernism, in that it both incorporates and depends on the very “inhuman” postmodern phenomena that it operates to disturb. Interrelated with the inhuman at the level of cause, structure, source, object and content, the sublime is not just an emotion that persists despite postmodernism; it is, as I will demonstrate, a properly “postmodern emotion.”

Certainly, reading Lyotard’s analysis of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*—the text through which Lyotard’s own understanding of the sublime is articulated—it is not

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difficult to see how critics have come to situate Lyotard’s sublime in opposition to postmodern social and technological phenomena. According to Lyotard,

The sublime … takes place … when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, match a concept. We have the idea of the world (the totality of what it is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it … we can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to make visible this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate.78

“Presenting the fact that the unpresentable exists,” the “sublime situation” indicates that there is something beyond the limits of experience that we can conceive of even if we can’t represent or imagine it.79 The “sublime sentiment,” then, can be construed as a powerful aesthetico-affective response to the disparity between our capacity for conceptualization and our capacity for concrete representation.80 A mixture of pleasure and pain, it oscillates between loss and triumph, between “the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept” and “the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation”: the pleasure, that is, in realizing the existence of the unrepresentable.81 According to Lyotard, as the central engine of the postmodern avant-garde, an art that “devotes its ‘little technical expertise … to presenting that the unpresentable exists,” the sublime emotion has a significant disruptive effect on the “inhuman” rational and techno-scientific platforms of


79 Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 78.

80 Lyotard, The Inhuman, 125.

81 Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 81. In this sense, the sublime response can be readily distinguished from the response to the beautiful. Whereas the aesthetic of the beautiful produces an “agreement” between “the capacity to conceive and the capacity to present an object,” the aesthetic of the sublime works to “prevent the free union of the faculties” of reason and imagination, provoking “a conflict between the faculty to conceive of something and the faculty to ‘present’ something. (Lyotard, (“An Answer to the Question,” 78, 77, 78, 77.)
postmodernism. In attesting to the irreconcilable gulf separating an epistemology predicated on the perceptible and knowable, and an ethics that can only ever function at the level of the concept, the sublime functions as a “shattering” of the ideal of a totalizing “rational system” enshrined in philosopher Jürgen Habermas’s notion of “communicative rationality”—and the techno-scientific complex that this rationality sustains. In other words, the sublime foregrounds the fractures and instabilities in the “unity … identity …[and] security” of our vision of social and ethical reality—a vision that, when not questioned, tends toward what Lyotard calls the “terror of totality”. Emphasizing the sublime’s capacity to disrupt postmodern techno-scientific rationality, then, Lyotard’s work initially appears to license Sim and Slade’s opposition of the sublime emotion and the postmodern “inhuman.”

Yet a closer reading suggests that if the sublime works to “shatter[]” the reality sustained by regimes of techno-science, it is also absolutely dependent on these regimes for its very emergence, with postmodernism’s techno-scientific forces providing the necessary historical and technological ground for this eruptive, disruptive emotion. On one level, this relation between the sublime and the inhuman

82 Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 78, 79.

83 Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 77; Stephen K. White, *The Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas: Reason, Justice and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 104, 28. For Habermas, the aim of art should be to “anticipate in aesthetic presentation the possibility of rational communication taking place”; in other words, art’s aim should be not to underscore the gaps between cognitive, ethical and political discourses, but to bridge them in a way that facilitates an idealized rational exchange and provides a model for a totalizing “rational system.” (Malpas, *Lyotard*, 39; Jürgen Habermas, quoted in Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 72.) For Lyotard, however, the aim of art should be to disrupt this, to expose the gaps between the the perceptible and the rational, the cognitive and the ethical. As Joanna Zylinska suggests, for Lyotard, the power of the avant-gardes lie in “the disturbance they cause to the self-satisfaction and performative excellence of the modern subject, a subject whose criteria of value and taste and dependent on the ‘behavior’ of the market.” (Joanna Zylinska, “‘Nourished … on the Irremediable Differend of Gender’: Lyotard’s Sublime,” *Gender After Lyotard*, ed. Margaret Grebowicz [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007], 156.)

84 Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 73, 82, 81.

85 Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 77.
is a practical and causal one. As Lyotard argues in “An Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern?” it is only with the emergence in modernity of sophisticated representational technologies like photography and film, that writers and painters were able to renounce “the endemic desire for reality” and “question the rules of the art of painting and narration as learnt and received from their predecessors,” discovering, in the process, that “those rules…[are] means to deceive, to seduce and to reassure.” To the extent that postmodernity only extends and elaborates modernity’s representational technologies, it is difficult not to read the aesthetics of the sublime as historically dependent on the inhuman techno-scientific epoch whose co-ordinates it disrupts. Yet the relationship between the postmodern techno-scientific inhuman and sublime emotion penetrates deeper than the purely causal, extending to a shared skepticism toward what passes for “reality.” As Lyotard incisively observes, while one of the effects of the techno-scientific regime is the production of the illusion of a coherent, stable reality, the development of any one techno-scientific regime is contrastingly predicated on a sense of “the lack of reality of reality”—a position that clearly echoes the sublime’s commitment to the “unpresentable.” As Lyotard puts it,

science and industry are no more free of the suspicion which concerns reality than are art and writing …. The objects and the thoughts which originate in scientific knowledge and the capitalist economy convey with them one of the rules which supports their possibility: the rule that there is no reality unless testified between partners over a certain knowledge and certain commitments … Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without a discovery of the lack of reality of reality, together with the invention of other realities.

86 Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 75, 75, 74.

87 Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 77.

88 Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 76-7. As Lyotard continues, “This withdrawal [of reality] is absolutely central to the emergence of science and capitalism. No industry is possible without a
Where the emergence of new regimes of techno-science depend upon a “nihilis[tic]” or “perspectivis[t]” awareness of the arbitrariness of the “rules” that regulate our current perception of reality, the sensibility subsuming techno-scientific advancement seems oddly reminiscent of the sensibility at the heart of the sublime, which crystallizes around the conviction that “there is something which can be conceived [but] which can neither be seen nor made visible.” The implication here is that the sublime emotion is informed by the same historical “flight of reality out of the metaphysical, religious and political certainties” that gives rise to the inhuman forces of what Lyotard rather vaguely calls “science and industry.” This establishment of a direct historical correspondence between the intense emotion embodied by the sublime and the “inhuman” regime of postmodern techno-science runs entirely against Sim’s claim that feeling survives only  despite postmodernism’s increasing mechanization, its encroaching “techno-science” and the process by which “the inhuman has infiltrated our daily existence.”


80 Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 77.

81 Sim, Lyotard and the Inhuman, 6. The later work collected in Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime extends the suggestion that the sublime emotion is marked by many of the characteristics of techno-scientific rationality. Whereas the emotion of the beautiful is marked by a “disinterested delight, not directed by an interest in the existence of the object,” the emotion of the sublime is identified with a kind of exploitative and even violent relation to its object, as its sense of powerlessness before “a magnitude or a force that exceeds its power of presentation” entails a certain abuse of those elements of nature that fall within the domain of the representable. (Lyotard, Lessons, 77, 52.) As Lyotard puts it, “[the sublime] becomes the user of nature. This employment is an abuse, a violence. It might be said that in the sublime feeling thinking becomes impatient, despairing, disinterested in attaining the ends of freedom by means of nature.” (Lyotard, Lessons, 52.) In this exploitative relation to nature, the sublime emotion surprisingly replicates some of the characteristics that we have become accustomed to attributing to techno-science: instrumentalism, end-orientation, the exploitation of resources, and a basic “will to mastery.” (Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” Technology and Values: Essential Reading, ed. Craig Hanks [Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010], 101.)


defending emotion against the inhuman perils of postmodern techno-science, this reading suggests that, on the contrary, Lyotard perceives this “inhuman” epoch as oddly cognate with, even uniquely hospitable to, sublime emotion.

What is even more striking for our effort to place emotion and the inhuman postmodern into dialogue, is that, having carefully embedded the emotion of the sublime within the inhuman technological and social co-ordinates of postmodern techno-science, Lyotard strategically dials down the emotional weight of alternative and historically older responses to art such as “pleasure” and “delight.” 92 Initially, the distinction is merely one of intensity, as Lyotard contrasts “the extreme tension (Kant called it agitation) that characterizes the pathos of the sublime,” with “the calm feeling [characteristic] of beauty.”93 Yet by the period of the Lessons, the sublime’s status as an emotion makes it “contrary to taste [ie, the beautiful],” the pleasure attached to which apparently no longer constitutes an emotion at all. Indeed, having sucked the affective substance out of the feeling of the beautiful, Lyotard continues to expand the definitional scope of the sublime until virtually all emotions can be shown to fall into its jurisdiction.94 As he puts it,

One must not think that the affectual ‘content,’ so to speak, determines the sublimity of a feeling. Any emotion, any subjective state or thought can pass over into the sublime: anger, desperation, sadness, admiration, and even … apathy, a state of disaffection, can become sublime,

for the sublime is distinguished, he insists, not by the “affectual qualities or nuances” of the content, but “rather, by the quantity of energy that is expended on the occasion of the object said to be sublime.”95 Where all emotions have the potential to become

92 Lyotard, The Inhuman, 99.
93 Lyotard, The Inhuman, 98.
94 Lyotard, Lessons, 68. Italics mine.
95 Lyotard, Lessons, 154.
sublime when exacerbated to a certain level of self-shattering fervor, the sublime, it would seem, simply *is* strong emotion. In this model, far from being banished by the inhuman of postmodern techno-science, emotion—at least in the field of aesthetics—only begins to emerge with its advent, in the form of feeling of the sublime.

Yet not only is the sublime response—and thus, implicitly, aesthetic-affective responsiveness in general—specific to this most “inhuman” of historical moments, its appearance both entails and depends upon the spectator’s encounter *with* the inhuman. According to Lyotard,

> The sublime cannot be the fact of a human art, or even of a nature complicit … with our sentiment. On the contrary, in the sublime, nature stops addressing itself to us in this language of forms, in these visual or sound landscapes which bring about the pure pleasure of the beautiful and inspire commentary as an attempt at decipherment. Nature is no longer the sender of secret sensible messages of which the imagination is the addressee.⁹⁶

Here, the sublime object is conceived not as an anthropomorphic reflection of the human, but as radically inhuman: intractably present, “in excess of consciousness,” pure “presence,” the Kantian sublime is the “it happens.”⁹⁷ Again, a contrast with the aesthetic of the beautiful proves salutary. Whereas the feeling of the beautiful presupposes “an affinity of nature with reflective thinking,” in which nature’s forms are “able to be immediately read by the feeling of the beautiful,” the object of the sublime is radically other, radically inhuman; whereas the beautiful resides in the quality or form of an object, the object of the sublime is pure quantity, marked only by its “magnitude” and “formlessness”—a mode that manifests itself, in practice, as a lack of both human figuration and recognizable forms.⁹⁸ Modern and postmodern art’s shift away from the representation of the human figure has been viewed in many

⁹⁶ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 137.

⁹⁷ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 79, 139, 93.

quarters as alienating the viewer and foreclosing the possibility of emotional response. For Lyotard, however, far from countervailing the emergence of the sublime emotion, the inhuman seems to supply its ideal object. In this connection, it is worth noting that, while the absence of the human form at the level of pictorial representation is often compensated for by the humanizing figure of the artists him- or herself, whose individual energy the work is seen to express, the art of the sublime is further marked by the complete effacement of the figure of the artist. Describing the color-field works of Barnett Newman, for example, Lyotard suggests that

Newman’s space is no longer triadic in the sense of being organized around a sender, a receiver and a referent. The message speaks of nothing; it emanates from no one.99

Not only is Newman’s work evacuated of the human figure, it is also wholly lacking in the expressive elements that might enable us to trace it back to a human agent. For Lyotard, however, it is precisely Newman’s expulsion of the human, his “flushing out [of] the artifices of presentation,” that makes his work available to the feeling of the sublime.100 In these terms, then, far from opposed to the inhuman, the “real sublime sentiment” can be shown to revolve precisely around an aesthetic confrontation with the inhuman.101

Yet Lyotard’s deconstruction of the opposition between emotion and the inhuman proceeds further still, as, in addition to predicating the sublime emotion on the encounter with the inhuman, and locating this encounter in an inhuman age, Lyotard suggests that the sublime emotion actually pivots on the exposure of the inhuman—that is, the mechanical and inorganic—within the human subject. According to Lyotard, the spectator’s encounter with something that cannot be presented by the imagination “gives rise to a pain, a kind of cleavage within the subject between what


100 Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 79.

101 Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 81.
can be conceived and what can be imagined.”102 Yet where it is a vision of full, expressive self-presence that underpins the archetype of the human subject, this image of a proto-poststructuralist “split” subject, fractured by the gap between what she can imagine and what she can conceptualize, seems to reveal the subject as itself inhuman.103 Certainly, this dysphoric moment of “cleavage” rapidly cedes to a moment of pleasure, as “the impotence of the imagination attests a contrario to an imagination striving to figure even that which cannot be figured.”104 Far from being split or fractured, in the emotion of the sublime the subject is consolidated and buoyed up to in the realization that her conceptual reach may compensate for her imaginative failures.105 Yet as Lyotard’s descriptions of the unfolding of the sublime emotion repeatedly insist, in order to reach this putatively human state of emotional intensity, we must transition through a moment of “cleavage,” splitting or fracture that is not human at all. Indeed, the same paradoxical structure appears to be at play in Lyotard’s description of the Burkean sublime. According to Lyotard, the effect of Burke’s “very big, very powerful object [that] threatens to deprive the soul of any it happens,” is to “strike[…] it with astonishment … the soul is thus dumb, immobilized, as good as dead.”106 Again, this moment is temporary, as “art, distancing this menace, procures a pleasure of relief, of delight. Thanks to art, the soul is returned to the agitated zone between life and death, and this agitation is its health and its life.”107 Yet while the process ultimately culminates in a moment of sublime emotion, marked by the vibrantly human feelings of “relief,” “delight” and “agitation,” this emotion can materialize only through a kind of inhuman death-in-life, a dumb immobilization. As

102 Lyotard, The Inhuman, 98.

103 Lyotard, The Inhuman, 1.

104 Lyotard, The Inhuman, 98.

105 Lyotard, The Inhuman, 98.

106 Lyotard, The Inhuman, 99-100.

107 Lyotard, The Inhuman, 100.
Lyotard puts it pithily in *Lessons*, “The ‘regression’ of the imagination in sublime feeling strikes a blow at the very foundation of the ‘subject’. Taste promised him a beautiful life; the sublime threatens to make him disappear.”¹⁰⁸

What is “inhuman” about the emergence of the sublime, however, is not just its form, a “cleavage” between faculties that seems radically opposed to the whole subject, but also its content, since the faculty that triumphs within this cleavage, the faculty around which the sublime’s unique combination of “relief,” “delight,” and “agitation” revolves, is the faculty of cognition. As Lyotard puts it, the feeling of the sublime “renders … intuitable the supremacy of our faculties on the rational side.”¹⁰⁹ Far from being a paradigm for a traditional romantic conception of emotion, then, the feeling of the sublime is the epitome of the triumph of cognition over affect, the inhuman faculty of reason over the faculty of the imagination. Indeed, it is not just that the sublime is an emotion generated by an idea or concept, but that it is an emotion generated by the idea of the power of ideas, flying entirely in the face of the initial feeling of awe and terror that inaugurates it. Clearly Lyotard valorizes the sublime’s capacity to institute a “shattering” of the inhuman, totalizing model of the world inscribed in Habermas’s model of “rational communication.”¹¹⁰ Yet while repudiating Habermas’s model of a transcendent or totalizing rationality as an “illusion,” Lyotard nonetheless also sees reason as central to our capacity to bear witness, in the sublime feeling, to the fact that it is an illusion.¹¹¹ As Lyotard puts it in a pair of striking paradoxical formulations, the sublime “short-circuits thinking with itself”; it “leaves thought dumbfounded even as it exalts thought.”¹¹² In this sense, it is only through the inhuman faculty of reason that we are able to expose the gaps and fractures within an inhuman reason.


¹¹⁰ Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 77; Malpas, Lyotard, 39.

¹¹¹ Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question,” 81.

As this analysis has shown, the sublime emotion both incorporates and depends upon the “inhuman” postmodern phenomena that Sim and Slade pit it against. Far from being in danger of expiring in the postmodern, then, the sublime both emerges in, and is marked by a series of uncanny affinities with, the “inhuman” regime of technoscientific rationality that it disrupts. Like Jameson and Baudrillard, it would seem, Lyotard is committed to a model of emotion that incorporates that which resists it, a model of emotion in which the negative moment of its failure or demise is transmuted into a moment of amplified intensity. In the uniquely dialectical emotions of euphoria, ecstasy and the sublime, emotion and postmodernism form a companionable pair rather than haughty antagonists. Yet the extremity of these “exemplary” postmodern emotions leaves something to be desired in the phenomenological geography of postmodern aesthetics. While Jameson, Baudrillard and Lyotard all provide a commodious home for emotion in postmodernity, their reliance upon extreme emotions raises the question of how our more humdrum, everyday experiences of postmodern aesthetics might work. While not continually overcome with ecstasy or euphoria, we remain responsive to postmodern texts in ways we take for granted. In the chapters that follow, then, I will examine some of the more routine emotions that attend our cinematic experience of postmodern texts—emotions of fear, bewilderment, boredom, fascination and knowingness.
Fear: Dead Subjects and Living Dolls in Wes Craven’s *Scream* and Sigmund Freud’s “The Uncanny”

The publicity poster for Wes Craven’s 1996 blockbuster, *Scream*, is dominated by the image of a screaming female face in extreme close-up (*Figure 1.1*). Her eyes are wide and pupils dilated with fear; her chalky-white face shades into a gloomy chiarascuro, as if to relegate the other information the poster contains, from the title of the film to the names of the cast, to the status of insignificant small print; and her hand only partially covers what Gilles Deleuze vividly calls “the shadowy abyss” of the screaming mouth, its protracted howl forming an “o” at the centre of the image.¹ Striking in its minimalism and directness, the poster makes a powerful statement in the context of a genre that was then, as it remains now, the object of critical speculation as to its emotional efficacy. As the preeminent sign and expression of fear, the scream possesses a cachet in the horror genre’s physical grammar that far supersedes that of the rival responses catalogued in Noel Carroll’s morbid parataxis of “tension, cringing, shuddering, recoiling, tingling, frozenness, momentary arrests, paralysis [and] trembling.”² For while an oral expression, like speech—the vehicle of language and meaning—the scream marks a point of semiotic failure in which speech dissolves into pure noise, issuing, ostensibly, not from the mouth but from deep within us: this is emotion welling up out of the body, rather than merely writing upon it, involuntary overflow rather than surface inscription. Indeed, as what Mladen Dolar dubs “the most salient inarticulate presymbolic manifestation of the voice,” the scream threatens not just to disclose our psychic contents, but to turn us inside out.³ As Deleuze puts it, in the scream “the entire body tr[ies] to escape, to flow out of itself … to disgorge itself through a tip or hole”—a violent disgorging that the poster’s deployment of the figure of the hand *over* the mouth only amplifies, by figuring the conventional social and cultural mechanisms ostensibly operating to


Figure 1.1 Scream’s publicity poster.

suppress or contain it. Foregrounding the scream, then, this key piece of promotional material constitutes a promise at once entirely implicit and screamingly explicit: to restore the affective power of a generic tradition regularly figured in terms of “crisis,” “fatigue” and “dissatisfaction.”

It does not require too much critical dexterity to observe that the status of the scream the poster depicts is far from secure: as our eyes scan down from the scream of the

4 Deleuze, Francis Bacon, xiii.

image to the scream of the title, we transition from the ostensible immediacy of the visual to the manifest mediation—and slipperiness—of linguistic positing, a slipperiness that is not only semantic (a “scream,” after all, is not only a cry of pain or fear: it is also commonly used to refer to a text, object or person capable of inducing laughter), but also syntactic, as the “scream” in question oscillates between event and imperative, between a pure emotional release and a disciplinary instruction—“Scream!”—that recalls a Foucauldian analytics of the confessional body. This instability in the status of the film’s titular expression is hardly surprising, of course, for as scholars and critics never tire of reminding us, Scream is an ostentatiously “postmodern” horror film.6 An installment in the popular “slasher” sub-genre, its account of a group of friends in the fictional town of Woodsboro, who become the target of a masked killer known as “Ghostface,” is replete with the “knowing pastiche” and “consistently arch references to previous work in the genre” that have become the calling cards of postmodern aesthetics’ relentless appeal to spectatorial self-consciousness.7 The scream, by contrast, continues in much film theory to epitomize an absorbed spectatorial naiveté, a naiveté in which, as Tom Gunning puts it, “credulity overwhelms all else, the physical reflex signaling a visual trauma.”8 Within this line of thinking, the kind of immediacy and naiveté associated with the scream, and the kind of savvy reflexivity associated with postmodern aesthetics, are wholly incompatible. This opposition is tenuous, to say the least; indeed, the groundbreaking article in which Gunning’s analysis appears frames the identification of the scream with spectatorial naiveté as an insidious misreading. Yet the models of emotion that currently dominate film theoretical readings of horror tend to perpetuate


the polarization of postmodern aesthetics and the scream of fear. Carroll’s influential analysis of “art horror,” for example, transports a basic cognitive appraisal model of emotion into the domain of horror criticism in order to argue that the “abnormal physical agitation (shuddering, tingling, screaming etc)” elicited by horror has been “caused by … my thought: that [the monster] is a possible being, and my evaluative beliefs that (b) said [monster] has the property of being threatening in the ways portrayed in the fiction.”

For Carroll, then, and for the many film critics who similarly draw upon cognitive appraisal models of emotion, spectatorial fear at horror depends on the uncomplicatedly referential reading of the image that a postmodern text forecloses. Whereas the emotions of fascination, boredom, knowingness and bewilderment addressed in later chapters are sufficiently idiosyncratic, self-reflexive, and displaced as to render them quite readily reconcilable with the basic tenets of postmodern film aesthetics and theory, the scream of fear, read in this rigidly cognitive way, seems obdurately resistant to such a possibility.

Given the scream’s abiding status as postmodern aesthetics’ other, then, it is hardly surprising that Fredric Jameson’s argument for a postmodern “waning of affect” is articulated through a discussion of Edward Munch’s 1893 expressionist painting The Scream, and that it is the scream—the “embodiment … of the very aesthetic of expression itself”—whose “vanish[ing]” Jameson points to as “a dramatic shorthand parable” of the transition between modernism and postmodernism. Nor is it surprising that despite the burgeoning of interest in emotion in cinema studies, the extensive critical work on so-called “postmodern” horror film has almost entirely neglected the question of the genre’s capacity to scare us. Most critical discussions of postmodern horror, a genre which includes Scream but also encompasses films like Wes Craven’s New Nightmare (Wes Craven, 1994), I Know What You Did Last Summer (Jim Gillespie, 1997) and Scary Movie (Keenan Ivory Wayans, 2000), treat the texts as cerebral exercises in “spot-the-allusion,” interesting not for their capacity


to tap into the kind of intense feeling we associate with the horror genre, but for their
capacity to engage reflexively with horror tradition. In fact, far from functioning as an
appropriate site at which to explore fear, and its most privileged bodily confession,
the scream, postmodern horror has become a critical magnet for anxieties about the
demise of emotion in postmodernism as a result of cultural exhaustion. Writing of the
“contemporary teen horror film,” Pamela Craig and Martin Fradley complain of the
“numbing of the sub-genre’s affective content” and the “apathetic political
sensibilities of [horror film’s] youthful consumers”; following sociologist George
Ritzer, Paul Wells analyzes what he calls a “McDonaldisation of horror” in the
“postmodern text,” lamenting the way that these “knowing deconstructions of the sub-
genre speak only limitedly about the culture that produces them”; in a vitriolic review
of Marcus Nispel’s 2003 remake of horror classic Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Tobe
Hooper, 1974) Mark Kermode refers to the “cynical modern sensibility” of the horror
remake’s “jaded 21st century audience”; while Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller pit the
“darker, more disturbing and increasingly apocalyptic” tone of horror cinema after
2001 against the self-consciously postmodern horror of the 1990s, suggesting that it
was only after the events of 9/11 made “critique and reflexivity … suddenly
unacceptable” that the genre relinquished “national apathy … disengagement [and]
retreading the fundamental tropes of the genre” in order to offer “narratives that are
frighteningly timely.”¹¹ In part through the evocation of the spectre of a “jaded,”
“cynical” and “apath[etic]” postmodern spectator, these critics frame the signature
gestures of postmodern horror aesthetics—“knowing deconstruction,” “critique and
reflexivity”—as obstinately incompatible with the profound emotion of fear. As Matt
Hills’s survey of the critical literature on postmodern horror concludes, “po-mo horror

¹¹ Pamela Craig and Martin Fradley, “Teenage Traumata: Youth, Affective Politics, and the
Contemporary American Horror Film,” American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the
Millennium, ed. Steffen Hantke (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 78 and 82; Paul
Wells, The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 94, 97,
97; Mark Kermode, “What a carve up!” Sight and Sound 13.12 (December 2003): 16 and 13; Aviva
Briefel and Sam Miller, Horror After 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror (Austin, TX: University
of Texas Press, 2011), 1, 2, 2, 3.
… apparently no longer works to code [or, it would appear, elicit] social/cultural fears, but instead reflects only on previous genre texts.”

Initially, this sense that postmodern aesthetics might have no place for the kind of guttural, full-bodied fear promised by the film’s billboard campaign seems entirely borne out in Scream itself. While the poster proffers the reassuringly human spectre of a woman screaming, at the core of the film’s narrative lies an open-mouthed, elongated latex “scream” mask, a mask which—along with a black, full-body cloak—constitutes Ghostface’s signature garb. At once recalling Jameson’s figure for an anxiety-ridden modernism (the shape and expression of the mask is clearly modeled on Munch’s original painting) and confirming Jameson’s hunch about the figure’s redundancy in a wholly commodified, hermeneutically suspect “postmodern” world, the mask suggests that in Scream’s postmodern universe, a scream is less the expression and source of anxiety than a mass-produced Halloween toy. This is a point the chief of police rams home when he notes, upon finding a mask abandoned at the scene of one murder, that the floppy latex bauble has no value as evidence: “you can buy these at every five and dime store in the country.” Stripped both of the empathic swirls of cloud and landscape that bespoke, in Munch’s original scream-landscape, a sympathetic world, and the promise of an anguished inwardness, the mask embodies an affective display with no relation either to a subject or to the social. Indeed, the toy is deprived even of that scene of origin by which, in many classic slashers, a mass-produced object is magically invested with an “aura” that renders it distinctive and unique, from Jason’s hockey mask (Halloween, John Carpenter, 1977) to Catwoman’s rubber catsuit (Batman, Tim Burton, 1990). So conspicuously free of aura is the scream-mask, in fact, that many of the film’s plot-points pivot on the question of whether the masked figure is the real killer or a prankster posing as him. In its relentless circulation throughout the film, then, the scream mask tends to bear out Vera Dika’s claim that “The stalker film …. is made up of dead things …. from parts of old films,” embodying precisely the logic of seriality, mechanical repetition and

exhaustion that has led critics to proclaim the genre’s emotional demise in postmodernism.13

Yet if the gaping latex mask seems to provide a tidy, concrete trope for the failure of the emotion it depicts, this failure is perhaps more consequentially embodied at the level of form: in a strategy typical of postmodern cinema’s penchant for generic mixture, but rarely, until Scream, so clearly embodied in horror cinema, the film’s violent slasher scenarios not only fail to evoke the screams promised by its poster, but are uneasily matched by comic affective cues. Certainly, the film’s narrative is familiar enough, with the first scene placing us in an antiseptically well lit, suburban ranch-style home with a home-alone teenager, Casey (Drew Barrymore), whose blonde hair, creamy complexion and white-on-white outfit make her ideal slasher-film fodder. It’s not long before the film delivers on its generic promise, with Casey receiving a series of phone calls from a dusky, Jack-Nicholson-esque voice, whose light banter suddenly turns sinister when Casey’s interlocutor reveals that he can see her: “I want to know who I’m looking at.” Shattering at once the fantasy of physical distance established by the device of the telephone, and the fantasy of meta-filmic distance established by the self-aware horror film chit-chat, the revelation is striking in its equation of voyeurism and physical threat—an equation secured when Ghostface actually bursts through the glass sliding doors, knife at the ready. The extended chase sequence that ensues culminates in Casey’s slaughter, and, in a final spectacle that consolidates the episode’s status as the film’s “primal scene,” she is left to hang, “gutted,” from a tree. Yet while the narrative and characterization of this scene traffic in familiar horror-genre cliché, replete with screaming, pleading and tears, the film’s tonal and affective plane markedly diverges from tradition by inviting us to assume a position of amused, self-reflexive distance from the very real violence Scream depicts. On the one hand, this invitation is built into the very structure of the scene, as Ghostface proposes what he calls “a little game,” a snap “horror film history” quiz in which failure to answer correctly spells instant death. On the other hand, it’s apparent in the visual allusions with which the scene is loaded, from the Jiffy Pop Casey is heating up on the stove, a clear reference to years of teen-horror

13 Vera Dika, Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 207.
direct-marketing ploys, to the homage to Dario Argento’s *Suspiria* (1977) knitted into the image of Barrymore hanging from the garden tree. This tendency to punctuate its brutal executions with a humorously reflexive commentary on its own generic logic is secured further as the film proceeds and we are introduced to our protagonist, the beautiful, virginal Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell), whose mother was killed one year before in identical slasher-style, and whose own life now appears to be at risk. For even as the killer begins knocking off the core cast, the film provides dramatic and affective space for an amused, knowing response, as its characters relay the events through their knowledge of a range of slasher texts, note connections between ‘real’ events and those in classic slasher film, speculate as to who will play them in a movie version, and argue about the “rules” for “surviving” a slasher.\(^\text{14}\) The kind of knowing, detached posture these strategies petition seems to give weight to the widespread critical anxiety that postmodern horror breeds numb, desensitized spectators.

If *Scream*’s tonal level appears to be marked by an effort to turn “slasher flicks into slapstick,” moreover, the primary characters’ emotional deviance both matches and feeds into the film’s own.\(^\text{15}\) Vernacular incarnations of postmodernism’s favorite monster, the numb, emotionless subject, the characters seem more concerned with exploiting the film’s various grotesque scenarios for wise-cracks than with registering the full horror befalling their butchered peers. When Randy (Jamie Kennedy) receives a phone-call informing him that the school principal has been murdered and “found hanging from the goalpost on the football field,” his friends’ jubilant response is to drive over to the school to have a look “before they pry him down”; likewise, when

\(^{14}\) The characters’ cinematic references run the gamut from *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) to *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1977), to *Friday the Thirteenth* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980). It is worth noting that the film’s reflections on genre are complemented by a series of meditations on media voyeurism: the callous professional investment of TV journalist Gale Weathers (Courtney Cox) in extracting Sidney’s “story,” at all costs, functions self-reflexively as a figure for the film’s own exploitative relationship to suffering.

Sidney notes that Casey Becker, the film’s first victim, “sits beside [her] in English,” her best friend Tatum (Rose McGowan) is quick to quip: “not anymore.” If, as Carroll has suggested, “the responses of characters [in horror film] often seem to cue the emotional responses of the audience,” the “callousness” of Scream’s teenage cast would seem to mark out a position not for a horrified spectator, but for a knowing, amused and distanced one, an audience who—to borrow John Kenneth Muir’s description of Scream’s characters—care only about their “own entertainment, not the feelings of other people” and whose “exposure to sanitized movie violence has left them with no concept of real pain and suffering.” As the title’s playful collapse of laughter and fear suggests, then, Scream’s comic tone and characterization render the pained, anguished screams of its victims “a scream,” conjuring all too starkly the glacially emotionless postmodern horror spectators projected by aghast cultural commentators.

With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that the film should have entered critical circulation as a cornerstone text in the argument about the waning of emotion in, and as an effect of, postmodern horror spectatorship. As Steffen Hantke has shown in a thorough analysis of the film’s hostile academic reception, according to many popular and scholarly commentators, “Scream was … the worst thing to happen to horror film,” its “recycling of ‘classic’ precursors transform[ing] the more politically attuned horror film of the previous generation into self-indulgent postmodern play.” Thomas S. Sipos, for example, deploys the familiar opposition between self-referentiality and genuine emotion in order to argue that “Scream’s self-referential and smart-alecky,

16 Carroll, “The Nature of Horror,” 52; John Kenneth Muir, Wes Craven: the Art of Horror (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2004), 205. For another critic whose work assumes a direct correlation between character and spectatorial emotion, see Linda Williams’s argument that “the spectator is caught up in an involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on screen.” (Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess,” Film Quarterly 44.4 [Summer, 1991]: 44.)

tongue in-cheek attitude … diluted its own horror, and that of the cycle it spawned.”18 
Scream emerges here as both underproductive and monstrously over-productive, at 
once “dilut[ing]” real horror and “spawn[ing]” a cycle of equally emotionless 
commercial film product. Kendall Phillips also invokes Scream’s investment in 
satirizing previous slasher films as a sign that it has failed to grapple with the “general 
sense of hysteria, fear and paranoia” that “grip[s] the country,” arguing that in doing 
so it has contributed to the fact that “the American horror film has fallen back into 
one of its periods of slumber.”19 Sipos and Phillips, then, predicate genuine 
spectatorial fear on the realistic, serious depiction of substantial politically or socially 
charged threats. To the extent that Scream’s affectively compromised, thematically 
evacuated and self-reflexive comic horror wholly evades this structure, it is taken as a 
sign that the slasher is losing both emotional efficacy and popular ground.

Yet there are a number of conspicuous instabilities in the argument that Scream’s 
evocation of the numb, emotionless subject embodies a culture-wide waning of 
responsiveness to horror film, and that this, in turn, heralds the demise of the genre. 
First of all, while foregrounded with an unusual clarity in Scream’s idiosyncratic 
juxtaposition of violence and humor, the figure of the numb, desensitized subject was 
hardly a new figure in postmodern slasher reception. In fact, the figure had appeared 
again and again in the critical discourse around the slasher in response to earlier 
examples of the genre, where relentless repetitions of a fixed formula had, according 
to many critics, already resulted in a conspicuous emotional gap between the 
screaming victims on screen, and amused, detached and “desensitized” spectators—a 
gap, then, that Scream would appear to underscore rather than originate. Robin 
Wood’s description of watching The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Tobe Hooper, 1974) 
alongside what he delineates as “a large, half-stoned youth audience who cheered and 
applauded every one of Leatherface’s outrages against their representatives on the

18 Thomas M. Sipos, Horror Film Aesthetics: Creating the Visual Language of Fear (Jefferson, NC: 
McFarland and Company, 2010), 23.

19 Kendall Phillips, Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture (Westport, CT: Praeger 
“screen” is typical here both in its disapproving juxtaposition of “cheer[ing] and applaud[ing]” with the “outrages … on the screen,” and in its moralizing, pseudo-scientific reconstruction of non-normative feeling (i.e., “cheer[ing] and applaud[ing]” at horror) as a sign of the complete numbing or failure of feeling.20 Along similar lines, Tania Modleski tellingly structures her argument about perversions of subjectivity in postmodernism around a discussion of unfeeling slasher film spectatorship. Describing “the audience’s great glee” as “an unseen nameless presence” “annihilates one by one their screen-surrogates,” she aligns this cinematic scenario with a broader sociological one, a “kind of joyful self-destructiveness on the part of the masses” in the culture at large, where the rhetorical force of both descriptions depends on the putative discrepancy between emotion and act, between “glee” and annihilation, between ‘joyful[ness] and “self-destructiveness.”21 While Scream’s explicit disparity between comic affective cues and on-screen violence is notable for bringing the figure of the numb, desensitized spectator of postmodern slasher into sharp focus, then, it would appear from these analyses that the history of the figure is as long as the history of the genre itself. This impressively long critical life-span calls the numb spectator’s status as a harbinger of the slasher’s demise into serious question. If Wood’s “cheer[ing] and applaud[ing]” spectator of 1974 was really a portent of a new post-emotional age, in which teenagers would be wholly inaccessible to emotional appeal, it remains to be seen why were people still attending slasher films—and attending in such numbers—in 1996.22


22 To say that people were still attending in 1996 is an understatement for far from dying out, what Roger Ebert has called the “dead teenager” genre enjoyed an unprecedented popularity in the wake of Scream. (Roger Ebert, Roger Ebert’s Movie Yearbook, 2009 [Kansas City: Andrew McMeel Publishing, 2009], 860.) Not only did Scream gross $173 million worldwide on a slim $15 million production budget, but it spawned a series of copycats, from the I Know What You Did Last Summer franchise to the Scary Movie franchise, which mimicked both its basic comedy-horror paradigm and its
Yet what is at least as striking as the recurrence of the figure of the numb subject is the recurrence of the fear that the numb subject is said to have displaced, as the anxious fretfulness with which critics write of the “waning of affect” in postmodern horror seems to constitute the fearful response they insistently claim has fallen away. For Kim Newman, for example, *Scream*’s comic approach to horror signals a degeneration of its capacity to depict “the horrors and neuroses of the age,” a function that, once essential to horror, has now been “passed on to other types of movies.”<sup>23</sup> Yet the performative level of Newman’s argument comes into direct conflict with his constative claims. Arguing that *Scream*-like “comic horror has all but driven the real stuff out of the marketplace,” rendering the “non-camp horror movie ... an endangered species,” Newman projects the emotionally effete “comic horror” in conspicuously non-comic—and even horrific terms—terms: as a raging, monstrous entity capable of driving the feeble, non-camp “real stuff out of the marketplace.”<sup>24</sup> In doing so, Newman’s work seems both to exude and evoke the fear he insists is precluded by postmodern horror’s excessive levity. Jonathan Lake Crane’s evocation of *Scream* is also suffused with a pervasive disquiet, and again, that disquiet seems, paradoxically, to revolve around the spectacle of fear’s demise. After a description of the film’s opening sequence, in which Casey Becker is murdered for not knowing the name of the killer in *Friday the 13th*, Crane observes that in a film defined by knowing pastiche, death is a matter of trivia ... and a trivial matter ... [T]he generic representation of gory death becomes a playful game for initiates only. The trivialisation of death through the consistently arch reference to previous work in the genre, a monstrous version of cinematic homage, reaches an even more enfeebling point near the conclusion of the film... Climactic scenes from *Halloween* (1978) play on the television as the casualties mount. Within the popular success. ("Box Office History For Scream Movies," The Numbers, [http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/series/Scream.php](http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/series/Scream.php), accessed July 6, 2009.)


knowing constraints of the postmodern horror film … film feeds upon film as the genre embraces the acquisitive logic of cannibalism.25

For Crane, Scream’s substitution of “cinematic homage” and intertextual “reference to previous work” functions to “enfeebl[e]” or “trivial[ize]” our emotional experience. What is striking, however, is the way in which this process of emotional enfeeblement or trivialization is itself re-imagined in “monstrous” terms, as the figurative incorporation of “cinematic homage” becomes the brutally literal incorporation of “cannibalism,” such that the film’s emotional deficiencies assume, through a tropological slippage, all the “monstrous” and “gory” power of the violent events to which they so conspicuously fail to respond appropriately. Again, these monstrous projections manifest a persistent critical fear that recursively takes the film’s ostensible deficit of fear as its object; as in the passage by Newman, whatever emotion Crane projects as lacking in the general spectatorial response to the postmodern horror is recuperated at the level of the analysis itself. This is, of course, a fear displaced and inverted—less a response to the film’s gory violence than a meta-response to a spectre even more horrible than violence: the spectre of the anaesthetized subject who does not fear it. Yet as both Adam Rockoff’s description of the journalistic hoopla around slasher-spectator numbness as a “scare” and Wood’s description of watching Texas Chainsaw Massacre with numb, emotionless teens as a “terrifying experience” suggest, a displaced critical response cannot be differentiated in any final way from the “immediate” spectatorial response to the film.26

But how do we account for these anxieties in light of claims about the desensitized, emotionless spectator? For feeling theorists like Massumi, the anxiety circulating around the postmodern slasher should be construed as a sign that postmodern speculations about the numb, emotionless spectator are simply wrong. In Massumi’s terms, the figure of the numb subject is a critical misconception oblivious to the intensity of feeling that encrusts postmodern cultural and social forms. As we have


seen, Massumi makes a direct dig at Jameson’s “the waning of affect” in his assertion that “belief has waned for many, but not affect. If anything, our condition is characterized by a surfeit of it.”

Yet rather than subscribe either to the notion that fear has expired in postmodernism, or to the idea that it is in simple, uncomplicated “surfeit,” this chapter will suggest that in postmodern aesthetics the emotion of fear is importantly bound up with the spectacle of its own demise. To the extent that this spectre of the numb, desensitized spectator has recurred again and again across the history of postmodern slasher, without the genre seeming at any point to lose audience cachet, we should assume that the figure of the numb subject is, in some way, essential to the postmodern slasher and its continuing emotional appeal. Arguing this involves complicating the model of fear that has become the template both for our understanding of how cinematic fear works, and for our sense that fear is incompatible with postmodern aesthetics. In Carroll’s standard model, fear is orientated around a monstrous object perceived to be threatening or dangerous. Yet as I will show through a re-reading of Sigmund Freud’s classic essay “The Uncanny”—a somewhat idiosyncratic yet nonetheless important instance of this model of fear—this paradigm is by no means the only one. While the key through-line of “The Uncanny” is an argument for a model of fear as a response to the threat the other poses to the subject’s bodily and psychic integrity, the essay’s suppressed dialogue with another text, Ernst Jentsch’s “On the Feeling of the Uncanny,” offers us glimpses of a very different model of fear. In this classic instantiation of the archetypally modern discipline of psychoanalysis, then, a revisionist, quintessentially postmodern model of fear has a kind of buried, covert existence, rendering one of the most influential arguments for the emotive, expressive subject a rich resource for theorizing


28 Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 27.


a powerful but counter-intuitive link between, on the one hand, the scream of fear, and, on the other, the numb, emotionless spectatorship that seems to herald its demise. In these terms, precisely because of Scream’s insistence on the anaesthetized spectator, the poster’s promise to restore the emotional power of the horror genre may have more currency than one might initially suppose.

II

Proposing to isolate the “specific affective nucleus” that “allows us to distinguish the uncanny,” Freud’s investigation of the uncanny draws initially, and perhaps most famously, on the term’s complex etymology.31 In an analysis of an extended dictionary excerpt, he demonstrates that the term “uncanny” yields two distinct sets of meanings, one of which relates to the familiar and comfortable and the other of which relates to the strange and foreign. Indeed, “among the various shades of meaning that are recorded for the word ‘heimlich’ there is one in which it merges with its formal antonym, ‘unheimlich,’ so that what is called heimlich becomes unheimlich” in a kind of semantic impaction whose effect, Freud concludes, is felt in the uncanny’s inherently ambivalent status as “that species of frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had been long familiar.”32 Importantly, however, this etymological discussion is followed and reinforced by an extended reading of a literary example—that of E.T.A. Hoffman’s dream-like, gothic little tale “The Sand-Man.”33 Hoffman’s story opens with an account of a young Nathaneal, whose fears of the terrible fairy-tale figure, the “Sand-Man,” said to steal little children’s eyes, have become bound up in his mind with the malicious Coppelius, a family friend who often spent evenings in conversation with his father. These childish fears are borne out

31 Freud, The Uncanny, “The Uncanny.” While there are important distinctions to be made between anxiety, fear, terror and the feeling of the “uncanny,” this chapter will tend to conflate these four terms as different species of fear.

32 Freud, The Uncanny, “The Uncanny.”

when Coppelius becomes implicated in the death of his father—and are re-awakened, years later, when Nathaneal, now a student living in a university town, encounters Coppola, a barometer and eye-glass dealer, who may or may not be Coppelius under another name. By chance, Nathaneal becomes enamoured of Olimpia, a wooden automaton built by Coppola that he believes to be real; his subsequent discovery of the trick in the story’s breathtaking finale precipitates both Nathaneal’s figurative descent into madness and his final quite literal descent into a convenient nearby abyss. Abounding in strange doublings and shifting identities, then, the story is ripe for analytic exploration.

While marked by an investment in psychic symbolism and displacement peculiar to psychoanalytic theory, the model of fear Freud develops during his reading of “The Sandman” bears striking structural similarities to the basic cognitive appraisal model of emotion that seems to structure our conventionalized understanding of what it is to scream before, to shudder at, to fear a film—and so to structure our assumption that we can fear no longer. According to Freud, the fear the story generates in its readers can be traced, “beyond doubt,” to the triplicate figure of Coppola/Coppelius/the Sandman.34 As Freud observes, “psychoanalytic experience reminds us that some children have a terrible fear of damaging or losing their eyes,” an anxiety whose persistence into adult life seems substantiated by a multitude of “dreams, fantasies and myths.”35 For Freud, then, it is significant that in each of its three instantiations, the Coppola/Coppelius/the Sandman complex seems to pose a threat to the eyes, whether through the Sandman’s legendary status as a thief of little children’s eyes, Coppelius’s sinister doubling of the Sandman, or Coppola’s literal production of ocular prosthetics. In these terms, the fear that congregates around the triad revolves around its threat to their bodily integrity, and thus, like the cognitive appraisal model of fear, Freud’s model of fear assumes that emotion is a physiological response to a perceived threat posed by the other to one’s physical or mental well-being. This model is profoundly complicated, of course, by Freud’s insistence that the anxiety

34 Freud, The Uncanny, “The Uncanny.”

35 Freud, The Uncanny, “The Uncanny.”
aroused in a reader by the Sandman’s threat to vision exists in a substitutive relation to an ancient, formative anxiety about castration.\textsuperscript{36} Indeed, it is the “particularly violent and obscure emotion” aroused by the threat of castration that “first gives the idea of losing other organs its intense colouring,” and which thus charges “The Sandman” with the emotion of the uncanny.\textsuperscript{37} Yet while Freud’s psychoanalytic model of fear is obviously idiosyncratic in its insistence that any fear we experience in the present is an echo of deeper, infantile fears, the basic structure he advances, in which fear is a physiological response to the judgment that one is imperiled from outside by a menacing other, seems strikingly reminiscent of the structure enshrined in more familiar cognitive appraisal models of emotion.

Yet the model of fear Freud establishes here is bound up with—at once builds upon and attempts to refute—an earlier, far less stable and linear representation of fear. This is a model established by Jentsch in 1906 in a paper “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” which Freud cites as the sole discussion of the uncanny preceding his own and which also, significantly enough, deploys the Hoffman story. Jentsch’s argument, however, is quite different to Freud’s. For where Freud traces the uncanny effect of the Hoffman story to the threat to the subject posed by Coppelius/Coppola/The Sandman, for Jentsch, these fears accrue rather to the sense of uncertainty engendered by the ambiguously animate figure of Olimpia. As Jentsch points out, Olimpia’s status is strikingly indistinct. While seeming the height of feminine perfection—possessed of “beautifully moulded features,” a “shapely figure” and a voice like a “glass bell”—she also seems peculiarly inhuman, with a “peculiar rhythmic regularity” in her dancing and a “stiff and measured” gait.\textsuperscript{38} For Jentsch, it is

\textsuperscript{36} As Freud puts it, “anxiety about one’s eyes, the fear of going blind, is quite often a substitute for the fear of castration.” (Freud, \textit{The Uncanny}, “The Uncanny.”)

\textsuperscript{37} Freud, \textit{The Uncanny}, “The Uncanny.” In line with Freud’s earlier-elaborated notion that “the uncanny is something familiar that has been repressed and then reappears,” then, the threat of the loss of one’s eyes only acquires its intense emotional charge because of its ability to reawaken a repressed oedipal anxiety about another threat: the threat of the loss of the penis. (Freud, \textit{The Uncanny}, “The Uncanny.”)

Hoffman’s strategy of “leav[ing] the reader in uncertainty as to whether he has a human person or rather an automaton before him” that is the key to the story’s diffuse anxiety. As Jentsch puts it more generally, “among all the psychical uncertainties that can become a cause for the uncanny to arise, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate, and, conversely, doubt as to whether a [seemingly] lifeless object may not in fact be animate.” In the latter case, our uncertainty revolves around a sense that a lifeless object might, in fact, be animate, as in Jentsch’s examples of dolls, wax figures and tree-trunks that unexpectedly turn out to be snakes. In the former, conversely, our uncertainty revolves around a sense that an apparently living being might, rather, be inanimate, as in the case of “epileptics,” whose fits “reveal[] the human body to the viewer—the body that under normal conditions is so meaningful, expedient and unitary … as an immensely complicated and delicate mechanism.” Despite the different directionality of the imagined transformation, however, both examples elicit in the reader an anxiety about the object’s ambiguous status, which veers unnervingly between human and inhuman, animate and inanimate, affective and emotionless. Significantly, however, the way Jentsch frames this anxiety suggests that our fear does not simply revolve around the object per se. Rather, our perception of its ambiguous human/non-human status triggers processes of identification that prompt us to assess the implications of this status for ourselves as subjects. As Jentsch puts it, our observation of these figures suggests “that not everything in the psyche is of transcendental origin,” and that “mechanical processes are taking place in that which [we were] previously used to regarding as a unified psyche.” The (in)human other, that is, seems to call into question the naturalness and priority of our own emotions, awakening latent uncertainties about our status as autonomous emotive subjects.


As this suggests, Freud and Jentsch’s models of the workings of the uncanny are opposed almost point for point. Where for Freud, the uncanny is premised on a certainty that the other is threatening or dangerous, liable to take out our eyes if not “castrate” us altogether, for Jentsch, the uncanny derives from intellectual uncertainty about the animate or inanimate, human or inhuman, mechanical or organic status of the other. Where for Freud, our fears echo an originary anxiety about the threat posed by symbolic castration, and are thus independent of dramas of imaginary identification, for Jentsch, our fears depend centrally on a dreaded identification with the (in)human other, an other whose ambiguous emotional status calls into question our own. Where for Freud, the “uncanny” is merely a variation on the familiar and homely, and thus leads us back into the circle of the intimately subjective, for Jentsch, the uncanny is wholly other, provoking us to doubt the stability of our familiar categories of self and other, inside and outside, animate and inanimate.43 Where for Freud, then, the figure of the numb, emotionless other occupies a position that is wholly at odds with the subject of fear, for Jentsch, the spectacle of the ambiguously animate other is importantly bound up with our ability to feel afraid: our fear derives from an intellectual uncertainty as to the animate status of the other, an intellectual uncertainty that in turn triggers fears for our own status as feeling subjects.

Importantly, Freud does not let this marked divergence between his own position of fear and that of Jentsch pass unchallenged. While the question of the uncanny might seem like an inconsequential one in relation to Freud’s broader theses—and while, in fact, Freud is quick to devalue “emotional impulses” as secondary phenomena unusually “restrained, inhibited” in their aims in comparison to the drives that are his more general preoccupation—for Freud, as for many psychoanalytic film scholars after him, the screams, cries and shivers documented in and elicited by the horror text fulfil an important supplementary function, their powerful evidential value capable of authenticating claims about the significance of castration anxiety in the structuration

43 Where Coppélius is merely a regular fellow with a memorably irregular appetite for little children’s eyes, Olimpia’s unstable occupation of the category human prompts unsettling questions about the status, orientation and nature of emotion.
of the subject. It is hardly surprising, then, that in his own essay on the aesthetics of the uncanny, Freud sought to repudiate Jentsch’s view, repeatedly insisting, in no uncertain terms, that “uncertainty as to whether an object is animate or inanimate” is “quite irrelevant” to the story’s “uncanny effect.”

Importantly, however, there are a number of moments in the Hoffman story itself that seem to quietly bear out Jentsch’s suggestion that it is the figure of Olimpia rather than the Sandman who exerts the story’s most potent uncanny effect. It does not seem insignificant, for example, that in describing an encounter with Olimpia in a letter to a friend, Nathaneal not only directly nominates Olimpia as the source of an “uncanny feeling,” but does so in terms that laminate this emotion to her ambiguously animate status. As Nathaneal puts it, “There was something lifeless about her eyes, as though they lacked the power of sight; she seemed to be asleep with her eyes open. I had a rather uncanny feeling ... there must be something peculiar about her.” Yet perhaps the most persuasive substantiation of Jentsch’s theory of fear lies, paradoxically, in a scene that Freud deploys to corroborate his model of fear as an effect of castration anxiety, to link the “scream” to the figure castration. This is the scene in which the young Nathanael is caught spying on the nocturnal activities of his father and Coppelius, and in doing so, glimpses:

human faces … visible on all sides, but without eyes, and with ghastly, deep, black cavities instead… ‘Bring the eyes! Bring the eyes!’ cried Coppelius in a hollow rumbling voice. Gripped by uncontrollable terror, I screamed and dived from my hiding place on to the floor.

44 Freud, *The Uncanny*, “The Uncanny.”


46 Freud, *The Uncanny*, “The Uncanny.”

Alerted by Nathaneal’s scream to the presence of the spying boy, Coppelius—like the fairytale figure with which the boy has equated him—threatens to take out his eyes, announcing, “‘Now we’ve got eyes—eyes—a fine pair of child’s eyes.’”48 In response, continues the narrator, “My father raised his hands imploringly and cried: ‘Master! Master! Let my Nathaneal keep his eyes! Let him keep them!’”49 Freud frames the horror of this scene—a horror condensed both in Nathaneal’s scream and his father’s cry of protest—as a response to the threat of castration posed first by the sight of the “human faces …without eyes” and then by Coppelius’s announcement that he intends to extract the boy’s eyes. Yet this reading of the scene’s peculiar uncanniness depends on an elision of the context in which the threat to the eyes takes place—a context in which the eyes seem less linked metaphorically to the testicles than metonymically to the “hands and feet” as just one of a number of “parts” of the body that Coppelius has commandeered for some kind of obscure epistemological enterprise. It is worth noting, for example, that after relenting and allowing the boy to “‘keep his eyes,’” Coppelius proclaims his intention of “exam[in]g the mechanism of his hands and feet’”: as the narrator recalls, “he seized me so hard that my joints made a cracking noise, dislocated my hands and feet, and put them back in various sockets.”50 While Freud traces the scene’s uncanniness to the manifest threat to Nathaneal’s eyes, far more uncanny here is the extent to which Nathaneal seems to function as a doll-like object for assembly and disassembly, a veritable collection of spare parts. Though Freud attempts to recuperate the metonymical slide between “eyes” and “limbs” by framing the unscrewing of the limbs as “a new castration equivalent,” the language in which the unscrewing is framed suggests a discourse not of punishment but of scientific investigation. Again, what is at stake is not Nathaneal’s castration but his uncanny conversion into an object: inert, insensible, his bodily members fair scientific game. The sense of the uncanny that pervades this scene derives not, then, from the tropological link between eyes and penis but from the symbolic oscillation between animate and inanimate generated by Coppelius’ scientific investigations into the production of life out of inert matter—investigations


that inevitably throw up the converse operation: the treatment of living beings as insentient objects.

Yet while the Hoffman story itself seems to reinforce Jentsch’s model of fear, it is Freud’s own strenuous effort to displace Jentsch’s theory that affords us the most striking proof that fear may derive from “doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate,” as the rhetorical torsions and curlicues through which Freud structures his argument function, paradoxically, to consolidate the value of Jentsch’s. The fact, for example, that Freud takes Jentsch’s quite opposite understanding of fear as a starting point for “[his] own investigation,” right down to re-deploying as his central text a literary example initially offered by his theoretical antagonist, ensures that Freud’s theory of fear as a phenomenon independent of the question of the numb, emotionless other, paradoxically originates in and as a reflexive recoil from the figure of a fearful subject whose emotions are bound up with a numb, emotionless other. Even as Freud refutes Jentsch’s theory, that is, he exemplifies the kinds of anxieties that attend the notion that there might be certain instabilities in the categories human/inhuman, animate/inanimate. The second of these performative contradictions emerges in Freud’s concluding statements to what he sees as a thorough refutation of Jentsch:

This brief summary will probably make it clear beyond doubt that in Hoffman’s tale the sense of the uncanny attaches directly to the figure of the Sandman—and therefore to being robbed of one’s eyes, and that intellectual uncertainty, as Jentsch understands it, has nothing to do with this effect.51

Here, Freud deploys the rhetorical device of contrast to pit his own fearful subject, shaken by the very concrete fears of “being robbed of [his] eyes,” against the dry, abstract “intellectual uncertainty” of Jentsch’s fearful subject. In doing so, he invokes a binary schema that identifies the concrete with the living, and the intellectual or conceptual with the non-living. Yet to the extent that it is precisely our nervous shrinking from this latter term in the binary (Jentsch’s coldly “intellectual” subject) that persuades us to accept the former (Freud’s figure of a subject wracked with fears

51 Freud, *The Uncanny*, “The Uncanny.”
of castration), the process through which we come to acquiesce to Freud’s model of fear effectively confirms Jenstch’s model, where fear functions as an instinctive springing away from that which perplexes us as to its animate/inanimate status. Freud’s effort to coax the reader into accepting the value of his own model of fear, that is, depends for its rhetorical force on the truth of Jentsch’s. However insistently we attempt to break the connection, the scream remains stubbornly shackled to the figure of the ambiguously animate other.

How does this re-reading of Freud’s “The Uncanny” inflect our understanding of the scream that seems everywhere problematized in contemporary horror and in particular in Scream? As we have seen, while Freud insistently triangulates our anxieties through deeply entrenched psychic paradigms, his model of fear nevertheless strongly recalls the basic cognitive appraisal models of emotion, in that it predicates fear on the assessment of an external threat—whether the loss of the eyes, or, at a more primal level, the loss of the penis. Yet while this model may be appropriate for understanding fear in modern horror, it is, I suggest, wholly inappropriate for understanding the unique emotional configuration of the postmodern slasher, remaining entirely unable to account for the seeming contradiction between the persistent circulation of the figure of the numb spectator in slasher discourse on the one hand, and the continued popularity of the slasher genre on the other. It thus becomes significant that while on a surface level “The Uncanny” sponsors a traditional model of fear as a response to an external threat, it also sustains a kind of proto-postmodern counter-theory that binds fear to anxieties about the possible loss of feeling, or to put it in terms that recall our original problematic, that binds the “scream” to the spectacle of the numb subject. In this model of fear, the emotion operates not through an assessment of the psychic or physical threat posed by a dangerous other but through a sense that fear itself is under threat, whether in the other or in myself. This involves the displacement of fear from the immediate level of a reaction to an external peril to the reflexive level of what Sally Markowitz calls “meta-responses,” in which we respond to and “aestheticize our reactions” (or, in this case, our lack thereof.)52 In mobilizing this idiosyncratic, alternative model of fear, it

is possible not only to reconcile the ubiquitous critical figure of the numb, indifferent slasher spectator with the continued popular fascination of the slasher genre, but to argue that it is precisely this coupling of fear and the numb subject that propels *Scream*’s immensely successful narrative and filmic project.53 *Scream*, in other words, incorporates as its enabling condition the very cultural figure that critics have identified as an index of the slasher film’s death-throes more generally: the dead, emotionless spectator. As I will show, this coupling of fear and its other takes place on multiple levels: at the level of character identification, in which our fear operates on behalf of the numb, emotionless other; at the level of dreaded identification, in which our fear is of the numb emotionless other; and at the level of a kind of anxious subjective split, in which the film’s comic affective cues threaten to transfigure us into the numb, emotionless other.

III.
The memorable set-piece in which Tatum is trapped in the garage with Ghostface offers a particularly succinct illustration of the first dynamic. With a tendency to make light of the events in Woodsboro—not least by descending into the basement while a killer is on the loose—Tatum, Rose McGowan’s busty, eye-rolling, gum-chewing red-head, epitomizes precisely the kind of numb, jaded teen recruited by critics as a sign of a newly hardened, desensitized youth. Even when Ghostface makes his long-awaited appearance in the scene, she is imperturbable, and the dialogue that follows is almost entirely constructed from movie references: “Is that you, Randy?” she asks. “What movie is this from?” she inquires drolly as she walks toward him: “*I Spit On Your Garage*?” When Ghostface blocks her exit, Tatum is still skeptical—“O, you want to play psycho killer?” Indeed, it is only when her attacker reaches for his

53 In this sense, it can be no accident that though reviewers extrapolating directly from the disparity between the film’s comic affective cues and its violent narrative content unquestioningly assume that the primary emotion provoked in *Scream*’s audience was amusement, acquaintance with the user responses on the IMDB forum makes it clear that the primary response of its audience, despite the affective cues, was one of terror. Recurring terms in the mostly ecstatic reviews are words like “terrifying” and “chilling”; one respondent titles his review “One of the scariest slasher movies ever made—one of the year’s best films”; while another claims that “th[e] film would have to be the scariest movie I have ever seen.”
knife and cuts her forearm that Tatum shows real fear. Yet where critics have characterized *Scream*’s characters’ constant recourse to knowing allusion as trivializing the violence to which they are subject, and foreclosing a fearful spectatorial response, the opposite is the case. Entirely inadequate to the reality of danger, Tatum’s amused knowingness only compounds the tension of the scene and the fear of spectator. Far from inviting a spectatorial amusement that matches hers, Tatum’s unshakeable impassivity has us shouting at the screen, in a way that anticipates Randy’s insistent exclamations to Jamie Lee Curtis’s oblivious, entirely un-affected Laurie, at the very point that she is about to be attacked: “look behind you!” At stake in this pairing of the disaffected character and the animated audience, of course, is an exact reversal of the traditional logic of character identification—a logic spelled out in Carroll’s insistence that in the horror context the responses of the characters in the text tend to bolster and even “cue the emotional responses of the audience.”

Drawing on the work of David Hume, however, Philip Fisher has offered a useful explanation of the kind of dynamics at play in *Scream*, suggesting that while texts largely depend on their characters to model the spectator’s response, they may also call upon what he calls a volunteered passion, “where we feel something exactly because the other does not.” In *Scream*, of course, our desire to “supply the missing fear” of the film’s knowing, jaded cast is amplified by the fact that—in a self-conscious twist on the classic slasher’s identification of sexual experience and violent death—the film singles out its culturally experienced characters very particularly for punishment. Its key scenes of slaughter staged as ripostes to the characters’ projections of shrewd cultural erudition, then, the film works hard to shackle our screams to its culturally savvy and emotionally benumbed subjects.


57 Where in *Halloween*, for example, it’s the sexually voracious Lynda (P. J. Soles) whose life is most at risk, in *Scream*, it’s the wise-cracking Tatum—her pop-culture references running a promiscuous gamut from *All the Right Moves* (Michael Chapman, 1983) to *Friday the 13th*—who’s earmarked for the film’s bloodiest death. It is in accordance with this same logic that Sidney Prescott, the only member of the core teenage cast who survives *Scream*’s bloody mise-en-scene, is also the only
Yet if *Scream* generates fear on behalf of these numb, emotionless subjects, it also renders them fear’s object, as, far from a sign of the expiry of the genre, the numb, emotionless spectator is transfigured into the genre’s newest monster. Replete with dead eyes, flat emotionless, stare and monotone drawls, Billy and Stu are self-conscious embodiments of a millennial nightmare of teenagers “turn[ed] psychotic” by horror: “watch a few movies, take a few notes … It was fun!” This new lamination of monstrosity to media-saturated emotionlessness is evinced in the fact that the two young men’s disclosure that they are the masterminds behind Ghostface is articulated through their revelation of an unexpected knowledge of horror film. As Billy divests himself of the pretence that he is an anguished stabbing victim and reveals himself as one of the film’s cold-blooded killers, the transition is marked and indeed defined by his quotation of Anthony Perkins in *Psycho*: “we all go a little mad sometimes.” In *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, which draws primarily on slasher films of the 1970s, Carol Clover identified the killer in terms of his psychosexual “fury.” By the 1990s, however, the slasher is no longer furious; he’s blank, emotionless, or amused. The tension sustained by Billy’s cold, emotionless demeanor is, if anything, defused by a momentary humanizing glimpse of the genuine rage and hurt that underpins it. When Sidney’s interrogation of his motives prompts him to recall how “[Sidney’s] slutbag mother was fucking my father … and she’s the reason my mother moved out and abandoned me,” Billy’s air of impervious, emotionless cool is displaced by a rage that, while initially more intense, is also less scary. The tension is restored, however, when the cut back to Billy—at a long shot reveling in Sidney’s awed absorption of the information—shows him turn away from Sidney to address Stu with a flippancy that undercuts his earlier display of vulnerable humanity: “How’s that for a motive? Abandonment causes serious deviant behaviour.” Fear, it would seem, is alive and kicking in postmodern aesthetics, with the qualification that it has come to orientate itself not around an external threat but around the question of its own continued

character who, while not actually virginal, is nevertheless the postmodern equivalent: inexperienced in the rules and conventions of horror, quite open about her refusal to watch horror film, and thus the ideal (because so easily-horrified) horror-film viewer.

existence—that is, around the anxious speculation that in someone, somewhere, emotion is in dire paucity. Recruiting as its villains precisely those numb, desensitized young people “turn[ed] psychotic” by horror that—for most critics—augur the exhaustion of the genre, Scream transforms the figure of the numb, emotionless spectator into the engine rather than the expiry of the slasher form.

Importantly, however, at stake in this transformation is—beyond our fear both for and of the numb, disaffected characters—a fear for ourselves, as the film’s irresistible comedy threatens to transfigure us into the knowing, emotionless spectators it depicts. Again, the scene with Tatum exemplifies this dynamic. While on a narrative level the scene punishes Tatum’s knowing disbelief with death, on an emotional level the scene repeatedly tempts us into occupying a parallel position of amused skepticism. This is especially evident in relation to the masked killer, whom the film invites us not to fear but to ridicule. On the one hand, his costume is a degraded, commercialized, trick-or-treat version of Munch’s high-modernist seriousness. On the other, his farcical tumbles—skidding on beer, sent flying by an opening fridge door, the victim of Tatum’s flying beer cans—continually threaten to tip his air of menace into slapstick. Even when he has irrevocably established his serious intent by murdering Tatum, the ludicrously comic physical details of the murder, which sees her severed mid-torso in the garage-door cat-flap, accompanied by exaggerated foley noises to indicate squashed internal organs, make it hard to resist assuming the posture of knowing amusement that got her there in the first place. Conventional theory concerning the relationship between comedy and horror in slasher films frames comedy as a formal technique for relieving the tension built up by the spectacle of violence (as Noel Carroll has it, “Horror, in a sense, oppresses; comedy liberates. Horror turns the screw; comedy releases it”). In Scream, however, the film’s humour actually works to ratchet up the tension, functioning as an affective lure that holds out to the viewer precisely the position of knowing, satirical amusement that gets the characters in so much trouble.

The salient effect of the mobilization of the terrifying spectacle of the numb or emotionless subject, then, is the reproduction of the feeling, fearful, living subject, who is resurrected within the postmodern slasher as the subject desperately worried for the state of his or her emotional subjectivity. How, after all, can we be numb and emotionless if we’re wracked with anxiety over that very prospect? Certainly, the weight that this places on the scream—as the ultimate locus of the distinction between properly feeling and unfeeling subjects, and as a function of the definition as much as the expression of the fearful subject—is immense. Yet *Scream’s* detective-story structure makes it especially well placed to dramatize the significance of a scream that is everywhere pressed into narrative service in the distinction between killer and potential victim. An illustrative incident here sees Sidney, having extricated herself from Ghostface’s vicious ambush, flee up the path toward the house in terror. Rather than pursue her, however, her attacker seems suddenly to disappear; we see Sidney’s point-of-view shot of the road, note that it is empty and then cut back to her terrified face, before a deliberately skewed and unsteady tracking shot follows her up to the porch, where she frisks the deputy sheriff’s prostrate body for a gun. At this point, we hear voice-off cries, and the reverse shot shows Randy dragging himself up the path, pleading for help and clasping his apparently wounded thigh. While the audience knows that he is innocent—we were privy to his attack—Sidney’s first intuition is that he is the killer, trickily divested of his costume and feigning injury; as we cut back to the house, we see her cocking the gun, prepared to defend herself. Now, however, her point-of-view shot discloses yet another figure arriving at the house; this time it’s Stu, also clasping his thigh. Here, the boys’ terrified cries—“Sidney!” “Help me!” “It’s him! He’s a killer!”—are as much pleas for Sidney to recognize them as fearful subjects as they are expressions of their very real fear of the killer; as much attempts to differentiate themselves from what they have rightly intuited to be the distinctive emotionlessness of the killer as they are expressions of their fear. Our spectatorial horror at *Scream’s* numb, emotionless killers is analogous in its collapse of the performative and the expressive; screaming at the sight of postmodern horror’s assembly of numb, emotionless subjects, we effectively differentiate ourselves from them.
This run of argument tends to bear out Cosimo Urbano’s speculation, made in relation to the trajectory of horror film across the twentieth century, that “both monsters and the manner in which they are depicted change precisely so that their effects can stay the same.” Yet while this argument would seem to project a rosy picture of emotive subjects issuing miraculously from the corpses of dead ones, the movement is far from unidirectional. If Tatum’s emotional deficiencies procure spectatorial fear, moments of character terror seem to foreclose spectatorial response. While, as Carroll puts it, the shuddering “recoil” of Dracula’s Jonathan Harker from the sight of the vampire is meant to “structure [the reader’s] emotional response,” in Scream, on the contrary, Casey Becker’s show of emotion seems actually to obviate ours. As the camera tracks in on Casey’s tearful, terrified face, her display of horror leaves this scene entirely devoid of the compelling tension that characterizes the rest of the film. Where the object of fear has shifted from the violence itself, to the emotional deficiencies of its victims, violence accompanied by healthy, robust response leaves us cold, actually relieving the spectator of the anxiety about insufficient response that attends the scene of Tatum’s death. Slavoj Zizek’s notion of “interpassivity” provides a useful resource for understanding this kind of emotional economy, in which one subject’s emotion seems to obviate rather than prompt another’s. Observing, of canned laughter, that “where laughter is included in the sound track … the TV laughs for me — that is, it realizes, takes over” the spectator’s emotional function, Zizek suggests that at stake in emotional display is not so much an expression of a deep-seated internal urge, but an exhibition for the benefit of what he calls in psychoanalytic terms the Other, and in which what is significant is not that I in particular respond but that someone does. It is within the orbit of this logic that both


63 Zizek, The Zizek Reader, 104-5.
our failure to respond to Casey’s cries, and our eagerness to respond to Tatum’s impassivity, take place.

*Scream,* then, is ultimately less a reassuring fable about our endlessly renewable emotional resources, a fable in which even the spectacle of the end of feeling works to generate emotion, than a disturbing warning that in postmodern culture, it may be *only* the spectacle of emotionlessness that is capable of generating feeling, and that, as a consequence, the scream and its opposite may be bound together in what Massumi might call a “mass production line of fear.”64 The final sequence bodies this principle forth in the form of a kind of frenzy of reversals and unmaskings, in which numbness and fear continually switch places, and in which a continually migrating human scream leaves a throng of numb, emotionless subjects in its wake. While Billy’s charade of gasping and crying falls rapidly away when he discloses himself as the killer, his scream finds an avid displacement in Sidney; after an extended scene in which Billy and Stu stand off against a terrified Sidney, Gail Weathers returns from the dead (“I thought she was dead”; “She looks dead”), transferring the burden of the scream to the two young men; foiling her plan and regaining the knowing, amused upper hand, the two men temporarily reduce their victims to cowering, pathetic terror, until Sidney—having escaped with the gun—assumes the posture of cool-headed, ironic knowingness that made the killer so unsettling in the first place. Mimicking the relentless displacement of the latex scream mask itself, the scream’s circulation through the sequence operates according to a kind of hydraulic model of emotion, in as if it were incapable of occupying two characters at once: every scream is bound to numb emotionlessness, every cry has its silent partner. If, for Samuel Beckett, “the tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops,” the same seems to be true of screams.65 Rather than fully sublating the mechanical and emotionless, the film’s coupling of the numb subject and the scream together merely displaces the emotionless to the systemic level.

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of a cinematic programme that produces both feeling subjects and numb subjects in equal measure.

Figure 1.2.

In arguing this, it is worth returning full circle to the film’s first scene, what Humphries calls its “brilliantly orchestrated opening.” Having temporarily evaded Ghostface by escaping outside, Casey attempts to locate his position on the property in order to determine her own next move. As she ducks under the window and then undertakes a quick reconnaissance of the interior, a point of view shot shows the smoke-filled kitchen, and a dark, ambiguous shape at the window—a shape whose sudden movement quickly reveals it as the killer. At this point, however, something odd happens: cutting suddenly to the reverse shot in a brief occupation of the slasher’s point of view, we are shown not only Casey’s screaming face, on the other side of the glass, but—superimposed upon it, in a shadowy reflection—the killer’s own latex scream mask, the instantly recognizable grimace reflected in the glass of the brilliantly illuminated interior. (Fig. 1.2.) The shot appears for no more than a second before we cut back to an action shot of the killer breaking through the window, yet its

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message is clear. Here, the mask whose palpable unreality becomes a very figure for the loss of emotion, and the very real horror of a girl in fear of her life, are bound together in a kind of double-helix structure; Casey’s cries at once a defiance of, and inextricable from, a culture everywhere marked by a “waning of affect.”

IV.
Whereas the other chapters of this thesis analyze postmodern aesthetics’ affiliation with borderline, marginal emotions, this chapter has argued for the persistence of a familiar emotion—fear—in a new, dialectical form. In its unsettling alignment of old-school slasher violence and comic tonal cues, Scream committed the emotional heresy of inviting us to respond to suffering with knowing amusement, if not outright laughter. Throughout the 1990s, the film became a kind of byword for the notion, then flourishing in both popular and scholarly cultures, that postmodern aesthetics are marked by a waning of affect, and provoked panicky speculations about desensitized young people and turgid requiems for a supposedly exhausted slasher genre in equal measure. Yet as my close analysis of the film has shown, while formally and thematically preoccupied with the figure of the numb, emotionless spectator, Scream can hardly be called bereft of emotional power. On the contrary, the film’s engagement with this figure provokes a displaced, self-reflexive form of fear that revolves precisely around the creeping conviction that fear is on the wane—whether in myself or in the other. Drawing on Jentsch’s model of fear as a response to an intellectual uncertainty as to the animate or inanimate status of the other, I have argued that fear is capable of structuring itself around—and thus renewing itself through—the spectacle of its own demise. In arguing this, I have shown that while a conventional cognitive appraisal model of fear would rule out of the possibility of fear’s survival in postmodern aesthetics, fear can, in fact, be imagined in more complex ways.

In arguing that it is this self-reflexive, supplementary form of emotion that the postmodern slasher enlists, however, I depart from the work of other critics who have endeavoured to pinpoint the difference between modern and postmodern horror. For these theorists, the shift from modern to postmodern horror is a shift from a horror located in the “other” to a horror located in the subject. For Andrew Tudor, for
example, _Psycho_ (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) ushers in postmodern horror by marking a transition “from collective fears about threatening forces somewhere ‘out there’” to a “sexuality, repression and psychosis” that is frighteningly close to home.\(^{67}\) Likewise, for Dana B. Polan, writing of “recent” horror that others have identified as “postmodern,”

part of the significance of recent horror films lies in the way they reject or problematize this simple binary opposition to suggest that horror is not something out there, something strange, marginal, eccentric, the mark of a force from elsewhere, the in-human. With an unrelenting insistence, horror films now suggest that the horror is not merely among us, but rather part of us, caused by us.\(^{68}\)

Both Tudor and Polan identify the postmodern horror with a subjective turn, in which the hidden recesses of the psychological subject become the locus of fear. Yet where the psychological subject is a peculiarly modern phenomenon, the transition Polan and Tudor describe here would appear to be a transition not from modern to postmodern, but from pre-modern to modern horror. If _Psycho_ stages the threat posed by “sexuality, repression and psychosis,” this threat is already in operation in _Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde_ (Robert Mamoulian, 1931), and—in a displaced form—in Tod Browning’s _Dracula_ (1927); in this sense _Psycho_ harks back to, by literalizing, the themes of earlier films, rather than anticipating the themes of later, more properly postmodern horror. Where the psychological subject belongs to modernism, it is the deconstruction of the subject—marked out by films from _Halloween_ on—that defines the postmodern.\(^{69}\) As my reading of _Scream_ suggests, rather than simply shift from


\(^{69}\) It is in these terms that Christopher Sharrett strongly distinguishes the slasher cycle, from _Halloween_ onward, from an earlier horror cycle bookended by _Psycho_ and _Texas Chainsaw Massacre_. For
one term to another while maintaining the basic binary oppositions of outside/inside and inhuman/human, postmodern slasher film works to destabilize these oppositions altogether, locating the numb subject as a dreadful kernel perpetually both undoing and re-engendering the fearful, feeling subject. Certainly, it is only by figuring fear as supplementary to, rather than expressive of, a suddenly problematized feeling that we can account for the contradictions within a contemporary culture in which proclamations of fear’s disappearance are matched by an unrelenting stream of commercial horror product. This argument allows us to resist the opposition between “comic horror” and what Newman calls the “real stuff” of the “non-camp horror movie”—and the related notion that the descent into ineffectual “comic horror” “through repetition and spoof to ridiculousness” is, according to some divine law of diminishing emotional returns, the manifest destiny of every horror cycle. As the example of Scream clearly demonstrates, repetition, spoof and ridiculousness are less a sign of the genre’s flagging capacity to scare us, than the lifeblood of a fear that thrives on the spectacle of its own expiry.

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Sharrett, “the psychological themes of the horror film, with their adjacent social criticism, became grossly transmogrified into the misogynist teen-kill slasher films of the Eighties.” (Christopher Sharrett, “The Problem of Saw: Torture Porn and the Conservatism of Contemporary Horror Film,” Cineaste 35.1 [Winter 2009]: 32.) In films accurately characterized as postmodern, that is, the monstrous other is located not “in” the subject but around the question of the status of the subject per se, the question, that is, of whether they—and we—are really subjects at all.

70 Newman, Nightmare Movies, 288.
Bewilderment: Postmodernity’s Face in *Mulholland Drive*

I.

At the heart of David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (2001) is a face—a face whose specifically symbolic and thematic weight is underscored by the fact that the scene in which it makes its brief appearance is serenely detached from the film’s primary narrative line. As this isolated, indelible set piece opens, we see two men seated across from each other in a diner booth. One of the men, a nervous, bushy-eyebrowed man identified in the credits as “Dan” (Patrick Fischler), claims that he “just wanted to come here” after having had “a dream about this place.” In response to the slightly skeptical prompting of the other man, Herb (Michael Cooke), Dan reveals the dream’s content:

DAN:

It’s the second one I’ve had, but they’re both the same. They start out that I’m in here, but it’s not day, or night. It’s kind of half-night, you know? But it looks just like this. Except for the light. And I’m scared, like I can’t tell ya. Of all people, you’re standing right over there, by that counter. You’re in both dreams, and you’re scared. I get even more frightened when I see how afraid you are … and then I realize what it is. There’s a man … in back of this place - he’s the one who’s doing it. I can see him through the wall. I can see his face. I hope that I never see that face, ever, outside of a dream.

HERB:

So … you came to see if he’s out there.

DAN:

[nodding] To get rid of this godawful feeling.

The dream described in Dan’s monologue revolves around a paradoxical entity: the figure of a face that can be seen through a wall, a figure in which visibility and invisibility, subjectivity and the stubbornly thing-like, uneasily converge. For Dan,
the meeting at Winkie’s is predicated on the familiar therapeutic premise that no “actual” phenomenon could be quite as unbearable as that in a dream, and thus that to confront what is “out there” is to dispel or “get rid of” the fear that attaches to it. Yet the scene that ensues short-circuits the cosy assumptions that actuate it. As the two men leave the restaurant to investigate the backlot, the intercutting between a series of tense, unsteady shoulder-mounted shots of the wall floating up toward us from the car park, and a series of equally tense, unsteady reverse shots of Dan descending the steps into the car park provokes an escalating unease that very quickly proves prescient. As the drab concrete block wall rears up to fill the screen, a grinning, dirt-coated face appears quite suddenly from behind it, occupying the frame for one single, horrifying close-up. Neither male nor female, neither young nor old, neither quite alive nor quite dead, the face remains on screen just long enough for us to register that it is a face, but not long enough for us to ground that face in a body, let alone in any kind of narrative or characterological context. With only the whites of the eyes and the dull gleam of the teeth breaking up the rind of filth that encrusts it, the face seems to have been stripped of its conventional status as the animated vehicle of human subjectivity and to have acquired, in turn, the stolid, inert quality of the wall from behind which it appears (Fig 3.3). Whereas for Emmanuel Levinas, in just one example of a still-prevalent humanist reading of the face, the face functions as the index and vessel of the human subject, this face seems to have passed into the realm of the object.¹ The credits’ designation of the figure as “Terrifying Bum” corroborates this transition, by indexing the “front” of the subject to its “behind,” the cosy familiarity of the face to the abominable abjection of “what’s left behind, what doesn’t count … [what’s] emptied of meaning except for its residual meaning as waste and its consequent association with that very emptying or wasting of meaning as such.”² Indeed, the scene’s denouement—a reverse shot of Dan collapsing limply into the arms of his baffled friend, as Angelo Badalamenti’s spectral synthesizers shudder

¹ For Levinas, for example, “the human being is a being which has a face.” (Bernard Waldenfels, “Levinas and the Face of the Other,” The Cambridge Companion to Levinas, eds. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 67.)

sympathetically—suggests that, itself evacuated of subjectivity, this face possesses the eerily Medusa-like capacity to evacuate the life of those who encounter it.

In place of the anticipated therapeutic or narrative resolution, then, the appearance of this face generates a flurry of bewildered questions: who is the “Terrifying Bum”? Why does his face instill such horror in Dan? How is the scene connected to the wider thematic and narrative concerns of the film as a whole? This bewilderment is entirely in keeping with the global tone and effect of a film that critic George Toles defines as a series of “bewildering, pathless, teasingly thorny episodes,” that Stephen Holden characterizes as a “little like peering into the semidarkness from the front car of a runaway subway train,” and that Kenneth Turan describes as “upend[ing] us psychologically like a judo master would toss a charging opponent.” Yet while the majority of Mulholland Drive’s critics chalk up the film’s well-documented emotional force to its complex, multi-layered narrative, the scene described in detail above clearly routes bewilderment through a problematization of the figure of the face.


bewilderment both effected by and depicted within the scene, in other words, is inseparable from the transformation—centred around the face of the Terrifying Bum—of subject into object, of conscious being into stupefied heap, of human face into mud-caked monstrosity.\(^5\) Indeed, far from confined to the scene analyzed above, the figure of the troubled, inverted or occulted face is one of the film’s most powerful and consistent leitmotifs, a figure inextricably bound up with *Mulholland Drive*’s much-vaunted capacity to bewilder. It is hardly insignificant, for example, that the enigma that animates the film’s narrative is precisely a face without a name, the face of “Rita” (Laura Harring), a bewildered amnesiac beauty whose effort to establish her true identity forms the core of the detective plot that develops when she is taken into the care of a blonde ingénue named Betty (Naomi Watts), fresh off the plane from Deep River, Ontario. Yet if the figure of failed faciality is key to the film’s bewilderment at the level of character and narrative, it is no less key at the level of form. From the explosive narrative drive of the film’s opening sequence to the stagnant tapering-off of its final scene, the bewilderment that suffuses *Mulholland Drive* is an effect of its escalating assault on the capacity of the face to secure suture—a project that culminates three quarters of the way through the film, as the diegesis that contains Betty and Rita vanishes and the lead actresses are capriciously recast as players in a second story-world that is at once “troublingly continuous” with, and impossibly remote from, the first.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) According to Silvan S. Tomkins, for example, bewildered babies have a “blank” expression. (Silvan S Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness, Volume II: The Negative Affects* [New York: Springer Publishing Company], 297.)

\(^6\) Lee Wallace, *Lesbianism, Cinema, Space: The Sexual Life of Apartments* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 100. It is worth noting that two films released in the same year as *Mulholland Drive*, Cameron Crowe’s *Vanilla Sky* (2001) and Richard Kelly’s *Donnie Darko* (2001), establish a similar equation between bewilderment and the figure of troubled faciality. In *Vanilla Sky*, it is the episode in which protagonist David Ames’s (Tom Cruise) face is disfigured in a car crash engineered by an embittered ex-girlfriend that sets in motion the events that lead both Ames and his audience into disorientation and bewilderment. Likewise, in *Donnie Darko*, the bewilderment felt by Donnie (Jake Gyllenhaal) is routed through and finds its clearest figuration in his repeated hallucination of the figure of Frank (James Duval), a menacing, hypnotic-voiced rabbit that repeatedly appears to Donnie throughout the film and
What this lamination of bewilderment and failed faciality underscores is bewilderment’s status as an extreme emotion, an emotion that aggressively tests the boundaries of our received ideas about feeling. Throughout the history of the philosophy of emotion, the face has invariably been conceived in subjective terms, as what Barbara Johnson calls the “pathway to the soul”; despite the fundamental structural differences between, say, Guillaume Duchenne’s expressive paradigm of emotion as a divine “spirit” that is then “paint[ed] ... on the face of man,” and William James’s insistence that physical, observable bodily or facial changes precede the internal, psychological emotion, such that “we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble,” theories of emotion have been remarkably uniform in their assumption that the face is the physiological aspect of a privileged psychological phenomenon, its twitches, grimaces and spasms inextricably coupled to something “within” the subject. In these terms, Mulholland Drive’s effort to engage with bewilderment by exploiting the figure of the problematized, troubled face suggests the emotion’s powerful destabilization of our customary understanding of the relationship between faciality, subjectivity and emotion. In bewilderment, that is, we are encountering an emotion that turns familiar ideas about feeling on their head.

What Mulholland Drive makes clear, however, is that if bewilderment is crystallized in the traumatic, destabilizing face of the Terrifying Bum, that face’s disruptive power is indissolubly connected to its reified diagnostic capacity. Mulholland Drive, in other words, is not just a bewildering film, a dizzying catalogue of collapsing and metamorphosing faces. Rather, it is a film that insistently champions bewilderment as

whose image appears on the film’s poster as a kind of visual composite of the faces of the film’s key cast. In both cases, bewilderment is tied, whether as effect (Vanilla Sky) or as cause (Donnie Darko), to the figure of the problematized face.

the emotional posture that corresponds most clearly and most symptomatically to the postmodern universe it portrays. Not only does *Mulholland Drive* glorify the beautiful, bewildered visage of the amnesiac Rita as a bodily harbinger of the narrative and social disintegration to come, but it works strenuously to endow its darker, more bewildering second diegesis with an epistemic and narrative priority over the sanguine optimism of the first. The film’s own tendency in this respect is echoed in its criticism, with most scholars earmarking the much longer section one as a dream, hallucination or “retrospective fantasy sequence” that serves to dissimulate the “real” enshrined in section two. Given this filmic and critical propensity to privilege *Mulholland Drive*’s more disorientating second installment, it is hardly surprising that we should find bewilderment cited with such approval and frequency in theoretical descriptions of postmodern aesthetic practice. Barry Lewis refers to the “bare, bewildering landscapes of the original [literary] postmodernists”; Norman K. Denzin to “this bewildering, frightening, terrifying, exhilarating historical moment”; while Stephen Bonnycastle notes that “many people feel … disoriented and dismayed by postmodern works of literature: they contain such a mixture of styles, genres, and language that they can seem bewildering.” In keeping with a long-standing

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8 Wallace, *Lesbianism, Cinema, Space*, 101. While criticism of *Mulholland Drive* has varied in specific content, it almost invariably fetishizes the film’s central diegetic break as the pivot around which to substantiate or process a version of this highly hierarchicalized opposition. For McGowan, for example, the film provides a perfect stage for articulating a familiar psychoanalytic argument about the way fantasy displaces the painful, contradictory reality of desire; for Jay R. Lentzer and Donald R. Ross, the film stages a dream that “represents [Diane’s] deeply conflicted wishes” in relation to a painful reality; for Jennifer A. Hudson, the film is an allegory of the triumph of “non-logical sense” over “traditional sense.” (Todd McGowan, “Lost on *Mulholland Drive*: David Lynch’s Panegyric to Hollywood,” *Cinema Journal* 43.2 [2004]: 67-89; Jay R. Lentzer and Donald R. Ross, “The Dreams that Blister Sleep: Latent Content and Cinematic Form in *Mulholland Drive*,” *American Imago* 62.1 [2005]: 103; Jennifer A. Hudson, “‘No Hay Banda, and Yet We Hear a Band’: David Lynch’s Reversal of Coherence in *Mulholland Drive*,” *Journal of Film and Video* 56.1 [Spring, 2004]: 23.) Such is the magnetic power of the film’s invitation to this kind of reading that performing an analogous reading here—pitting bewilderment and some other term against each other in a kind of diagnostic stand-off in which section two’s bewilderment somehow “trumps” section one’s more conventional narrative mode—remains difficult to resist.

philosophical predilection for according emotions marked by negative affect a special affinity with truth, then, both postmodern aesthetics and postmodern criticism have afforded bewilderment a certain diagnostic cachet. Indeed, while this chapter furnishes the condition of bewilderment with an ontological weight absent from the condition implied by the term “aporia”—a “tired word of philosophy and of logic” that acquired a new lease of life within Derridean deconstruction as the name for a logical impasse or paradox in which the condition of something’s being is also the “condition of [its] impossibility”—the similar critical prestige that has come to attach to the term aporia provides further evidence of postmodern criticism’s high valuation of emotions indexing disorientation, however differently structured. While bewilderment is clearly a disruptive and unruly emotion, it also seems to have acquired a certain critical and filmic distinction as an emotional cipher of postmodern aesthetic and social co-ordinates.

As this suggests, bewilderment’s status in postmodern theory and aesthetics is an ambivalent one. On the one hand, the emotion constitutes an unsettling inversion of the familiar co-ordinates of subjectivity and emotion—an inversion indexed most clearly in Mulholland Drive’s decision to articulate the emotion through a radical destabilization of the figure that has traditionally formed the heart of our understanding of emotion: the face. On the other, the emotion has been repeatedly


The traditional philosophical investment in “melancholia” is an excellent example of this.

1 Jacques Derrida, *Aporias: Dying-Awaiting (One Another At) “The Limits of Truth”* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1993), 15. As Derrida indicates, the notion of the aporia has recurred throughout his work to convey the internal contradictions that haunt the logic of the gift, hospitality, mourning, death and forgiveness. (Derrida, *Aporias*, 15-6.) Yet if aporia is a condition of an object to be known—or not known—it is also, and crucially for our argument here, a condition of the subject, a state that we “undergo” or “experience” as we would an emotion, and a state that Derrida glosses as “the not knowing where to go … the experience of the non-passage.” (Derrida, *Aporias*, 33, 33, 12.) Indeed, Derrida is careful to distinguish the state of aporia from the logical or rhetorical tropes with which it is often identified. As he puts it, “aporia … is neither an ‘apparent or illusory antinomy,’ nor a dialecticizable contradiction in the Hegelian or Marxist sense, … but instead an interminable experience.” (Derrida, *Aporias*, 16; italics mine.)
reified in postmodern theory as a valuable emotional symptom of postmodern social and aesthetic conditions. This chapter proposes to unpack the source and implications of this ambivalence. First, I will show, through a close reading of one of the only passages in postmodern theory that chronicles bewilderment in any depth, that the emotion can be situated at the crux of a chiasmus in which subject and object exchange their properties. Second, I will account for bewilderment’s privileged status in postmodern theory and aesthetics by demonstrating that its unsettling chiastic structure is almost uncannily cognate with some of the characteristics commonly ascribed to postmodernity. Finally, I will explore the implications of bewilderment’s ambivalent position through an analysis of the emotion’s inscription in *Mulholland Drive*, where its combination of diagnostic supremacy and troubling bodily force sees it simultaneously reified and quarantined to certain socially and sexually “othered” bodies. On the one hand, *Mulholland Drive* promotes bewilderment as an aesthetic and epistemic ideal; on the other, it confines the emotion to characters in whom its corrosive subjective and bodily effects are unable to threaten a critical and aesthetic practice that continues to demand a traditionally masculine posture of autonomy and agency. Tracking the formal itinerary of the face of bewilderment through *Mulholland Drive*, this chapter will argue that the valorization of bewilderment offers a glimpse into some of the more disconcerting proclivities of postmodern theory and practice.

II.
What exactly is bewilderment, and why is the figure of the troubled, inverted or occulted face its primary form of articulation in *Mulholland Drive*? While the term bewilderment recurs repeatedly in descriptions of postmodern aesthetics, it is seldom afforded any more than a superficial definition. An important exception to this rule, however, is Fredric Jameson’s extended analysis of John Portman’s Westin Bonaventure hotel, one of the key passages in the opening chapter of his *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, and a bold theoretical set-piece that Bill Brown has deemed “one of the most famous (indeed, most fetishized) scenes in the theoretical archive of postmodernity.”12 In this passage, Jameson installs bewilderment as the postmodern emotion *par excellence*, repeatedly reaching for the

word in his efforts to convey the affective experience of the cognitive and social problematics the space allegorizes, referring, for example, to his “bewildering immersion” in this “complacent if bewildering leisure time space.” Yet what is striking about his description of bewilderment is the way in which it seems to unsettle received assumptions about how emotion is supposed to work. If—as I have previously argued—cognitive appraisal models of emotion serve to secure normative ideas about political agency and subjective autonomy, Jameson’s model of bewilderment in the passage runs entirely counter to the basic criteria set out by such models, and as a result, tends to challenge or even undermine some of our most cherished assumptions about the relation between subject and object. Where the intentionality requirement of emotion demands that emotion be, as John Deigh puts it, “directed at something,” bewilderment pivots on the disorientating failure of a stable subject-object relation, an inability to locate what that “something” might be: in Jameson’s terms, the object is “impossible to seize” due to the failure of “that distance that formerly enabled the perception of perspective or volume.” Similarly, where the cognitive requirement of emotion grounds feeling in a belief or judgment, bewilderment depends precisely on the failure of our capacity to formulate a belief or judgment: in the Bonaventure, with “hanging streamers … suffus[ing] this empty space in such a way as to distract systematically from whatever form it might be supposed to have,” judgment is compromised if not impossible. Finally, where emotion is meant to possess some kind of identifiable physiological correlate, bewilderment expresses itself only in a kind of ocular “scanning”—a continual shifting from object to object that grants Jameson’s verbal dilation on the


Bonaventure its uniquely compelling power, as description devolves into a kind of breathless parataxis.\textsuperscript{17}

More than just falling short of cognitive theory’s model of emotion as a neat representational correspondence between a bewildered subject and bewildering object, Jameson’s use of the term bewilderment reveals a model of the emotion that depends on a kind of felt chiastic inversion of the conventional relation between the terms “subject” and “object.” On the one hand, the optic of bewilderment sees the object acquire many of the properties conventionally accorded to a subject. Not only do the building’s plethora of technological conveniences “plummet … down,” “shoot up” and “splash down” again, as if in a constant state of independent movement, but these movements are granted actual agency and intelligence: the “milling confusion” that the lobby produces in guests at the hotel is figured as the “vengeance this space takes on those who still seek to walk through it,” while the lobby’s decorative elements are said to “distract systematically and deliberately from whatever form it might be supposed to have,” as if the building were deliberately contriving to baffle and bewilder its guests.\textsuperscript{18} Speculating that the Bonaventure embodies a kind of “mutation in the object” that “we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with,” Jameson’s model of the hotel enshrines less a stable, knowable object, a McLuhanesque “extension of man,” than an uncanny agent capable of mutating and evolving of its own accord.\textsuperscript{19} This inverted view of the object

\textsuperscript{17} Tomkins, \textit{Affect, Imagery, Consciousness}, 297. Bewilderment’s status as a kind of failed or aborted experience has interesting implications for some of the criticisms that have been directed at Jameson’s reading of the Bonaventure, most prominent among which is the objection that the Bonaventure is “not really as bewildering as he says it is.” (Ian Buchanan, \textit{Deleuzism: A Meta-Commentary} [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002], 110.) For this insistence on the disjunction between theory and reality, between Jameson’s reading and the concrete architectural space, actually plays into and supports his reading: it is precisely this non-coincidence with the object that, for Jameson, constitutes the experience of bewilderment in the first place. Paradoxically, then, the less objectively justified the experience of bewilderment is, the more truly it warrants its name.

\textsuperscript{18} Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism}, 43.

\textsuperscript{19} Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism}, 38.
is encoded in the peculiar syntactical structures that mark the passage, with Jameson repeatedly granting the building itself the privileges of the grammatical subject:

The gardens in the back admit you … the front entry admits you … the elevator lifts you to one of those revolving cocktail lounges in which, seated, you are again passively rotated about.20

Jameson’s model of bewilderment, then, involves the attribution of grammatical agency to an insentient object—an attribution that, while perhaps logical in the case of the elevator, is far less so in the case of a garden or an entrance way.

Yet if bewilderment registers a sense that the object has acquired the properties of a subject, this same chiastic transposition sees the subject, in turn, acquire many of the properties of an object, stripped of her cognitive and perceptual faculties and plunged into a state of helpless, paralyzed embodiment. Interestingly for my argument that bewilderment’s inversion of subject and object finds its clearest articulation in the problematization of the human face, one of Jameson’s key elaborations of what he deems a state of “bewildering immersion” sees the subject not only incapable of perceiving “perspective or volume,” but “in this hyperspace up to [her] eyes and [her] body.”21 Where the face is usually the locus of subjectivity, here it becomes a surface on which external forces play, as the rhetorical fragmentation of her person into the discrete entities of “body” and “eyes” underscores her status not as the vehicle for a presiding consciousness but as a material body, less moving actively through the world than “immersed” hopelessly in it. The immediate spatial cause of this inversion of the conventional properties of subject and object, Jameson suggests, is postmodern architecture’s “dialectical heightening” of the narrative models that have begun to infiltrate architectural theory:

We know, in any case, that recent architectural theory has begun to borrow from narrative analysis in other fields and to attempt to see our physical trajectories

20 Jameson, Postmodernism, 43.

21 Jameson, Postmodernism, 43.
through such buildings as virtual narratives or stories, as dynamic paths and narrative paradigms which we as visitors are asked to fulfill and to complete with our own bodies and movements. In the Bonaventure, however, we find a dialectical heightening of this process: it seems to me that the escalators and elevators here henceforth replace movement but also, and above all, designate themselves as new reflexive signs and emblems of movement proper ...22

As this suggests, if traditional buildings can be understood as suggesting narrative trajectories for their guests “to fulfill and to complete with their own bodies and movements,” the “postmodern hyperspace” of the Bonaventure appears not just to dictate its guests’ trajectories, but also to “replace” them with its own. To the extent that its escalators and elevators are “signs and emblems of movement proper,” the building’s visitors become redundant, a kind of superfluous corporeal residue.23 The resulting instability in the subject’s status is registered in a series of slippages in the passage’s use of the pronoun. Brown has suggested that in the context of a book notable for its apparent aspiration to critical omniscience, the Bonaventure sketch stands out as a stab at the confessional mode, a moment in which one “feels fully in thrall of the autobiographical,” yet what is more remarkable about the piece than its adherence to the necessities of first-person narrative is the continual mutations in the agency governing it. 24

What one is still tempted to think of as the front entry, on Figueroa, admits you, baggage and all, onto the second story shopping balcony from which you must take an escalator down to the main registration desk. What I first want to suggest about these curiously unmarked ways in is that they seem to have been imposed by some new category of closure governing the inner space of the hotel itself ...25

22 Jameson, Postmodernism, 42.

23 Jameson, Postmodernism, 42.


25 Jameson, Postmodernism, 39.
Bewilderment manifests itself here in a kind of shifting instability in the relation between speaker and addressee: as the impersonal “one” becomes the second person “you” only to return to the first person “I.” The bewilderment that Jameson claims to feel, then, seems to institute a kind of felt tremor in the subject’s status as subject, a tremor that is hand in glove with what I have suggested is bewilderment’s saturation of the object with subjective agency. In this sense, bewilderment does not just fail to conform to a cognitive-appraisal model of emotion; it actually turns that model on its head, converting a conventional subject-object dynamic into a far less familiar object-subject dynamic, in which the subject experiences himself as an object, completely lacking in both epistemological mastery and worldly agency, while investing the world around him with all of the agency commonly attributed to a subject. Indeed, both these dimensions of the emotion are inscribed in its etymology, which, tracing the term to the late seventeenth-century verb *wilder*, meaning “to lead or go astray,” allies bewilderment with a sense not only of lost orientation (“led astray”) but of lost agency (“*led astray*”). In these terms, it seems hardly surprising that bewilderment should find its most compelling form in the problematization of the face, the physical figure most consistently called upon to function as a metonym of subjective models of emotion.

Yet what is quite as striking as bewilderment’s disruption of a set of subjective, bodily and facial norms, is the way in which bewilderment correlates—almost too perfectly—to the conditions of postmodernity. For Jameson’s use of bewilderment is not accidental or one-off; rather, it emerges organically in the context of his description of the failure of cognitive mapping in a postmodernity fatally marked by a gulf between local subjective experience and an apprehension of a total social network. Extrapolating geographer Kevin Lynch’s analysis of spatial structure to the realm of global totality, Jameson’s “cognitive map” is “an abstract concept whose effect is to render visible the various forces and flows that shape and constitute our world situation,” which is to say, the networks of transnational globalized capitalism in which our limited daily experience is implicated.26 Such, however, is the incoherence of the kind of postmodern “hyperspace” that Portman’s “full-blown

“postmodern building” embodies, that it becomes a kind of “analogon” of cognitive mapping’s failure—an analogon, that is to say, of “the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentred network in which we find ourselves caught.”27 If the experience of the Bonaventure provides an architectural figure for our inability to “organize [our] immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map [our] position in a mappable external world,” bewilderment, in turn, provides an emotional figure for that experience, affording the visitor’s state of disorientation a powerful phenomenological and emotional weight.28 To the precise extent that it so clearly marks the failure of our capacity “cognitively to map” the social totality, it becomes the clearest bodily allegory of what is, for Jameson, the social totality’s most significant feature: that it is wholly unknowable. As Jameson himself puts it,

successful spatial representation today … may be equally inscribed in a narrative of defeat, which sometimes, even more effectively, causes the whole architectonic of postmodern global space to rise up in ghostly profile behind itself, as some ultimate dialectical barrier or invisible limit.29

Precisely as the sign of representational defeat, then, bewilderment is the vehicle for a kind of “ghostly profile” of the social totality, a corporeal hallmark of social conditions, a bodily inscription that symptomatizes and allegorizes the networks we can neither fully comprehend nor fully oppose. Until we can, as Jameson puts it, “grow new organs … expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions,” in a way that might more productively map that social totality, bewilderment remains the most accurate

27 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 43, 38, 44.

28 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 44.

emotional emblem of the social and economic geography of the postmodern, “a placeholder … for successful cognitive mapping.”

If bewilderment is the perfect emotional correlate to Jameson’s understanding of postmodern global totality as the failure of cognitive mapping, it also maps neatly onto the two primary poles around which most accounts of postmodernity tend to coalesce. On the one hand, postmodernity is understood as having demoted the subject to the status of a pawn in a system she can neither control nor fully understand, at once compounding modernity’s reification of human subjects, and emphasizing corollary states of failed agency. For Jean Baudrillard, postmodernity indexes “the disappearance of the subject into the object”; Douglas Kellner and Steven Best describe the moment of late capital as the process by which “human beings are transformed into things”; Kathleen Woodward characterizes “the emotional style required by [a postmodern] society” as one in which “the self is conceived of as an object, a material object”; while according to David Harvey, postmodernity is marked by a sense of “the plasticity of the human personality through the malleability of appearances and surfaces.” Within this model, even one’s emotions become, as Rey Chow puts it in her classic essay “Postmodern Automatons,” “eruption[s] of the machine,” effects of “the automatizing of the human body,” and thus less expressions

30 Jameson, Postmodern, 39. As Brown has suggested, “Allegory comes to stand as a placeholder through much of Jameson’s work—for successful cognitive mapping: Postmodern networks may not be mappable, but contemporary phenomena are allegorizable as the symptoms of postmodernism. Allegory appears as the productive sublimation of a cartographic drive; the allegorical operation substitutes hermeneutic certainty for cartographic clarity.” (Brown, “Dark Wood of Postmodernity,” 737.)

of a subject than signs of that subject’s subjugation and administration. Yet if postmodern theory’s tendency to demote the subject to the status of an object is readily recognized, a certain complementary formation of postmodern theory, in which the object is elevated to the status of subject, has been less explicitly remarked upon. Within this configuration, enlightenment ideals of truth dissolve into a throng of competing discourses under the pressure of both a Derridean critique of language and a Foucauldian analytics of power and knowledge, effectively transfiguring the once-stable, knowable object-world into the vehicle or instrument of the “Other.” From Jacques Lacan’s construction of the object as the vehicle of the Gaze, as in his meditation on a tin can whose gleam marks the point at which it “looks at me,” to Michel Foucault’s reading of Bentham’s panopticon, which models a world whose saturation by a “visible and unverifiable” surveillant gaze renders all objects potentially the vessel of a watching subject—these theories express a peculiarly postmodern vision of the world in which the object, no longer an inert fixture of the material universe, is saturated with the agency and intelligence more conventionally attributed to a subject. In these terms, the “general indeterminacy” that, according to Peter Canning, “pervades the postmodern mode of existence,” can be shown to be an effect of this metamorphosis of the finite, knowable object into a knowing, agential subject. To the extent that bewilderment, then, is defined as a feeling of subject-object inversion, it seems to possess a unique affinity with a “postmodern condition” marked both by the death of the subject and the failure of epistemic certainty, both by the reduction of subject to an object, and the saturation of the object by social, political and ideological forces. Where other emotions are merely symptoms of the system that shapes and regulates us, bewilderment takes that system as its object;


where other emotions are merely effects of coercion, bewilderment provides an emotional distillation of coercion’s impact.35

Yet if bewilderment is a dispositional state peculiarly appropriate to a postmodernity defined by its criss-crossing of the respective properties of subject and object, it also

35 It’s worth suggesting that a consideration of these new, inverted forms of emotion characteristic of postmodernity is precisely what is at stake in the emergence of feeling theory, which addresses itself to forms of emotion that develop in political, social and economic contexts in which enlightenment models of centred, autonomous subjectivity can no longer hold. Sianne Ngai’s work on emotions like paranoia, anxiety and envy focuses on the negative emotions that arise from states of suspended or obstructed agency; Lauren Berlant’s work on “cruel optimism” and everyday utopianism considers the kind of self-defeating affective attachments that form around conditions of relentless social and economic insecurity; Sara Ahmed’s work frames feeling as a phenomenon triggered by “contact” with things rather than detached appraisals or judgments about them; while Teresa Brennan’s notion of affective transmission suggests that emotion can be absorbed directly through exposure to the emotional “atmosphere” of others. (Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005]; see, for example of Lauren Berlant’s work, “Cruel Optimism,” *differences* 17.3 [2006], 20-36; Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* [London: Routledge, 2004]; Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004], 1.) All four critics are engaged in projects that consider emotion in the context of a subject stripped of the ontological and epistemic privileges that have been its conventional adjuncts—a subject, that is, that often looks more like an “object.” While placing feeling in the context of postmodernity is not often an explicit part of feeling theory’s project, the fact that the thematics of failed agency recur so frequently within it would suggest that feeling theory responds, however unwittingly, to some of the conditions of postmodernity. In relation to these emotions, bewilderment’s significance lies in its status as a kind of limit-case, in which the properties of subject and object are not just compromised or scrambled but actually criss-crossed. While Ngai’s description of “irritation” certainly delineates an emotion deficient in agency and force, especially when compared to the anger of which it constitutes a modulation, the familiar arrangement of, and dynamic between, the irritated subject and the irritating object remains in place. (Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 175-208) Likewise, while Berlant’s “cruel optimism,” a feeling “of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility,” is both confused in its judgment and self-defeating in its agency, it is bewilderment’s literal stasis—as an emotion that seems both to atrophy our powers of judgment and to terminate our agency—that fully thematizes the twin failure of judgment and agency at stake in cruel optimism. (Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” 21.) In its extremity, then, bewilderment starkly foregrounds the inversions that are at stake in feeling theory’s shift away from a traditional cognitive-appraisal model of emotion, and thus make it absolutely clear that its emergence takes place, in part, under the sign of an attempt to theorize emotion in postmodernity.
seems to pose a problem for postmodern theory itself. For bewilderment tends to compromise the forms of lucid, autonomous critical subjectivity that, despite the constative claims of postmodern theory, remains a normative requirement of postmodern critical practice. How can a state of bewilderment be incorporated into, rather than merely theorized by, a postmodern critical practice that depends upon maintaining a level of critical lucidity—especially where that critical lucidity is precisely what enabled it to identify bewilderment as an exemplary postmodern emotion in the first place? This impasse becomes starkly manifest in the ambivalence that plagues Jameson’s relation to bewilderment in the Bonaventure passage. For while at the level of content Jameson celebrates bewilderment’s vertiginous inversions of subject and object as an experiential “analogon” of the failure of cognitive mapping in postmodernism, at the level of form he maintains a writerly posture of studied autonomy and control, effectively quarantining to the past the destabilizing—and implicitly feminizing—experience he so enthusiastically champions.\textsuperscript{36} The lucidity and control of Jameson’s tone is sufficiently noticeable for Brown to observe Jameson’s “perceptual activity” or even “aggressivity in fixing phenomena,” and to suggest that “Jameson posits himself as the epic or novelistic hero.”\textsuperscript{37} In these terms, it is difficult not to register a certain disingenuousness in the one moment in the text where Jameson does gesture towards the possibility that bewilderment’s effects might infiltrate the scene of writing itself, in claiming to be “at a loss when it comes to conveying the experience of the thing itself, the experience of space you undergo when you step … into the lobby or atrium”—especially when this claim is immediately undermined by the authority with which he then does just that.\textsuperscript{38} Jameson’s apparent effort to maintain authorial ascendancy through form spills over into the level of content, as the climax of a passage delineating bewilderment’s capacity to reverse subject-object dynamics concludes with a reassertion of his

\textsuperscript{36} Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism}, 44.

\textsuperscript{37} Brown, “Dark Wood of Postmodernity,” 739. Italics in original.

\textsuperscript{38} Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism}, 42-3.
mastery of the visual field, as an implicitly feminized “Los Angeles itself [is] spread out … before us.”39

If the structure of bewilderment is strangely isomorphic with postmodern social and cultural conditions, then, it is also an emotion whose incorporation into postmodern discourse entails a certain unease. Like other postmodern theorists, Jameson simultaneously champions bewilderment as an emotion uniquely capable of condensing our postmodern predicament and stops short of actually assuming this bewilderment at the level of critical practice. As this suggests, bewilderment’s status in postmodern discourse is an ambivalent one, and as this chapter will argue, Mulholland Drive provides a telling case study in this ambivalence. On the one hand, in its destabilization of the human face that has conventionally functioned as the linchpin of both cinematic suture and theories of human subjectivity, the film is clearly committed to depicting and producing a bewilderment that it valorizes as a trenchant symptom of postmodern conditions. On the other hand, this bewilderment remains incompatible with the forms and practices that, despite the claims of postmodern theory, continue to define normative models of both critical autonomy and aesthetic coherence. It is no accident, then, that Mulholland Drive tends to body bewilderment forth in the form of certain social and sexual others. Yet the value of the film as a critical object lies in the starkness with which it dramatizes some of the bodily costs of this simultaneous valorization and projection of bewilderment, as the narrative of bewilderment finds its clearest form in the figure of the corpse—the corpse, moreover, of a woman.

III.

Mulholland Drive’s opening sequence sees the camera trailing a slow-moving, hearse-like limousine along an isolated, unlit hillside road, which a brief shot of a street sign identifies as the labyrinthine highway of the film’s title. It is night, and only the two gleaming backlights and the patch of dusty illumination cast on the road by the car’s headlights break up the prevailing darkness. The pro-cinematic suspense cues are many: there’s the sooty, insidious gloom that saturates much of the image; there’s the mystery of the car’s late night errand; there’s Angelo Badalamenti’s haunting synths.

39 Jameson, Postmodernism, 43.
Yet the primary source of the scene’s tension lies neither in the film’s content nor in its soundtrack. Rather, where a single establishing shot of the car would suffice to set the scene, the series of long, lingering tracking shots, repeatedly re-framing what is essentially the same image—alternately veering in close and falling back, suspended slightly above the car’s trunk and peering up at it from below—tend to instantiate the camera as a hovering, voyeuristic and somewhat sinister presence. As Jean-Pierre Oudart has shown and as numerous theorists of suture have subsequently elaborated, the primary effect of our perceiving that an image is “framed and delimited” is the sense that

...every filmic field traced by the camera and all objects revealed through depth of field—even in a static shot—are echoed by another field, the fourth side, and an absence emanating from it . . . the place of a character who is put there by the viewer’s imaginary and which we shall call the Absent One.\(^40\)

To the extent that the image remains unanchored in the point of view of a character within the frame, our growing awareness of the frame can only underscore the image’s status as a function of unknowable industrial and authorial agencies. On the one hand, the objects on screen are no longer entirely objects, available to be known and understood by the viewer, but engines of some unpredictable agency—actually the industrial machinery of cinematic production but imaginatively personified by Oudart as an enigmatic “Absent One.” On the other, we ourselves are no longer entirely subjects, but pawns whose free exercise of epistemic and worldly agency is limited by our restricted access to the real machinations of power, which clearly take place off-screen. What is significant here is the extent to which the emotional

\(^{40}\) Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Cinema and Suture,” *Screen* 18.4 (1977): 35-6. Published alongside Oudart’s article in *Screen*’s aegis-defining dossier on suture was the psychoanalytic discussion on which Oudart’s work was based, Jacques-Alain Miller’s “Suture (Elements of the Logic of the Signifier),” and an excellent elaboration of Oudart’s work by Stephen Heath. (Jacques-Alain Miller, “Suture [Elements of the Logic of the Signifier],” *Screen* 18.4 [1977]: 24-34; Stephen Heath, “Notes on Suture,” *Screen* 18.4 [1977]: 48-76.) While years of sustained critique have depleted suture theory’s overarching explanatory cachet, the concept remains a useful way of thinking about basic structures of identification.
coordinates of failed suture seem homologous with the emotional coordinates of Jameson’s experience at the Bonaventure. In both cases, the guest/viewer is made aware of the operation of systemic forces at the margins of the visible; in both cases, the guest/viewer is made to feel like an object, a defenseless target for the work of what Oudart evocatively calls “phantom” forces. Yet what is particularly striking about this sequence for our purposes is the extent to which its bewildering failure of suture is specifically channeled through the figure of the anti-face. If, for Deleuze, the archetype of the face is concentrated in the formula “white wall/black holes,” these extended shots of a limousine’s gleaming backlights trailing through the darkness of a deserted street in the Hollywood Hills seem radically to invert the humanizing figure of the face, creating a counterposing black wall/white hole formation. In articulating the failure of suture in terms of a kind of anti-face, the film reminds us that what is at stake in our investment in the face is the need to humanize and therefore dissimulate the disturbingly inhuman mechanisms that regulate and define what we see.

The face’s capacity to mask the mechanisms of filmic construction has been the cornerstone of film theories of suture, according to which the cut from an initial image to its reverse shot—the image of a character onto whose “look” that initial image can be mapped—sees the determining agency that the spectator is in danger of disruptively attributing to forces outside the film, displaced onto and dissimulated through a character within the film, whose face has typically been our primary point of affective contact. Lee Edelman takes up this line of thinking in his classic reading of the face in *Laura*, arguing that “narrative cinema’s obsessive preoccupation with faces … figures (or gives face to) and thus disfigures (or effaces) the apparatus of

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41 This term is from Oudart, whose descriptions of the “Absent One” are subtly infused with the ghost-film rhetoric of “echo[es],” “phantom[s]” and “haunting.” (Oudart, “Cinema and Suture,” 39, 42, 41.)


43 McGowan, “Lost on *Mulholland Drive,*” 68.
cinematic inscription—an apparatus that, by means of these processes, attempts, as Jacqueline Rose puts it, ‘to close itself off as a system of representation.’ The face, in other words, elides the infinite, unknowable workings of cinematic agencies through the reassuringly humanizing figure of the face on screen, re-establishing normative subject-object relations through what Eugenie Brinkema calls “a humanism organized around faciality as the site of subjectivity.” Yet the face’s conventional status as what Mary Ann Doane calls “the very locus of subjectivity” only makes what happens when Mulholland Drive attempts to institute “suture” all the more striking. At first, all is well: cutting at last from the exterior shot of the car to a close-up reverse shot inside the car that purports to disclose the bearer of the look, we see the face of a beautiful, voluptuous brunette. A dead ringer for a classic femme fatale, Harring—soon to christen herself “Rita”—is just the kind of heroine guaranteed to assuage anxieties about the comprehensiveness of the filmic illusion, her perfectly made up visage the very essence of focused, goal-oriented fixity (Fig. 3.4). Yet no sooner have we been established in identification with this agential subject than something happens to mock and undermine our investment in her face. Pulling the limousine abruptly to a halt, the driver turns in his seat, cocks a gun at our mysterious heroine and demands that she “get out of the car.” A reverse shot shows the brunette seemingly evacuated of the combative impulse that just a few seconds before had prompted her to observe angrily, “We don’t stop here”; her neck muscles stiffen, her eyes widen and her lip is aquiver. At stake in this transformation is bewilderment’s capacity to transfigure subject into object, as Rita’s subjective


experience of herself as an object—helpless patsy to the gun-toting driver’s caprice—is recapitulated in her physical assumption of two of the salient characteristics of an object: inertia and passivity. Importantly, however, just as the subject of fascination is also herself a source of fascination, so the bewildered face is always also, in turn, a bewildering face. Far from a vehicle of a focused subjectivity capable of displacing the bewilderment engendered in the spectator by an awareness of “the apparatus of cinematic inscription,” Rita’s face is a tremulous, unstable mechanism that induces bewilderment by actually advertizing and theatricalizing the work of this apparatus. Exaggerating the “postmodern automatism” that our other emotions conceal, the bewildered face emerges as what Mary Ann Doane—outlining an alternative critical construction of the face in close up—calls “a lurking danger, a potential semiotic threat to the unity and coherency of the filmic discourse,” that underwrites what she dubs a “crisis in the opposition between subject and object.”47 Confronted with the

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47 Doane, “The Close-Up,” 90, 94. It is one of the ironies of bewilderment, then, that while the bewildered subject’s developing intuition that she is being controlled from outside actually indexes an incipient loosening of such control, that intuition nevertheless makes her seem more controllable, more pliant and more malleable. Where ordinary emotions “fuse signs of the body’s subjection to power with signs of its ostensive freedom,” the bewildered subject’s anguished awareness of her subjection appears, paradoxically, to amplify and heighten that subjection. (Ngai, Ugly Feelings, 100.)
bewildered face, then, the film’s capacity to knit us into its imaginary fabric is proscribed if not entirely thwarted.

Yet the scene is not over: as if the threat contained in the cocked handgun were not enough, it is immediately followed by a second menace, which becomes visible in a cutaway shot of a pair of cars careening at high speed down the same hillside road. The force of both these threats culminates in a reverse shot of the brunette’s face—a quivering surface across which the threat not just of a gun about to be discharged, but of a car about to impact her, pass simultaneously, with the headlights of the oncoming car illuminating the gleaming whites of her eye. Importantly, while the combination of the pointed gun and the out-of-control car embody some of the forces that might act upon our bodies, they also operate to figure one set of forces specifically: that of the camera (a “shot”) and lighting (“headlights”) that form the technological arm of a larger cinematic/industrial complex. Together, they render her face’s abject status—as the projection screen for the very controlling cinematic agency that it was meant to dissipate—strikingly clear (Fig 3.5). Indeed, in taking in Harring’s terrified visage it is hard not to recall Roland Barthes’ description of Greta Garbo’s face in terms of what he calls the “face-object.” For Barthes, Garbo’s

make-up has the snowy thickness of a mask; it is not a painted face, but one set in plaster, protected by the surface of the colour, not by its lineaments. Amid all this snow at once fragile and compact, the eyes alone, black like strange soft flesh, but not in the least expressive, are two faintly tremulous wounds.48

Here, far from expressive signs of emotion or perceptual tools of vision, the eyes are “wounds,” impressed from without by some kind of abrupt assault or injury; far from animated and mobile, the face is set in plaster, the fruit of someone else’s labour; far from a stable sign of identity, it is subject to Barthes’ compulsive reinscription of its substance, which slides from “plaster” to “snow” to “strange soft flesh.”49 Garbo’s face, of course, belongs to the silent era, and thus seems to mark a moment in

48 Roland Barthes, Mythologies (Frogmore: Paladin, 1973), 56.

49 Barthes, Mythologies, 56.
cinematic history just prior to the modern cinematic face-making project that reduces the human visage to an instrument of suture; yet the noticeable congruence between Harring’s face and that of Barthes’s Garbo suggests the return, in postmodern aesthetics, of the disruptive, spectacularized faces of early cinema, faces that bear all over them the distinctive imprint of subjection to a cinematic agency. Indeed, it is as if to illustrate the extent of this subjection, and to flaunt its own capricious agency, that *Mulholland Drive* makes its next move: a climactic series of shots show the oncoming vehicle plummeting directly into the limousine’s side, precipitating it into a roadside ditch in what initially seems to augur the end of this line of narrative, and of the face that so conspicuously fails to carry it.\(^50\)

At a physical level, of course, this death never takes place: through the proverbial puff of smoke that conventionally flags moments of cinematic transformation, we see the brunette emerging awkwardly from the smoking, upturned car and stumbling down

\(^{50}\) Importantly, just as Rita’s face institutes a certain bewilderment, so Barthes links Garbo’s face to a certain self-loss or bewilderment: not just to the state of “losing one’s way” (as Barthes puts it, “Garbo still belongs to that moment when … one literally *lost oneself* in a human image as one would in a philtre”), but, perhaps more disturbingly, to death (the face of Valentino, Barthes claims, “caus[es] suicides.”) (Barthes, *Mythologies*, 56.)
the hill to the light-studded city below. Clearly disoriented and concussed, she seems entirely unharmed—right down to her untousled hair, immaculate cocktail dress and pristinely made-up face. Yet while physically intact, on a figurative level, her death is very real. Vacant, amnesiac and without real agency or direction, she can barely be called a “subject.” On the contrary, she seems to have assumed as a permanent expression the blank bewilderment that unsettled her face as she stared into the headlights of the oncoming car. Overwhelmed by the appearance of passersby, dazzled by the lights of passing cars, Harring is a subject who experiences herself as an object. Far from capable of carrying the narrative and enfolding us into the film’s diegetic world, her face remains a bewildering visual map of the cinematic, industrial and social forces that act upon her from without, continually reminding us of the camera’s work in organizing and regulating what we see. It is hardly surprising, then, that the narrative comes to figure her face as a dangerous, disruptive entity that must be hidden, concealed, obscured—or even disposed of. When a laughing couple emerge from a house on Sunset, Rita crouches in the foliage nearby, as if terrified of discovery in her confounded, bewildered state; Louise Bonner (Lee Grant), Rita and Betty’s slightly deranged, psychic neighbour, appears at the door of the pair’s apartment one night to announce, clearly with reference to Rita, that “there is trouble” within; while when Coco (Ann Miller), the owner of the complex, gets wind of Rita, she barely warrants a humanizing pronoun: “if there is trouble in there,” she warns Betty, “get rid of it.” A living symbol of postmodernity’s doubly troubling failure of both subjectivity and objectivity, Rita’s face’s capacity to unsettle the binaries usually secured by the face bewilders everyone who encounters her, and it is the desire to resolve or dispel this bewilderment that sets the narrative machinery of the film itself—as well as the ideological machinery it depicts—in motion.

Yet if Rita’s bewildered and bewildering face functions as a destabilizing force both for the film’s spectators and for its characters, it is impossible not to notice that it is also invested with a certain epistemic and aesthetic authority. Just as for Jameson bewilderment is simultaneously a disruptive entity more comfortably quarantined to the past and the clearest emotional diagnosis of the present, so Lynch’s characteristic sympathy for the repressed and the marginalized ensures that Rita’s face is both a narrative trauma and a visual fetish. It is hard to ignore the loving homage the film pays to that wide-eyed, lost-looking face as she makes her way through the darkened
suburban streets of West Hollywood. Again and again, the camera paces languidly with her up the broad, empty boulevards in a series of tracking close ups that are always just a little more intimate than those that attend the faces of the film’s other characters—close ups in which the cropping of a chin or the truncation of a hairline have clearly been judged a worthwhile concession to proximity to that exquisitely sensile visage. But what is the source of the bewildered face’s evident visual magnetism? For Jameson, of course, bewilderment’s unusual authority is exclusively epistemic, and certainly it is hard to ignore the epistemic value embodied in Rita’s disorientated state. As a character in a film, and thus quite patently the object of both surveillance and manipulation—a surveillance and manipulation, moreover, of which the camera’s probing and the director’s instructions are but the most immediate manifestation—Rita’s sense of being an object radiates with a powerful diagnostic authority. Yet in a cinematic context, the epistemic power of the bewildered face is matched by its aesthetic power. Physically speaking, Harring’s disorientated Rita is the ideal cinematic subject, her pliant, vulnerable and infinitely receptive face offering itself to view with an almost touching promise of transparency. Whereas just prior to the accident, the streetlights passing over Harring’s glossy, calcified features serve only to underscore their impervious resistance to the camera’s gaze, immediately subsequent to the accident her face seems to register every movement around her with antennae-like responsiveness, a vulnerability and pliability that make her a dream to watch.

_Mulholland Drive_’s tendency to valorize the aesthetic and epistemic affordances of Rita’s bewilderment is only amplified by the appearance of the completely _un_bewildered Betty, who is as closely identified with a kind of subjective autonomy as Rita is with subjective atrophy. Betty’s inaugural appearance in the film, which shows her arrival at LAX accompanied by an elderly couple that she appears to have met on the plane, is distinguished by a series of extended tracking shots that capture her beaming face. If, as Benedict de Spinoza has argued, our affective states can be divided into the categories of those that “increase[] or aid[] man’s power of acting,”

51 Betty’s habit of embarking on lengthy descriptions of her ambitions as an actor, for example, suggest her faith in the narratives of self-transformation that at once issue from and circulate around Hollywood.
and those that mark a decrease of power, Betty’s insistent optimism tends to fall into the former category, her “Bett-ific” smiles suggesting a robust sense of subjective autonomy and “increase” that is entirely lacking in a bewilderment most clearly marked by its sense of stark subjection to external control. Yet within *Mulholland Drive*’s filmic world, this distinction between empowered and disempowered emotions is only apparent: the empowering, uplifting emotions consistently modeled by Betty throughout the film are merely emotions that elide the machinery of their own solicitation. As Betty and the elderly couple go their separate ways, we cut, quite unexpectedly, not to the interior of Betty’s cab, but to that of “Irene” and her unnamed husband. A long, narratively redundant shot of the couple, clearly still thrilled by their encounter with the young acting hopeful, shows them grinning “moronically,” their faces contorted into tormented masks of joy. If Betty’s grin had seemed to exude agency and control, the grins here—toothy, mechanical, anguished—are so jarringly exaggerated as to install them less as organic expressions of an inner emotion than robotic agitations painfully extracted from or imprinted on their faces. In its suggestion that even the most active, enabling and agential of emotions, such as happiness, are underwritten by our fundamental status as what Chow calls “postmodern automatons,” the logic of the scene clearly echoes that which regulates postmodern theory.

Given Betty’s obvious investment in a certain ideal of agency, it is hardly surprising that upon discovering the amnesiac occupant crouching in the shower of her aunt’s apartment, she is quick to recode her new housemate’s bewilderment in terms of the more straightforwardly epistemological confusion of the detective plot. Confronted with Harring’s disarmingly ingenuous, infinitely vulnerable “I don’t know who I am! I don’t know what my name is!” Betty recalls the black purse that Harring had with her on her arrival at the house, and demands, first, that her friend search the purse for clues about her identity, and second, when that strategy only turns up more questions, that the two do some sleuthing to establish Harring’s personhood once and for all, deploying as their tools a range of detective methods scraped together from popular


culture—the anonymous phone-call, the use of the “back entrance,” and the thoroughly probed flashback. Yet while the detective plot structures much of the first part of the film, the film’s formal trajectory makes it clear that the investigation is a red herring, as the epistemic aporias thrown up by the “mystery” narrative are continually undermined by a profound ontological bewilderment that registers as a series of disturbances in the status of the face. In what is perhaps the climax of the detective narrative, for example, Betty and Rita visit an apartment complex that they suspect may be the home of Diane Selwyn, one of “Rita”’s possible identities. Upon entering the dank, lightless interior of the apartment in question, they encounter a corpse rotting on the bed in the master bedroom. While its biological status is fairly obvious, the pair advance toward the bed, as if unable to verify its status fully until they have seen its face—the precipitous camera work eagerly preceding the characters’ own access to the view of the corpse, and the rise of harsh synthesizer notes on the soundtrack securing the evacuation of diegetic sound that accompany the film’s key moments of psychic intensity. As they round the corner of the bed, Rita, like Dan before her, cries out in horror and collapses, literalizing bewilderment’s chiastic inversion of the characteristics of subject and object: the inanimate cadaver on the bed suddenly possesses an imperious power, while the living, breathing Rita is struck helplessly down. Yet if Rita can hardly look at the dilapidated face, apparently blown off with a gunshot, she is also unable to look away, remaining at the bedside for a whole minute of barely interrupted screen time as we cut repeatedly between her stricken face and the rotting, collapsed non-face of the corpse (Fig. 3.6). This repeated shot-reverse shot structure establishes an implicit alignment between the subjectively evacuated face of the bewildered subject and the blasted face of the dead woman, between a face-as-object and the literal object-face—an alignment that is only amplified by Rita’s behaviour when she does finally tear herself away. Cutting at last from the suffocating interior of the house to an exterior shot of the apartment, we see Rita, closely followed by Betty, bursting through the front door and down the pathway toward the fixed camera. Yet where the sight of something unbearable conventionally prompts us to cover our eyes, here the image of the dilapidated face prompts Rita to cover her face; in this, the bewildered subject’s terrifying receptiveness to external control and impression is articulated specifically as a threat to the face, a threat that Rita can only avert by hopelessly gripping the sides of her face as if in an effort to clamp it down, to keep it in place, to prevent it from sliding
away (Fig. 3.7). This apparent dissolution of the boundary between face and environment is amplified by the unusual visual effects applied to the shot in post-production, as the superimposition of several iterations of the same shot of Rita clasping her face, with slight delays, generates a kind of smudging or melting of the outline of the face. In this, the ostensibly bounded, contained field of the face

*Figure 3.6. The ruined face of Diane Selwyn.*

*Figure 3.7. Rita grasps her face in an effort to secure the distinction between face and environment.*
threatens to lose its form completely by merging into the foliage around it, becoming what Arthur Kroker and David Cook, writing on the postmodern body, call “an infinitely permeable and spatialized field whose boundaries are freely pierced.”

With the contours of Rita’s face compromised by the image of the dead woman’s, the subsequent sequence is structured around an effort to shore up its boundaries, as we fade from the image of Rita’s blurred face in the courtyard of Diane’s apartment to the image of Rita back at Havenhurst, feverishly cutting her hair into the bathroom sink. At stake here of course is the “makeover,” a scenario whose paradoxical promise of stability through change, of identity through influence, of invulnerability through susceptibility prompts Brenda Weber to dub it “a potent cure for the postmodern condition, bringing coherence, solidity and empowerment to the fractured and schizophrenic state.” Yet this effort to secure the difference between Rita’s face and that of the corpse through the tools of feminine self-improvement only destabilizes that face further—though this time not through disintegration but through multiplication. The temporal ellipsis conventional to the makeover scenario sees us cut from “before” to “after,” panning across an array of open, in-use hair and beauty products on the dresser and up to a mirror into which Betty draws Rita for her post-makeover “reveal.” In a manoeuvre reminiscent of the famous double-mirror scene in Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966), not only are both women doubled by their mirror images, but they are also shown to double each other, with Rita modeling a blonde bobbed wig in a cut similar to Betty’s, as well as similar make-up. This facial duplication has the effect of destabilizing a logic of suture that works by dissimulating cinematic mechanisms through reference to the individual gaze housed in a unique, singular face. As this scene suggests, if the postmodern face is an object vulnerable to external control, these controls—embodied in technologies of bodily transformation like cosmetics, fitness, dieting and plastic surgery—operate in the name of the universal installation of a standardized facial “type,” and thus militate against the


singularity on which cinematic suture relies. But this is not all. The culmination of the bewildering doubling at the heart of the scene is the slow fade from the image of the new, blonde Rita into a top-shot of Betty’s face, now in her pyjamas and lying in bed, a fade in which the two women’s almost-identical faces are superimposed on top of each other in a ghostly, chimeric impression of sameness. By ensuring that the climax of the scene’s doubling is bound up inextricably with cinematic technology, the film reminds us that the very filmic apparatus that relies upon the stable and singular status of the face for its operation is also—in its assembly line of gleamingly idealized, almost indistinguishable cinematic types—complicit in the face’s unsettling loss of identity.

Yet in linking the bewilderingly destabilized boundaries of Rita’s face with the makeover, a cultural scenario with, as Jackie Stacey puts it, “an immediate association with femininity,” what the scene also underscores is the proximity between the figure of bewilderment and the discourse of femininity. It is, after all, not just any “body” that the film has mobilized as its vehicle for this most extreme of emotions, but that of a woman, recalling Chow’s wry observation that a woman’s departure from male modernist norms becomes an occasion for “male romantic musings.” This decision to body bewilderment forth in a female figure is all the more marked, and all the more clearly deliberate, because it relies on a striking inversion of the film noir conventions that the film otherwise seems content to draw relentlessly upon: whereas a classic film noir, organized around a more sedate confusion, casts the femme fatale as the embodiment of “an epistemological trouble” for a male detective figure, Mulholland Drive’s postmodern neo-noir, organized around bewilderment, casts Harring’s femme fatale as herself epistemologically troubled. It’s not hard to discern the congruences between the semiotic constellations that coalesce around the figures of the “woman” and “bewilderment” respectively. Where bewilderment marks the subject’s recognition of their status as a malleable corporeal surface vulnerable to external


57 Chow, Writing Diaspora, 64.

control, the emotion seems to dovetail all too readily with a “woman” who has come to “overrepresent” the body in Western culture, and who is conventionally “more closely associated with the surface of the image than its illusory depths.”\textsuperscript{59} What is unsettling here, however, is the extent to which the film’s deployment of this homology between bewilderment and femininity suggests an effort to protect a series of male gender and aesthetic norms from bewilderment’s destabilizing effects. Quarantining bewilderment in a fetishized female figure allows \textit{Mulholland Drive} simultaneously to reify bewilderment and to strategically distance itself—and its viewers— from the emotion’s more deleterious epistemic and ontological implications.\textsuperscript{60}

Yet if the woman provides an efficient vessel for this simultaneously valorized and unsettling emotion, the lesbian proves even more serviceable in the work of containing and exculpating the film’s use of the emotion, a fact the film seems keenly alert to as the makeover scene—one woman coming to resemble another—segués into the scene of one woman making love to another, identification sliding all too easily into desire. The narrative is familiar enough: intimacy heightened by the makeover episode, the two women opt to share the master bedroom, but when Rita leans over to kiss Betty goodnight, the goodnight kiss metamorphoses into a passionate embrace; with Betty responding eagerly to her advances, the two proceed to what Heather Love sardonically calls a “very breasty, very kissy” idea of lesbian sex, sex whose passionate intensity is punctured only by the moment when Betty’s hackneyed enquiry, “have you done this before?” is met by Rita’s comically ingenuous observation that she doesn’t know.\textsuperscript{61} What is striking here, however, is the extent to


\textsuperscript{60} With this in mind it becomes significant that of the many “bewildering” films released in 2001, only \textit{Mulholland Drive}—a film about bewildered women—received universal critical acclaim, and that Cameron Crowe’s \textit{Vanilla Sky}, which traces the figure of postmodern bewilderment through the figure of an emasculated male character, was dismissed as an incoherent jumble by the same critics who praised \textit{Mulholland Drive} for its pleasurable perplexity.

\textsuperscript{61} Heather Love, “Spectacular Failure: The Figure of the Lesbian in Mulholland Drive,” \textit{New Literary History} 35.1 (Winter, 2004): 127.
which Rita’s sexual advances are framed not as a correlate of any kind of profound lesbian identity but as a correlate, rather, of opportunity and context, of responsive availability to circumstance or, as Wallace puts it, “pre-eminently a matter of cinematic time and place.”62 This responsive susceptibility, of course, recalls our construction of bewilderment as a feeling of self-loss; yet it also, significantly, resonates with the “contagion,” “hypnosis” and “mesmerism” tropes that, as Diana Fuss has shown, dominate a certain figuration of lesbian desire—tropes in which the notion of sexual proximity and exposure, sexual influence and infection, have priority over any notion of sexual “identity.”63 If woman is all surface, in this model, the lesbian is woman plus: her bodily boundaries ideally permeable and susceptible, ideally available to being “taken over and inhabited by an infectious agent.”64 One might almost suggest that whereas, as Edelman has shown, the gay man is imagined as an essence without a face, and thus a fitting challenge for the face-making project of classical cinema, the lesbian is imagined as a face without an essence, and thus the perfect figure for a postmodern cinema committed to bodily destabilization.65 At any rate, the deployment of the lesbian makes it strikingly clear that while inviting us to feel bewilderment as the emotional epitome of postmodern experience, the film is keen to avoid bewilderment’s potential threat to the boundaries of the autonomous masculine subject by containing it to the fetishized receptacle of a social and sexual other.

With lesbianism installed as bewilderment’s aesthetic and social alibi, Mulholland Drive’s assault on the coherence of the face hits its stride, as subsequent scenes work to ravage not just the face’s capacity to guarantee suture, but the camera’s capacity to imply the presence of the face. Again, we are set up with a hermeneutic project, embodied in the new lovers’ discovery of the triangular blue key that is the exact


64 Fuss, Identification Papers, 123.

match to the mysterious locked blue box discovered in Rita’s bag earlier—and again that hermeneutic project unravels. Positioned in the bedroom as Betty and Rita enter, key in hand, the camera pans right to display Betty, in profile, place her handbag on the bed, while a pan back to the left, showing Rita excitedly retrieving the blue box from the wardrobe, has Betty disappear behind the camera. So far so conventional: yet while a character’s disappearance behind the camera traditionally indicates a double transfer of properties—in which the character appropriates the camera’s gaze, while the camera putatively acquires the character’s face—what transpires shatters this presumption. Having recovered the blue box and with the blue key at the ready, Rita looks toward the space occupied by the camera for reinforcement from her friend, only to find Betty missing. A series of unanswered exclamations reveal that Betty has entirely vanished from the diegetic space. Calling the bluff of the cinematic conventions that purport to personify and “give face” to the camera’s mechanical gaze, thereby suturing us into the film, Betty’s disappearance exposes the absence that lies at the heart of the cinematic machine, her sudden abdication of the “point of view” recalling us to our status as addressees of a mechanical and industrial event, rather than as empathic observers of a poignant human scene. If the face itself has lost its capacity to conceal the manoeuvres and strategems of the cinematic forces that exhibit it, now, too, the camera has lost the capacity to function as a facial surrogate. Unsurprisingly, it is Rita’s sudden awareness that she is alone that prompts her long, nervous scan of the room, her sudden sense of “being watched,” her impossible awareness of the presence of the camera; for it is the “faceless” look of the camera—rather than the familiar look of a loving friend’s face—that fully warrants the term gaze.

It is the film’s central diegetic break, however, that ultimately crystallizes the face’s capacity to foreground the cinematic and industrial forces that play upon it. With Rita entering the blue key into the blue Pandora’s box, the film is sucked into a kind of pre-cinematic darkness from which a series of brief, displaced fragments—the menacing cowboy appears at the bedroom door with the announcement “Hey pretty girl, time to wake up”; Betty’s “Aunt Ruth” arrives home to find her apartment curiously evacuated—resolve finally into a story-world as narratively and formally different as a common location and an unchanged cast allow it to be. Watts’s perky, upbeat Betty is transformed into the sallow, aging “Diane,” embittered and frustrated
by the recent departure of Harring, her lover—now referred to as “Camilla.” Certainly, these newly christened faces are embedded in a mise-en-scéne that has as much or as little verisimilitude as the earlier one; yet, far from securing suture, both Watts and Harring’s faces become painfully obvious indexes of the cinematic agencies that can arbitrarily reassign them new names and identities.66 Like Barthes’ Garbo, who is “plaster,” “snow” and “flesh” all at once, these are infinitely malleable, impressionable faces, faces that remain in thrall to what Judith Butler calls “the tenuousness of imaginary identification.”67 This central diegetic break is, to a large extent, quite as aleatory as it seems, the stamp less of directorial calculation than of a fragmented, piecemeal production history marked by an array of conflicting financial, industrial and cultural pressures. Originally conceived as a television series, the two-hour pilot produced for ABC was rejected for broadcast, and it was only when Mulholland Drive was picked up by StudioCanal for release as a feature film that the second section was shot and appended to provide a resolution of sorts. What is important, however, is the extent to which this actual intervention of industrial and cinematic forces in the naming and construction of the face becomes part and parcel of the film’s reification of such a problematized face. For in deploying a number of narrative cues to suggest that section one has been a dream—most prominently the fact that the new mise-en-scéne fades in on the image of Diane waking from a mid-afternoon torpor—the film effectively promotes section two’s bewilderment as a “real” from which the original, less bewildering diegesis falls short, whether as dream, fantasy or hallucination.

But how can a film committed to the production of bewilderment through the destabilization of the figure of the face reach any kind of resolution? If, as Linda

66 The generally warm colour tones that dominated the initial chronotope give way to dull taupes, blues and sages, while the rich, mysterious space of Aunt Ruth’s apartment, a space whose conformity to the hermeneutic norms of the detective story lies in the extent to which its promise of depth is matched by its guarantee of spatial stability, gives way to the more properly “noir” space of Diane’s apartment, whose flat, depthless emptiness is matched by a constantly shifting spatial co-ordinates.

Williams has argued, emotions can be lined up with corresponding generic forms, what is the characteristic “plot” of bewilderment? The power of Mulholland Drive lies in the way in which its ending starkly dramatizes the costs of the theoretical and aesthetic reification of bewilderment. And this ending comes quickly, with the film’s foreshortened second section plummeting headlong to its finale: Camilla has terminated her relationship with Diane after embarking on an affair with the male director of the film in which the two appear; a devastated, bewildered Diane is persuaded by Camilla to attend a party at Adam’s hilltop mansion; Camilla and Adam announce their engagement; Diane meets with a hit-man to discuss the murder of Camilla, and is promised that when the hit is completed she will find a “blue key.” At stake in the planned homicide, of course, is an effort to acquire a simulacrum of agency through the erasure of someone else’s. Yet the act meant to liberate Diane from her hopeless attachment to Camilla only further consolidates her abjection, establishing her as the new characterological avatar for the bewilderment that overtook Harring’s Rita in section one. Immediately subsequent to the meeting with the assassin, we cut to black, the bottom dropping suddenly out of the film’s briefly stable and reliable spatial co-ordinates. What follows—a blurry, grainy interior panning shot—suggests the film struggling to re-establish its relation to a presiding subjectivity: a jerky pan across Diane’s living room digests the glass table-top, the carpet, the couch and finally the beige hem of Diane’s dressing gown, before panning up to her face, a cinematic conflation of actor and setting that flattens out the distinction between animate and inanimate, subject and object, person and thing in a way that seems to resonate clearly with a postmodern logic of reification. Yet even when we do locate Diane’s face, the face itself is inadequate to establish her as the locus of a presiding gaze—its transfixed, rigid expression suggesting a look that is less an instrument of vision than a function of Diane’s thingification. A reverse shot discloses the object of her look, in an extreme close-up of the blue key that signals Camilla’s successful assassination. Yet the image of the key only serves to ensure that when we cut back again to the image of Diane, the low-angle shot of our heroine is perversely established as the key’s point of view, effectively granting the object subjective sovereignty, while reducing the subject to an inert thing, in a neat

68 Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess,” Film Quarterly 44.4 (Summer, 1991): 2-13.
exemplification of bewilderment’s chiastic structure. Unsurprisingly enough, this bewilderment is articulated through a progressive disintegration of Diane’s face, as a series of extreme close-ups fragment her visage into a series of disparate part-objects: an eye, with a quivering eyelash; the curve of a nose and a shock of brittle hair; an extreme close up on the eye again. Amplifying the loss of identity effected by the fragmentation of these extreme close-ups is the sheer biological detail of each shot, as the pores of the skin, with their slight pricks of sweat, effect a demotion of human subject to biological organism. The sequence recalls Jean Epstein’s description of the close up as the occasion of a kind of dramatic semiotic and physical fragmentation, in which, as Doane has noted, the face is transfigured into an incongruous collection of objects, running the gamut from the concrete to the abstract:

A head suddenly appears on screen and drama, now face to face, seems to address me personally and swells with an extraordinary intensity. I am hypnotized. Now the tragedy is anatomical. The décor of the fifth act is this corner of a cheek torn by a smile. [. . .] The orography of the face vacillates. Seismic shocks begin. Capillary wrinkles try to split the fault. A wave carries them away. Crescendo. A muscle bridles. The lip is laced with ties like a theater curtain. Everything is movement, imbalance, crisis. Crack. The mouth gives way, like a ripe fruit splitting open. As if slit by a scalpel, a keyboard-like smile cuts laterally into the corner of the lips.69

Not only does the close-up of Betty reduce her face to a series of foreign fragments, from an earthquake to a theatre curtain, from a piece of fruit to a piano keyboard, but these fragments are reduced, in turn, to a mere sounding board for a series of loud noises-off: the screaming and cackling of Irene and her husband, who are now compressed, in an almost comically surreal touch, to a pair of Freudian miniatures; the insistent knocking at the door that could be a sonic projection of Diane’s bewildered state, or could be the police come to interrogate her about the death of Camilla.

It is the sequence that immediately follows this one, however, that clearly spells out the stakes of the kind of bewilderment indexed in and garnered through the film’s fragmentation of the face. An unsteady, hand-held close up shows Diane, apparently “driven mad by remorse,” rushing down the hall toward the bedroom, and—as if enacting a wholly ineluctable course—assuming the same position on the bed as the corpse encountered by Rita and Betty in section one before blowing her face off with a gun. As the scene fades out, the film consecrates her body with a puff of dry ice, retreating—this time—away from the face rather than lingering gormlessly at the bedside, as in the earlier scene that it now seems, uncannily, to chronologically precede. The effect of that face, however, is unchanged: here, as there, this dilapidated ruin or gaping abscess provides a chillingly literal mirror of the more figurative fragmentations and destabilizations undergone first by Rita’s, and now by Diane’s, faces. Yet the particular horror of this, the face’s second appearance, lies in the way it shifts the status of the ruined face from unhappy accident to ineluctable fate, from a singular instantiation of one woman’s misery to a kind of filmic destiny, the painful culmination of any aesthetic or theoretical system that reifies bewilderment. If bewilderment is our modus operandi, it would seem, no matter what genre we pick—whether the buoyant detective fantasy of section one, or the bleak social (sur)realism of section two—we end up in the same place. Indeed, the “impossibility” of bewilderment’s face is driven home as we cut from the now smoke-filled bedroom to what appears to be a blurry recapitulations of images from Diane’s dream, a series of blown-out close-ups of Rita and Betty’s faces projected against a night-lit L.A. backdrop. Virtual transparencies, pockmarked and studded with the lights of the urban background against which they are projected, these faces are literally inseparable from what they are facing, starkly epitomizing the bewildered subject’s inability to quite locate and objectify an object. Yet as such, they are also ghosts—substanceless, ectoplasmic projections, built entirely of light. Bewilderment’s ultimate figure, then, is a woman with her face blown off; a ghost projected on a screen. As Hal Foster has argued, “for many in contemporary culture, truth resides in the traumatic or abject subject, in the diseased or damaged body”; as he also notes, “there are dangers with

70 Love, “Spectacular Failure,” 123.
this siting of truth,” for “if there is a subject of history for the cult of abjection at all, it is not the Worker, the Woman, or the Person of Color, but the Corpse.”

Foster’s reminder of the embodied form taken by postmodern theory’s tendency to reify some of the extremes of experience is timely, yet the strange non-equivalence of the categories he invokes, in which a catalogue of identity positions are lined up alongside a biological state, allows him to overlook one thing: that no corpse is innocent of raced, gendered or classed categories, and that, in this case at least, the corpse is, not at all accidentally, the corpse of a woman.

As we have seen, Jameson’s famous meditation on the Bonaventure hotel bestows upon bewilderment the ambivalent distinction of postmodern emotion par excellence, the emotional hallmark of a system that Jameson deems inaccessible both to the individual’s control and to their comprehension. Indeed, given Postmodernism’s comprehensive valorization of bewilderment, it is hardly surprising that, in the near-contemporary “Cognitive Mapping,” Jameson effectively dismisses alternative emotional responses to postmodern co-ordinates, such as paranoia—writing off the notoriously paranoid genre of conspiracy theory as “the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age… the degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system”

In these terms, only bewilderment, a unique emotional congealment of epistemic and ontological defeat, is capable of diagnosing a postmodernity in which the impossibility of cognitive mapping is matched by the demise of the autonomous, agential subject. Yet as this chapter has shown, Jameson’s promotion of bewilderment here is marked by ambiguity. While bewilderment may constitute the most rigorous emotional analogue of postmodern social and economic conditions, it is also an emotion incompatible not only with theoretical practice but with our capacity to get through the day. It is this ambivalence that underwrites Mulholland Drive, in which this simultaneously critically valorized and subjectively confounding emotion not only requires disavowal and projection in the body of a lesbian, but ends in her quite literal defacement, epitomizing what feminist theorists have anatomized as a tendency for “male


hegemony [to] rely on the ‘loose woman’ … for a projection of that which is subversive, improper, marginal, unspeakable, and so forth.” In light of bewilderment’s narrative destiny in *Mulholland Drive*, it seems hardly surprising that Jameson was later to alter the position on bewilderment expressed in the Bonaventure passage, and to suggest, instead, that while epistemically problematic, the conspiracy narrative’s desperate struggle to “figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century” has value in and of itself as a “wild stab at the heart” of a network whose true contours remain inaccessible. Certainly, Jameson qualifies these claims with the caveat that “nothing is gained by having been persuaded of the definitive verisimilitude of this or that conspiratorial hypothesis.” Yet, as he puts it, it is “the intent and the gesture that counts” in assessing conspiracy narrative: however clearly these hypotheses displace the social totality’s essential unrepresentability, they remain essential to our capacity to live in the world. Conversely, as *Mulholland Drive* suggests, while bewilderment may most accurately reflect the conditions of postmodernity, it is also a condition whose clearest archetypal embodiment is the rotting, defaced corpse of a woman.

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73 Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 64.


Fascination: Between the Rough and the Glossy in *Crash*

I.

If postmodernity is marked by the shift from an aesthetics of depth to an aesthetics of flatness, this flatness—in both its hermeneutic and emotional senses—finds striking exemplification in the final scene of David Cronenberg’s *Crash* (1996). In it, James Ballard (James Spader) and his wife, Catherine (Debra Cara Unger), recent witnesses of the gory automobile deaths of two of their fellow crash-fetishists, undertake an unusually slow, ritualized car chase that culminates in Catherine’s car overturning and her body being thrown from the vehicle. Painstakingly engineered by both characters—with James’s totalled Lincoln carefully nudging Catherine’s silver coupe into a gentle descent down a median strip and into a grassy ditch—this is clearly no “accident.” Yet despite the strange, simulacral quality of the car crash itself, nothing within the dramatic or narrative co-ordinates of the scene itself prepares us for the determined flatness with which it is portrayed. As James pulls to a stop and proceeds down the bank toward his wife’s upturned car, the film eschews the facial close-ups through which cinematic emotion is conventionally transacted in favour of an extreme long shot that invites us to consider the image at the level of aesthetic surface rather than at the level of a representation of a fully rounded world.¹ Bloodied body and mangled car notwithstanding, the image is graceful, aerial and detached. This formal flatness, in turn, is recapitulated in the characterological flatness of James’s slow, considered gait, which exudes none of the “urgency” that Philip Fisher attributes to the vehement passions of anger, grief and fear, nor any of that “animation” that Sianne Ngai identifies as one of the minimal requirements of emotion.² Possessed of

¹ For the assumption that the close up of the face constitutes the primary currency of cinematic emotion, see Bela Belas, “Visible Man, or the Culture of Film,” trans. Rodney Livingstone, *Screen* 48.1 (2007): 100.

all the time in the world and none of the animation, James—when he finally reaches the car—is initially absorbed by the broken wreckage itself, deeply inhaling the smoke, surveying the upside-down wreck and inserting himself experimentally into the mangled interior before he finally turns his attention to his injured wife. Even when he does attend to Catherine, he seems decidedly devoid of the kinds of concern we would expect a man to feel for his injured wife. After mechanically inquiring as to whether she is “alright,” James repeats the consolatory mantra that has echoed throughout the film, its referent sliding ominously from orgasm to death: “maybe the next time, darling … maybe the next time, darling.” As he begins to make love to a prostrate, semi-conscious Catherine beside the battered body of her car, the camera cranes serenely up and out of the scene in a movement that directly reverses the descent into the airplane hangar that opens the film—a moment of formal closure that seems, once more, to “flatten out” the emotional ambivalence of the scene at play.

For many critics, this striking discrepancy between the scene’s sensational narrative content and its conspicuously “flat” formal, characterological and tonal elements crystallizes Crash’s central tension, in which, while quite literally “trafficking” in emotionally and morally inflammatory subject matter—from wound-sex, to car-crash fetishism to plain dangerous driving—the film is nevertheless marked by what Fredric Jameson calls “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness.” According to Jameson, the social, economic and cultural changes wrought by postmodernity entail the expiry of a hermeneutic model of interpretation in which the surface of the image is only the first stop in an interpretative voyage that should lead, ultimately, to an appreciation of an underlying historical situation or deeper symbolic meaning. In its place we witness “a new kind of superficiality” that resists restoration to any “larger context.” This hermeneutic flatness is immediately and by definition an emotional “flatness,” too, for as Jameson himself puts it of Andy Warhol’s Diamond Dust Shoes, to the extent that

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4 Jameson, Postmodernism, 9, 8.
there is no way to complete the hermeneutic gesture and restore to these oddments that whole larger lived context of the dance hall or the ball,” the image “does not really speak to us at all.”\(^5\) Stripped of the hermeneutic and contextual resonance to which emotion is conventionally thought to respond, the flat postmodern image is presumed bereft of emotional power. *Crash’s* apparent capacity to flatten the emotion out of such controversial and titillating content has afforded the film a real critical cachet among scholars wishing to elaborate a conventional relation between postmodern aesthetics and the foreclosure of emotion. Admittedly, the formal decisions to which critics ascribe the film’s “shrinking of three-dimensional space” differ: for Parveen Adams, it is Cronenberg’s penchant for attaching the camera to a moving car’s running board, which produces an image whose putative dynamism is undercut by its compositional uniformity; for Mark Dery, it is the film’s constant switch-ups of the participants, objects and modes of sexual excitement; while for Alan Jones, meanwhile, it is the mannequin-like, two-dimensional characters and the actors’ frostily flat performances.\(^6\) Almost all critics agree, however, that its flatness and depthlessness leaves *Crash* stubbornly impervious to the magnetics of identification and emotional engagement.\(^7\) In fact, according to many critics, it is the protagonists’

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\(^7\) According to William Beard, James and Catherine are defined by their “affectless alienation” and “emotional vacuity”; for Terry Harpold, *Crash* is characterized by “its cool, detached anality” and “deadening, counter-erotic repetitions”; while for Botting and Wilson, “boredom is the film’s milieu.” (William Beard, *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg* [Toronto: University of Toronto, 2006], 384; Terry Harpold, “Dry Leatherette,” *Postmodern Culture* 7.3 [May 1997], 3; Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, “SexCrash,” *Crash Cultures: Modernity, Mediation and the Material* [Bristol: Intellect Books, 2003], 83.) “Boring,” of course, seems a feeble approximation of the emotional atmosphere of a film that opens with a triptych of sex scenes structured around the fetishistic deployment of industrial technology. Yet as Botting and Wilson elaborate, for the central characters of *Crash*, “sex becomes the same dull daily grind as work: a banal, repetitive, mundane event,” evacuated of feeling and charged with what Harpold calls a “cerebrality, disconnectedness, and abstraction” that
desire to escape this state of emotionlessness that animates the narrative and sees the protagonists drawn into the cult-like force-field of the charismatic Vaughan (Elias Koteas). According to this model of the film, the crash-cult’s increasingly intense investigations into and experiments with the car crash are efforts to restore their access to intensities of emotion unavailable in postmodernity’s depthless culture of apathy and anonymity. Flatness, it would seem, is emotionlessness, and only its “puncturing” can reinstate a basic modicum of human feeling.

Yet closer attention to the film’s striking final scene—and to the many like it in the film—prompts us to modify our understanding of the film’s postmodern “flatness,” whether meant in the literal, hermeneutic or emotional senses. This is not to say that Crash’s images are unmarked by that perspectival and psychological flatness that Jameson ascribes to the postmodern text, but that this flatness is so richly embroidered by texture that both the term “flatness,” with its connotations of matterness, evenness and dullness, and the term “depthlessness,” with its purely negative specification of the surface as absence of depth, come to seem spectacularly inadequate to convey the unusual character of the film. In lieu of more traditional sources of dramatic tension, Crash’s final scene revolves around the visual tension provided by textural contrast, a tension encapsulated in a series of low-angle shots that set the metal of the overturned car’s dented side panels against the tenderized flesh of Catherine’s prostrate body, the stainless steel watch on James’s wrist against his wife’s wounded hand (Fig. 4.8). Indeed, if the scene is not literally flat, nor is it emotionally flat. Although James’s response to the incident is far from conventional, as he runs his fingers over the car’s jagged doorframe and dabs at the florid bruises on his wife’s leg, he displays so connoisseur-like an absorption in the various textures thrown up by the car wreck that he cannot be described as unmoved. While wholly surface-oriented, to the extent that he treats the surface of the car wreck is likely to “disappoint” viewers whose expectations of the film are coloured by its sexual content. (Botting and Wilson, “SexCrash,” 83; Harpold, “Dry Leatherette,” 3.)

as equivalent to the surface of his wife’s body, his actions seem quite at odds with the idea of postmodern emotionlessness. If he cannot “feel” in any traditional sense, he also appears unable to look away.

Far from an isolated case, the textural logic that animates this final, climactic scene is almost routine in a film whose repetitive, improbable narrative can often seem in service to its obsession with highly textured forms. Not only does the film’s habit of both opening and interleaving each scene with a slow track along the glossy side panels of a car or an extended high-angle of its gleaming bonnet maintain the glossy surface continually at the forefront of the spectator’s consciousness, but where actual chromatic surfaces are absent, their effect is simulated through the use of lighting or even water. The saturation of blue lighting throughout, for example, affords even conventionally soft, matte surfaces such as human flesh a dull, metallic glow, while the rain-slicked streets provide fittingly disjunctive backdrops for the series of twisted car bodies the film sets against them.\(^9\) This postmodern gloss, however, must be

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\(^9\) Critics attest to \textit{Crash}’s status as a “chrome-plated construct” in virtually every review and essay on the film. (Roberta Jill Craven, “Ironic Empathy in Cronenberg’s \textit{Crash}: the Psychodynamics of Postmodern Displacement from a Tenuous Reality,” \textit{Quarterly Review of Film and Video} 17.3 [2000], 187.)
carefully distinguished from the specifically modernist “shine,” or “incandescence”
that Anne Anlin Cheng identifies with the fetishized bodily surfaces of the iconic
modern “race beauties” Josephine Baker and Anna May Wong.¹⁰ To the extent that
gloss suggests not the source of light, but a second-hand, reflected gleam, it maps
most effectively not onto the live body of a charismatic celebrity, but onto the wholly
inhuman, inert, metallic and mass-produced objects of what Sonya Shannon has
called postmodernity’s “Chrome Age”—an “age” that finds its clearest emblem in the
lustrous, reflected magnetism of the car.¹¹ Yet if Crash is a film fascinated by the
glossy surface, it is at least as fascinated by its opposite: the rough, the broken, the
bruised and the fractured. Whether it’s a broken windscreen’s stalactites of shattered
glass or the vulva-like scar worming its way down the back of Gabrielle’s thigh,
Crash inducts us into a world in which the close cinematic scrutiny of open facial
wounds, damaged metal panels and royal purple bruising is an essential component of
character development and narrative progress; indeed, the characters’ tactile
investment in each other’s bruises, scars and broken fenders makes the question of
texture in assessing the film as seemingly unavoidable as it has been, so far, deftly
elided in the critical literature. Again, Crash’s rough surfaces must be distinguished
from those valorized in modernist art and philosophy, such as the “pair of rough
peasant shoes,” creased and tattered by a lifetime of contact with the earth, that

1022, 1024, 1024. Nor, for that matter, is the glossy like the “shine” that Martin Heidegger attributes to
moments of “revealing” in his discussion of the work of art. (Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the
Heidegger deploys shine in his analysis of the work of art as an entity capable of revealing “earth” as
the fundamental substrate upon which all “world” is formed (Heidegger, The Origin of the Work of Art,
91.) Arguing that the earth resists efforts at direct penetration, Heidegger suggests that “Color shines
and wants only to shine. When we analyze it in rational terms by measuring its wave-lengths, it is gone.
It shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained … earth appears openly cleared as
itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by nature undisclosable.” (Heidegger,
The Origin of the Work of Art, 91.) Whereas “shine” is unidirectional, the radiance of pure inwardness,
the glossy is duplicitous and mirrory, both reflected and, in turn, reflecting the gaze of the onlooker.

Martin Heidegger celebrates in the “Origin of the Work of Art.” A jagged tear in the once-immaculately gleaming steel of a car’s side panel, a gaping wound generated in human flesh by a shard of glass: the “rough” surface in Crash is inseparable from the metallic, glossy surface of which it nevertheless constitutes a disruption.

Subtleties aside, the point not to be missed here is that if postmodern aesthetics is conventionally characterized by a certain “flatness,” in Crash this flatness is marked by a ceaseless toggling between the glossy and the rough, a binary that exists in an undetermined and unsettling relation to the more familiar binary surface/depth. At once ubiquitous and almost entirely untheorized, this opulently heterogenous textural rubric counters postmodern theory’s dominant model of surface as lack—lack of depth, lack of meaning and lack of emotion—with a model of surface as variegated, complex plane. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s observation that “a peculiar intimacy seems to subsist between textures and emotions” suggests, a model of surface as texture seems far more hospitable to emotion than a model of surface as “depthlessness”—making this new vocabulary of surface texture a suggestive resource for the project of conceptualizing emotion in postmodernism. Given this, it is hardly surprising that “texture,” particularity, and what Nigel Thrift calls “the little, the messy and the jerry rigged,” have become such an important constellation of terms in recent thinking about affect and emotion, a critical topos whose reach extends from a loose investment in texture as a figure for the richly experiential, as in what Ann Cvetkovich calls “the textures of everyday experience,” to Sedgwick’s more literal emphasis on texture as a planal level capable of “shifting the emphasis of some interdisciplinary conversations away from the recent fixation on epistemology … by asking new questions about phenomenology and affect.” Yet while feeling

12 Martin Heidegger, as cited in Stuart Elden, Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault, and the Project of a Spatial History (New York: Continuum, 2001), 65.


theory habitually frames its investment in texture as a methodological transcendence of forms of postmodern analysis that ostensibly disregard or slight emotion, postmodern aesthetics actually anticipates feeling theory’s deployment of textural tropes, thus problematizing feeling theory’s tendency to relegate postmodern aesthetics and theory to a moribund, affectless moment in the critical and cultural past.

This chapter will explore the implications for postmodernism and emotion of Crash’s rustling, redolent engagement with texture through the lens of fascination, an emotion that—as our tendency to deploy the terms “fascinating” and “glossy” almost synonymously suggests—attaches very specifically to the glossy surface. As what Oliver Harris calls “an obscure attraction, an experience we can capture only in the process of being captivated,” fascination epitomizes the kind of idiosyncratic, borderline emotions that I have suggested might be thrown up by postmodernism’s compendium of surface textures. As a film abounding in glossy surfaces, then, it is no accident that Crash has magnetized the kind of intense critical fascination manifest in Mark Browning’s description of the film’s “mesmerizing fascination,” Janet Maslin’s grudging acknowledgment that the film “manages to exert a grim fascination,” and Robin Dougherty’s account of the film as “pleasantly hypnotic.” Indeed, if Crash is manifestly a fascinating film, it is no less clearly a film about fascination. As Roger Ebert notes, the characters in Crash “live in … a trance; they are hopelessly fascinated by a connection between eroticism and automobile accidents.” This chapter will unpack the conceptual and aesthetic stakes of the film’s fascination through a close analysis of its strange, chrome-plated world. Before doing so, however it is necessary to grasp the broader theoretical context in which


Crash’s filmic exploration of the relation between texture and fascination takes place. This chapter, then, will set out the co-ordinates of the critical profile texture has acquired in postmodern theory before returning, once more, to Crash, in order to show that the film offers a unique insight into the distinctive emotional logic of postmodernism.

II.

If Crash’s textural adornment of the flat postmodern surface seems striking in its reinscription of the familiar binary surface/depth, even more striking is how readily texture can also be shown to be at work, in a ubiquitous if underelaborated way, in postmodern theory. For the debates in postmodern theory around the opposition surface/depth repeatedly call upon a lexicon of other terms—glossiness, shininess, gleam, on the one hand, or the fractured, the broken and the punctured, on the other—for supplementation and support. Although Jameson’s primary analysis of Warhol’s Diamond Dust Shoes revolves around its flatness, for example, a less theoretically developed passage later in the discussion describes the gleam that attends this flatness. In his evocation of “the glitter of gold dust, the spangling of gilt sand that seals the surface of the painting and yet continues to glint at us,” Jameson bestows upon the flat surface the capacity both to foreclose on depth (“seal[ing] the surface of the painting”) and to promise more than meets the eye (“continu[ing] to glint at us.”)

The semiotics of this strange tableau are complex: not only does the “glint[ing]” postmodern surface seem to flirt with the spectator in a way that complicates our customary critical alignment of flatness with emotionlessness, but also, to the extent that this transformation of the familiar matte surface into a glossy or lustrous one takes place through the acquisition of value—as “sand” is converted to “gilt,” “dust” turned to “gold”—it tends to evoke a logic of commodification that seems wholly

18 Jameson, Postmodernism, 10. This reference to the surface “glitter” of Warhol’s famous work is expanded in a later work, Signatures of the Visible, where Jameson offers a technological account of postmodern image culture’s “cult of the glossy image” in terms of the development of “wide angle lens, light-sensitive film”—a development that Crash can be seen at once to amplify and thematize through the location of glossy surfaces in pro-filmic space. (Fredric Jameson, Signatures of the Visible [New York: Routledge, 1992], 85.)
untheorized in the passage that it ostensibly supports. Yet Jameson is not alone in his suggestion that there is something inherently glossy in the phenomenological texture of postmodernism. In a similar vein, Jean Baudrillard attests to the rise of the glossy as the sign of the standardized and simulacral, “the very last traces of marginality excised as if by plastic surgery: new faces, new fingernails, glossy brain-cells”; Andreas Huyssen refers to postmodernism’s “gleaming facades”; and Ziauddin Sardar evokes both its “high-tech gloss” and its “glitzy yuppie euphoria.”

Indeed, as if the semiotics of what Renu Bora calls “postmodernism’s predominant glossophilia” were not confounding enough, enough, postmodern theory’s recurrent reliance on the figure of the glossy, gleaming surface is matched by its continued recourse to a series of variants on the “rough” surface. For Joseph P. Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, a “moment of rupture … mark[s] the birth of postmodernity”; according to Jameson, postmodernism is to be defined by the “fragmentation” of subjectivity and cultural forms; Roland Barthes (in his later, poststructuralist incarnation) initiates a new mode of analysis of the photograph with the term “punctum,” which he defines as the “element that rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me,” thereby “break[ing] or punctuat[ing] the studium” of a non-acute, conventionalized interest in a text; over the full-length, coherent text Baudrillard privileges rhetorical “fragments,” which he identifies as a rhetorical strategy that provides a theoretical reflection of “a world of debris, of waste,” while at the same time reifying “contusions, scars, mutilations and wounds”; and Derrida’s work is shot through by the figure of the “wound or inspiration which opens speech and then makes possible


every logos or every rationalism.” Wounds, ruptures, breaks and fragments: while varying in function and in kind, these figures are united by their status as points at which a smooth or continuous surface is ruptured or interrupted, points at which a uniform, homogenous plane is shattered or disturbed.

Running the gamut from the glossy surface at one extreme to the rough or broken surface at the other, this nebulous and often inchoate rhetoric of texture seems rich with conceptual and figurative possibilities. Yet what is most remarkable about the makeshift pair glossy/rough is the extent to which postmodern theorists have tended to assimilate it to the more conventional opposition surface/depth that it seems so productively poised to disrupt or disperse. Rather than permit texture’s glossy, grainy particularity to unsettle a model of surface as emotionless superficiality and depth as vessel of emotional truth, postmodern theorists habitually enlist the glossy to figure depthlessness, and the rough to figure depth. This snug critical fit between the glossy surface and postmodern flatness is most starkly apparent in the customary identification of the glossy with what has come to be seen as both the source and symbol of postmodernism flatness: the commodity. For Jameson, for example, “the cult of the glossy image” constitutes “the ultimate form of the consumption of streamlined commodities”; Angela McRobbie, meanwhile, speaks of “the glossy objects provided … by consumer capitalism”; while Laura Mulvey refers to “the shiny, glossy surface fascination of the screen …[which masks] the process of commodification engenders depthlessness.


22 Jameson, for example, links the loss of history and the “random cannibalization of all the styles of the past” in pastiche—both functions of postmodernism’s new depthlessness—to “a whole historically original consumers’ appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself.” (Jameson, Postmodernism, 18). In other words, it is not just that the commodity is marked by a lack of depth, but that the process of commodification engenders depthlessness.
production concealed behind it.”

Bora’s exhaustive survey of the function of texture in theories of the commodity fetish cements this sense that the commodity, synonymous with postmodernism’s condemnable superficiality and frivolity, is unmistakably marked by its gloss, observing that it is “shine [that] marks the shimmering of exchange value.”

Though the actual commodity may just as readily be rough as it is glossy—one thinks, here, of Baudrillard’s suggestion that it is the “the craving for the antique … the rustic, the artisanal, the handmade” that animates the culture of simulation—it remains figurally inextricable from the figure of the gleaming surface.

Subtending this equation between the commodity and the glossy surface, I suggest, is the glossy’s capacity to theatricalize the effacement of the process of production that is at the heart of the Marxist view of the commodity: indexically, gloss signifies the labour that went into polishing and perfecting the object, even as, iconically, it implies that the object has never been touched at all, its gleaming patina, as Sedgwick puts it, “defiantly or even invisibly block[ing] or refus[ing]” all “information about how, substantively, historically, materially, it came into being.”

It is no wonder, then, that the glossy surface seems to have assumed the figurative burden of signifying the loss of depth that the commodity traditionally marks.

If postmodern theory has consistently laminated the glossy to the “superficial” commodity, it has quite as consistently fused the rough to the real that inheres beyond the surface—whether the real of social relations, the real of language or the real of emotion. For Barthes, the punctum and studium are contrasted as the truly subjective and intensely felt to the merely cultural and conventional; for Baudrillard, “the secret


26 Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 14.
of the world is in the detail, in the fragment, in the aphorism—in the literal sense, *aphorizein*, meaning to isolate, to separate, to cut off—not in the whole”; while Derrida’s description of the “wound or inspiration which opens speech” reveals the figure of the wound as one of a number of interchangeable synonyms, developed throughout his career, for *différance*, the neologism that marks the quasi-metaphysical principle of self-difference and infinite deferral that underpins all Derrida’s work.27

No wonder, then, that Jameson, faced with the image of the glossy filmic surface, admits that he “long[s] from time to time for something both more ugly and less proficient or expert, more home-made and awkward,” for where gloss functions as the hallmark of the depthless and the false, these sites of brokenness and irregularity, conversely, hold out the promise of truth and revelation.28 Indeed, where the text fails to yield fractures or fault-lines of its own, it is the putative role of the critic to engender them. Slavoj Zizek contrasts modern and postmodern interpretative strategies on exactly this basis, arguing that whereas modernist interpretation aims to transfigure the modern text’s “irruption of trauma” into a glossy hermeneutic coherence, postmodern criticism is to be defined, conversely, by its attempt to make the glossy surface rough through a process of critical “estrang[ement].”29

As this demonstrates, while the opposition rough/glossy has the capacity to disrupt or complicate the more familiar binary surface/depth, postmodern critics have tended to abrogate this possibility by strategically configuring the “rough” surface as the site of hermeneutic depth, while dismissing the glossy surface as the site of a hermeneutic deficiency. In other words, the murky, amorphous rhetoric of surface texture has been almost wholly recuperated for the orthodox and established opposition of vacant surface and profound, hermeneutically rich depth. What is immediately striking about


this, however, is the extent to which this critical equation of roughness and depth runs counter to these same critics’ customary resistance to hermeneutic models of meaning. There is, it would appear, something about the semiotics of texture that prompts even those critics who have expended considerable theoretical energy in problematizing the traditional hermeneutic trope of depth, to resurrect—in the figure of the rough—a kind of quasi- or substitute depth. Phenomenologically, of course, there is an intuitive sense to this differential coding of the glossy and the rough. Where the rough surface accentuates the volume and stubborn materiality of the object in a way that underscores its possession of depth, the glossy exterior spotlights its visual qualities in a way that seems to underscore its status as surface, to the point of evacuating the object of its material properties, transfiguring it into a medium, a reflective device, a mirror, a mirage or, as Judith Brown puts it, “into a sparkling play of light.”30 Despite these opposing phenomenological effects, however, both the rough and the smooth are simply kinds of surface. The fact, then, that one of these surfaces has been recruited as more surface than the other, with the glossy surface assuming the full burden of postmodern flatness, and the rough surface attracting many of the connotations that formerly attached to depth, attests, I would argue, to some profound desire to elide texture’s challenge to our familiar thinking.

Yet what is most significant for our larger argument about texture and emotion is that this critical tendency to map the opposition glossy/rough onto a more traditional surface/depth opposition has had serious knock-on effects for our understanding of texture’s relation to emotion. As the widespread assumption that the expiry of hermeneutic depth in postmodernism entails the expiry of emotion suggests, emotion remains inseparable for many theorists from models of deep meaning and value. It is hardly surprising, then, that postmodern theory’s habitual alignment of the binary glossy/rough and the binary surface/depth has ensured that only the rough surface, a surface that masquerades as depth, is imagined capable of inciting genuine emotion, while the glossy surface is aligned with the suspect anti-emotion of fascination. Baudrillard delivers a powerful précis of these two emotional configurations in his heavily texture-oriented description of James Ballard’s Crash (the book on which the film was based rather than the film itself, to be sure, but the point still holds.)

30 Brown, Glamour in Six Dimensions, 151.
According to Baudrillard, “the technology of Crash is glistening and seductive, or unpolished and innocent”: whereas the “unpolished” surface has a kind of guilelessness or innocence, the “glistening” surface exerts a power of “seduction” that draws us in through trickery or deception, generating an emotion that, grounded in epistemic illusion, is itself implicitly illusory.31 Whereas the rough surface makes no manipulative claims on our feeling, allowing our emotional response to rise up spontaneously and naturally, the glossy surface seduces and fascinates us, provoking an emotion that—as an effect of artful manipulation—isn’t really an emotion at all. It is not difficult to find examples of the critical tendency to quarantine genuine emotion in the figure of the rough, coarse or broken surface. Roland Barthes’ exaltation of the photographic punctum is exemplary here, for in this model, the rough, “punctured” surface of the photograph, and the state of being moved by that photograph, share one and the same word, the punctum—which can be mobilized to refer alternately to the piercing of the photograph’s studium through the striking detail, or to the wounding of the viewer’s own body.32 Similarly, Baudrillard’s projection of the age of simulacra as an age in which “Every gash mark, every bruise, every scar left on the body is an artificial invagination … which serve as a vehement answer to the absence of the body” fetishizes the figure of the rough body—that is, the gashed, bruised, scarred body—as a “vehement answer” to the emotional body’s disappearance from postmodern life.33 Yet this insistent critical identification of genuine, authentic feeling with the rough surface—a texture whose coarse, grainy surface facilitates its transformation into a kind of simulacrum of depth—effectively abrogates texture’s implicit demand that we reassess our familiar depth-dependent models of emotion and seek out forms of emotion that attach to the intricacy and complexity of surface.

A similar nullification of texture’s more radical potential is at play in the critical association between the glossy surface and fascination, an emotion that, deriving “from the Latin fascinare, meaning to bewitch or enchant,” has traditionally been


32 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 42.

called upon to emblematize fake or inauthentic feeling.34 Where emotion is conventionally construed as a physiological effect of a subjective evaluation or judgment, critics have tended to condemn fascination as “an instrument of social and political manipulation,” the effect of what Heiko Schmid, Wolf-Dietrich Sahr and John Urry call “stage managed events [that] often have a magnetizing and captivating effect on the consumer”—and thus less a real emotion than, as Steven Shaviro puts it, “the ghost of love, its uncanny double, risen from the grave. Zombie emotion.”35 It is this popular tradition of fascination-bashing that Jameson exploits when he suggests that postmodernism’s characteristic practice of nostalgia is a “mesmerizing new aesthetic mode” that “endows present reality and the openness of present history with

34 Steven Connor, “Fascination, Skin and the Screen,” Critical Quarterly 40.1 (1998): 9. David Hume’s treatise, “On the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” conceives fascination as a tool in government’s subjugation of the populace: “as large states can afford great expense, in order to support the pomp of majesty, this is a kind of fascination on mankind, and naturally contributes to the enslaving of them.” (David Hume, “On the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects [London: A. Millar, 1809], 74-5.) Maurice Blanchot’s description of fascination provides a somewhat more existential version of this model, formulating the emotion as an effect of a specifically visual encounter in which “what is seen imposes itself upon the gaze, as if the gaze were seized” in a way that “is not an active contact, not the initiative and action which there still is in real touching. Rather, the gaze gets taken in, absorbed….” (Maurice Blanchot, The Space of Literature, trans. Ann Smock [Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1982], 32.) Theodor Adorno’s description of “will-less fascination” with the new frames fascination as an intellectual paralysis that blinds its victims to “the fact that there is no longer anything new” in a society increasingly dominated by mass production. (Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life [London: Verso, 2005], 238, 235.)

35 Ackbar Abbas, “On Fascination: Walter Benjamin’s Images,” New German Critique, 48 (1989): 50; Heiko Schmid, Wolf-Dietrich Sahr and John Urry, Cities and Fascination: Beyond the Surplus of Meaning (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 2; Steven Shaviro, “The Life, After Death, of Postmodern Emotions” (Criticism 46.1 (2004): 139. Shaviro’s framing of fascination in the work of Andy Warhol is worth quoting at greater length because of the way it emblematizes a widespread critical tendency to figure fascination as a hollow, empty or, in this case, “posthumous” emotion: “Zombie emotion. It is what remains, what lives on, what returns from the crypt, in the gap between self and aura, or between the shrunken personality and its impersonal emotions, or between the bitter, campy irony of closeted gay men and the self-congratulatory irony of mainstream media culture. Fascination is love aestheticized, experienced under the aegis of Kantian disinterest. It is a love ‘indifferent to the existence of the object’ yet taking pleasure in the object’s abstracted forms and qualities. (Shaviro, “The Life, After Death, of Postmodern Emotions,” 139.)
the spell and distance of a glossy mirage.”36 Here, Jameson deploys “glossy” as a synonym for the fascinating, yet this glossy fascination is not only itself a “mirage,” but is the effect of the twin deceptions—both natural and supernatural—of “distance” and a “spell.” Where conventional cognitive appraisal models of emotion frame emotion as a function of independently formed, subjective evaluations, Jameson figures fascination as a ghostly, hollow effect of an implicitly ideological trickery, and thus less an emotion than a kind of anti-emotion.37 A similar association between fascination, the glossy, ideological manipulation and emotional hollowness marks David Harvey’s work on postmodernity. Drawing extensively on Jameson’s discussion of “the reflecting glass surfaces of the Bonaventure hotel,” Harvey suggests that postmodernism’s “evident fascination with surfaces” involves “drawing a veil over real geography through construction of images and reconstructions, costume dramas, staged ethnic festivals, etc.”38 To the extent that it is predicated on the “drawing [of] a veil over real geography,” fascination itself is fundamentally misguided or illusory, a fake or apparitional emotion. In these readings, then, the glossy surface offers “no … intimacy with [its] character,” its “icy” surfaces resisting all authentic affective investment, and only the rough surface—a surface artificially reinscribed as depth—is capable of delivering genuine emotion.39


37 The connotations that Jameson here attaches to the fascination of the glossy postmodern image prefigure his later, more explicitly pejorative—and more famous—descriptions of fascination in *Signatures of the Visible*. There, what he calls the “essentially pornographic” quality of the visual—what he calls the “cult of the glossy image”—derives from its taking “mindless, rapt fascination” as its aim and telos. (Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, 1, 85, 1.) Again, fascination is framed as an index of cognitive and subjective atrophy, less a genuine emotion than a delusory effect of the kinds of “cult” attachments that form around the glossy image. The full quotation is: “The visual is essentially pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination.” (Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, 1.)


At stake in these classic postmodern readings of the rough and the glossy is a full-scale short-circuit of texture’s capacity to unsettle our understanding of both hermeneutics and emotion. Instead of addressing the idiosyncratic forms of emotional attachment that might form around the textures glossy and rough, postmodern theorists have differentially coded the two textures in ways that continue to allow them to align emotion with depth, and non-emotion with surface. In these terms, a postmodern aesthetics of surface texture becomes available to authentic emotional investment only to the extent that it becomes the site for an imaginary revival of older, modernist structures of feeling—only, that is, through the rough surface’s figurative reinstatement of a lost depth. I have already suggested that fascination may hold the key to understanding the emotional dimension of texture in its own terms. But what, beyond the critical condemnations of its falsity and illusion, is fascination exactly? The section of *Postmodernism* that Jameson devotes to downtown Los Angeles’ Bonaventure hotel involves an extended meditation on the postmodern icon’s “great reflective glass skin” that not only serves as an instance of the generalized suspicion that surrounds the glossy surface and the form of mesmerized attachment with which it is associated, but illuminates the structural underpinnings of this suspicion. For Jameson, the building’s mirror-glass exterior

repels the city outside, a repulsion for which we have analogies in those reflector sunglasses which make it impossible for your interlocutor to see your own eyes and thereby achieve a certain aggressivity and power over the Other. In a similar way, the glass skin achieves a peculiar and placeless dissociation of the Bonaventure from its neighbourhood; it is not even an exterior, inasmuch as when you seek to look at the hotel’s outer walls you cannot see the hotel itself but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it.40

What is most immediately apparent about the passage is a certain contradiction between what it says and what it does. For where at the constative level of utterance Jameson repeatedly bemoans the surface’s obstinate resistance to any kind of epistemic or emotional investment, these claims are belied by the performative level of the utterance, whose sheer duration bespeaks a persistent, affectively charged

40 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 42.
diagnostic effort that is spurred on, rather than put off, by the surface’s mirrory gloss. The stretch of the passages discloses Jameson’s attraction to the image, even as he proclaims its “repulsion” of engagement of any kind. Yet if Jameson’s own palpable fascination with the building’s “great glass skin” appears, initially, as an untheorized excess, irreconcilable with his explicit claims about the building’s “repulsion” of passers-by, closer attention discloses the extract itself as a coherent attempt to theorize this tension between enchantment and disengagement as the essence of fascination itself. The opening sentence of the extract is exemplary here. While its first half seems intent on delivering us to the purely negative opinion that the glossy surface resists both understanding and engagement, describing the way the glass “repels the city outside” and “makes it impossible to see” what is going on within, the tail end of the sentence takes an unexpected turn, with the assertion that, “repulsion” aside, the glossy surface nevertheless “achieve[s] a certain … power over the Other.” At stake in this shift is not just a modification but a wholesale transfiguration of the character of the glossy surface being described. For the characteristics that give one “power over” something or someone seem wholly opposed to the characteristics that “repel” something or someone: in many dictionary definitions, to have “power over” something is to enthrall or to captivate. While the first part of the sentence, then, frames the glossy surface as a mechanism of repulsion, the second frames it as an object of attraction and allure.

What exactly is at play here becomes clearer when we observe that the subject of repulsion and the subject of attraction are actually two different subjects. If “reflector sunglasses … make it impossible for your interlocutor to see your own eyes,” they nevertheless “achieve a certain … power over the Other.” As this suggests, it is “your interlocutor” who fails to see, and someone far more mythical and elevated—“the Other”—to whom an enthralled fascination is attributed. This differential apportionment of feeling between subject and other, where the former remains unmoved while the latter is magnetized, is further reinforced by Jameson’s dual characterization of the nature of the surface. While at first blush the “glass skin” is a surface glossily impervious to the gaze, a surface that actually “repels the city outside,” it is also a medium capable of absorbing the gaze: indeed, “it is not even an exterior, inasmuch as when you seek to look at the hotel’s outer walls, you cannot see the hotel itself but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it.” Bringing this
triple alignment of terms together, then, it would appear that while the reflective surface’s glossy opacity yields nothing either to our gaze or to our touch, this opacity co-exists with another quality—the ability to reflect the “distorted images of everything that surrounds it”—that tends to evoke the spectre of an “Other” arrayed behind or alongside us, whose gaze seems less repelled than enthralled by what it sees.

Balancing the fascination that suffuses Jameson’s description against the dual logic of immersion and disengagement that he describes, it appears that it is in the dialectic between the sense of epistemic defeat provoked by the “impossible …to see,” and the epistemic envy conjured by the notion that some “Other” can see “images of everything that surrounds” us, that fascination emerges. Our fascination with glossy surfaces, in other words, functions according to a triangulated configuration in which an initial lack of comprehension and therefore of attendant emotion is resolved into the second-order emotion of fascination through the development of the idea that someone, somewhere, does understand and therefore—in Jameson’s paradigm—feel.41 Importantly, this model of fascination marks a departure from a familiar

41 Slavoj Zizek corroborates this model of fascination from a psychoanalytic perspective, in his analysis of our contemporary relation to classic film noir, where he adapts the Lacanian logic of desire as desire of the other in order to argue that our captivation with film noir is less a fascination with a textual object than with a spectatorial gaze. According to Zizek, “what fascinates us is precisely a certain gaze, the gaze of the ‘other,’ of the hypothetical, mythic spectator from the ‘40s who was supposedly still able to identify immediately with the universe of film noir.” (Slavoj Zizek, Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992], 112.) In other words, “The real object of fascination is not the displayed scene but the gaze of the naïve other, absorbed, enchanted by it.” (Zizek, Looking Awry, 114.) Jean Baudrillard’s Ecstasy of Communication involves a meditation on contemporary art spectatorship that is particularly pertinent to our attempt to illustrate the persistence of the social in regulating fascination. (Jean Baudrillard, Ecstasy of Communication (New York: Autonomedia, 1988]). In it, Baudrillard describes a scene that seems to contraindicate the conventional view that emotional attachment to the art-object orients itself around a promise of some deeper meaning that lies behind or beyond the surface, and in relation to which the surface of the image may “fool” or “deceive” us. (Baudrillard, Ecstasy of Communication, 30.) As Baudrillard explains, despite the fact that within contemporary hyperrealist sculpture “there [i]s nothing to see,” spectators at the exhibition nevertheless “leaned over to see something, to look at the texture of the skin, the pubic hair, everything.” (Baudrillard, Ecstasy of Communication, 30.) Determining that what seems like anomaly must, on the contrary, be indicative, Baudrillard suggests that it is “precisely because there is nothing to see” that spectatorial fascination has been so inflamed:
understanding of the allure of the glossy surface as a fetish, a model in which, as Cheng puts it, “the lure of shine … protect[s] the fetishistic spectator from the threatening lack underneath.” In fact, if anything, the fascination with the glossy surface I have been describing seems to index a kind of failed fetishism. For Freud’s Oedipal subject, the object of “lack” is the maternal phallus; for the fascinated subject, the object of lack is intense emotion. Yet from this point on, the analogy breaks down, since if, for Freud, the fetish works simultaneously to “ward … off” and to “memorial[ize]” the realization of the lack of the phallus, the glossy surface conspicuously fails to ward off our awareness of the lack of intense emotion. Indeed, as she scans the repellant chilliness of postmodernism’s reflective surfaces, the fascinated subject is defined precisely by her abiding sense of emotion lack—a sense of lack that is only resolved into emotion by the glimmering expectation that for some other, somewhere, emotion is not lacking at all. In fascination, that is, emotional “arousal” of the kind Freud attaches to the fetish exists only as an infinitely deferred and constantly beckoning promise.

“They lean over to see an astounding thing: an image where there is nothing to see…” (Baudrillard, *Ecstasy of Communication*, 31.) Yet while this is a neat paradoxical answer to the question of our continued attachment to images in a postmodernism characterized by the failure of belief in a depth of meaning, there is something else in his description seems to escape his consideration—and that is that each individual act of looking takes place not in isolation, as the encounter of a lone spectator approaching a decontextualized work, but within the social and cultural density of the art gallery. Especially in the gallery context—a space not only charged with the expectation of meaning, but traversed by the social struggle to monopolize and prescribe meaning—the most remedial psychological or discursive reading of the scene would want to consider the question of these other spectators in assessing what it is that draws each spectator back. While the image itself is so painfully present as to effectively empty itself of depth, the presence—in this case very literal—of the other’s gaze ensures that something about the image always eludes the spectator, always escapes his attempts to “test” or “check” the reality of what he sees.


On one level, of course, this triangulated model of the emotion seems inadequate to account for the critical hostility fascination has inspired within postmodern circles, since in many ways it maps almost too neatly onto a poststructuralist hermeneutics in which meaning is not located in the object itself as a positive essence, but is infinitely deferred through a linguistic and social network within which the object is embedded. Yet as Teresa Brennan puts it, “If we accept with comparatively ready acquiescence that our thoughts are not entirely independent, we are, nonetheless, peculiarly resistant to the idea that our emotions are not altogether our own.”44 While postmodern and poststructuralist theory’s critical labour over the past forty years has predominantly revolved around securing, for the social and linguistic, territory once held to be the exclusive domain of the sovereign subject, it seems less hospitable to the social and linguistic incursion into the domain of the emotions. This resistance finds its most striking exemplification in the subtle and often unconscious persistence of cognitive appraisal theories of emotion, even within discourses to which its key tenets seem wholly opposed. In these terms, the resistance to fascination seems more readily explained. Whereas most emotions—and certainly the kind associated with the rough surface of Barthes’s photograph—can at least appear to conform to cognitive appraisal models of emotion, fascination makes its divergence from this model strikingly explicit. In foregrounding so starkly the fact “that our emotions are not entirely our own,” fascination cannot but be discomfiting to critics invested in securing the precincts of emotion against the erosions of poststructuralism’s interminable advance.45


45 John Deigh, “Primitive Emotions,” Thinking about Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotion, ed. Robert Solomon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9. While this model of emotion has done much to accommodate itself to cultural theory, bravely endeavouring to encompass the cultural and linguistic embeddedness of the judgments we make of objects, it is fundamentally unable to account for the ways in which those judgments may actually be diverted or mediated through other gazes—the way in which, for example, an encounter with the initial opacity and repellent chilliness of reflective surfaces is synthesized into fascination through the projection of an invested other. As Daniel M. Gross has argued, the cognitive appraisal model of emotion “collapses at crucial points into a decisionism that forecloses adequate historical and political analysis of emotion,” and secures, in turn, an isolated, monadic model of the subject. (Daniel M. Gross, The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle’s Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006], 3.)
In what follows, I will analyze Crash as a film that seems, on first sight, to bear out postmodern theory’s reading of texture and emotion. The story of a couple whose emotional exhaustion in the face of a gleamingly commodified postmodern world sees them seek out the alternative forms of emotion proffered and embodied by the charismatic Vaughan, Crash appears to reify the rough surface as the vehicle of deep emotion, and dismiss the glossy surface as a lure for the vacuous non-emotion of fascination. Yet as this chapter will demonstrate, Crash’s formal exploration of the relation between texture and emotion ultimately works against the claims of its characters and narrative. This argument will be played out in four stages that are worth foreshadowing here. First, I will demonstrate that Crash dramatizes fascination’s distinctive triangulated structure in a way that recapitulates the model I have delineated through a reading of Jameson; second, I will indicate the ways in which the film’s narrative trajectory seems to sustain and uphold postmodern critical orthodoxy, appearing to valorize the rough surface and condemn the glossy; thirdly, I will show how, whether as advocates or as adversaries of the film, critics have almost uniformly reiterated its narrative rhetoric. Finally, however, I will argue that while Crash’s narrative appears to endorse this conventional critical position, close attention to the film’s visual and formal plane reveals a different emotional grammar at work. In fact, Crash ultimately configures the distinctive “triangulated” structure of fascination not as an emotional aberration, but as a useful heuristic for understanding the workings of postmodern emotion per se. While most postmodern theorists have actively attempted to proscribe the radical potential of texture, the example of Crash suggests that postmodern aesthetics are more adventurous, and that, through concentrated attention to the film’s visual and formal syntax, we may be able to recuperate the power of “texture” to unsettle our understanding of the relation between depth and surface, true emotion and false.

III.
In the context of a film that engages the glossy surface as an object of “fascination,” Crash’s inaugural scene asks to be taken as a kind of thematic and visual set piece, establishing both emotion’s taxonomical ambivalence and the film’s glossily airbrushed aesthetic from the opening credits, as the titles’ glistening chrome font emerges out of a vanishing point into the shifting glare of a light-beam simulating
oncoming headlights. Implicitly locating us in the driver’s seat, and thus cannily inserting between the spectator and the movie screen the “windscreen” of a car, these credits place the question of mediation front and centre from the beginning. Indeed, the opening scene these titles usher in is all of a piece with the glistening, dehumanized world of the credits, its setting—an airplane hangar, a location whose scale and contents render it the natural habitat of the glossy and technological rather than the human—affording ample range to the exercise of the film’s fascination with fascination. Complemented by the predatory “smoothness” of the camera work, the glossy, phallic noses, gleaming floats and streamlined fuselages of the aircraft have a metallic finish that clearly embodies what Sedgwick has called the “willed erasure of its history” characteristic of certain mass-manufactured postmodern surfaces, surfaces whose mass production seems to render them resistant to genuine human investment. Yet as the scene plays out, it becomes clear that the glossy surfaces of the planes are no mere backdrops to a more properly “human” drama. While the appearance of a female figure—the woman we will come to recognize as Catherine Ballard—precipitates the film’s first cut, suggesting a transition from eerie opening landscape to the more regular conventions of filmic character, the cut conspicuously fails to initiate a hand-over from the inanimate to the human, the establishing shot to the drama. Instead of replacing the aircraft as object of the camera’s fascination, Catherine assumes the camera’s fascination as her own: leaning over the nose of the plane and caressing her own image in the polished metal, she removes her breast from her bra and stimulates her nipple to erection against the cold, metallic surface. Even when a second figure—a man this time—enters the frame from behind Catherine and begins to have sex with her, his presence is both visually and narratively circumscribed, restricted to a pair of polished business shoes and trouser cuffs, as the brilliantly gleaming nose of the plane continues to monopolize both Catherine’s and the camera’s gaze. (Figure 4.9.)

Yet while the plane’s surface clearly elicits a certain fascination from our as-yet unnamed protagonist, it is also clear that this fascination is not readily or easily identifiable as an emotion. Although Catherine’s gaze and gestures suggest a kind of intense engagement, her face is fixed and inscrutable. Where emotion is most often

defined by its ability to animate or excite the subject in a manner best embodied by the vocabulary of facial expression, fascination appears to freeze her, producing what Beard calls an “expressionless static countenance.”⁴⁷ Likewise, where for Fisher, “the passions seem to turn our experience of time into something like a double landscape of foreground (both into the past and the future), middle distance, and background,” fascination is an emotion that suspends time, arresting the gaze at the shimmering surface and recalling the dictionary definition of the verb to fascinate as “to render motionless, as with a fixed stare or by arousing terror or awe.”⁴⁸ Indeed, so fixed and static is fascination that if, as I have argued, it takes the glossy surface as its object, it also shares many of the properties of the glossy surface. A character for whom the glossy surface exerts an irresistible fascination, Catherine has herself been described in terms of a certain “mirror-smooth surface,” her “lacquered insentient beauty,” “glossy features” and deficiency of facial and bodily expression suggesting fascination’s ability to internalize and even incorporate the object with which it is transfixed.⁴⁹

![Figure 4.9. Fascination and the glossy surface.](image)

⁴⁷ Beard, *Artist as Monster*, 397.

⁴⁸ Fisher, *The Vehement Passions*, 76.

⁴⁹ Beard, *The Artist as Monster*, 403, 397, 397.
Yet if fascination looks very much like the absence of emotion, this doesn’t mean it’s not one. Silvan S. Tomkins’s brief description of fascination in his ground-breaking *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, for example, resolves the emotion’s taxonomical difficulties by suggesting that it be understood paradoxically, as an emotion that “moves” us to stop moving. Locating fascination as one stage of the “two distinct aspects [of] the ocular component of the affect of excitement,” he suggests that when in its thrall, “the individual seems to be passively caught or fascinated by the object,” in a fashion marked by “a cessation of breathing … correlated with the fixed stare at the object.”

While fascination’s physiological effects are negative, not the quickened breathing we traditionally associate with emotion, but rather a “cessation” of breathing, they are no less dramatic and consequential for that. Indeed, though Tomkins foregrounds fascination’s loss of physical animation, he also indicates fascination’s heightening of ocular animation by emphasizing the emotion’s morphological relation to the “fixed stare.” This construction of the emotion as a distinctive amalgamation of motor diminution and ocular zeal substantiates my suggestion that fascination emerges in and as a dialectic between a lack of tactile stimulation and an excess of visual stimulation. Indeed, this suggestion is further borne out by returning to the film, for while the glossy surface of the plane appears to yield nothing to Catherine’s touch other than its icy chill—a chill already colloquially identified with emotional lack—her eye is working overtime, scanning the gleaming surface for clues, leads and telltale signs that there’s something more to be felt. If, as her rigid, statue-like posture suggests, she cannot move, she also cannot stop looking. At play here is a kind of dialogue between hand and eye, between the glossy surface’s smooth, blank feel and its glistening appearance. Recalling Cheng’s insistence that “shine mobilizes the interstitiality between sight and feeling, visuality and textuality,” fascination oscillates between the absence of immediate sensation transmitted by the surface texture and its counter-indication in the form of a subtle surface gleam—a gleam that seems to hold out the promise that someone, somewhere, feels.


Just who that “other” is becomes clear in the next scene, which sees Catherine united at home with her husband, James. Opening with an extreme close-up on James’s face that frames his grey-green eyes as the source of a presiding gaze, the scene shows him coolly probing the details of Catherine’s sexual encounter in the airplane hangar:

JAMES:
Where were you?

CATHERINE:
In the airplane hangar.

JAMES:
Did you come?

CATHERINE:
No.

This quiet interrogation retrospectively configures the earlier scenario as a performance stage-directed and supervised by James, positioning him as an Other whose putative ability to take direct sexual pleasure in the sight of the contact of a woman’s breast on the metallic nose of a light aircraft mediates Catherine’s own unstable fascination with that surface. Yet what the scene also suggests is that this mediatedness cuts both ways. It is not long before the direction of the inquiry is reversed, and Catherine’s own questioning—“what about your camera girl?”—elicits James’s confession that he too failed to “come,” to which Catherine offers the consolatory analgesic: “maybe the next one, darling, maybe the next one.” A long-awaited reverse shot reveals her from James’s point of view, leaning with her back to him against the balcony railing, one hand casually lifting her skirt to expose the cleft of one perfectly toned, hairless buttock. This peculiar posture and gesture endows her with precisely the mysterious, alien sensuality that allows the “mirror-smooth surface” of her skin to become a site of investment for James, prompting him to approach Catherine and sedately enter her from behind, as the camera, in a moment of uncharacteristic discretion, drifts over her shoulder and into a twilit vista of the asphalt flyover below. What this brief exchange suggests, then, is that if James mediates Catherine’s fascination, Catherine mediates James’s, each member of the couple contriving to occupy—through what Iain Sinclair succinctly describes as performances “enacted by one partner and directed at the other”—the position of an
Other who truly, intensely feels. Catherine’s rather cheerless promise—“maybe the next one, darling, maybe the next one”—echoes throughout the film’s dry-lit urban interiors and abandoned lots as a pledge peculiarly apposite to this role. From this perspective, what many critics find most confusing and discomfiting about the film—the couple’s stagey, hushed voices and self-conscious stiffness—can be best understood as role-play in which each member of the couple contrives to spur the other’s ability to invest emotionally in the chrome-plated world around them by temporarily occupying the position of this sensualized, fully responsive other.

It is precisely this mediated structure of fascination that regulates the film’s unusual narrative trajectory, which seems less to unfold along the linear path projected by a desiring protagonist than to fork and multiply continuously into new couplings and new permutations of mimetic desire, rendering the question of whose desire is driving the plot an entirely open one. On the micro level, this mediated structure emerges most clearly in the film’s habit of structuring scenes around one character’s enthralled, baffled and voyeuristic—that is to say, fascinated—observation of another character. Exemplary here is the scene immediately following James’s accident, a scene in which a soundtrack limited to the couple’s hushed, monotone voices provides a deliberate counterpoint to the image track, where James’s florid bruising and ladder-like stitching do their best to inspire revulsion. Closing with the bed-bound James telling his attentive wife that “after years of being bombarded by road safety propaganda, it’s almost a relief to be in an actual accident,” the cut to an over-long and seemingly redundant reverse shot of Catherine’s face exists solely to display her fascinated scrutiny of his, her emerging awareness of the embryonic impulses he harbours. If James’s newfound interest in the car crash will become a burning obsession, the pursuit of which sees him follow Vaughan into a series of increasingly dangerous traffic violations, Catherine, in turn, will be one step behind him, submitting first to Vaughan’s borderline sex attack in the back of her husband’s car, and finally to James’s semi-homicidal attempt to drive her off the road, which results in her being thrown from her overturned car by the side of the freeway. Superficially, then, this is a film about characters obsessed with car crashes, but structurally it is a film actuated by a logic of influence, testing the limits of its characters’ fanatical

52 Iain Sinclair, Crash (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 47.
submission to the sway of the other. It is no accident, then, that fascination’s
dictionary definition moves with such ease from denoting a generalized intransitive
condition (“the state of being fascinated”) to indexing a particular transitive power
(“the quality or power of fascinating”), a force possessed and exercised by certain
persons. Indexed in the slippage is the realization that those who fascinate others do
so to the precise extent that they seem fascinated themselves.

What makes Crash interesting as a critical object, however, is that its central trope—
the car crash—effectively dramatizes postmodern theorists’ tendency to condemn or
attack the glossy surface and the forms of desire and investment it sustains. After all,
if James and Catherine are, at least initially, fascinated by the glossy surfaces
enshrined in advanced technology, they are also deeply suspicious of the
triangulations and mediations through which fascination works. The action of the film
is almost entirely propelled by their efforts to locate in crushed metal, shattered glass,
and scarred human flesh—in particular, that of Vaughan, whose acne- and accident-
scarred skin is a human correlate of the roughened, coarse metallic surfaces he so
excels at creating—avatars of the kind of emotional immediacy and intensity they
imagine they miss in the smooth or the glossy. There is one scene in particular,
however, that provides a unique insight into the stakes of the couple’s investment in
the coarse, irregular surface of broken metal. Suddenly back up on the sunny balcony
of his apartment after the previous scene’s midnight rendezvous with Vaughan,
James’s afternoon reverie is interrupted by his wife Catherine’s slightly narcotized
whisper in his ear: “my car.” A cut to the garage shows Catherine crouching next to
her small silver convertible, a visible dent blighting the otherwise perfectly
streamlined panels of its right side. Her question to James—“Could it have been
deliberate?”—is immediately answered by the audience, who draw on their own
knowledge of Vaughan’s repeated ramming of the side of James’s car in the previous
scene to infer that this too was Vaughan’s doing. Yet James’s answer seems to bypass
the workings of psychological deduction, relying, instead, on direct textural
experience: his revelation that “it was Vaughan” is cued by his running his hand in
quasi-mystical fashion over the crushed side panel. Setting the personalized signature
of the crushed side panel against the glossy texture of the mass-produced car, James
fantasizes the crushed metal panel as a kind of raw pre- or post-capitalist inscription
in which the real of subjectivity trumps the anonymity of mass production. If the
glossy surface remains smugly resistant to “direct” comprehension, the dented, uneven metal of the car’s side panel is able to elicit a confident certainty about its status and meaning. (Fig. 4.10.)

Moreover, as James’s quietly moved expression as he runs his hand over the craggy surface suggests, the simulacral depth evoked by this rough surface enables it to facilitate just the kind of raw, direct and unmediated emotion that the glossy, intact surface militates against. As Botting and Wilson put it, Crash locates in “the battered and broken body … the last remnant of a human erotic imaginary in the face of a fully automated form of desire.” Yet the connection suggested in this scene between the rough texture and strong emotion is realized most forcefully during James and Vaughan’s first one-on-one sexual encounter, the dramatic and sexual climax of which takes place not in Koteas and Spader’s rather self-conscious back-seat make-out session but in the moment of vehicular collision that caps it off. In a spatial and temporal hiatus clearly contrived to circumvent the representation of the homosexual sex act, the film’s unusually explicit homosexual action suddenly gives way to a discreet cutaway pan along a wall, before cutting once more to the image of James emerging from Vaughan’s Lincoln (the owner of the car is nowhere to be seen.) After

53 Botting and Wilson, “SexCrash,” 84.
wandering a short distance to a conveniently placed scrap metal yard, James gets into a waiting totalled car; as if on cue, the Lincoln, now occupied by a maniacally grimacing Vaughan, appears from around the corner and rams into James’s car repeatedly, as James collapses orgasmically against the dashboard, eyes closed. As William Beard describes it, *Crash* shows the body being directly “imprinted with the hard edges and shapes of the car in the form of wounds,” where the notion of imprinting manages to collapse the rough surface, a depth model of signification and the emotional overtones of psychological “imprinting,” into one highly efficient figure.

Given the extent to which these scenes appear to reinforce postmodern theory’s insistent opposition of an emotionless, depthlessly superficial glossy surface and an emotionally charged, hermeneutically complex rough surface, it is hardly surprising that both scholarly and journalistic critics of the film also tend to recapitulate the reading of emotion and texture set out in postmodern theory. On the one hand, critics ill-disposed to the film focus on its initial preoccupation with what Jameson has called the “prefabricated … glossy and neutralized” products of a postmodern consumer culture, attacking the gleaming surface and its corresponding emotional lexicon as a betrayal of character depth. Deeming the film “annoyingly superficial,” Gary Johnson argues that while

54 James and Catherine’s association of the rough surface and a kind of “raw” or direct emotion is most clearly condensed in the figure of the wound. The scene immediately following Catherine’s quasi-rape at the hands of Vaughan, which shows Catherine lying naked on her bed with a number of dark bruises, depicts James’s careful inventory of his wife’s injuries. The camera slowly tracks in as Ballard leans over her, placing his fingers gently on the blossoming imprints of Vaughan’s hand, its raw surface facilitating a direct, frontal intimacy between the couple that is in clear contrast to their earlier refusal to “face” each other. Simultaneously tender and disturbing, the scene frames the bruise as a site of unique self-expressive vulnerability.


Cronenberg has created a fascinating world in *Crash* … he never gets beyond the surface allure, the glisten of chrome and the oily glow of human bodies desperately fucking … Cronenberg doesn’t let us inside the characters’ pain so that we can understand their obsessions.57

Here, Johnson attributes the director’s failure to “let us inside the characters” to the distracting “surface allure” of “glistening chrome” and the “oily glow of human bodies”—a “surface allure” that diverts the director’s gaze from the genuine emotions that should be his object.58 Yet even for those critics who do acknowledge fascination as an emotion, there remains something disturbing about its odd, triangulated structure, especially in the context of the Ballards’ marriage, where its divergence from the more “direct” emotions that conventionally sustain romantic and sexual attachments reads to many critics as cold and sordid. This critical distaste for the key role played by fascination in James and Catherine’s relationship is most frequently articulated in terms of a discomfort with the characters’ refusal to “face” each other. As Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs and Ramaswami Harindranath observe in their ethnographic study of the film and its reception, many of the interviewees questioned about their responses to *Crash* read the sex scenes “as lacking intimacy, as being cold and emotionless, because there is no eye contact and the angle of their heads often accentuated the degree to which the characters were looking out and away from the


58 Interestingly, the language in which Johnson frames his attack on the glossy surface for diverting the director from the task of penetrating his characters’ “obsessions” inadvertently reveals a knowledge that the glossy surface may be itself the object of those obsessions. For Johnson’s equation between the glossy surface of the “chrome” and the “oily” surface of the “bodies desperately fucking”—of metallic gloss and the sweat of intercourse—tends to accord to the glossy surface a kind of sexual allure, drawing an analogy between the supposed depths of human character, sexuality, and the glossy surface of a plane. Thus, while Johnson’s critical presupposition is that the emotional truth of character basks in a kind of crevasse-like invagination beyond the glossy surface which the film has failed to penetrate, the form in which the attack is framed suggests a latent awareness of the glossy surface’s emotional power, and, as a corollary, an awareness of the possibility that Cronenberg’s refusal to penetrate the glossy surface of his characters’ lives is his critical insight into their character—as characters whose emotional lives are focused around that glossy surface.
other person.” 59 James Bellamy, likewise, complains that although “James and Catherine have a passionate looking sex scene near the middle of the film … even in that scene they are essentially fucking someone else,” in a triangulation that is implicitly incompatible with true feeling. For Johnson, meanwhile, what renders the film “lurid and disturbing” is the way in which “people copulate mechanically, rarely looking each other in the face.” 60 Where the marital relation is conventionally conceived as a kind of emotional sanctuary whose value lies in its ability to seal off desire from the ceaseless solicitations of the social, James and Catherine’s play with distance, aloofness and otherness—that is, their deliberate invocation of the social—reads as repellent to many viewers, in a way that strongly recalls the condemnation of fascination inscribed in postmodern theory.

If the film’s popular denouncers tend to focus their condemnations on the film’s glossily airbrushed surfaces, however, its mostly academic champions have tended to concentrate their praise on its depiction of the rough surface. Again, however, their arguments seem to do little more than reinforce postmodern theory’s insistent opposition between the rough and the glossy, the emotional and the emotionless. For these self-professed “radical” scholars, Crash is an unambiguous celebration of the power of the rough surface to reanimate an emotional life drained by postmodernity’s emptily glossy surfaces, with Botting and Wilson, for example, describing the narrative of the film as a process by which, “from being a mechanical failure of diminishing returns, sex is transformed by the crash and becomes, again, a liberating experience,” and Beard suggesting that “the revitalization of the James-Catherine relationship” is “founded … on the abjection of crashes and crash-like injuries.” 61 Yet if this reading of the relation between emotion and texture in Crash very clearly


61 Wilson and Botting, “SexCrash,” 87; Beard, The Artist as Monster, 405.
rehashes that advanced in postmodern theory, it also seems to do little more than transcribe into scholarly rubric the statements made by *Crash*’s characters. When Botting and Wilson, for example, suggest that *Crash* locates in “the battered and broken body … the last remnant of a human erotic imaginary in the face of a fully automated form of desire,” it is difficult not to hear echoes of Vaughan’s announcement—to Ballard, as the two men speed through the night in the open-topped Lincoln—that “the car crash is a fertilizing rather than a destructive event, mediating the sexuality of those who have died with an intensity that’s impossible in any other form.”62 This straightforward critical reproduction of the characters’ own valorization of the rough surface leaves no space for narrational irony, internal self-difference or simple performative contradiction—no space, that is, for the very “wounds,” “punctums” or “fragments” that are the formal correlates of the literal rough surfaces they reify. As this suggests, there may be something inherently self-contradictory in the scholarly reading of the film as an exaltation of the emotional currency of the rough surface.

In order to fully exploit this point of contradiction, however, it is necessary to refocus our critical attention from the level of narrative and character, the level at which texture is described and portrayed, to the level of formal rhetoric, the level at which texture is experienced. Certainly, on first viewing, *Crash*’s formal labour seems to sustain and corroborate the ubiquitous conviction that the glossy surface is the locus of an emotional disaffection from which the rough surface can rescue us—most prominently through its tendency to align the glossy surface with the tracking shot. According to Sinclair, the effect of Cronenberg’s famously clinical tracking shots is to underscore the presence of the camera, rendering it, as Sinclair puts it, less the neutral observer of the scene than “an accomplice, an expected intruder … [an] instrument [without which] the scene would never happen.”63 Yet as classic film theories of suture make clear, foregrounding the presence of the camera effectively precludes suture and thus any kind of emotional identification with the characters on screen by

62 Wilson and Botting, “SexCrash,” 84.

63 Sinclair, *Crash*, 47.
shifting the status of the visible from “cinema to cinematic, cinema as discourse.”

To the extent that the tracking shot is a formal technique associated with a certain alienating, distancing quality, then, *Crash*’s habit of portraying the coruscating gleam of its various glossy surfaces through a series of prowling, insistent, virtuoso tracking shots tends to bear out and authenticate at the level of form the ideas about the glossy surface advanced by its characters at the level of narrative. As the camera cranes slowly into the first scene to disclose Catherine leaning over the nose of the plane, for example, the different distanciation effects we associate with the extended, unattributed tracking shot on the one hand, and the glossy surface of the aircraft on the other, are consubstantialized. The implication is that the glossy surface, like the “glossy” shot, is somehow resistant to deep emotional investment.

Laminating the glossy surface to a formal manoeuvre whose effect is to keep the spectator on the surface of the image, *Crash* conversely aligns the roughened, fractured surface with a formal manoeuvre whose traditional function is to draw the spectator into the film: the “cut” of filmic montage. Where classical film theory has established the cut as the filmic device that heralds the viewer’s suture into a three-dimensional, psychologically rounded world, *Crash*’s co-ordination of the cut with the rough surface tends to reify its capacity to afford access to depths of feeling precluded by the insistent superficiality of the glossy surface. The most vivid example of this strategy at work is the first collision sequence, in which the sudden institution of a series of rapid cuts comes as a stark contrast not just to earlier scenes but to earlier segments of this scene, which opens with an extended pan along the rain-slicked hood of James’s car before cutting to an equally extended shot of James inside it. It is, significantly, James’s loss of control of the car—the first step in a process that will end in a tableau of cut glass stalactites, wounded flesh and tarnished metal—that precipitates a series of sudden cuts between exterior “action” shots of the car sliding over the wet road, and interior over-the-shoulder shots of James attempting to regain control of the wheel. This fusion of the “cut” of filmic montage to the rough, broken surface is further secured at a figurative level. For the scene’s unusual car-interior view of the crash enables the camera to pinpoint the exact moment when the glass of the windscreen shatters, as a body from the car opposite is precipitated through it.

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This plummeting blur of flesh and fabric so completely obscures the view from the camera that the cut to a view outside the car reads as a sign that the body had actually penetrated and shattered not just the glass of the windshield but the surface of the lens. It is as if the car crash had enabled the camera to achieve so raw and indexical a connection to its object that it had been forced to seek relief in a more distanced point of view. If the glossy surface ostentatiously remains just that—a surface—the rough surface is imagined as affording a range of immediate emotional experiences that are not just unmediated by the other, but unmediated by (cinematic) language itself.

Yet while appearing to endorse the critical assimilation of the glossy/rough opposition to the surface/depth opposition, Crash’s exploration of the relation between textural form and textural content ultimately facilitates a subtle critique of this conflation. For there is something about the consubstantialization of the rough surface and the filmic device of montage that is almost too perfect, too flawless, too glossy—and which, as such, tends to preclude the raw emotion that it should, ostensibly, provoke. As Marc Jancovich has shown in his careful reading of New Critical rhetoric, the treatises of the New Criticism describe the perfect dovetailing of form and content according to the vocabulary of “integrity” and “wholeness”—a vocabulary that holds even where the individual textural character of both the form and the content under discussion is as “ragged and dirty” as that of Crash’s many collision scenes.  

By too-perfectly aligning the broken, shattered and fragmented surfaces on screen with their appropriate formal correlate, the cut, then, Crash effectively forecloses the kinds of ”gaps,” “fragments,” “punctums” and “wounds” that postmodern critics have reified as the site of the genuine emotion, and evokes, instead, the logic of the brilliant filmic commodity. The very conscientiousness of its efforts to hammer home at the level of form the roughness and rawness of the surfaces it depicts at the level of content, then, paradoxically transfigures Crash’s own surface into a flawless, shimmering and glossy one, making it a perfect candidate for fascination. This irony is confirmed by the film’s popular reception, in which a film teeming with characters convinced of the epistemic and emotional value of broken skin, torn metal and

shattered glass has become the object of endless critical reflections on its consummate lustre—with most critics offering some version of the observation that “for all of its macabre content, Cronenberg’s film is a glossy affair, his car crashes varnished in celluloid,” or, in Terry Harpold’s words, “Cronenberg’s Crash aspires to a kind of fleshy, abject raggedness, but never quite makes it.” The film’s scintillating surface sheen is further corroborated by its emotional reception, which, as we have already seen, is characterized not by the kind of intense excitement anticipated by the film’s radical scholarly critics, but by the unsettlingly low-key, triangulated emotion of fascination, with both fascination and its close synonyms—mesmerism, hypnosis—enjoying high rotate in reviewer’s accounts of the film. As a text, then, Crash seems to embody the very sparkling surface that its characters spend their time attempting to fracture, shatter or generally rough up; to constitute at the level of form the gleaming commodity that it condemns at the level of narrative.

This does not, however, leave the film entirely devoid of the raw intensities so valorized by both its characters and critics; rather, it forces us to alter our understanding of the way they emerge. Certainly, the reviews make it clear that the film’s penchant for matching the image of wounded flesh with the formal technique of rapid cutting is incapable of conveying the raw, direct emotion the characters have in their sights—and that, in fact, this too-neat correspondence only elicits further fascination. Yet there are exceptions to this rule of form-content correspondence—scenarios in which the film’s raw, rough content is actually juxtaposed with a glossy filmic aesthetic. One example of a scenario like this is the film’s final scene on the grassy verge at a fork in the freeway, in which Catherine lies concussed and bloody next to her overturned car as her husband fucks her, gently and somewhat contemplatively, from behind. In its conflagration of flesh wounds and torn metal the content of the image epitomizes what I have been referring to as the rough surface; yet the shot that depicts it is smooth, the slow crane away from the couple echoing in reverse the equally smooth crane shot that had lowered us in to the opening scene. Yet while this formal betrayal of the rough surface is often read as diminishing the

emotional cargo of the rough surface, it is, oddly enough, precisely this scene and scenes like it that provoked the most intense emotion from critics. Beard’s complaint, that the film’s formal “serenity” disrupts its effort to convey the raw force of its characters’ injuries, is typical here:

Cronenberg’s camera tracks over and cuts among these injuries with utter serenity; and the amazingly cool, clean, empty, purple-curtained hospital ward offers an environment of inviolable composure. Indeed, it requires every ounce of abjection emanating from James’s wounds to prevent these massive bruises and contusions from being assimilated into the overpoweringly calm grey and violet design scheme.67

At the constative level, the passage argues that the disparity between rough content and glossy form dials down the emotional impact of the rough content, such that the potential emotional charge of the “massive bruises and contusions” is almost entirely deflated. At the performative level, however, it suggests something quite different. For Beard’s vividly imagined inventory of just those features whose impact he claims to have been almost entirely “assimilated into the overpoweringly calm grey and violet design scheme,” actually manifests the intensity of emotion for whose absence it endeavours to argue. A similar performative contradiction is evident in the response of Barbara Creed, whose lucid parataxis of “sheaths of metal, shards of glass, ripped leather upholstery, blood glistening on a steering wheel, two crash survivors copulating in a car, a man fucking a wound in the leg of a female crash victim, repeated episodes of anal sex” is succeeded by the lamentation that “Crash is oddly and unexpectedly detached.”68 Here, Creed’s almost hallucinatory incantation of the film’s various torn or broken surfaces reveal her to have been strongly affected by the same rough surfaces whose impact, she complains, has been compromised by their “unexpectedly detached” formal presentation. While both Beard and Creed argue that the film’s glossy aesthetic undercuts its rough content, then, the vehemence of their

67 Beard, The Artist as Monster, 398

responses to this disparity comes to constitute the very strong, “direct” emotion whose foreclosure they are lamenting.

But if these passionate responses to the film’s juxtaposition of rough surface and glossy image represent the few examples of “intense” emotional response to the film, the mode through which this emotion emerges forces us to reconsider our acceptance of its status as direct. For the strong emotion provoked derives not “directly” from the rough texture per se, but from its juxtaposition with or mediation through a smooth, glossy cinematographic motion that is felt to fail to do it justice. Beard’s emotional response to “the abjection emanating from James’s wounds … these massive bruises and contusions”—an emotion evinced in the sheer vividness of his descriptive vocabulary—is mediated by and depends on a sense that the “utter serenity” of Peter Suschitzky’s camerawork is on the point of assimilating them into “the overpoweringly calm grey and violent design scheme.” This juxtaposition of rough image and glossy form produces a second-level filmic gap or fracture that is actually capable of communicating the rough to the audience, but only in and through the mediation of the glossy—in a way that recalls Stanley Corngold’s insistence that literary feeling arises precisely from “the conflict between what sentences say and what they do, between the propositional meaning and the rhetorical effects … such tensions are concentrated to elicit new forms of feeling.”69 Despite being framed as the epitome of directness, rawness and intensity, then, our experience of Crash’s rough surfaces is just as mediated as our experience of the glossy, emerging only through their juxtaposition with the pristine control of a series of gleaming tracking shots. Indeed, this logic is just as apparent within the image itself as it is in the dialectic between image and form. The grotesque contusions of the vulva-like scar that runs along the back of Gabrielle’s thigh, for example, gain their impressive intensity of effect through their constant proximity to the sheen of patent leather and the gleam of her chrome accessories; the sight of James’s leg wounds acquire their abject raggedness largely through their juxtaposition with the metallic leg brace in which they are enclosed. Many critics have reified the film’s vision of the rough,

broken or punctured texture for its capacity to provoke direct, intense, unmediated emotion. Yet the film’s care to abut the rough surface continually against the glossy suggests the extent to which the rough surface’s emotional effect depends on its alignment with the glossy surface, whose glacial superficiality must be ceaselessly invoked in order to sustain our belief in the rough surface’s own affective and hermeneutic wealth.  

Yet though these apparently more direct and intense emotions are no less mediated than fascination, the semiotic heft of their mediation is strangely but significantly inverted. Whereas the fascination generated by the glossy surface involves the feeling that someone is feeling the emotion that I lack, the emotion generated by the rough surface involves the feeling that someone—and, most probably, those fascinated by the glossy surface—is missing out on the real, direct emotion that I feel. In other words, while fascination and these seemingly more direct emotions are alike in their dependence on the other, the former revolves around the projection of an empowered other, an other imbued with a kind of immediate emotional vigor, and the latter derives substance from the spectacle of a disempowered other, an other imagined to be impotent, alienated and emotionless. This opposition is most clearly demonstrated through the different conceptualizations of “traffic” with which the two emotions are associated. Near the beginning of the film, the characters’ fascination with cars prompts them to see cars everywhere as charged with some mysterious purpose. As Helen Remington puts it, much to James’s excited recognition, “When I left the hospital I had the strange feeling that all these cars were gathering for some reason I didn’t understand … there seemed to be ten times as much traffic.” Yet by the final few minutes of the film, James, driving at night down an empty stretch of freeway, is moved to remark to Catherine: “The traffic! Where is everyone? They’ve all gone away.” If the fascination that animated the first section of the film depended on an other charged with an empowered sensuality, an other “gathering for some reason I didn’t understand,” the characters’ taste of the kind of raw emotion yielded by the

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70 This is dramatized most clearly in the oddly dialectical way in which Vaughan articulates the experience of “direct” emotion: describing the car crash as “a liberation of sexual energy, mediating the sexuality of those who have died with an intensity impossible in any other form,” Vaughan at once dismisses those “other form[s]” as redundant in light of the “intensity” of this emotional experience and reveals their necessity to that “intensity”’s self-definition.
rough surface evokes an evacuated, empty other—an other who is, quite literally, “gone.” Both the rough and the glossy, then, participate in emotion’s triangulated structure, yet where fascination hallucinates an other imagined to be the hidden repository of real emotion, the emotion of excitement projects an other imagined as the graveyard of emotional lack.

As this suggests, while the glossy has traditionally been equated with a model of icy, emotionless superficiality and the rough with a model of emotionally-charged depth, neither of these alignments seem to do justice to the specificity of the two textures’ emotional structure or effect. As Sedgwick has argued,

To perceive texture is always, immediately, and de facto to be immersed in a field of active narrative hypothesising, testing, and re-understanding of how physical properties act and are acted upon over time. To perceive texture is never only to ask or to know What is it like? Nor even just How does it impinge on me? Textural perception always explores two other questions as well: How did it get that way? And What could I do with it?71

Rather than merely recapitulating the emotional logic that has attended the surface/depth opposition, the rough and the glossy yield a specific emotional syntax of their own, in which the ostensible textural object of our emotion is always situated in relation to the spectral phantom of some “other.” The emotions invoked by texture, that is, take texture as a springboard to the projection of social, discursive and material worlds through reference to which we come to feel. In fascination, the glossy surface’s manifest hermeneutic and thus emotional vacancy magnetizes me with the glimmering promise of an other’s gaze possessed of an intensity and directness of feeling that eludes me. In more “direct” emotions, conversely, the rough surface’s imagined hermeneutic and emotional cornucopia pivots around the spectre of an other ostensibly deficient in the emotional immediacy I conceive myself as possessing. This “triangulation” of emotion is unsettling for postmodern critics whose insistence on the subject’s enmeshment in broader social, linguistic and cultural domains seems to exclude emotion, which remains a fetishized space of privacy and singularity. It is

71 Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 13.
hardly surprising, then, that in its strikingly explicit reliance on the concept or spectacle of the other, the “fascination” that attends the glossy surface has been recruited as the traditional fallguy for these triangulations. Yet as this chapter has suggested, fascination’s triangulated structure is less an aberrant feature of a marginal, borderline emotion than a trait that can be shown to brand many postmodern emotions that take texture as their object, whether rough or smooth, ostentatiously triangulated or apparently direct.
Boredom: Avant-Garde and Trash in Harmony Korine’s *Gummo*

The scholarly and critical reception of Harmony Korine’s *Gummo*—the first directorial outing from the *enfant terrible* previously feted as the screenwriter of Larry Clark’s infamous 1995 “kidsploration” drama, *Kids*—situated the film squarely within the tradition of the cinematic avant-garde. For J. J. Murphy, *Gummo* belongs in an “American avant-garde tradition”; for David Denby, it is a “shock avant-garde feature”; while for Jeffrey Sconce, *Gummo* “does exactly what we so often hope an ‘avant-garde’ screening will do.”¹ To a large extent, this critical construction of the film was set in motion by the promotional material, which saw a number of iconic directors draw heavily on the conventional rubric of the avant-garde in their generous praise of the film: Bernardo Bertolucci dubbed *Gummo* “a revolution in cinema,” tapping into a conventional alignment between avant-gardism and political change; Gus van Sant’s insistence that the film was “a completely original creation” employed the avant-garde’s traditional association with formal novelty; while Werner Herzog announced of the film, “it knocked me off my chair”—a claim which resonates with the avant-garde’s much-remarked upon capacity to propel political action.² Yet the avant-garde co-ordinates within which the film was framed and publicized hardly worked in its favour, for *Gummo* was almost universally heralded as an avant-garde failure. For Walter V. Addiego, “Korine’s trying to offer a radical vision of rotten America, but the whole thing seems warmed over.”³ Russell Smith dismissed those who, apparently mistakenly, believe “they’re seeing something original or


groundbreaking in *Gummo*.”⁴ For Paul Tatara of CNN, meanwhile, whereas the true avant-garde was “railing against social and economic oppression,” *Gummo* is merely “making fun of people” to no apparent political purpose; whereas the true avant-garde was doing something new, *Gummo* is “not telling us anything that we don’t already know.”⁵

Despite this critical condemnation, however, the film’s status as an avant-garde flop is far from unambiguous. While *Gummo* is clearly no *Zorns Lemma* (Hollis Frampton, 1970) or *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Bunuel, 1929), it does conform to the basic profile of avant-garde cinema sketched by Michael O’Pray, who offers a three-pronged definition of the filmic avant-garde that takes into account a film’s production and distribution channels, its relation to mainstream cinema, and its political orientation. The avant-garde film, briefly, is “no-budget, intensely personal and us[es] quite different distribution and exhibition circuits”; it is marked by an “opposition to mainstream cinema” at the level of form; and it is charged with “radical social and political ideas,” which O’Pray specifies as loosely Marxist.⁶ The use of alternative production and distribution channels is certainly in evidence, for while financed and backed by FineLine features, *Gummo* was made on a modest $1.3 million budget by a director whose vision saturates every aspect of the film, and was clearly never intended for the Multiplex. The formal resistance to “mainstream cinema,” is there, too, in the film’s clear refusal of the coherence of Hollywood continuity editing and film structure, and its commitment to the strategy of “fragmentation” that Peter Bürger dubs “the fundamental principle of avant-gardiste art.”⁷ Though, contrary to much avant-garde protocol, *Gummo* has a rudimentary plot—tracing the trials and

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tribulations of a series of restless teens in the impoverished rural community of Xenia, Ohio, a few years after the town has been eviscerated by a devastating tornado—the plot is ultimately secondary to the film’s impressionistic, collage-like evocation of the lives of the marginalized and dispossessed, its agglomeration of fully-scripted scenes, documentary interviews, stock footage, and cued actualities mixing film-stocks and formats and deploying a variety of media from actor-held video camera to 35-mm film. Finally, *Gummo*’s conformity to O’Pray’s model of the avant-garde is rounded off by its “radical social and political ideas”—the film’s investment in the depiction of the dispossessed and marginalized resonating strikingly with Brazilian avant-garde director Glauber Rocha’s commitment to “draw[ing] the audience’s attention to … poverty in order that it should be capable of revolutionary action.”8 *Gummo*’s opening sequence, for example, a montage of grainy stock footage of Xenia locals, telegraphs an immediately legible lexicon of “white trash” poverty and dispossession. A skinny, bare-chested boy shows off his puny pectoral muscles; an obese woman reclines on the steps of a cheap, clapboard house, petting a cat; a man with a goatee and a death

8 Richard J. Williams, “Towards an Aesthetics of Poverty,” *Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. David Hopkins and Anna Katharina Schaffner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 200. As Rocha’s own work suggests, while documentary realism and the avant-garde are often directly opposed, there is, in fact, a long cinematic tradition of combining avant-garde technique with a critical social realism whose grittiness actually undermines and critiques the glossy patina of Hollywood “realism,” and much of this work is structured around the explicit objective of catalyzing its audience to political action through the exposure of impoverished and unjust social conditions. As a film that, as Jay McRoy and Guy Crucianelli observe, clearly “evokes the works of both neorealist and avant-garde experimental filmmakers,” *Gummo* seems to fit within what we might call the “realist avant-garde.” (Jay McRoy and Guy Crucianelli, “I Panic the World: Benevolent Exploitation in Tod Browning’s *Freaks* and Harmony Korine’s *Gummo*,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 42.2 [2009]: 268.) A genealogy for this strain of “realist avant-garde” film-making can be formed through a loose assembly of titles: from Miguel Litten’s *Alsino and the Condor* (1982), Hector Babenco’s *Pixote* (1981), Glauber Rocha’s *Terra Em Trans* (1967), Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *La Porcile* (1969), and Luis Bunuel’s savage tale of Mexican street children, *Los Olvidados* (1950), to, earlier still, the work of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. According to Scott MacDonald, the Soviet revolution “produced a cinema that mounted a direct attack on the mass-entertainment film industry, particularly its function as propagandist for capitalism and the political systems that support it—from a position outside capitalistic culture. The major films of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko, and Vertov combined overt political content and experimental form into impassioned critiques of social conditions and polemics for more humane political system.” (Scott MacDonald, *Avant-Garde Film* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], 3-4.)
metal t-shirt grins toothlessly from the front seat of a wrecked car; an adolescent boy
races by on a bike. Embodiments of what Thomas Carl Wall terms the “nameless and
powerless residue within the compulsive popularity and homogeneity of capitalist
consumerism,” or what Lauren Berlant dubs “the politically inconvenient,” these
figures clearly recall the impoverished thugs of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s La Porcine
(1969) and the cruel children of Luis Bunuel’s story of Mexican streetkids, Los
Olvidados (1950)—both avant-garde classics.9

Given the film’s conformity to these key elements of the filmic avant-garde, then,
what is it about Gummo that for the majority of reviewers excluded it so conclusively
from the canon? In answering this, it is worth noting that there is one significant
component of the avant-garde that O’Pray’s definition seems to have overlooked: its
alignment with strong emotion. As Jonathan P. Eburne and Rita Felski observe in a
recent issue of New Literary History, the avant-garde text is traditionally marked by
the presence of both shock and anger, not only “typically organized around moments
of shock, rupture and youthful revolt” but manifesting a “militarist aggression.”10 This
presumption of strong emotion’s significance to the avant-garde’s dissident agenda is
reflected in some of the most influential theoretical work on the modernist avant-
garde, most notably Bürger’s seminal Theory of the Avant-Garde. For Bürger, to the
extent that the avant-garde is conceived as a kind of springboard to political action—
in this case, the undoing of the boundaries between art and life—shock is the essential
emotional catalyst for that action, “the means to break through the aesthetic
immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient’s life practice.”11 Yet
where for Bürger avant-garde shock bears primarily on the status of art itself, other
theorists have mobilized the avant-garde’s affinity with strong negative emotions to
more explicitly revolutionary ends. As O’Pray has shown, for example, filmmakers in


11 Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, 80.
the tradition inaugurated with Sergei Eisenstein saw the avant-garde’s capacity to both depict and elicit strong emotion as an aid in revolutionary political praxis, framing “cinema as a call to action or at least an identification with the emotions necessary for class struggle, emotions he hoped to arouse in the spectator through his montage of attractions.”\(^\text{12}\) As the classic futurist dictum—“we will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure and by riot”—suggests, emotion and political action, “excite[ment]” and “riot,” are inextricably braided together in the theory and practice of the cinematic avant-garde.\(^\text{13}\) The powerful oppositional emotions of anger and shock, then, lie at the heart of the avant-garde’s radical aims.

Yet despite \textit{Gummo}’s extensive avant-garde credentials, and the best efforts of its promoters, the film’s dominant tone and effect is neither shock nor anger but a restless, irritable boredom—an emotion that we might provisionally characterize as the painfully recursive feeling of feeling nothing at all. For Walter V. Addiego, in an odd mixture of metaphors that combines the “off” and the “overcooked,” “Korine’s trying to offer a radical vision of rotten America, but the whole thing seems warmed over”; for David Denby, the film is “boring and redundant”; for Dennis Schwarz, “I found myself becoming bored and tuning the film out”; while for Ed Scheid, “the film loses interest because Korine never gets beneath the surface of his troubled characters.”\(^\text{14}\) It is not hard to diagnose the source of these wearied responses, for

\(^\text{12}\) O’Pray, \textit{Avant-Garde Film}, 28.


while the film clearly deploys a number of familiar avant-garde strategies, it also seems to mark their exhaustion and fatigue. Though the film’s fragmented, episodic format is an avant-garde signature, it can hardly be called radical, for not only have avant-garde filmmakers been exploring the possibilities provided by anti-narrative, mixed media filmmaking for several decades, the techniques have since migrated into advertising, television and mainstream cinema. Likewise, though a degraded, impoverished setting is a realist avant-garde trademark, *Gummo* seems determined to deprive the scenes of poverty it portrays of any urgency or extremity, depicting the pettily cruel rather than the brutally violent; the poor rather than the dying; the structurally disenfranchised rather than the violently downtrodden. As Wall puts it, “these are the ordinary poor—the vulgar, the vernacular, the most innocuously impoverished of the socially overlooked.” Moreover, as a boring film, *Gummo* also seems to be a *bored* film, its fragmented, scattered style—which sees it abruptly switching subjects and formats just when a scene or character seems about to make good on the film’s avant-garde promise—inviting comparison not to the calculated avant-garde disruptions of an *Un Chien Andalou*, but to the restless distraction of MTV.

Boredom’s status as the film’s salient tone and effect seems inseparable from its status as the dominant emotion of its key protagonists. Where the realist avant-garde traditionally pictures its dispossessed populations in angered resistance to or transgression of the social structures that oppress them, *Gummo*’s characters’ primary response to the scene of dispossession is a restless, irritable boredom. Unmotivated by any larger or more radical goals, a series of self-seeking mini-projects—what one critic identifies as the “search for distraction” designed to “mask … boredom” and “kill time”—replace the kind of propulsive narrative drive in which a stronger emotion might find expression. The boys, Solomon (Jacob Reynolds) and Tummler


(Nick Sutton), huff glue, pay for sex with the retarded sister of a friend, and track the town’s streets and alleys for cats to kill and sell to a local Chinese restaurant; the girls, a trio of sisters led by Chloe Sevigny, share beauty tips, gossip about boys, and search for their missing pet cat. As one scene, in which a motley group of locals assemble for a drinking session in a characteristically derelict kitchen, suggests, this “poverty-stricken, numbingly boring place” is primarily marked by its dearth of stimulation or excitement, with the characters’ boredom almost palpable in their slack, stultified postures.17 Certainly, the film’s proscription on strong emotion does not detract from the scene’s tension, as the gap between a palpable desire to feel and the lack of occasion for feeling manifests as a restless, unfocussed search for distraction. Bored by the night’s series of arm-wrestling matches, and egged on by encouraging cries from his pals to “Kill it!” or “Get that motherfucker!” one man resorts to wrestling a chair, an absurd simulacrum of antagonism that underscores the pathos of boredom’s indiscriminate investment in feeling something rather than nothing. Indeed, his pursuit of diversion is directly mirrored in the live-action, documentary-style cinematography that records his exploits: as if mirroring a subject restlessly scanning the visual field for interest, the camera shifts quickly from face to face, opportunistically zooms in on movement, whip-pans to capture a speaker in action. Despite this restless struggle for distraction, however, the scene repeatedly falls back into stasis and silence. Poverty, the film seems to be saying, is boring.

Permeated at every level by an insistent boredom, then, Gummo diverges markedly from the emotional profile characteristic of other realist avant-garde films. Yet given the conspicuous incongruity of boredom in the context of a film with clear avant-garde aspirations, what is most striking about the film is its sheer insistence on the emotion. While an uneventful evening at a friend’s might seem a relatively appropriate object for boredom, Gummo is insistent on situating boredom in relation not just to everyday tedium, but to the more disastrous and destructive implications of poverty—those occasions in which a much stronger, more radical emotion might

seem more apt. Exemplary here is the opening sequence of the film, in which a voice-over narration recalls Xenia’s horrific devastation by a tornado some years prior. As the voice-over runs though a litany of horror, it is anchored by a series of grainy, poorly shot stock images of disaster (a dog is caught on a television antenna; a boy lies injured on the road):

A few years ago. A tornado hit this town. It killed the people. Dogs died, cats died, houses were split open and you could see necklaces hanging from the branches of trees. People’s legs and neckbones were stickin’ out. Oliver found a leg on his roof. A lot of people’s fathers died or were killed ...

Despite the sensational content of both the images and the description, the voice is torpid to the point of being catatonic, constantly on the point of expiring into a feeble whisper. This palpable boredom is all the more marked in that, judging by the spectacular nature of the description, which transfigures a scene of violent death into visual spectacle (“people’s legs and neckbones were stickin’ out”), the content has been framed for no other purpose than to evoke intense emotion of some kind—an intuition corroborated by the narrator’s last-ditch attempt to endow the panorama of violent death with the additional titillation of the semi-pornographic in the story’s brief post-script (“I saw a girl fly through the sky and I looked up her skirt.”)

The perversity of Gummo’s insistence on boredom over and above other emotions, however, becomes clearest in the film’s tendency to invoke more intense and substantive emotions, only to immediately dismiss them. When Solomon and Tummler are out hunting cat, Tummler expresses curiosity about Solomon’s diet. “Does your mother ever make you food?” he asks, picking up his bike. “Has she ever made you crepe suzette?” The subject of Tummler’s own—conspicuously absent—mother has arisen before in the film, in a teasing, tantalizing way that, like the interrogation of Solomon with respect to his own mother here, holds out the promise of an elaboration of fuller motives for the boys’ delinquency than the figure of

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18 This paragraph is indebted to Sianne Ngai’s analysis of irritation, which draws on Aristotle’s arguments about virtuous emotion’s “appropriateness” to its object. (Sianne Ngai, Ugly Feelings [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005], 181.)
boredom has so far been able to provide, and accords with the popular notion that, as Patricia Meyer Spacks puts it, “boredom … usually masks another condition.”\(^{19}\) In this model, the politically anemic emotion of boredom is merely a repression or blockage of an emotion both more muscular and more profound. Yet while the film repeatedly invites us to expect the revelation of some stronger emotion underpinning the prevailing boredom, it just as frequently dismisses these expectations. Immediately after introducing the charged motif of the mother, the film abruptly shifts—in a classic moment of avant-garde fragmentation—from the descriptive and realist format associated with fuller emotions to the direct-address format characteristic of vaudeville or stand-up comedy, with a long shot of the two boys on their bikes accompanied Tummler’s voice-over singing a frivolous colloquial song: “This man I know … had gravy on his vest, gravy on his tie, gravy on his shirt, gravy all over him …that dirty old man.” At the very point that we are expecting Tummler to reveal the roots of his boredom in, say, maternal melancholia, the film changes tack in a way that effectively reconfigures the character’s gesture toward deeper issues as yet another attempt to distract himself from tedium.

Keeping in mind the primacy of strong emotion to definitions of the avant-garde, the film’s insistent boredom would seem to license the widespread journalistic tendency to interpret \textit{Gummo}’s tedium as a self-evident sign of aesthetic failure. Yet simple condemnations of the film as “boring” remain problematic in light of the fact that many scholars have voiced their skepticism as to whether avant-garde shock has any purchase at all in postmodernity. Arguing that “nothing loses its effectiveness more quickly than shock,” Bürger, for example, describes the post-war neo-avant-garde as the redundant recycling of forms and strategies from the first two decades of the twentieth century, bereft of their original political muscle.\(^{20}\) Other theorists have

\(^{19}\) Patricia Meyer Spacks, \textit{Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), x. For another example of this assumption, see D. A. Miller’s claim that “Far from the intrinsic reflex-response to banality, boredom hysterically converts into yawning affectlessness what would otherwise be outright panic.” (D. A. Miller, \textit{The Novel and the Police} [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988], 145.)

echoed this skepticism, suggesting that the changed social and cultural conditions marked by the emergence of postmodernity effectively neutralizes shock’s political power. According to Fredric Jameson, for example, late capitalist consumer culture thwarts the avant-garde’s ability to shock through the relentless assimilation of avant-garde practices into the cycle of commodity production:

commodity production and in particular our clothing, furniture, buildings and other artefacts are now intimately tied in with styling changes which derive from artistic experimentation; our advertising, for example, is fed by modernism in all the arts and inconceivable without.\(^\text{21}\)

Strategies of shock have thus been appropriated and incorporated by a consumer capitalism that in many ways embodies the pernicious bourgeois norm that the avant-garde was putatively conceived to contest. This position has become ubiquitous in scholarship associated with postmodernism. For Andreas Huyssen, “There seems to be little doubt that the classical avant-garde has exhausted its potential”; for Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, “modernist art [has] lost its sharp critical and oppositional edge” through institutionalization in the museum; while even Marjorie Perloff, one of the modernist avant-garde’s few remaining champions, who insists that the avant-garde’s “death has been vastly exaggerated,” has to admit that “the utopian side of avant-gardism, its longing to change the world, to overcome the bourgeois ‘dislocation [of art] from the praxis of life’ has not met with success.”\(^\text{22}\) From this


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perspective, if *Gummo* is boring, it is less a case of an individual aesthetic failure, than a symptom of a broader historic crisis in the function and efficacy of the avant-garde.

While acknowledging this crisis, however, this chapter will argue that far from a symptom of or engagement with the avant-garde’s demise in postmodernity, *Gummo*’s tedium is part of an effort to remodel and repurpose the avant-garde for postmodernity’s changed social and economic conditions. If *Gummo* is boring, it is meant to be boring: the tedium that reads on first sight as a sign of the film’s aesthetic failure—and thus a sign of the more general failure of the avant-garde project in postmodernity—might be more accurately read as deliberate, calculated strategy. This chapter, then, frames *Gummo* as an argument for the avant-garde’s continued purchase in postmodernity. In doing so, however, it also frames the film as a sign that the avant-garde’s ongoing tenure lies in its capacity to continually change form. There is a tendency among champions of the neo-avant-garde to defend the same avant-garde: an avant-garde that struggles for formal innovation, that orientates itself around strong emotion, and that finds its apotheosis in revolutionary political action. Yet as Hal Foster argues in his impassioned 1994 defence of the avant-garde, “What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?” in order genuinely to embrace the “neo-avant-garde”—an avant-garde that persists beyond the modern moment—we need to acknowledge the mode’s capacity to transform.23 Seconding Sianne Ngai’s contention that “the nature of the sociopolitical itself has changed in a manner that both calls forth and calls upon a new set of feelings,” this chapter will argue that *Gummo* exemplifies an avant-garde practice whose emotional constitution—and thus its relation to formal and political change—is specifically tailored to the economic and social co-ordinates of the postmodern.24

Yet in arguing that boredom is uniquely congenial to the postmodern avant-garde, it is worth establishing what is it about boredom that has traditionally seen it dismissed as inimical to the avant-garde project, in contrast to emotions like anger, shock or

23 Foster, “What’s Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde?” 23.

compassion. At stake here, I suggest, is that boredom is somehow at once too subjective and not subjective enough to acquire any kind of radical value or political force. To address the “not subjective enough” angle first, it should be observed that whereas Philip Fisher’s “strong” or “vehement” passions “fill up awareness” and possess an “outward-streaming energy” that expresses itself in powerful, significant action, the infamously etiolated emotion of boredom, by contrast, appears to indicate a vacancy or emptiness at the centre of the subject that makes powerful action impossible. Sociologist Haskell Bernstein, for example, characterizes boredom in terms of the “hollowness” or “emptiness” at the heart of the bored subject, while psychologist Otto Fenichel’s classic psychoanalytic study of boredom suggests that boredom lacks “instinctual impulses.” This is not, of course, to say that the bored subject doesn’t act: indeed, most profiles of boredom suggest that as a result of this internal deficiency, the bored subject is forced to seek out external objects to supply the emotional arousal with which other, better-resourced subjects come fully equipped. For Fenichel, for example, “instead of manifesting itself in the form of instinctual impulses, [boredom] require[s] incitements from the outside world”; while in a similar vein, Bernstein notes that, lacking any natural emotional spur, the bored subject will “create external situations calculated to evoke feelings of so much intensity that those feelings will break through their internal insulating barriers to awareness.” Yet these descriptions of the bored subject’s restless pursuit of distraction and stimulation merely bring us to the other problem with the bored subject: that to the precise extent that they lack the kind of subjective fullness that might enable them to act passionately in the world, they are also marked by a kind of persistent self-focus or self-orientation. Whereas the angry or shocked subject has feelings that are expressed in action, the bored subject acts in order to feel, seeking


“incitement[s]” or “creat[ing] external situation[s]”; whereas the angry or shocked subject’s actions are orientated around an object in the world, the bored subject merely deploys objects in order to create vibrations within her private sensorium. As Spacks puts it, generalizing from a case in which social faux pas are framed not in terms of their transgression of social norms but in terms of their wearying effect on the subject: “to call a nuisance a bore … makes the observer’s emotional response to his companion definitive. Instead of commenting on the interloper’s failure to conform to objective standards, such a designation notes his effect on another.”

Given this apparent self-absorption, and the profound inversion of the conventional relation between emotion and action that underpins it, it is hardly surprising that boredom has regularly been derided as trivial and self-interested, dismissed by the Situationists as “always counter-revolutionary” and by Bernstein as “a trivial and unworthy feeling, reflecting some idiosyncratic flaw of shallowness and superficiality in the bored person.”

Yet as if this morphology of the bored subject—as simultaneously inadequately and excessively subjective—were not sufficiently damning on its own, it seems to map all too readily onto the models of the consumer subject projected by critiques of postmodern commodity culture. Like the bored subject, the consumer subject is distinguished by a singular combination of self-absorption and vacancy, marked, on the one hand by their dependence on external stimuli and excitement, or what Mike Featherstone calls a “new Narcissism, where individuals seek to maximize and experience the range of sensations available,” and, on the other, by what Stephen Miles calls the “the deeper malaise [of] a spiritually empty and immoral society where money is all and where the soul is degraded.” This affinity between boredom and consumerism is evinced in Gummo’s reviews, with critics linking the film’s

28 Spacks, Boredom, 8.


engagement with boredom to what they deem its exploitative commercialism.

According to Janet Maslin, for example, the film “casts non-professional actors, often freakish individuals whom the film flaunts contemptuously, like the simple-minded woman who treats a doll as her baby”; according to Tatara, this was a “teen exploitation flick,” an exercise in “making fun of people”—and doing so “for fun and profit.”

What renders this alignment between boredom and consumer culture so damning to boredom’s utility within an oppositional project is the fact that, as Walter Adamson has shown, consumer culture is an economic and social complex that oppositional projects have historically pitted themselves very clearly against. Avant-garde rhetoric, that is, is marked by an insistent hostility to consumer culture, from Clement Greenberg’s classic essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” which framed “avant-garde culture” in direct opposition to “popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction,” to Bürger’s The Avant-Garde, which counterposed the literary avant-garde against “a literature whose primary aim is to impose a particular kind of consumer behavior on the reader” and that functions as “mere enticement, designed to prompt purchasers to buy what they do not need.” To the extent that boredom, then, seems to index a peculiarly consumerist orientation toward an object, its capacity for mobilization within radical or avant-garde praxis seems strikingly tenuous.

Yet if the structural homology between the subject of boredom and the subject of consumerism has deleterious consequences for boredom’s availability to the avant-garde, it is worth noting that this alliance is deeply enshrined in postmodern theory,


32 According to Walter Adamson, at stake in the avant-garde project is “above all, the effort to press art into the center of modern cultural life while resisting those tendencies that would reduce it to a commodity defined ultimately by its exchange value.” (Walter Adamson, Embattled Avant-Gardes: Modernism’s Resistance to Commodity Culture in Europe [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007], 3.)

where scholars have routinely recruited boredom as the prototypical emotion of a critically devalued postmodern consumer culture. Boredom, in other words, has become the typifying affective state of politically inert subjects who are over-reliant on commodities for their mental and spiritual stimulation and in whom satiety and overstimulation only begets further boredom.\footnote{It is worth noting that, from Baudrillard’s work on “banality” as one of advanced capitalism’s “fatal strategies,” to Jameson’s analysis on boredom as “a precious symptom of our own existential, ideological, and cultural limits,” boredom, often framed in terms of a rubric of cultural exhaustion and repetition, pervades the theoretical construction of postmodernism. (Jean Baudrillard, \textit{Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings}, ed. Mark Poster [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988], 198; Fredric Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism} [Durham, NC; Duke University Press, 1991, 72.) See also Gianni Vattimo’s argument that ennui is the presiding after-effect of modernity, with its logic of “novelty become obsolete and replaced by new novelty in a process that discourages creativity in the very act of demanding it.” (Gianni Vattimo, “Verwindung: Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy,” \textit{Substance} 53 [1987]: 8.)}

Spacks’s \textit{Boredom}, for example, frames boredom as at once a driving force of commodity culture, compelling postmodern subjects to seek salvation in the embrace of the commodity, and also one of commodity culture’s most deleterious consequences, as the temporary thrill of the commodity ultimately redoubles the symptom it purports to relieve: “We gaze at television to forestall boredom and television generates more of it.”\footnote{Spacks, \textit{Boredom}, 249.} Assessing the theoretical legacy of the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in postmodernity, Stjepan Gabriel Mestrovic offers a similar appraisal of boredom in its relation to the commodity. As he argues,

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it is obvious that boredom and the need for almost constant distraction have become more not less problematic with the development of postmodern culture. Cruise ships, classrooms, television programs, and a host of other postmodern phenomena seem almost desperate in their attempts to keep the viewer, customer or spectator constantly amused and distracted. What could be the cause,
\end{quote}
he asks, “except for a terrible fear of boredom?”36 For both Mestrovic and Spacks, then, far from resistant or opposed to the mainstream bourgeois culture that is much oppositional culture’s target, boredom is merely a plaintive, irritable cry of an always-inadequate immersion in it. Whereas an emotion like anger is capable of delivering up an emotional critique of capitalist consumer culture, boredom simply registers a frustrated desire to be more satisfactorily or more completely a part of it; whereas shock seems to mark a subject that exists in animated resistance to capitalism’s injustices, boredom indexes a subjective vacancy that can be relieved only by capitalism’s consumer gratifications.

Yet given this construction of boredom as an index of a kind of rapacious, insatiable consumerism, what remains unsettling about Gummo’s use of boredom is not just that it is inappropriate to its clear avant-garde oppositional agenda, but that it is all too appropriate to a widespread and demeaning stereotype of the uneducated rural white populations the film depicts, stereotypes that cast this population as what Gail Sweeney calls a group of “total consumer[s] and non-producer[s].”37 This stereotype is perhaps best condensed in the vicious pejorative label “white trash,” a label in which the trash that they have supposedly produced through their excess consumption gets figured, tropologically, as their very essence. Dovetailing with a wider process by which, as Daniel Miller puts it, “materialism, understood as a concern for increasing one’s possession of goods often at the expense of a concern for other people, tend[s] to be strongly associated with poverty rather than wealth,” the figure of “white trash” is a key critical projectile in the effort to explain and justify the social dispossession of rural whites through reference to their supposed moral inadequacy.38 In these terms, Gummo’s construction of Xenia’s resident rural whites as bored seems merely


to reinforce the stigmatizing moral and social discourse that already circulates around these marginalized populations.

Not only vacant, trivial and self-absorbed, but regularly associated with the capitalist consumer culture that the modernist avant-garde strives to resist and overthrow, boredom has to be a candidate for the emotion “least likely to play a significant role in any oppositional praxis” or radical activism. This status is only amplified when we observe the destructive stereotypes the emotion seems to reinforce in the context of Gummo’s representation of a disenfranchised rural population customarily identified by the term “white trash.” In choosing to engage with boredom, then, this

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39 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 181. Certainly, not all critics insist wholeheartedly on boredom’s inappropriateness to the scene of political struggle against injustice. Indeed, many critics have recruited boredom as an inherently critical and radical emotion. For Siegfried Kracauer, for example, boredom is less the effect of a “culture of distraction” than a sign of its critical rejection, and thus a posture that we should cultivate by “tarrying for a while, without a goal, neither here nor there.” (Siegfried Kracauer, *Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995], 332.) For Walter Benjamin, likewise, boredom is “the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience”—providing fertile emotional soil for creativity and imagination. (Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-38*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002], 149.) For Martin Heidegger, boredom is a fundamental form of attunement that allows us access to Dasein, and thus far from shaking it off, we should “awaken” this fundamental attunement,” this mood that is capable of “look[ing] into our Da-sein …. And with this haze already penetrat[ing] us and attun[ing] us through and through.” (Martin Heidegger, “Description of the Situation: Fundamental Attunement,” *The Heidegger Reader*, ed. Gunter Figal [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007], 100.) Yet even Heidegger is careful to distinguish between “profound boredom” and “superficial boredom,” between the boredom that is capable of “attun[ing] us through and through in the ground of dasein,” and a “fleeting, cursory inessential boredom” that simply indexes the desire for some kind of stimulating external object. (Heidegger, “Description of the Situation,” 103.) Indeed, perpetuating this distinction between what Fisher has called a “dispositional” passion and an “occasioned state,” Bernstein, likewise, distinguishes between boredom as a transient “responsive feeling.” and boredom as a chronic “malaise.” (Fisher, *The Vehement Passions*, 18-19; Bernstein, “The Ready-Made Life,” 513.) Spacks helpfully resolves these fine distinctions within boredom by suggesting that to the extent that we are talking about an emotion that can have a broader, social bearing, we are talking about ennui not boredom. It is “ennui [that] implies a judgment of the universe; boredom, a response to the immediate.” (Spacks, *Boredom*, 12.) In this sense, my suggestion that boredom (as opposed to ennui) has been perceived as trivial and apolitical still holds.
cinematic fable of “rural white disaffection” perversely flaunts conventional avant-garde logic, and it is no accident that many critics received the film as a straightforward avant-garde failure. This chapter, however, is predicated on the intuition that the widespread critical insistence that boredom is antithetical to the avant-garde because of its association with a decadent consumerist privilege is undermined by the sheer breadth and intensity of the revulsion the emotion excites—a revulsion that situates boredom on the margins of social and economic acceptability. It will argue that while in the context of modernity the vacant, trivial emotion of boredom may have indexed an immersion in consumer culture incompatible with any genuine avant-garde praxis, the changed conditions in postmodernity have altered its status, and thus adjusted the lens through which we should understand Gummo’s formal and aesthetic decisions. As many theorists have observed, the transition from modernity to postmodernity is marked by a shift from a society predominantly organized around production to a society predominantly organized around consumption. According to Jameson, for example, postmodernism is marked by “a new type of social life and a new economic order—what is often euphemistically called … consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism.” As Gummo itself shows, one of the effects of this shift from modern production culture to postmodern consumer culture are changes in what falls into the ambit of capitalism, as emotion is absorbed into what we might call an “emotional economy.” As a result of these shifts, far from being uniquely implicated in consumer culture, boredom has become a sign and effect of exclusion from the emotional economy—less consumer culture’s emotional epitome than its emotional refuse or garbage, and thus an emotion with a potential utility to the avant-garde. In arguing this, however, I do not dispute the emotion’s customary characterization as a rapacious, empty, trivial and weak emotion—as emotional “trash.” Rather, I will simply suggest that precisely as trash, boredom has the capacity to provide significant diagnostic insight into the system that both produces and expels it.


The profile of this reconfigured avant-garde comes into relief when we see that, for many theorists, at the heart of the transition from a production-orientated modernity to a consumption-orientated postmodernity is a wholesale shift in the organization of emotion that sees not one emotion but emotion as a category assimilated to the domain of consumer culture. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s concept of “immaterial labour,” for example, figures emotion as part of late capitalism’s “ensemble of intellectual, communicative, relational and affective” commodities; while for Zygmunt Bauman, the shift from a producer to a consumer society means that what is deployed to integrate society is no longer the ethics of work but the aesthetics of consumerism, an aesthetics that “puts a premium on the sublime experience.” In this model of mutual imbrication between a “commodified” emotion and an “emotional” commodity, not only is the commodity framed in terms of the affective frisson it generates, but the experience of emotion is framed in terms of its dependence on the commodity: “The excitement of the new and unprecedented sensation is the name of the consumer game.” Whereas Baudrillard, Jameson, Mestrovic and Spacks have tended to earmark boredom as unique in its implication in consumerism, in Bauman’s model of postmodernity, all strong emotions are both adjunct to, and embodiments of, the commodities that radiate through late capitalist consumer culture. In this formulation, emotions like shock and anger circulate as


44 In this, Bauman sketches the contours of what Daniel M. Gross, in a powerful critique of what he calls the twentieth century’s critical theory’s “democratization of emotions,” has called “a contoured world of emotional investments, where some people have significantly more liabilities than others.” (Daniel M. Gross, The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle’s Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006], 5, 3.) According to Gross, both cognitive appraisal models of emotion, which locate emotion as an effect of individual judgment, and psycho-neurological models of emotion, which locate emotion in the mind or brain, project a purely private model of emotion as something “housed in our nature.” (Gross, The Secret History, 5). In doing so, they elide the extent to which emotions’ constitutive power lies in their uneven distribution.
commodities within the very cultural and economic formations they are customarily figured as resisting.

Indeed, having placed these powerful, “oppositional” emotions in an intimate relation to the commodity, Bauman proceeds to single out boredom—the frustrated, recursive feeling of feeling nothing—as the emblem of a pained, desiring distance from the commodity. For Bauman, “boredom is the psychological corollary of other stratifying factors specific to the consumer society,” since “common remedies against boredom are not accessible to those in poverty.” At the heart of this shift is a changed relation to work: whereas in industrial society the entire labor force is needed, in post-industrial society, “which produces everything needed without the participation of a large and growing section of its members,” work has become a privilege, while a leisure unrelieved by the distractions and stimulations of consumption becomes the curse of those unable to find work. The new class of the bored, then, represent what Bauman has analyzed as the underprivileged, involuntarily “leisured” classes of late capitalism; discards of what Berlant has called “the impersonal pulses of capitalist exchange,” they are dispossessed even of that hyper-exploitative form of participation in the capitalist economy known as wage-labour. At stake here is a complete reversal of the model of boredom that percolates through postmodern theory. Far from being an emotion with a special constituency among rabid consumers, boredom is visited upon those “shut off or excluded from the social feast”; far from being a sign of implication in consumer culture, boredom is capitalist culture’s other, the only emotion not on the market, the emotional economy’s discard or waste-product: a kind of emotional trash.

45 Bauman, Work, Consumerism and the New Poor, 39, 40.

46 Bauman, Work, Consumerism and the New Poor, 1.


48 Bauman, Work, Consumerism and the New Poor, 39.
Gummo’s commitment to this view of the emotion is evident in its insistence on elaborating boredom’s relation not to commodities but to trash. Virtually all of the film’s critics commented on its over-stuffed frames, with Janet Maslin of the New York Times noting of the production design that “directorial instruction [did] not apparently extend beyond asking the cast to conserve about a year’s worth of laundry and litter,” and the Chicago Reader critic observing, of the scene between Solomon and his mother, that it transpired in “a basement piled high with junk.”49 And “junk,” here, is just the point, for attention to the content of these overflowing frames—from the junk lining the hallways and corridors of Solomon’s mother’s house, to the kitschy mess of the sisters’ upstairs bedroom, to the literal rubbish-dumps in which the children play—makes it clear that they are packed not with commodities but with trash, the paradoxically overwhelming materiality of a series of socially and educationally deprived lives. The important difference between “trash” and “commodities” might be usefully articulated through the classic Marxist distinction between “commodity” and “thing,” where the term commodity designates an object that possesses exchange value and the term “thing” designates an object stripped of such value. As Peter Stallybrass’s concise gloss of Marx’s analysis clarifies, “the commodity becomes a commodity not as a thing but as an exchange value. It achieves its purest form, in fact, when most emptied of particularity and thingness.”50 In their insistent materiality, their incorrigible “particularity and thingness,” the old clothes, broken furniture and stacks of newspapers that stuff Gummo’s frames clearly fall into the category of things, objects that have conspicuously failed to achieve abstraction or transfiguration into a moment of pure, glimmering exchange value. This is not to say, of course, that there are no commodities in the film, but simply that these commodities—like the glue that circulates throughout the film as Solomon and Tummler’s reward for cats killed and sold to a local restaurant—are wildly


outnumbered by the objects that sit stubbornly in the background of the film’s scenes, silent testimony to a lifetime of random acquisition. With this in mind, it seems clear that if the characters are bored, their boredom derives not from engagement in commodity culture but from immersion in the mountainous jumbles of its refuse. Indeed, this affiliation of boredom and junk finds striking exemplification in a poignantly humorous scene between Solomon and his mother that takes place in what one reviewer describes as “the world’s most disgusting basement.” Structured around Solomon’s mother’s attempt to distract both herself and her son by retrieving from the inexhaustible bounty of the basement’s floor-to-ceiling piles of junk first a pair of old tap-shoes and then a toy revolver, the scene is first and foremost a story of emotional frustration, as items are picked out, briefly examined and then thrown away, having failed to do the commodity’s job of generating any kind of intense or sustained feeling (Fig. 5.11). Yet this link between trash and boredom is not only causal, in that trash begets boredom, but analogical, with boredom emerging as the affective equivalent of the junk that fills the film’s frames. In these terms, the

Figure 5.11. *Gummo’s* frames are filled with junk.

colloquial tendency to conflate boredom and waste, as evinced in the regular critical variations on the claim that the film was “pointless garbage,” “the vilest waste of two hours of my life,” or “wasting 88 minutes of my time,” seems telling.\(^5\) Far from being an emotion whose implication in consumer culture renders it wholly inappropriate to the avant-garde, then, boredom emerges as the abject refuse of a postmodern emotional economy.

Given this, it is worth noting that while many of the criticisms of the film’s boredom were predicated on the notion that boredom is a uniquely consumerist emotion, the way in which these criticisms are worded seems to demonstrate a different model of the emotion—that is, they tend to secure its relation to junk. Janet Maslin’s disgusted denunciation of the film is exemplary here: where description of the film’s rubbish-filled mise-en-scene—the “trash-strewn” bridge on which bunny-boy walks, the “tawdry” clothes worn by the three sisters—is frequently mobilized to stand in for assessment of its aesthetic qualities, it is almost impossible to distinguish between Maslin’s revulsion at the film’s abundance of trash and her revulsion at the film’s tedium.\(^5\) Ken Fox of the \textit{TV Guide} makes a similar rhetorical manoeuvre: in the claim that “Korine’s loose, improvisatory script is all over the place, picking up the garbage-strewn lives of Xenia’s other inhabitants in fragments,” he deliberately collapses the difference between failed film form and junk-laden mise-en-scene, using terms with strong associations with the rubric of trash (“loose”, for example, tends to echo “garbage strewn”) to condemn the film’s formal failure.\(^5\) Both repudiations of the film’s tedium recruit the film’s trash as evidence or support, thereby effectively aligning boredom not with an excess of commodities but with an excess of trash, in what is essentially a slippage between two divergent reasons for repudiating the film:


\(^{53}\) Maslin, “Cats, Grandmas and Other Disposables.”


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because it is not sufficiently opposed to consumer culture or because it doesn’t sufficiently embody its norms; because it is too closely fused to the commodity or because it’s too much like trash.

This equation of boredom and trash helps us explain a number of otherwise puzzling anomalies in the film’s reception. It is only in light of this alignment of boredom and trash, for example, that it becomes clear why the frequent condemnations of the film’s boredom were so clearly tinged with what Thomas Carl Wall calls, with minimal exaggeration, “a nearly universal spasm of revulsion,” provoking not just a “profane [critical] repugnance” but an unprecedented NC-17 rating for “nihilism.”\textsuperscript{55} This palpable, visceral disgust seemed out of all proportion to a target whose ostensible crime was merely its implication in a consumer culture—a crime to which moral censure or disapproval might be a more conventional response. Yet it becomes strikingly comprehensible in light of this reassessment of boredom not as consumer culture’s epitome but as its waste-product. As emotional garbage, boredom quite logically provokes the emotions provoked by actual refuse: scorn and abhorrence. Indeed, to the extent that this profound equation of boredom and trash remains so antithetical to our customary understanding of boredom as an unusually consumerist emotion, it also helps explain why many critics of the film tended to misrepresent the film’s narrative content in an attempt to account for their disgust. As Wall observes, “numerous disgusted mainstream viewers claimed to have been shocked by scenes of unspeakable violence,” with critic Adrian Gargett, for example, condemning the film’s “idiotic and shockingly brutal incidents of teenage criminality.”\textsuperscript{56} Yet as Wall notes “very much to the contrary, the film contains scenes mainly of awkward tenderness, detached friendship, and profound sympathy.”\textsuperscript{57} Unable to explain the film’s abhorrence within the parameters of a conventional construction of boredom as overly consumerist, Gargett, along with a handful of other critics, manufactures or hallucinates scenes of “shockingly brutal” violence. The irony, of course, is that the

\textsuperscript{55} Wall, “Dolce Stil Novo,” 309, 310.


\textsuperscript{57} Wall, “Dolce Stil Novo,” 313.
genuinely “shockingly brutal” would not have inspired this kind of disgust at all: fully recuperable as a commodity within an emotional economy that values the capacity to elicit emotion above all else, violence would have guaranteed the film’s critical acceptance, leaving that which is not recuperable for entertainment—the boring—to accrue critical disgust and revulsion.

Yet if, as this critical disgust confirms, boredom is itself a kind of emotional trash, it is also, Gummo suggests, an emotion that makes trash of its bearer. To the extent that most of the debris scattered throughout Gummo fails to undergo the transition from “thing” to “commodity,” from material object to abstract value, it becomes the marker of its owners’ failure to make the analogous transition: from a worthless object for a panoptic-cinematic gaze to autonomous, emotive consuming subject. This process is enacted in the film’s repeated refusal to observe the cinematic conventions traditionally deployed to distinguish between people and things, foreground and background, subject and object. One scene opens with a shot of a small boy lifting a framed picture from his living room wall; disclosing and upsetting a swarm of cockroaches hiding beneath it, he instigates an unsettled relation between animate and inanimate that is only extended by the rest of the scene. After lingering on the boy’s futile attempts to replace the picture, the camera undertakes a slow, paratactic inventory of the piles of junk that furnish the room, taking in broken toys, stacked newspapers, chipped crockery, heaped clothes. It is only after this careful visual catalogue that we zero in on our protagonists, who, barely more animated than the detritus that surrounds them, are seated on the couch huffing glue from a plastic bag. No dialogue is exchanged, and the music playing rather incongruously in the background—a Bach concerto—only serves to underscore the characters’ obtuse inability to engage with this product of an elite high culture. Surrounded by things that, as ex-commodities, have lost both emotive and monetary value, they become indistinguishable from these things. In not having commodities, they become trash. If strong feeling, the effect of achieved possession, certifies our status as commodifiable subjects, boredom, the emotional index of dispossession, reduces us to a worthless, lifeless thing. In light of this sense that boredom demotes those who feel it to the status of human waste, we are able to develop an alternative genealogy of the appellation “white trash” that specifically counters the conventional and reactionary notion of white trash as hyper-consumers, their colloquial handle a reference to the
trash they ostensibly create. Through this optic, “white trash” emerges as a term that
denominates not so much a despised category of person—a person who creates
trash—but a person who, lacking in the feeling conferred by the commodity, falls into
the forlorn category of trash.

Of course, while boredom both constitutes, and makes of its bearer, a kind of waste-
product of consumer culture, it can hardly be said to exist “outside” consumer culture.
Indeed, it’s not hard to grasp why critics have so continually mistaken boredom for a
paradigmatically consumer emotion, for where other emotions, already adjuncts of
satisfied consumer desire, seem to need or desire nothing, boredom takes those
commodities as its object of a highly visible, even theatricalized desire. In a sequence
that introduces two middle class boys through Solomon’s narrative point of view, the
film showcases boredom’s propensity to theatricalize its relation to the consumer
culture from which it is excluded. The image track frames the two sturdy adolescent
boys in a series of activities—they play with a dog, work out on their expensive
exercise equipment, engage in a faux fist-fight—against the backdrop of a well-heeled
middle-class home that features a boat, a lavish-looking car and a luxuriously fitted-
out kitchen. Yet while their smirking, self-conscious grins register their obliviousness
to the commodities that both buttress and facilitate their experience, Solomon’s voice-
over narration contrastingly foregrounds his acute awareness of and rapacious,
desiring zeal for the commodities that fail to buttress his own. His whispery
commentary alternates between envious inventory of their possessions and the slack
boredom of his own dispossession. “There were these two kids I know, two brothers
… They came to school in really nice shorts and polished tennis sneakers and their
shirts were always collared with buttons and their hair was always slicked back …”
Barred from participation in “the social feast,” a bored and frustrated Solomon thinks
only of the gleaming commodities that festoon it. In these terms, it is hardly an
accident that boredom has been so regularly recruited as the epitome of postmodern
consumer culture. Those who cannot buy their way in to consumer culture, it appears,
can no more buy their way out, saddled with an emotional—and thus spiritual and
moral—“trash” whose theatricalized relation to the commodity ensures they will
forever be identified with the very consumer culture from which they are excluded.
Just as the environmental movement calls upon trash to stand in for the excesses of
consumer culture, with land-fills and garbage dumps functioning as its visual
metonymy, so boredom, our emotional waste, gets repeatedly recruited as the symbol of the consumer culture of which it constitutes the refuse—leaving those emotions that are more properly consumer culture’s adjuncts looking decidedly untainted by boredom’s moral stigma. Yet while boredom’s preoccupation with the commodities of which it is deprived might explain its continual enlistment as consumer culture’s emotional mascot, its natural habitat is not in fact the luxurious LA pad of a privileged, Brett Easton Ellis-style brat, but the dead streets, junk-strewn yards and messy teenage bedrooms of Xenia, Ohio.

Indeed, with this in mind, it is no accident that the single appearance of the kinds of emotional qualities traditionally attributed to the avant-garde occurs in the context of a marked shift in economic milieu, taking us from Xenia’s clutter-ridden suburban ghettos to the plush suburban living room of the boys above. For if Solomon’s exclusion from consumer culture paradoxically deprives him of the capacity to extricate himself from implication in it, the boys’ material affluence facilitates a focus and diligence that seems to indicate their detachment from and elevation above material considerations. In possession of the “nice shorts and polished tennis sneakers” and the expensive exercise equipment that their parents’ money affords them, the two boys dutifully demonstrate their regular weightlifting exercises for the camera in an instance of the kind of purposive, self-improving, goal-oriented activity that so conspicuously fails to interest the other characters in Gummo. The film’s careful ocular record of the boys’ possessions—in which a measured pan absorbs the textures of their clothes, the sheen of their car and the opulent appurtenances of their home-gym—works hard to establish the fact that the moral qualities of rigor, focus, ambition and diligence embodied in these activities are directly correlated to the consumer commodities through which—indeed, quite literally, on which—they are

At stake here, as Marx’s classic analysis of the commodity helps us see, is the fact that the waste expelled at the end of the consumption cycle is simply more visible than the pristine, shrink-wrapped commodities that fill the shopping mall or the supermarket, for whereas the commodity—apotheosis of a materialistic culture—is paradoxically dematerialized into the abstract social, monetary and emotional value that it represents, trash is ostentatious in its “particularity and thingness.” As Gay Hawkins condenses this Marxist alliance between trash and visibility, “Things …are what we suddenly notice when an object seems to drop out of the systems that give it meaning and value.” (Gay Hawkins, Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish [Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006], 80. Italics mine).
exercised. Yet as the film also demonstrates, it is in the nature of these emotional and moral qualities to detach themselves from the consumer culture on which they depend. Irrespective of the film’s careful visual accounting, the boys’ diligent, focused expressions read as positive signs of sights trained on loftier goals: career, work, family, and, at least potentially, radical activism. If those who can’t buy their way into consumer culture are equally unable to buy their way out, those who can buy their way in can purchase an emotional detachment from or even opposition to that culture through recourse to the emotional qualities facilitated by the commodity.

What is valuable about this reconfiguration of the relation between emotion and the commodity, this alignment of boredom and trash, is the way in which it forces us to reconsider the status of the film’s engagement with this conspicuously weak, trivializing and vacant emotion. In particular, it throws a new light on the reified figure of the spontaneously animated, angered proletarian subject against which the bored, apathetic Solomon and Tummler are measured. In view of Gummo’s insistent alliance of our literal and emotional “trash,” this figure emerges as a kind of fantasy—a fantasy in which the emotional effects of material dispossession are disavowed, even as their causes are not, and a fantasy that has as its unfortunate upshot a contemporary critical scene in which the poor have come to be seen as emotionally and spiritually inimical to the avant-garde that operates in their name. If, as Bauman has suggested, modernity marks a moment prior to emotion’s absorption into consumer culture, it may have been legitimate at that historical juncture to project an emotive subjectivity that inheres beyond what we consume, own or possess, making the demand that the poor respond to structural injustice and dispossession with anger

59 This kind of lofty focus is inaccessible to Tummler and Solomon, whose social and educational impoverishment deprives their lives of the organizing structure provided by practices of self-development and ambition. When, a little later in the film, Solomon attempts a similar work-out regime—he tries lifting home-made “weights,” a set of forks tied together with masking tape, in front of the wall mirror in his basement, to the soundtrack of Madonna’s “Like a Prayer”—he becomes an object of ridicule rather than admiration, his actions signs not of elevation above consumer culture but of a hopeless yearning to live up to an unachievable, commodity-driven ideal of masculinity. As his mother chides, “You’re gonna stunt your growth with those things! You shouldn’t lift while you’re growing.” Indeed, the presence of a full-length mirror in the scene, a mirror whose “point of view” the camera repeatedly occupies, relegates his actions to the realm of the imaginary, an exercise in vanity rather than vocation.
or shock a plausible if still somewhat excessive one. Yet where emotion is caught up in access to the commodity, the atrophy of our capacity to launch any kind of powerfully emotional protest is part and parcel of our economic dispossession; to the extent that we are deprived of access to commodity culture, surrounded by actual trash, we are inevitably also saddled with the emotional “trash” of boredom. In this sense, the expectation that the poor should respond to the trash that surrounds them with an emotion obtainable only through access to the commodity becomes wholly unreasonable. Indeed, it is worth suggesting that the concomitant expectation that texts documenting the scene poverty and dispossession—a scene that de-animates those who suffer it—should nevertheless animate the audience, tends to perpetuate at the level of form precisely the imbalanced distribution of material and thus emotional resources that underpins the poverty it critiques at the level of content.

Of course, if shock’s status as an emotional commodity renders it inappropriate for the postmodern avant-garde, it should not be assumed that, merely because boredom is not a commodity, it automatically possesses avant-garde credentials. Yet I want to suggest that our emotional trash does have a certain important agency as an instrument of the postmodern avant-garde. After all, if the existence, location and disposal of trash is frequently called upon to bear the burden of the disapproval more properly directed at the consumer culture of which it is the by-product, it is not merely because trash is more visible than the commodity, but because in its visibility it works to bring into relief the worst excesses of the system from which it is excluded. As anthropologist Mary Douglas famously argued in her classic Purity and Danger, dirt is not “a residual category, rejected from our normal scheme of classifications,” but rather a term that can make that “normal scheme of classifications” starkly manifest. The same, I suggest, is true of boredom, which, as

60 This argument resonates with Berlant’s insistence that to the extent that the rise of immaterial labour and the failure of citizenship rights leads to the rise of “survivalists, scavengers bargaining against defeat by the capitalist destruction of life,” it also leads to the rise of what she calls “aspirational normativity” and “social conservativism.” (Berlant, “Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal,” 282, 301, 278.)

our emotional “trash”—as an emotion that revolves, painfully, around the absence of feeling—functions to disclose the contours of the emotional economy in which we live. In deploying boredom, then, *Gummo* works to underscore not only the fact that emotion is first and foremost a commodity, but that we are invested in these emotional commodities over and above—and often at the expense of—the political effects those “goods” supposedly secure. This becomes most strikingly clear, for example, when we note that, despite the film’s novel emotional complexion, in many ways it does deliver on more traditional avant-garde promises. Key to the reification of shock as the paradigmatic political emotion is the conviction that its disruptive presence might enable, for example, political identifications across class boundaries, “draw[ing] the audience’s attention to … poverty in order that it should be capable of revolutionary action.”62 In *Gummo*, however, it is boredom that proffers such a moment of recognition, as the affective deprivation embodied in boredom mirrors the mundane everyday of poverty in an uncanny loop that artist Mike Keller has evoked in his description of watching the film “in a half-nod watching people in a half-nod.”63 Yet though *Gummo*’s twinned boredom facilitates a certain identification and commonality across class boundaries in a way that effectively realizes one of the avant-garde’s primary goals, critics have tended to draw on the aesthetics of shock to avoid this identification, arguing that the film’s boredom (“barely educated drunks who live in squalor and arm-wrestle for entertainment are not telling us anything we don’t already know”) renders it unworthy of its avant-garde pretensions. At stake here, then, is a recourse to the aesthetics of shock (or rather, its absence) as a pretext for evading the political identification that shock has been so celebrated for its capacity to secure. This tendency to deploy shock as a means of eluding the ethical and political claims that the emotion allegedly secures is dramatized within *Gummo* itself, in the sequence that sees a leathery-skinned old man claim to have sighted the missing house cat for which our three female protagonists have been searching.


Predictably enough, his offer to drive them to the place “just out of town” at which he’d spotted the cat is revealed as a scam: having reached a suitably isolated suburban carpark with the three girls bundled in his backseat, he attempts to molest them. Rebuked by the girls’ triplicate outrage as they pile out of the car, he drives rapidly away, but not before offering a dismissive parting shot in an attempt both to excuse his behavior and to dismiss their fury: “nothing new to trash like you.” This self-serving maxim clearly resonates with the critical investment in the aesthetics of shock in its assumption that the structural, ingrained, familiar and ongoing status of an event—that is, its inability to excite the intense emotion of shock—makes it something we shouldn’t protest or address. Again, by putting into circulation the emotional “trash” of boredom—boring events, boring formal structures, bored people—the film is able to illuminate the systematic privileging of emotional commodities over and above the political identifications and actions they supposedly facilitate. In deploying emotional trash, then, the film works to bring clearly into relief the emotional economy of which it is the abject waste-product, suggesting that what might once have been an important oppositional project, its telos radical identification and action, is now a function of consumer culture, its telos the frisson of intense emotion.

Yet if boredom can be usefully recruited to an avant-garde agenda, it is not as shock traditionally has been—that is, as a direct springboard to political action. What is at play in Gummo’s enlistment of boredom in place of shock is other than a simple substitution of one affect for another within the context of a structurally continuous avant-garde project. Rather, the movement from shock to boredom marks a large-scale shift in the avant-garde’s aims. Whereas the “shocking” modernist avant-garde uses emotion to propel us to political action, the “boring” postmodern avant-garde points to the need for a form of political action detached from a drama of feeling—diagnosing a situation in which the new “emotional economy” means we can no longer quantify injustice according to the depth and intensity of feeling it provokes in its victims or its spectators. Boredom’s status as both criticism and consumer culture’s affective waste-product is no accident; this chapter has not attempted to recuperate or redeem an emotion that is not only morally problematic, but physically unpleasant. Rather, I have argued that precisely as our emotional “trash,” boredom can be deployed in the postmodern avant-garde in a way that plays into the recent
endeavours of many theorists to foreground the radical incommensurability between feeling and politics, or what Heather Love, less bluntly, calls “the conflicts in scale and political goals between psychic life and political power.” 64 Yet if, in these terms, boredom might help us untie the semiotic knot that links emotion with the political, the habit of linking the two is so strong that it remains near-impossible not to merely transpose the connection between emotion and politics to a new level—framing this notoriously weak anti-emotion as a new and paradoxical index of political urgency. From this perspective, if what we see in Gummo tends to invoke in us less the animated “shock of the new” than the slow-burning distaste of something worthless, trashy and irrelevant, this is exactly the point at which it acquires political urgency, even as it deprives us of affective compensations for the tedium of witnessing it. Jean-Francois Lyotard has defined shock as “par excellence, the sign of something happening, rather than nothing at all.” 65 From Gummo’s perspective, however, shock is less the mark of something happening in general than the mark of something happening that, whether in the form of avant-garde art or mainstream consumer kitsch, is able to find mainstream recognition as a commodifiable event. Conversely, boredom is less the mark of nothing happening than of something happening over and over and over again; something to which, precisely because it no longer excites or surprises us, because it lacks both commercial and affective value, we may be ethically bound to pay attention.

64 Heather Love, Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 11. As Berlant avers sardonically following a description of a scenario wherein the violin-straining spectacle of child labour is replaced by the equally unjust but less memorably pathetic scene of underpaid adults: “the uncomfortable pressure of feeling dissipates.” (Lauren Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, Politics” in Left Legalism, Left Critique ed. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002], 107.) Yet as she insinuates, if the feeling dissipates, the injustice does not.

Knowingness: Feeling Theory and its Other

I.
A coming-of-age story about one Max Fischer (Jason Schwartzman), a diminutive fifteen-year-old with sizeable ambitions, Wes Anderson’s *Rushmore* (1999) was greeted by critics as a sign that the “knowing” moment in cinema was drawing to a close. Collating the formal shifts evinced by *Rushmore* with similar shifts in roughly contemporary films, Jesse Fox Mayshark, for example, concluded that a cinematic aesthetics whose tonal trademark was its knowingness was being superseded by something new, which he clusters under the term “post-pop cinema.”¹ According to Mayshark, “Having grown up on the wink-and-nod knowingness of postmodernism,” *Rushmore*, alongside other contemporary movies of a similar ilk, uses knowingness “as a starting point rather than a conclusion.”² Mayshark is not alone in reading *Rushmore* as both sign and exemplar of the demise of a knowing cinematic practice. For Mark Olsen, whereas Anderson’s older contemporaries Gregg Araki and Hal Hartley “use a knowing stance to establish their superiority over characters and audience alike,” *Rushmore* is marked by a “sincerity largely absent from the contemporary youth picture.”³ Drawing on the expressive morphology of the “knowing wink” and the “knowing nudge” with which knowingness is often associated, Lisa Schwarzbaum similarly maintains that Anderson “treats eccentricity with compassionate respect: no winking, no nudges,” leaving the film conspicuously devoid of the tonal and formal attributes that usually invite the nomination.⁴ Blogger Kenny Byerly agrees, adjudicating between Anderson’s films and those of other


directors in terms of a distinction between a “smug” knowingness and a “sincere” emotionality, and maintaining that while “there’s bad irony in movies, where smug knowingness is used to excuse intellectual laziness … Anderson’s movies are extremely sincere emotionally.”

For all four critics, then, *Rushmore* marked a long-overdue displacement of the brand of “wink-and-nod knowingness” that had monopolized much earlier cultural production.

Yet despite the casual, even “knowing,” way in which knowingness is invoked here, this series of observations about a film in which knowingness is absent merely prompts the question of what knowingness is—or rather, if we are to take these critics’ claims seriously, what knowingness was. Mayshark’s intimation that knowingness is affiliated with postmodernism would suggest that postmodern theory might provide a valuable resource on which to draw in developing a definition of the term, and indeed, the term does appear with a noteworthy frequency in writing on postmodernism. Steven Connor defines postmodern architecture as that which “repeat[s] knowingly” a series of past styles; Lawrence Grossberg argues that “postmodernity’s statements exhibit an ironic, knowing distance”; while Chris Barker maintains that “postmodernism is marked by an ironic knowingness because it explores the limitations and conditions of its own knowing.”

Indeed, for many postmodern critics knowingness transcends the status of a feature of postmodern textuality to become virtually co-extensive with it. Linda Hutcheon’s use of the term in the preliminary statements of her influential *The Politics of Postmodernism* is exemplary here:

“Postmodernism today manifests itself in many fields of cultural endeavor ... In general terms it takes the form of a self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement ... The effect is to highlight or ‘highlight’ and subvert or

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'subvert,' and the mode is therefore a ‘knowing’ and an ironic—or even
‘ironic’—one.7

For Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland, meanwhile, it is “knowingness” that
grants the distinction classical/postclassical “its most defensible validity”; and if Tim
Woods’ Beginning Postmodernism initially broaches knowingness as a popular
postmodern textual strategy, one of the “key characteristics of postmodern film,” it is
quickly promoted to one of the primary points of difference between modernism and
postmodernism: “Postmodernism is a knowing modernism, a self-reflexive
modernism, a modernism that does not agonize about itself.”8 So well-established is
this identification between knowingness and postmodernism, in fact, that the two
terms have become virtually synonymous: in Mayshark’s work, for example,
knowingness and postmodernism alternate with each other in a kind of definitional
circuit in which to call something “postmodern” implies its possession of a certain
knowing tone, and to call something “knowing” implies its membership of the group
of cultural objects we deem postmodern. Certainly, the “postmodern” phenomena
with which knowingness is associated here are diverse, a series of loosely
interconnected cultural, critical social and economic trends: where one critic speaks of
shifts in architectural styles, another speaks of heightened levels of literary self-
reflexivity and another of the transition from classical to post-classical cinema. Yet
the range of the term’s application is less a sign of the incoherence of postmodernism,
than a measure of knowingness’s capacity to afford postmodernism an imaginary
unity and identity by functioning as a kind of affective hallmark.

But what is this phenomenon that has been so closely and so regularly laminated to
postmodern cultural forms as to be quite often identified with them? While
continually invoking knowingness in association with postmodern art, architecture
and politics, postmodern scholars seem reluctant to grant the term rigorous


8 Warren Buckland and Thomas Elsaesser, Studying Contemporary American Film (London: Arnold,
2002), 78; Tim Woods, Beginning Postmodernism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999),
214, 8. For Woods, as for Hutcheon and Elsaesser and Buckland before him, “knowingness” is what is
added to modernism to make it postmodern, an undefined difference that makes all the difference.
definition, their continuous deployment of the term matched by a wary refusal to
define or theorize it. It is, then, to the Oxford English dictionary that we should turn
initially for a framing definition. While not listing “knowingness” as a state, the
Oxford English Dictionary offers a telling definition of the adjective from which it is
derived, “knowing,” which it describes as “showing or suggesting that one has
knowledge or awareness that is secret or known to only a few people: a knowing
smile,” alongside a “chiefly derogatory” related meaning: “experienced or shrewd,
especially excessively or prematurely so: today's society is too knowing, too
corrupt.”9 What first catches the eye is that the “knowledge or awareness” at play
here is not “knowledge or awareness” possessed but “knowledge or awareness”
“show[n] or suggest[ed]” through the affective display of a “knowing smile,” making
knowingness less the state of knowing something than a manifest “show” of knowing
something—and, as such, a phenomenon whose lineaments seem to conform
strikingly to the contours of what we understand as emotion. On the one hand, like
many emotions, knowingness possesses a distinct physiological and expressive
component, as evinced in its alignment not just with the colloquial figure of the
“knowing smile,” but with a series of similar bodily idioms, like the “knowing” wink
and the “knowing” glance. On the other, and again like many emotions, knowingness
is bound up with judgment or evaluation: for philosopher Jonathan Lear, knowingness
is a “stance”; for scientist Norm Levitt, knowingness is an “attitude”; while for
philosopher Richard Rorty knowingness is a “state of soul.”10 As what Philip Fisher
calls “the local feeling of intelligibility” or “the feeling of ‘getting it,’” then,
knowingness might be best defined as the specifically euphoric and emotional
dimension of understanding.11


10 Jonathan Lear, Open-Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press, 1998), 33; Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, Higher Superstition: The Academic Left
and its Quarrels with Science (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 73; Richard Rorty,
Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press, 1998), 126.

11 Philip Fisher, Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences (Cambridge, MA:
Yet while this description goes some way toward determining the intrinsic qualities of knowingness, it is impossible to separate the emotion itself from certain extrinsic factors—notably the fact that for the four critics quoted above, the term functioned as a pejorative critical projectile in the so-called “Culture Wars” of the 1990s, a series of clashes between poststructuralist scholarship and the defenders of traditional disciplinary practice. In order to grasp the nature of their hostility to the emotion, it should be noted that while this “feeling of ‘getting it’” might be assumed to be complementary or conducive to the knowledge whose presence its physical lexicon so proudly proclaims, these critics explicitly figure knowingness as inimical to knowledge. For Fisher, for example, knowingness or “The satisfaction of intelligibility … is different from what a philosopher would call knowledge and it is even more remote from what Descartes called certain knowledge.”12 Yet Fisher’s insistence on the distance between the feeling of knowledge and the fact of knowledge does not derive from the obvious ontological difference between the two states—that is, from the fact that knowingness is an emotion whereas knowledge is traditionally understood as an interiorized, cognitive state. Rather, his aversion to knowingness derives from a perception that knowingness impedes and undermines the emotions that are the traditional cohorts of philosophical thought, from Aristotelean wonder to Cartesian doubt. Rorty, for example, sees knowingness as the enemy of philosophical awe: “knowingness is a state of soul which prevents shudders of awe. It makes one immune to romantic enthusiasm.”13 The aptly named Lear, likewise, figures knowingness as a hindrance to the wonder and awe that is philosophy’s true emotional accomplice: “Philosophy, Aristotle says, begins in wonder, or awe. If so, Oedipus [whom Lear has earlier identified as an embodiment of knowingness] cannot get started: he is too busy figuring things out to have any such experience.”14 For Raymond Tallis, meanwhile, “Knowingness … is the obverse of the anguished sense of uncertainty that drives philosophy’s primary discipline—

12 Fisher, Wonder, 8.

13 Rorty, Achieving our Country, 126.

14 Lear, Open-Minded, 51.
epistemology, the scrutiny of knowledge itself.” Where wonder, awe and an “anguished sense of uncertainty” are valorized as the emotions “proper” to critical inquiry, it’s not hard to see why the feeling of knowingness should be condemned as antithetical to a certain philosophically oriented conception of knowledge. On the one hand, whereas wonder, awe or doubt mark our inadequacy before a universe rich with potential revelation, the feeling of knowingness seems to involve a sense of epistemic sufficiency that implicitly dismisses the pursuit of further knowledge as futile or pointless; as Levitt puts it, in an impassioned attack on postmodern science studies, “a fatal knowingness … licenses practitioners to talk endlessly about science without ever talking about science.” On the other, the kind of awareness that knowingness’s characteristic “knowing smile” points to is implicitly inscribed as exclusive or privileged, a “knowledge or awareness that is secret or known to only a few people.” A feeling of “getting” something that someone else does not, then, knowingness is not only smugly resistant to the process of epistemic “discovery” so central to our ideas about how knowledge is acquired, but trades in forms of one-upmanship and exclusivity wholly antithetical to enlightenment ideals of a knowledge unsullied by worldly interests or concerns. The fact that knowingness is euphoric and pleasurable rather than painful and unpleasant, as the example of the “knowing smile” suggests, only compounds the moral offense it embodies.

Despite—or perhaps because—of the fact that Fisher, Gross and Levitt, Lear, Rorty and Tallis’s model of knowingness is a pejorative by-product of their impassioned defense of a reified vision of “knowledge,” these six critics seem to deliver a peculiarly incisive morphology of the term. Indeed, their condemnation of the emotion makes it strikingly clear that the prestige that attaches to the emotion within postmodern theory runs against the grain of what appears to be a much more widely and deeply held antipathy toward the emotion. But how does this model of knowingness register in postmodern texts? It is not hard to demonstrate that a feeling


of “getting it” that is at once resistant to the kind of philosophical expansionist project inscribed in Lear’s valorization of “wonder, or awe,” and invested in epistemic one-upmanship and exclusion, might have an affinity with certain forms of postmodern aesthetics and criticism—especially where one of the founding texts of postmodern theory is a comprehensive critique of the reified visions of knowledge that the above critics so insistently defend.\(^{17}\) That text is Lyotard’s early 1980s polemic *The Postmodern Condition*, and it is to this text that I will turn in attempting to provide an example of knowingness in operation. Like much postmodern scholarship, *The Postmodern Condition* works to deconstruct some of modernism’s most cherished truths, attesting not just to the demise of meta-language, but to the demise of “metaphysical philosophy,” “justice,” disciplinary purity and the university itself.\(^{18}\) In full evidence here is Lyotard’s implication in what has become the signature gesture of postmodern scholarship—a critical mode known as postmodern critique. As Linda Hutcheon has shown, postmodern critique is marked by the de-doxification or de-naturalization of established truths, “foreground[ing] the productive, constructing aspects” of representation and showing that “representation can no longer be considered a politically neutral and theoretically innocent activity.”\(^{19}\) At first glance, this kind of skepticism might seem incompatible with what Fisher calls “the feeling of getting it,” which would appear to depend upon a level of epistemic certainty or stability. In fact, however, it is in the labour of skeptical critique that knowingness’s sense of epistemic sufficiency and investment in epistemic hierarchy finds its clearest realization. On the one hand, whereas modernist philosophizing devoted itself to the project of developing a newer, clearer language and vocabulary for something that resides, mysteriously and glimmeringly, beyond representation—Heidegger’s anguished, idiosyncratic grammatical torsions comes to mind here—Lyotard’s emphasis on exposing “the productive, constructing aspect” of a range of social, representational and technological practices in producing knowledge, leaves the notion of “discovering” the new, rather than merely unveiling the illusions of the old,

\(^{17}\) Lear, *Open-Minded*, 51.


seeming suspect or naïve; at stake here, in other words, is just the dismissive epistemic complacency we have associated with knowingness. On the other, while refusing to subscribe to familiar truisms about the categories he interrogates and deconstructs, Lyotard’s mode of critique nevertheless buys clearly into the critical capital that attaches to the claim of superior powers of demystification and exposure of those able to “see through” the illusions of subjectivity, truth and individual style; in other words, though clearly undermining some of the foundations of epistemic certainty, postmodern critique nevertheless facilitates a kind of epistemic triumphalism that revolves around the process of undermining itself. 20

Indeed, the somewhat covert knowing gratifications that accompany Lyotard’s demystification of knowledge are underscored by the more explicit knowing gratifications at play in his display of cultural knowledge through allusion and reference. Absorbing everything from science to literature and ranging ably across historical periods and theoretical genres, Lyotard’s endlessly citational style seems to rejoice in staying abreast of the very cultural production whose value he dismisses as no more than a shadowy effect of social, political or economic forces. As the opening pages of The Postmodern Condition attest, even as Lyotard critiques knowledge, he invites his audience to join him in the knowing pleasures of “those who recognize the sources of … appropriation and understand the theory that motivates it,” as Hutcheon puts it (indeed, the knowingness at play is all the richer for Lyotard’s ability to condense his cultural sophistication into the crypto-casualness of the passing allusion.) 21 In Lyotard’s paradigmatically postmodern critical practice, then, knowingness’s characteristic air of epistemic complacency and superiority suffuses

20 It is no surprise that Rorty, Gross and Levitt’s disparaging condemnation of knowingness in general frequently recruits postmodern “ideology critique” as an illustrative example. For Gross and Levitt, the apparent attraction exerted by what they view as the “brittle skepticism of postmodern thought” is understandable only in terms of “the possibility of becoming an initiate, part of an elect whose mastery of a certain style of discourse confers an insight unobtainable elsewhere and authorizes a knowing (and often smug) attitude”; for Rorty, meanwhile, the kind of “knowing theorization” he sees going on under the sign of Jameson’s Postmodernism produces scholars who can “ridicule everything but can hope for nothing, can explain everything but idolize nothing.” (Gross and Levitt, Higher Superstition, 73; Rorty, Achieving Our Country, 127.)

21 Hutcheon, Politics of Postmodernism, 3.
both his skeptical critique of the possibility of locating any real truth or authenticity in cultural and scientific production, and his allusive display of his breadth of cultural expertise.

Yet far from isolated to postmodern criticism, “knowingness”—as its continual evocation in scholarship on postmodern textuality suggests—is also a prominent tonal feature of postmodern aesthetics and cultural production, where the twin formal modes to which I have so far attached it—critique and allusion—can clearly be seen at work. On the one hand, postmodern art is marked, as Hutcheon has repeatedly insisted, by a labour of “denaturalising critique”—from John Barth’s inquest-like probing of the “exhausted” novel form, to postmodern feminist art’s “scrutiny [of] patriarchal structures of culture, existing cultural practices and women’s potential for making culture,” to Victor Burgin’s photography, “Parod[y]ing John Everett Millais’s Ophelia through a transcoding of its female subject into a representation of a model in Ophelia’s pose but portraying Kim Novak’s representation of the character Madeleine in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo.*” On the other, it is marked by a dazzling display of cultural literacy through the use of devices such as allusion and reference—from *Pulp Fiction’s* glittery mesh of allusions and references, to David Foster Wallace’s masterful stylistic pastiche, to Cindy Sherman’s immaculate evocations of classic Hollywood film chronotopes. Film critic Noel Carroll, for example, invokes knowingness in his description of allusion in Laurence Kasdan’s *Body Heat,* arguing that Kasdan’s deployment of allusion “tells us that for this very reason [the film] is to be regarded as intelligent and knowing”; Elsaesser and Buckland’s discussion of post-classical cinema cements the relationship between knowingness and knowledge, attributing to post-classical cinema “a special sort of awareness of the codes that govern classical representation and its genre conventions, along with a willingness to display this knowingness and make the audience share it by letting it in on the game”; while according to Rosenbaum, films like *Pulp Fiction* “depend on references and

asides … to convey a fashion-plate surface of knowingness.” Conventional critical consensus, then, would seem to concur with my argument that postmodern textuality’s signature emotion, knowingness, attaches itself to postmodern aesthetics’ use of critique and allusion.

As this chapter will show, this affinity between knowingness and postmodern cultural and critical practice has important implications for a postmodernism that has traditionally been understood in historical or stylistic terms. For Jameson, postmodernism is a “cultural dominant,” a series of cultural and stylistic phenomena that arise as a result of shifts in western capitalism. For Hutcheon and Lyotard, it constitutes a very specific, isolatable aesthetic that the former identifies with parody, appropriation and allusion and—notably—critique, and the latter with the aesthetics of the sublime. Yet while these have been the predominant schema through which the character and status of the postmodern have been articulated, the ubiquitous critical identification of postmodernism with knowingness proposes the possibility of a model of the postmodern as a primarily emotional phenomenon—a model of the

23 Noel Carroll, “The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (and Beyond),” *October* 20 (Spring, 1982): 54; Buckland and Elsaesser, *Studying Contemporary American Film*, 72; Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Movies as Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 173. While not openly situating its claims in relation to the then-incipient concept of postmodernism, Carroll’s classic description of the operation of allusionism in 1970s film nevertheless evoked the kind of epistemic break to which postmodernism is most often said to refer, locating the device as “the symbolic structure that most distinguishes the present period from the past.” (Carroll, “The Future of Allusion,” 54.) As Alan Kirby puts it, “Postmodernism prided itself on the ‘media literacy,’ the smartness of its irony, knowing textual recipient, who could identify the quotations, the sources, and allusions, who was aware of the conventions and practices of textual production, who could piece together the discontinuous fragments, and appreciate depthlessness as a positive quality.” (Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure our Culture* [New York: Continuum, 2009], 155.)


postmodern that is more akin to what Jameson himself suggests when he points to postmodernism’s instigation of a “whole new emotional ground tone.” In these terms, in attempting to determine whether a text was properly postmodern, we would look not to its deployment of a familiar range of “postmodern” stylistic devices or its place in historical context, but for the presence of a certain emotional tone—a tone that, while often associated with and effected by the strategies of critique and allusion, would not be identifiable with them. In this model, the term “postmodern” would function chiefly as what Raymond Williams calls a “structure of feeling” rather than as a name for an identifiable aesthetic or critical style, or a delimited historical epoch. A concept developed to account for how historical/cultural moments express themselves in “the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity,” Williams’ “structures of feeling” refer to characteristic elements of impulse, restraint and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought; practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and relating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a ‘structure’: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension.

For Williams, importantly, these structures of feeling “are not taken to be epiphenomena of changed institutions, formations and beliefs, or merely secondary evidence of changed social and economic relations”: more than mere “effects” of social, structural and institutional formations, they “cannot, without loss, be reduced to belief-systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships, though [they] may include all of them as lived and experienced.” Rather, Williams’ structures of feeling describe social and textual dynamics in terms of values as they are actively

26 Jameson, Postmodernism, 6.


28 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 132.

29 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 131, 133.
lived and felt. By offering us a way of thinking about the “social content” of postmodernism that does not reduce that content to concrete stylistic, historical or institutional phenomena, Williams’ “structures of feeling” might be a useful way to frame postmodern texts per se. Connor has disparaged the tendency among critics such as Christopher Nash and Ziauddin Sardar to frame postmodernism as “a sensibility or state of mind.” Yet as our habitual critical identification of knowingness with postmodernism reminds us, there is no denying the centrality of the emotion to our experience and characterization of postmodern texts. This seems to license a wholesale reassessment of the postmodern as a set of tonal and emotional rather than historical or aesthetic co-ordinates. What would it mean to take this affective model of postmodern textuality as a specifically “knowing” textuality seriously?

While exploring this question will be the primary aim of my chapter, my inquiry into the implications of this allegiance between postmodernism and knowingness will be mediated through the specificity of the current cultural moment—a moment when, as the opening discussion of Rushmore suggested, the postmodern critical and cultural practice conventionally associated with knowingness seems to have lost its cachet. This shift can be registered across a range of contexts, from the academic to the aesthetic. If Lyotard’s characteristically postmodern form of critique once occupied a position of analytic preeminence in the text-based disciplines, for example, shifts in the critical climate have seen many scholars insist on the need to suspend routine gestures of unveiling and demystification on the basis that such gestures often inadvertently fortify—by endlessly insisting upon—the very regimes of normativity they so carefully scrutinize and deconstruct. New theories of interpretation, such as Rita Felski’s “new phenomenology,” Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’ “surface reading” and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s reparative reading, have sought to develop methods that avoid critique and restore to criticism a richer, more textured sense of our lived experience of the world. These practices not only seem incompatible with


the kind of ostentatious “knowingness” that suffused much postmodern ideological critique, but seem far more hospitable to other emotions like joy and curiosity, pathos and shame, nostalgia and hope. Moreover, there has been a corresponding turn to practices that seem antithetical to a conventionally knowing sensibility in literary, cinematic and artistic production. In film, the once-reified aesthetic practices of allusion, pastiche and self-reflexivity have been jettisoned in favour of a renewed investment in more traditional forms of storytelling; as cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker put it, “the postmodern years of plenty, pastiche and parataxis are over.”32 Robert L. McLaughlin, for example, has identified a “sea change in contemporary fiction,” in which literary practice is perceived as repudiating “style without substance, of language without meaning, of cynicism without belief, of virtual communities without human connection.”33 In art, meanwhile, critical reverence of Cindy Sherman’s hip, critical reconstructions of iconic moments in Hollywood cinema has given way to the earnest engagement with global cultural and economic flows that Nicholas Bourriaud enshrines in his notion of Altermodernism, with its emphasis on creolism, multiculturalism, nomadism and heterochronicity.34

Given my argument that postmodern critical and cultural practices have regularly been characterized as knowing, it is hardly surprising that critics from all three fields agree that these stylistic shifts away from stylistic devices conventionally considered postmodern constitute a sign that knowingness has had its cultural day. As Mayshark observes, the cultural primacy once accorded the work of directors like Quentin Tarantino, Hal Hartley and David O. Russell has dropped away, allowing the

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ascendance of filmmakers whose “knowledge of style and genre is assumed” rather than unduly emphasized. Delineating a “shift away from postmodernism in children’s cartoons,” philosopher Alan Kirby describes Shrek The Third as a deliberately “warm rather than knowing or ironic” riposte to the negative press and public reception that greeted Shrek 2’s dated use of “knowing irony.” Journalist Jonathan Jones points to similar transformations taking place in the art world, where new work is “sweep[ing] away the fag-end of postmodernism and renew[ing] faith in art” after what he calls the “world-weary intellectual climate of the late 20th century.” Literary commentator Jason Morris, meanwhile, maintains that contemporary poetic practice is marked by the rise of a “New Sincerity,” an affective posture of “honesty” and “immediacy” that seems quite at odds with knowingness’s smugly skeptical relation to truth. Similarly, Vermeulen and van den Akker’s more generalized argument for the displacement of postmodern practice by “metamodernism” takes the demise of “knowingness” as one of its primary proofs. According to these critics, then, to the extent that much contemporary cultural production is marked by a deliberate turn against traditionally postmodern modes, it is also marked by the abandonment of more ostentatiously knowing forms of discourse.

Of all the critical and aesthetic formations that have emerged over the past few years in the wake of postmodernism’s signature knowingness, however, one perhaps has particular relevance here because it is the discourse in which this thesis is implicated. An interdisciplinary formation that draws on influences as diverse as the psychologist Silvan Tomkins, the philosophers Benedict de Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze, and the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, feeling theory is committed to documenting the affective and emotional components of individual and collective life, which it sees as

35 Mayshark, Post-Pop Cinema, 13. Italics mine.

36 Kirby, Digimodernism, 17, 16.


elided by postmodernism’s thorough deconstruction of terms like experience and subjectivity. Both feeling theory’s key objects and its key methodologies constitute deliberate challenges to the strategies of ideology critique that have formed postmodernism theorizing’s dominant critical paradigm. On the one hand, for many in feeling theory, feeling’s capacity to “shake people out of deeply grooved patterns of thinking and feeling” enables it to disturb and unsettle the normative regimes of power that ideology critique’s endless analyses only entrench more deeply. Feeling theory, in other words, endows feeling with the power to exceed the hold of familiar social, historical and bodily patterns in a way that could not be imagined by a postmodern theory that tends to treat the systems it analyzes as totalizing and all-encompassing. On the other, as Heather Love argues, this “affective turn” in criticism is also, necessarily, a “descriptive turn,” its shift of thematic focus complemented by a marked methodological turn away from an identifiably postmodern mode of ideology critique. Where ideology critique’s endlessly skeptical posture is seen as “insulating” us from feeling, feeling theory deploys analytical models that pose a direct “challenge [to] the hermeneutics of suspicion and symptomatology,” such that an emphasis on critique, exposure and demystification is displaced, as Ann Cvetkovich’s work suggests, by an effort to “document ordinary life,” to “represent global political conditions and the felt experience of everyday life,” and to “depict … ‘ordinary affects.’”


41 Naomi Scheman, “To See it Feelingly: On Knowingness and (In)vulnerability,” unpublished paper, *Emotions, Affects … And Other Intimacies* conference, Umeå, Sverige, 2011; Janet Staiger, introduction to *Political Emotions*, ed. Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich and Ann Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2010), 4; Ann Cvetkovich, introduction to *Political Emotions*, ed. Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich and Ann Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2010), 8. This practice emphasizes texture and particularity over easy political judgments, and advises “going slowly,” “noticing the details of the moment or the object” and “paying attention to the complexities of lived experience and cultural expression in ways that do not necessarily break down into convenient dichotomies between left and right, progressive and reactionary, resistance and containment.” (Cvetkovich, introduction to *Political
For many in feeling theory, this methodological shift away from ideology critique takes the expiry of knowingness as one of its primary entailments. Seen as virtually isomorphic with postmodern practices of critique, knowingness is at once denounced as critically dangerous and dismissed as no longer of any threat. Naomi Scheman’s praise of new developments in feeling theory, for example, is set against the backdrop of a moribund “postmodern theorizing,” which “encourages an attitude of knowingness that insulates us from what are seen as naive, even embarrassing encounters with texts.” Willing not only to face embarrassment, but also to take embarrassment as its object, feeling theory implicitly marks the abandonment of “the attitude of knowingness” that suffuses postmodern critical practice. Brian Massumi also identifies feeling theory’s renunciation of practices of critique with a repudiation of the “knowingness” that has been its conventional affective signature. For Massumi, ideology critique’s emphasis on discursive and structural determination at the expense of a potentially disruptive or unruly feeling perpetuates these determinations at the level of criticism itself, in the form of an insidious knowingness: “From the moment a newness irrupts, [critical] procedures already ready-at-hand clamp down for the knowing capture.” The current spate of work on asignifying intensities that elude or exceed “signification or coding,” then, suggest that a certain “knowing capture” no longer applies. Nigel Thrift seconds this position, insisting that “without [feeling theory’s] kind of affective politics, what is left of politics will too often be the kind of

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*Emotions*, 11, 6.) Sedgwick’s work provides a paradigm for these new reading strategies. Against what she frames as a “paranoid” practice of critique that culminates in demystifying “exposure,” Sedgwick proposes an alternative mode of “reparative reading.” (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 126, 108, 123.) Reparative reading emphasizes the expansionist labour of interest and excitement rather than the protectionist labour of warding off “bad surprise[s],” focusing on our affective response to and use of texts as resources for negotiating the world. (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 130.)

42 Scheman “To See it Feelingly.”


macho programme-making that emaciates what it is to be human—because it is so sure it already knows what that is or will be.” Here, Thrift equates critique with a posture of “already know[ing]” that not only impoverishes our understanding of politics but ravages (“emaciates”) the human body and its emotions, in a way that only feeling theory’s new, post-critical methodologies can rectify. Sedgwick’s work undertakes a similar manoeuvre, enlisting knowingness in her inventory of the “negative affects” that bear the burden of defining what she calls paranoid reading, a mode of textual interpretation that—though Sedgwick herself does not say so—bears comparison with postmodern critique in its privileging of the revelation of the hidden workings of social, political and economic forces over more creative, affective forms of engagement. According to Sedgwick, the embrace of an alternative, “reparative” model of reading involves “surrender[ing] the knowing, anxious, paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new.” Knowingness is here marginally admitted to the status of an emotion—it is, after all, recruited to Sedgwick’s catalogue of “negative affects”—but it is hardly worthy of feeling theory’s sustained attention, let alone avowal, and is relegated to the remote critical past. For all four of these critics, then, knowingness is the critical sensibility that must be relinquished in order to pursue the more expansive and productive critical programme that currently coalesces around the figures of affect and emotion.

It’s not difficult to discern why feeling theory would view knowingness as a problematic emotion, irreconcilable with its own critical practice. After all, where feeling theory is committed to the possibility of change, surprise and the new, maintaining that “attending to elusory [sic], opaque spaces of affect orientates inquiry to the conditions under which new encounters, relations and events are produced,” knowingness’s cynical resistance to “wonder and awe” shuts off—in a way the OED


47 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 146.
defines as “premature”—the possibility of genuine social or critical transformation. 48

Similarly, where feeling theory is invested in a certain ideal of scholarly community and exchange, and strives to resist the forms of academic one-upmanship that see us “build our reputations and our positions on the corpses of other scholars, condemning their inadequacies and their complicities with the dominant powers,” knowingness is inherently bound up with this kind of one-up-manship. 49 “Showing or suggesting that one has knowledge or awareness that is secret or known to only a few people,” knowingness’s paradigmatic “knowing smile” is a euphoric reveling in the exclusions and hierarchies that underpin the knowledge it displays. 50 Certainly, knowingness is not alone in its relation to social hierarchy and division. Clare Hemmings points, for example, to “the delights of consumerism, feelings of belonging attending fundamentalism or fascism” as “affective responses that strengthen rather than challenge a dominant social order,” while Lauren Berlant has devoted considerable theoretical energy to demonstrating how “affective states—a desire to feel reciprocity and a sense of belonging, for example—can generate attachments to normativity and current social arrangements, even those that create the stressful conditions of one’s life.” 51 Yet while obviously available to recruitment by the forces of social normalization, these feelings are marked by a “disruptive openness” that affords them the capacity to unsettle, exceed and even resist the social norms they sustain. 52

Knowingness by contrast, seems wholly unrecuperable and intractable, an emotion


definitionally bound up with hierarchy, exclusion and the perpetuation of the same. As such, knowingness appears inherently incompatible with feeling theory’s key methodologies.

It is hardly surprising, then, that far from countenancing the existence of knowingness in its critical practice, feeling theory is perhaps most notable for its efforts to catalyze critical enthusiasm for an affective posture or position that might function as knowingness’ opposite—a certain epistemic openness or naïveté. If, for Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, many accounts of feeling “have been viewed as naïvely or romantically wandering too far out into the groundlessness of a world’s or a body’s myriad inter-implication,” it is clear that this state of “ naïveté” is not just a widespread critical misperception but a critical ideal. Those “ naïve, even embarrassing encounters with texts” that Scheman sees banished by a terroristic postmodern knowingness become, in her paradigm, a kind of valorized norm to the extent that they ward off the “insulating” tyrannies of knowingness. Indicative of this reification of naïveté is a consistent recourse to the term “openness,” understood as a kind of epistemic suspension held over and against knowingness’s epistemic closure. Teresa Brennan advises a technique for short-circuiting the tendency to project and introject emotion through maintaining “an openness … to one’s own sensations and feeling for the other;” in her introduction to Political Emotions, Cvetkovich similarly suggests that an “openness to the richness of emotional experience … marks the affective turn”; while Ben Anderson refers to “the ambiguous openness that the term affect names.” While knowingness has long been critical theory’s critical posture of choice, for feeling theory, “openness” is imagined to be more conducive to both the experience, and the theoretical understanding, of affect and emotion.


54 Naomi Scheman, “To See it Feelingly.”

What is puzzling here, however, is that while knowingness is clearly not an emotion that feeling theory would wish to avow as a component of its critical methodology, this should not, in principle, exclude it from the catalogue of feelings that feeling theory is willing to examine. Feeling theory, after all, is a critical formation explicitly committed to probing some of the more “ugly feelings” that actuate critical practice—even those, like knowingness, that seem outdated, unattractive and intransient. From Heather Love’s work on queer loneliness, to Sally Munt and Elspeth Probyn’s work on shame, to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on critical paranoia, these critics aim, as Cvetkovich puts it, “to be honest about [the] moments of boredom or exhaustion or depression” that haunt critical practice. Not only does feeling theory grapple with “trivial” or “minor” emotions not previously admitted to the canon of critical emotion, but it frequently undertakes the naming and identification of emotions not previously recognized as such: Ngai offers an analysis of a hybrid of boredom and the sublime she calls “stuplimity”; Kathleen Woodward examines “statistical panic” and “bureaucratic rage”; Berlant, meanwhile, isolates an affect peculiar to the destructive economic flows of global capitalism that she dubs “cruel optimism.”

Feeling theory’s neglect of knowingness, then, seems informed by differences that go deeper than the methodological. Key here, I suggest, is that the qualities that render knowingness incompatible with feeling theory’s methodological practice are also


qualities that render it inimical to feeling theory’s self-definition as a field.

Knowingness, that is, is irreconcilable not just with the practice of feeling theory, but with some of feeling theory’s most foundational insights. Most prominently, knowingness appears to destabilize the characterization of emotion that lies at the heart of feeling theory: where feeling theory frames emotion as conducive to the new, “integral to a body’s perpetual becoming (always becoming otherwise, however subtly, than what it already is),” knowingness’s resistance to “shudders of awe” involves a resistance to the possibility of the new; where feeling theory frames feeling as capable of resisting normative structures of power, knowingness is an emotion inextricably bound up with a certain kind of one-up-manship, hierarchy and exclusion.59 Knowingness, in other words, provides embodied evidence against feeling theory’s principal model of emotion, its very existence a reminder that of feeling theory’s efforts to recruit feeling as an instrument for unsettling social norms is an unstable and tenuous one. Both underpinning and compounding this problem is that knowingness is that virtual oxymoron: an emotion affiliated with postmodernism. As such, knowingness tends to problematize feeling theory’s customary opposition between a reactionary postmodern critical practice ill-equipped to accommodate, let alone understand, emotion, and a flourishing, subversive feeling theory uniquely capable of embracing it. In this, knowingness emerges as an awkward, unincorporable other, a foreign body or “bad object” that is not only incompatible with the practice of feeling theory, nor even just problematic to the definition of emotion that lies at the heart of feeling theory, but destabilizing of feeling theory’s favoured origin story, in which it rises, phoenix-like, out of postmodern theory’s emotional blackout.

As this suggests, there is a lot riding on feeling theory’s capacity to evade or gloss over knowingness, whether by banishing it to the critical past or by avoiding the term altogether. As an emotion that thwarts the practice of feeling theory, challenges its understanding of emotion and scuppers its favoured perception of emotion’s relation to postmodernism, knowingness seems to threaten feeling theory’s very foundations. Yet there are, I suggest, certain contradictions in feeling theory brusque repudiation of knowingness. On the one hand, it prematurely abrogates the possibility that the

59 Gregg and Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” 3; Rorty, Achieving Our Country, 126; Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 36.
emotion might have some kind of critical productivity. On the other, it conflicts with feeling theory’s own insistence on emotion’s mobility and sociability. When Love, for example, recommends abandoning knowingness—abandoning, that is, the “familiar academic protocols like maintaining critical distance, outsmarting (and other forms of one-upmanship), [and] believing the hierarchy”—she treats knowingness as an entity that can be locked down to a specific set of argumentative and aesthetic devices, devices whose renunciation can thus be expected to terminate the flow of knowingness between text and reader.60 Similarly, Scheman’s association of knowingness with an outmoded postmodern form of reading, Massumi’s elision of knowingness with the “old” cultural studies, and Sedgwick’s conflation of knowingness with the techniques of ideological demystification she identifies with “paranoid” reading, all align knowingness with an identifiable critical practice whose rejection guarantees knowingness’s disappearance. Yet this conception of knowingness relies on a restricted and inadequate model of emotion that comes into direct conflict with feeling theory’s explicit championing of feeling’s capacity to exceed the jurisdiction of the subject. In order to banish knowingness, then, feeling theory has had to contain it within precisely the limited, subjective and expressive paradigm of emotion that feeling theory—devoted, as Ann Cvetkovich has observed, to thinking feeling beyond the “the domain of the personal and private”—ostensibly exists to combat.61

In an effort to further feeling theory’s own avowed commitment to radical thinking about emotion, this chapter will take issue not only with the notion that knowingness has entirely disappeared from view, but that such a disappearance would be desirable. While not disputing the contention that conventionally postmodern, traditionally “knowing” cultural and critical strategies, such as ideology critique, have lost much of their purchase on the cultural and critical imagination, I do, however, dispute the imputation that these simple methodological and aesthetic shifts can or should guarantee knowingness’s expiry. Despite both the empirical evidence of


61 Ann Cvetkovich, “Public Feelings” conference address, as cited in Janet Staiger, introduction to Political Emotions, 2.
knowingness’s demise, and the critical rationales for hastening it, this chapter will argue not only that the emotion persists in much ostensibly post-postmodern critical and aesthetic work, but that it possesses genuine critical value—if only as a kind of analytic foil capable of bringing some of feeling theory’s less prominent presuppositions into relief.

In what follows, then, I will first demonstrate that the idea that knowingness can be readily and straightforwardly discarded depends on the limited, narrow way in which the emotion has been framed. As I will show, knowingness is a far more mobile and insidious affect than is implied in the notion that we might simply “surrender” it, and that its peculiarly elastic, shape-shifting character enables it to transcend the particular stylistic, aesthetic and argumentative features that have formed a critical sediment around it. In arguing this, I will return to my initial cinematic example, Wes Anderson’s 1999 coming-of-age classic *Rushmore*. While, as my opening paragraph suggested, the film is regularly marshalled as a sign both of the demise of knowingness, and of the emergence of a cinema of “engagement and empathy,” *Rushmore* is nevertheless a text in which knowingness possesses an abiding if unacknowledged power. As I will show, the film’s efforts to sever itself from the circuits of knowingness that energize many a classic instance of postmodern film merely amplify its implication in the network of knowingness through the labour of what I will call a “knowing naïveté.” Yet arguing this has ramifications that extend beyond the question of the continued existence of a particular tone or sensibility. For while I do not wish to efface the crucial political and generic differences between cinema and cultural studies, I do suggest that *Rushmore*’s status as the avatar of a “New Sincerity” places it in a relation to filmic postmodernism that is roughly equivalent to feeling theory’s relation to critical postmodernism. On the one hand, then, I want to argue that *Rushmore*’s implication in the work of “knowing naïveté” suggests that feeling theory’s efforts to immunize itself against the toxic presence of an insidious knowingness may not be as secure—or, indeed, as productive—as it initially seems. On the other, I want to argue to the extent that the fates of knowingness and of postmodernism have repeatedly been yoked together, the disappearance of certain identifiably postmodern stylistic devices may be inadequate

to secure an argument about postmodernism’s expiry, and that what seems at first glance like postmodernism’s demise is only a surface shift in its form—a shift that should, furthermore, prompt us to re-evaluate how we understand postmodernism. If my previous chapters have argued for the significance of emotion in the self-definition of postmodern theory and aesthetics, then, this one will argue for the persistence of postmodernism via emotion.

II.

*Rushmore*’s critical deployment as a sign that an identifiably postmodern cinema of knowingness is on the wane finds ample justification in the film itself. Abandoning “the tyranny of … hip references and technological and narrative trickery,” the film possesses an aura of immunity to the influence of contemporary cinematic and popular culture that wholly distinguishes it from the conventional postmodern film.  

Shot in and around the tree-shadowed neo-gothic limestone faculty buildings of Anderson’s own alma mater, St. John’s School in Houston, *Rushmore* plays out in what Kenneth Turan calls a “unique world,” a dreamy, timeless prep school of the imagination, in which particular historical markers or references have been displaced by a kind of quaint, ahistorical whimsy. The naïveté that suffuses the film’s storybook locations and over-decorated interiors is underscored by the cinematography, dialogue and narrative. Whereas more openly knowing postmodern films continually undercut their protagonists through a bristling display of their own mastery of filmic codes, style and intertexts, *Rushmore*’s cinematography seems marked not only by a kind of clunky amateurism but by a kind of historical backwardness. More often than not, the camera—its awkwardly frontal orientation amplified by the use of a cartoonishly wide-angle anamorphic lens—seems to function less as mobile agent than as proscenium arch, as if, like many early films, *Rushmore* had not fully extracted itself from a model of cinema as “filmed theatre.” Likewise, whereas one prominent mode of postmodern film, notably associated with the work of Tarantino, is earmarked for an insistently referential “talkiness” whose  


relation to either character or narrative development remains moot, this “type of pop culture dialogue—a fixture of Nineties hip cinema—is … absent from Anderson’s feature.”65 In its place, *Rushmore* brokers a series of painfully heartfelt—if often comedic—exchanges designed to reveal character depths rather than reference parallel filmic surfaces. The film’s apparent imperviousness to the lure of reference and allusion is maintained at the level of narrative: whereas classically postmodern films pride themselves on their knowing play with codes of filmic narrative, *Rushmore* is a traditional, linear coming of age story, faithfully and even ploddingly documenting Max’s maturation as he falls in love with a teacher and out of favour with his school before acquiring a humbled recognition of his own value.

If these formal signs of naïveté seem to secure the film’s place in the critical logbooks of a “New Sincerity,” the case for the film’s relinquishment of knowingness is further reinforced at the level of theme. For *Rushmore*’s coming of age story reads, in many ways, as Max’s relinquishment of a posture of lonely knowingness by way of a rapid education in the socializing value of naïveté. The boy we meet in the opening scenes is a boy making strenuous efforts to cultivate an aura of knowingness—at once captain of the fencing team, leader of the “model United Nations” and founder of the astronomy club, positions designed to display a “knowledge or awareness that is secret or known to only a few people”; he is also in love with a teacher twice his age.66 The boy unveiled in the final scene of the film, by contrast, is a boy who has learned to act both his age and his station, embracing the public school system and dating a girl of roughly similar years. Supported by a spatial transition from the snobbish exclusivity of a tony private school to a public school gymnasium in which rich and poor, old and young mingle freely, this thematic statement is brokered in part through a striking shift at the level of visual style. Whereas Max’s efforts at establishing his knowingness in the earlier parts of the film are structured around very rigid, tableau-like separation between frames that tend to isolate characters in their own little Cornell-boxes of art-decorated glory, the final scene indulges in a series of leisurely pans and tracks whose sinuous movement locates characters previously


rigidly segregated from each other—from the school principal to Max’s lowly barber father—in a single, unified cinematic space. Whereas Max’s attempt to gain acceptance from his upper-crust schoolmates by attempting unsuccessfully to replicate their social codes only succeeded in alienating him from them, his humbled embrace of his own naïveté creates an egalitarian space in which he effectively transcends class boundaries.

Thematically, too, Rushmore seems fully alert to the social and historical shifts that have undermined the cultural value of the posture of “getting it.” Exemplary here is the film’s opening sequence, which sets up a classic circuit of knowingness only to provide a cutting critique of it. When the teacher promises, rather extravagantly, that if one of his students can solve “the hardest geometry equation in the world,” no one in the class will have to “open another math book for the rest of [their] lives,” the class falls into hushed, excited discussion amidst which the repeated whispering of the name “Max” can be distinguished, prompting the teacher to inquire, “Max, care to try it?” When Max himself, until now suspensefully off-screen, is finally disclosed as a bespectacled boy with a gleaming bowl-cut, he offers a knowing smile along with an ironic question—“I’m sorry, did someone say my name?”—that provokes the class to roars of knowing laughter. To the extent that the knowing exchange here is predicated on a reference to a certain shared knowledge—everyone knows, after all, “that someone [said his] name”—it tends to cement the link between knowingness and a kind of dense, knowledge-packed allusion. This link is further consolidated when Max actually solves the problem, and is held aloft by his classmates in a moment of scholarly congratulation. Importantly, however, Max’s investment in knowingness is roundly mocked when the entire sequence is revealed to be a dream; the image of Max being cheered by his fellow students is intercut with a looming, high-angle close-up of Max asleep, mouth open and head resting on the back of a pew, as the noise of classmates’ applause fade into what we now realize is the “actual” sound of assembled students applauding the speaker during morning chapel. This scene is, in fact, merely one of many scenes in the film that revolve around the failure of Max’s efforts to command either respect or intimacy through the kinds of epistemic display we have come to associate with knowingness. Throughout Rushmore, Max’s ostentatious displays of inappropriate, excessive or misplaced knowledge manage to isolate him from the very community he is trying to enter, marking him out not as
savvy but as try-hard, smart-arse or—worse—criminal. *Rushmore*, then, not only frames knowingness as an undesirable and unappealing trait, but equates postmodern theorists’ investment in knowingness with a kind of dismal schoolboy fantasy.

Yet if *Rushmore* seems clearly not only to abandon but also actively to critique knowingness, it should be noted that we are working with one particular model of the emotion—a model of knowingness as the emotional or tonal complement of a person or a text’s display of sophisticated cultural competence, through the ostentatious decoding or deployment of devices like allusion and pastiche. While this remains the accepted understanding of knowingness, I would suggest that it fails to describe knowingness’s unique structure, in which the feeling of “getting it” is not readily locked down to a particular set of aesthetic devices. Indeed, the scene described above—a scene that seems at once to secure and then to critique film theory’s classic model of knowingness—also offers us a way of understanding knowingness’s capacity to “escape” the concrete epistemic displays enshrined in the practice of allusion and reference. Occurring at the climax of an extended dramatic build-up in which Max’s actual appearance on screen has been deferred while a series of whispered exchanges of his name intensify our eagerness to see him, the shot of Max’s knowing smirk is marked both by an unusual length and a unique visual-aural intricacy. First, our eyes are drawn to Max’s smile, as he asks, knowingly, “did somebody say my name?”; then, shifting from visual to oral modality, we register the noise-off of the class’s responsively knowing laughter, indicating their own knowledge that his question was intended in jest; finally, returning to the visual register, we revisit the image of Max’s face, its expression of gratified knowingness deepened this time, as he breaks into a knowing smile that affirms the comprehension manifest in their laughter. In this sense, then, the grin that initially seems to express knowingness might be more properly understood in terms of its implication in a kind of social circuit of emotion, in which an initial invitation to knowingness, interlocutor response, and completed affective circuit are concertinaed into a single image. Just how important that response is might be illustrated through reference to a hypothetical scenario in which Max’s classmates don’t respond. In such a case, Max would have appeared not heroically knowing, but thoroughly foolish. For knowingness is not a
feeling that we “have”—a feeling that materializes in response, for example, to the recognition of an allusion—but a feeling that must be conferred upon us by others through forms of social corroboration. Whereas fear, for example, emerges quite independently of any kind of immediate feedback from another, it is simply not possible to conceive of knowingness minus the knowing wink or the knowing smile and the circuit of response they set in motion—as evidenced here by the triple
ricochet performed by Max’s knowing smile, as it moves from invitation to completion.

In this respect, knowingness cannot be understood in terms of the dynamics of expression, which configures emotion as an entity lifted from the deepest recesses of the self or the text onto the inscriptive surface of the text or body, in which it might take the form of an allusion or a knowing smile. What we take as affective or tonal expressions of knowingness—the nudge, the wink, the allusion, the knowing smile—are invitations to knowing feedback rather than ways of expressing an already-existing feeling of knowingness. If these signs meet with response, confirmation and corroboration, they become knowing; but they are not knowing in isolation. On the contrary, texts are only properly “knowing” when their invitation to a “knowing” community through allusion finds a responsive audience; likewise, spectators who respond knowingly do so only within the confirming embrace of a community capable of returning their knowing glance or nudge. Knowingness is an emotion or tone that is conferred upon subjects and texts rather than expressed by them. Yet if, as this suggests, knowingness fails to conform to a straightforward subjective model of emotion as expression or cognition, it also diverges from a paradigm of emotion as “contagion” or transmission. Often associated with the work of Teresa Brennan, the model of affective transmission suggests that it is possible for feeling to “pass” directly between bodies, such that, as Sara Ahmed puts it, “I feel sad because you feel sad; I am ashamed by your shame.”67 Yet to the extent that this schema tends to keep in place the notion of an originary, subjective feeling—a feeling that is only subsequently circulated or transmitted to another—it seems inadequate to the challenge posed by the emotion of knowingness, which is only properly felt to the extent that its initial cues are reciprocated and confirmed. Unsettlingly enough, then, knowingness is less a subjective, personal emotion, capable of “causing” emotional changes in others, than a metaleptic effect of its own effect, a spectral afterlight of the very wink, nod, smile—or allusion—that seemed to mark its presence.68


68 In this respect, knowingness must also be distinguished from models of “social” emotion developed in the social and human sciences, in which emotion is variously conceived as responsive to the social,
Importantly, this sense that knowingness is less a stable subjective experience than an effect of collective sociality, less an inherent quality of a text than a reflex of social corroboration, means that the kinds of texts that can be understood as knowing are peculiarly vulnerable to the whims of social and cultural change. It is not so much that any text can be knowing at any time, but that what counts as a knowing text depends on continually changing social values. This, in turn, prompts us to reassess our understanding of what happens when one of the key social changes that mark the present moment is precisely the devaluation of knowingness itself—along with the postmodernism of which it constitutes the primary emotional signature. If knowingness is not an inherent quality of a text, but a tone conferred on those texts that are felt to be ahead of the cultural curve, the cultural condemnation of knowingness would seem less to extinguish knowingness than to displace it, forcing it to relocate from those texts that ostentatiously display knowingness through a bristling repertoire of allusion, to those texts that openly eschew knowingness through a calculated display of naïveté. In other words, where the overt avowal of knowingness has become a social and critical anathema, but where the value of knowingness nevertheless reigns, almost by definition, supreme, the emotion comes to circulate via those texts that seem most antithetical to it, such as those marked by naïveté and sincerity. In this sense, it is precisely *Rushmore*’s refusal of knowingness that guarantees its status as knowing—a status that is confirmed every time a critic privileges *Rushmore* over other films because of its guileless candour. When Mayshark, for example, frames “post-pop cinema” as that which succeeds an older knowing cinema—suggesting that “Having grown up on the wink-and-nod knowingness of postmodernism,” *Rushmore*, alongside other contemporary movies of a similar ilk, uses knowingness “as a starting point rather than a conclusion”—his attribution to *Rushmore* of an advanced knowledge that these older films lack performatively situates the film as knowing in the very gesture by which it constatively frames it as post-knowing. Given the emotion’s strategic illegibility, it is

as shaped by the social, as solicited by the social, as regulated by the social in terms of its timing and expression, or as about the social. Whereas these analyses address emotions that have social causes, effects or objects, knowingness is an emotion that depends upon the social in its very enactment, emerging as an effect of its own immediate social feedback. (Larissa Z. Tiedens and Colin Wayne Leach, *The Social Life of Emotions* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 2.)
hardly surprising that this “knowing naïveté” is almost always misrecognized as naïveté pure and simple. Yet as Berlant has shown, our tendency to accept a text’s—or a person’s—emotional self-explanation at face value seems oddly uncritical in light of what she has called “a small virtually rhythmic difference between the encounter with affect and the process of achieving clarity in it.”69 Indeed, knowingness seems to amplify emotion’s ordinary capacity for misrecognition, because of its ambivalent social status as an emotion that is as spoilt for aspirants as it is lacking in champions.

Where knowingness, then, might be located most clearly in those texts that disown it, it’s possible to read Rushmore’s lack of knowingness, somewhat paradoxically, as a kind of open invitation to knowingness, a paradigm for the working of what I will call a “knowing naïveté”—the form taken in much contemporary culture by a knowingness forced underground by the pressure of its post-postmodern critique. For Rushmore doesn’t just not have allusions: rather, it functions reflexively as a series of meta-allusions to allusion itself. Exemplary here is the opening shot of the scene in the hotel room where Blume has booked himself an indefinite stay when his wife sues for divorce—a shot that, lingering in close-up on a hotel welcome card with the calligraphic entreaty, “Enjoy Your Stay,” seems to suggest a latent meaning. Yet whereas in any other film, a shot of this length might indicate the presence of an allusion, here, knowingness has been emptied out into a tonal or formal entity, underscoring precisely the film’s refusal to allude. At stake here, in other words, is a kind of meta-allusion to more conventionally postmodern films, whose ostentatious allusive excesses now look wildly passé. Similarly, Rushmore doesn’t just not meddle with traditional narrative structure: every point on its plodding, linear story arc is marked by the parting of a curtain that rises, as upon a kind of amateur stage production, before each new “act” of the film, rendering its naïveté self-conscious and deliberate. Likewise, the film doesn’t just not play with cinematography: the stubbornly frontal orientation of the camera, underscored by Anderson’s obsessively symmetrical framing, tends both to foreground the very camera work it ostensibly elides and to render the activities of the characters within it oddly comical, like puppets whose emotional histrionics are bathetically restricted to the cramped

frontiers of a miniature theatre. If *Rushmore* is knowingly naïve, then, it is because it has learned to stylize and foreground its naïveté and refusal of cultural competence in the very same way as earlier films worked to stylize and package their cultural competence.

Yet what is most effective about *Rushmore*’s knowing naïveté, I suggest, is not only that it is not openly knowing, but that it is also not openly *anti*-knowing. To the extent that, as Sedgwick has shown, the gesture of critique seems to leave an ineradicable residue on the critic, overtly condemning knowingness would leave *Rushmore* vulnerable to the charge of being knowing itself—thus putting it at risk of further knowing one-upmanship. *Rushmore*’s extravagant display of knowing naïveté, however, is counterbalanced by the extravagant deniability inherent in the fact that it is—incontrovertibly—naïveté that’s being displayed. This effort to camouflage its naïveté’s implication in a network of knowingness is best advanced by Max himself, who assumes the function of absorbing and embodying the attempted (and, in his case, unsuccessful) knowingness from which the film wishes to dissociate itself. With Max at its centre, any implication that *Rushmore* is involved in a circuit of knowingness is vanquished, its own social and affective ambitions screened by the bombastic, cartoonish knowingness of Max himself, who—despite his appalling grades—claims Harvard as his “safety school” should he be rejected by the Sorbonne.

Yet if Max’s presence in the film helps to elide the film’s investment in knowingness, it may equally well be seen to expose that investment. While, as a filmic defense of naïveté, the film can hardly be seen to valorize Max’s knowingness, any attempt to mock it threatens, as Sedgwick has shown, to rebound doubly back on the film itself. Paradigmatic here is the early scene in which Max, endeavouring to create some kind of verbal rapport with Mr Blume, praises the speech Blume has just delivered in chapel: insinuating himself between the chapel speaker and the school Principal, Dr Guggenheim, he declaims: “I just wanted to say that I strongly agree with your views concerning Rushmore. Your speech was excellent.” Yet while Max’s own speech is quite as “excellent” as Blume’s—his discourse and his manners flawless—not only is no knowing exchange achieved between Max and Blume, but, on the contrary, Max

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becomes the object of a knowing exchange between Blume and Dr Guggenheim. Exploiting the lens’s depth of field to hold Max and Dirk in the centre background of the frame while allowing Guggenheim and Blume, unbeknownst to Max, to exchange glances across their foregrounded positions flanking the frame, the film ensures that the knowingness that Max attempts to secure through a display of verbal mastery is secured instead at the level of the visual through a rapid exchange of gazes to which he remains oblivious. And no wonder: for Max is practicing—unsuccessfully—exactly the kind of overt knowingness that the film’s shrewdly naïve knowingness knows better than to try itself. Importantly, however, the mechanism of “exposure” through which the film is able to show this is the classic knowing mechanism par excellence, emblematic of the kind of blatant—and thus unsuccessful—knowingness that a properly knowing naïveté might do well to avoid. Brutally stark, the film’s wide-screen camera recalls not the naïve fumblings of early cinema but the kind of unblinking acerbic gaze from which no embarrassing flinch, no adolescent foible, can escape. The film’s knowing exposure of Max’s overt knowingness thus leaves Rushmore vulnerable to the traditional gestures of knowing one-up-manship against which its carapace of whimsy purports to guard it. Implicating itself in the very practice it declaims in Max, it threatens to trigger an infinitely regressive chain of knowing one-upmanship, in which every smart-arse is simply a dope waiting to happen.

It is significant, then, that at every point at which the film seems on the verge of acquiring an overt or explicit relation to knowingness, it regresses strategically into a frenzy of cinematic naïveté. The episode described above, for example, precipitates a kind of representational atavism, as the film retreats to an earlier cinematic moment in which movies were no more than a series of staged tableaux. A top-shot of “The Rushmore Yankee,” a red, hard-bound yearbook cues an extended montage sequence composed of staged tableaux, all of which centrally feature Max and which are intended to read as the book’s “contents.” The first features Max leading four fellow students across a grassy, tree-studded quadrangle, accompanied by the title “Rushmore Yankee: Publisher,” in the film’s canny red and white font; the next features Max at the centre front row in a class full of listening booths with the title “French club: President”; and so on, running the gamut from Captain of the fencing team to Founder of the astronomy circle, indicating the voracious range of Max’s
interests and his seeming ubiquity within the school community. Taking surface
refuge in the artlessness of the naïve, suspending the forward momentum of narrative
to undertake a whimsical foray into an obsolete cinematic mode, the film carefully
secures its unveiling of Max's problematized knowingness against further chains of
knowing one-upmanship.

Oddly, however, if the absence of a knowing Max would risk revealing the film’s
strategy of knowing naïveté as its own, and if the presence of a knowing Max risks
falling into a more traditional knowing exposure, the presence of a guileless and
simple-minded Max seems to lay the film open to an even more dangerous fate—that
of simply looking naïve. Stripped of his knowing posture, by the final scene Max has
become precisely the kind of bland, amiable creature—precisely, that is, the kind of
non-character—that it is the conventional labour of a coming-of-age story to
transfigure its protagonists into. Without Max’s problematized knowingness against
which to situate itself, however, the film’s own knowing naïveté reads as a kind of
 naïve sentimentalism. Rosenbaum is one of many critics to register the extent to
which the final scene’s almost ceremonial unveiling of Max’s successful character
transformation is matched by a less narratively explicable formal and tonal shift:
“unlike the madder scenes” earlier in the film, this “optimistic ending bears some
recognizable relation to the real world.”71 Yet in acquiring a clearer relation to “the
real world,” the film loses the adroit balance of full-blown knowingness and its
pseudo-naïve disavowal that characterizes the most powerful moments in Anderson’s
films. As Olsen describes the final scene, in which all the players are brought together
for a party to celebrate Max’s play ‘Heaven and Hell’, “all squabbles are forgotten and
differences set aside … Anderson allows us a final, slow-motion look around the
room, taking in every detail, reaffirming that these are the moments we remember—
the laughter, the friendships, the triumphs, the successes.”72 If these scenarios sound
painfully sentimental, this is because they are: deprived of the figure whose
unsuccessful knowingness has continually enabled the transfiguration of its naïve
pseudo-classicism into what I have called a “knowing naïveté,” the final scene is

71 Jonathan Rosenbaum, “In a World of His Own: Rushmore,” Chicago Reader, February 12, 1999,

72 Olsen, “If I Can Dream,” 17.
weighed down by sentimentalism, an orgy of lessons heavy-handedly learned, relationships healed and differences overcome.

III.
A number of voices in aesthetics and criticism have dismissed knowingness as an anachronistic vestige of the postmodern past, and vested their liberatory hopes in “naïveté,” openness, or sincerity. As my analysis of Rushmore has shown, however, where knowingness accrues precisely to the film’s moments of naïveté, and its moments of ostentatious knowingness ring painfully naïve, making a clean break with knowingness is a less than straightforward proposition. At stake here is knowingness’s shapeshifting, insidious, elastic quality, as a social emotion that is as hard to repudiate fully as it is to stably assume, and that everyone wants to have a stake in even as no one wants openly to avow. Whereas the semiotics of knowingness in its classical form are straightforward enough, the semiotics of a knowing naïveté are complex, and a balance between being seen to know too much and being seen to know too little is difficult to maintain. What is clear, however, is that Rushmore’s appearance on the scene indicates not the demise of knowingness, but its subtle persistence. While repeatedly tethered to specific stylistic practices like allusion and critique, knowingness is an emotion that not only endures but thrives on the kind of cultural backlash that has seen these practices stripped of their former cultural constituency. It is not that knowingness is a drive too deep and too intractable to eradicate, but that it is a social emotion that circulates around and is conferred upon subjects and texts rather than expressed by them. Such a structure would seem to imply that, while we can never determine the extent to which we might be implicated in knowingness, we can also never fully extricate ourselves from or straightforwardly “surrender” it either.

Knowingness’s residual presence in the critical and cultural dynamics that form around Rushmore has important consequences for postmodernism. As we have seen, the postmodern text has conventionally been framed in stylistic or historical terms. This chapter, however, has exploited the ubiquitous critical equation of postmodernism and knowingness to argue that postmodern textuality might be more readily characterized by the emotion or tone of knowingness. In this model, postmodernism, like the knowingness with which it is affiliated, must be understood
not as an inherent quality of a text that stands or falls on the presence of a particular stylistic device, but as an emotional relation between text and reader. A recent cultural backlash against “post-modernism” in the arts and the academy has seen the wholesale repudiation of a number of the postmodern’s classic aesthetic and theoretical gestures, leading many theorists to argue that postmodern textual practice has been superseded by newer aesthetic and critical strategies. Yet where postmodernism is identified with knowingness, rather than anchored in specific textual devices, these claims are stripped of their critical weight. Indeed, it becomes possible to read the current critical crusade against postmodernism as a specimen of just the kind of critical knowing one-upmanship that has always saturated postmodern textual practice and reception. Whereas Hutcheon suggests that postmodernism’s “discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on” despite postmodernism’s death, it might be more accurately observed that postmodernism itself lives on despite the expiry of the discursive strategies and ideological critique conventionally identified with it.73

Yet in addition to its consequences for postmodernism, as a critical mode that can no longer be banished to the past, the recursive re-emergence of knowingness in Rushmore also has consequences for feeling theory, as a critical mode that can no longer claim a full break with the postmodern methodological and emotional values enshrined in knowingness. As we have seen, the spectre of knowingness is something of a bête noir for feeling theory: riding roughshod over feeling theory’s implied opposition between emotion and postmodern critique, knowingness is an emotion underpinned by disturbingly reactionary attitudes that render it not only antithetical to feeling theory’s methodological praxis, but fundamentally at odds with the definition of emotion that underpins feeling theory. It thus comes as no surprise that feeling theory has dismissed knowingness as the redundant signature emotion of a moribund critical epoch where it has addressed it at all (and, remarkably for a discourse that is wholly orientated around feeling, it has only very briefly brushed against knowingness). My reading of Rushmore, however, suggests that feeling theory’s critical resistance to knowingness, evinced in part by its embrace of critical methodologies that seem impervious to the emotion, is in fact insufficient to forestall

73 Hutcheon, Politics of Postmodernism, xi.
knowingness’s continued efficacy. To the very extent that it is “naïve” in its approach to narrative and characterization, *Rushmore* is a “knowing” text, its lack of allusion alluding knowingly to its paranoid, postmodern, openly knowing predecessors; analogously, to the very extent that feeling-orientated criticism avows a post-knowing naïveté, it can be seen to perform an act of knowing one-upmanship that not only partially explains the critical prestige currently attendant upon it, but reveals feeling theory as fully enmeshed in the knowing, postmodern critical paradigm it imagines itself to have escaped with the abandonment of critique. Feeling theorists have frequently called upon Williams’ work on “structures of feeling” in order to explore what Gould calls “the tension between dominant accounts of what is and what might be, on the one hand, and lived experience that contradicts those accounts.”74 In this chapter, however, I have deployed Williams’ work in a way that runs counter to feeling theory, suggesting that our “lived experience” of knowingness contradicts the arguments enshrined in feeling theory for the demise of a knowing postmodernism. While not “formalized, classified, …[or] built into institutions and formations” in the way that it might once have been, this knowingness nevertheless presses at what Williams calls “the very edge of semantic availability,” felt as “an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency” in the very texts that seem most clearly aloof from the circuits of knowingness.75 Knowingness’s secret, siren-like allure seems to capture even those most resistant to its implicit ideological cargo.76 With this evidence of knowingness’s persistence in mind, feeling theory’s studious refusal to assess knowingness’s consequences for feeling theory’s self-positioning in the critical field seems unsustainable, as we are forced to acknowledge the ways in which the emotion destabilizes some of feeling theory’s most dearly held convictions about both emotion and its study.


76 To this extent, postmodern theory’s explicit avowal of knowingness might seem less an indefensible embrace of this most morally ambivalent of emotions, than a valuable candour about some of criticism’s less attractive tendencies.
Yet the insights inscribed in the emotion are not wholly negative, and certainly, the mere existence of knowingness would hardly oblige us to acknowledge or espouse it as an important critical term. As Sedgwick has made clear, the notion that a phenomenon is true “is, it turns out, separable from the question of whether the energies of a given … intellectual or group might best be used in the tracing or exposure” that phenomenon. Rather, I want to insist that there are potential critical benefits to incorporating the emotion of knowingness—and, through it, postmodernism’s insights about language, cultural exhaustion and critical one-upmanship—into our critical practice. On a general level, knowingness’s status as feeling theory’s other forces us to acknowledge feeling theory as a field, reminding us that precisely in and through its claim to emotional openness, feeling theory, like any other critical practice, inscribes a series of emotional and critical norms. At a more specific level, however, I would suggest that a deliberate, subjectivized practice of knowing critical self-scrutiny might counter some of the less productive effects of feeling theory’s posture of critical naïveté. Gregg and Seigworth’s introduction to Affect Theory attempts to deny any kind of trackable uniformity in the thinking that congregates around feeling, arguing not only that feeling-orientated work is not propelled by knowingness, but that it could not itself become the object of knowingness. “There is,” the writers argue, “no single generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be”—a “never” whose absoluteness contrasts sharply and I would suggest symptomatically with their commitment both here and elsewhere to the open-ended logic of the “not yet.” Yet the point is not just that this denial seems inconsistent. Rather, it is that, while Sedgwick has argued that epistemic blockage is bound up with the rigid pattern-recognition characteristic of what she calls a “deadening pretended knowingness,” such blockages may equally be an effect of a naïve refusal to acknowledge any patterns at all—especially those patterns into which our own work might find itself habitually falling. According to Sedgwick, knowingness’s “smooth, dismissive” tendency to see and to produce more

77 Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 124.


79 Sedgwick, Epistemology, 12.
of the same—its tendency to assimilate the seemingly particular and strange to another instance of broad, conventionalized and familiar social and linguistic categories—forestalls the sorts of epistemic openness necessary to reparative reading.80 Yet it is the application of precisely that “knowing” capacity to see more of the same that enables Sedgwick to identify the workings of knowingness in her own work, and thus to posit the possibility of modes of seeing that seemed less rigid or hidebound. Unless feeling theory can be openly knowing about itself—unless, that is, it turns upon itself just the “smooth, dismissive,” and “pseudo-urbane” posture it balks at in others—it will continue to produce more of the same.81 Here it is worth recalling that there’s a flipside to Fisher’s reification of wonder. While on the one hand he scorns “a stupidity that never wonders because it never notices anything,” he also scorns “the opposite: those who find everything amazing or striking, even the trivial differences of surface, monstrosity, oddness and the merely strange.”82 Just as, according to Walter Benjamin, cinema’s latent “shock effect” can arise only in a state of distraction, so the ambient hum of a cynical knowingness may provide just the right emotional climate for something new to flourish.83


Restlessness: A Coda

A scholarly practice that has, to quote Bill Brown, well and truly “internalized the fashion system (a system meant to accelerate the obsolescence of things),” critical theory is inherently restless, fretfully seeking the new, the innovative, the surprising.\(^1\) Whatever the consensus on knowingness, then, it’s hardly surprising that—the temporal open-endedness flagged by postmodernism’s “post” notwithstanding—the project of defining the conceptual and terminological co-ordinates of what comes “after” postmodernism has acquired a tenacious hold on certain sectors of the academy. While feeling theory has been reluctant to endow this “post-postmodern” moment with a critical handle, scholars in other fields have been more ambitious in their coinage and conceptualization. Sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky, for example, argues that the character of the epoch is best captured by the term “hypermodernity,” which names a historical and economic condition defined by “movement, fluidity and flexibility.”\(^2\) For philosopher Alan Kirby, the postmodern ends with the rise of “digimodernism,” as the development of digital technology sees the roles of reader, writer, producer and text wholly reconfigured.\(^3\) In a series of observations on contemporary art, meanwhile, the art critic Nicholas Bourriaud has suggested that postmodernism’s “negativity,” “depressiveness” and “essentialism” have been displaced by the emergence of “altermodernism,” understood as a “synthesis between modernism and post-colonialism.”\(^4\) Robert Samuels attempts to grasp the unique contours of the present moment through the term “automodernity,” arguing that “instead of technological automation creating a sense of mechanical alienation and impersonal predetermination, digital youth turn to new media and technologies to


increase their sense of freedom and individual control.”

Finally, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s notion of “metamodernism” characterizes the post-postmodern period as one of symbiosis, in which “postmodern irony” co-exists with “modern enthusiasm.” As this brief survey of arguments for the emergence of a new, post-postmodern epoch attests, feeling theory is hardly alone in its insistence on relegating postmodernism to a moribund moment in the critical and cultural past.

It’s easy enough, of course, to resist this restless pursuit of the new—insisting that the qualities these theorists wish to install as the signature features of a brave new post-postmodern moment are merely attributes of the same old, slightly shop-worn postmodern. Indeed, to the extent that the impetus behind many of these projections


7 Vermeulen and van den Akker’s model of “metamodernism” for example, seems a fairly precise approximation of certain elements of the very postmodern moment they intend it to displace. If the metamodern is best crystallized in an emergent neo-Romantic sensibility, whose alternation between “a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness” involves a longing for an emotional and spiritual transcendence that it simultaneously acknowledges as impossible, this same dialectic seems exactly what is at stake in Lyotard’s much-discussed equation of postmodernism with the renewal of the aesthetics of the sublime (Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Metamodernism,” 8.) According to Lyotard, the sublime—an aesthetico-affective response to the our ability to conceive of an idea for which no corresponding concrete representation is possible—operates through the balancing of a conceptual possibility and a representational impossibility: “The sublime … takes place … when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, match a concept. We have the idea of the world (the totality of what it is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it … we can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to make visible this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate.” (Lyotard, “An Answer to the Question: What is Postmodernism?” in The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988], 78.) This same sort of critical manoeuvre could be readily repeated with respect to every one of the above arguments for postmodernism’s demise.
is the assumption that postmodernism is unable to accommodate emotion, my thesis has contributed to the resources by which it is possible to counter these restless arguments for postmodernism’s demise. Demonstrating that postmodern discourse carries a heavy if somewhat unusual emotional freight of its own, I have suggested that emotion is not just manifest within postmodern theory, but plays an important structural role in it—from Baudrillard’s ecstasy, which functions as a cornerstone of his arguments about reversibility, to Lyotard’s “sublime feeling,” which forms the very condition of possibility of avant-garde art in postmodernism. Far from being hostile to emotion or to new developments in thinking about affect and emotion, then, postmodernism provides a valuable conceptual vocabulary for enriching feeling theory’s sense of emotion’s structure and possibilities.

Yet given how much of this project is devoted to resisting critical restlessness, it is worth noting that in many ways, “restlessness” exemplifies the very phenomena that have been the subject of this thesis—that is, it names an emotion that, circulating through both postmodern theory and aesthetics, has been earmarked as having a special affinity with the kinds of labour and consumption cultures that develop in late capitalism. Like many of the emotions in this thesis, restlessness is idiosyncratic in its structure, naming less a fixed, identifiable condition than a kind of emotional instability in which states of attachment and engagement are pursued by states of disgust and detachment, as what Leslie Paul Thiele identifies as postmodernity’s “routinization of novelty” sees the excitement of the dazzlingly new forever alternate with the boredom of its unsatisfied anticipation. At stake in restlessness is not so

8 Philip Wexler, for example, refers to the “restless, frenetic consumerism” of capitalist culture in postmodernity; according to Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, a certain “restless search for new epistemological and aesthetic paradigms” marks the postmodern cinematic-industrial complex; while for the late historian and critic Christopher Lasch, the argument that it leaves us “perpetually dissatisfied, restless, anxious and bored” is one of the primary weapons in his critique of postmodern consumer culture. (Philip Wexler, Critical Theory Now [London: The Falmer Press, 1991], 138; Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, A World In Chaos: Social Crisis and the Rise of Postmodern Cinema [Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003], 9; Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations [New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979], 72.)

9 Leslie Paul Thiele, “Postmodernity and the Routinization of Novelty: Heidegger on Boredom and Technology,” Polity 29.4 (Summer, 1997), 490. Certainly, the preoccupation with continual change
much ecstasy’s transcendence or dissolution of the boundaries between hatred and love, between emotion and its lack, as a kind of temporalized cycling through these apparently opposed emotions; intermittently bored and excited, restlessness is marked by a continual emotional orbit that sees it assume manifold other forms. Also like the emotions in this thesis, restlessness has become a promiscuously used if negatively charged term in the critical vocabulary of postmodern theory. On the one hand, restlessness seems the emotion most germane to the state of perpetual desire demanded of the postmodern consumer, a consumer who, as Bauman notes, “seek[s] actively to be seduced.” On the other, restlessness is an emotion peculiarly felicitous to the constitutional “flexibility,” that, as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have shown, is the attribute most sought after in the new labour market, in which workers must be “adaptable and flexible, able to switch from one situation to a very different one, and adjust to it; and versatile, capable of changing activity or tools, depending on the nature of the relationship entered into with others or with objects,” in what Italian Marxist social theorist Paolo Virno calls restlessness’s “agitation without end and

that I am here identifying as a characteristic of postmodernity is also a characteristic closely identified with modernity. Georg Simmel, for example, emphasizes the continually “changing and contrasting forms of life” in modernity, while Walter Benjamin’s comments on “the profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus—changes that are experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big-city traffic” indicate his sense of modernity as the ceaseless, ennervating production of novelty. (Georg Simmel, The Philosophy of Money [London: Routledge, 1990], 500; Walter Benjamin, Illuminations: Essays and Reflections, ed. Hannah Arendt [New York: Vintage Digital, 2011], Kindle Edition, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”) Thiele’s argument about the “routinization of novelty,” however, allows us to stake out a distinctively postmodern iteration of this urge to innovate. For Thiele, in postmodernity, the new is built into structures of expectation and commercial exploitation, such that, in Thiele’s terms, novelty is not just received by but is “constantly demanded by postmodern publics and elites.” (Thiele, “Postmodernity and the Routinization of Novelty,” 490.) The postmodern response to innovation, then, is not a straightforward response to the new—whether that response be Benjamin’s “shock” and “innervation” or Simmel’s “blasé attitude”—but a response forever modulated by the expectation of the new. (Simmel, The Philosophy of Money, 274; Benjamin, Illuminations: Essays and Reflections, Kindle Edition, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”) It is the cycle of tedium and excitement that this generates that the term “restlessness” is meant to capture.

without goal” Restlessness, then, correlates in important ways with the kinds of postures and attitudes demanded of the subject under postmodern conditions of consumption and production, naming not just the emotional logic of a market driven by the urge to innovation, but the emotional signature of both the consumer compelled to keep up with it, and the worker capable of adapting to the new labour markets that uphold it.  

Yet if restlessness seems to exemplify the kinds of emotions that have been broached in this thesis, its unique double-sided structure also affords it a kind of meta-emotional capacity that enables us to mobilize it to reflect on these emotions. For like restlessness—though in perhaps less starkly legible, or less temporalized ways—all of the emotions I have examined are marked by a dialectic of emotional deficiency and emotional intensity, extracting, as they each do, emotion from the very crucible of its lack. Whereas cognitive appraisal models of emotion tend to project emotion as a positive visceral or cognitive entity that subjects unambivalently “have or possess,” postmodernism introduces a moment of negativity or lack into the experience of emotion. In the field of postmodernity, fascination attaches to the gleaming spectre of an Other who—in contrast to the subject herself—is imagined to feel truly and deeply; ecstasy marks a collapse of the boundaries between frenzy and indifference; fear attaches to the spectacle of the end of fear, whether in the other or the self; while boredom is a dysphoric emotional registration of the absence of feeling, in which the moment of apathy itself causes pain. It is just postmodern emotion’s endless shuffle between emotional absence and emotional intensity that restlessness seems to make manifest. Indeed, it is worth noting that for many theorists—writing in postmodernity,  


12 If postmodernism just is restlessness, then resisting postmodernism becomes a peculiarly postmodern gesture—an insight that allows us to suggest, somewhat paradoxically, that in seeking to establish a new social and critical domain beyond postmodernism, ostensibly “post-postmodern” critics merely entrench their status as restless postmoderns. Indeed, within this logic, it becomes possible to make the paradoxical argument that postmodernism realizes itself most clearly in and as the claim that it is over.  

13 Steven Shaviro, Post-Cinematic Affect (Hants: O Books, 2010), 3.
if not explicitly writing on it—this restless movement between emotion and its absence simply is emotion. For Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, what they call “a body’s affectual doings and undoings” are marked by a certain “not-yet-ness,” which names the extent to which feeling is tied up with “a body’s perpetual becoming (always becoming-otherwise, however subtly, than what it already is).” Likewise, for Rei Terada, emotion is structured according to “the recirculating infinity of feeling living on” in which “emotions arise from others’ subsidence, from reflection on emotions, and from the very absence of any particular thing to feel.” As these quotes suggest, and as my thesis has attempted to bear out, postmodern emotion is bound up in some important way with a ceaseless movement between extinction and renewal, its inherent and inexhaustible capacity for self-regeneration making nonsense of claims about the conclusive decline of emotion in postmodern aesthetics and theory.

Yet if a certain “restlessness” is apparent in the dialectic between emotional deficiency and emotional reanimation characteristic of postmodern emotion, it is at least as apparent in the structures of contagion and mimicry that underpin postmodern emotion. This contagious quality of postmodern emotion cannot be quite identified with the phenomenon that Norman K. Denzin calls “emotional infection” and that Teresa Brennan dubs “affective transmission,” in which a feeling is directly transferred from one subject to another. Rather, it captures the sense in which, to the extent that postmodern emotions are orientated less around an object than around the question of emotion itself, the postmodern moment sees the others’ emotional state become the keystone or focus of the subject’s own, ensuring that, far from bound by the limits of the individual monad, postmodern emotion slides restlessly and promiscuously between subject and other, inside and outside. Fascination, bewilderment and knowingness provide clear illustrations of this dynamic. Itself


predicated on a projection of the other as unusually enthralled or captivated by a surface in which I myself can see nothing, the posture of fascination generates an aura of emotional intensity that fascinates others in turn; to the extent that bewilderment’s peculiar brand of subject-object inversion manifests itself in the form of a “blank” face from which the familiar subjective landmarks have been evacuated, it tends to instill the same bewildering sense of subject-object instability in others; while knowingness actually comes into being through the social feedback loop that the knowing wink or knowing glance sets in motion, emerging as a glimmering, metaleptic effect of its own signs. Postmodern emotion’s preoccupation with the precarity of its own existence generates structures of projection and imitation that allow it to circulate restlessly between subjects in ways that more traditional emotions cannot.

Not only has my analysis of postmodern emotion’s peculiar “restlessness” helped us counter arguments that postmodernism is unemotional, it has also enabled us to counter the insistence on emotion’s inherent conservativism that often accompanies those arguments. While much current work in feeling theory is prefaced by an almost ritual dismissal of emotion as the rigid, subjective and non-progressive counterpart to a liberatory and mobile affect, this thesis’s analysis of the “restless,” borderline emotions of knowingness, bewilderment, fascination and boredom makes it clear that emotion can be quite as challenging to our subjective, economic, social and emotional norms as affect. Interpretative and psychological, these are definitely emotions rather than affects, but that doesn’t mean that they are foggy, subject-bound and dependent on classical hermeneutic norms, that they are either “tamed and reduced” or “the capture and closure of affect.” Indeed, postmodern theory’s own, often virulent, repudiations of emotions like bewilderment, fascination and boredom make it clear that these emotions have a disruptive, radical edge of their own. While postmodern theorists have celebrated bewilderment for its attunement to key postmodern precepts, for example, they have also tended to quarantine it to certain delimited historical, sexual or social sites due to its capacity to unsettle a still dearly cherished ideal of critical autonomy. Likewise, much postmodern work registers a residual distaste for

fascination, an emotion whose triangulated structure brings postmodern emotion’s foundational reliance on the social into stark relief. Similarly, as an emotion that postmodern theory has continually devalued as trivial, consumerist and amoral, boredom has the unsettling power to underscore the emotional economy in which postmodern feeling is implicated—a power testified in the often rancorous reviews of *Gummo*. Under the pressure of postmodernism’s insistent destabilization of the subjective and hermeneutic foundations that have conventionally underpinned emotion, then, this thesis has reconstructed emotion as a flexible category rather than a fixed and predictable entity. As this suggests, to the extent that we understand emotion as itself a “restless” phenomenon marked by a continual oscillation between absence and presence, inside and outside, subject and other, feeling theory’s own restless dismissal of both postmodernism and emotion becomes largely unfeasible.

Yet if this thesis’s analysis of the distinctively “restless” emotional charge of postmodern texts has enabled us to resist both feeling theory’s repudiation of postmodernism and its proscription of emotion, it also allows us to suggest that many of the concerns at the heart of feeling theory are rooted in those of postmodern aesthetics and theory. On a specific, local level, I have demonstrated not just that feeling theory’s investment in “texture” as a figure for the grittily particular is prefigured in postmodern theory, but that a key postmodern film—*Crash*—exploits texture’s capacity to yield new ways of thinking about emotion. Similarly, in my chapter on bewilderment, I showed how feeling theory’s current work on the emotions that attach to forms of atrophied agency is anticipated in Jameson’s discussion of the Bonaventure hotel—a discussion whose aim, like feeling theory’s own, was to locate a phenomenological and emotional correlate for a condition of curtailed understanding and agency. Yet this thesis has also provided conceptual resources for making this argument on a broader, more general level. In other words, it licenses the argument that far from irreconcilable with feeling theory, the unique socio-economic and aesthetic “climate” of the postmodern—as a moment at once preoccupied by the value of emotion, and rocked by the instabilities that attend the traditional subjective and hermeneutic platforms of emotion—is essential to our contemporary critical obsession with feeling.
Indeed, more than merely demonstrating postmodernism’s historical significance as an important theoretical setting for the emergence of feeling theory, this thesis has suggested that certain topoi in postmodern aesthetics and theory might expedite our thinking about feeling. Certainly, it is clear that this thesis’s insights into emotion’s diverse structuration—its capacity for triangulation, sociality, reflexivity, inversion—contributes to feeling theory’s understanding of emotion at the level of content, helping us break down some of the clunky affect=good/emotion=bad rhetoric that seems to encrust a lot of writing on affect and emotion. Yet I would also suggest that this analysis of postmodern emotion has important implications for the form and practice of feeling theory. In my discussion of knowingness, for example, I pointed to an emotion that seems to knot together some of the tensions and contradictions that run through feeling theory. While feeling theory has tended to repudiate knowingness along with the postmodernism it laminates, this thesis has shown that the emotion may nevertheless have some ongoing value for feeling theory, not just by exposing some of the problems within its practice, but by forcing it to confront itself as a practice rather than as purely amorphous, unbounded potential. In attempting to expand the envelope of feeling theory, then, this thesis has tended to gravitate towards those terms that seem, in some way, to challenge its assumptions and norms.

This practice has been strongly reinforced by its grounding in and articulation through a range of self-consciously postmodern films—a vernacular postmodernism whose commercial orientation ensures that the capacity to move the spectator is never very far from the surface. As Steven Shaviro puts it bluntly, “cinema generates affect,” and in this sense, it’s no surprise that while postmodern theory disavows some of the more troubling emotional entailments of arguments about postmodernism, postmodern aesthetics has picked up the slack, demonstrating an infinite appetite for precisely those challenging, borderline emotions that postmodern theory often fails to analyze or even repudiates altogether.18 Certainly, it is the fraught relation of emotion not to postmodern but to digital cinema that currently preoccupies most film studies scholars, with critics such Shaviro, Vivienne Sobchack and Thomas Elsaesser exploring the fate of emotion in view of the incipient obsolescence of the material technology on

which classic theories of cinema are based. Yet, again, by turning back to this slightly earlier cinematic and critical moment—a moment whose present redundancy is intensified by its so-recent vogue—it is possible to throw new light on these debates about feeling in the context of new cinematic technologies. At once viscerally emotional and icily distant, the films in this study have provided exemplary instances of emotion’s capacity to adhere to the very aesthetic practices that seem to militate against it, as allusion becomes knowingness, indeterminacy becomes bewilderment, a depthless plane becomes a gleaming surface, and the absence of emotion becomes an occasion for gaping fear. This thesis’s recasting of familiar postmodern aesthetic strategies as vehicles not for “the absence of emotion, but [for] a different emotional orientation” clearly has value for thinking about a specific kind of postmodern cinema. Yet in establishing a paradigm for thinking emotion in productive, dialectical relation to a genre or medium that resists it, it may also facilitate our current efforts to grasp the emotional dimension of newer cinematic practices, to apprehend the “structures of feeling” that emerge in a “computer- and network-based, and digitally generated, ‘new media.’”

This thesis is less a “cartographic enterprise” than “an effort of renewal and transformation,” less an attempt to provide an exhaustive emotional map of a series of postmodern filmic and theoretical texts than an attempt to provoke a more current critical field into new ways of thinking. At the heart of this thesis, that is, is a critical gambit rather than an empirical project—the hunch that feeling theory’s development might be best aided by examining those terms that it repudiates, by attending, that is, not to the next big critical thing, but to a seemingly moribund postmodernism, and not


to the more obviously radical “affect” but to the seemingly more conservative “emotion.” Yet while I hope this thesis has some value as a critical provocation, I also hope that something in it resonates with actual experience. After all, the emotions I have reviewed in these pages do not just recur throughout postmodern theory and postmodern aesthetics, but percolate through everyday journalistic and critical discourse, suggesting their purchase as figures that congeal a set of aspirations and anxieties, subject positions and social relations, that are peculiar to the moment we might call the “long nineties”—and thus, I have suggested, no less native to the now. In this sense, I hope that these analyses of bewilderment, fascination, knowingness together, albeit in texts from the last century, achieve a certain sonority as an account of “what it feels like to live in the early twenty-first century”—a century that I am still happy to refer to as postmodern.\(^\text{23}\)

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